Gold runs into his rival after a devastating explosion in Ilex Forest.
Silver had been tracking Team Rocket’s activity for over a month, ever since the first rumors of their reunion started floating the dark web. Skeptical at first, he disregarded it completely, taking it for another hoax. With the disappearance of Giovanni three years ago and the subsequent disbanding of the syndicate, multiple criminal assaults claimed to have been operating under the Rocket’s name, yet all without fail were later uncovered as unrelated cases.

This time around, though, it was distinctly disturbing. Just within one week the Rocket’s mentions grew exponentially and a multitude of recruitment threads opened in the unindexed corners of the Internet. The first alerts to the Johto police servers started coming in soon after that. Mostly consisting of minor crimes such as property damage, burglary and Pokémon theft, they had one thing in common - as reported by the witnesses, they were all committed by people in dark clothing with an unmistakable red ‘R’ on their chests.

This was something he could no longer ignore.

He kept monitoring the info channels and, despite the increased frequency, the attacks remained oddly chaotic - there was larceny, Slowpoke tail black market, Pokémon trafficking, drug trade - all lacking a definite pattern. Team Rocket was evidently growing its network, but what the bigger picture here, their ultimate goal had still been unclear.

With the beginning of repeated assaults on electronics warehouses and radio stores across the region Silver could, at last, make an estimated guess regarding their target. The Azalea Slowpoke Well he’d suspected earlier was a purely temporary outpost like many others and all the logistics and operations were conducted from a separate, much more secure location. The scattered data he’d acquired to date had finally fallen into place. The hideout was in direct vicinity of Goldenrod, the largest city in the region bearing the most complex infrastructure and home to one of Johto’s main jewels - the Radio Tower.

Posing as a returning member, he spent an evening scanning the Rocket’s hidden message boards and public data communication channels and shortly, in a somewhat superficial search, was able to attain some hard evidence. Situated in the far southwest of the Ilex Forest, was an actively operating supply hub.

The redhead conducted an assessment of the GPS coordinates, mapped the exact location and made arrangements to set out. The time for action had come. He would hinder further development, mercilessly shut down any advances and make it crystal clear to each and every Rocket member that none of their activity will go unpunished. He was prepared to declare war on the organization that took everything from him, the organization that made his existence living hell. He was ready to eradicate Team Rocket in its entirety and, ultimately, take on Giovanni himself.

On standby, he camped outside of the three building complex, careful to stay undetected. The shipment rotation held to a regular schedule: two large cargo trucks arrived early every morning and left in the afternoon of the next day. From what it seemed they were expeditiously assembling equipment and packaging it to transport elsewhere. But where? He needed information.

Discreetly, he released Haunter from his Poké Ball.
-Haunter, drop these at the interiors of buildings two and three. Don’t get yourself noticed.

He lowered a handful of flash drives into the Pokémon’s outstretched palms. Same brand as the Rockets used, they were designed to fool the victims while voiding any unwanted misgivings.

The ghost type drifted away and reappeared ten minutes later, giving his trainer a silent nod. Silver returned the gesture and fired up his tablet. Now all he had to do was wait patiently for somebody to take the bait. And surely, there it was. Just minutes later some curious Rocket goon was inserting the drive into his computer. The device’s console came to life and a cascade of logs flooded the black window - the backdoor was in place.

Silver easily navigated the file system, getting his hands on the building’s blueprints, shipment logs and the current roster of Team Rocket members. He couldn’t help but snigger at the utterly inferior security employed in the system. Were they really trying to revive the infamous criminal team that indisputably ruled over Kanto with this level of prep work? That would require more than a half-assed firewall and a few modified permissions.

He browsed some more and eventually stumbled upon a set of encrypted directories. Perhaps they did deserve some credit, after all. This particular employee, unfortunately, did not have the clearance to view the data and the chance of a Rocket executive falling for the flash drive trick was exceedingly low.

Silver tabbed out of the original window, thinking. He’d have to get his hands on the access codes some other way. There were options requiring varying amounts of effort, so before he’d choose to blatantly brute force the servers, he’d have to consider the lower hanging fruit first.

Lifting his eyes from the tablet’s screen, he gazed past his cover at the secret facility. Given this was a distribution hub, all the Rocket members were unarmed and carried a bar code scanner and a pair of magnetic stripe cards on an extendable keychain. One was clearly used for entry, so it was reasonable to assume the other acted as a network authentication key.

“Quite an archaic system”, Silver thought to himself as he pulled up a list of commercially available card readers. Normally only the government and affiliated agencies were known for utilizing card slots on their computers, but even they strove to move away from the approach in the later years. Security issues aside, it was plain impractical.

The teen shrugged, matching a number of compatible input devices for his system. If anything, this would make his life easier. He’d simply have to wait for an admin to arrive at the hub and then swipe his card. This would not go unnoticed, of course, but he was prepared for a confrontation. The second phase of the plan was just about to begin.

Judging from his earlier observations and the supply logs in the database, the west building was primarily a storage unit - half the equipment designed to be used for the upcoming Radio Tower assault and half to be exported. Central housed the main control hub, and the east was an assembly facility. They all bore significance, yet the latter two had to be targeted first.

Silver split his last brick of C4 into three uneven parts and carefully attached the electric blasting caps. Two larger blocks for the communication and production departments and the smallest one for the storage. It was more than sufficient, considering the volatile qualities of radio equipment, for even a short blast was enough to set off.

He added an ignition based detonator to each lot as a precaution against chip malfunction and set them aside. There’d been some additional preparations to be made, such as disabling the sprinklers and fire alarms in all the buildings, but that would be a minute task for a Pokémon that could go
The Team Rocket admin had not arrived for another two days. In the meantime, Silver used his Pokémon to plant the explosives in their respective buildings, distribute Haunter’s flammable Toxic at the perimeters of the storage unit and in any areas rarely undergoing inspection and took out the only two smoke detecting devices he’d managed to find in the entire complex. Further inspection of the Rocket server hinted at potential developments at the Lake of Rage and Mahogany Town, yet without further elaboration. Most of the data was still masked under layers of encryption, completely unattainable for prying eyes.

For the lack of readily available solutions he tried brute forcing the system anyway, but each attempt deemed frustratingly unsuccessful. He’d just had to wait for the admin’s card.

A black sedan zoomed through the forest on the third day and parked in the lot near the central building. Greeted by a number of goons, a tall figure in a grey uniform emerged from the vehicle and casually walked to the communication center. Just as the case with his subordinates, a set of plastic rectangles was dangling off his right hip.

Tonight it was then. Silver would retrieve the key card and make his statement.

For the most part of the day the teen merely monitored the hideout’s methodical activity. The grunts turned in their weekly reports to their superior, three more pieces of radio equipment were manufactured, two of which were moved to the west wing.

Dusk fell upon the forest and a truck got prepared for loading. Silver checked the minimal gear once more - Poké Balls, messenger bag, detonator - all was in place. He’d planned to engage before the moving vehicle could depart and now was the time.

He crept past the rears of the facility, tossing a dark orb in each of the buildings, whether it was through a cracked window or an air vent. He then circled around and emerged a dozen meters away from the comm center’s exit and waited for the delayed action smoke bombs to go off.

Clouds of dark fumes erupted from the inside of all buildings shortly, followed by surprised outcries. Eager to escape, people spilled from the concrete boxes, coughing and swearing. Two goons stumbled out of the east building and four more from central. The admin was yet to be seen. Silver surveyed the layout. Regardless, 7 people total, that he could deal with.

-Brat, you responsible for this?!

One of the Rockets recovered from the gas and was now yelling hoarsely at Silver.

-Nobody’s supposed to be here apart from us, Team Rocket, get him!

All grunts reached for their belts in unison, lunging the Poké Balls.

-Sneasel, Golbat!

Multiple consecutive cracks echoed in the air, followed by a muted flicker. A scatter of crushed red and white orbs fell to the ground, lifeless, permanently trapping the Pokémon inside.
The foremost Rocket gaped in shock as he watched the scrawny punk rob them of their Pokémon in one swift pass. He stomped forward when a sudden weakness spread through his limbs. He was floating, moving through a thick haze, the only thing in front of him a pair of hypnotizing purple eyes. A distorted voice rang through his clouded conscience.

-Where is your admin?

-Admin…

-Yes, the Rocket executive in charge of this facility.

-Well, well, aren’t you looking for me then?

The tall man appeared to the west of the central facility, holding a Poké Ball in his palm.

-Fancy you managed to disable my underlings, but are you able to handle me?

Three red flashes and Arbok, Koffing and Raticate emerged from their captivity.

-Raticate - Hyper Fang, Koffing - Sludge, Arbok - Bind.

The trio charged Silver’s direction, eyes frenzied and aflame with rage.

-Golbat - Supersonic, Sneasel - Agility, then Fury Swipes.

Speed far superior to their opponents, Golbat’s intense sonic wave hit first, forcing the Pokémon to disperse, disorienting them from their original course. Raticate and Koffing were met with Sneasel’s ruthless slash and fell to dirt unconscious.

Arbok slid around and sprung yet again, aiming for the boy’s throat. A swift stroke cut through the air, slicing at the giant snake’s neck with a nasty crunching sound.

Silver turned to face the admin with a smirk.

-You were saying? I advise you prepare for the end of Team Ro--

-ENOUGH!

A terrible ringing cut him off, filling his ears and threatening to turn his brain inside out. With the corner of his eye he noticed his three Pokémon writhing on the ground in agony, their acute senses amplifying their susceptibility to the deafening white noise.

He grasped his head, struggling to stay upright himself. Had he unwittingly neglected one of the manufacturing or storage logs? No, none of the inventory mentioned anything even remotely similar. This device had to be one of the new developments from Mahogany. Foolish, so so foolish.

-End of Team Rocket? You’re playing with fire, kid. I suggest you take on someone your own size.

The Rocket executive swung a long, remote looking device resembling in his hand, expression of open mockery adorning his features. The grunts finally broke out of their trance and were now making their way toward the teen, completely unaffected by the jarring sound.

Silver froze, toiling to tune it out of his head. The sound wave frequency seemed to be getting more and more inconsistent with every passing moment, but was not quite enough to resist against yet.

“Keep calm,” he urged himself steadily, “whatever that is, it must still be a prototype. I can still
move, so if could only…” He stretched his hand towards his right pocket and grabbed the
detonator. All he had to do was flip the switches.

A sharp blow collided with his jaw, making him stumble backward.

-Thought you outsmarted us with your little tricks, punk?

The group of goons were now surrounding him, faces smug. Warily, he noticed them all wearing
miniature earpieces. So, those were not just comm devices as he’d assumed earlier, but also
dampers for this awful white noise.

Another punch came his way, now from the left. Struggling to keep focus, Silver leaned
backwards, dodging the jab, readying his right elbow to absorb the next impact to his chest.

Though sufficiently trained in combat, it got progressively harder to avoid and deflect the hits.
Vision hazy and head about to split in two, he missed a hook that landed hard on his face and a
straight punch to the gut. He needed to shut the device down. Soon.

He spun around, searching the admin with his gaze, when a heavy kick to the back sent him flying
to the ground.

-What is that, a switch?

The leading grunt stepped on his wrist, kicking the detonator out of his grip with another foot.

-You weren’t gonna blow us up, were you?

Silver hissed at the pain. This was bad. The only other way to trigger the explosions was to set the
buildings on fire. Using his free arm to protect his head, there was nothing he could do to shield the
rest of his body - a couple of blows met his chest and stomach and plundered at his sides. Another
strike to his gut caused him to retch.

-Who’s acting all high and mighty now, eh?

Body growing numb with pain, he could not afford another second to lose. He inhaled and counted
down the sound wave rhythm, doing his best to ignore the burn of his insides. The noise’s
frequency finally tempered for a split second and he forcefully yanked his hand from under the
Rocket’s boot. Spinning on his elbow, he took out the closer grunt with a low sweep. In the
momentary confusion he ripped the earpiece out of the man’s ear, briskly placing it in his own. A
blessed, refreshing silence filled his buzzing brain. He spotted his device on the far right and he
dove forward. With a tuck and roll he swooped it from the grass. Hesitating no longer, Silver
flipped the switch.

A massive bang shook the forest, causing the manufacturing facility to go up in flames. The
ringing stopped altogether as the explosion completely nullified the sound waves. But why weren’t
the other two detonating? Has the vicinity to the admin and his transmitter somehow disrupted the
receiver?

With a burning flash the plastic device flew out of his hand. The Team Rocket executive stood a
few meters away from him, gun in his hand. His features were contorted with fury.

-You or your Pokémon move an inch and I’ll fire.

Silver slowly turned his head. The blood streaming down the left side of his face, partially
obstructed both his vision and hearing.
The admin shifted his voice.

-Now tell me, who sent you?!

-Nobody.

-Liar! Is it the police or the shadow mafia?

-Neither. I'm here on my own accord. I am going to single-handedly put an end to Team Rocket, I'll bring down every one of your secret bases, I'll wipe everything that you've worked on.

A high pitched cackle pierced the silence. The man laughed maniacally, still pointing his gun. The grunts to the either side watched the interaction with varying expressions of confusion and contempt.

Slightly shifting his stance, the teen locked his gaze with the Rocket's. With his right hand out of the view, he crossed his fingers and flicked them sideways, signaling. Haunter and Sneasel blinked, acknowledging the command.

-Although your measly attempts are nothing compared to the empire Team Rocket once was. You being here is nothing but a fluke, it will be easy to dispose of you.

-I wouldn’t act so cocky, kid, you’re barely standing.

Absently, Silver pondered about his condition - face bloodied, clothes soiled with dirt and bile, he must've been quite a sight right now. But no matter, it was no time to stress about appearances.

-By the end of this night you will learn better than to underestimate me.

The Rocket dangerously lowered his gaze and flicked the safety off.

-Good luck with that.

-Sneasel, now!

A number of things happened at once. A gunshot, a clang of metal on metal, a purple mist and a slash through the air.

Silver fell on one knee, sharp pain exploding in his left leg. Sneasel deflected the bullet’s trajectory from his chest with a Metal Claw, causing it to hit his upper thigh instead. Haunter filled the clearing with a dark haze, preventing the grunts or the admin to move any further, a metal object landed on the ground with a clink.

An anguished roar echoed in the night.

The Rocket executive clutched onto his hand, bleeding profusely, fingers missing. Just as he pulled the trigger, Golbat sliced the firearm out of his grasp.

The teen did not even look in his direction. He cautiously examined his leg - the bullet did not seem to have hit an artery, nor did it lodge itself in his flesh. A slicing wound was something he could deal with later. He got back on his feet and with a swift motion released his last Pokémon from its Poké Ball.

-Quilava, Flamethrower!

The nimble fire type sprang toward the building, proceeding to cover it with a barrage of hot
flames. Silver recalled the other three and leapt a couple meters backwards, kneeling and shielding his head with an arm. A huge blast tore the comm center apart, sending glass and debris everywhere, as giant shock wave knocked down anyone standing on the ground.

A third explosion reverberated the scene and set the storage facility on fire. An array of cracks came from within the building, indicating that the equipment’s batteries and coils detonation. Staying in radius got more and more dangerous by the second.

The teen strode toward the Rocket executive who was still grasping his injured hand, sprawled and squirming in the dirt. He kicked, turning the man over to his back and checked if he was still conscious.

The admin looked up at his assailant with clouded eyes. The boy was standing back to the fire, red hair illuminated from behind, blood on his face glistening black, a look of pure revulsion on his face. A vague feeling of recognition tugged at the back of his mind. He must’ve sworn he’d seen the same kid sometime, somewhere before. But where and when? His memory was irrevocably failing him, as was his body. One way or another, this child was none other than an agent from hell itself.

-If you somehow survive this, make sure all the other Rocket admins know - I’m coming for them. I’ll burn you all to the ground.

With that he snatched the Rocket’s key card off his hip and made his way into the pitch darkness of the forest.

It was time to get out.
Chapter 2

The entire hideout was now engulfed in fire, sending dark clouds of smog throughout the forest. Quilava emerged from the billowing smoke, splotches of soot covering her sides, but overall unharmed. Silver retrieved her with a flick of his hand and placed the Poké Ball back on his belt. This mission resulted in being dangerously close to failure. How could he have possibly overlooked the development of that new device? He'd made his mistakes and paid for them dearly.

Adrenalin still pumping in his veins, he moved to a reasonable distance from the burning facility and ran another check on his leg. It was still bleeding, coating his pant leg in liquid black.

He pulled out a roll of medical tape out of his messenger bag and taped a tight band over the fabric - this would hold it for now and potentially save him from major blood loss. Rummaging some more, he extracted a small syringe. He flicked it at the light and removed the cap, swiftly stabbing his side.

The searing heat had caught up to him, forcing him to start moving once again.

The potent painkiller somewhat eased the arduous pain he felt in his chest and leg, enabling him to break into a small sprint as he was navigating through the giant trees. If only he could get to the outskirts of Goldenrod, he assessed, then he’d be able to take some more time to recuperate.

Toxic smoke was spreading way faster than the fire itself made it harder to breathe by the minute. Eyes watering and a wet cough stuck in his throat, the boy pushed through the thick shrubbery in the dark. Soon enough the physical exhaustion began to get the better of him. About another thousand meters out his legs gave out, sending him to the damp forest floor. “What a disaster. I've truly lost my touch over the years”, echoed at the back of his mind.

Mustering his strength, he got back up and leaned on a nearby tree. He needed to get out of here at any cost. He would fucking crawl if he had to.

Gold was getting ready to set camp in the east end of the Ilex Forest when he heard a deafening blast followed by a tremor. Alarmed, he leapt to his feet and stared past the thick trunks of the surrounding trees. The forest was shrouded in darkness and, seemingly, lifeless. He hesitated, debating whether or not it was worth to investigate. Fighting Rocket goons at the Slowpoke Well had already been a risky endeavour, but exploring sudden detonations in the midst of the night just screamed ‘bloody danger’.

A gunshot followed suit with a pained cry. The teen froze, startled - now this was definitely outside of his scope. He stayed exceptionally quiet, hoping to conceal his presence and potentially catch any other noises. Apart from the obvious, something seriously unsettled him about that shout, yet he couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

Wait, didn’t he recognize that voice? He'd been quite positive he did. It was his testy rival - the same guy that battled him and called him worthless just a couple of days ago. The distant boy that refused to give him his name, that infuriated and intrigued him at the same time, the mysterious trainer whose relentless and daring fighting style he’d never be able to forget.

Somebody else’s despairing yell resonated in the woods. Another explosion rattled the trees, closely succeeded by a third. Gold clenched his fists - just what the heck was going on there?
Deciding not to take any chances, he tore from his spot and sprinted in the blast’s general direction. Whatever was going on, the redhead was in trouble, and no matter their relationship, he was not going to let him perish in vain.

Silver staggered a couple more hundred meters, vision blurry and another fit of nausea creeping up his throat. He stepped forward, foot slipping on the wet moss, when firm grip caught him by the shoulders.

-I’ve finally found you! You sure did not make it easy--

Momentarily alert, the taller teen switched his stance and caught the unwelcome impostor by the neck, slamming them into a the closest tree. Did the Rockets chose to pursue him? He was already reaching his limit, he’d rather end this quickly. With strenuous effort, he tightened his hold, lifting his potential foe off the ground, choking them.

Gold scrambled, kicking, futilely trying to remove the hand clasping his throat. The hell was going on?! Airflow cut off, he started to feel progressively more lightheaded. From the corner of his vision he saw his rival standing in front of him, expression deadly, the entire left half of his head covered in blood. His eyes widened in horror and his nails bore into Silver’s wrist.

The redhead scrutinized the other's face for another second and then released him, placing his arm on the surface behind. It was not the Rockets after all, just the pesky trainer that he seemed to run into all too frequently. He pushed himself off the tree and silently moved past. The other boy posed no threat, there was no need in expending the last of his energy on him.

Careful not to lose footing again, he reeled forward, partially relying on the sprawling branches and trunks for support.

The brunette leaned back and breathed shallowly, recovering from the shock. On instinct, he rubbed his aching neck. A chill ran down his spine when his gaze fell on his hand, fingers now sticky and smeared with red.

-What… what happened?

Still somewhat dazed, Gold followed him with his eyes. He saw the other falter at a particularly steep slope and barely hold his balance. As if doused in ice water, he sprung up. What the heck he doing? He didn’t come all the way here to watch from a distance as his peer gradually bled out. Swiftly, he ran after the injured boy and offered him his shoulder.

-Come on, I’m gonna get you out of here.

Just as he was about to put his arm around the other’s back, his rival jerked and shoved him away, hard.

-Leave me alone. I don’t need your help.

The brunette stared in disbelief.

-Yes, you do. Let’s go, I’m gonna take you to a hospital--

- NO!

He bit his tongue and looked at the taller teen. Breaking through the dense crones, the pale
moonlight faintly illuminated his slumped figure - his body was visibly trembling, dark splotches plastered his worn clothing.

-Please… you’re hurt, let me help you. The hospital, it’s just the next town over.

-I said no. Mention the hospital again and I’ll burn you down like I did to the rest of those bastards.

Hand balled up into a fist, he looked like he was ready to strike. Gold took a tiny step back and waved his hands in submission.

-Okay, okay, as you say.

So the redhead was ultimately responsible for the explosions and fire. Regardless, this was not a time to back down - hospital or not, his stubborn rival needed medical attention and fast.

-I won’t take you to the hospital, but I will help you. Where--

-Outskirts of Goldenrod, southeast, there’s an inn.

-Inn? But…

The other boy stiffened up once more.

-Alright, let’s go. Here, lean on my shoulder.

Reluctantly, Silver complied and they started to make their way to what he hoped was the exit to the endless Ilex Forest. He would never admit it, but if the other trainer hadn’t showed up, he probably wouldn’t have been able to make it out, collapsing just a couple meters further.

Gold made sure to keep the pace adequate for his companion, noticing the severe limp he was walking with. A dozen of questions flooded his mind, but seeing the other’s state and how hard he pushed to stay alert, he kept to himself. The smoke finally thinned, as did the trees and an expanse of dried marsh opened in front of them. Far off, toward the main road, he could see tiny red and blue lights and muted sirens of the firefighters entering the forest. He wondered if the other had noticed as well. He turned his head to look at him. The redhead was facing down, breath ragged. Sensing Gold’s hesitation, he tried to straighten.

-The inn, about two kilometers from here, east side of… Daycare.

Silver coughed, drowning the last part part of the phrase. Gold blinked back as he noticed a trail of dark blood trickling down the other’s chin. With mixed feelings of pity and sorrow he watched as his rival lifted his arm and carelessly wiped his mouth with an already filthy sleeve.

Another acute, burning emotion started churning in his chest - and this time it was pure, unadulterated anger. Anger at himself for not getting here sooner, anger at the other boy for being so obstinate, but, most of all, anger at whoever dared to hurt him like this. He grit his teeth for a moment, trying to shake off the unfamiliar, disturbing sensation.

-Sorry, yeah. I remember. Come on.

It had certainly been a busy week, with Radio Tower festival coming up and Goldenrod City’s
shopping center rolling out seasonal promotions. The surge of tourists ceaseless.

Flipping through the latest issue of Pokémon weekly, Marta switched to her favorite show and settled at the reception desk for her grave shift. Unlike her coworkers, she did not mind working the night at all, for it was the most peaceful time that required few interaction and that she could spend mostly on herself.

The door burst open and two figures stumbled in. She jumped, surprised by the disturbance.

-Good night, welcome to the--

She froze mid greeting as she took a second look at the late night visitors - two teenagers, one with an awful bruise on his face, and both covered in dirt and blood, were standing in the brightly lit reception area.

-Holy Arceus...

Gold was the first to speak up.

-We need a double room, checking in now.

The woman took a moment to compose herself. What on earth happened to these children, what horrible accident did they get into?

-My dears, on my Lord. Can I call the ambulance for you? Or the police?

-No, thank you, room, two beds, please.

-I’m so sorry, I think you really--

Silver glowered as he was forced to listen to the same arguments over again. He stuck his hand into one of the bag’s pockets and procured a stack of Pokédollars. Decisively, he slammed the cash on the reception desk. Both the inn’s employee and the other teen fell silent.

-Room, now. Paying upfront, do not call the police or ambulance.

Marta looked over at the injured boy, welling pity now overridden by fear. There was something dangerous in his aura and the way he eyed her, gaze unflinching. After a short hesitation she nodded and proceeded to browse the inn’s inventory.

-I’m incredibly sorry, we’re out of double rooms right now… out of any rooms to be honest, the festival coming next week and all. But there’s only one left - it’s a suite, king bed and kitchen… it was reserved for later tomorrow, though.

The redhead jerked his hand away and lay another 250000 on the table, tripling the previous offer.

-Cancel the booking, we’re taking it.

The lady stood in place, petrified. How much money did the kid have, what was he involved in?

-I’m um... sure... let me show you to your room.

She pulled a strained smile and ushered the boys through the corridor. Gold surveyed the exchange in shock, expression squarely mirroring Marta’s. He followed silently as she lead them to a door and then handed over the keys.
-Have a pleasant stay, let me know if you’d need anything.

Her voice was small and evidently startled. Snapping back into it, the brunette stopped her in a desperate gesture.

-A medkit, please, as soon as possible.

-Yes, one moment, sir.

With that she turned around and walked briskly down the hall.

Silver lumbered to the bed and collapsed back first with a slight ‘oof’. They were finally in relative safety with no fires, toxic smoke, potential Rocket pursuers or police. Strength waning and the drug soon to wear off, it was the time to treat his wounds and make sure none of them were infected.

Slowly, he tried to get himself up. A shooting pain pierced his chest and a lump stuck in his throat - he definitely had at least one rib broken.

-All right, give me a sec.

Gold studied the room - a large living area stretched right in front of them with wide bed at the far end. Just as a spacious, was the kitchen situated to the right.

Silver heard cupboard doors opening and closing, some rattling and a sound of running water. The other returned shortly with a large bowl and a couple of towels.

-Here, you can put that on your head.

With a little smile he stretched his arm out, damp cloth in hand, and placed the bowl on the floor at the foot of the bed. The redhead took the towel with a nod and slapped it on the left side of his face. The cool water felt nice, easing the ceaseless burn of his skin.

Before long, there was a knock on the door. Gold made his way back to the entrance and opened a crack.

-Sirs, the medkit.

Marta was waiting outside the suite, holding a rectangular container in her hands with a couple of extra bundles of gauze on top.

-Thanks.

He grabbed the packed box and closed the door, looking back at his rival. Silver’s second attempt to sit up deemed successful and he was fumbling with his boots, clearly uncomfortable and at a odd angle. Without a word Gold stepped over to the bed and kneeled down, untying the other boy’s left shoe.

-What are you doing?

-Taking your boots off, obviously.

Silver opened his mouth to protest.

-Look, I know what you’re gonna say - that you’re fine, that this is not a big deal. But we both
know that’s not true. I see that you’re hurting, please let me help you.

Gold uttered yet another time today. Getting no response, he took it as an okay to move forward. He slowly pulled both boots off, careful not to move the other’s injured leg. The redhead winced and turned his face away.

When had he grown to be so weak? He’s had countless injuries before, starting with mere cuts, ending with open fractures. He would tend to the lighter ones himself and would leave the rest to the infirmary. At one point pain was the only constant in his life, so what had changed now?

-Um, your pants.

He turned, pulled out of his dismal thoughts by the other’s comment. The brunette was looking up apologetically, hand nervously rubbing the back of his head. The makeshift tape bandage was already laying aside on the floor.

-You need to take off your pants so I can treat the wound.

Silver bit the inside of his mouth. He really had to get his act together. Silently unbuckling his belt, he sat up to pull the pants off his ass. He clenched his teeth as the cloth got peeled off the wound. His upper leg was entirely caked in blood, causing the nylon to easily stick to it.

Gold moved the bowl closer and dabbed a towel in it. He started carefully wiping the skin around the cut. The slicing wound did look quite deep, but at least the bullet didn’t wedge itself in the bone. He seriously doubted his proficiency in taking lead out of someone else’s body, with no anesthetic to boot. The other just stopped him with his hand.

-Don’t bother yourself.

He grabbed a gauze and drenched it in isopropyl alcohol from the medkit. Without hesitation, he firmly pressed it to the wound. Eye squeezed shut, he did not make a sound as the familiar sting burned his flesh. Dabbing it a few more times, he applied a thick layer of gauze and then wrapped it up with a tight bandage.

Secretly, the brunette felt relieved that he wasn’t the one doing it. There was no way around it, but he couldn’t help but feel guilty for causing any more discomfort than he had already been going through. He sat immobile, following his rival’s actions with a morbid fascination - the other’s unnatural tenacity and composure in the situation was formidable.

Silver rotated his torso from side to side slightly, earning another sharp stab to his chest. His earlier predictions were correct. This was the most concerning, as it had a potential to turn into serious complications for the upcoming operation. Pensively, he thought back to the last time he was in a similar predicament. The nurses had to cut his suit open and suction the blood out of his pleura. Well, he conceded, he should at least be grateful he didn’t get a punctured lung this time around.

He shifted, trying to get rid of his jacket, which somehow proved to be a larger feat than he expected. Unwilling to get his clothes ruined over something like this, he reluctantly looked over at kneeling boy. Gold, who was patiently waiting for any further instructions, caught his gaze and readily sat up.

-What should I do?

-Um, well. My ribs are broken, could you…

The brunette felt his heart ache at his rival’s sight yet again. Why was the other so unwilling to ask
for simple assistance even though he was clearly in severe pain? Was seeking and receiving human kindness so abnormal for him?

He didn't say a word as he gently tugged at the jacket’s cloth, pulling it upwards along with the sweat-drenched shirt. He let out a shocked gasp as he surveyed the redhead’s slender frame. An angry bruise was plastered over his chest, circling around to the back, plethora of smaller bruises speckling his arms and stomach, along with an array of older scars and marks.

The other boy’s head was now hanging low, avoiding eye contact.

-You shouldn't have seen me… like this.

He was painfully aware of his condition and could not blame the other for his reaction. How many times has he seen these kinds of wounds before, a ghastly palette of blue and purple, a painting of pain and ruptured blood vessels? He felt truly disgusted with himself - he was finally out in the field on his own terms after a long break and his very first mission ended up with staggering blunder. Was he truly unable to operate without a voice on the radio, was he all but a puppet without a puppet master? There were a dozen things he should’ve done differently - he should’ve waited for that shipment to leave and steal the Rocket’s card key with the fall of the night, he should’ve waited to decrypt that data, then he would’ve known about the ear-piercing sound device that is capable of disabling humans and Pokémon alike, he should’ve built a better housing for the detonator chip, he was aware it was radio equipment he’s dealing with, he should’ve… Harrowing, repressive self-accusations just kept stacking one onto another.

-Pathetic sight, isn’t it? You probably think I’m the largest hypocrite, always criticizing you, yet here I am, completely at your mercy, weak, disgusting, powerless. Can’t take my damned clothes off, not to say carry out a plan without fault.

He felt tears roll down his face. No, no, no, no. Why was this happening now? It weren't even the pain or exhaustion that were steadily breaking through the expiring drug. What he felt was years of self loathing crushing on him in an instant - everything he’d so skillfully locked away, everything he’d been repressing for the last couple of years. The feeling was absolutely crippling.

-Amateurish, pathetic, detestable.

He said mostly to himself, clutching at his forearms, knuckles white, desperately trying to calm down.

-You have literally anything better to do right now rather than being here, babysitting me.

Gold couldn’t believe his ears. After all that he had been through today, his rival still managed to blame himself.

-Hey... look at me.

He was kneeling down, face at the same level as the redhead’s. He grabbed the other boy’s quivering hands and squeezed, ushering him to lift his head up.

-Please look at me.

Silver shook his head, sobs now wracking through his body. He wept only once like this before. He remembered clutching to Blue’s coat, drenching her clothes in tears. The brilliant, audacious Blue that desperately strove to pull him out of his nightmare. That struggled and failed, just as he was failing right now. His body trembled as the last emotional facade ruptured at the memory.
Something broke in Gold at that moment. It was the same boy who beat him and lost to him, the boy that continuously insulted him, the boy that egocentric and stubborn, the boy that bled out, that kept pushing on, the boy that always had to do it all by himself. He felt pain almost physical tearing his heart, he could no longer bear to see him like this.

Careful not to brush over the purple bruises, he pulled his rival into a gentle hug. He could feel the other’s body tensing up in an attempt to push away, but he only tightened the embrace and refused to let go.

-You’re wrong.

Silver held his breath in for another couple moments, containing his sobs and fruitlessly trying to relax.

-If I see that you’re suffering, if you’re hurting and alone, what can I be doing, besides trying to offer my support? How can I choose to be anywhere else? You’re my peer, my rival.

He chuckled softly at the admission.

-But of course I’d care, I’d never hesitate to hold out my hand to you.

He parted, lifting the other’s chin lightly to face him.

-And you’re nothing but weak. I’ve known you only for a short time, but I’ve seen you struggle, I’ve seen you fight. And I can say with certainty - you’re tenacious, you’re brave, you’re resolute. Your perseverance and dedication have no match. I don’t know what happened to you today and I’m not gonna ask, but your self reliance is astounding, if even to a fault... And I couldn’t even start to imagine how you managed to endure all this pain for so long. I would’ve definitely just curled up and died somewhere there in the forest, but you kept going, driving forward.

Gold wiped his own tears that collected in the corners of his eyes and gave the redhead a genuine smile.

-I believe you’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met.

Silver listened to him with wide eyes. What was he saying, they were complete strangers, he knew nothing of him, how could he possibly infer all this from their brief couple of encounters? There was no way he was being sincere, he was just saying all this to make him feel fetter, to make him finally shut the fuck up. And yet, he saw the raw expression on the other boy’s face, eyes slightly red and yet still smiling.

Distractedly, he wondered what kinds of emotions reflected on his own features. Hurt, hatred, anger, or was it gratitude, vulnerability?

Maintaining eye contact for such a long time would've normally make him uncomfortable, but just this once he couldn’t look away. For a moment they stayed like that, silent, breathing, accepting.

Gold finally moved, expression changing to that of cheerful encouragement.

-Here, let me bandage up your chest before you go hating yourself anymore.

He gave him another reassuring smile as he lightly dabbed the wet towel down the other’s chest and back, wiping off the blood and dirt.

-Let me know if it’s too hard to breathe, I’ll loosen it.
He took out a couple of elastic bandages from the medkit and started wrapping them around the other’s body, hoping it would immobilize any fractures. The redhead remained quiet, processing their previous interaction, vacantly staring at his own hands.

All the towels and the water were already filthy, so Gold went to the kitchen to replace it. He then bunched up some clean gauze and soaked in the liquid.

-Last but not the least.

He kneeled to eye level with the sitting boy once again and gently pushed the strands of hair hanging over his left eye to the side. No longer having the strength or desire to resist, Silver simply closed his good eye and leaned slightly forward. Carefully, the brunette brushed the gauze over the other’s forehead and eyebrows. The skin was split just above the hairline - that’s what most likely painted his face crimson - and a dark bruise covered his eyebrow and cheek, effectively sealing the eye shut.

-I’m not sure if it’s little too late, but, you know…

Lingering briefly, he wiped the long streak of dried blood off the other’s temple. He then went through the familiar process with alcohol over the cut and wrapped a sturdy bandage over his rival’s head.

-I’ve never got your name.

He folded a patch out of the gauze and fixed it over the boy’s cheek and brow with medical tape. Silver said nothing. It was strictly against his policy to share his name and other key information with anyone for very particular reasons. Yet at the same time the other trainer hadn’t attempted to interrogate him, questionlessly acceded to his asks and offered his support. And not once had he derided him for this pathetic breakdown. Maybe he owed him at least this much. Body drained and mind hazy from the continuous stress, he felt his eyelids growing heavy.

Not really expecting a reply, Gold got up and rubbed his hands.

-I’m gonna soak your clothes in the tub overnight and, well, probably mine too. I don’t think the laundry service would be readily accepting of these slasher movie props.

He pushed out a little laugh, quite tired himself. Who would’ve guessed that he’d still be able to make jokes after tonight’s daunting experience? He undid the covers and helped his rival into the bed.

-Try to get some rest, you really need it. I’ll be back in a bit to turn off the lights.

Walking through the room, he earnestly picked up the scattered garments, used towels and supplies. He heard a voice call out to him, soft, barely audible, and turned to face his companion.

-Mmm?

-It’s Silver. My name is Silver.
Chapter 3

Gold woke up and groggily rubbed his face. The sun was already out and shining through a crack in the drawn curtains. Wait, curtains? Wasn’t he supposed to be in his tent in the Azalea outskirts? Also why did his throat hurt so bad? He rolled over, stretching, and suddenly found his face buried in long, tangled hair. It starkly smelled of smoke and something metallic.

His eyes flew wide open as yesterday’s events crashed his mind all at once - the explosions, his rival drenched in blood, desperate dash through the woods and the run-down inn. He sat up and spun his head. They were in a huge suite, the only apartment available in the entire motel at the time, sharing a massive king bed.

He looked at it in dismay. This was not the situation he’d expected to share a bed with someone, let alone another guy. He cautiously peered at Silver over the covers and flinched, instantly forgetting his childish concerns over their sleeping arrangement. The redhead was breathing heavily, cheeks hot, dried blood stains speckling his pillow and sheets.

Trying to not make any noise, Gold tiptoed to the kitchen and grabbed a fresh towel and some water. He delicately lowered the damp cloth onto the other’s forehead and placed the glass on the nightstand.

What he really had to do was get some painkillers and fever reducers in addition to the essentials in the medkit. Even he understood that the stuff for first aid was largely inadequate for any further treatment.

He swung by the bathroom and dumped their wet clothing into a plastic laundry bag. About to leave, he caught his reflection in the mirror. A dark handprint shaped bruise enveloped the entire frontal part of his neck. He traced his fingers over it, transfixed. Silver certainly overdid it in his self-defense and was now in for an real earful.

Wavering, the brunette covered the raw mark with his own hand. But could he really condemn the other for acting the way he did? He was hurt, driven into a corner and probably more terrified than Gold himself.

He hung his head and leaned on the sink, acutely remembering the interaction - the blood, the panic, the look in the other boy’s eyes. His hands clutched at the white ceramic.

-He thought I was going to attack him. He thought that I was going to hurt him more…

No, there was no way he’d be able to blame him. Moreover, it was his own fault for jumping him so suddenly.

He straightened and zipped his hoodie all the way up. For now, this and his old bandana would be enough to conceal it.

Sparing one last glance at Silver, he snuck out of the room.

Gold flung the double reception doors open, hoping for a lungful of the crisp morning air after the stuffy suite. He took a wide step forward but halted right before he could take a breath. The entire area surrounding Ilex Forest was covered with a thick layer of smog. It partially blocked out the sun’s rays and spread the pungent smell of burnt plastic all the way up the intercity route. He
moped and pulled up the bandana over his nose in an attempt to save his already burning throat from any more irritation.

Not only did his rival managed to almost die last night, but also caused a local environmental catastrophe. He promised Silver that he wouldn’t ask about what happened, but, honestly, was skeptical that the other would’ve told him even if he did.

Gazing ahead, he followed the main road with his eyes - it stretched all the way from the Daycare, and probably further, to the entrance of the Ilex Forest. A couple of police cars were parked just outside it, blocking the path. Perhaps he could make a quick detour to investigate a little himself just before he hit the shops.

Casually approaching the patrol vehicles, the brunette gave the policemen a friendly wave.

-Good morning, officers!

The two men at the site turned to their visitor, expressions weary, and lazily waved back. Soot streaks on their uniform, eyes bloodshot - they obviously looked like they were on patrol all night.

-Morning. Passage through Ilex Forest is closed, if you’re travelling to Azalea, please use alternate route via south of Goldenrod and Violet Town.

The older man recited with a dull voice, probably his hundredth time this morning.

-Aw, shucks. I was planning to do some training, do you know what happened?

-Yeah kid, sorry.

The other cop chimed in and lit up a cigarette. The already inferior air quality did not seem to faze him in the least.

-Can’t let you through, a campfire got out of hand, burnt the entire campground, set off a few propane tanks - nasty stuff. We’re currently clearing the path.

Campfire, propane tanks? He seriously doubted that, but didn’t let it show nonetheless. Whatever those explosions were that he heard yesterday, that were no propane tanks, he’d seen enough videos on the Internet to know that much. The police must have been working hard to cover something up. He briefly exposed his mouth and smiled.

-Thanks, officers, have a good day. And hang in there!

The older patrolman just lifted his hand in recognition, his partner let out a cloud of smoke.

-You too, kid.

Gold turned around and started walking the direction he came from. He saw a bright yellow “CAUTION” tape and wire fencing stretch from the toll hub and all around the observable perimeter of the forest. Well, shucks, he really wouldn’t be able to sneak in later then, unless he was ready to put in some serious work.

Digging his hands in his pocket he kept going, not intending to loiter around the fence longer than necessary and raise suspicion. He tried to imagine his grouchy rival battling campers and exploding gas tanks in the middle of the night. The very thought made him giggle. Joking aside, though, what did the redhead blow up to burn a good part of the forest, and, as a result, what were the police so adamantly trying to hide? He made a couple more steps on the pavement and absently kicked a
random stray rock ahead of him. What were you doing? What was sheltered in the shadows of Illex?

Suddenly, it struck him - just after their last confrontation in Azalea, Silver dropped something about Team Rocket before disappearing into the forest. Gold begrudgingly recalled their most recent encounter - the redhead ran into him just as he was heading for the gate. He questioned him about the Rockets, outright refusing the believe that he had, indeed, driven them out of Azalea Town. He ridiculed and taunted him and then challenged to a Pokémon battle. “Then let’s see how good you are”, were the words, spoken by his rival, a different kind of flare in his eyes, an opposite emotion to the mostly indifferent exchange at Cherrygrove.

The outcome of that fight still weighed heavily on Gold’s mind - with minimal effort, Silver completely annihilated his team.

“Weak trainers, weak Pokémon - it doesn’t matter who or what. This goes for Team Rocket too. You said you beat them, yet truthfully you never stood a chance. Keep out of my way”. The words stung, this was the first time on his journey he lost to anyone - trainers, gym leaders or even Rocket goons alike. Liberating the Slowpoke Well sure boosted his ego, while the devastating loss to his rival sent him crashing right back to the ground.

Gold dragged his palm over his face - now wasn’t the time to revel in self-pity, this was not about him, this was about Silver. Promptly after their fight his rival departed, and the next time they met was at the disastrous fire last night. He walked a couple more meters, Silver’s words circling around in his head - ‘Team Rocket’, ‘never stood a chance’, ‘keep out of my way’, ‘Team Rocket’, ‘beat them’, ‘Team’... Well of course, how could he be so blind?! The redhead was taking on the criminal team and, from the looks of it, all on his own. He tracked down some secret base in that forest and probably felt confident enough to engage. Although, something went terribly wrong and he ended up getting hurt. “Reckless and fearless, aren’t you, Silver?”, he caught himself thinking as he punted the unfortunate pebble once more. What about the explosions then, were they intentional or an accident as well? Given the enhanced security at the forest, the only way to find out would be to ask him directly.

Most of the puzzle pieced together, the brunette finally reached the Daycare and the miniature shopping center behind it. He got several brands of painkillers, unsure which one would work best, at the local pharmacy along with a few Potions for his Pokémon. He later swung by a sandwich shop and grabbed two ‘deal of the day’ footlongs.

Wondering if he forgot anything, he turned back once again. Him and his rival were on the same side after all. No matter what his objectives were, Silver was selflessly fighting Team Rocket to the point of grisly wounds and broken bones. There was no way Gold could leave him alone in this - he despised the criminal team just as much, probably never willing to forgive their cruel exploitation of Pokémon. And what they did to Silver just added fuel to fire.

It would only be natural to join forces and confront the enemy together. Their Pokémon would balance each other’s typing and abilities, while they could have one another’s back, able to avoid any disastrous outcomes in the future battles. He nodded to himself - this was positively the best course of action and quite the perfect plan.

Gold found Silver sitting upright in the bed, leaning on a pile of pillows, right knee under his elbow. A pair of headphones were plugged into his Pokégear and a tablet-like device rested in his hands.
-Morning, Silver! How’re you feeling?

The teen briefly looked up from his work with twinge of resentment at the other’s cheerful tone.

-Like a truck ran over me.

The brunette grimaced. He couldn’t even start to imagine the torment the other must be going through. He noticed a folded towel with a bloody bandage lying on the other’s nightstand, an empty syringe sat right next to them.

-Um yeah... you were having a fever earlier. I really didn’t want to wake you up, so, sorry, that was the best I could do.

The other paused whatever he was listening to and followed Gold’s gaze to the items on the bedside table.

-I know. This type of painkiller is most effective, though it also includes a dose of Modafinil in it, among other things.

-Modafinil?

-Drug to keep one alert, so wouldn’t have worked for a pleasant nap.

-I see… Is it even legal?

-I’ve no obligation to answer that.

Silver stared at him blankly, while Gold resisted the urge to roll his eyes - why did he even bother ask. Judging from his previous actions at Prof. Elm’s lab and in the Ilex Forest - given these were the only ones he knew of - the other did not exactly shun from any kind of unlawful activity.

-Well, couldn’t get any of that kind, but here are some over the counter ones.

He emptied his spoils on the unoccupied side of the bed. The redhead looked through the boxes of medication, nodding at a couple of them. He then reached for his bag and pulled out the thick bundle of cash held together by a metal clip.

-Take however much you need for these. I don’t want to owe more than I already do.

Huh? Not this again. This time Gold actually rolled his eyes.

-How many times do I have to tell you, I’m not helping you out of vanity or self-interest, I’m helping you because I want to.

Before Silver could make any objections he added.

-Besides, you paid a fortune for this place already. What are you up to anyway?

This mercenary discussion just felt wrong to him and, thankfully, the other chose not to press it.

-Looking into some data. It’s none to your concern.

Somehow the response did not surprise him one bit.

-Is there anything I could assist you with?
Gold shrugged, not that he expected to be welcomed with open arms either. In this case, he should exchange some information of his own to start it off.

Okay. Well, I took a walk earlier today and it seems the whole perimeter of the Ilex Forest is shut down by the police. They’re not letting anyone in, saying there was a campfire accident, but they’re hiding what really happened, aren’t they?

He nodded at the other with a conspiratorial look. Silver’s back turned rigid.

Poor dudes looked positively beat, probably sick of pubbies like me going around asking questions.

What did you tell them?

The brunette just waved his hand.

Oh, nothing really. They kept going on how the campground got on fire and propane tanks started exploding--

He felt a tight grip on his wrist.


Silver was watching him with a sinister glint in the eye.

Ow ow, let go.

He tried to wrestle his arm out and the other applied more pressure.

Look, I didn’t tell them anything - about you or yesterday. And wasn’t planning to, so chill out.

Finally released, he gingerly rubbed his arm. How could the redhead be so strong?

Do not treat this like a game and do not tell me to ‘chill out’. I’ve been monitoring the police frequency all morning and if I’ve heard any mentions of a nosy little trainer meddling in matters that did not involve them, it would’ve ended poorly for them.

Gold reluctantly locked his gaze with his rival - Silver was dead serious.

I thought you might benefit from some outside info, that all.

I require no such thing and I need you to stay out of this.

How can I stay out of this when I saw you bleeding in the forest like that?

Silver massaged the bridge of his nose, irritation building. Being reminded of his recent near-fatal failure and a pair of prying eyes were the last things he needed right now. He exhaled, keeping his voice as calm as possible.

Gold, listen. I... appreciate what you’ve done until now, but from here on out we’re on our own. Go camp, shop at the Goldenrod mall, challenge the gym leader, I don’t care. Do not seek me out and do not try to contact me.

Not entirely beat down by Silver’s attitude, Gold still found rage building at the offhanded
-Do you really think I’m an idiot, do you think I don't see what's going on? I don’t know what your whole deal is, but those explosions yesterday, the gunshots, the fire, whatever you’re working on right now - you’re trying to take on Team Rocket by yourself, aren’t you? I’m not gonna let that happen.

Silver’s expression went back from annoyed to menacing in a split second. The brunette felt his feet grow cold - this was not how he planned to propose their partnership at all.

-Hold on, I don’t mean it like that. What I’m saying is - I’m gonna help you.

-Once again, I do not need y--

-Please, just hear me out. You know I fought Rocket at Azalea town, they’re despicable people and what they did to those Pokémon is unforgivable. What they did to you is unforgivable. I want them gone as much as you do. Let’s--

The redhead sat up and smashed the headboard with the side of his fist, silencing him.

-Do not interrupt me. I couldn’t care less about the Pokémon and for the other part - it’s none of your business.

Involuntarily, Gold shrunk away.

-What is it in for you then, why are you trying to fight them so hard anyway?

-I have my reasons.

-Fine, and I have mine.

-For the last time - no.

-Why, why are you so against it? We clearly have the same final objective here, the same enemy. Despite all your snarky insults I’m not as weak as you paint me to be, I have won over you previously, if you care to recall. Let’s join our forces, we can be allies.

He looked at his rival and potential partner with hope in his eyes, just to be shut down once again.

-I advise you to drop it. This is for your own good.

The boy groaned under his breath. He was getting absolutely nowhere with this, so he would have to switch tactics.

-Why are you so confident you can handle it on your own then? Something obviously went wrong yesterday, that won’t happen if we have each other’s backs.

Silver leaned back again and lifted his arm quizzically.

-Okay, counter question then - how can you guarantee you’ll contribute?

-Huh? I’ll battle against the Rockets alongside you, of course. If anything goes south, we’ll figure a way out of it. You know, double the brawn, double the brain.

The redhead just threw him a sardonic look.
I see you have been blinded by your minute success at the Slowpoke Well. Let me relieve you of the pink glasses clouding your vision - the scum you fought at the Well were no other than bottom ranking grunts, running a lowly side operation to acquire some cash. They had nothing to do with the main force that is the newly revived Team Rocket. Do you even know what their next target is?

“Way to diminish my achievements, Silver”, Gold bitterly thought to himself. As for the other matter, he genuinely had no clue.

-Um… no.

-Do you know the very basics of self defense, basics of combat?

-I mean I’ve been in fights before.

-Do you know how to use your Pokémon in extreme situations outside of a friendly battle?

His rival was definitely getting the upper hand here, but he was not ready to back down so easily.

-So what if I don’t know any of those things, what makes you act so superior? Just because you beat me that one time in Azalea, it doesn’t mean you’re above me now! What do you have to show for yourself, all I’ve heard is unbased claims so far.

-Very well.

Silver removed both his headphones and got off the bed. If he couldn’t talk sense into the dim-witted trainer, maybe beating some in would prove more effective. He stood in the open area in front of the window and gestured the other to move to his side. Unsure what this sudden display meant, the brunette got up and hesitantly walked around to face the taller teen.

-Punch me in the face.

-What?

-Lay a single hit on me and I will consider your proposal.

Gold looked at the boy standing in front of him. Silver was barefoot, wearing a pair of plain black boxers and shirt, bruises covering his arms and legs, head heavily bandaged.

-Are… are you sure?

The redhead just nodded and gestured at his body.

-I will consider this a fair handicap. So, do we have a deal?

He blinked in confusion. Was his rival that dismissive of his abilities that he was expecting to win a fistfight even with all those injuries? If anything, he was throwing him an easy victory. Deciding to fight half power in order not to aggravate the other’s health any further, he nodded.

-Sure, deal.

He balled up his hand into a fist and swung it at Silver, aiming for his chin. The other countered effortlessly, blocking the hit with the back of his wrist then extending his own arm, palm now in the brunette’s face. Momentarily, he lowered it back to his side. The shorter teen flung a hook with his other fist, only to be dodged by a slight lean backwards.

Was he mocking him? Initial hesitation gone, Gold was not going to go easy on his opponent. He
sprung forth. The redhead deflected the jab with his elbow and gave the other’s now open chest a tap with the ball of his hand. Anger still churning, he turned around and lifted his left leg, ready to strike Silver’s side. A quick grab on his ankle followed by a shove sent him toppling to the floor.

Silver looked positively bored.

-Are you done? I think the situation is clear.

He turned his back and stepped toward the bed. Unwilling to give up, Gold attempted another blow at the other’s ear. Surely he couldn’t avoid or deter if he wasn’t looking.

-Playing dirty, aren’t you?

Swiftly turning his torso, Silver blocked the hit, grabbing the attacker’s elbow with his other hand and twisted hard. Gold fell face forward onto the covers, arm locked behind his back. Trying to move his body any direction and failing, he groaned a sign of surrender - Silver had effectively pinned him to the bed. The standing teen released him and stepped back, giving room for him to get back onto his feet.

Gold flexed his joint, it was the second time this particular arm was assaulted today. His shoulders slouched as he considered his performance, this was an utter and indisputable defeat.

-How did you do it? I thought I had you that last time.

-Lack of vision is not equal to lack of awareness.

-Yeah… but how could you so easily predict all of my attacks?

-I’ve trained from a young age. And you - you’re an amateur.

The brunette looked down at his feet unsure what to say. The other was, after all, stating the truth. How could he have known that his rival was some kind of ninja under his dispassionate facade? But come to think of it, under all the bruises and scars covering it, the other’s body did seem rather well toned.

Absently, he touched his neck through the colored cloth - maybe he shouldn’t have jumped the bet, naively judging by the other’s physical appearance or state of health.

-Anyhow, I’ve won fair and square.

-Yes.

-You will not interfere with my work and would not make any foolish moves on Team Rocket of your own.

-Yes...

-You will vacate this room by the evening.

-Ye… what? That wasn’t the deal!

-‘Not interfere with my work’ evidently implies that.

-No, it does not. This giant suite has plenty space for both of us. I’m staying here until the festival, whether you like it or not. I’ll pay the extra expenses if that would be necessary.
Silver just rubbed his temples.

-If you insist. Do not pester me any further.

With that he threw the covers back and got in bed, pointedly plugging his headphones in and firing up his tablet. The device promptly sprang back to life with countless tables and diagrams filling the screen.

Feeling absolutely dejected, Gold circled around and sat on his side of the bed. What was he supposed to do now? If only the other wasn’t so exclusive to receiving any form of assistance, he would’ve trained, they would’ve worked this out, they would... The brunette shook his head - no, he could not push this any further, he has given his word. But was he truly out of options here? He needed time to think this new situation over and come up with a good reason for Silver to change his mind.

Preparing to leave once again, he picked up his backpack - it weighed down noticeably in his hand. That’s right, neither of them has eaten anything since yesterday. He dug to the bottom of the bag and retrieved two slightly battered sandwiches.

- Breakfast, if you fancy.

He gave a quick heads up and tossed the wrap the other boy’s direction. Without looking up, Silver snatched the sandwich mid air. Gold raised his eyebrows and pulled at the paper wraps of his own sub, once more impressed by the other’s instantaneous reaction.

- Well, see you later then.

He dropped as he made his way toward the door.
Chapter 4

Gold wandered through the outskirts of Goldenrod, slowly making his way to the metropolis. He had just had another argument with his rival and in the heat of the moment agreed to that stupid bet that he had no odds at winning, throwing away his only chance to team up with Silver against Team Rocket. And not only that - he had promised to not confront the enemy on his own. After seeing the fire yesterday, seeing the redhead hurting, struggling with all his might, he just could not bear the idea of him marching into the Rocket’s headquarters, wherever they might be, all by himself. No matter how intricate and risk averse the other’s master plan was, even with a slight error the conflict could instantly turn into a suicide mission. But even this wasn’t the most terrifying part - Silver was well aware of the predicament and was going to do it anyway. The brunette clenched his fists in his pockets. “Just what are your reasons? What did Team Rocket do to you in the past, that you’re willing to fight like this? And most importantly, what could I still do to help you?”

Silver did raise quite a reasonable question - how could he contribute? True, he was no match for him in hand to hand combat, but why should that even matter, they lived in a world where Pokémon battles decided everything. Or did they? And what were the extreme situations that the redhead mentioned? At this point he had accumulated more questions than answers.

There was one thing he was certain in - he could no longer return to his careless Pokémon journey, pretending that nothing ever happened. Laughing away with his friends, challenging gyms, collecting Pokémon just didn’t seem right anymore, not after what he had saw and heard yesterday. There must be a way, he just hadn’t come up with it yet.

An insistent buzzing drew him out of his thoughts - how long had his Pokégear been ringing? He looked at the little screen and felt panic swelling within him - 15 messages and 7 missed calls from mum. Nervously, he tapped the little phone button.

-Gold?

-Hi mum…

-OH MY GOD GOLD WHY DIDN’T YOU PICK UP THE PHONE?!

There it was. Gold shut his eyes and prepared himself for a lengthy lecture. He settled on agreeing with anything she said, or he’d never hear the end of it.

-I’ve been calling and texting you since early morning, can you even imagine how worried I was?

-Sorry, mum. I must’ve just left my Pokégear somewhere--

-Left it somewhere? Oh Gold, how could you do this to me? It’s all over the news - the fire in the Ilex Forest. I’ve heard the entire campground burned down, such a terrible accident. Are you ok? Last time we talked you were leaving Azalea, weren’t you? Are you hurt? You weren’t in the forest where you?

-Mum, mum, slow down a little. I’m ok. I got out of the forest before the fire happened, I’m completely safe.

-Oh thank goodness, you were not replying and I thought that you might’ve… Nevermind, I’m so glad you’re safe! Where are you right now?

-I’m in a little hostel in north end Goldenrod, was pretty hard to find a spot. It’s a pretty cool place,
there are people from different regions here.

Gold rubbed the back of his head and laughed slightly. He was surprised how easy it became to lie to his mum. He didn’t tell her about his little detour at Slowpoke Well earlier, and sure as hell wasn’t going to tell about what he was planning to do now.

-That’s so nice to hear, honey. It’s always great to make a bunch of new friends.

He sighed - the only person who’s friendship he cared about right now just told him to get lost and keep out of his way.

-Yeah, it’s quite great…

-Is there something that’s bothering you, sweetheart?

“Astute as always, mum”, the boy thought to himself.

-Nah, it’s all good. Nothing that can’t be solved with a large pepperoni pizza and a Soda Pop.

-You really should lay off on all of that fast food, you know that’s not healthy.

-Yeah, yeah, I know, mum.

-Well, I was really happy to hear your voice. Don’t leave you Pokégear lying around anymore, ok?

-Ok, I promise.

-Take care, honey! I love you.

-Love you too, mum.

The Pokégear bleeped, indicating the end of the call. Gold finally exhaled and put his arm down. He really should do better than ignore his mum’s calls next time, but, then again, so many things were going on, no wonder he lost track of the messages.

He thought back to her words regarding the fire - so it was on the news now, and they were still sticking to the campfire story. That did make sense, they were probably trying to avoid mass hysteria at Rocket’s prospective return. Or, perhaps, whatever facility his rival blew up there was top secret. Either way, it would be next to impossible to find out any more information without breaking his promise to Silver at this point.

He smiled bitterly, mulling over his current position. If only a large pizza and a fizzy drink could actually put an end to all his woes.

He walked another couple of meters in thoughtful silence, then tapped the orb on his belt, letting Croconaw out of his Poké Ball.

-Hey buddy, wanna battle some Rattatas?

The blue bipedal creature jumped up and down excitedly and ran into the grass.

They trained all the way to Goldenrod, halting only when the areas turned way too urban for Pokémon skirmishes. Battling wild Pokémon always helped him clear his mind, but the pushing circumstance still weighed him down heavily. Hopeful that the large city would inspire some revolutionary ideas, Gold stepped onto the busy streets.
He browsed the city center for a good couple of hours. Everything in Goldenrod was just huge - the Pokécenter complex took up an entire district, probably marking the largest Pokémon hospital in Johto, the shopping mall at least 6 stories high was towering over the main street, countless glass high-rises were piercing the sky. He saw the famous Radio Tower reflecting the sun’s rays in the distance, easily another ten blocks away. This was the first time in his life he saw so many people gathered in one place as well. Homey little New Bark Town could not hold a candle to this monster of a city.

Settling on visiting just shopping center for today, Gold entered the crowded building. He checked floor by floor at a time - the selection of Goldenrod’s main commercial hub was astounding. One could get anything starting with regular Potions and ending with exotic supplements that each cost a little fortune. He got his Pokémon’s favorite snacks and a few for himself and sat on one of the benches on the 6th floor. It was an open rooftop with a row of vending machines and a picturesque view of the sun lit city and the rolling hills behind it. A fresh breeze ruffled his hair as he stared into the distance admiring the stunning scenery.

-Excuse me. Do you mind taking a picture of us?

A girl was leaning beside him, camera in an outstretched hand.

-Yeah, sure!

He took the device and stood up. The girl smiled and gestured her friend to join her at the railing. They posed - first together, then apart, varying their postures, while Gold took a number of snapshots from different angles. He wondered absently, if Silver would’ve been willing to join him at this viewing deck, if he would’ve enjoyed seeing the sun set over the sprawling city together. He promptly shook his head. What was he even thinking, the redhead would’ve made fun of him for even considering it. But then again, he was sitting in the stuffy inn all day, hurting, alone. He probably didn’t need Gold’s company, but the very idea of this still made the brunette inexplicably guilty.

-Sorry, I’ve somewhere I need to be.

He hastily returned the camera back to its owner and ran for the elevators exit.

It took longer than he expected to get out of Goldenrod. As the sun was setting and the street lights started to turn on, a new surge of people filled the avenue - tourists, day workers, travelers have all spilled onto the streets to celebrate the last warm days of the season. Gold battled his way through the crowds and by the time he reached the Daycare the dusk had already fallen.

As he walked down the side road leading to the inn, he noticed bright flashes coming from behind the trees to the east. He snuck up, poking his head from behind one of the bushes.

A familiar redhead was yelling commands at two of his Pokémon that were fiercely battling each other in the secluded clearing of the forest.

-Sneasel, you’re at a type disadvantage, don’t let that faze you, go faster - Agility, then Fury Swipes! Quilava, don’t get distracted, Smokescreen, then Flame Charge, take him out!

The two Pokémon were a blur of motion, taking and evading hits at amazing speeds. Silver moved around the makeshift arena, pointing out any misses or flaws in the creatures’ attacks. A cloud of dust and smoke erupted in the area, causing him to go into a horrible coughing fit. Sneasel and
Quilava halted, looking with concerned expressions at their trainer.

Gold stepped out from behind the trees and approached the other boy. He noticed a fresh splotch of blood covering his sleeve.

-Silver, what are you doing out here, you should be resting!

The redhead turned and threw a glare at the other teen.

-Who are you to tell me what to do and what not to?

-No, I just… You're hurt, you shouldn’t be moving like that.

-I’m fine, just leave me alone.

-No, you’re not! Let’s go home.

-I said leave me the fuck alone.

-I will not! You can lie to me all you want, but at least don’t lie to yourself - it hurts, doesn’t it?!

Please stop--

-Ok, yes, it hurts - I’m choking up blood, I’ve got three cracked ribs, a gunshot wound and can’t feel the entire left side of my face, so yes. It. Fucking. Hurts. Gold, what the hell do you want from me?

-I… want you to stop pushing yourself so hard. Both you and your Pokémon.

-If I’m not gonna do it who will? You? Team Galactic? Do you know how little time I’ve got until this whole thing goes down? I’ve been in way worse situations before, this is no more than a mere speedbump. Now out of my way.

He pushed past the other boy and toward his Pokémon, blood still running from the side of his mouth.

-Who the hell told you to stop. Fight, until one is unable to continue!

The tired Pokémon hesitantly took their battle positions and got ready to attack once more. Their coats were covered in dust, cuts and patches of burned fur.

Gold could no longer bear to watch his rival beat himself and his Pokémon up. There was a limit to one’s tenacity, and Silver was crossing the line. With a swift motion he snatched a Poké Ball off his belt, releasing the occupant in a red flash.

-Croconaw, SURF!

He’d gotten the HM as a gift from a family relative a long time ago and was thrilled to teach it to his water type starter as soon as he could. Unfortunately, it was too physically taxing for the little Totodile to reproduce altogether and Croconaw still had trouble controlling it.

Trying to focus and failing, the Pokémon unleashed the attack, full power. The entire clearing was instantly flooded with water, covering both trainers and their Pokémon head to toe.

-What the--

Silver was irate. He got up to his feet, soaking wet, bandage on his head now loose and bleeding
renewed. Gold pushed himself off the ground as well.

-I asked you to stop! If you can’t understand spoken word there was another way to cool you off.

The brunette was clutching his Poké Ball, body in a defensive stance.

-I’m… sorry I ruined your bandages, but you weren’t doing yourself any service here either. We should go home. Now.

He expected more insults to fly his way, but this time around the redhead said nothing and just strode past him with a heavy limp.

-Fine, it’s night anyway. Sneasel, Quilava, get back.

Gold thought of offering the other his support, but from the look of it Silver was not planning to go back on his dignity more than he already has. He retrieved his Pokémon as well and quietly tailed the taller boy, careful to put at least several meters between them.

After the events of the previous night Marta was delighted to find that today’s shift was going without issue. The troublesome tenants from room 215 did not cause any commotion, mostly keeping to themselves in their room behind a permanent ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign.

The door flew open and the red haired teen marched past her. He carried water all over the reception and turned straight to corridor leading to their room, ignoring her greeting completely. The brunette followed suit, warily closing the door behind him. He smiled apologetically.

-Hi, sorry about that, didn’t mean to make a mess!

-Um… please don’t worry about it. Are you alright, though?

-Yeah, yeah, totally fine. I’ll ugh… bring the laundry out again soon. Have a great night!

With that he gave a little wave and disappeared behind the corner as well.

Marta sighed - just what were those boys up to? She then remembered the fat stack of bills stashed under her counter and shook her head. This was none of her business.

Gold entered their room and did not find Silver in any of the common areas. A wet jacket was thrown on one of the kitchen chairs, the sound of running water was coming from the bathroom.

-Silver, you ok?

Getting no response from the other teen, he decided to leave him for the time being. Surely his rival didn't want to see his face after what he's done just fifteen minutes ago. He fumbled around his bag and changed out if his own wet clothes.

The water stopped and there was silence now. Not sure how to occupy himself, the brunette flipped through the free channels available on the inn’s outmoded entertainment center. Rather limited in his options he settled on a rerun of an old series he used to watch. He’d rush home every day after Trainers’ School to catch the first minutes of the show and listen to the upbeat opening.
The theme song was just as he remembered it, but everything else, instead of inducing warm and pleasant nostalgia, just seemed to fall completely flat. The characters were dull, their motivations questionable and actions downright dumb at times. And he didn’t even want to get started on the exceptionally lazy animation of the action sequences.

He sat through one insipid episode and then switched the channel to a documentary about Shellders’ eating habits which was just as boring, but at least didn’t ruin his childhood memories. It did remind him though, that it was probably about time for dinner.

He browsed the inn’s catalogue for a menu and then called into the reception to place an order.

About half an hour later the pasta with meatballs was delivered to their door. He placed the plates on the table, ready to dig in, nourishment from the morning’s sandwich and evening snack long gone. Grabbing a fork, he paused - it would probably be rude to eat without Silver. He fed a couple of bars he bought earlier to the overjoyed Aipom, Croconaw, Flaaffy and Togepi and then sent them to rest back to their Poké Balls.

Now that even the documentary had ended and he’d set the TV on mute, the room was eerily quiet. He turned towards the bathroom and tried to make out anything indicating life, really hoping the foolhardy redhead was doing alright.

- Hey, Silver.

No reply.

- Hey, do you need any help or anything?

Still nothing.

- Silver?

Could he have passed out in the shower? He wasn't looking that great earlier, for sure. Gold paced around the room for another couple of minutes. What if the other fell unconscious in the tub and hit his head? He was fairly confident he would’ve heard if that were the case, although he did get distracted by the inane show and meatballs for a bit.

Another few long moments of strained silence passed by, disturbed only by the faint buzz of the TV set.

That was it, he couldn’t stand to wait any longer. Bodily, he charged into the bathroom door. The primitive deadbolt flew off the hinge, unable to hold the impact, and hit the floor with an echoing clang. The wooden door had slammed open.

Silver was leaning back in the tub, eyes closed, expression relaxed for the first time in the last two days.

- Are you… okay?

The other boy languidly cracked one eye open. He felt so fucking tired.

- Does the word ‘privacy’ not exist in your books?

Gold suddenly realized what he had done - he had just barged in on the other peacefully taking a bath. He instantly turned red in the face.
-I’m uh... sorry! I thought you might’ve--

-I what - collapsed? Committed suicide? Are you trying to insult me?

-Um yes, actually no... but I ugh, I thought, you didn’t reply, so I...

He was positively spluttering now, trying to look anywhere but Silver’s face. He noticed a pile of wet clothes and bloody bandages in the corner. The tub wasn’t filled all the way up, water a pale pink color.

-Your leg, how did--

-Sealed it with the medical tape. Now get the fuck out.

-Yes, I’m so sorry.

He said once again and closed the door as best as he could with the bolt now lying on the worn tiles across the room.

He landed on the bed with a thump and covered his face with his hands. He was such a freaking idiot. Why the hell did he think something would be wrong with his rival? The redhead was not at all frail, that has been clearly established and certainly could take care of himself. But still, he could not help but worry about the other teen and act on impulse - what would’ve anybody else done if they heard nothing but dead silence for over a damn hour?

Invading the other’s privacy definitely hadn’t helped at earning brownie points in his grand mission of making him change his mind. He has ruined it all now, Silver hates him even more and is going to run him out of the inn the moment he gets out of the shower. No meatballs or Pokésnacks are going to save him from his fate. It was done for.

Fatalistic thoughts circling his head, he sat feeling guilty and downhearted. None of this was going in his favour. Not only had he wasted his shot at becoming the other’s ally, but also screwed up any other possibility of assisting him. If only there was a silver bullet to this problem, something that he couldn’t refuse, something that he wanted… Gold held his breath - hold on, there still was one thing he could do. Silver was obsessed with strength, power and control, wasn’t he? And he’d go to great lengths to obtain them, not giving a second thought.

Yes, this might still work.

He jumped up and made a few loops around the bedroom. He then sat back on the mattress and waited patiently, practicing the words in his head.

The other teen walked out of the bathroom and grabbed the medkit that was set aside. Without saying a word he sat down on the other side of their huge bed and applied a tight bandage to his leg. He prodded at the top of his head, pinpointing the wound, and wrapped a fresh bandage there as well, then adding a new patch to his cheek. He looked over his chest and reached for the elastic bandage, just to meet Gold’s hand holding onto it.

-Let me.

Surprisingly, the other boy did not object, nor further scold him for the incident earlier. He silently raised his arms and let him tend to his injuries. He nodded after the other finished and threw his feet on the bed and his head back onto the upright pillow.

This docile, quiet behaviour scared Gold way more than if Silver would’ve been yelling at him.
right now. He wasn’t sure if he should say anything, but the other was the first to start talking.

-This always happens when the drug wears off. Gets one through the day, but in the end it all comes crashing back at you - the pain, the exhaustion, it all comes back.

Gold felt sorrow filling up his heart for his companion - if only he could do anything to ease the other’s anguish. Silver simply rocked his head.

-Don’t waste your pity on me, I know what I signed up for.

-Can I get you one of the lighter painkillers so you’d be able to sleep?

-It won’t be any use. I’ve taken two of the previous one today, I’d need a higher dose to come into effect and cover the withdrawal.

The brunette winced, whatever that drug was, it almost certainly went past prescription grade. And the immediate implication that the other had to use it previously was no less troubling. “Silver, what did you sign up for?” But that was a question for another time.

-Um, Silver… about our talk this morning.

-I really have no energy for this.

-Please, I won’t ask to join you anymore, I promised already. Just… just hear me out.

Silver turned his head slightly.

-I know you’re adamant about doing it yourself, and even though it pains me to leave you alone in this, I respect your decisions. But I also know you’re always in pursuit of strength, constantly seeking new sources of power, that’s why you stole that starter from Prof Elm’s lab, didn’t you?

He looked at the other boy to make sure he was listening.

-So?

-So, if I cannot be an ally in your plan, I’d like you to take my Pokémon.

His rival stared at him, confounded. The foolish trainer was willing to give his Pokémon away for a dubious cause? To a stranger, a thief no least. Wasn’t he the one that was always preaching love and friendship for his companions, that he would not give it up for anything?

-Why would you do that? I’m nobody to you, my intentions have nothing to do with you.

-That’s not true. You probably hate me by now and don’t care to hear this, but know that I admire your dedication and intent, whatever your motives may be. As I cannot help you directly, I’d love you to use my Pokémon. I’m sorry to be parted with either of them, but I’d feel better if they were accompanying you on your mission. I’m sure they would understand.

Silver distrustfully weighed the other’s words in his mind. There was no logic in this, it must’ve been some useless trick. Nobody in their right mind would voluntarily hand over their Pokémon, moreover insist on it, and especially not to the likes of him.

-Why are you willing to go this far?

-I… You know, you were right, I am not as strong as you - I can’t beat you in a fist fight and I’ve never used my Pokémon in extreme situations outside of a casual battle. I don’t know what
Rocket’s next target is or how to approach this whole thing. But I’m persistent, I’m a fast learner, I’m willing to train day and night, I would’ve worked my hardest if you accepted me as an ally. But I also know that is out of the question now.

Unable to look at his rival any further, Gold turned his head and stared at his knees.

-I think I understand now why you were so harsh with me earlier, you were just trying to protect me, but I… I just can’t stand the idea of you getting hurt anymore like this. So my last option is to offer you my Pokémon. Unlike me, they’re not weak, they can take all that you throw at them, I’m sure of that. And besides, doesn’t your current party miss a water and electric type? It should be a good match.

The redhead stayed silent for a couple of seconds, deliberating. Something about this exchange struck him with an uncanny sense of a deja-vu. Another room in another life floated to his mind. They were sitting in a dimmed place, with only the faint light from the laptop screen illuminating their faces. He was still recovering from his injuries from the last mission, so he had an opportunity to sneak out to spend his time with Blue.

The monochrome console was flooded with logs, all his consecutive breach attempts blatantly shot down by the advanced firewall. He typed in string after string of chained commands, desperately trying to break through. Suddenly, the speakers gave a tiny bleep - access was granted.

-Hey there, you sure are a quick learner, Sil!

Blue rubbed his head affectionately and gave him a small hug.

-You know I shouldn’t be doing this, you shouldn’t be doing this.

-Of course not, but that’s where it gets fun!

-I’m not talking about just the hacking, though. You mustn’t be involved with me, you might get caught.

-Haven’t we talked about this? You don’t have to worry about me, kiddo, I can take care of myself.

-But--

She just put a finger on his lips.

-Shhh. I’m aware of the risks, but this is my decision, you cannot make it for me.

“You cannot make it for me,” said Blue. And then, he vividly remembered the ultimate disaster it all ended in. The sheer memory made him shudder. Would he be making the same mistake he did last time, by letting Gold stay by his side? Blue was trained, she knew what she was doing, she did not need protection, but he was the one that had to save her in the end. Would he be able to go through all of this again, may the need arise?

Silver shook his head. None of that would be necessary, he managed to secure the other trainer’s safety already. No matter what he says, it has all been decided already. And yet, the words tumbled out of his mouth on their own volition.

-Fine.

The brunette tensed up, mixed feelings of anticipation and dread building up - this was the moment the other would name the Pokémon he was going to take with him.
-I cannot take your Pokémon.

Huh? But didn’t he just...

-You will refrain from any stupid and careless actions, you will do exactly as I say. I’ll brief you on the details tomorrow.

Gold lifted his head and stared wide-eyed, not quite believing his ears.

-Wait, does that mean--

-Don’t make me regret it.

The redhead said quietly, mostly to himself.

-Thank you! I won’t let you down!

He beamed, visibly resisting the urge to hug the other boy. It worked, it worked, it worked! He wasn’t sure what exactly made Silver reverse his stance, but his last minute plan actually worked. The conditions were rather binding, but he’d lost all his bargaining power hours ago. Feeling ecstatic, he sprang up, celebrating his little victory.

-I uh... Right! I ordered some food. But it must be cold by now.

Energetically, he spun on the balls of his feet and sized up the neglected meatballs on the kitchen table.

-One sec, gotta reheat.

While he was fiddling with the microwave, Silver closed his eyes and briefly lost himself in thought once again. Was it the right decision after all - having an amateur assist him in his operation? Uncharacteristic to himself, he agreed entirely on impulse, the faint memory of Blue still lurking at the back of his mind. What was it about the other boy that made him lower his guard like this? This was the second time already he had gone against his convictions. He did not dislike the him, despite what the other has made up in his mind. His loud, meddlesome antics and excessive empathy to everything that moved were truly irritating at times, his character and attitude being nothing but Silver’s polar opposite, and yet, at the same time, there was a feeling he couldn’t shake off. The jaunty teen unmistakably reminded him of somebody from a long time ago, a person who only existed as a pallid ghost of the past - his younger self. A young boy that still believed there was escape from this vicious circle, a boy that was, perhaps, a little bit more trusting and, doubtlessly, a lot less broken.

-Here ya go, I hope you like meatballs. If not I can get something else.

The redhead nodded and took the plate, placing it on his lap. The other sat next to him cross legged on the bed, and chowed on his own portion.

-Mmm so good, I haven’t really had anything since that sandwich yanno.

He said with his signature grin, mouth full of pasta and sauce.

-Don’t get food on the sheets.

Silver dropped reproachfully, but there was no malice in his voice. He looked at the carefree trainer, envying his blissfully ignorant enthusiasm.
“Gold, I hope you won't grow to regret this either.”
Chapter 5

-I’m going to let Team Rocket take over the Radio Tower.
-What? Why? If you know when the attack is happening, why not try to prevent it?

The two boys sat on the bed as Silver moved windows and folders on his miniature tablet. He had taken a triple dose of the strongest over-the-counter painkiller and was feeling more or less alive once again.

-No, for once we have similar objectives here. The Rockets are going to broadcast their return, as well as reach out to Giovanni. This is a long shot, but there’s a possibility he might respond. They will be recruiting new members in the time being, and it might hinder our advances, but that’s risk I’m willing to take in return for their leader’s whereabouts.

-Hold on, they’re going to reach out to him? The news did say he went underground after that incident three years ago, but I’d just assumed he was behind it all again trying to revive his former glory or whatnot.

-According to the official version and even Rocket’s communications - he’s not involved. But, trust me, at the top of his power, you couldn’t even comprehend the extent of his operations. He might be passively watching these attacks from the sidelines, or manipulating them from within - at this point there’s no way to tell.

-Huh, I see.

-Whichever it’d be - silence or return response of a kind, it would hint at his true intentions.

-So it isn’t really Team Rocket you’re after, it’s their boss?

-Both. Whether they’re acting independently this time, or he’s pulling the strings - crushing his followers would be equivalent to issuing him a direct challenge.

-And what if he ignores that as well?

-He won’t.

-How can you be sure?

-He’ll know it’s me.

The brunette gawked.

-What!? And when’d you get all buddy buddy with the infamous mob boss?

Silver did not look up, engrossed with his device, rapidly typing in some sort of code.

-I cannot talk about this.

-But, you just--

-This is all the information you need to be assured of the operation’s success. Once Giovanni is taken care of, Team Rocket would be done for - cut the head off the snake and the body will die.
Gold wavered, unsettled by the certainty and sharp tone of the other’s statements.

-We’re not cutting anybody’s heads off, though.

-No, there are simpler ways to neutralize a man.

This did not make it any better. Unwilling to know exactly what meaning the redhead put into the word ‘neutralize’, he rubbed his neck and turned away. Silver tapped on another folder.

-Regardless. So we leave the Radio Tower be, meanwhile diverting our attention to Lake of Rage.

-Lake of Rage?

-The intel I acquired in the Ilex Forest heavily inferred that they have another base in Mahogany Town and are experimenting with Pokémon evolution and radio waves. According to the encrypted data - the research is already underway, so soon enough we’d be hearing of evolution anomalies in the area of the Lake.

-So then we should go take that down before it happens?

-We won’t be able to make it in time, and charging in without due preparation is beyond foolish. That is their current headquarters after all.

-That makes sense, sorry, dumb question.

-And, truth be told, I am quite curious to see the first results of their experiments as well.

-Aha.

-They have another prototype in development that I had the pleasure to experience the effects of a day ago - it is a white noise transmitter that is capable of disabling both humans and Pokémon alike. Pokémon seemed to be more receptive due to their heightened senses and were completely out of commission. I was able to resist, although not without effort.

-White noise? Like the shuffling sound the TV makes when it gets no signal?

-Similar, though in the format radio frequency and not as harmless. In short - it emits a terrible noise that prevents you from moving and makes you feel like your skull is splitting in two.

Just picturing the effects made Gold fidget in his seat. Arceus alone knew what could happen when such a dangerous device was placed in the wrong hands.

-Was that thing--

-The reason I’ve been almost beaten to death? Yes, and I admit it’s been very short sighted on my part. But no matter now, we’ll have to work with what we’ve got.

The brunette flinched at the remark, once more irked by the other’s words. Oddly detached, Silver delved into the topics of death and own mortality as casually as one would discussing an upcoming TV show.

-That sounds really awful... Did you manage to cut it off? Is there any way to counter it?

-There is. All the grunts wore a comm earpiece that doubled as a damper, they could move freely
with the transmitter on. Incidentally, I’ve gotten my hands on one in the skirmish.

-That’s great, though. Now you’re pretty much safe.

-Quite an overstatement there. Unless we understand how it works, the current version might be rendered obsolete by the time we encounter it again.

-Uh uh.

-But that’s already being taken care of - yesterday I dropped the comm piece off at a trusted radio shop for analysis. They couldn’t promise to reverse engineer a version of their own within the limited timeframe, but in the least we’d have functional duplicates for us and our Pokémon.

-Oh, neat!

-So this is the safest and most efficient option. Of course, there’s another way to shut it down - a huge shockwave.

-...isn’t that a little extreme?

-You’re right. We cannot predict when they would use the device and relying on explosives in close quarters would be, I’d say, ill advised. Just keep this alternative in the back of your mind as kind of a last resort.

-Okay… sure.

Pensive, Silver leaned back onto the pillows.

-Honestly, the transmitter bothers me much more than the evolution experiments. I can only speculate what chaos would ensue after they integrate it with the Radio Tower’s infrastructure and deploy it. As such, the operation should be executed with precise timing - at a set time next Saturday, just as Team Rocket would be taking over the Tower, we shut down Mahogany. Unable to utilize their developments, internal communications in disarray and half their units gone, they’d still be forced to make the broadcast. In that short window of turmoil, we move back to Goldenrod and liberate the Tower.

He paused and briefly placed the tablet on his lap.

-Any questions?

The other nodded, considering the plan. Their assessment of the device’s capabilities squarely matched - it had to be destroyed before Team Rocket would get the chance to use it. But easier said than done, wasn’t it?

-How are we going to shut down Mahogany?

-The same way I dealt with Ilex - we blow it up.

-Hm, but didn’t we just agree that it’s unsafe?

-If used haphazardly, of course. We shall place the C4 blocks on the carrying structures of the research facility’s lower level. After the timer runs out the foundation would collapse along with everything atop of it.

-What about the people that still might be in there?
-As soon as we place the bombs, I’ll trigger an evacuation alarm. There’s no need for unnecessary casualties.

-Thank Arceus.

Gold felt a significant weight lifted off his shoulders. His rival’s well-being aside, this was something that had been bothering him for a while, and, as much as he detested Team Rocket, he’d never wish for a massacre.

Silver just sighed at the other’s visible relief. He’d made the same mistake too, years ago. The wake-up call did not take long - latching onto a partial truth was equivalent to accepting a comfortable lie.

-But it’s up to them how to interpret it. They’re a criminal organization, prepared for strife by definition. It’s their choice to desert the ship or go down with it.

The brunette stood up abruptly and gestured in dissent.

-No, no we can’t--

-We can and we will. Both parties are aware of the risks, and, as far as I know, you’ve picked a side.

-But Silver--

Impatient, the other teen cut him off. If he was truly that naive, he’d have to face reality sooner rather than later.

-End of discussion. If you’re not fit for this, the door is wide open.

He bore his eyes into Gold’s, waiting for a reaction. The other boy struggled to hold his gaze, multiple conflicting emotions battling within him. There was no way he would condone such an approach, but at the same time he wouldn’t even think of leaving, now that he finally managed to attain a partner in his rival.

-I’m staying.

All he’d have to do is put his mind to it and figure out a more nonviolent solution. Then, he decided, he’d bring the issue up again. Silver regarded him humorlessly.

-Whatever you’re thinking right now, it’s going to get the best of you.

He pulled up a lengthy list on his tablet and continued, discounting the other’s puzzled look.

-In addition to Mahogany’s, we’ll have to get blueprints of the Tower, shopping mall basement and any underground connections that are available in between. I’m almost certain the Rockets are going to take advantage of them.

-...got it.

-And I need to procure more of that drug. I cannot allow my physical condition to be more of a setback than it already is. I have a few ampoules left, but unless I get more, I’d have to use it judiciously.

Gold frowned, still trying to make sense of the cryptic phrase and follow the current conversation. He then begrudgingly recalled the drug’s description and presumed effects.
-That med’s not good for you, it’s not healthy.

The other ousted a chortle and pointed at his own face.

-We’re well past that, don’t you think? Furthermore, we’d need a sufficient amount for any potential emergencies. If either of us were to sustain heavy injuries, this could hold us over and enable to continue the operation.

The brunette fumbled with his bandana. If that was an attempt at a joke, it sucked.

-Alright, as you say.

-You’re going to Goldenrod today, aren’t you?

-Yeah, I was planning to take on the gym and browse around a bit.

-Then if you care for my health so much, you’ll acquire these drugs for me.

He drew a small notebook from his bag and jotted some names on it. He then tore the page out and folded it in two, handing it over to the other teen. Gold accepted and skimmed through its contents. His face fell. He felt like he was back in preschool again, reading his mum’s biology journal - there was not a single word he’d recognized.

-Err… okay. But where will I get all this?

Silver opened a new tab and punched in an address, and then rotated the screen for the other to see.

-You will go to the city underpass on Pine Hill and 32th Streets and talk to the dealer. Ask for the drug marked by the checkmark first, and, if unavailable, just get the three components underneath. Although far from ideal - lower potency and cause severe migraines, they’re the next best thing.

“Didn’t that just go from bad to worse?”, the brunette thought wryly as he scribbled down the cross streets onto the same piece of paper. He looked back up and saw the other tapping his finger on the tablet’s bezel with acute displeasure.

-What? What’s up?

-Poor timing.

-Huh?

-My Kanto stock, regrettably, had been exhausted, and C4 is incredibly hard to come by in Johto these days. After they’d doubled down on the regulations, the supply is even worse than for firearms. I’ve been sifting the darknet for leads for weeks now, but the boards are getting shut down one after another. Hm, no choice but to…

The other mumbled something to himself, swiped upward a few times and began typing.

-Please don’t tell me you’re gonna steal those explosives from some army base.

-No, my hands are full as it is. Dealing with the military is pretty low on my list.

-Phew. Then--

-I’ll manufacture it myself.
Once more Gold caught himself outright staring at his companion, who looked completely nonplussed.

-This is ridiculous, you can’t just go and whip up a bomb yourself! It’s not like we’re baking cookies--

-I can make a bomb out of the detergent under that kitchen sink. Do not speak of things you don’t understand.

-Is there anything you can’t do?

The redhead plainly ignored the question and tossed a bundle of cash at the other teen.

-I’d prefer you didn’t waste time. We’ll resume this once you’re back.

This was spinning way out of hand. Trying not to think about the horror stories of homemade explosives and their creators’ unfortunate endings, the standing boy reflexively flipped through the bills and gave a low whistle. This was the most money he’d ever had on his hands. Could Silver have robbed a bank instead? He deliberated for a moment whether or not he should find a secure spot for it, and then just stashed it at the bottom of his backpack. If he were a mugger, he’d rather pick a more appealing target than a random scruffy trainer in bright yellow shorts. He threw the bag over his shoulder and briefly looked back.

-Do you wanna grab brunch before I go?

Headphones in and and fingers on the touchscreen keyboard, the other’s attention had already been elsewhere.

-I’ll pass. I need to take care of some shipments and equipment.

Gold shrugged, hiding the slight disappointment at the refusal. Surely he did not expect they’d be permanently sticking together, but the unease he felt throughout the conversation ultimately morphed into a fervent curiosity. Bold, callous, coming from an entirely different world - who really was his rival? He wanted to know.

He returned to a completely empty room. Some of his own stuff was lying at the foot of the bed where he’d left it, Silver and his tablet gone whatsoever. Had he left to take the gym as well and they’d just missed each other on the way?

-Haunter, you can let him see.

The brunette jumped, not expecting the voice to come from this proximity. A light haze formed and dissipated the image of an empty kitchen at the right.

-Holy shit--

His eyes widened as he surveyed the scene - their large table was covered with a set of communicating vessels, burners, vials and flasks. A white box took up about a sixth of the surface in the far right, was it a… fridge? Silver was sitting at the far end of the table, his tablet plugged
into some sort of extended base with an extra monitor and keyboard.

-Did you get the supplies?

Completely at loss of words, Gold gaped at the ridiculous construction in front of him.

-Yes, well… He only had 3 packs of the one you requested, so I got the other ones just in case too. What the heck even--

-Just as I thought, well, no matter, this is fine. They stopped dispensing that for a couple of months now, something must have happened to the core supplier in Hoenn.

-Did you just seriously set up an entire meth lab in our hotel room?!

-First off, one cannot make meth with the current equipment - there’s no pressure tank, secondly, only I - and now you - can see it. Haunter’s ability can mask a static environment and deter anyone from entering by altering their perception.

The other barely registered the second half of the statement.

-Wait, does that mean you actually made meth before?

-I have not, but I know the general theory. Methamphetamine impairs judgement, I’ve no use for that.

-Dang.

He exhaled noisily. The redhead was not fucking with him earlier, as he’d half-assumed.

-Where did all this even come from? I’m quite sure you didn’t carry it in your bag.

-Acute observation.

Silver’s voice was laced with sarcasm.

-Got it shipped from the storage unit in Violet City.

Gold took a few steps forward and noticed a number of unopened boxes under and beside the table. So the meth - ahem - chem lab was just a part of it? He snatched up a miniature flask and curiously peered through the white crystals. He tapped it lightly, watching the gleaming particles reflect the light.

-If you want your fingers intact, you’d put that down.

The boy stopped dead in his tracks and, trying not to breathe, carefully lowered the bottle back on its tray. As soon as the glass bottom was safely cushioned by the padding, he turned to his rival, fuming.

-Why the hell would you keep something so dangerous right on the table?!

-Well, pardon me for not making my lab idiot proof - He parried - And what do you think I’m doing here?

-I know but--

-It’s in a sealed vacuum container and will only ignite when exposed to air.
-Why not just put it away in some armored box and stash it away then?

-That’s for chemicals sensitive to light and, well, the particularly reactive ones.

He casually gestured at the container closest to the other’s feet. Without uttering another word, the other simply turned around and walked the largest radius he could around the table. Silver leaned back in his seat, seemingly entertained by the brunette’s sour look.

-I suppose you’ve earned the Plain Badge?

-I have.

Still pouting, he settled down at the chair furthest from any potentially flammable substances and unstable elements. This was a losing argument to begin with.

-Everything went smoothly until Whitney’s Miltank came onto the scene. Seriously, that thing was nuts - heal, Rollout, Rollout, heal non-stop! Aipom got knocked out, but then Flaaffy landed a stun, so we finally got a breather and...

As he moved to describing the battle, he quickly forgot his pointless grudge. He flaunted, depicting the Pokémon’s attacks and adding sound effects along the way to his presentation.

-But never mind that, dude. The underground was sooo sketch - a couple of trainers jumped me right as I entered the passage, some random old lady kept trying to sell me her ‘herbs’, another creep was going on about a massage, and the drug guy refused to talk to me for a good 15 minutes until I shoved a stack of Pokédollars in his face.

His rival’s lips curled into a smirk.

-Welcome to the dark side of commerce.

-I can’t believe you have to tolerate these kinds of people all the time!

Gold failed to comprehend the other’s amusement at this. He wouldn’t ever want to set foot there again, unless absolutely necessary. The redhead just waved his hand dismissively.

-It’s just business, Gold, don’t dwell on it. Besides, you’ve performed your first successful negotiation, have my regards.

Not quite convinced whether the other was praising or mocking him, he rubbed the back of his head awkwardly.

-Thanks. I guess?

He then pulled the remaining cash from his pocket and nudged it towards the keyboard.

-Here’s the change. You gave me way too much.

-Keep it, you might need to purchase more supplies. Also don’t forget to re-stock on Revives and Full Restores.

-But I’ve got my own money, you don’t have to pay for everything.

-I don’t care, it’s simpler this way.

Gold hesitated, staring at the somewhat battered stack of bills. Even for the mission, readily
accepting huge sums like these put him ill at ease.

-Hey, Silver.

-What?

-If you don’t mind me asking, where do you have all this money from?

“Just please don’t say you robbed a bank, please don’t say you actually robbed a bank…”

-Team Rocket goons. Well, and hacked a couple of Rocket admin’s private accounts for practice a while back. Who would’ve known they were handling almost all their transactions with actual cash flow and not cryptocurrency. Been leeching off them then ever since. Out of the still active ones - neither has closed the backdoors.

The brunette zoned out, processing what the other just said. Hacking, cryptocurrency, backdoors? And there he was, letting his mum handle his finances.

-Fortunately, the Rocket’s current server cluster hadn’t employed any extra network security either. Well, fortunately for me, that is.

-Rocket’s server… Wait, does that mean you’re, like, in their computer system or something? And you can see everything they’re up to?

He made his best attempt to keep up, his expertise on the subject inadequate to say the least. He’d download a movie or reboot the home router, but that would be as tech savvy as he got. The other shook his head lightly.

-More or less. I have access to their internal boards, roster, shipments and inventory. Part of the database is encrypted, though - it’s only human-readable with a special key, and even then a good amount is written in code names and series of digits. I’m still working on deciphering it.

-Damn.

He cussed again, admiring his rival’s ability.

-Since we’re on the topic, this would be your assignment for tomorrow.

Silver plucked a small metal object from his computer and slid it across the table.

-A flash drive?

-You shall engage in some social engineering.

The brunette picked it up and brought it close to his face. Apart from the lack of the printed logo and capacity, it looked like a regular USB stick.

-Sounds like some contrived psychology term. Unless it actually has something to do with engineering.

-No, that is quite accurate. You’ll go to the Radio Tower and plug this into one of their machines.

The other looked at him doubtfully. Plug into one of their machines? Not a thing one would usually get away with impunity.

-Huh, a little conspicuous, isn’t it? How am I gonna do that?
-Not my concern, figure it out. Butter up the receptionist girl with your natural charisma, take the radio card quiz, whatever - distract them. The drive should stay in the machine for 5 seconds, then you can retrieve it.

Gold nodded, reciting the instructions in his head a few times - wait - did he just call him charismatic?

-I did send out a couple of phishing emails just in case, but this is just more efficient. Don’t worry about getting caught on the security cameras, I will erase any footage as soon as I’m in their system. Then do the same at the mall. There’s a possibility Team Rocket is going to target their networks prior to the attack, we cannot afford to miss a single move.

He paused, noticing the other’s marginally spacey look.

-You listening?

-Yeah, yeah I am. Charm the girl, plug it in, wait 5 seconds, take it out - got it.

He heard a stifled noise come from Silver's direction. Did he just… snort? What was so funny, he was just repeating after him. The redhead airily rocked his hand.

-Well, I’m in no place to judge.

Shortly, the implication sunk in. He bolted upright, hip colliding with the table’s edge, causing the glass containers to clink ominously. Face red, he frantically waved his hands.

-Ugh shit, my bad!

The other gave him a sinister glare.

-Astounding, how little value you have for your extremities. Do keep it up, then any amount of seconds would be considered a miracle.

-I said I’m sorry... And that’s not what I meant!

Silver did not linger on the subject any longer. Swiftly, he extended his arm and flicked his fingers.

-Give me your Pokégear. I’ll register my contact info and install a few apps for ease of communication.

Gold handed the device over and sat back down, apologetic. He’d blurted out stupid things before, to his rival included, but never had he felt so flustered, stupid lab and his clumsiness be damned.

-You will ping me right before you enter the tower and mall - I’ll be prepared to crack their security as soon as the backdoor is in place. After that I’ll monitor both systems and would be able to intercept any breach. Any updated blueprints and access to the cameras would be quite the pleasant bonus.

He passed the gear back and got up himself. Wordlessly, he walked around the table and gathered the newly purchased packages in front of him, examining the list of ingredients on each. He tore a box open and counted the ampoules - they were standard issue, 5 per each. The other teen timidly spoke up again.

-Is this enough?

-It’s adequate.
The redhead broke one phial open and filled up a syringe. Routinely, he inserted the needle a little below waist and exhaled.

He then reached over and switched the cooling system on. The machine sprung awake, emitting a faint buzzing sound. Two thick tubes, attached to the top and bottom feeders of the jacketed vessel, began circulating a pale blue liquid, and a new window popped up on Silver's computer. Dozens of indicators displayed even the smallest changes in temperature, composition and multiple other parameters.

Gold followed the process as if in trance, letting the bizarre situation settle in his mind. They were about the same age, and, judging from the level of their Pokémon, started their journey at approximately the same time. Yet when it came to their skillset, they were a lifetime apart. Along with that, the raw nerve, the unprecedented nonchalance the other talked with about any precarious matters - were they drugs, explosives, or breaking into admin accounts was undoubtedly disturbing, but also so so fascinating.

-Silver, you know what?

-What? I need to get this batch started.

-You’re fucking amazing.

The redhead paused, hand hovering over the vessel's tubing.

-Flattery won’t get you anywhere.

-I’m not trying to flatter you, I really mean it. Look, I’d be damned if I knew even half of that! All the servers, hacking, um... reactive chemistry, the way you fight, hell, even this whole black market business, you’re really truly amazing!

Silver studied his face, searching for some sort of catch. Countless times he’d gotten looks of fear, hatred, revulsion, envy, contempt, criticism in response to his work, but never had it been such uninhibited awe and admiration. He’d long accepted and even welcomed all the other reactions, but this somehow felt way more perverse. Did Gold really fail to see it? All that he just listed were weapons, twisted devices meant to maim and destroy. There was nothing to acknowledge here, there was no pride behind it, no honor. Just pain, despair and a price higher than one should ever be allowed to pay.

He looked away, refusing to accept the adoration in the other’s gaze. This was not something he had wished for and certainly not what he deserved.

Taking the hesitance for modesty, or, perhaps, the inability to take a compliment, Gold went on.

-To be completely honest, in the beginning I thought you were just way up your own ass, but I can now see how you were going to go against Team Rocket all on your own. I might not know to hack computers or create bombs, still, I’ll make up for it somehow, I won't let you down! And just know, you always have my help and support.

Cautiously, making sure not to bump the table again, he got to his feet and gave his companion a bright smile and a thumbs-up. The redhead belatedly regained his poise.

-Get us into the Tower and mall’s networks and we'll talk.

-Wilco! Is there anything I should do now?
Silver pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and propped the clear glasses on his face. In a single pass he dumped one of the vial’s contents into the container and checked back with the monitor. He closed in on the gauges and adjusted the temperature, all while avoiding the other's eyes.

-You’re a Pokémon trainer, aren’t you? So go train your Pokémon.

Nodding, Gold threw a mock salute and spun on his heels. Now this was an order he could readily follow up on. In high spirits he aimed for the door, turning around just for a quick goodbye. He halted, noticing the other’s grave expression, and lowered his arm.

-What? What did I do this time?

Silver exhaled and gave him an oblique glance before returning to his equipment.

-Drop the military act, will you. I’ll join you when I'm done.
Gold stood at the entrance of the Radio Tower unable to shake off the tingling in his toes. Dealing questionable substances in the dark of the underground was one thing, but barging into a public organization to hack their computers was something entirely different. Even if, technically, he’s not going to be the one doing the hacking. Last night’s training session was terribly tedious and frustrating, but, he conceded, he’d chose that over the so called ‘social engineering’ any day.

They’d battled for hours in the remote spot by the Daycare, hidden from any stray passerby and potential onlookers. Right off the bat, Silver outwardly refused to fight his Togepi, stating that he would ‘not waste his time on an underdeveloped egg’ and would only consider a battle after the ‘sordid thing evolved’. The boy tried not to take the statements to heart, but the tone of his voice made it way harder than he'd wanted it to.

The drill went as expected, otherwise - the redhead kept getting annoyed at how amiable the other trainer, obviously not pushing his Pokémon’s full capabilities, while Gold kept pointing out the the other’s overly aggressive approach in return. And yet, it was a new kind of experience trying to adapt to the other’s style, as a team, instead of clashing against it.

They did an extended run in the morning as well, and, after a myriad of fights against each other and a number of double battles against wild Pokémon hoards Silver finally deemed their efforts a degree of satisfactory. Wishing the other luck on the ‘penetration’, he took off, leaving Gold alone with his mission.

The brunette ruminated over the choice of words on his way to the city, trying to convince himself that it was a purely professional use of the term, but the stark memory of yesterday’s mishap firmly suggested the opposite. He sighed inwardly and resisted to desire to bang his head on something solid - he’d totally brought this one upon himself.

He shot a brief message to his partner and stepped inside the tall glass building. A young man in a smart blue suit promptly greeted him at the reception desk.

-Good day, sir. Welcome to the Radio Tower.

-Hi! Where can I get the Pokégear radio card?

-Just to the right, sir. My colleague would be glad to assist you.

He gestured to the side of the long counter that separated him from the visitors. At the very end stood a pretty girl with long brown hair in matching uniform. She was enthusiastically talking to another customer and pointing at a colored piece of paper.

-Thanks!

He walked over to the stand and took a moment to look around. And elderly man that came in shortly after him immediately rolled out a full-fledged attack at the poor receptionist, dragging him into a raucous dispute over some faulty radio coverage in his neighborhood. Obviously disinterested in the commotion, the security guard by far right of the staircase was flipping through a gossip magazine. No more people were in line behind him, and no more in front. The coast seemed clear.
Thank you for using Johto Radio, hope you enjoy our shows!

The girl gave a little bow to the departing lady. Shortly, she noticed the waiting teen and offered him a welcoming smile.

-Good day, sir, would you like to update your Pokégear with our special radio card?

-Hello! Yes, please.

-The card is free, but you would have to take a quick quiz to get the expansion. Are you ready to participate?

-Sure.

He leaned on the desk and gave the employee a flashing smile - it was his job to charm her, wasn’t it? Now, being as close as he could get, he tried to locate the USB ports in her computer. It looked like a standard machine, similar to the registers that they use in Pokéstores, with the exception of an extra device plugged into it - most likely the radio card reader. He could plainly see the monitor, the keyboard, but there was no processing unit. Did it act as the base? This was going to be more complicated than he’d originally thought.

She turned a small screen his way, mirroring the quiz questions and his current progress.

-Okay, first question: Can the town map be displayed on Pokégear?

-Yeah.

He dropped absently, eyes racing back and forth as he frantically tried to identify any slot at all.

-Correct! Besides calls, messages and radio playback, the Pokégear does have the Town Map support. Second question: Can Nidorina be female only?

-Yes.

-Absolutely right - Nidorina can be female only.

What kind of stupid questions were these? Anyone with the slightest speck of intelligence would know the answers. Meaning to complain, he stopped himself mid thought. This was not a performance test and his main objective was to buy time. No matter how silly the next question would be, he must get it wrong.

-Third question: Does Kurt the Poké Ball craftsman use Apricorns?

-No.

-Correct!

What? Kurt definitely used Apricorns to make Poké Balls, how did he get this one correct?

-It’s a common mistake to confuse the spelling of Apricorns, congratulations on being so attentive.

Gold peered at the screen. Dang, he should’ve actually been more attentive, that way he wouldn't have fallen for the cheap trick. It was alright, though, he asserted, there were still two questions left.

-Question four: Magikarp can’t learn any TM move?
He made a face. It was so obvious, it hurt. Reminding himself again that larger things were at stake here, he shoved his burning self-esteem concerns aside.

-Um… no?

-Incorrect. Magikarp cannot be taught any moves via TM or HMs.

-Ah man, my bad. Must’ve got distracted by something. Or someone.

He lowered his gaze and curtly waggled his brow. It sounded way smoother in his head, but the girl covered her mouth and giggled in return. Smugly, he issued himself a mental pat on the back.

-No problem, sir, would you like to try again?

-Sure thing!

The employee reset his progress and started over. It was only be a matter of time of them reaching the same question; he had to think of something and fast. He ran over his options - with the counter this high, he would have to bend over to reach the monitor base. But how would he do that?

And surely, just a few minutes later, they were at the same place they left off.

-Final question: Professor Oak’s Pokémon Talk is a very popular program. Is Marie the co-host of the show?

Shit. He honestly didn’t know the answer to this one. He had respected Prof Oak greatly for his research, but the show he ran happened to be just so goddamn boring, that Gold always ended up changing the station to Pokémusic while he was at the house. So was Marie his co-host? He had no clue. Trying to unearth anything useful, he ransacked his brain in search of any snippets of media or pop culture knowledge for related subject. DJ Marie was an uprising star in broadcasting, he recited inwardly. She’d got her own show in the past year and was featured on the cover of Poké Weekly at least twice. Impressive history, wasn’t it? There was no reason why she wouldn’t co-host with Prof Oak. He’d say ‘no’ and reset the counter once again.

-Nope.

-Correct! Professor Oak’s co-host in the show is DJ Mary. Granted their names are similar, DJ Mary is a host in Johto where all the programs are recorded, while Marie leads a couple of gardening programs in Kanto. Congratulations, you have won the radio card!

Gold’s heart sank at the verdict. More spelling traps and gardening programs in Kanto, huh.

He gloomily watched the girl tap the touchscreen to issue the new card. How could he get that particular question right, when he tried so hard to do the reverse? Silver put this flash drive together and was doing all the heavy lifting with the server stuff, not to mention the explosives and other provisions, and he had just failed the one simple task that was allotted to him.

-Here you go, your brand new card. Please insert it in the Pokégear to register the expansion.

The brunette loosened the wristband and pulled to take the device off. Palms sweaty from the nerves, he wished to keep his hands steady.

Wait, this was it.

Struck with sudden inspiration, he lifted his arm and awkwardly slipped the gear right out of his
hand and over the counter. With a loud crack it fell at the employee’s feet.

-Woops. Truly, what are you doing to me--

Theatrically, he brought the back of his palm to his forehead and peeked sideways, for the first time reading the girl’s name tag.

-Sheryll.

She rocked her head in mock accusation and hid another laugh behind her hand. Feeling like he was really hitting the groove, he attempted a bolder move.

-I do apologize profusely, though. May I come around to pick it up?

-Don’t worry about it! Let me get it back for you.

This worked just as well. Desperately hoping the gadget survived the fall, he made his best apologetic look and leaned over further to take a look at the lost device, simultaneously snooping at the computer’s processing unit. And there they were - two USB ports right at the front of the base on the left.

Sheryll turned around, kneeling to pick up the Pokégear. With a swift motion the brunette flung himself over the counter, plugged the flash drive in one of the ports, and then jolted back to his spot. Now, five seconds.

The girl got up and then stretched out her arm with his tech.

-Here you go.

-Thanks for your help. What can I ever do to repay you?

-No need for that at all. Thank you for being a customer and I hope you enjoy listening to our programs!

She smiled back at him and bowed, clearly ready to will him goodbye.

Shit, shit, shit. He still had to get the drive out. He couldn’t possibly drop his Pokégear - or anything else for that matter - again without being overly suspicious and he neither could he let her see the stick in her computer. “Think, genius, think”, he urged himself wildly.

-Do you have any flyers left for the Radio tower Festival?

There, perfect. She’d been showing one to the lady earlier, so hopefully she had a stack behind her table or something.

-Of course.

She slid her hand by the shelf under her desk and handed him a bright-lettered print. Well, given how soon the festival was, it only made sense she would keep them handy.

-Thanks! Do you have more by any chance? See, a large group of friends of mine are visiting from all over Johto, I’d like to pass them around.

-How many would you like?

-Hmm… like a whole stack!
-You have a lot of friends, sir.

She dropped coyly and briefly spun to grab a pile of papers from the far left side of her desk. Whether she genuinely thought he was going out of his way to impress her or simply fell victim to free advertising, he did not care. It was now or never. Gold swung forward once again and grabbed the small metal device, promptly stashing it in his pocket. He then put his arm behind his back and laughed loudly.

-I do get along. Do you want to join us on the festival?

Sheryll handed him a handful of flyers and overextended over the stand separating them herself.

-That is very sweet of you, but I have to decline. We've already made plans with my fiance.

She drew back and smiled.

-Hope you and your friends have a great time. Thank you for stopping by the Radio Tower!

She gave a final bow and gestured to the next person behind him. Feigning disappointment, he thanked her and the receptionist for their time and shuffled to the exit.

The brunette exhaled as the cool air hit his face. The ordeal didn’t go as terribly as it could’ve - he’d managed to distract the employee long enough to plant the drive, and from the looks of it, she hadn’t noticed a thing. As for being turned down, not much he could've done. All he could hope for was that the pretty employee’s date wouldn’t be irredeemably ruined, for Team Rocket were planning to crash the festival not only for her, but for the entire region.

He set out, reluctantly checking his Pokégear for damage. Thankfully, there was only a small indent on the plastic casing, otherwise device completely intact. A ‘new message’ notification was blinking on the screen. Eager, he tapped the icon.

“In their system. Checked the security camera recording, sure took you a while.”

The knee jerk reaction was annoyance, followed by slight embarrassment at being watched without consent. He ran the conversation through his head in search of anything he’d said that the redhead could use to undermine him later. There were a couple of hiccups here and there, but he felt like he did a damn good job. He’d liked to see Silver have a go at that engaged chick. Taking a defensive stand in advance, he set out to type a snappy comeback when another message tagged on to the first.

“Not the smoothest execution, but kudos for the gear trick. Contact me when you’re at the mall.”

Gold lowered his hand and soughed - he had sure become quick to assume the other’s attitude with and without context. Maybe he should just give him a chance.

Hands behind his head, the teen walked down the streets towards the commercial district. Frankly speaking, he was quite curious how the redhead would have gone about the flash drive had he not been around. There was some talk about ‘fishing’ earlier, but he’d never really questioned what that actually meant. Probably just another hacking term or, perhaps, some sort of obscure slang for flirting.

He burst out laughing before he could stop himself. Silver and flirting? Preposterous. He could see the other bribing or threatening the employee, decking her, erasing the footage and pretending it
never happened, but certainly not trying to hit on her in that sense. This was the most out of character thing he could picture the other boy doing, a close runner up being nursing baby Pokémon or singing in the shower.

He slowed down for a moment and shook his head. There was no evidence to go off regarding Silver’s love life whatsoever, so he was getting ahead of himself and just being unfair all over again. For all he knew the aloof teen could be a major player, picking up girls left and right between his elaborate tactical missions. He did have the resources to take them out wherever he wanted, and, as much as the brunette hated to admit, the looks as well. Despite the long hair, his physique could hardly be considered feminine, and even bruised and bandaged he had this rugged feel to him, not diminishing the appeal one bit. “For the ladies, that is,” the brunette amended. A purely impartial assessment of the other’s odds at acquiring a potential partner and simple constatation of facts, if you will.

Then how come he was getting so jittery just thinking about this? Gold scowled and stopped, earning a dirty look and a cuss from a tailing pedestrian. Feeling increasingly annoyed, he reneged on his obviously premature evaluation - looks or without, his rival had the most god-awful personality and absolutely no girl would willingly put up with that. Romantic business was his domain, and the other could not contest.

He pushed through the crowds, basking in the feeling of superiority and self-imposed victory. And he would not hesitate to shove it in the redhead’s face, if not for the incessant nagging at the back of his mind. What good was winning a competition that they did not start in the first place, and why did it feel like he cheated himself horribly somewhere along the way?

The shopping center appeared to be a beast of its own. Clock nearing noon, the inflow of customers was steadily increasing and, compared to the mostly deserted radio tower, the store was bustling with energy. Every level was filled with a varied combination of ogling tourists, frustrated locals, yelling kids and exhausted parents trying to get a bite off those sweet pre-festival deals.

After a cursory check of the floors, he swung by the premium goods department hoping to employ his prior tactics, but even the usually peaceful floor was overtaken by customers. A group of flashily dressed ladies were arguing over brands of beauty supplements right at the register, while a pair of burly dudes were trying to buy Iron in bulk.

Loitering around the isles of overpriced items proved counterproductive, so Gold made a compulsory retreat to the elevators. It had been over fifteen minutes since he’d sent Silver the text and, though they’d never established a clear deadline, he felt like time was inevitably running out. He realized, of course, that it did not matter as long as he got the job done, but then at the same time the last thing he wanted was to get any more shit for time-related pacing reasons.

Issuing himself another mental slap, he concentrated, recalling each level’s layout and degree of congestion. First one were the reception and lobby - a large, open area with plenty room to rest and meet up with fellow shoppers. The tall counter was similar to that at the tower, but unlike the latter, it was situated smack in the middle of the room, making it highly observable from almost every angle. Same was the case with the last merchandise level of the store - F5, the TM department. Not only did it employ a mirror floor plan from the reception, but also sported an obnoxious red carpet right in front of the registers. The risk of getting caught on camera or being reported to the mall security made those hardly even worth considering.

He’d already given up on F4, mostly because he didn’t want to spend bouts of cash on a slim chance of success, and F6 solely housed vending machines and the viewing deck, that had no
terminals at all.

That left him with F2 and F3, the largest and the busiest sections of the entire complex. They carried common goods such as Poké Balls, Potions of varying potency and limited use battle items. Known for frequent promotions and deals, they attracted countless shoppers and today was no exception.

The elevator dinged in announcement of it’s arrival. Gold threw another glance at his watch and squeezed inside. Jammed like a Remoraid in a can, he wondered if he’d been approaching this thing the right way altogether. And also if it would’ve been a better choice to have taken the stairs.

As soon as the doors opened he was practically carried out of the confined space. The shopping area was as packed as he’d predicted, if not more. Even with the aid of multiple assistants, the cashiers were barely keeping up with the queues, and all the floor attendants were constantly surrounded by patrons. A fragile balance one should not dare to disturb.

He pulled the cap over his eyes and stepped forward. If there’s no way to carry out the task in stealth mode, he was going to do the exact opposite.

Demonstratively, he yanked out the huge stack of flyers from his bag and swung them in the air. He then rolled one up into a makeshift funnel and at the top of his lungs yelled.

-ONLY TODAY! GET AN EXTRA 50% ON YOUR PURCHASE WITH A RADIO TOWER FLYER. I REPEAT 50% OFF WITH FLYER. ONLY WHILE SUPPLIES LAS--

The last of his words were drowned by the shrills of the excited shoppers. Dozens of hands were reaching his way, elbowing, pushing each other and shortly he found himself carried by the masses once again. The moment he felt solid ground he ducked out of the churning whirlpool and shoved the rest of the papers in some random bloke’s arms.

Few minutes later the floor was mayhem. The lucky patrons who managed to snag a flyer in the beginning were already en route to the registers with their overstocked baskets, while the rest were still battling over the remaining few crumbled sheets.

Gold could clearly see the looks of panic on the cashier’s faces and the futile attempts of the attendants to reason with the agitated crowds. He did feel bad for them, the entire staff, honestly, for subjecting them to deal with the consequences of his brazen, bald faced lie.

He crept behind the annoyed customers, that were now angrily shoving their flyers in the employees’ faces, and poked his head out to inspect the register. It looked very much like an older model of the one he’d encountered previously, so he reckoned the position of the ports remained the same. He stretched out his arm with the drive and blindly searched for the dents in the plastic. Finally, it clicked. Leaning on one elbow, he supported himself against the continuous motion behind his back. It proved almost impossible to keep the position any longer, so he jerked the device out, and prayed that the fateful five seconds have already elapsed.

Falling back, he forced himself through the frenzied mix of customers, floor employees and a few security guards that had just arrived at the commotion. Away from the main hallway and past the elevators this time he shot straight for the stairs, easily bypassing the rest of the crowds.

Worn but rather satisfied, he spared one last glance at the staircases and then walked out of the giant revolving doors of the Goldenrod shopping center’s south exit.
Sorry, this one's a lil short.
Really trying to keep up with Inktober this year and not die of sleep deprivation at the same time. Hopefully will get in the groove and be more productive!
The spacious hotel room was filled with a pale mist and a bitter smell. The compact burner was on, a clear liquid bubbling in the flask on top of it. The coil extending from its side was connected to a larger bulb that looked like it was collecting the condensation. Silver was in his now usual spot at his computer, typing wildly. His double screens were filled with diagrams and spreadsheets along with a large console window, which looked like was running some sort of script all on its own.

Not really enthused by any interaction with the chem lab, Gold walked straight to the bedroom and belly flopped onto the mattress.

-Uuuugh that was really something.

He mumbled through the sheets.

-Hope you hacked the heck outta those servers.

Getting no response, he perched his chin on his forearms just enough to have a view of the kitchen.

-Hey, did you hear me?

The redhead did not look away from the monitor.

-If that incoherent muttering was directed at me, then no.

-I said hope you hacked all the stuff, cus I'm probably permanently banned from the mall now.

-Rather likely, you did put on quite the show.

-I know, right? I was totally awesome when-- Wait, what'd you mean by 'rather likely’?! You said earlier that you'd remove all the footage. Didn't you do that?

Silver turned at last just to savour the other's alarmed look.

-I did. There's nothing I can do about the people that might've seen you, though.

-Shit, hadn't thought of that.

He sat up, reflecting on his circumstances. He’d actually been joking about the ban, but now that the other had brought it up, it only made sense that at least someone had remembered his face. Question was whether or not they were righteous enough to report him for his little prank.

Well, now he'd have to think of a disguise if he were ever to go back there.

-Anyhow, due to your efforts, we’re currently in the two largest digital networks in Johto. It was surprising to see how improficient the firewall was at the Radio Tower. If their physical security is as weak, I can see how they’re going to be an easy target for the Rockets.

Gold grinned at the acknowledgement.

-Of course, my plan was bulletproof after all.
-I’d argue on that, but the result is what counts. I’ve sent you the blueprints, make sure to memorize then.

-Okay, will do.

-I am going to leave now. Do I need to remind you of the safety precautions around the lab?

The brunette’s smile disappeared, replaced by his standard frown reserved for all things lab related.

-No, I think I’m quite good.

Silver got to his feet and plucked his jacket of the chair.

-Good.

-You gonna go challenge the gym?

-Yes, along with a couple other things.

-Will you be alright, though? It’s quite a walk from here.

The other boy just raised an eyebrow.

-I’m taking a taxi.

Right. Not everyone was stuck with Chevrolegs as their primary means of transportation.

-It’s unclear to me why you haven’t either. You still have an excess of finances from the medical supplies and you can take more whenever you need.

The teen stuck his hands in his pockets. He'd already resolved to hold off on spendings and reserve those solely for a potential emergencies.

-I ugh. Like exercise.

-Well, your pick.

He ran a last check on the burner's temperature and threw the bag over his shoulder.

-Meet me at the clearing at 6:00PM. Bring a variety of Poké Balls with you.

Gold shrugged dismissively.

-Okay, but to be honest, I’m not that keen on any of the wild Pokémon in this area.

-No catching would be involved.

-What’re they for then?

-You’ll see. There are a couple of useful techniques you’d benefit from.

-Eh, techniques? What do you mean?

He called out, but the other was already out of the door.
Gold threw himself back on to the mattress and gazed into the ceiling - Silver’s last remark was obscure as ever, but instead of annoying him it made him all the more curious. The tasks he had to carry out until now were challenging in their own ways and definitely required him to adapt quickly, so what was in store for him now?

Fighting his impatience, he rolled over and pulled up the blueprints the other had mentioned earlier. The external link pulled down an enormous archive that filled up almost the entirety of his gear's memory. He unpacked it and then reluctantly tapped to open one of the files.

Not only did it take forever to load, but also was completely unreadable at the screen size and resolution. The 3D rendering of what he guessed to be the Radio Tower froze at any input and scaling proved impossible altogether.

Sulking at the device's performance, the boy exited the viewer and browsed through the folder some more. Along with the model files, there were a number of vector images with a matching naming convention. These loaded way faster, but the legibility issue still stood. He tried zooming in and out and scrolling up and down the figure to make at least any sense of the structure, but after painstakingly going through the first two floors of the tower, he finally gave up and accepted the unavoidable. He'd either have to discreetly print these out or invest in a tablet similar to Silver's.

As if in agreement the complicated setup on the table emitted a short beep and one of the monitors started overflowing with logs.

He got up and walked over to inspect the cause of the sudden reaction. Was it one of those breaches the redhead was talking about? He peered into the flat screen, anticipating to see a sinister message in red saying something like 'SECURITY COMPROMISED’ or ‘HACKING COMPLETE’ like they always did in the movies, but the console consisted of no more than just a wall of text. He made out the words ‘error’, ‘permissions’ and ‘root’, but other than that it was mostly illegible.

He sighed and sat in the chair, pondering whether or not he should notify Silver of this development or just let it be. He stared at the black and white lines a little longer and eventually decided against it. The other seemed quite meticulous when it came to technology, so this was probably the expected behaviour.

It did cross his mind that he could borrow the machine at its owner’s absence to study the blueprints, but seeing the diagrams and indicators for the chem lab he chose to drop this idea as well. That was the last thing he wanted to mess with. Besides, if the redhead caught him snooping around his computer his death was sure to be slow and painful.

Gold sprinted to the clearing, dodging the occasional pedestrians and cursing at himself for his vanity. He should’ve totally declined that last battle instead of falling for a glaring taunt. The opponent’s prized water team ended up being a set of six oddly leveled Magikarp that the trainer refused to discharge all at once no matter the argument. A forfeit essentially amassed to a crime at this point, so the teen was forced to stick it out till the end of the match, knocking out the useless fish one by one.

-You’re late.

Silver stated blandly as the other got in earshot.

-I know, I’m not happy about it either.
He resisted going into an indignant rant about the stubborn fisherman and his drudging battle preferences. He figured it would only make him look worse in the other’s eyes if he did.

-Unforeseen… circumstances came up.

The redhead remained unmoved.

-Something you should learn to handle.

-Yeah yeah. I’ll work on it, okay? How’d the gym go?

-Predictable.

-Mm?

-I can’t believe someone like that was deemed fit to be a gym leader. She even broke down in tears and refused to give me the badge afterwards. Pathetic.

-Were you a dick to her?

-Not anymore than I should’ve.

Gold just sighed, as he secretly agreed with the other’s sentiment. Whitney did seem a bit out of it to him as well, but he was not going to justify the other’s brashness.

-No matter. Did you bring what I asked you to?

-Yeah. Is 10 of a kind enough?

-That would be entirely up to you.

Soundlessly, Silver produced a miniature switchblade from somewhere and, twirling it between his fingers, grabbed a Poké Ball from his bag. He tossed the orb upwards and with a swift metal flash hacked it in the air. The round object landed precisely into his other open palm.

Gold watched the actions, captivated, until the same Poké Ball almost smashed into his own face. Fast enough to deflect, but not to catch it he sent the ball flying in some random direction.

-Hey! What was that for?

-You did look like you were paying attention.

-Yeah well, a little heads up would’ve been nice.

Huffing, he trailed the missing object in the damp grass. He brushed it off briskly on a pant leg and lifted it to eye level. A clean diagonal cut ran through the hinge at the back of the sphere, only slightly exposing the wiring inside.

-O...kay?

The taller boy gave the knife another spin and stashed it in his inner pocket.

-We’re going to be fighting Team Rocket, that is inevitable, but our objective, nonetheless, is to fight as little as possible.

-Huh?
-We’d have a limited time to get in and out of the facility, so we need to bring the confrontation down to a minimum - whether it’s disabling the Pokémon or their trainers. While the latter is rather straightforward, the great variety of held and battle items allows to sustain a Pokémon almost indefinitely in a span of a battle as well as making it way tougher to permanently remove from the fight.

He pointed at the Poké Ball in Gold’s hand.

-And this is a surefire way to do it.

The other rotated the ball and tried the release button. No sounds or vibrations came from within and neither did it open nor retract. The device was as good as a broken toy.

-Aha, by busting it.

-Jamming it, to be exact. If there were a Pokémon inside, it would be unable to escape unless taken to a specialized facility.

-And there’s really no way to get it out? What if they crush the ball, then the Pokémon will be set free, no?

Silver placed one hand on his hip and simply inquired.

-Have you ever tried crushing a Poké Ball?

-Um, no.

-Then I’d tell you - it’s close to impossible via common means. When a Pokémon gets released due to Poké Ball failure it is also gets exposed to whatever forces or environment that caused the ball to break in the first place, which, most frequently, is life incompatible. As such, all the certified models are manufactured as highly durable, enabling them to withstand pressures up to 200 ATM and temperatures up to 1000 °C to secure the inhabitant.

Gold had vaguely remembered hearing this somewhere before, was it the trainer school or some science program on the TV. Preferring practice to theory, he’d always faze out the boring stats, never quite retaining any of them. Oddly, he found himself hypnotized, listening to the Silver rattle off facts like a Pokédex and the information he’d previously dismissed as brain clutter, now sounded engaging and significant. He let the breath out that he’d been holding during the other’s explanation.

-Damn, okay.

-The hatch, on the other hand, is not as sturdy. It might be futile to pry it open without special tooling, but jamming it is easier that you’d expect. You’d have to slash the hinge right at the barrel, so an amount of precision is required. Your Pokémon with the higher speed stats should be able to master it in no time.

The teen nodded and, about to release his fastest party member, he paused, remembering the beeping of Silver’s computer. A sudden idea came to his mind - what if instead of jamming...

-Hey, what if the Poké Balls get disabled even before that?

The redhead looked at him inquisitively.

-You mentioned earlier that you have access to the entire Team Rocket roster, right? PCs,
Pokémon, storage, it’s all digital at that point, so can’t you, like, hack their Poké Balls and lock the Pokémon inside remotely?

-Your hopeful ingenuity is commendable, but no, I cannot do that. The Pokétransfer system exists independent of organization and affiliation, all the transactions are heavily encrypted cannot be tampered with. Imagine how simple the police and the Fed’s job would be were this an option.

-Oh. Oh well, worth a shot.

-I can, however, view the registered Pokémon within Team Rocket and the trainers they’re assigned to. The data is mainly for lower ranking members, though, which is much less useful.

-You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you?

-Of course, I’m not playing around here. Same should go for you.

He made a step towards the other trainer.

-After I’ve healed to an acceptable state, I’d be teaching you basics of combat and self defense. You’d need more than that pitiful flailing once you engage in battle.

Gold tried to look scandalized, despite that being a pretty accurate description of his brawling performance.

-Oi! I was just going easy on you. Besides, won’t my Pokémon be enough to protect me if so be necessary?

-Negative, you must account for all outcomes. What if your Pokémon are disabled, unconscious or somehow alternatively unavailable? The inability to properly defend yourself and others may cost you more than just your health.

-I see...

It acutely felt that the other wasn’t merely advising him, but talking from personal experience. Gold clenched his fist swung it in the air mimicking a punch.

-Yeah okay, then show me what you’ve got, coach.

Silver gave curt nod and released his Haunter.

-Now, enough chatter, it’s time to train. Make one of your Pokémon practice the Poké Ball technique and battle with the others. A bit of multitasking wouldn’t throw you off, would it?

-Nah, my body is ready.

His body was not ready. Barely able to give Aipom any cohesive instructions, he was dragged into the battle that had started without a second of delay. It took up most of his attention, keeping up with Haunter’s evasive maneuvers and sudden attacks, while guiding Flaaffy’s dodges and counters. And the fact that mangled stray Poké Balls kept flying into the field did not make the task any easier either.

But even so, he refused to give in to the initial frustration, forcing himself to develop new ways to tackle the issues. Golbat was paired with Aipom at his request, keeping that balls away with his Quick Guard, while Flaaffy finally brought Haunter’s speed down with consecutive Cotton Spores.
and was prepared to go full electric offense.

With their combined efforts Aipom managed a about a 80% success rate at jamming a Poké Ball and Flaaffy and Haunter both learned a new move by the end of the night.

Tired but content, the brunette helped his Pokémon collect the orbs scattered on the ground, when he caught himself thinking. In just three days with Silver he’d learned and experienced more bizarre and extraordinary things than he had from the start of his adventure. If this was just the beginning, he couldn’t wait to see more.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, this should've been part of the previous chapter, but oh well. Next will be longer!
The morning came and went without fanfare. Silver kept working at his computer, insisting he had something urgent to finish, so Gold was left to his own devices. Largely inspired by the last night’s training session, he’d figured it’d be only natural to go back and solidify the results. Aipom already had most of it down, so he could teach the rest of the team, while the teen practiced jamming the Poké Ball himself, just like his rival had originally showed him.

He released his entire party, allowing them to stretch and run around in the early sun before they started the training. Croconaw instantly leapt into a the largest puddle he could find and Togepi buried himself in a pile of yellow leaves under the sprawling oak trees. Flaaffy and Aipom - the main participants of yesterday's workout - patiently waited for their trainer’s instructions, sensing they rather came here for business.

Gold smiled at their determined expressions and readily passed his command to Aipom. He then stepped out of the way into the shaded nook to the near right. Camping knife in one hand and a Poké Ball in another, he took a moment to focus. Even if he wouldn't pick it up right away at least the trees would be able curb the balls’ irregular trajectory.

He exhaled and threw it straight up. With his knife he lurched through the air, yet instead of the ringing hack he heard a faint ‘dink’ followed by muted ‘thud’. The orb rolled on the ground barely a meter from his feet. He picked it up and examined the casing for any kind of damage. There was a tiny indent on the red part of the shell, but it was impossible to tell if he’d just done this or it’d been there from the beginning. He’d never been particularly careful with his gear, especially not the catching balls - those were always free to roll around at the bottom of their allotted pocket along with some other random items.

It felt kinda ironic though - for an item that could withstand a wildfire and submerging to crushing depths - it sure was prone to the most common of cosmetic damage.

The boy continued with his work and hour and a half later he had still yet to yield any promising results. He would consistently smack the Poké Ball with the blade, but hitting it even remotely on the hinge seemed unimaginable. What made it even more disheartening was how effortless Silver had made it look earlier. Just how long did he practice to achieve such effect?

“I’ve trained from a young age, and you, you’re an amateur” the other had said the day he refused Gold’s help.

The brunette tried for another twenty minutes and decided to throw in the towel for the morning, stashing away his pocket knife with a sigh. 'Training from a young age’, after all, did not happen in a day, and certainly not in a couple of hours of merely chucking balls.

He checked in on his Pokémon in the forest's open area, and they too, looked like they were ready for a break. Croconaw was the only one besides Aipom that was able to jam the ball in the end, but even he much preferred freezing the sorry device instead of chopping it with his claws. Deeming that a decent working alternative the boy gave his team an approving thumbs up and distributed the remaining snacks he had left from his shopping spree.

He squinted at the flickering sunlight behind the the crones. It looked like it was still all too early for lunch, but perhaps, he thought, he and Silver could catch a late breakfast.

“Hey, Silv! Wanna go get some grub together now?”
The response didn’t come right away, so he idled around, waiting for the peppy buzz on his wrist.

“That is not my name.”

Gold chortled as he pictured the other’s face at the reply and then tapped the keyboard.

“Silver. So do you wanna? I saw a great taco place on the way.”

“No, I’m still busy.”

“Lunch then?”

“No.”

He started typing another inquiry but before he could finish a new message popped up.

“Also no. Training same time and place. See you then.”

And that seemed to be it. From the looks of it Silver had no interest in wasting any more time on texting and obviously had his own agenda for the day.

Gold lowered his arm and looked at the mid autumn sunrise once more. Fine then, his rival wasn’t the only busy one here, he and his Pokemon still had heaps of ground to cover.

Not at all keen on traveling all the way to Goldenrod the second day in a row, he spent most of his time exploring the backwater pits on the west side of Route 34. Separated from the open waters by wave breakers, they presented a perfect place for Croconaw to dive about and practice Surf and for the others to take a go at fighting water types which were a rare commodity until now, save for yesterday’s blasted fisherman.

The area also extended a lot further than they’d anticipated, stretching all the way to the hanging groves of South Ilex. For a good part of it they had to go upstream and sometimes hike through marsh, which made him doubt if this was even worth it. Right about as he was going to ditch the idea and Surf back, Croconaw tugged at his sleeve and pointed towards a narrow passage between the dangling branches.

Despite the abundant growth it seemed like the pathway had been used fairly recently, making Gold all the more curious. He roamed through the grass for a minute or two and finally emerged at a large empty space, blocked off by trees and a tall fence on either sides. Judging by the streaks on the grass, ground and the surrounding greenery, the opening was primarily used as a battle arena, much like their clearing beside the Daycare. Deep ruts were carved into the dark soil and most of the protruding branches were slashed, burned or otherwise damaged.

Gold circled the unmarked perimeter, wondering what kind of people usually gather here. Somebody had clearly went through the effort to set up a battle zone in a remote area like this, so the contenders’ level and proficiency should be much higher than a random encounter. He fantasized running into an Ace Trainer, Black Belt or maybe even a Dragon Tamer tonight if he waited long enough. He surveyed the objects around him turning it into a little pop quiz for himself to pass the time. The tree above him definitely got hacked by some sort of ice-type move, hence the blackened leaves, the rocks to the left bore distinct lightning bolt patterns left by a charged electric attack and the shrubs ahead were clearly shredded by a high speed technique such as Fury Swipes or X-Scissor. Pumped for a prospective battle, he reached the far end of the loop and leaned back on the fence. He heard a soft shuffle behind him, so he turned around. A piece of
paper was stuck to the wooden planks with a single piece of degrading tape. It looked like it’s been here for at least a week, battered by and exposed to the elements. The boy squinted, trying to make out the message in the smears of ink.

“-- suspended indefinitely. Beware of R”

“Beware of R”, he wistfully repeated in his head. There was only one ‘R’ to beware in this context and they’d been the order of the day for him and his rival as it was.

He soughed as he got ready to go back. He’d been so excited to meet some crazy strong trainers and then tell Silver all about it later tonight. He’d already planned to invite the other out here, so they could double battle or tag team their opponents in fierce clashes of force and wit. Contrary to the laid-back hangout on the mall’s viewing deck, Silver would’ve surely valued the unique challenge opportunity.

Brooding, he walked up the grassy path - no matter what he did or thought about it always came back to the redhead, didn’t it? Could he have really expected at the beginning of his journey that he would partner up with the moody boy that unceremoniously kicked him out from behind Prof. Elm’s lab? The cool, collected teen that always was a dozen steps ahead of him.

He lingered, replaying the interaction in his head. Even then something struck him about Silver. Thinking back, it wasn’t the brash attitude or the physical advance that he found appalling, but the infinite apathy he saw in the other’s gaze. Not that he’d ever wanted to do it, but if Gold were to go around stealing Pokémon his heart would probably be racing a thousand miles per hour, yet Silver looked inhumanely detached.

They later had a run in right outside of Cherrygrove City, where the other sent out his newly acquired Cyndaquil only to be easily taken out by Totodile. Dropping something about a ‘waste of time’ he promptly departed. Then there was a brief encounter at the Sprout Tower and the one in Azalea that the teen was still incredibly touchy about.

If Silver had effortlessly wiped his Pokémon in that last battle, could it mean that he just threw the one in Cherrygrove? He must’ve intentionally concealed his full party, while simply testing out his fire type’s competences. And judging from the imbalanced battle from the first day, it was just one of his standard training techniques.

Feeling dejected, the brunette strolled past the first marshy pouches on the swampy shore. If his rival was distinctly better than him in every possible area, why was he even bothering with him now? Gold had been bold in his ambition to join the battle against Team Rocket from the start, but could he prove that this boldness wasn’t just self-serving arrogance?

He stopped, suddenly overcome with the desire to smack himself with a Dunsparce. This was no time and place for doubts, and, moreover, Silver had accepted him as a partner, so there must’ve been something to him that he himself might not even see. It was more often than not, that he couldn’t quite follow the other’s thought processes, ending up baffled and confused. And honestly, it wasn’t just that - almost everything about the redhead was so damn confusing and shrouded in mystery.

He thought of the many things he’d been yearning to ask. “Where did you come from? Where have you been before? How are you so adept at so many things? What is that’s driving you? Where are all those scars from?” These and a dozen more were circling in Gold’s mind. One thing was certain, though. His rival’s determination to take down Team Rocket was unshakable - he bled out, he took the drug, he trained and he fought, he pushed on no matter what.
Once more familiar sorrow filled up his heart at the astonishing stoicism that Silver took any
adversity on, although he was still just a boy, just like him. He had his own insecurities and painful
emotions that he so desperately tried to hide. He yelled at Gold and commanded him to leave when
the other insisted on joining his fight just to protect him from the dangerous world he had lived in,
he cried that night in Gold’s arms, saying how much he hated himself. He mocked Gold for his
optimism, he teased him for his stupid remarks, he praised him for his work, he encouraged him as
they trained. The cold, hardened Silver was way more human that he had himself thought.

The more he learned about him, little by little, the more enraptured he became with this
extraordinary new person he found in his rival. The incredibly smart, sarcastic, infuriating, brave,
distant, brash, eccentric, funny, ruthless, calculating, reckless, vulnerable…

Gold noticed himself clutching his own chest through his hoodie, heart pounding. Did he have…
feelings for Silver?

He stood there, idle, letting the revelation to sink in. With a whole minute’s delay he noticed that
his shoes were too, in fact, sinking into the wet marsh. Sending chunks of mud everywhere, he
waddled back onto the drier soil.

He stooped and placed both hands on his face - how could this possibly be? They were antagonistic
towards each other just until a couple of days ago, they still barely knew anything about one
another, and to boot, they were both male. He’d never really pinned himself as queer either. Didn’t
he always like Crys, his next door neighbor? The cheerful and gentle Crys, that he’d known since
they were children in New Bark Town, that laughed at his corny jokes and chatted away during his
calls on the weekends, that embarked on her own Pokémon journey shortly after him. He hadn’t
contacted her or had the desire to since Azalea Town, and all after blubbing about how he beat
Team Rocket in the Slowpoke Well. He did see a missed call from her on the morning after the fire,
realizing, that she must’ve been sincerely concerned just like his mum was.

Suddenly Gold felt guilty. There was so much going on - the training, the daily tasks from Silver,
the planning, he hadn’t even once thought of her. He scrolled through her messages, pictured her
smile, her dark hair that glistened almost blue in the sun, her lighthearted laugh. He tried to unearth
any buried emotions he might have for her, anything that would suggest that his disturbing
infatuation with Silver was just a misunderstanding.

He scoured frantically, but the restless search revealed singly notions of friendship or childhood
companionship. He truly cherished these feelings, the moments he spent with her, but it was just
not the same. It was not the same when Silver glared at him, sending shivers down his spine, when
he offered that brazen smirk, making his cheeks heat up, or when he commended him for his little
successes making his heart swell.

He stared at the muggy road with unseeing eyes, contemplating his new predicament. There was no
chance in any universe that Silver liked him back. This was completely and utterly hopeless.
Punctual this time, I see.

Silver arrived at the clearing on the dot, carrying a patterned paper bag in his hands. Gold sat cross-legged and leaning on a tree with his eyes closed, a steady mantra in his head. “Act normal, nothing happened, act normal...” He slowly got up to greet the other teen. “…act normal, absolutely nothing happened.”

-Better start getting used to it! So, how was business today?

-Tedious, but essential. Plundered the Rocket’s encryption mechanisms, handled some shipment logistics, checked in with the radio shop - work is moving along according to schedule. You?

The brunette rocked his head in accord. That all did sound quite tedious, especially compared to the leisurely outdoor activities he’d been engaging in all day.

-Mmm, not bad either. Practiced the Poké Ball trick some more and then trained with my Pokémon. Route 34 is waayy longer than I thought. Did you know that there was this huge secret battle arena in the far west?

-No, but I’ve heard of the Goldenrod’s infamous underground battle scene. Was this one of their locations?

-Maybe. It was totally cool and looked like it housed some serious fights there. Not when I stopped by, though.

Still rather bummed by the ring’s closure, Gold pulled a face.

-It’s currently closed down cus of Team Rocket’s return. Or at least that’s what I got from that mangled note. Yanno, I really hoped I’d get to fight some seasoned adventurer, rare Pokémon collector, or just somebody impressively strong tonight.

-Seems like it’ll be just me then. Sorry to disappoint.

Silver procured a foil wrap from his bag and tossed it to the other boy.

-Here you go.

-Nah, that’s not…

Gold meant to express how excited he’d been to invite the other to the arena and to battle all those trainers together, but as the tugged on the wrapper the practiced words flew right out of his head. A super Kanto-style burrito from that same shop he’d babbled about earlier sat in his hand. He felt warmth enveloping his entire body as his fingers frenziedly dug into the fresh roll. Did the other feel bad for repeatedly turning him down in the morning after all?

He managed a muffled ‘thanks’ and eagerly started stuffing his face. He had been quite hungry from his long trip, but that was not the main reason he’d urged to keep his mouth occupied. A maelstrom of emotions at the unexpected gesture, at the other’s vicinity was now bubbling inside
of him, ardent and threatening to spill any moment.

-You catch a cold or something?

Before he could brace himself, he saw the other looking at him with a scrutinizing expression. Shit, has his face borne an embarrassing shade of red this entire time? Packing the last bite of the burrito he cleared his throat and decided to go along with it for now.

-I… yeah, perhaps.

-Well, not enough reason to interrupt our training.

Silver got up and threw the crumbled wrapping back into the paper bag. All while trying to fight the searing heat off his cheeks, Gold did the same. He glanced at other’s bandaged face and absently wondered what would, in fact, qualify for ‘enough’. If he were to bet on it, his rival wouldn’t hesitate to drag him and himself out into the field even they had several limbs missing. Each.

-No, of course not. Let’s do it.

Just as they moved into the open area it started raining. Gold gazed into the evening sky - in a drastic change from just a couple hours ago it was wholly overcast. Predictably, Silver refused to postpone the training due to ‘a mere drizzle’ and released three of his Pokémon at once. Puzzled, the brunette followed suite, begrudgingly keeping the Togepi within his Poké Ball.

-We’re going to practice multiple battle tonight. There will be times when you’d have to fight several enemy Pokémon concurrently, so you’d need to train the reflexes and exercise concentration to timely react to all of them.

Half listening, Gold nodded, seriously doubting his ability to exercise concentration on anything but the other boy’s long hair, carelessly thrown around by the wind. How hadn’t he noticed how beautiful it was until now? Fiery and flowing, it was a wildfire before his eyes, much like the owner - dangerous, alluring and brilliant. “No, snap out if it!”, he kicked himself angrily, “now is not the time, actually, never is the time.”

Oblivious to the other’s inner struggles, Silver continued his monologue.

-The matchups would be Golbat - Aipom, Quilava - Flaaffy, Haunter - Croconaw.

The brunette finally made an proper effort to pay attention and repeated the assigned cohorts in his head. Something about them just felt off.

-Wait, that doesn’t really--

-Follow the basics of type advantages?

-Yeah.

The other teen just simpered.

-Trust me, it very rarely does.
They begun, Silver promptly getting the upper hand. Only the first pair’s speed was comparable, while for the other two the lag was getting more and more noticeable. Both Flaaffy and Croconaw ended up stiffly tanking most of the hits from their nimble foes. Gold once again had huge trouble keeping up with everything that was going on the battlefield, water in his eyes and Pokémon turning into a fuzzy blur of colors. The rain picked up even more, causing Quilava’s fire to go out in billowing smoke. Neither the Pokémon nor her trainer seemed fazed by the development.

-Perfect, keep the fire going!

Thick clouds of smoke started filling the area, obstructing the vision further. Gold coughed and covered his eyes, sullenly noting his opponent’s ability to take advantage of any situation. Unwilling to back out, he spun on his heels and yelled.

-Aipom - Sand Attack, Flaaffy - Thundershock, Croconaw - Water Gun, to your left!

The hurl of sand did not affect Golbat altogether but hit Quilava, sending her off course and thinning the smoke. Croconaw navigated the battle scene and shot a current of water square into the fire type’s snout. Haunter’s claw, in turn, aimed at Flaaffy’s throat.

He heard a single clap from the other side of the clearing and all Silver’s Pokémon instantly stopped moving.

-I was wondering when you’d figure it out.

Gold wiped his face and peered at the other trainer. He was moving towards him, large umbrella in hand. The rain had positively turned into a downpour.

-Initial matchups are not to be viewed as restrictions. You’re not a lost cause after all.

Ambiguous nature of the compliment aside, Silver sounded rather content. He stood beside the shorter teen, extending his arm and now shielding both their heads from the cold shower.

The brunette felt his mouth run dry and mind blank. The covert praise, the other’s sudden proximity made it all too much for him to handle.

-Um I… thanks.

He couldn't bring himself to look the other in the eye, so he just stared at his feet and belatedly retrieved his Pokémon. Doing the same to his own party, Silver gestured in the general direction of the inn.

-Well, no use staying here during the storm, we can withdraw.

He started walking, leaving the other boy behind. Caught in a momentary trance, Gold promptly got brought back to his senses by the large droplets that started landing on his head. Struggling to keep his pulse down, he hurried back under the cover.

He inhaled deeply, listening to the rhythmic thrumming of the rain on the umbrella’s nylon, the gentle splashes of their feet against the growing puddles, the wailing of the wind. He was sincerely grateful for all of it. For if not this natural front, he was certain, Silver would've instantly picked up on his shaky breath and the wild drumming of his heart.

-Hey, Silver?

-Mmm?
Not even sure what he’d wanted to say himself, he bit the inside of his cheek. “Could you be gay, by any chance? Am I your type? Do you wanna go out?” Gold clenched the hem of the hoodie in his fist and closed his mouth shut. No, that was absurd, that’s not what this was all about, that’s not what he’s here for. Blurt any of that out and their unfledged partnership would be as good as over. He turned his head away in resignation.

-No, it’s nothing.

Silver threw off his boots as he entered the room and, right away, went to examine the stats on one of his monitors. He clicked several times, adjusted a number of indicators and began typing a command. Seeing the other preoccupied, Gold promptly shot for the bathroom. He closed the door as best as he could and sighed guiltily - after all, he’d been the one responsible for the no longer functioning deadbolt.

Trembling, he approached the tub and started the water. Even with the umbrella’s protection he managed to get completely soaked and hadn’t noticed how freaking frozen his body felt until they entered the yellow light of the inn’s reception.

He let the warming currents ease the numbness in his fingers and the frenzy in his mind. If he were to continue with the mission, he realized, he’d have to put a lid on these swarming, unwelcome emotions.

He got out of the shower, threw on a change of fresh clothes, peeking towards the kitchen. Silver was slowly twisting the valves on the jacketed vessel, rubber gloves on his hands, hair tied up in a high ponytail. An even stream of clear liquid poured from the metal spigot into a tall glass container. He waited for it to fill up to three fourths of its capacity and then closed the valve shut. He then lifted the flask into the light and twirled around slightly, checking for any residue, when he noticed Gold outright staring at him.

-What? There something on my face?

The sitting boy violently shook his head as he sought to come back to his senses. Even though the other was performing a visually simple task, he found the ultimate concentration in his gaze, the accuracy of his motions strangely mesmerizing. And he couldn’t even start on how fucking cute the unfamiliar hairstyle looked on the redhead.

-Sorry, spaced out for a sec. Your face is perfectly fine.

Silver eyed him with suspicion.

-Good to hear. But you better put one of those fever-reducers to work, you tapping out on me here is the last thing I need.

Gold swallowed and straightened his back. Right, he was pretending to have a cold. Silently, he got up and chugged one of the meds he bought earlier just to avoid questioning and then walked over to the table. His apprehension towards the lab was no excuse for slacking and neither were his newfound feelings.

-Need any help?

The other looked at him briefly, considering the offer, and then nodded at the box of green medical gloves sitting on the table.
-Put those on while I’m mixing this. It will only take a minute.

He did as instructed and patiently watched as the other gradually emptied the newly forged liquid into a bowl of brownish powder. Silver carefully stirred the mixture with a long spoon in a counterclockwise motion, making sure it was the right consistency and, most importantly, stable. About a minute later he slapped right in the middle and, as promised, pushed the entire tub to Gold.

-Done. Roll this out and then slice into roughly 15x10cm blocks. Then transfer them to that box.

The brunette took a second to inspect the doughlike substance and, sensing nothing particularly alarming about it, scooped up a chunk with his hand. Stretchy and cool, it felt like standard modeling clay more than any kind of cooking batter. “Only that it’s neither”, he reminded himself. The matter he was casually handling like play-doh was none other than a deadly plastic explosive.

The brunette finished up with cutting and stacking the homemade C4, while the other worked on starting, from what it seemed, a new batch. Out of viable tasks, Gold plopped back on the bed and buried himself within the comforter. He warily checked his Pokégear for any messages from his mum and, thankfully, there were none. Not particularly tired, he made another attempt at the blueprints, thoroughly reading through each section and trying to ignore the fact that he and Silver had shared a bed for the last couple of days.

He pulled the covers up, hiding his face. He had never shared a bed with anyone before unless, perhaps, his mum when he was a little child. He would run to her room during night thunderstorms, much like the one raging outside the windows tonight, and hide under the soft duvet. No matter the reasoning, she couldn’t bring herself to drive him away, so he ended up curled up by her side till the morning.

As if a testament his thoughts a blinding flash lit up the flooded area outside, followed shortly by a rumbling thunder. He felt the mattress shift as Silver had finally joined him on the king bed.

-Don’t tell me you’re afraid of thunderstorms.

Gold tore the blanket down and pulled the most exasperated impression he could muster.

-What?! Of course not!

The redhead just snickered. This was probably the closest he saw his rival to actually smiling, and, even if it was at his expense yet again, it secretly made his heart glow with warmth.

Silver propped up a pillow at the headrest and leaned back, tablet in hand. Gold noticed a complex rendering of something that resembled the inside of an amp on the screen. And he only knew how an amp looked because he smashed his friend’s one while helping him move.

-Is that… an amplifier?

Silver gave him an approving nod.

-Indeed, it is. Only this particular one takes up a 300 square meters in surface area.

-Woah…

-This is the main device that is housed in the underground of Mahogany’s hideout. Previously, all data on it was encrypted and scattered. Seems like it’s finally nearing its completion.
So this was what Silver spent half the day doing.

-That’s insane, how are we going to shut it down? Can you even make that many explosives?

-We don’t have to cover the entire area with C4, all we need to do is trigger a chain reaction, it will be up in the air before you know it.

-Mmm, that’s true.

-On top of it all, it’s radio equipment, most of its components, such as coils or vacuum tubes are toxic and flammable, so setting it off should be the least of our worries. The thing that concerns me are these oversized orbs which are attached to the opposite sides of the circuitry. They lack any kind of indicators on the schema and were not listed in any of the supporting documents.

-You think they’re some kind of new technology they’ve developed?

-Potentially. That’s something I need to look into further.

He zoomed in and out of the 3D rendering, examining the individual elements and occasionally typing symbols onto a spreadsheet. Leaning over the other’s upright pillow, Gold followed his actions for a little while, squinting at the tiny shapes and lettering. Unable to understand most of it and his fever drug kicking in - did he take the night version by accident? - he gradually started to doze off.

He dreamt they were kids playing pillow fort in his parents’ attic. Barricaded behind a tower of cushions and top sheets and armed with hot cocoa and crackers, they were just two friends enjoying their carefree game, the storm above them the only worry in the world.

-Oh my Arceus!

Silver slammed his hand on the mattress, hard. Startled, the brunette jumped, bumping into the other’s shoulder. He flushed at the sudden contact and recoiled, hiding his blush in the sheets. He mumbled from under the covers.

-What happened?

-They’re Electrodes!

-Electrodes?.. I dunno how exactly radio equipment works, but isn't that normal?

-No, not that kind of electrode, the Pokémon Electrode!

-Huh?

The other boy was now rapidly typing something in the tablet’s browser.

-I can’t believe I didn’t see it right away. They’re using the Electrodes to power up the entire system. Of course, otherwise the authorities of Mahogany would’ve noticed the significant spike in the volt usage, and, given how much electricity the Pokémon are able to produce, it only natural to use them at such a large scale.

Gold gently rubbed the cheek that he brushed the other’s shoulder with, staring at him with fascination - it was a rare sight to see Silver get so excited about anything. Whether it was something mundane as a new toy for a child, or cracking a criminal organization’s ploy for the redhead, the look was unmistakably similar - it was like Christmas came early.
-This makes our life so much easier. I can totally get away with just a few bricks of C4, the Electrodes’ agitated state and consequent Selfdestructions would take care of the rest. I thought the storage facility in Ilex was a fluke, but this is instant detonation on a silver platter. Now, if I could calculate the summary output of each unit, then I could predict the blast radius...

Silver dove into the advanced specifics and Gold felt his eyelids growing heavy yet again. He murmured a couple of noises of agreement at random intervals only to pass out minutes later. The last things he caught himself thinking before falling into deep slumber were how happy he was to see his rival’s sincere enthusiasm and his genuine smile, just to be followed by a traitorous and nagging sensation - would he ever be able to make Silver feel the same way about him?

Chapter End Notes

Amazing fanart by geneseedraws
Chapter 10

Gold shifted under the covers and drowsily cracked one eye open. Judging from the dimmed lighting in the room it was rather early and he should’ve probably still been fast asleep. He flopped to his side and threw a glance at his Pokégear sitting on the nightstand. ‘6:47AM’ indifferently glowed the miniature screen. This was the earliest he had woken up in weeks and for no good reason either. He groaned in resentment and rolled back over, aggressively pulling at the heavy comforter. The blanket gave in with little resistance and he almost toppled right off the edge the mattress.

-Fu--

Swearing, he sat up and turned his head to face Silver’s inevitable glare.

-Fuck. I’m sor--

He stopped, swallowing his eloquent apology. The other side of the bed was empty.

How long had the other been gone already? And where the hell would he go so freaking early in the morning anyways? He did stay up yesterday too, calculating the voltage or something, while Gold got knocked out by the ill-picked fever reducer.

Rubbing his face, the brunette switched the bedside light on and picked up his gear. He thought that maybe this was for the best after all. If he’d awoken to a facefull of those silky red strands instead, he’d be doomed to start blushing and then never be able to stop. And common colds, fake or not, don’t even last that long.

With a deep sigh he opened the single unread message blinking on his screen.

“Out for errands in the city. Clearing, 6:00PM.’

Gold ran his eyes over Silver’s text several times - it was received almost an hour ago - and exited the menu. Seemed like he was left to himself for today as well, and, for once he was not woefully disappointed by it, but quite the opposite.

Marking his previous adventuring endeavor as moderate success, he’d set to explore more areas on Route 34. It didn’t cover a huge variety of terrain, mostly being marshlands and groves, but the proximity of the metropolis had an evident effect on the route’s ecosystem. Aside from a regular Pidgey or Rattata it was possible to encounter a Abra, Drowzee, or sometimes even a Snubbull, all Pokemon prevalent in dense urban areas. He’d even heard rumors about a Ditto outbreak once before, but discarded them as nothing but - those things were as rare as a legendary.

He let Togepi go crazy on the wild encounters while they made their way north under the rays of the rising sun. He tried not to think about his rival or what he was up to this very moment, but even the smallest most unrelated thing drew his thoughts back to the redhead. Was it the buzzing of the power lines, notably similar to the even tone of his rival’s chem equipment, the shuffling of the leaves so close to the sound of the other’s brisk typing, or those campers’ fire, hot and welcoming and... 

He lingered, briefly losing train of thought, as he watched the naked flames flicker and dance. Yellow and orange they lapped over the kindling wood, erupting into smoke and sizzles as large
greasy drops fell from above.

His stomach gave an obnoxious growl and he realized he’d been arrantly staring at some strangers’ cooking for the last minute. A quintet of gazes ranging from puzzled to entertained turned his direction. Awkwardly, he lifted his arms and let out a garbled laugh.

-Haha, sorry guys, don’t mind me.

The girl closest to him covered her mouth and giggled.

- Seems like our exquisite breakfast is attracting more than just wild Pokémon.

Gold took a step back and freshly surveyed the campers’ temporary setup. Seated around an open fire pit, three guys and two gals about his age, were waiting on their morning meal, paper plates and forks in hand. The batch of breakfast sausages skewered over the grill slowly rotated, emitting a divine mouth-watering aroma.

Surely, his olfactory senses beat his visual ones on this one. He backed some more, hoping to mask his now persistently rumbling belly.

-I’ll just get going--

-No worries, dude. You wanna join us? We’ve got enough for everyone.

A guy across the fire gave a friendly wave and all the other campers nodded in agreement. They shuffled slightly, making space, and ushered the newcomer to sit down. Relieved and actually quite ravenous, he grinned and settled between the giggling blonde and the boy to her right.

-Thanks, really appreciate it!

Shortly, the meat and hot dog buns were distributed among everyone and Gold was pulled into the good-natured banter.

-And so I totally won that bet, Brandon.

A camper in khaki bucket hat folded his arms and harrumphed.

-Are you really still on about this? I told you many times, it doesn’t freaking count.

-Sure does.

-Does not. If that damn explosion didn’t scare off the Pineco, I would’ve totally gotten the best of you.

His opponent shrugged.

-Admit it, you’re just out of luck. And owe me a box of Net Balls.

Brandon scowled, ready for a retort, when the girl next to Gold butted in.

-Guys, just cut it out, would ya? Besides we could all use some luck. It’s been what, five whole d--

-Three.

-Three whole days, and they’re still not letting anyone in!
She sighed and theatrically tossed her head.

-There goes our annual Ilex expedition, ended faster than you’d snap your fingers.

The ginger girl one person over slapped a hand on her friend’s back and played along.

-Emily, I do feel your chagrin! I was hoping to visit the shrine after to give my offerings, too.

-Maybe that’s why the gods have forsaken us!

Gold snickered and stopped chewing for a second, mildly invested.

-You keep joking, but I’m telling you guys, there’s some huge conspiracy going on. The government is testing secret weapons there.

A lanky guy in a blue t-shirt and glasses waved his fork emphatically. Ginger brushed her hair, dropping the silly act.

-Aw shut up, Todd. There’s nothing of the such.

-Yeah? How would you explain the shooting and extended police involvement?

-I don’t know! But why would the government test weapons in a national park? If it were me, I’d go to a desert or something.

-Don’t be daft, there’s no desert in Johto.

-I’ve heard they found blood on the scene too.

The boy to Gold’s left said in a hushed voice. Emily squeaked and brought a palm to her face.

-Yeah and I’d say the police weren’t entirely honest with us. At this rate it could be the government, or something even more sinister…

Brandon the bucket hat simply waved his hand.

-You’re just screwing with us.

-Not in the least. When was the last shooting registered in Johto or Kanto? From what I remember it was around three years ago, when Team Rocket was still at large. And all those rumors about their return.

Todd nodded with enthusiasm.

-Mmm, this is even more probable than the government weapon testing. The police must’ve had a shootout with them and there were casualties!

The brunette set his plate down altogether, curiously absorbing the campers’ theories. They hadn’t missed the mark completely, but were still off by quite some ways. The mention of blood, though, was concerning - was it Silver’s or somebody else’s? Casually, he chimed into the conversation.

-Hey, what are you guys on about? Were you actually in the forest at the night of the fire?

Emily gave him a meaningful look.

-We sure were. We settled down a few hours prior and went out for our evening hike when this
massive earthquake almost knocked us off our feet.
-It was an explosion.

-Explosion, whatever, Todd, don’t be a bore. And then another and another. Somebody was shooting and yelling, real crazy stuff. We got back to our tents - there was no use catching Pokémon anyway - and then there’s this army of policemen and paramedics storming the area. They made us pack right that instant, giving no explanation whatsoever and drove us out of the forest.

Ginger nodded and took over.

-They told us of some gas tank malfunction at the site, but we were at the campground, so I call bullshit on that.

-And now we’re stuck here, waiting for the gates to re-open. But it’s been three - she gave Todd a dirty look - days and they’re still not letting anyone in!

Gold sized up the story - well, that was nothing new.

-What about the blood?

The person to his right dropped his voice conspiratorially again.

-One of the the campers that stayed that night in the camp told me he snuck through the forest after the explosions and tried to spy on whatever was going on.

-Oh? What did he see?

-He said it was horrifying - a huge building ablaze, windows popping, signs of struggle, pools of blood on the ground and no police in sight.

Brandon let out a low whistle as the other continued.

-So maybe the Rockets had a shootout with one of their own.

He then spread his arms and laughed.

-Of course he might’ve been lying to spice up the drama, he kinda looked even more of a wacko than Todd.

-Hey!

-There’s no way Team Rocket is back, that trainer three years ago did them good.

Emily reached out and punched his knee over Gold.

-You’re an idiot, Sam. All you tell is scary stuff.

The discussion gradually moved back onto its light-hearted track and nobody brought up the fire yet again. Gold mused, chewing on his second sausage - what the nameless camper had told Sam had most likely been true.

They finished up with breakfast and Todd proposed a good old Pokémon brawl to kick off the day.
The brunette jumped to his feet and snapped his Poké Ball belt ready. Having only fought shoddy wild Pokémon earlier, he was down.

The group battled all morning and well into the day, juggling various styles and taking occasional breaks for chitchat or to grab a snack. They managed to go through single, double and even triple modes, now that they had an even number of people. Gold proposed to do the multiple battles as well, but that got confusing all too quickly, so they scrapped the idea almost instantly.

At one point Brandon stepped away to start the grill again and Gold felt it was the appropriate moment to depart. He’d already been leeching off the campers’ generosity and food supply for long enough.

As he was packing he exchanged contact info with Sam and Todd. Partially since they turned out to be decent battle opponents, but mostly because he wanted to keep tabs on the spicy Team Rocket gossip from a source other than the TV or his mum.

Waving his final goodbyes he was about to set out, when he felt a grip on his wrist. It was gentle, not like the Silver’s, and almost made him want to jerk his arm away in recourse.

Emily was looking up at him with a bright smile on her face.

-You're cute, let's go on a date sometime.

He blinked. Wow, straightforward.

-I don’t--

-Aw come on, no need to be shy. Or do you have a girlfriend?

-No, but--

-Perfect then.

Never letting go of his wrist, she pulled at his arm, punched a number into his Pokégear and then hit ‘call’. Her own device gave a little buzz.

-Here you go, all done. Name’s Emily in case you forgot, but you should save me as something cute. I’ll text you later today!

She grinned and turned around, already sprinting back to her friends.

Gold touched his wrist as he stared at the six digits of her number shamelessly inscribed on the screen. It was solid proof he’d just scored a date with a pretty girl, zero effort at that, yet all he could see was a jeering reminder of his own standing. He envied the nonchalance, the perfect ease that she’d approached him with, and the fact that, regardless of his answer, there’d be virtually no repercussions for their relationship.

He closed his eyes and let his arm fall to the side. Emily, as you’ve yourself mentioned earlier, you’re damn well out of luck here. A picture of Silver’s rare, precious smile floated his mind for the thousandth time today and he clenched his fist. In fact, you never stood a chance.

There was still time left until the meeting, so Gold ran by his favorite little shopping center to restock on Poké Snacks and buy a little something for himself. He got the usual sub to go and
wandered around the perimeter of the nearing Daycare.

He’d always had a soft spot for baby Pokémon and was overjoyed when Prof. Elm gave him the task to take care of the Egg. Ever since it hatched, he’d doted on his Togepi and anyone who felt otherwise was clearly just blind or too biased to see it as well.

Leaning on the fence, he surveyed the hustle and bustle inside the enclosure. A pair of Teddiursas was chasing one another in the central play structure, the rowdy group of Sentrets kept busy digging and rolling in the the sandy pits and a couple of water types splashed around in the little pond. Gold loved watching the hatchlings, their innocent and jaunty demeanor always putting his mind at ease. There were no Rockets, no need to break or hack into things, no need for fighting, no need for Silver’s plan.

He chuckled lightly when he noted how similar his morning acquaintances’ disposition was to the Pokemon running around in front of him. The cheerful campers were kind of loud and quirky in their own ways, but he still had lots of fun hanging out with them. Carefree and heedless, it was so departed from the serious, calculated nature that the redhead had approached everything with. This could be him again, he thought, had he followed his rival's orders that day and left him alone at the inn. Grilling out with friends, sharing stories, going on dates, quibbling over stupid bets, or having Pokemon battles lacking both skill and challenge…

As he went down the list, he realized that it held much less value for him than it did before.

It felt superficial almost. Hollow. And if a certain somebody wasn’t there to experience it with him, he wasn’t sure if he valued it at all.

-Good afternoon, young man.

The brunette gave a start, abruptly pulled from his thoughts. An elderly lady in a cozy shawl was standing next to him, leaning on an elaborately carved wooden cane.

-Um, good afternoon.

-I always enjoy when young people come over to the Daycare. You waiting for your girlfriend, aren’t you?

Gold bit hard on his sandwich as he felt his face turning pink. Just what was with today? This was the second time somebody had inquired him about his girlfriend.

-Ah, so you are. It’s so wonderful, couples coming to play with the baby Pokémon. My husband and I can only give them so much attention.

-They’re... they’re not my girlfriend.

-Oh, a date then.

-No!

-I see, I see.

The lady rocked her head and gave him a knowing look. She hung down her arm over the fence and made a couple of taps on the painted wood. Half a dozen of hatchlings eagerly waddled over as she procured a woven pouch. Cordially, she gestured for him to hold up his hands.

-Do you have a few minutes to listen to an old lady's story?
He considered the prospect, as she poured a handful of cookie snacks into his open palms.

-Sure.

Nobody in their right mind would turn down an opportunity to play with the little rascals and listening to the lady's reminiscences looked like a good way to avoid further interrogations about his nonexistent girlfriends.

-When I was about your age, I’d get asked out on dates rather frequently. You might not tell, but I was a pretty little thing back then.

She winked playfully.

-I’d reject some, I’d accept the others, but nothing seemed to work out in the end and nobody really struck the young maiden’s heart. Until this quiet boy transferred to our school. He was kind of a loner, always keeping to himself and rarely talking to anyone in the class. His aloofness intrigued me, so I tried approaching him time and time again. Some could argue I was being too nosy for my own good, but I was genuinely confused why he kept avoiding me and what I'd done for him to hate me that much. Persistent as I was, I arranged to swap places with a classmate so we’d be placed on a project together. Finally, when it was just the two of us I questioned him about his behaviour.

The lady chuckled.

-He must’ve felt so cornered... It turned out he was just shy! He hadn’t that many friends and wasn’t used to getting so much attention, let alone from a girl. We’ve cleared up all the misunderstandings and after that we got along quite well. He was clever and kind, his jokes would always make me laugh. Soon everyone started teasing us, calling us an old married couple when we’d continuously bicker and make up. It carried on for a some time and still, I wondered if he’d ever ask me out.

She paused and looked into the distance.

-Ahh, those were the days.

For a long moment she did not say anything and Gold wondered if she was planning to continue. Impatient and experiencing a severe lack of closure, he encouraged her to go on.

-So what happened next? Did he ask you out in the end?

She turned and lifted her left hand, ring shimmering in the sun.

-Last year we celebrated our 50th anniversary.

-Oh, congratulations!

-Thank you.

She brushed the crumbs off her hands and smiled at her companion.

-When you're young, love life can be quite the journey with it's own highs and lows. Yet I truly believe that when you find the right person, you’d know it, you’d feel it in your heart.

Gold eyed her skeptically.

-How would you know?
-Well, if you don’t mind a piece of advice from an old soul like me. It might sound boring, but if you feel that their happiness comes before your own, then they’re the one.

He sighed inwardly. It was a sweet story, but none of it sounded particularly enlightening. Among a few similarities, their situations had been totally different - he was no girl and his rival was the furthest from the definition of ‘shy’. They weren't exactly avoiding one another, so giving him more attention didn't apply either. And the thing about putting their happiness before your own, what could that possibly mean? Gold tried to imagine what he could even do to make Silver happy and froze up almost instantly. He already has. He had offered up his Pokémon, his dear companions, seeking nothing in return, he promised his full support and vowed to follow him through his mission no matter the danger.

The brunette swallowed noticeably and averted his eyes.

- I see you have already found them. You’re a lucky one, young man. What is your name?

-Gold.

-I’m Tabatha, pleasure to meet you.

The boy just nodded and shook her hand.

-Cheer them.

-I don’t think they like me back.

-Ah well, there is no way to command a person’s heart and sometimes we’re faced with disappointment.

Gold lowered his head into his hands.

-But you’ll never know unless you try.

Tabatha gave another wink and tilted her head to the side.

-They’re meeting with you today, right? Why not ask?

He did not reply. He'd already decided that spilling his beans to Silver was the worst move and he’d follow this recommendation only if he wanted to ruin everything he’d worked for until now. All he could do was bide his time and wish for a miracle.

His heart stopped as his gaze fell on his Pokégear - it was five minutes to six.

-I’m sorry, Tabatha, I have to go now. It was nice meeting you!

-Nice meeting you too, Gold. Please don’t hesitate to come by the Daycare, my husband or I will invite you in the enclosure, you can play with the hatchlings to your heart’s content.

-Will do!

-And don’t give up on your special someone, you know, love works in mysterious ways.

He took off, dropping the last farewell as he ran. How could he have lost track of time like that? It was fine, though, if he cut through the marsh, he could still make it in time.
Silver was waiting at the clearing, casually flipping through the radio channels on his Pokégear when Gold emerged from behind the trees. He was breathing raggedly, his entire front covered in mud. The redhead raised a brow at the other’s undignified appearance.

-And what might’ve happened to you?
-I… I fell.

He panted heavily. Running through the marsh on the day after the storm was a terrible idea after all. Not only did he not save any time, but also spent extra after his boot got wedged in the sticky sludge.

-Quite unfortunate. Shall we begin?
-Yeah, yeah, just let me catch my breath.

His Pokégear gave a loud beep and he brushed the dirt off the screen. He squinted to see if any of it got under the plastic casing, but most of the mud just stuck to the exterior. Once more he had the manufacturers to praise for making it so sturdy and also waterproof.

“Hey Gold, Emily here! How’s it rolling, ready for that date? Are you free tomorrow?”

Grimacing, he ignored the message, equally annoyed by her rashness and his own incompetence. He felt like he owed a huge apology to all the Slowpokes he’d ever made fun of, figurative or not.

Silver shot him a sidelong glance.

-A date, huh? Glad to see you’ve got your priorities straight.
-No, it's not like…

He soughed inwardly and paused, formulating a cohesive explanation in his head. Admitting that the pesky girl registered her number against his will would’ve been exceptionally pathetic.

-Ok, so in the morning I went to northwest Goldenrod to train.

He told him all about his encounter with the friendly campers, their Ilex fire theories, how they battled and then how they all exchanged their contact info. A necessary lie, he asserted, to protect the last shreds of his dignity.

-So yeah, pretty eventful morning.
-I see.

-And how was your day?
-Fine.

Fine? That's all?
-Did your errands go well?
Silver turned and swiped a Poké Ball off his belt. He hadn’t said a word after that and Gold couldn’t shake off the acute feeling that he’d still fucked up somewhere, despite trying his best not to.

They began their training, switching up different combinations and uneven number of Pokémon until finally moving unto the general standard - single battles. Gold noticed how irritable the redhead was and how his tactics were even more aggressive than usual. They came down to the final members of their parties - Quilava and Croconaw. Silver moved first.

-Quilava - Smokescreen!
-Croconaw, Scary Face!

Gold was not going to let him have it his way. The stat reducing attack was partially weakened by the black clouds emitting from the fire type’s body, managing to lower their Speed by only one rank. That was nowhere close to thwarting Quilava’s superior agility.

-Ignore it, Quick Attack. Go!

Quilava moved on momentum alone, easily landing hits at the bulky Pokémon.

-Water Gun, don’t miss it!

Smoke in his eyes, the reptile lost the sense of direction entirely and shot water at random. In that case blindly attacking here would be the best solution.

-Don’t feel discouraged, Flail!

The fire Pokémon circled around once again, ready to strike, only to be met with a hard smack from Croconaw.

-Yes, you did it! Now again.

Silver promptly geared to change his stance.

-Quilava, Defense Curl. Then Flame Charge - burn him!
-Croconaw, dodge!

He managed to avoid the hit head on, but a blazing streak brushed his side making him roar in pain.

-Now again!

Quilava aimed at the same spot, deepening the burn. Angry welts started forming on the biped’s tendered skin. He Flailed again in desperate fury, flaunting his claws against the smaller foe.

Gold head a yelp and saw red splatter on the ground. This was no longer a simulated battle.
-Silver, we need to stop this!
-No, we're not done here.
-Yes we are, we need to heal--
-I said no, keep going!

The fire type obediently sprang up and, ignoring its jagged gash, increased it's inner combustion. The heightened flames flared and made her look twice her size as she veered across the battlefield.

The brunette clenched his fists.

-I’m sorry, Croconaw, hang in there, we need to put out the fire. Water Gun, again, drench her!

The Pokémon lunged forward shooting one Water Gun after another. Quilava avoided all but one hit, easily drying the rest with the heat of her body. Still, Gold deemed it enough.

-That’s it, good job, we’ve got her now. Croconaw - SURF!

Thanks to the daily practice and diligent training Croconaw had improved significantly since the last display. There was absolutely no way the opponent could withstand the full power of the move, given her state and the obvious type disadvantage. The teen was certain of it, this was the attack that would to put an end to this pointlessly savage fight.

Silver's lips curved in a smirk.

-Finally. Quilava, Wild Charge!

Quilava shrouded herself in a storm of electricity and charged ahead. Gold’s eyes widened as he realized what was about to come.

A huge shockwave exploded in the flooded area, electrocuting, paralyzing both Pokémon and the other trainer. Silver simply stood on the side, untouched, grounded by the tree’s roots.

-Are you insane?!

Gold yelled as soon as he got back to his senses. The redhead ignored him.

-Now Quilava, finish him - Flame Wheel!

She shook off the static, fazed, but still standing on her feet. Creating a terrifying fiery vortex she smashed into the still recovering Croconaw. A heavy clash rang through the forest - the biped was holding back the Flame Wheel with his claws, feet digging deep into the wet ground.

Suddenly, a blinding flash lighted up the enclosure, the two wrestling Pokémon lost in the midst of it. It disappeared just as fast as it came, and in the middle of the scorched and flooded battleground towered two new creatures, pushing at each other with all their weights and beastly roars.

-Halt!

Silver stepped forward with his arm in the air. Typhlosion and Feraligatr stopped and hesitantly pulled apart, throwing detesting glances each other’s direction.

-We shall call it a draw. Although, I’m surprised you held your ground for as long as you did, given I’ve six levels on you.
Gold gaped at the scene, mixed feelings battling in his heart. He was ecstatic for his starter to evolve to his last form, but was completely infuriated with the other’s methods to achieve it.

-I’m gonna ask you again - are you fucking insane?!

The other boy waved his hand in dismissal.

-A little shock therapy wouldn't get you killed, though you could’ve moved away.

-I’m not talking about me! How could force that on the Pokémon? I asked for them to stop!

-And yet your Pokémon continued to attack.

-It was in self-defense. Didn't you see they were hurt? You could've waited for a minute while we healed them with Items if you wanted to continue this much.

-A battle doesn't stop when someone gets a scrape.

-It wasn't a scrape, they were burns, bad ones. And what about your own Pokémon, she was bleeding, how could you… Can’t you be more humane?

-I’d like to see you act more humane when you're looking down a gun barrel.

His voice was laced with contempt.

-But there wasn’t. There aren’t any guns here, why can’t you find more compassion in yourself for your partners?

-There aren’t right now, but there might be tomorrow. Pokémon are tools of war.

Gold couldn’t believe what he was hearing. After all these days spent together, he thought that he now knew another Silver - a funny and teasing and caring Silver. But it looked like they were back to square one.

-And so are we.

The brunette tilted his head, not quite understanding.

-What are you--

-I believe you’re still under the misconception that we’re playing games here, that this is some sort of summer camp to bond over with our Pokémon. Well, let me disappoint you, we are not. We have mere days until the Mahogany operation and the work isn’t halfway done. I’ve drawn out the true potential of your Pokémon, and if anything, you should be grateful.

Silver jerked his head, moving hair out of the way.

-If you’re planning to wallow in your useless feelings of friendship and affection some more, feel free to, I’ve got work to do.

With that he retrieved Typhlosion in a flash, and, like on that first day, stormed away, leaving the other alone behind.

Gold stayed in place, head in his palms, body shaking with anger. He wanted to yell at the top of
his lungs, to break something, to make this frustration go away. Finding nothing breakable, he grabbed a spare Poké Ball he’d kept from the other day and chucked it as far as he could. How could Silver turn from a normal person that encouraged him, that brought him a burrito, to an insufferable tyrant that cared about nothing but ‘full potential’? And calling the Pokémon tools like they were soulless, emotionless objects was absolutely unforgivable. Under no circumstances, was there an excuse to treat them this way.

The brunette paced around trying to regain his composure. So this was his ‘special someone’, this was a person he was meant to make happy? He sneered to himself - tough fucking luck.

He felt a sudden weight on his shoulder and turned his head. Feraligatr was looking at him with a concerned expression, holding the discarded ball in his other palm.

-Oh sorry, Croc...Feraligatr! I didn’t mean to neglect you. Thanks.

He mustered a little smile and retrieved the round device.

-Congrats on evolving! I’m so happy for you.

He reached for his bag again in search for a Full Heal.

-Here, let me fix you up.

To his surprise the wound had already healed over. He ran his fingers over the toughened scales and sprayed on the antiseptic anyways just in case. Evolutions were most certainly amazing, but he wasn't going to take chances when it came to his Pokémon's health.

-I’m really sorry you had to fight like that...

The large reptile merely moved his head side to side. Did he not mind? Was he willing to fight so viciously for Gold’s sake as well?

He patted Feraligatr on the side and procured a fresh Pokésnack from his pocket.

-I got a new brand today, hope you like it. And thanks, Feraligatr, you did a great job tonight.

The Pokémon happily crunched at the bar, smiling at the trainer with his eyes.

Gold bumped his forehead into his buddy’s large snout and pressed the little button on his own Poké Ball.

-And now let’s go and get some rest.

Silver had cleared part of the kitchen table and was sitting in the new spot, tinkering with some device. Gold was about to walk over when the other’s last words resounded in his head. The bitter resentment for the other boy he thought had already subsided reignited with a renewed force. He harrumphed, striding past the kitchen and into the bedroom instead. He threw off his dirty outside clothes and landed on the mattress back first. Arms over his face, he lay like that for a couple of minutes, trying to meditate the lingering animosity away. It proved near to impossible, the fierce battle and their recent argument still vivid in his mind. He had to find a way to distract himself.

Lazily, he picked up his Pokégear and scrolled through the old messages. He’d normally get back
to people right away, but since the beginning of his and Silver’s partnership he’d accumulated quite the backlog. Now was a good of a time as any to catch up to all the social interactions that he’d been consciously avoiding.

He messaged Crys - he was nearing the 4 day mark and at this point blowing her off was simply rude, replied to Joey’s persistent bragging, read through Kurt’s update from a week ago and sent Todd an inane Sudowoodo meme. He even considered texting Emily, purely out of spite, when Todd responded with an even more asinine image in return to his. He burst out laughing before he could stop himself.

-Having fun, aren’t you?

Silver was standing above him, sleeves rolled up, hair tied, portable soldering iron in one arm. Add the bandage and the patch, he looked downright intimidating. The brunette faced down, pretending to ignore the looming threat and wordlessly continued his typing.

-Chatting with buddies, setting up dates?

-Maybe, what’s it to you?

-As far as I remember, you’re the one who wanted this, so prove your dedication.

-Huh?

-Which section of the Mahogany base is allotted to the microelectronics lab?

Shit, that was the one that rendered particularly poorly on his device no matter what he did, so he’d never got the chance to study it.

-Um… actually…

-B3F, north west. Fine, let’s try an easier one. Which Pokémon are assigned to the trap zone on B1F?

-Mmm, Electrodes?

-Wrong. Voltorb, Geodude, Koffing.

Gold felt like he was going to get thwacked with a wooden ruler like in trainer school, only this time it would be a rod of red-hot metal. He tried vindicate himself.

-Look, I meant to ask to borrow your tablet for that, my Pokégear cannot handle the larger files.

-Then why haven’t you?

-You always seemed to be using it.

That was a lame excuse and they both knew it was a lie. Silver looked at him in disdain.

-I will not tolerate your half measures.

Feeling remorseful until now, the brunette got triggered by the flippant remark. Yes, he shouldn’t have put it this off for as long as he had, but it was no reason to generalize his work. He’d gone out of his way to adapt to the other’s dubious practices and to accommodate all his asks.

-You can’t be fucking serious now, can you? Sure, I’ve messed this one up a little, but it’s not like I
was never gonna do it. Until this moment I’ve carried out your orders without complaint - I’ve solicited illegal drugs, I broke into private networks, I… I offered you my Pokémon, what else do I need to do to be acknowledged, to prove my dedication?

“I’ve even hopelessly fallen for you”, he added in his head, while aloud he said.

-I just took a minute to message my friends before starting working on those blueprints or rolling out your boom pastry. How’s that a crime now?

The redhead rocked his iron a couple of times, deliberating. What the other had said bore a grain of truth. They had their differences regarding Pokémon battles, but otherwise, Gold had followed through all the tasks, earnestly trained on a daily basis and hadn’t done a thing to undermine his trust.

Silver had recognized from the beginning that he couldn’t hold the other to his own standards in a lot of aspects, but it wasn’t the performance per se, but the attitude that aggravated him. Disorganized, careless and carefree, the boy was a ticking time bomb in the operation. Of course the other didn’t realize it, and having experienced a normal upbringing, this way of acting was the default conduct for him. Romping around, chatting with friends, indulging his Pokemon - easily, he could afford to do so. His misstep hadn’t cost him lives, he hadn’t had body and mind broken time and time again, hadn’t had his life torn to pieces and hadn’t spent years toiling to put the wretched remnants back together.

Silver grit his teeth and turned to retire, fighting the influx of boiling self-hatred. He’d drop the dispute for today. The other trainer had nothing to do with either of this and he would not lose control once again.

Gold watched the standing teen falter, irritably mutter something under his breath, and then spin on his heels. Was he simply going to leave? Out of everything this response or, rather, lack of thereof stirred Gold’s anger the most. Before the other could move further away, he snatched his forearm, looking up at him with defiance.

-That’s it? You’re gonna say nothing? You storm out on me, basically calling me delusional, and, as you put it ‘wallowing in feelings of friendship’ and then go prying about my texts, when I actually do take up on your advice for a change. I have done nothing to wrong you, so quit acting like such a pretentious asshole.

Silver struck his arm away and roughly clasped the brunette’s face with one hand. No tyro would dare throw his impudent judgements at him.

-Pretentious? You have no idea what I’ve been through to get here.

-So the asshole part isn’t the one that’s bothering you?

The other clenched his fingers, pulling upwards.

-Be careful Gold, I will break you.

Gold felt his breath hitch as their faces grew mere centimeters apart. The warm kindling in the other’s eyes from yesterday was gone. In fact, what he was seeing now was so removed from that, he thought he might’ve imagined it altogether. The fire in Silver’s eyes was of a completely different kind. It was a fire meant to consume, a fire meant to destroy.

He suddenly felt sticky, panicked fear spreading in his insides. Not for his life, no, the other teen couldn’t physically break his jaw in this stance, but of the thought that he might’ve been wrong
about him all this time. He struggled to speak through the sharp pain pulsing in his cheeks.

-You... wouldn’t.

-Or would I? How can you know?

-Because I know you, I know you’re better than this.

In all honesty, he wasn't sure of anything at this point. He was clutching at straws, desperately trying to find the person he grew to revere so much in those desolate flames.

Some unidentified emotion flickered behind the grey eyes and Silver’s dropped his arm.

-You have no idea who I really am.

Without looking back, he disappeared into the kitchen and reappeared seconds later. He tossed his tablet on the bed, about 10 colored tabs readily open on the screen.

Gold fell back onto the mattress and massaged his aching face. His hands refused to obey him as he reached for the smart device. He didn’t know what had just transpired between them and wasn’t confident what to believe anymore. The upright conflict about battle approaches somehow grew into something entirely more devastating.

He vacantly stared at the backlit slides. What if the other was right and he truly had no idea what kind of person his rival was? He’d been so engrossed by this construct of Silver he’d framed in his mind, that he’d never ventured to question his true nature. But if that were the case, did it mean that these so-called ‘feelings’, that have been tormenting him since yesterday, also nothing but a fake?

Feeling betrayed by his own emotions, he zoomed into the first set of images in an attempt to be productive. His finger froze over the elaborate wireframe - the quality was day and night compared to his crummy gear screen. He surveyed the gigantic warehouse area stretching for kilometers under Goldenrod City’s surface. It covered everything from the far south, the central mall and to the north east of the train tracks, the creep riddled underpass being only a tiny fraction of it. Some segments were closed down or abandoned and some still under construction, creating a number of grey areas that could potentially be of advantage to the Rockets.

He clicked the little ‘Add comment’ icon, thinking it would be helpful if he’d documented this and was greeted by at least three paragraphs of notes on each of the locations he’d just pinpointed and another two he didn’t even know were there. Automatically the map got cloaked with a custom overlay, displaying the exits, vents and security cameras, along with a few extras such as insulation, levels of groundwater and vicinity to sewage ducts.

The pattern continued and every time Gold presumed he’d found an obscure pathway or a suspicious segment, he was met with detailed documentation mirroring or sometimes even invalidating his finds. It was impressive, honestly - Silver had thought of everything and even more in his research. They were currently fighting, but it was impossible to curb the admiration for the other and the sheer amount of effort he put into his every task.

The brunette paused, trying the word in his mouth. Admiration. Maybe that’s all it was. He could’ve totally mistaken the temporary sensation for a good bout of admiration and a mix of respect. After all, the other boy was rather apt and talented at a lot of things and, not to mention, astoundingly hard-working.
Now that he thought about it rationally, it made so much sense. And that thing Tabatha said about happiness - laughable - he hadn’t valued anyone’s happiness over his own. Silver was a strong trainer and an important ally and Gold needed that strength and resources to be able to challenge Team Rocket. Simple as that. There were no feelings, no affection, just an impartial junction assembled for a unified cause.

He moved to the next rendering, feeling significantly lighter. The sets of unfortunate coincidences that lead to this confusion were coming together at last, and he had nothing to worry about.

He kept on with this reasoning during his study, and by the time Silver requested his computer back, the brunette had absolutely convinced himself that this was all just a delusion, just as his rival had inferred about one of his other convictions.

Once again stuck with his Pokégear, Gold opened a simple text app. He’d transferred some of his notes into the device’s memory for housekeeping, but did no further work on the blueprints, now that he’d been thoroughly spoiled by the tablet’s GPU. He then switched on the radio, striving to keep alert, and ran through the building plans in his head lest Silver decided to quiz him again. Almost an hour later he still hadn’t heard a thing from the other except from the sound of his uniform typing and slowly started to doze off.

He’d jerk awake at odd intervals but, sensing no change around him, fall back asleep. Around the fourth time he actually bothered to check the clock and holy shit - it sure was late. Did the redhead decide to pull an all nighter? Well, none of his business. He was going to take a leak, grab some water and go to bed.

As he walked into the kitchen he threw a quick glance at the large table. The ironclad facade he’d been methodically building all evening crumbled in less that an instant. Silver was asleep at his computer, leaning over the keyboard, one arm under his head, other hanging awkwardly off the table. He still had his hair up, revealing the dark circles under his eyes. A console window was typing out an endless command of a single repeating character.

Overwhelming feelings of fondness flooded his heart as he approached the sleeping teen. No matter how much of an ass, how much of a hypocrite the other may be, Gold just could not bring himself to stay mad at him. Silver was up late yesterday, got up before the crack of dawn today and had kept working well past midnight tonight as well.

Unable to resist the temptation, he gently removed a stray strand of hair lying on the other’s face, “Silver, you’re going to work yourself to death like this, you know,” he whispered softly.

The redhead stirred a bit, but still continued to press the ill fated key with his weight. Deciding that carrying him to bed was out of the question, Gold tapped him on the shoulder lightly.

- Hey Silver, you’ve fallen asleep at your computer. Let’s go to bed.

He stirred once again, but didn’t awaken. The brunette raised his voice by a notch.

- Come on, you’re gonna be all sore if you sleep like this.

- Mhmm...

- Ok, if you don’t get up, I’m gonna press ‘Enter’ and submit whatever random code you just elbow-dialed into the console.

The other finally cracked an eye open.
-What kind of terrorist demand is this?

-Not a demand, just my second successful negotiation.

Gold grinned at him, ushering him up. Silver rolled his eye and turned his head to face the screen, removing the command sabotaging his console in one click. Lazily he got up and drifted toward the bed. Pants and jacket off, he fell on the mattress, pulling the blanket over him.

-You could’ve just left me there.

-Why would I leave you there? You’d get all cramped up sleeping like that.

-Naturally, but how’s that to your concern?

“Because I actually care about you, you dole”, Gold answered, if only in his head.

-Let’s say I’d hate to deal with your grumpy attitude in the morning after you slept all night crooked on a desk and leave it at that.

The other boy paused for a second, contemplating the assertion.

-Fair.

-Goodnight, Silver.

-Goodnight.

The brunette just smiled to himself. Instead of making hasty, sightless assumptions he would seek to learn more about the other teen, he’d work to understand him. He would embrace the searing flames. He would give Silver all his friendship, his support and his devotion, he would give him anything and everything, he would put his happiness before his own. And maybe, just maybe, someday his rival, partner, ally and special someone would be willing to give some back in return.
Chapter 12

-TRAITOR!

A direct kick to the face, a sickening crunch and a sharp pain as liquid flooded his pharynx. He spat, trying to clear his throat.

-I hope you… choke on your ambitions.

A cold piercing laugh.

-Like you're choking on your own blood right now?

A forceful tug on the hair tilting his head backwards. Forceful enough to pull out a handful.

-Your ploy failed. We’ve caught your little friend.

A poignant smirk.

All of the color drained from his face.

-What have you done to him?!

-Asked a few questions, nothing much.

A swift hand gesture.

-Bring him in.

A black haired boy dragged into the room, teeth and nails missing, barely recognizable under the layers of crusted blood.

-No! Please, stop!

A brow raised in fake surprise.

-Quite a change in attitude. But you know what will happen now, don't you?

-Please, he had nothing to do with it! It's me that you wanted, right? Take me instead!

A faint metal click.

-Your time to make demands had long passed.

-No, no, no, NO--

A deafening bang.

Silver was abruptly shaken awake. No longer was he prostrated on the filthy floor of an unknown basement. Instead he was in a bedroom, rather large one at that, a tousled head looming over him. Alive and well, Gold was clutching his shoulders, a look of utmost concern on his face.

-Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you up, but you were having a nightmare.
-Let me go.

-Right, yes.

The brunette released the other from his hold and timidly moved aside.

-You were twisting and turning and chanting ‘no no no’. Is everything okay?

-Yes.

-What happened?

-I don’t remember.

He lied and turned away. What the hell was this? He’d been haunted by the same recurring nightmare for years, but tonight, for the first time ever, the endings have diverged significantly. He hugged himself, trying to prevent his body from trembling. This will not happen, this shouldn’t happen, this cannot…

-You know you can always talk to me, Silver. I’ll listen, I’ll try to help.

-I said I don’t remember. Go back to sleep.

He breathed slowly, subduing his post-wake shock. He was older now, he was more prepared, he would not let anything like that happen again. Gold was an amateur, not an idiot, and, if he was willing to put in the effort, if he was willing to help himself, then everything was going to be fine.

They ordered breakfast from the inn and ate at the bed. It had become an unspoken default spot, since every other surface was overridden with Silver’s equipment.

The brunette did not bring up the nightmare from earlier and mostly stayed quiet, trying not to antagonize his rival first thing in the morning. He’d borrowed the tablet once again and was earnestly going over the Rocket HQ blueprint on the off chance he’d missed any detail the night before. After the fifth review he peered at the other teen.

-Aren’t you going to quiz me again?

-Quiz you?

-You know, where the lab or the emergency exits are in this or that building.

-You understand this is for your own benefit, right? I shouldn’t have to police you.

-I… yeah, I guess you’re right.

Gold swallowed his egg, a little disheartened. It made sense that it was up to him to learn the basic in and outs of the facility they’re infiltrating, but he still wanted to show off his work.

-Will you tell me about yesterday then? You went to the shop again, didn’t you?

-I did.

A few moments of silence later Gold had accepted that this was all he was going to get today as well, but Silver pushed a button on his Pokégear and continued. He did sound a little reserved, but
overall was in a much more agreeable disposition than anticipated.

-They gave me a call the night before, saying the initial work had been completed. The white noise damper is truly an interesting device that turned out to have quite some history. From what I’ve learned, its original purpose was to control Pokémon via brain waves, but, unable to harness the technology the Rockets decided to turn it into a debilitating weapon. The microchips were manufactured ahead of time so they ended up with a surplus stock of tech they couldn’t wholly exploit or realize.

-And you’re saying you and the radio shop figured out a way to do it?

The redhead gave a dry laugh.

-No, of course not. At minimum spec that would require a full-fledged lab, a team of neurobiologists and months of research. We were able to figure out a way to reverse the waves frequency, though.

-Reverse the waves?

-The updated configuration captures the original transmitter’s frequency and turns it inside out. All the dampers would still work as intended until we flip the switch. Team Rocket would be out of commission, while we'd stay immune to either white noise.

Gold nodded, thoroughly impressed.

-Man, that’s fucking awesome.

-As for you - get prepared. I’d be giving you basic combat training after I’m done with the tech shop.

-Oh, already? You think you've healed enough?

-No, but you’d want all the practice you can get.

The brunette was about to object and was promptly cut off.

-I told you to quit worrying about me and I’m telling you again - I can handle it. We’re short on time and this way we’d cover more ground. I need you to be able to protect yourself on your own. He eyed the other’s bony physique.

-To a degree at least.

Gold felt like he was being unfairly evaluated over again.

-Oi, if you said can handle it, I sure as hell can too!

-As you say. We shall start with self defense, and if you show promise, move to assault. That would be preferable, in all honesty.

-Yeah, sure.

-Meet me at 4:00 PM, I should be finished earlier tonight.

He got up and snatched the last of his toast off the plate.
-And wear something with long sleeves, you don’t want to get needlessly bruised from falling to the ground too much.

He threw his bag over the shoulder and headed for the door, not sparing another glance.

Gold remained immobile and keenly self-conscious. He'd always assumed he'd been in pretty good shape, especially with all the walking and hiking he did, yet that was apparently insufficient according to the other's assessment. He was glad, though, that Silver had finally gotten back to his normal self. It came with the inevitable price of daily ridicule, but if that's what it took, he was quite fine with it. On top of it, learning combat skills excited him no less than Pokémon battles. It only seemed fair to train alongside his partners and Silver was more than competent in his skillset.

He remembered the strong grasp on his wrist from the first morning, the other's instantaneous reaction, the fluidity of his motions, the way he effortlessly twisted his arm and bodily pinned him to the bed. Or the firm hold just from the day before that brought their faces so dangerously close together.

He violently shook his head, trying to shut out the images overloading his teenage brain. “Where the fuck did that come from?!” This was clearly not what Silver meant when he said he’d end up on the ground.

Slumping head first into the bed, he smushed his skull with a pillow, wheezing.

“Admiration, my ass.” It was amazing in itself that he'd been able to fool himself like that even for an evening.

A persistent buzzing on his arm eventually drew his attention. He wondered who'd want dial him so early. It couldn’t be the redhead, after all he never called him, and Joey reserved to bug him solely after lunchtime. The two remaining options were Crys and mum. Unsure if he’d be willing to deal with either right now, he peered at the screen.

Yup, it was his mum. Well, he did promise not to leave his Pokégear lying around and he really wasn’t up to anything important, apart from fantasizing about his absent companion. Groaning under his breath, he clicked the green button.

-Hey Gold, how’re you doing, honey?

-Hey mum.

-Is anything the matter? You sound down.

-Nah, I’m ok, just a bit sleepy.

-Aw, are you staying up late again?

He did stay up late yesterday listening to whatever radio station, futilely trying to hate Silver.

-Haha, you caught me.

She clicked her tongue but did not scold him.

-Anyways, I’m calling to tell you I’ve spent some of your money.

He rolled his eyes. He totally should’ve anticipated this.
-Muuum, I’m trying to save that up, you know!

-I know I know, but there was this fair, they sold a bunch of rare items from different regions, besides, it was so pretty, I couldn’t resist.

-Ok, seems like you cannot return it… what is it?

-It’s this claw thing, I thought it could be used as a necklace, but it was too sharp, so I deposited it at your PC.

-What, you weren’t even buying it for me?

-I let you know, didn’t I? Anyways, gotta run, glad you’re doing well. Bye honey, love you!

She dropped the call without even waiting for his response. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. Something told him she bought more than just that claw item she mentioned over the phone.

He came to the clearing at least half an hour early, remembering yesterday’s blunder. As per the other’s instruction, he dug up the only slacks he had and a plain grey long sleeve shirt - the outfit surely met all the criteria. On the second thought, he did look like he was wearing pajamas. Maybe, he considered, he’d swing by the mall later and buy something more appropriate.

Silver arrived on the dot as usual. In a complete mystery to Gold, the other always managed to do so regardless of time of day, traffic or weather conditions.

-What’s with the getup? Did you stay in bed all day?

The brunette grimaced - he would definitely have to swing by the mall later.

-That’s all I had, okay.

-I’m messing with you, I could care less if you came naked or in a SWAT suit.

Gold flushed, inappropriately reminded of his morning reverie. He spun around and slapped his cheeks, trying to drive the blush away, while the other unknowingly fumbled with his bag.

Silver retrieved a tie and pulled up his hair. He then placed his jacket on the ground next to his other belongings.

-Alright, come stand in front of me.

The other boy moved to a spot about a meter from his teacher.

-These are the basics, but I’ll go over them anyway. We’re starting with self defence, so the main objective is to inflict injury so you could escape. Before the assailant has gained full control, you would normally only have a few seconds to land your hits. So aim for the body parts that can be damaged most easily: the eyes, nose, ears, neck, groin, knees.

-Got it.

-Eyes are pretty self explanatory - gouging, poking, scratching, anything works, as long as you’re able to inflict pain as well as interfere with their vision.

-Okay…
The idea of gouging somebody’s eyes made the brunette rather uncomfortable, but he did not contest.

-If they are up close in front of you, you can use the heel of your palm to strike up under their nose. Throw the entirety of your body weight into the strike. Like this.

Silver made a swift step forward and shot out his arm in front of his face.

-If they’re behind you, you can hit their nasal bones with your elbow.

He turned around and flung his elbow, stopping just millimeters from the other’s nose.

-Quite simple. Another option is to temporarily stun them with a knife hand strike. The side of the neck is a large target, where both the carotid artery and the jugular vein are located. You hold your fingers straight like this, thumb tucked and bent at the knuckle.

He demonstrated and swung his arm at Gold’s neck, customarily stopping before causing actual impact.

-Give it a go.

The shorter boy nodded and threw his arm at Silver’s nose from the front and elbow from the back, then doing the same with the knife strike. He felt rather awkward waving his hands in mock hits like, but also wasn’t that keen on attempting to hurt his training partner.

-Get comfortable with the motions, we’ll get to the real thing soon enough.

Gold put his hands up and shook his head.

-No, I wasn’t really--

-Of course you were. Otherwise there’s no point to this.

He looked at the redhead’s stern face. Silver was under no obligation to spend extra time and teach him how to fight, but was doing it anyways. He nodded in confirmation and faithfully repeated the motions another couple of times. The other assessed the exercise and gestured to carry on.

-Now, if they’ve got a hold of you, how do you get away while maximizing the damage? Again, simple: use your elbows, knees and head, they are the body parts that are the most effective in inflict the said damage. Elbow, headlock, knee to the groin. Here, grab my shirt.

The other boy hesitantly put his hands on Silver’s black collar. The redhead swiped the side of his head with an elbow, then locked his arms behind Gold’s neck, making his body lean forward, and kneeed him lightly between his legs. The brunette in turn tried to remember the moves and pretend that their bodies weren’t really all that close.

-You can headbutt them too in this case. If they’re grabbing you by the arm, same logic - elbow, knee, headbutt.

He repeated the motions from a slightly twisted position.

-If they’re grabbing you from behind, elbow to the face, to the gut, headbutt.

He went through the moves and then gestured to grapple him, arms just over the elbows, binding them.
Lastly, if your arms are pinned like this, you can try a groin strike, foot stab, or again, the trusty headbutt.

Gold let go of him after the demonstration and lowered his head, hiding his embarrassment. His rival seemed too preoccupied with the instruction to notice.

- And one more sleek technique to use with your elbow. Most opponents you’d encounter would be larger and stronger than you, but don’t let that faze you. As I mentioned earlier use your body weight to make efficient, targeted blows.

Silver put his right foot forward and rammed into the other’s chest with his shoulder. Not expecting the impact, the other boy stumbled several steps back.

- See, I didn’t put that much force, but using my body weight still threw you backwards. Here you had a generalized contact point along your torso from my shoulder and my hip, but if I were to choose a specific one, such as your face or your neck, the impact would be way more tangible.

He raised his forearm and charged again. This time around Gold let out a strangled noise flew to the ground, choking.

- Ow, what the--

The redhead approached him, holding his arm out. He grabbed it, pulling himself up and gingerly rubbed his neck.

- The surface area that absorbed the impact is much smaller now. Normally, this would crush their throat.

- I… I see.

- Fling your body weight like a bat. This is a common technique used by various law enforcement agencies and can result in serious injury for the attacker.

Gold swallowed, a hard lump still stuck in his throat. Silver assumed his stance.

- Okay, let’s practice then.

They trained in the clearing for over two hours - Silver made passes on the brunette, while he, in turn tried to counter, using the moves he recently learned. The elbow-headlock-knee was pretty straightforward and came rather easily to him, but he still couldn’t resist the treasonous blush creeping onto his cheeks every time his sparring partner grabbed him from the back.

They picked up the pace and Gold managed a couple of smooth combos, gaining an approving nod from his instructor. At some point he got so absorbed in the process he actually elbowed Silver in the face full force through his block. He halted instantly and apologized for a good five minutes until the other landed a hook on his right ear to tell him to shut the fuck up.

He absolutely refused ramming into the other’s chest but made several attempts with the body weight to throat blows. The redhead stood his ground, finally getting sent backwards with only his fifth shot. Gold helped him up with a victorious smile.

He worked up a good sweat over the course of evening and only retired to rest by his favorite tree as the sun had started to set. Silver silently walked over to his bag and withdrew two waters. He
threw one at the sitting boy and cracked one open for himself.

Gold caught the bottle and took a wide swig.
-Woah thanks.
-If everyone while fighting were as considerate as you the world would truly be a better place.

The brunette beamed.
-See, you totally agree with me now!

-I’m saying that’s a problem.

-I know, I know. I’m sorry I don’t like beating you up.

-The way you are now, you’re unable to beat me up. That hit to the face was my own fault, you do not have to hold back.

-But the throat thing, what if I injure you? You did say it could be serious.

-I’m allowing you to exert that much force on me. Don’t hold me for a fool, I know my own limits.

Gold gave it some thought. Silver was well rounded on the subject seemed to know exactly what he was doing, maybe his worries were for naught after all.
-Anyways, thanks for tonight, Silver. That was quite fun.
-Fun…”

The other’s expression darkened as he trailed away. Hastily, Gold tried to make amends to his previous comment.

-And educational! No, really, I learned a lot today.

-You don’t think that we’re done here, do you?

-Huh?

Silver released his four Pokémon.

-We still have a lot to cover with multi battles.

The brunette exhaled. The other had been exceptionally determined today, but it wasn’t something he could condemn. Silver was giving it his all, and so should he.

Gold kicked off his shoes and flopped onto the bed.

-Man, I’m beat.

They spent another good four hours in the clearing and he was now positively sapped and starving.

-Hey, how about I get a pizza?

Silver gravitated to his research on the kitchen table and already pulled on his gloves.
-Whatever.

-Any preference on toppings?

-None. As long as it has enough nutritional value.

-Geez, you sound like my mum.

The redhead glared at the other boy but did not say anything. Gold grinned in return and dialed the number for his favorite pizza joint. Thankfully, they delivered this late. He then got up and approached the table.

-Need any help?

-Separate these out and stack in the containers, you know the drill.

The brunette nodded with a smile. Despite their arguments yesterday, they seemed to be at peace with one another.

-Will do.

He finished up the job and threw the used gloves into the trash, stretching. He wondered if his muscles were going to be sore tomorrow.

-By the way, you never told me. How did the tech shop go earlier?

Silver moved the last of the vials into the vortex mixer and took off his gloves as well.

-The reversal transmitter is complete.

-That’s awesome! Will you show me?

-That would have to be tomorrow. The radius of effect is about 30 meters, you don’t want to disable all the tenants in this hotel, do you?

-Oh… right.

-You can have these, though. It’s for you and your Pokémon.

He pulled a little box out of his bag and slid it toward Gold. The brunette opened the lid and peered inside - seven custom earpieces sat in the container.

-But I don’t have this many Pokémon.

-You will eventually, won’t you? Don’t tell me this is your final party.

-Of course not!

Will Silver ever stop criticizing him? He turned the miniature device around in his hands and then placed it in his ear. It fit rather comfortably.

-Thanks, Silver.

He felt a crackle of static and almost jumped at the sudden sound.

-No need to thank me, I’d hate for you to turn useless in the middle of an operation.
The other was talking to him from across the table and over the earpiece at the same time.

-Don’t act so surprised, this is a comm device to begin with.

-Ah, of course.

He’d sometimes feel like he was in some kind of spy movie - they were on a super secret mission to infiltrate the main villain’s headquarters, using their supreme combat skills and futuristic gadgets. Well, Silver’s supreme combat skills, he couldn’t allow himself get all conceited after one day of training.

The doorbell’s insistent ring pulled him out of his daydream. It must’ve been the pizza. He almost forgot about it while talking with the redhead. Eagerly, he got up to greet the delivery man at the door. He flung it open, ready for a piece of cheesy goodness, but the corridor was completely empty. Was this a prank? He was about to turn around in disappointment when he noticed a medium sized box sitting at their doorstep. He called out to Silver.

-Hey, there’s a box--

-Yes, that’s for me. Bring it in and shut the door.

Shrugging, he picked up the package - the box was significantly heavier than he’d expected. He walked back into the room and placed it on one of the chairs.

-What is it?

-You can open it, if you’d like.

Curious what kind of crazy new thing his rival ordered, Gold grabbed a kitchen knife and sliced the tape on the top of the container. Inside were a set of dark clothing and a pair of bulletproof vests. Even though they looked like they would fit under a jacket or hoodie, they were still rather weighty. “Serious business”, he thought as he set the vests aside and picked up the black garment. It was a long-sleeve shirt with a bright red ‘R’ embroidered on the chest.

-Holy shit, are these Team Rocket uniforms? Are we going in undercover?

“Mission swift Electrode”, chimed the voice at the back of his mind.

-In the Radio Tower yes. It wouldn’t matter much at Mahogany, we’re going to be declared impostors as soon as we set foot in their hideout.

The brunette pulled on the shirt over his head and stared at his reflection in the microwave door.

-How do I look?

-Scrawny.

-Hey! Bet you won’t look any more threatening in it either.

Silver just sighed - he knew exactly how he looked in that. Another ring interrupted their conversation.

-Finally!

He sprung up and made a pass at the exit.
-I advise you take that off first.

Having already cracked the door open, Gold abruptly slammed it shut. He bundled up the Rocket sweatshirt and tossed it on the bed.

-Hi! Sorry about that.

The delivery boy met him with a confused stare.

-Um... good evening. Large meat lovers pizza?

-Yup, that’s me. Thanks!

He handed him cash with a nice tip and closed the door in his face yet again.

-Phew, good call.

Silver was standing in front of him, a large pizza box distance away, arms crossed.

-This is the last time I’m going to say it. If you’re not going to take this seriously, I’d prefer you leave.

-What-- I am taking it seriously!

-Then what was this right now?

He did jump to the door without even giving it a second thought.

-It was… a mistake.

-And mistakes can be fatal. Sure, maybe not this particular one - this one would just earn us a report to the police and the obligation to vacate this room immediately in retreat, but there will be a situation where one irresponsible move could cause ultimate peril. Injury - if you’re lucky, death - if not.

How did it always end up like this? They’d have a perfectly normal evening and then Silver would go fully patronizing on him. He was a little careless, but his rival didn’t have to spell it out to him.

-Look, I’m sorry. I already admitted my mistake, can we close the subject already?

-Not until I get through to you.

-You did. No irresponsible actions, they can get me killed, I get it. Can we have food now? I’m starving.

The redhead looked entirely unconvinced and rather livid.

-Put your shoes on, we’re going for a walk.

-What? But--

-I said put your shoes on.

Gold groaned, dejectedly setting the pizza box down on one of the dressers. What was this all about now? It was late and cold and they’ve been out there for a good part of the day already. This was yesterday all over again and he did not like the sound of it one bit.
As soon as he put the second sneaker on he felt a familiar firm grip on his wrist. Silver dragged him down the hallway and out of the inn, gradually picking up his pace. He didn't head in the clearing’s direction, but shot straight for the sparse forest to the right of the road. It was awkward trying to follow the taller teen as the trees got denser. He kept tripping and slipping over the marsh on the floor.

-Hey, let me go, I can walk on my own.

The other ignored him. They walked for another couple of minutes until the lights of the hotel were just a speck in the distance. Finally, Silver stopped and dropped his hold. Within seconds an ear-splitting noise filled the night forest. Gold clutched his head and fell to his knees, crying out in pain. What in the bloody hell was this? He felt like his eyes were about to pop out of his sockets and he was going to be sick at the same time. He heard a distant voice that was trying to reach him through the pandemonium that was now in his head.

-How do you like this? Say, you forgot the damper, like now. Just an honest mistake, isn’t it?

The brunette made an attempt to get up, but it was as if the gravity increased tenfold.

-And say, were I the enemy, I could do anything I please with you - shoot you, stab you, kick you. Will you be able to resist?

He stepped forward and pulled the kneeling boy off the ground. He was quivering, limbs no longer listening to him.

-Here, try to deter my advances like we trained today. Can you do such a simple thing?

A hand grasped the front of his shirt. Gold wracked his brain in desperation, struggling to remember anything that he was taught. Before he had time to react a straight punch collided with his face. He stumbled and fell to his ass, completely off balance.

-Get up, try again.

-N-no… I can’t…

-What? Do speak up, I cannot hear you.

He was hoisted up forcefully once again. Head spinning, he took a defensive stance, but his vision was a blur. The white noise was pulsating at a steady rhythm and it felt like his brain was about to melt.

A kick to the gut sent him flying into the small shrubs behind him. A dozen of pointy branches stuck in his side. He coughed, gasping for air and then feebly raised an arm to cover his face.

-Please… I give… up.

His rival was standing above him, spinning a small device in his hand.

-Say that again.

-I… give up.

The noise ceased as fast as it came. Gold heaved, trying to push himself off the broken shrubbery when a sudden fit of nausea stuck in his throat. He hurled, body weak and hands trembling.

-Do you understand now?
Silver was waiting patiently a few steps away from him. Finally gathering his strength, the brunette got up.

-This is not a game. Act carelessly and you will die. Have I made myself clear?
-Yes…

-Good, now let’s go back.

Without saying another word he turned around and marched in the direction of the inn.

The other boy lingered, utterly drained and shaken. The gall from his recent argument with Silver was gone. He carefully touched the spot where he got hit in the face and recoiled - this was definitely going to bruise. His rival had been painfully direct in the methods to ‘get through to him’.

Gold rubbed his sides, vaguely recalling the description of the white noise transmitter. He could have never imagined it’s true effects - the piercing noise was pure agony. For the first time in his life he'd felt this helpless - with no damper device in his ear, it took a gargantuan effort to simply stay upright, not to mention do any kind of fighting or blocking.

So this was what Silver faced that night in the Ilex Forest, and, from what he knew, was not only able to fight back, but also managed to disable the device altogether. That alone was mind blowing.

If it was merely one of Team Rocket’s many weapons, what more could they have in store? This was absolutely nothing like the group of disorganized grunts he’d encountered at Azalea City.

His mind went to the homebrew explosives, the bulletproof vests, the illegal painkillers, the engineered earpieces and the bloody bandages on the bathroom floor - his head was up in the clouds all along. As Silver said, this was no game and no spy movie, this was war, no prisoners taken. And he voluntarily agreed to be part of it.

With a heavy feeling building in his heart, he lifelessly sauntered toward the flickering lights.
Despite the staggering fatigue, Gold could not sleep that night. He kept replaying their outing to the forest and the excruciating effects of the transmitter that he got to experience first hand. The utter anguish and defenselessness he felt just a few hours ago were not something he could easily purge from his mind.

And yet, he brought it upon himself. Silver had never glossed over any aspects of the plan or his previous confrontation with Team Rocket, his bluntness unforgiving. He also bore no delusions about the possible outcome - he knew exactly what he was in for and was prepared to face the consequences.

It was Gold who was in denial this whole time. He refused to listen to the other’s warnings and ignored all the obvious signs. He even disregarded the camper’s ghastly description of the aftermath of the events in Ilex. It took a minute of agony and a beating to get the message across, and his rival didn’t even have to go out of his way to provide that.

The brunette clenched his fists, nails painfully digging into his palms. Had he become too comfortable casually spending time with Silver, had he chosen to pretend that the moment of the confrontation would never come, had he forgotten the true reason for their alliance?

The burning desire for retribution he felt that night, the unsettling sensation that he tried so hard to suppress, now turned into sickening dread. ‘This is not a game’ - the words that his partner uttered again and again have finally etched themselves into his wired brain.

He hissed as a nail punctured his skin. He took his arm out from under the blanket and passively looked at the dark crescent in the faint illumination of the curtained window. Defiantly, he balled his hand up again. Regardless of his newfound perception, the reality had not changed one bit. They were still in this together and he would not dare back out now. If anything, he should put way more work into his training and overall preparation, for if he were to become a burden instead of a support to Silver, he would never be able to forgive himself.

They had leftover pizza for breakfast while mostly keeping to their own. Being unable to fall asleep until the crack of dawn, Gold resided in a near comatose state as he mechanically consumed his meal. Silver was preoccupied with his computer as usual, typing one string of commands after another, evoking quick responses from the console. His two monitors were filled with long lists of names. An incoming message made his Pokégear buzz, drawing his attention. Briskly, he dimmed his screens and got up.

-I have another shipment to pick up, after that we’re pretty much done here. We’re closing shop and leaving for Ecruteak tomorrow early morning.

-Okay.

-Be in the hotel room when I get back, I’ll give you the rundown of our next steps.

-Sure.
The redhead unmistakably noticed the other’s apathy, but chose not to question him. Just as he was ready to leave, Gold finally spoke up.

- Hey Silver, do you mind if I ask you a question?

He paused in the door.

- Okay, shoot.

- The first time you battled me with Cyndaquil, you were just testing her out, right? You had other Pokémon on you, so you lost to me on purpose.

They’ve come a long way since their first encounter and their first battle, and with everything that happened and was about to happen, he had to to hear how the other truly felt. At least about this particular matter.

- That’s correct. I gauged her abilities in an unfavorable setting, having a real fight at that point would’ve been a waste of time.

The brunette was too tired to feel discouraged, besides he anticipated this answer.

- Okay… and the next time we fought, you did use a larger party. Was it cus I said I beat Team Rocket at the Slowpoke Well?

- That’s two questions already, but yes, you’re right again. I was aware of the Slowpoke tail trafficking, but it did not seem to relate to any of the other Rocket operations, so I disregarded it altogether. Even though they were a bunch of low ranking goons, your statement made me curious.

- You never sent out Sneasel, though. You’ve always had him with you, didn’t you?

- Well, regardless of my reputation, I do prefer a fair fight. Using Sneasel would’ve tipped the scales dramatically. I beat you flat out even without that, didn’t I?

- You sure did… By the way, what level is he?

Gold noticed this a while back and had been wondering ever since. Out of the few times he’d actually fought against him, Sneasel’s performance had always been impeccable, and yet his battle style felt rigid, restrained even. The teen could see that the Pokémon’s level exceeded 50, but otherwise, all the details and stats were masked from general view.

- Eighty four.

- Wha--

He gawked.

- How?!

- As you’ve said, I’ve always had him with me.

- But the rest--

- Is this all you wanted to ask?

Silver’s voice hardened and the other hesitated for a second.
-I… one last thing. I just don’t get it. If you thought I was a waste space the first time around and you roflstomped me the second, why did you even let me join?

-Have I scared you that much yesterday that you’re willing to go back on your offer?

-No! No… that’s not what I meant. I’m not going anywhere, you should know that by now.

He smiled weakly to himself, “I’m stuck with you, Silver, to the very end, whether you realize this or not.”

-It’s just… back then you kept going on about weak Pokémon, weak trainers, wouldn’t that put me there in your books? If your one Sneasel was the level of all of my party combined, you probably didn’t even want my Pokémon when I offered them.

Silver narrowed his eyes.

-I see. You're fishing for a compliment then.

The brunette shied away and waved his hands.

-No, I promise, I’m not. I’m just… I’m trying to understand.

-Okay then.

His rival looked at him with an odd glint in the eye.

-I’ve got to admit, Gold. The second time I battled you I was impressed how much you improved over the short period. It's rare to see trainers grow at such a fast rate. You had potential, but those notions of companionship were holding you and your Pokémon back. If trained correctly, they could’ve become a real asset. And so could you.

The brunette was taken aback by his rival’s sudden honesty.

-Besides, you reminded me of someone from a long time ago.

He reminded him of someone? That wasn’t something he’d expected to hear.

-Who did I remind you of?

Silver momentarily broke eye contact.

-Myself.

-Oh…

He sat there, processing the other’s words.

-Anyways, I have to go.

The redhead turned once again. Gold set his plate aside and got to his feet as well.

-Mokay. Well, if we’re taking off, there’s somewhere I need to visit before we go too.

Before the other would jump to any incriminating conclusions promptly added.

-It’s the Daycare.
Gold walked to the Daycare, mulling over the morning’s conversation. He felt much better after the talk with Silver - the redhead did not reprimand him for yesterday’s shameful display, and more importantly, called his progress impressive and said that he had potential. “And so could you” - the words stuck with him, pulling at his heartstrings. Despite what he said before, coming from Silver, it was easily the highest compliment.

The fact that they were fighting Team Rocket in just three days still stood, but somehow, he did not feel as powerless anymore.

The thing that irked him, though, was his rival’s last response. Judging from the context, resemblance to his younger self couldn’t be a bad thing, but there was something in the other’s eye, the tone of his voice when he said it, that felt amiss. Of course, he might’ve imagined or misinterpreted it altogether, but in that moment, that split second, he could swear he caught a glimpse of the boundless sorrow that Silver perpetually bore in his heart.

He still didn’t know anything about him, anything about his childhood, his family. He was the person who’s happiness he valued over his own, and yet, he did not know the simplest things about the other boy. What was that truly brought him joy, what was that brought him sadness, what were his dreams and his nightmares. And where did Team Rocket stand among all of this? Silver clearly wasn’t fighting them out of altruistic convictions, and whatever had happened between them in the past had made it deeply personal. What did they do to you, what did they take from you that you’re willing to put your life on the line?

He ran these questions in his head over and over again, never really getting anywhere. The teen wondered if the other would open up to him if he had asked now. It was next to impossible to read him, as for one day, like today, Silver would be excruciatingly honest and on the other he would shut him out completely. It hurt and even intimidated him at times, but it was Gold’s duty to learn to understand the other’s emotions, to respond to his desires and concerns. And maybe, sometime, somewhere at the end of this perilous path he’d be able to find the key to Silver’s heart itself.
Absorbed in his thoughts he reached the little building with the enclosure in no time. He walked through the door, only to find that the reception area was empty.

-Hello?

Nobody answered.

-Um hello, anyone here?

A gray head popped from another room.

-Good morning, are you here to leave your Pokémon? Ah, Gold, it’s you! How have you been?

Tabatha tottered over to the large armchair in the end of the room and gestured Gold to sit across her on the couch.

He tried to perk up. The nice old lady did not have to deal with his dreary attitude.

-I’m good, thanks. How’re you?

-Oh same old, same old. A couple of baby Nidorans hatched today, stung my husbands finger right out of the egg, little rascals.

-Oh no, is he alright?

-Of course, we’ve been doing this for quite a while after all, we have all sorts of ointments and creams in the back.

-That’s a relief.

-Baby Pokémon are like any children, adorable, but troublesome at times, that’s just how it is. You can’t help but love them. I remember that one time a whole group of newly hatched Poliwags escaped the enclosure, oh we sure had a jolly time fishing them out from the neighboring yards.

She chuckled at the memory.

-But enough about me, you seem moody today. Everything go well the other night with your companion?

She reached for her glasses to take a better look at the sitting boy.

-Oh my, what happened?

Gold mentally kicked himself. He should’ve worn sunglasses or the such, now that he was sporting a huge black eye thanks to his rival.

-We um… got into a fight. But, honestly, I deserved it.

-I see, well, being able to admit your own mistakes is a very important quality. Yet she’s a spunky young lady, isn’t she?

-Haha… yeah.

The very thought of Silver as ‘spunky’ not to mention ‘young lady’ was probably enough to earn
him another fist to the face.

-Were you able to make up?

-We were, in a sense.

-That’s good, I’m glad for you both. Arguments are quite natural in a relationship, after all.

He fidgeted, as he felt the conversation growing more and more awkward.

-Right.

-Would you like to go play with the babies?

Grateful for the change of topic the brunette jumped up.

-I’d love to!

Tabatha led him to the door, opening into the enclosure. Three Nidorans, probably the ones they talked about earlier, were rustling in the leaves under the large tree, two Woopers and a Corsola were splashing away in the pond and a couple of Eevees were chasing one after another. Gold kneeled over by the pond and extended his arm. A curious Wooper wobbled over to him and jumped into his palm. The brunette smiled and patted him with his other hand, making him let out a little squeal of joy. The other baby Pokémon noticed the outsider and were now crowding around him, fighting for attention. He laughed and put down the wiggling water type, feeling much more at ease. With all the things going on around him, he didn’t even realize how much he needed this.

-You guys, no need to push, don’t worry, everyone’s getting the pets.

Tabatha was standing a little ways and giving him a kindhearted look.

-You’re their new favorite now.

-Haha, looks like it.

He turned his head to face her and his glance fell on a lonely Pokémon, standing at the corner of the building. He was looking ahead of him, refusing to participate in the activities with his other buddies.

-Ah, yes. This is Tyrogue, his trainer didn’t want the egg, so he left it here. So sad, but occasionally this happens.

Gold felt strong sympathy for the little Pokémon. Why would their trainer refuse them like that? He got up and waggled his way out of the noisy group of baby Pokémon and walked over to the lonesome Tyrogue. He sat down to be on approximately the same eye level as him.

-Hey buddy, why don’t you come play with us?

The Tyrogue just turned his head away and started to inch away slowly.

-If you don’t want to be friends with them, you can be friends with me.

Gold beamed and stretched out his arm.

Shyly, the baby Pokémon lifted his own arm and put it into Gold’s, still not looking at him.
-There you go! Let’s go play in the grass then!

They strolled into the further end of the enclosure that was covered in knee-tall grass. They idled for a bit and then the boy came back with a handful of tiny acorns he found on the ground.

-So I’m gonna toss these at you, and you gotta try to hit them with your fists. Gotta be quick though!

Tyrogue nodded with a determined expression. He easily got a couple of the first shots, swiftly punching the air with his little hands. Gold increased the difficulty and was now throwing the nuts in different locations. The fighting type gladly accepted the challenge and was now jumping all over the place to catch the projectiles, now genuinely having fun.

-You know, it’s the first time he responded to anyone, let alone let play with them.

Tabatha said from a few meters away.

-You truly are a kind trainer, Gold. Say, would you like to become Tyrogue’s new partner?

He looked up, not expecting the sudden offer.

-For real?

-He seems to have developed a quite liking to you.

Gold approached the baby Pokémon and kneeled down once again.

-Hey Tyrogue, do you wanna go on epic adventures with me? We’re gonna become big and strong and we’re gonna make a lot of friends on the way! What do you say?

Tyrogue pondered for a second and then nodded with a happy grin, running towards Gold’s outstretched arms.

-Well, seems like it’s decided.

The brunette extracted a new Poké Ball from his backpack and lightly bopped the other’s extended fist.

-Welcome!

A red flash and Tyrogue was inside the dual colored orb. The button glowed once and turned white - Tyrogue was added to Gold’s party.

He beamed at the Daycare lady.

-Thank you!

-Oh, you don’t have to thank me for anything, I’m so glad that Tyrogue would be able to travel with you as your companion. There’s only so much support he can get by staying here. Seems like you two were made for each other.

Gold clutched the ball in his palm and nodded. His mind went to Silver again, who was now out somewhere retrieving the last of his equipment. With an air of sadness, he wondered if he would ever be able to become a person that could proudly stand by the other’s side and say with confidence, that they too, were made for each other.
-Is there something that’s bothering you?

-Yeah… no, actually nevermind.

-Are you sure? I’m all ears if you’ll have me.

“My rival, who I incidentally have a huge crush on, and I are about to engage in a deadly battle with a multiregional criminal organization and even thinking about it makes me want to pass out with fear” didn’t seem quite the right sentiment to drop on the unsuspecting old lady. Or “My rival, who I incidentally have a huge crush on, is just infinitely better than me and most of the things he does go right over my head”, or maybe “My rival, who I incidentally have a huge crush on, acts almost friendly towards me during the day and then beats the crap out of me the same night”. He furrowed his brow. Actually, those last ones were something he could probably ask without oversharng any delicate information. It was just a matter of conveying his discordant feelings in a condensed fashion.

-How do you get closer to someone?

-Closer to someone? I’m afraid the answer might be a little too vague for your liking, do you mind giving me a few more details?

He exhaled. That would be too vague, wouldn’t it?

-I… Okay, so I have this friend and they’re amazing. At, well, everything. They’re a skilled Pokémon trainer, they’re smart and they’re strong. They’re tenacious and have an answer to every question. Unlike me…

He shook his head and kept going.

-They don’t talk much about themselves and are greatly averse to asking for and receiving help. They do have quite a short temper, and we end up arguing a lot. As a matter of fact, we’ve been arguing non stop for the past two days. I do take my blame for part of it, but as for the other… I just don’t know. It’s so hard sometimes - I swear I’m not doing it on purpose, but I can never predict if something I said was inappropriate or if something I did would set them off.

His fingers scrunched up into a fist.

-I hate it. I don’t want to keep fighting like that. It’s confusing, it hurts.

-You care about him dearly, don’t you?

Gold froze up. Did he let a pronoun slip in his lofty monologue about Silver? He knew older people could be rather antagonistic towards these kinds of things, so he made extra sure to keep tabs on his wording, but, from the looks of it, failed. He slowly turned his head, prepared for any form or shape of contempt, but couldn’t find even the faintest inkling of malice in her gaze.

She offered him the warmest smile.

-I had a feeling that that was the case. Your eyes glow so brightly when you speak about him.

-How could you tell that he’s a guy?

-Just a hunch. Well, and you’ve listed a lot of outstanding qualities, but never said anything about his looks. In no way I’m saying that it’s a rule of thumb, but it’s quite common for boys to put emphasis on a female partner’s appearance. Of course, it shouldn’t matter much at all.
The teen puffed out his cheeks.

-Oh, he has the looks alright. He’s so goddamn flawless I wonder how it’s even possible. I wish I were even a fraction of that.

She rocked her head lightly.

-Don’t be too hasty to envy your friend, Gold. People who are good at a lot of things put an tremendous amount of time and effort into it. And from what I know, more frequent than not, the ones that seem ostensibly perfect are deeply unhappy at heart.

He meant to disagree, but promptly bit his tongue. The recent conversation was more than testament to this. Still, though, it didn't answer his question.

-I think I might know what you mean. But even so, if something’s bothering him, he would much rather close up and push me away, than accept my help.

-Sadly, it’s not always easy.

-Right...

-But it doesn’t mean that you should surrender, though. You might’ve not experienced the same things or gone through the same troubles, but you don’t necessarily have to be in another’s shoes to be able to understand them and offer them your hand in hour of need. It just may take time. Lots and lots of time and patience.

Gold looked down, wistful.

-You know, today he shared something with me. It was a first, I did not expect it, it was earnest and sincere. We acted like normal people towards one another.

She nodded and gave him another reassuring smile.

-See, it looks like you’re on the right way. Spend time together, be kind to one another, support each other and everything will fall in place.

He thanked Tabatha once more for Tyrogue, for listening and for her advice. Though he hadn’t learned anything profoundly new, it was liberating to finally talk to somebody about it, to vent the feelings he had pent up since their first major argument. Of course, he’d never assumed this was going to be easy but in no way was he willing to surrender either.

As expected, the layout in their room has changed yet again. All the chem equipment on the kitchen table was gone and two new boxes were placed to either side of the wooden furniture. A container of familiar brown blocks and some wiring sat on the table to the left, with a neat stack of what looked like microchips to the right, the redhead nowhere in sight.

Shortly, Silver emerged from the bathroom, adjusting his hair. The bandage was off, replaced by a small patch on the top of his forehead, bruises on his brow and cheek now a yellowish brown.

Gold raised a hand in greeting.

-Hey, how’s it going?

-Certainly nice to have a full range of vision once again.
-Yeah...

He nodded sympathetically. It must have been difficult for the other to perform all those intricate
tasks the past week with half his face covered in gauze. He touched his own cheek, secretly glad
that his rival didn’t deck him hard enough to lose his eye, if only temporarily. In the least, they had
matching bruises now.

-What’re the chips and wires for?

-Remote detonators, adjusted to resist white noise and other radio wave interference. We shall not
repeat the lapse from Ilex.

-Ohh, awesome.

He picked up a random chip and examined the circuitry up close. It looked all the same to him,
whether is was a TV remote or a detonator, but it was obvious that Silver really put a lot of thought
into this. They were reaching the final stage of their preparations and Gold speculated what other
important components could be required for the mission. Legality long out of the question, he tried
an estimated guess about the boxes’ contents.

-Did you order guns too?

The taller boy walked over to the table and sat down at his chair, picking up his soldering iron.

-No, I don’t favour guns. They jam, malfunction, have a static serial number and thus are easy to
track. Explosives, on the other hand, leave no trace.

Gold weighed the response in his head and the stack emphasis the other put on the last part.

-Hm, I suppose I could see that. You still know how to use a gun, though?

-I do.

The brunette smiled, looking at the other with genuine esteem.

-Wow, there really isn’t anything you cannot do.

Effortlessly wielding high explosives and specialized electronics, Silver was an accomplished
marksman as well.

-Where did you learn?

Silver ignored the praise along with the inquiry, expression turning solemn.

-Stop this.

Gold blinked, confused.

-Stop what?

-Stop idolizing me.

This came completely out of nowhere. Gold stuttered, heat creeping up his face.

-W-what?! I wasn’t idolizing anyone! I’m just--
- Presuming I’m some kind of superhuman?
- No, I--
- Either way, you’re wrong.

The brunette drew back, unsure what the other meant.
- I don’t get it.

Silver clutched at the iron’s handle and looked down, picking up a microcircuit. His voice sounded unsteady.
- I cannot stand this anymore.

Gold anxiously knit his eyebrows.
- Silver, what’s going on?
- You keep throwing these words around - ‘great’, ‘awesome’, ‘amazing’. Well, I’m neither of those. I’m not the person who you think I am.
- What are you talking about? Of course you are, you’re--
- You wanted to know how I learned to shoot? Sure, I’ll humor you. My father… facilitated my training a long time ago - pistols, shotguns, rifles, you name it - I was able hit a target, mobile or not, from any distance up to a twelve hundred meters, I would annihilate anything in my way. Yet it was never about my precision or accuracy - years of training and rigorous drills boiled down to one final test - to shoot my Pokémon.

He hitched.
- I don’t particularly have the fondest memories of the occasion.

Gold's eyes widened.
- Did you--
- Yes.

He instantly regretted he asked and simply stared, stunned, as Silver soldered two different colored wires to a microchip.
- Wasn’t what you expected to hear, was it? Sorry to bust your bubble.

The brunette tried to gather himself, completely at loss of words, unable to comprehend the horrific circumstances the other had been through.
- I’m… so sorry.
- Don’t be. I’ve learnt it early enough - nothing comes without a price.

He attached the other ends of the wires to two elongated blasting caps and moved onto the next set.

Visibly shaken by the other’s confession with unmoving legs Gold went over to the sink and filled up a glass. He sat down at the table and distractedly fiddled with his Pokégear, not knowing how to
fill up the heavy silence.

-So, how did your Daycare endeavour go?

-Daycare endeavour?

-Mhm.

-Oh, right...

Tears welled up on the sides of Gold’s eyes, “How can you talk about shooting your own Pokémon and then go asking about such trite things as how my day went?” He breathed through his teeth, firmly clutching at the worn fabric of his hoodie. This was so cruel and unfair. What other horrible burdens did Silver silently bear, what other terrible secrets did he hold behind his collected guise? He wiped his face with a sleeve, stifling a sob.

-It went fine.

He tried his best to keep his voice from quivering.

-I said my farewells to the baby Pokémon and the Daycare lady. She even gave me a Pokémon.

-Did she now.

-Yes, a Tyrogue. I believe he might be useful later in our operation.

Silver eyed him with skepticism before returning his focus to the iron.

-Huh, what level is he? Five?

Gold weakly folded his arms on his chest in defense.

-Fifteen.

-Hardly any better. But I see, at least your relationship with the Daycare personnel yielded some results.

-It’s not like that. He was abandoned by his trainer and stayed alone in the Daycare for a long time. He refused to even play with the other hatchlings, you know.

-Ever the bleeding heart, aren’t you, rescuing the forsaken and neglected?

-And what’s wrong with that, having a bleeding heart’s better than having none at all!

He halted at once, horrified by what he just said.

-Sorry, that was… uncalled for.

The redhead stayed silent for a couple of moments and then forced a sneer.

-Well, that’s more like it.

Gold’s stomach dropped. He extended his arm and reluctantly and placed it on the other’s shoulder.

-Silver, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking, I didn’t mean it that way…
The redhead finally turned, shoving his hand away in a sharp motion.

-Beat the entire Ecruteak Gym with that one Pokémon and I might consider it’s worth.

-But--

-Anything else?

-No… I'm really sorry.

-Spare me your worthless apologies or your cheap compassion. Now, if you will excuse me.

He flicked his hair and diverted his full attention to the explosives on the table.

Gold left the hotel and started walking in a random direction. He rubbed at his eyes, struggling to hold back the escaping tears. Despite how insistently Silver painted himself as the villain, it was him who was the real monster here.

He stooped in the middle of the road, head buried deep in his hands, a nauseating hollow feeling twisting at his guts. This was the absolute lowest thing one could do after their friend shared a painful memory from his past. And what for, to parry a snide remark, get back at him for the small satisfaction of victory? It was the exact opposite to what he had talked to Tabatha just hours ago, what he had resolved to do. He accused the redhead of toying with his emotions, but here he was, throwing the worst possible insult back in his face. He felt like filthy scum and ultimate, despicable trash that did not deserve to call himself the other’s partner.

He stayed like this for a good half hour, mulling in self-inflicted overwhelming despair. He had to go back, he had to apologize, he had to set things right. But at the same time, he couldn’t bear look the other in the eye, to face the grief and the hatred he might see in Silver’s gaze. “He’d probably just beat me up again, and I would again, totally deserve it.”

Stiffly, he got up and took a Poké Ball off his belt. He'd simply make things worse - given that was even possible - if he'd showed up in the room again. This wasn’t even a remotely faithful interpretation of the Daycare lady’s words, but they both needed some time. For now, apart.

He straightened and released Tyrogue from his confinement. The small Pokémon hopped excitedly, overjoyed to be reunited with his new trainer. He settled down quickly, as he noticed Gold’s bleak expression. The boy patted his head.

- Hey buddy. Sorry to jump this on you, but we need to start training immediately. Something big is gonna happen in a couple of days and we both need to get much much stronger. Are you with me on this?

Tyrogue nodded and lifted a fist. Gold bumped it with his own and mustered a shaky smile.

- That’s the spirit. Let’s go kick some butt.

They trained tirelessly for the entire evening. Tyrogue had a superb stamina and was quick to learn new moves, but before they knew it, the sun had already started to set. It was time to return.

The brunette sheepishly opened the door and entered the room. An eerie silence hung in the air -
there was no rhythmic humming from any of Silver’s machines, no snappy typing, no running water. The bed was neatly done, all containers and bottles removed from the nightstand, large storage boxes that were housed under the table were nowhere to be seen. The table itself looked intimidatingly empty as well - all the wiring and brown rectangles, along with the soldering iron and computer were absent.

Cold, numbing, dread welled in the boy’s chest. Keeping his shoes on, he ran to the bathroom, the little storage and the cramped balcony - they both were vacant just as the rest of the apartment. He rushed back to the main room, frantically searching for any notes that his rival might’ve left him, checking all available surfaces and even under the bed. A couple of sandwich wrappers and crumbs lay under his side, but any indications of another human being staying here with him were gone.

Given his deplorable outburst, he could see why the other would seek to avoid him, but the redhead couldn’t possibly leave without word or warning. Or could he?

One way or another there was no mistake - Silver had taken off without him.

Chapter End Notes

Totally was a spoiler for this one since inktober on tumblr
-No, no, no, nooo…

He whined frenetically as he stared at the empty room. This couldn’t be real, this couldn’t be happening, not now, not today. Why did he put off coming to the hotel again? Afraid of getting punched? Averse to witnessing another’s pain? Unwilling to face his own failure?

Head in his hands, he sunk to the dusty floor. A noxious mixture of self-loathing, guilt and shame were gouging his insides, making him feel physically ill. “This is all my fault, this is all my fucking fault. If I hadn’t said those horrible things, Silver would still be here, he’d be telling me about tomorrow’s plan, he’d be…”

Gold lifted his head slightly. There must be something he could still do.

Mind racing, he scampered through his options. He did know where the other was headed, he could rush after him, he could intercept him at Ecruteak, he’d plead him for forgiveness. Then again, if Silver had no desire to be located, there’s no way in hell he’d be able to find him even if he combed the entire city.

How about Mahogany then? The exact coordinates for the hideout and the date of the takedown mission were stored safely on his Pokégear. There was no set hour as of yet, but he could stake it out in some bush and wait for the redhead to show up. No, he had no idea what Silver’s revised plan was and any wrong move could easily jeopardize the entire mission, not to mention put their lives in mortal danger.

Alright, moving on. Radio Tower? Quite frankly, this was no better than the previous one and, on top of it, he no longer had the Rocket uniform for camouflage. He could probably order it somewhere just like the other did or even sign up as a rookie grunt. But what if the Rockets remembered his face from the Slowpoke Well? No, no, no none of this was going to work. Besides, he’d be leaving his rival to do all the work in the northern city’s HQ.

He pulled his hair in distress. So he couldn’t meet up with Silver before the takedown, he couldn’t participate in the takedown due to complete lack of coordination, which brought him back to the first point, and he couldn’t wait until after the takedown because… because how much more of an unreliable, lying, piece of shit ‘partner’ would he be then. This time he had totally driven himself into a corner. One thoughtless phrase and he’d lost everything he had so arduously built.

He sat immobile as a another notion ran through his mind, making his blood run cold - “What if I'm never going to see him again?”

Gold forcefully dragged himself off the ground and checked the clock on his Pokégear. No, anything but that. Refusing to lose any more time, he sprinted out of the suite.

He’d rush to Ecruteak, he’d comb the city, he’d wait in bushes, he’d buy Rocket uniforms, he’d do all in his power to get to Silver before it’s too late. It was dire, it was desperate, but he couldn’t give in to despair just yet.
They collided hard, the boy almost toppling over the oncoming person.

-Sorry! Didn’t see you, sir.

He blurted out, ready to take off again.

Silver was standing in front of him, looking morbidly exhausted, messenger bag over his shoulder and another large plastic bag in his hand. He gingerly rubbed the point of impact and strode past the other back into their room.

The brunette blinked several times, not believing his eyes, relief washing over him in waves. Silver was not in Ecruteak, Mahogany or anywhere else, he was right here with him in this dingy hotel, he did not abandon him after all.

Gold opened his mouth for a gleeful greeting when the torrent of guilt he’d been carrying all day crashed onto him at once, drowning, choking the words in his throat.

He quietly followed the other boy and closed the door behind him. The redhead was already settling into bed, tablet in hands, earbuds in his ears.

Hesitantly moving forward, Gold walked over and sat on his side of the huge mattress. He warily gazed at his own knees. Beyond doubt, this was a gift from fates themselves and he absolutely could not afford to waste it. No matter what the other had told him earlier, he had to apologize properly.

With immense willpower he turned to face his partner.

-Silver, you probably don’t want to talk to me, but please lend me a moment of your time.

The other teen did not look up from his tablet. Gold wondered if he’d even heard him. Didn’t matter, if he hadn’t he would apologize again and again, he would get down on his knees if he had to.

-I’m so sorry for what I said earlier, it was cruel, I did it out of spite. And in no way it excuses my behaviour. I’m awfully sorry you had to go through such terrible things in your life. You are an incredible person and absolutely nothing - nothing, you hear me - will convince me otherwise.

He paused, biting his lip.

-I did not mean to hurt you, I would never want to do anything to hurt you, ever. If you cannot forgive me, I understand. But please know, I am truly sorry.

He waited hopefully for a couple of seconds not invoking any response whatsoever. Eventually he went to turn around, crestfallen, when Silver lifted his gaze. His voice was monotone, lacking any emotion.

-You did not hurt me.

-I...

“I know I did.”

-None of it matters.

“Yes, yes it does. Everything matters, your feelings matter, you matter.”
He faced down and squeezed his eyes shut, raw guilt still tearing painfully at his core.

-I was so scared that you left.

-I wouldn’t compromise a mission over a squabble.

“Why do you always downplay your emotions, this was not a mere squabble.”

-Silver…

-I need to finish this.

Eyes bloodshot, Silver was furiously tapping away on his tablet with a slender stylus.

-Yes, sorry.

Gold had no intent to interfere with the other's work, but now he also had no idea what to do with himself. He thought of cleaning up the mess he’d made earlier, but what would it count, if they were leaving early in the morning? He sat idly for a couple of minutes and, unable to find a better activity to occupy himself with, decided to do it anyway. After uncovering a brush and dustpan from under the kitchen sink, he painstakingly swept the trash from under the bed and the chunks of mud he had carried in during his futile search. He then walked over to the bathroom and glumly inspected broken deadbolt that was set aside on one of the shelves. The sole hardware available were the original bent screws, one of them missing, so declaring the fixture repaired would’ve been quite a stretch, despite his best efforts. They weren’t exactly bound by a security deposit, all things considered, so he’d figured it would do the job.

As he wiped the stood out sweat off his forehead, his stomach gave an audible grumble. He put his hands over his abdomen in a reflexive motion. That’s right, he hadn’t eaten anything since the morning. Ready to make a call to the reception, he picked up the inn’s catalogue.

-I’ve got curry with me if you want it.

Silver called out, gesturing to the large sack sitting at his side of the bed. The brunette dithered and put the phone down.

-I uh… sure.

He shuffled in the bag and procured a white takeout container. Apart from the box, there was a neatly wrapped brown package. He settled not to ask - he’d done enough prying for one day. Hell, for an entire lifetime.

Weighing the box in his hand, he couldn’t help but notice how small the food container was.

-There’s only one portion.

-You can have it, I ate earlier.

The now familiar feeling of overwhelming fondness swept over him. He was such an idiot to attack Silver, and even a larger idiot to ever doubt him.

The curry was still warm so he skipped the microwave and eagerly dug in right away. It was a flavourful blend of meat, sauce and spices, topped off by an herby flatbread.

-Man, you always get the best food.
Feeling slightly more at ease, knowing that Silver was not going to hate him for the rest of eternity, he pulled out his own headphones and plugged them into the Pokégear. He tuned into the Pokémon Music radio station and closed his eyes, letting his mind go adrift. It was an outlet of sorts, a temporary refuge from the continuous emotional roller-coaster he’d been ever since that fateful night in the forest. In a span of one day he’d easily gone from elated to depressed, perplexed to confident, arrogant to humbled, resentful to affectionate, repeatedly, back and forth, all thanks to a certain redhead. It was unfathomable how a single person could elicit such intense mental turmoil. Unwittingly, mercilessly, Silver turned his heart inside out and then just as unwittingly pulled it back together.

His Pokégear vibrated three times, indicating a new incoming message. Listlessly, he tapped on the glowing screen. A blank message sat in the inbox - sender Silver.

Gold hastily removed his headphones and spun his head. The other boy was looking at him, expression even more tired than before.

-Rundown for tomorrow: we leave to Ecruteak at dawn, battle all available trainers in the vicinity, take the gym, inspect the Burned Tower, then camp out as far as we can on Route 42 to Mahogany. I am not planning to stay in the city longer than a day.

-Okay.

The brunette nodded, digesting the information. That made sense, taking their strict timing into account. Wait... was he supposed to take over the gym with a single Tyrogue tomorrow?!

Somehow, he’d anticipated having at least several days.

He could always use Feraligatr and his Bite to easily skid through the ghost challenge, but that would mean forfeiting without even giving the little fighting type a chance. He’d have to set an alarm earlier than dawn in order to get in some extra training to make this work. Just thinking about it made him miserable.

Silver sensed his palpable hesitation.

-Second guessing your ability to beat the gym?

-Um... no! Just you wait, we’ll do it.

-As you say. I’m exhausted, I’m going to sleep.

-Yeah, me too.

Gold exhaled - he did have quite an inadequate amount of hours left before his ungodly alarm. He got up and shut down the lights in the kitchen and the corridor, flipping the switch on his bedside lamp last. Motionless, he lay for a few long moments, listening to the faint ticking of the clock in the other room and his partner’s even breathing.

-Thank you, Silver.

The other squinted at him, almost asleep.

-For?

The brunette wavered, struggling to express the array of stifling emotions weighing his mind. He fought the inexplicable urge to touch the other boy, to grab his hand, to make sure he was still there. The notion of fighting Team Rocket was damn frightening, but the very thought of having to
go on with his life without Silver was absolutely terrifying.

-For sharing your thoughts, for being so patient. For staying. Honestly. For everything.

Silver looked at him with an expression he couldn’t quite decipher.

-You’re a strange one, Gold.

He then rolled over, turning his back to the other teen. Gold placed his arms behind his head and stared into the ceiling, thoughtful.

-Mmm… I guess I am.

Where would this path that he had heedlessly plunged himself into lead him? He decided, that as long as Silver would be there with him, he did not care.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for this one being short, but had to resolve the outstanding cliffhanger.

¯\_(ツ)_/¯
Chapter 15

The alarm blared in the silence of the dark room. Gold felt the sharp noise slicing at his sluggish sleep like a knife through butter. Why was it ringing anyway, weren’t they talking with Silver just moments ago?

-Oh shi--

The boy abruptly sat up, slamming the button just as his Pokégear was about to go off again. He turned to his rival, desperately hoping that he didn’t wake him up. The other boy stirred, but did not break his slumber.

It was a rare occasion for Gold to wake up before him, but just as before the other was restless in his sleep. His eyebrows were furrowed and hand balled up in a fist next to his pillow, twitching slightly. It seemed like he was having another nightmare.

The brunette looked at him with genuine sadness, the bitter aftertaste of yesterday’s feud still lingering at the back of his mouth. It was rather sudden how the other snapped at him, but he had absolutely no right to act the way he did. How could he possibly choose that the best response to the criticism of empathy was to display none whatsoever? Even worse than that, to exult in the other’s despair.

And yet, the glimpse into the other’s past, the idea that something like that could’ve happened to somebody, his peer no less, chilled him to the bone. The growing clot of dread that firmly settled in his gut since the day he got acquainted with the transmitter somehow gave him an impression that this was just the tip of the iceberg.

Shaking his head, Gold tried to rid himself of the heavy thoughts. What was important was that Silver had already forgiven him, if tentatively, and he still had a lot to prove to him, starting with the victory over the Ecruteak gym.

He got up, dressed and then quietly exited the suite.

Outside sucked balls. The fog was heavy enough to mistake it for drizzling rain and anything past an outstretched arm was hardly discernible. Searching for trails in the dew coated grass, he walked a few meters up the gravel road. Sadly, with this visibility each muggy spot was as good as any, or in this case, as bad.

Well, nobody said this was going to be a cruise. He fired up his GPS app, punched in the hotel’s coordinates and doggedly stepped into the wet marsh.

As the sun started to rise Gold was back at the inn and thoroughly drenched. His party and he had managed a blind sprint to Goldenrod and back, clearing whatever sparse wild encounters available on the way. Whether due to the mist or the unfortunate timing they were few and far in between, mostly amounting to Pidgeys with the exception of one very disoriented Snubbull.

Intently applying Silver’s standard technique, Gold refused to switch out Tyrogue, turning what would’ve been a short fight into a lengthy back and forth of Tackles and Quick Attacks. He did lose his patience eventually when the blasted bird used a fourth Sand Attack in a row and swapped Pokémon. Flaaffy dealt with it with a single Thundershock.
In the end, despite their best efforts Tyrogue did not get nearly enough exp to level up, let alone to evolve, leaving the brunette rather unsatisfied with the morning drill altogether.

He threw his shoes off and walked through the room. Silver was already up and fully dressed, situated at the large table, typing on his faithful tablet. A spare plate of egg and toast was placed to his left.

Gold smiled as he picked up his breakfast, mood lightening momentarily. The ceramic felt warm in his hands, giving his fingers a tingly sensation after the cool outside air and making his heart glow with affection. He scarfed the meal down in a matter of seconds and stepped into the corridor leading to the bathroom.

-Thanks! Gonna take a quick shower and then I'm ready to go.

As per usual the redhead just nodded, not looking up from his work.

-Taxi will be here in 10 min, try not to drown.

-Gotcha.

Giving a casual thumbs up, he closed the door and started the water. The hot streams washed off his morning fatigue and any lingering discontent. He placed his hand on the colored tiles and allowed himself a tiny smile. Silver’s attitude seemed no different today, so maybe he didn’t screw up their partnership after all.

They checked out, earning a relieved look from Marta who’s been regarding them with suspicion their entire stay. It had only been about a week, but it seemed to Gold like they’ve been living in the suite forever. He looked back with mixed feelings as the little inn rapidly zoomed out of view. Was he going to miss this temporary accommodation? Nah, no way he was going to long for the ever monopolized kitchen, the non-lockable bathroom, or the stuffy bedroom. The permanently crowded table suffused with the other’s bizarre and fascinating equipment, the discolored tub that Silver liked to occupy for his lengthy baths, the king bed that they’ll definitely never get to share again.

He placed his forehead on the cold glass of the car’s window and closed his eyes - who was he fucking kidding, he was missing the goddamned place already.

The vehicle plunged and swerved wildly as the front wheels hit a huge pothole, throwing it off course. With a loud thud Gold smashed head first into the window, only to get tossed back instantly at the driver’s sharp maneuver to stabilize the car.

-Ah! Dang--

He cracked one eye open and raised an arm to rub his wounded forehead. The other teen was looking down at him, mildly annoyed. The brunette paused and glowered. It’s not like it was his fault that the public works failed to do their job.

Silver drew his finger back and thwacked the other boy right between is eyes, hard.

-Ow ow ow! What was that for?!

Gold hastily covered his face with both hands, simultaneously trying to rub the sting away.
-I'm already gonna have a bump, now you're just aggravating it.

-Serves you right for spacing out.

-I wasn't spacing out, I was…

He trailed off, unsure how to finish. “Busy being upset that we can't sleep together anymore,” sounded wrong all around.

-Yes?

-I was spacing out.

He mumbled through his digits, defeated. He stayed still for a few moments and then peeked from behind his cover to check if it was safe to remove his hands. And sure enough, the other’s drawn fingers were hovering right above his face.

-Regardless. If you don’t remove your person from my lap this instant, I’m going to give you another one.

-Huh? What are you even on abo--

He held his tongue as he took a second look at the surroundings. From his vantage point he could plainly see the interior’s grey roof with some old markings, the tops of the windows, and Silver’s tilted face. And now that he thought of it, the back of his head was resting on something warm.

Gold sat up in a single motion, back rigid. He spun his head and fixated on the cup holder on the side of the door, unable to keep the treacherous blush off his face. Did he really land on his partner’s knees and just lay there without even realizing it? Also why did the driver turn on the heater now of all times? The salon was all too sticky, and the lack of air was suffocating. Shortly, he felt a trickle of sweat run down his back and his breath falter.

In a spontaneous attempt to calm down, he rolled the window down and stuck his head out. The chilling wind and speckling drizzle of the mist that he despised an hour ago was now a blessing. It soothed the acute burning of his cheeks and drained the deafening sound of blood pounding in his ears. The previously silent driver turned and gave him a sympathetic look.

-Sorry mate, rough roads on the outskirts. Should’ve just sat up front if you’re seasick. But if you puke in my car, I’ll charge you double for the cleaning.

He added sternly. The teen pulled a strained smile and nodded, grateful for the timely excuse and for the reason he didn’t have to make one up himself. He was already running on emotional overload and any additional processes were enough to make his brain short circuit.

They did not talk for the rest of the trip, each occupied with their own thing - Silver listening to something on his Pokégear and Gold desperately trying to conceal the fact that it wasn’t at all the heater that got turned on.

The taxi driver pulled up on the side of the road and loudly addressed the passengers.

-Here we are, that’s as far as I can go.

Nodding, Silver handed him cash and vacated the car. The brunette stalled just enough to check his
face in the rear view mirror. Thankfully, he no longer resembled a tomato.

-Hang in there, mate.

The older man called out to him as he reached for the handle. Gold thanked the driver and closed the door from the other side. He watched the black hatchback drive forth and make a swift U-turn for the road back to the metropolis, red tail lights growing fainter in the smoky mist. He sighed to himself - hang in there, huh. As if he had any other options.

He caught up to his rival just as the other was passing a bright orange roadblock placed right in the middle of the street. A huge banner hung over temporary barricade, inviting all willing challengers and spectators.

-Bug Catching Contest? Then that’s why the roads are closed.

The redhead finally lifted his gaze from his Pokégear’s miniature screen.

-Correct. Starts at noon, we have quite some time to clear the area before it gets too crowded.

-Suspect we’re aren’t going to participate, are we?

Having heard of the event on radio and multiple times and seen the colorful ads on TV, Gold was covertly looking forward to testing his luck and skill as well. Silver’s leery expression, on the other hand, suggested that he’d rather bury any and all such intents as far and deep as he could.

-Right.

-It would be of benefit for us, however. We shall battle as many trainers as we can and then take a detour via Route 36.

The other teen perked up. He could really use some proper Pokémon battles to gain exp before the Ecruteak Gym so, even skipping the contest, this was quite a bargain.

They walked up the paved road leading to the National Park taking turns to fight each consecutive trainer. The brunette was surprised that Silver didn’t go off on his own and actually stuck around while he battled. One headphone in, he did not comment, nor judge the other’s actions, just occasionally looking up at an especially loud blast or outcry. He half expected him to be distracting, given the cab incident earlier and overall state of affairs, but as he got more and more engrossed with the fight his concerns disappeared completely. If anything, his rival’s presence fired him up and raised his spirits.

Contrary to the Silver’s semi-attentive approach, Gold followed the other’s battles with utmost concentration. The unfamiliar position of a bystander allowed him to observe the scene from an entirely different perspective - instead of frantically tracking his and the enemy Pokémon, he could now solely focus on the underlying strategies, pick out the flaws, and compare them to some of his own. Truthfully, he near pitied his rival’s opponents. Usually being on the receiving end himself, he knew all too well how difficult it could be to break through the other’s party’s armor or match his Pokémon’s speed.

Though as beneficial it was to watch the duel from a practical standpoint, he found his eyes glued for another reason. Style utterly unforgiving, the redhead shattered his foe’s defenses, countered the advances, exploited their weaknesses, and punished their very minor miscalculations. Not a second of time lost, he conducted each attack with extreme precision. When he fought, Silver
looked absolutely striking.

In a fair number of battles the pair reached the grand entrance of the park and turned right off the main path. The crowd gradually began to thin as they moved toward the three routes intersection and away from the main event.

Silver stopped abruptly and twisted his Pokégear’s volume scroll all the way up.

-It started.

Not expecting the sudden break, Gold bumped into the other's back.

-Woops… what did? The contest?

-Team Rocket have activated their amplifier at Mahogany.

-Ooh...

So that’s what Silver was checking all morning.

-Multiple reports are pouring in regarding the abnormal activity at the Lake of Rage. Seems like the Magikarp native to that area are the primary targets.

The brunette gave him a questioning look.

-So should we hurry to the Lake of Rage now?

-No, our timing is correct. We’ll give them the day to collect and analyze the data. Honestly makes our job easier, I’d just have to tap into their server and--

-Heeeey!

Somebody leapt from behind, clinging to Gold’s shoulder with all their weight, laughing loudly.

-Fancy seeing you here!

A blond girl circled around and bounced up and down. Then, remembering herself, she pulled on an exaggerated pout.

-Why’d you never reply? It’s rude to ignore a girl, you know.

The brunette’s expression turned wry. Really, now of all times? He'd been meaning to turn her down from the moment she pressed the offer, but due to the never-ending turmoil in his everyday existence this basic responsibility conveniently slipped his mind.

He looked at her, morose, considering his next move. If it were up to him, he’d prefer to tell her the truth and simply admit just how irreversibly gay he was for his rival and how utterly disinterested he was in her or any other girl for that matter. Yet with the said rival standing right next to them, this was well out of the question. Perhaps if he could discreetly call her to the side and…

-Heyo, man, how’s it going?

Brandon, Todd and the rest of the gang appeared from around the corner, all enthusiastically
waving at him in recognition. He eagerly waved back, glad to get off the problematic subject and, hopefully, skip it in all.

-Hey everyone, great to see you again! Any luck with camping?

Sam merely spread his arms.

-Nope. We thought we’d try the National Park since Ilex was still off limits, and guess what - they don’t even allow tents or overnight stay.

-And close the gates right after 7:00PM.

Todd interjected as Sam continued his talk.

-We’ve migrated at least four times in the past week in search of a good spot, but they were all either too trashed, urban, sketchy or all of those at once. And then the police was absolutely everywhere. We weren’t up to no good or anything, but you know that feeling of constantly being watched? Creeped me out.

Brandon exhaled noisily through his nose and grumbled.

-Well, gotta thank Team Rocket or whatever other asshat from your theories for the ruined vacation.

Gold chuckled stiffly and locked arms behind his head, consciously avoiding looking Silver’s direction. Sam just shrugged at allegation.

-Either of them may be legit. Wanna make a bet on which?

-Only once I’ve won the last one.

-Quitter.

-I prefer strategist.

Sam jokingly swatted at him and turned to the brunette.

-So yeah, that’s been our life. What were you up to?

-Yanno, just the regular - hanging out, training, fighting off crazy shoppers in the mall.

-Hah, feel ya there! Almost got my arm ripped off the other day for a discounted TM. Had to battle children and violent old ladies alike.

He did a little boxing impression and they both laughed at the goofy mental image. They gossiped some more, exchanging their over-the-top pre-festival mart experiences.

-By the way, speaking of bets, Brandon and I are wagering on who’s gonna catch the largest Pinsir tonight. You want in?

-Mmm tempting--

Gold heard the sudden snap of a Pokégear getting shut close behind him.

-...but I’m gonna pass.
It was the least likely that Silver had found any of this amusing and chatting any longer would mean testing his patience. And he knew rather well what that usually amounted to.

-Actually, we gotta get rolling.

-Wait, you’re leaving already? You’re not going to the contest?

Emily butted in, separating from her ginger friend. They’ve been whispering amongst themselves this entire time all the while throwing covert glances at the pair. The brunette twisted his head lightly.

-Nah, not today. We’ve stuff to do, but good luck on the Pinsirs, everyone!

He started to edge sideways from the group, looking for an opening for a low-key exit. The two girls plainly blocked the path, arms on their hips. Emily lifted one hand and pointed at his face.

-Suppose I’ll forgive you once, but like heck we’re letting you off today so easily. Besides, you haven’t even introduced your friend.

Ginger gave the boys a suggestive wink.

-We were gonna challenge you at the contest, but since you’re such a spoilsport, this works too.

-Have a double battle with us. If we win, you two are going on dates with us. How ‘bout that?

Sam and Todd scoffed, Gold raised his hands to refuse, while the redhead wordlessly snatched a Poké Ball from his belt and stepped forward. Emily jumped with excitement.

-It’s settled then, let's get to it!

They moved away from the public road to a wide grassy patch and declared the start of the fight. Customarily, Gold chose to go with Tyrogue and Silver, for the first time today, sent out Sneasel.

-Tyrogue, Fake Out!

The priority attack landed on Clefairy, along with Sneasel’s consecutive Ice Shard and Focus Punch that instantaneously demolished the enemies’ HP. Wigglytuff and Clefable and were then sent to the field, but even the bulky evolved forms went down with a single Slash. Gold and the opponents alike hardly managed any input at all, and the one sided battle was over before it started.

He’d readily assumed that Silver wasn’t going to purposely allow himself get defeated, but this blatant stomp and the general situation started giving off some disturbingly negative vibes. They had to leave before it could turn into another disaster.

-Man, you really can't take a hint. You were supposed to play along!

Ginger declared, exasperated. Way more perturbed by the outcome of their bet than her Pokémon’s performance, she stood to the side crossly tapping her foot. Emily sighed and looked at them dolefully as well.

-Seriously, you guys.

She then grinned conspicuously, marking her quick recovery.

-Well, maybe we can still work out a consolation prize. What do you think?
Flirtily rocking her hips, she walked up and made a gesture to reach for Gold's arm. Just as he opened his mouth to retort, he felt a grip on his shoulder and a sharp jerk backward. He stumbled, falling back onto Silver’s chest.

The girl’s hand caught thin air.

The brunette gasped at the sudden contact and felt his cheeks blaze. The hot breath on the back of his head was enough to make him dizzy.

Emily froze as she caught the taller teen’s expression - if looks could kill, then this was it. Immediately taking the cue, she took two steps back.

Silver released the other’s shoulder, causing him to lose footing yet again. Haughtily, he retrieved Sneasel and strode past the small group of campers, disappearing behind the trees at the corner to Route 36.

All witnessing parties stayed eerily quiet. Sam whistled, eventually breaking the awkward silence.

-Severe, huh.

The rest nodded but did not submit any additional comments. Unsure what this entire display meant and how to act, Gold recalled his own Pokémon and made another attempt at escape.

-Well, um… yeah. Catch you guys later.

With the redhead gone and out of earshot Emily easily sprung back to her peppy demeanor. She ran up and smacked the teen’s other shoulder in a friendly gesture.

-Gold, why didn’t you just tell me?

He blanked.

-What?

-Oh, knock it off, you don’t have to play dumb anymore. I just can’t believe I hadn’t noticed sooner!

She danced around and gave his back a forceful shove towards the path that Silver just took.

-Anyways, now you really should get going.

Joyfully, she leaned in from behind and whispered into his ear.

-Hit me up if you need relationship advice or anything. Maybe you could avoid getting any more black eyes that way!

She pulled away and flicked a pair of finger guns at him, rejoining her buddies on the wide sidewalk.

-I’ll be rooting for you guys!

Gold simpered and diffidently mirrored the motion. He shifted his gaze to the mostly deserted road ahead of him and started walking. Hands in his pockets, he passed the National Park’s ornate fencing and the last of the leisurely contest participants. Reaching the end of the paved path, he set off to Route 36, bewildered and more confused than he had ever been before.
Chapter 16

Furious, Silver breezed through the connecting route to three cities, destroying any Pokémon trainer he met on his way. He passed the grassy area and the misty grove and ultimately emerged at the beginning of Route 37. Unable to hold it in any longer, he smashed his fist into the route sign with all his might. Again and again he collided with the cold surface, bruising, scratching his knuckles. Short of breath, hand burning, he could now feel thin streams of blood running down his fingers. He did not care. This feeling of pain was familiar, it was understandable, this feeling he could control. He leaned his head onto the sign and willessly punched it one last time, leaving red smears on the reflective paint. This was not rational, this was not sane, none of this was meant to happen. He closed his eyes and exhaled, despondent, distraught, “I cannot do this. I have no right.”

He stayed still for a few long moments. Regaining composure, he wiped the blood with the other hand and straightened up.

This was all irrelevant.

He flipped his Pokégear open and punched in a message - there, this should give him time to think things over and set his mind right. The mission took first priority and nothing, absolutely nothing, could interfere with it. Resolved, he set off once more, steadily making his way up north to Ecruteak.

Gold arrived at the intersection of the three major routes and briefly checked his Town Map to make sure he was still on the right way. He stopped, vacantly staring past the little screen.

Emily was going to give him relationship advice. As in romantic relationship advice. Romantic relationship advice for him and Silver. Because she’d inferred that he and Silver were in that type of a relationship.

His lips pressed into a thin line.

They were not. They would never be. The only time and place they were in a relationship were his wistful, feverish, wildest dreams, which this cold and callous reality had nothing to do with. How did she even come to this conclusion? He hadn’t said or done anything to express his true feelings, he’d been incessantly cautious about keeping his trap shut and his heart locked. Even if he considered telling her, he’d never gotten around to it, so how…

He groaned, forcibly stretching the hood over his eyes.

It was his dumb, worthless, stupid mug that gave it all away, wasn’t it? Sparked by his rival’s slight word or action, it was written all over his face in glowing red - screaming, loud and clear. No way it wasn’t obvious as hell. If a girl he’d met for the second time in his life picked up on it so effortlessly, that could only mean one thing. Silver had noticed as well.

Gold’s arm listlessly dropped to his side.

Silver knew. Silver knew. The words echoed in his mind as his body turned to lead.
For how long? Knew since the very beginning, learned it fairly recently, realized just now? How long had he known and chosen to say nothing about it?

The Pokégear gave a short buzz and Gold anxiously peeked at the sender’s name. For once he wished it were Emily, Joey, mum, literally anybody else rather than him.

Silver.

But of course, who else would it be. He grit his teeth and clicked on the icon, bracing himself for the worst.

“Burned Tower 4:00PM”, stated the curt message.

Huh, that was it? He read it over again and then checked for any additional texts, but surely, this was the only one. From the looks of it the redhead had no intention of waiting for him, and again, he was quite alright with the turn of events. A whole five hours ahead of him to explore the city, to locate the Tower, to decide what to do with this damned situation, and to… beat the gym. Shit.

He returned to the Map menu he hadn’t really got a chance to look at and eyeballed the distance to the Ecruteak. Even the most optimistic forecast promised a minimum 45 minute journey and that inevitably required breaking into sprints. He let his hood fall back as he glowered at the purple clouds above. This day was complete and utter trainwreck and they weren’t even halfway through.

-Tyrogue, Fake Out, then Rock Smash!

Tyrogue leapt forward and hit the significantly slower foe smack in the face. Drowzee quavered and took the attack that landed shortly after.

-Keep it up, Double Team, then again!

The Pokémon briskly stepped sideways, upping his evasiveness by a notch. The opposing trainer retaliated with confidence.

-Nice try, but pointless. Drowzee, Taunt, Confusion.

The fighting type easily fell for the Taunt and failed to Double Team the second time, as a thick wave of psychic energy engulfed his petite body.

Critical hit! It was super effective. Tyrogue was unable to battle.

Grudgingly, Gold sent out Feraligatr to end the fight. After the second Psychic in a row it became clear that his default strategy was not working. Type disadvantages seasoned with one hit-KO’s were his ultimate baneful mix and, in front of a ghost centered gym, he knew that it was just a warm up.

Gold walked out of the Pokémon Center with a handful of items and his party refreshed. Remarkably, he was grateful for his mum’s impromptu shopping sprees - not only did she deposit a good amount of Hyper Potions to his account, but also purchased some rare and useful items. He retrieved a Focus Sash from his bag and tied it over Tyrogue’s head.

-Here you go, no more knockouts for us now.

Tyrogue jumped up and down, unfazed by the recent loss and genuinely thrilled with all the
attention his trainer was giving him. The brunette then opened the TM compartment and pulled out TM17 Protect. He handed it and waited for Tyrogue to sync up with the data.

-And this will give you a little more defense.

Now something to deal with ghost types. He shuffled through the rest of the folder, eventually picking up Swagger and Hidden Power. He did not have any compatible dark type or other practical TMs, so at this rate their choices amounted to two options - either stubbornly staking it out or praying to the Gods that the Hidden Power wouldn’t turn out to be normal or fighting.

Head in his hands, Gold sat on the steps of the Ecruteak gym. He’d branded the day as a fiasco earlier, but this was definitely the cherry on the top. Out of all possible outcomes Tyrogue’s Hidden Power ended up being ground. A perfect fit were they facing any other poison type Pokémon, but it so happened that the ethereal Gastlys and Haunters both possessed the ability Levitate, making them completely immune. Sure, Swagger and Focus Sash worked as intended, but the overwhelming power of the Hypnosis and Dream Eater combo destroyed any chances at victory. He tried using Endure instead of the Sash and Chesto Berries to keep his Pokémon awake, but even that did not give him the upper hand.

Loathingly, he glanced at his wrist. There were three and a half hours till their meeting with Silver and chances of divine intervention were running drier by the minute. He pictured a team of acclaimed life coaches his mum used to obsess with, blasting their cheesy motivational phrases at him, heckling, mocking his pessimism.

“Do not give up, the beginning is always the hardest” - yeah, so was the middle, the interlude and the end.

“You have to look through the rain to see the rainbow” - joke’s on them, he was already gay and miserable.

“Shoot for the moon, if you miss at least you’ll end among the stars” - he was no astrophysicist, but he was quite certain that that would have to be quite a serious overshoot, unless being dead from asphyxiation and floating aimlessly in space counted as being ‘among the stars’.

“When you feel like quitting, think about why you started” - he started because he was a dick to Silver and this was his retribution.

“You miss a 100% of the balls you don’t throw” - though he genuinely doubted this quote’s authenticity, he was sure as hell he’d thrown all the balls he could at this figurative legendary and a Master Ball was not part of his inventory.

He angrily kicked the tiled stairs. If only he were a protag of one of those morning kids’ shows, where all he had to do to prevail was to simply believe in himself.

With forced determination he grabbed his bag off the ground and got up. As useless as all that advocacy was, basking in self pity, too, brought him no closer to his skyward goal. He’d give it another go, hoping for it to be an excellent curveball. And if Tyrogue wouldn’t evolve or learn at least one effective damage dealing move as a result, then he’d be out of shots for good.

They battled relentlessly, ignoring the starting rain, taking zero breaks or visits to the Pokémon Center, relying solely on Potions and Full Heals. Gold swapped out Tyrogue for Togepi from time to time, but otherwise allowed no variation. Fight after fight they polished their technique and now
most wild encounters ended within a couple of turns.

A Stantler sprung from the grass just south of the Acorn grove and, immediately, the brunette deployed Tyrogue’s Fake Out - Rock Smash - Protect offensive. It struck without fail, and minutes later the horned Pokémon was down, HP decimated. Togepi’s Yawn - Metronome combo was just as effective and, even with the volatile property of the attack, yielded promising results.

On another note, Gold realized, that while being undeniably efficient, this way of fighting completely sucked all the joy out of Pokémon battles. There was no time for experiments, no time for trial and error and definitely no time for fooling around. Clock ticking, he felt as if a sharpened sword hung right above his head by a fine string, threatening to snap any moment. He grew progressively more irritated at his Pokémon’s now frequenting misses and chastised them for their lack of resolve.

-Come on guys, put some effort in! Tyrogue, one more Rock Smash, Togepi - Metronome!

He commanded heatedly, thrusting his arm forward. They were just a pair of low level Growlithes, why the hell were they taking so long? Hit by a second Smokescreen, Togepi shot yet another Metronome right over the enemy’s head. The little egg-like creature stumbled and fell to it’s back, dazed.

-Togepi, who told you to stop, one more--

Something shattered inside the boy and he fell silent, unable to finish the sentence. The impact of his Pokémon’s attacks, muffled and distant, barely reached his ears. What was he doing? Was this really him? Forcing his loyal companions to battle, though they could barely stay on their feet and for what? To validate his own worth, to prove himself at their expense? He acutely remembered Silver utter these exact words that day after Ilex when he ordered his tired Pokémon to fight while coughing up blood himself. Gold criticized him for his actions, resenting his tone and his spite, and yet here he was, perfectly replaying the act. Another interaction then came to his mind - the bitter, painful argument that lead to this ridiculous dare.

His shoulders sagged as the blindly stared ahead. Not only was he an insensitive asshole, but also a raging hypocrite.

He understood now, the anger and impatience in the other’s gaze, the hatred was nothing but poorly masked desperation. The same desperation and helplessness he was feeling right this moment, the same emotion that robbed him of empathy twice in a row.

He looked at the Pokémon standing beside him, hurt, exhausted, but with unwavering devotion in their eyes. Heart tearing to pieces, he fell to his knees before them and pulled them into a fierce hug.

-I’m so sorry guys, I’m so sorry!

Tyrogue and Togepi readily huddled closer.

-How could I… you’re my dear friends! I would never do this to you again.

He held onto them like his life depended on it.

-Would you ever be able to forgive me?

A faint glow emanated from the little normal type, rapidly engulfing his rounded figure. The light lingered for a few seconds and died out, dissipating into a pearly haze. A delighted Togetic stood
in front of him, flapping his soft white wings.

-Oh my Arceus, Togepi— no, Togetic, you evolved, you did it!

Ecstatic, he drew his Pokémon into another huge hug as Tyrogue hopped around, no less excited for his teammate.

The boy beamed at both his Pokémon and put a hand on each of their heads.

-Thank you, guys. You really are the best!

Less than an hour remaining until the deadline, Gold faced the sliding doors of Ecruteak gym, party healed and ready. He’d decided he did not care if he beat the gym with one Pokémon or many. This was not the battle worth tormenting his partners to the point of exhaustion. Another fight, more dangerous, more challenging, more deadly, loomed in the impending future and would inescapably drive him and his Pokémon to their limits, but this was not the one.

He advanced through the gym, methodically taking out the Sage’s ghosts. Without the typing restriction, he felt a huge weight lifted off his shoulders. He’d allowed his Pokémon a couple of reckless stunts and tried out one of the new moves Togetic had learned. In the end he even let Tyrogue to steal the spotlight by finishing off the leader’s Gengar.

Insta-locked by the enemy’s Mean Look he proceeded to unleash his Hidden Power, steadily cutting chunks of Gengar’s health. Obtaining a semi-physical body and losing Levitate in it’s final evolution, sure did not play into its hands. Hanging on to his Focus Sash with one HP left, Tyrogue landed the final blow. Gym Leader Morty was out of usable Pokémon. For the second time today Gold saw his Pokémon immersed by blinding light. It illuminated the ghoulish interior of the gym, making it look like a cheaply decorated Halloween haunted house with extra steps.

Triumphant, the newly evolved Hitmontop punched the air and ran towards his trainer. The teen picked him up and spun in his arms, laughing, crying, cheering the same thing over and over.

-Yes! You did it! We did it!

The abandonment of his trainer, the sleepless night, the grueling training, the countless knockouts - Tyrogue persevered through all of it. In just a day they accomplished more than some struggle cover in months.

-You truly are fantastic.

Morty was standing a few steps away, surly expression affixed to his face. Not willing to partake in the childish celebration, he huffed and retrieved a small pin from his pocket.

-I don't think our potentials were so different. But you seem to have something more than that... So be it. This Badge is yours.

He stretched out his arm and dropped the Fog Badge into Gold’s hand.

-Thanks! You wouldn’t believe how hard we’ve been working for this.

The brunette smiled brightly and squeezed it in his fist. Ignoring the reply, the leader proceeded with his parting speech.
-Here is another thing... I want you to have this, too. It's Shadow Ball. It causes damage and may reduce Special Defense. Use it if it appeals to you.

Chapter End Notes

Damn, 16 chapters already.
I remember starting this story almost two years ago (probably even more if you count the perpetual daydreaming) and for the longest time it remained in scattered drafts and unordered docs on my drive. I hadn’t even planned on posting it anywhere, but, honestly, I’m oh so glad I did.
Everyone, thank you so much for sticking around so far, leaving kudos and writing lovely comments. I really truly appreciate your support and can’t imagine coming this far without you! <3
Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!
Hi everyone, I promise I'm not dead! I know this one took forever, but so it went (confession) 16 was the last pre-written chapter in this entire trainwreck. I've tried keeping to a schedule, but before I knew it was February already...

Anyways, thanks again for sticking with me and enjoy~

Along with the Ruins of Alph, Tin Tower and it’s burned counterpart were one of the few historical monuments still preserved in the region of Johto. Arguably the most curious of the three, the latter had drawn in tourists and archaeology enthusiasts for decades, both as a research target and an object of curiosity. Legends professed a powerful guardian to have perched there looking over the vast seas, but over a century ago the tower had gotten destroyed in a series of natural disasters - a bolt of lightning in the clear skies, a mysterious fire, followed by a sudden downpour.

Parts of the first and the second floor were restored and have been open to visitors until the last year when, for no explicable reason, the museum was declared hazardous and off limits to the general public. Some speculated the weak foundation was a result of money laundering during the restoration project, while others conjured up bizarre stories about the ancient Pokémon returning to its nest.

Gold could easily see the deteriorating structure from blocks away as he navigated the narrow streets. Despite being a fragment of its original height, it still towered over the city’s traditional style buildings, a silent beacon to his forthcoming destination.

The circumstances seemed even less favourable than from before he started his desperate challenge - he was running horribly late, he’d been cussed out by at least three people for his reckless traffic maneuvers, he’d gotten blisters from his perpetually wet shoes, and yet, despite it all he couldn’t feel more elated. Somehow, in the past hour his rotten luck did a 180, rewarding him with two evolutions and a shiny new gym badge. He was at the edge of his seat ever since the final battle, wanting to brag to Silver about his celebrated achievements.

He did not spot the redhead at the main entrance as he neared the Burned Tower, so he swung sideways to scour the structure’s east end. A wired fencing circled all around the foundation, eventually hitting the back wall. His rival was nowhere to be seen here either, so he turned back to check the other side, when a spiky head popped right from beneath his feet, causing him to yelp in surprise. Gengar cackled impishly and disappeared into the shadows yet again.

-You’re late.

Immediately embarrassed by the sound he just made, the teen spun his head, looking for the source of the voice. Silver was leaning on an old shedding maple, squinting at something on his screen. A long black raincoat was thrown over his head and shoulders, effectually masking his figure in the branches’ shade.

Gold nervously rubbed the back of his head and offered a lopsided smile.

-Yeah I know, I’m sorry.
He moved up and peered over the other’s shoulder. Before Silver could set the tablet down he caught a glimpse of a building plan, grainy camera feeds, and some sort of heat map all crammed into the limited area between the bezels.

-What are you-- oh, is that the inside of the tower?

The redhead slid the device into his bag and the flicked his fingers. Gengar materialized out of a wall and obediently floated toward his trainer. With a brief flash he was returned to his Poké Ball.

-Trivia window closed 19 minutes ago, we need to get going.

He pushed himself off the trunk and started moving, swiftly steering through the trees gaps and growing puddles. The shorter teen expeditiously scampered after him.

-Wait, what were you up to there? Fill me in at least a bit! I’m not asking for 10 page report, just a few words would do.


The brunette bit his lip. His rival seemed in no better mood than when they parted a few hours ago. Was he still mad about the campers and the pointless battle? Or was it about Gold and his unsought for feelings?

He chewed at the tender skin, scrupling. He’d already decided he wouldn’t bring it up unless the other outrightly questioned him, or if it somehow ended up coming between their cognate goal. Surely Silver had seen that as well, that’s why he’d never said anything - they were too far into this for it to matter. Then why…

Gold shook the raindrops from his hanging bangs. Even if Silver hated him now, they were a team, they had to see it through to the end. Ignoring a murky pool in front of him, he splashed ahead and spread his arms, crossing the other’s path.

-Look, think what you want about me, but please don't leave me hanging like this! Is this related to Team Rocket? We’re still partners, I deserve to know!

The other looked at him somewhat incredulously and pushed past, easily displacing the hovering arm with the weight of his body.

-I’m merely taking precautions, that is all. There are no guarantees of Team Rocket being involved with the Burned Tower.

-Even so, tell me.

The taller teen sighed, unsure what had gotten over the other boy all of a sudden. He’d never intended to keep this information a secret, now merely irritated by the other’s repeated tardiness.

-I’ve looked into the reasons behind the tower’s shutdown and a couple of things struck me as odd. First, how suddenly it happened, second how tight the physical security was, and third, how little data on the subject was available altogether. The latest logs were dated 10 months ago, when a professional team was hired to inspect the underground level, and after that - nothing. The company refused a second expedition and cancelled the contract soon after as well. Same happened with their successors. All submitted reports invariably noted some sort of an ‘overwhelming presence’ and ‘indescribable desire to flee’.

-Huh.
Gold had heard the rumors as well, but never paid them any heed. He would’ve readily discounted this story as an urban legend too, if it wasn’t the redhead narrating. Silver pulled a face as if mirroring the other’s thoughts.

-Yes, obscure, suspicious. But these people were specialists and would’ve barely benefited from misleading or forging information. Whatever was in there had to be sealed.

-Okay, what does it have to do with us, though?

-As is stands, Ecruteak is located on the crossroads between Goldenrod and Mahogany, meaning it would take a direct hit once the amplifier’s signal is routed through the tower. The mountains behind it would subsequently increase the gain. I wouldn’t have even bothered with at these senseless superstitions, if not for the Burned Tower’s immediate coordinates. That’s what made me thinking - a school of fish in a remote mountain lake could not truly be the end goal of Rocket’s experiments.

Once again Gold was reminded of how meager and insignificant all his day’s woes and victories were. He was struggling to level his Pokémon up, to beat a gym, to win a bet, to handle his emotions, while Silver was working to preclude Team Rocket’s - even theoretical - scheme to use some overpowered legendary.

-You just… damn.

-But as I’ve mentioned, no evidence to confirm or disprove any of this. The Rocket’s servers are deficient of any data regarding semi-burned structures and as for the tower itself, I tapped into the existing surveillance and had Gengar install a thermal camera along with some nullifiers just in case. The cameras were mostly static, understandably, with no lights around, and the heatmap readings all returned within an acceptable range for the given temperature and humidity conditions.

-And the nullifiers? Are they going to shut off the white noise? I thought you couldn’t, that’s why you had to reverse--

-They’re bombs, Gold.

-Oh.

-I’m not in favour of demolishing historic buildings, but if that saves us an additional major misguided Rocket disaster it’s a small price to pay.

-Then are you meaning to trap the Pokémon under the rubble?

-I doubt that would be possible. But if the Rockets do manage to influence them in any way and the thermal indicators pick up motion, once the noise passes a certain frequency, the detonations would emit shockwaves, negating the effects and setting the targets free. Whether they run or attack after, that I cannot predict.

-So much for preventing a disaster.

-Well, thing is, I doubt even the Rockets are fully aware of what they’re doing. As we've discussed earlier, the transmitter is only employing half of its chip’s brainpower, and any hasty modifications to increase that would most likely go untested at this stage. As far as I know, they're unable to even control the Gyarados they forced to evolve so far, little less anything more potent than that. So whether messing with lifeforms in the tower is an objective or an unfortunate side effect, I’ve moved to attempt to handle it regardless.
-By mining the tower.

Silver whirled and looked the other straight in the eye.

-Yes, by mining the tower. Do let me know what excellent suggestions you've got on your end.

- I don’t. It’s just…

-What? Come on, out with it.

-It’s first time I hear of it. I’m not saying your plan is bad, I just… I just wish you’d told me sooner, that you'd had a little more faith in me.

-I asked for you to be in the inn at noon yesterday, had I not?

The brunette faced down. That was indeed the agreement and he was the one who’d ultimately screwed it up and then dipped for half the day in pure cowardice. Feeling almost as guilty as in the moment he’d uttered those hateful words, he quietly murmured through pursed lips.

-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to--

He was blatantly cut off.

-Shut it and pick up the pace, will you? We have to cross Mt. Mortar’s pass before the storm hits.

The two boys reached the main road and caught a cab just in time for the hail to start falling - first in tiny specs and then gradually amassing to half-centimeter chunks. They slipped through the Route 42 gates before patrolmen could close them for outgoing traffic and sped past the growing chain of cars facing the opposite direction.

Silver specifically picked a rather sturdy-looking SUV out of the available options and proceeded to take the front seat, essentially acting as a navigator for the risky ride. The driver, incentivized by tripled compensation, did not drop a single complaint as they speedily passed a cluster of warning signs for rock slides, wild Pokémon and ice on the roads.

Gold sat in the back and tiredly observed the dreary scenery unfolding outside of the car’s comfortable cabin. The hail had turned to sleet and morphed the typically beautiful mountainous landscape into a dirty blur of gray and green. It was barely half past five in the evening, but to him it felt like the day should’ve ended at least three times over. He’d already been up for twelve or so hours and the endless physical and mental strain was taking an inevitable toll on his body. How did Silver manage to do this day after day and perform effectively at the same time? He did not know.

What he did know was that both of them could use a nice long vacation following this entire ordeal. Preferably somewhere peaceful and happy and warm, with gentle waters, sandy beaches and radiant sunsets. He slouched on the leather upholstering, half asleep, dreaming of their far-fetched, but well deserved getaway.

The door swung open, letting in a burst of cold air and icy droplets that instantly stung the bare skin of his uncovered calves. Silver was standing by the exit, looking exceptionally pissed.

-Out, now. We've missed our window, pass is closed.

-Umm… come again?
The brunette blinked his vision into focus, the inviting images of a tropical island still lingering behind his eyelids.

-You heard me. We're traversing the cave system to get to the other side.

Gold peered into the dark and dismal void on the other side of the insulated cabin and shivered involuntarily. Great, simply wonderful, that’s exactly how he’d wanted to spend the rest of the evening. And what made it even better was that most likely it’d been nobody’s but his own fault.

He sat up and tugged the grey slacks out of his bag, awkwardly fumbling with his right shoe along the way.

-Really? You couldn’t have done it on the road?

-I just--

-Two whole hours?

He bit back another apology, feeling like he’d been doing nothing but in the recent times and thus only fueling his rival’s annoyance. Frantically, he pulled the long pants right over his shorts and skipped out onto the slushy pavement.

-Voilà! See, did not take long.

-Fascinating. Now let’s go, this is not going to be a pleasant hike.

Silver’s prediction was gruesomely correct. The path they took after turning off the main road wound up the side of the mountain at almost a 45 degree angle. Steep and slippery, it was a nightmare to scale in footwear suited for dry terrain and the piercing winds along with the sleet made it harder than ever to concentrate on keeping traction. They trucked on for a good half hour and when Gold had already lost all hope of seeing the peak, they emerged at wide jagged entrance of Mt. Mortar.

To his chagrin the cavern was no more welcoming.

The ground was just as uneven and in place of the gust's pitched howling, the travelers were now met with a plethora of dripping, yowling and screeching noises, that still brought the chills, although for an completely different reason.

Gold reached for his belt, eager to summon Flaaffy and light up the cave’s murky interior, when a hand caught him by the elbow. He saw the other shake his head and hastily point upwards. The brunette squinted, trying to make out whatever he was supposed to look at and froze mid step.

Dozens and dozens of little beady eyes glimmered right above their heads in the entryway’s faint gleam, watching, waiting for the slightest trigger to jump on their prey.

Gold put a finger on his lips in accord and flicked his Pokégear open instead, setting it to the lowest brightness. He did not want to disturb the cave’s sinister inhabitants, but also had no desire to break his legs on some random rock he failed to identify either.

They steered deeper into the tunnel, forced to slide, climb, wade and even Surf through the occasional particularly flooded areas. It was exhausting in itself to trek the clammy surfaces, but the blisters that Gold had consciously neglected, were now getting impossible to ignore. He tried using the walls for support and shifting the weight off his heels, but that simply resulted in more
tripping and skidding than if he’d been walking as normal. He was most certainly bleeding by now, but even so he refused to call for rest, stubbornly reminding himself that that this was nothing, that he could take it, that Silver was probably in much greater pain and hadn’t fretted once, that he could not afford to slow them down any further.

Silver moved ahead, charting the terrain and regularly checking his GPS and Mt. Mortar’s preloaded map on the adjusted splitscreen. Due to the frequent rainfalls and storms, large sections of the cavern were cut off by mudslides or fully filled up by standing water. He made adjustments to the route with as much efficiency as he could on the fly, but according to his estimate it was getting more and more improbable for them to reach the midpoint by scheduled time. Furthermore, if the forecast he’d seen earlier was correct that meant the precipitation wasn’t going to subside anytime in the near future, keeping pass closed till the night of Friday and potentially extending to Saturday. This placed severe restrictions on the plan and threatened to be quite the upset. He had to secure an alternate route from Mahogany as soon as he’d get an opportunity. The current passage might’ve been an acceptable impromptu solution, but on the way from the takedown they’d have even lesser time for detours and, all things considered, would likely be in way worse shape.

Clasping the outer edge of a large boulder he threw himself over and easily landed on his feet. He lingered for a brief moment and then dutifully stretched his arm to the other side. With a sharp tug he pulled the shorter teen up and over the rock.

As his soles hit the ground, Gold staggered and hissed, wildly clinging to the side of a dampened wall. He smiled shakily in return to Silver’s stare and trudged to close the gap in between.

For the first time since the beginning of their lengthy expedition Silver had gotten to take a proper look at his companion. Stilted gait, quick breath and visible tension throughout the stooping frame - the boy was in considerable pain. Had the audacious trainer been silently enduring it the whole trip?

The redhead dropped his pace by a good margin and put added effort into inspecting the nooks and passageways of the far-fetching tunnel. He took note as he roamed and after backtracking a few corners and a decline, came to a full stop.

-We’re taking a break.

Off balance, the other almost ran into him at the end of the slope.

-Are you sure?

-I’m sure.

A flash colored the murky pass red and then swiftly blended into a warm yellow glow of open fire. Typhlosion shook and fluffed her fur and then lazily settled behind the two trainers on a protruding rock. Instinctively, Gold started leaning into the heat. He stopped short midway and threw his head up to the ceiling, searching for critters or other hazards. Silver waited for him to confirm the absence of the above and gestured toward the foldable emergency blanket he’d set on the sodden floor.

-Strong drafts in the area. Fortunately, we have ample time before the pressure stabilizes.

Gold visibly exhaled and sagged to the rustling sheet. Wincing, he plucked his shoes one after another and anxiously peeled the sticky socks. Judging by the state of his feet, he’d been suffering
for longer than just the past hour, blisters already popped and oozing. He dumped a whole bottle of antiseptic on the soles and stretched his legs out, letting the raw skin to ease off and dry.

Silver wearily watched the other’s chunky motions. Unfavorable weather and Rockets aside, sitting right there was his largest problem yet.

Ever since that nightmare he could not escape or shake off the feeling of the building, abiding concern for the teen. It was a weakness, a setback, a handicap, it distressed him deeply, but he would be lying if he’d said that he hadn’t come to grow fond of the other boy. His airy, yet invariably genuine character, his unabashed enthusiasm, forever disarming sincerity, his unprecedented kindness. These and so many other traits he used to rebuff, now seemed remarkable in their own way. They assailed, dazed, healed him. They ambushed and caught on to him when he’d last expect.

The first night and the next and just the other day when Gold got inadvertently subjected to a fraction of his abject past. The teen was horrified, he called him despicable, he fled the room - and that was fine, that was expected, that was alright. The thing that strikingly wasn’t was the fact that he returned. And not only that. With tears on his eyes he practically pled Silver for forgiveness, he said how scared he was, not of him, but because he thought he’d left, he stressed his gratitude for sharing and thanked him for the decision to stay.

It was bizarre and sick and twisted, it was backwards and wrong, but it wasn't this disparity that he feared the most. It was the simple thought, the fleeting notion that Gold might've developed a kindred feeling as well.

Silver clenched his jaw as he considered the fallout. He did not care for himself, he'd gone through it previously and would go through it again, this one last time, but if his selfish assumptions were even marginally correct, that would only mean that he'd been callously leading the other on this entire time.

He had to cease this, shut down, break it off. He had to drive a wall between them and cut all ties. He had to forestall and safeguard Gold from the crippling pain before it had become too late.

The brunette picked up a fresh pack of bandages and paused, suddenly looking very flustered. He darted his eyes, as if deciding on the next words and then stuttered.

-I um… Thank you.

Silver focused his gaze and rocked his head ever so lightly.

-Learn to gauge your body’s limits and speak up if you’re reaching them.

-Yeah, but I didn’t want to…

Gold faltered.

-I thought I’d be fine.

-Acting tough benefits no one if by the end of it you’re unable to walk.

To his surprise he heard a soft chuckle in response.

-What is it?
-Funny you mention it. Let’s say I’m just learning from the worst.

-I'm not taking credit for that.

-The best then.

Gold beamed warmly and Silver turned away.

This was going to be much harder than he'd thought.
They rested in the shelter of the cave accompanied by drafts’ low whisper and the faint cracking of Typhlosion’s fire. The distant howling sounded a lot less imposing with the cavern illuminated and the little cavity they’d used as a temporary outpost felt almost cozy.

Silver’s attention was devoted to the detailed terrain map he’d cached ahead of time. He audited the layout with heed, placing markers on the tentatively accessible routes and flags on the ones that failed to meet his criteria. Belatedly, he heard the other talking to him from over to his left.

-Congrats on Haunter’s evolution by the way. He sure spooked me back then!

He briefly looked over.

-He was just getting bored. You brought it upon yourself.

The other laughed a little.

-Hehe, I guess. Who'd you trade?

-One of the sages at the gym.

-You know we could’ve done it whenever, right?

-There’d be no mutual gain in that.

-What are you talking about, Silver? I wouldn’t mind at all, I’d do it cus we’re friends and not for some sort of gain.

-As long as it happened before the takedown it didn’t matter, when he’d evolved. I’ve already had his moveset finalized.

-I see.

The brunette lingered but did not persist.

-I bet you’ve dominated the gym battles then. Wanna hear about mine?

-I have a pretty good idea.

-You do?

-Not too hard to guess. You’ve made an attempt - maybe a few, knowing your unbridled optimism -
failed, then used the rest of your party to pick up the slack.

Gold’s posture drooped.

-Well yes, in short...

-Your only way to prevail with the current setting was if Tyrogue had been IV and EV trained prior to your acquiring him, possessed a nature and combination of stats to learn an appropriate Hidden Power, or was bred to know Pursuit. Given that he was abandoned in a daycare, it was safe to assume that neither or few of those were the case.

The other teen stuck out his tongue.

-You’re such a killjoy, Silver, I was gonna focus on the positives. And if you knew all that, why did you even make me do it?

-You were merely presented a condition, you chose to challenge it yourself. As for me - I was curious how far you'd push it.

-I thought you were just angry with me.

-My take on the matter is of no consequence. So, get any results?

-I did.

Gold plucked Togetic's Poké Ball off his belt and thoughtfully rotated it in his palm.

-It helped me to analyze my approaches from another standpoint and also made me understand something very important. It wouldn’t happened under other circumstances. I’m really grateful for that.

He grinned.

-Also two of my Pokémon evolved!

-Well, good for you.

The redhead was about to return to his map, but the other looked like he had more to say.

-Silver, I'm not going to impede on your training methods or criticize your technique anymore. I understand you’ve got your motives for that. It’s true that your Pokémon are capable in both offence and defense, they're resilient and will do exactly as you say. Undoubtedly, they’re powerful… assets in this fight against Team Rocket. But they’re also living beings - they breathe and feel just like you do. They see how hard you’re working, it’s not like they don’t understand. They will support you regardless. So please Silver, could you try being just a little bit kinder to them?

Silver eyed him warily. So that was his main takeaway? Very Gold-like indeed, but he had little time for any of this, and even less for a sentimental lecture on empathy.

In the meantime the sitting boy pressed on.

-I know you can, you’ve been kind to me countless times. Even now you’re…

He shortly lowered his gaze, but then looked up once more.
-And then your Golbat - I’m sure you’re aware of the catalyst for his third form. Just try it, alright? I mean what's the worst that could happen?

Silver pressed the tablet’s thin bezel tight between his fingers. He was well informed of his party’s triggers for evolution and he did not request for advisory reminders. He’d been acting the way he did for a reason, Golbat did not have to reach his final form, he was being sensible, not kind, and Gold had just unwittingly entered some dangerous waters.

-This is none of your business.

-I was just trying to think of what’s best for ev--

-Then limit it to yourself and do leave me out.

-I… okay.

The brunette readily backed off and reattached his Poké Ball. He’d hoped that his rival would be more open to hearing him out and possibly reflecting on his methods, but that was not the case. Pokémon and discipline have always been a touchy subject between them, and despite Gold’s relinquishment on some of the aspects, the redhead remained unyielding in reaching a consensus.

Their relationship had already been on rocks ever since the last clash and Gold had been making conscious effort to avoid another one. He did want to emphasize his respect for the other’s feelings and privacy, but even then any conversation had the potential to shift from a casual chat to treading an unmarked minefield.

And yet he wanted to ask Silver so so many things. He was curious, of course, about how the other learned to hack or got into homebrew explosives, or how the heck Sneasel came to be the level that he was, but it didn’t have to about any of that at all. He yearned to learn anything about the other boy - his favorite shows and movies, a book he’d reread more times that he could count, a band he listened to while coding or working out. Whether he was into any winter sports, ever seen a legendary Pokémon, had a radio station of choice, or if he’d preferred Pinap Berries on pizza. Anything - serious, silly, random, exciting, trivial - all the tiny bits that made up Silver.

He rotated his head just enough to be able to see the other boy from the corner of his vision. His partner’s face bore extreme concentration. Gold saw him frown, pan out of the current view, rotate the screen 90 degrees with a quick swipe and then zoom back in. Silver entered two long decimals into the search bar, lifted an eyebrow just slightly and punched in two more.

Gold followed his every little nod and gesture, every tiny expression. He treasured and cherished all of them. As much he cherished the memories they’d made, are making and would make together, as much as he cherished the extraordinary person sitting right there next to him. No, he was not perfect or flawless like he’d expressed once, he had a haul of his issues and quirks, but Gold knew for certain - it couldn’t be anyone else.

Patiently, he waited for a lull in the other's activity and called out.

-Hey Silver, what are you gonna do when all this is over?

-Hm?

-You know, when we’ve beaten Team Rocket, found Giovanni.

The redhead paused moving his fingers for a moment and then lowered them on the tempered glass again.
-I prefer to focus on the tasks at hand.

-Mmm, I thought you might say that, but I won’t believe you don’t have a thing in mind. Long term or short term - either. Like, are you gonna continue collecting the badges to challenge the league later? Or maybe become a full time hacker or a scientist?

He nodded with amity.

-You definitely have the skills and wits for that. There’s always Pokémon research too, or dunno, becoming a professional ninja.

Silver expressed no inclination to indulge his musings whatsoever. Gold sighed.

-No? No plans at all?

-No.

-I see. Then how about I pitch an idea? I’ve been thinking about it earlier and… anyways, how do you feel about taking a few days - or weeks - off and going on a short vacation, mm? I’ve heard lots of good things about Cianwood City. It’s warm all year round, maybe not warm enough to swim right now, but still sunny and pleasant. Or if beaches aren’t quite your thing, we can do a camping trip to the mountains - a nice one, not like this. We’ll sit around a fire pit and share scary stories and grill delicious s’mores.

He smiled, imagining the scenario.

-So, what do you think?

-Don’t you have anyone else to do all that with?

Gold cocked his head, thinking but for a second.

-I suppose. But I want to do it with you!

Silver’s voice dropped an octave.

-I decline.

-Aw come on, just imagine how nice it’ll be to get away from tasks and responsibilities for a bit. There’s also a monthly fair in Olivine that we can check out later.

He winked and adjoined.

-If you’re not tired of me by then, of course.

-No, Gold.

-Why not?

He was met with a stone cold stare.

-You are getting ahead of yourself. There is no extension to this, no ‘later’. There will be no vacations, no camping trips and no fairs. Do not forget the terms of our agreement - we’re not some adventure buddies, we’re allies on a strictly temporary basis.

A dark glimmer passed behind the ashen eyes.
-So if you’ve come here seeking friendship or anything else, you’ve come to the wrong place. After, as you’ve put it, ‘all this is over’ you’re never going to see me again.

He ran. He ran, skidding on the wet dirt and tripping over his tangled laces. He did not bother tie them after he’d pulled on his half damp sneakers and hadn’t done a thing to handle the godawful visibility. With tears gushing down his face, he knew he’d be essentially blind either way.

He didn’t care when his pants snagged on a jut, tearing both fabric and skin, he did not care when his blood mixed with mud as his palms met the jagged rocks.

That pain was insurmountable to the bloody gaping chasm that was now slashing, shearing, shredding, splitting his heart in two.

He’d been telling himself over and over that it was dumb start getting his hopes up, that there was nothing to expect, that there was no chance at all, that he must not merge reality and personal cravings, that he must not confuse the nature of their relationship, and yet...

The only one he could see in front of him, the only person he truly desired was Silver.

The other’s unsparing expression, the piercing words that hung in the cave’s eerie echoes had burned themselves into his inflamed and feverish consciousness. Without even hearing a proper confession, Silver had not only downright rejected him, but also refused the very idea of friendship. And it hurt.

It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

It hurt more than when he slipped on another cant, heavily landing on his tailbone. It hurt more that the sharp pain shooting up his spine and paralyzing his muscles. He wondered if it would hurt more than a pair of broken ribs, and how gladly he would’ve traded for it, regardless of the answer.

A fierce gust threw him sideways and before he’d realized it he was outside. The chilling rain instantly soaked his torn up clothes as he stumbled down the hill, escaping the suffocating, claustrophobic cave.

He sprinted past the long slabs of igneous rock, sparse trees and dense bushes until his feet sunk in the shelf of a mountain river. He moved alongside it first right then left, but only saw more water, more mountain or a steep waterfall - the stream happened to perfectly encircle the spit of land at the cavern’s outlet. There was nowhere else to go.

Entire body aching, head spinning and eyes burning from the ceaseless sobbing, he stopped at the thrashing course. Right where he was standing he dropped to his knees.

He screamed.

At the top of his lungs, he yelled, trying to expel the anguish, the frustration, the suffering. Until he could yell no longer, until his throat gave out, leaving nothing but a rasping cough.

He brought his legs up to his chin and tightly wrapped his arms around them. The rapid currents walloped and splashed, drenching his bruised ankles and numbed his already frozen feet. Feeling absolutely beat down and spent, he buried his face deep between his knees and wept.
Silver detested himself. He detested himself more than he ever did in his entire life, and that was one tall order. Tensely, he paced around the dimmed tunnel, trying to convince himself of his indisputable success. The other trainer had now been permanently freed of his delusions, there were no false hopes and no more fake expectations. This was the goal, this was exactly what he’d wanted.

Then why did he feel like absolute filth? Why did it feel like he’d purposefully ripped out a part of himself as soon as he’d outed that last sentence? And most importantly, why did the other boy give him a look of such abounding pain and betrayal right before he tore down the chute?

Typhlosion huffed and spewed a burst of hot fire in pronounced displeasure. Silver quietly walked over and stooped to be with her at eye level.

-You too then?

He stared at her profile but instead of the angered red orbs he saw Gold's face. Those wide saffron eyes and that woeful and tormented expression.

He covered his own face with an arm. So he’d been too late after all.

He’d only noticed another’s presence when the cold droplets stopped pelting his scalp. Silver stood above him, blocking the sleet off with his large umbrella. His face was covered by a shadow, making the features undecipherable.

-Are you crying?

Gold feebly raised his head as a thought sailed through his mind.

“Wasn't this much obvious?”

He strained his injured vocals, trying to speak, but the words came out as a shallow rasp.

-If… if you've come here to mock me, save it for another time. I couldn’t possibly feel any worse right now.

-Why?

“Why? Really, why? You say you hate me, that you never want to see me again, all knowing how I feel about you, and then you ask me why?”

-I...

-Why do you care this much?

Gold let out a faltering breath.

-How could I not?

The redhead dithered and extended his umbrella further.

-You’ll get hypothermia, we should go back.

“As if you’d actually care.”
Just let me be for a while. I promise, I’ll return once I’ve..

He felt the nylon shift again as the other knelt beside him on the soppy river bank. Morosely, he looked at the object of his affection sitting so close and way beyond his reach at the same time.

-Now you’ll get soaked as well. Why won’t you leave me alone?

No response.

-Do you expect I’m gonna harm myself if you do?

-Looks like you already did.

-That… was not on purpose.

He surveyed his messed up knees with despondence.

-Say Silver, if I went off into that freezing river right now, would you come rescue me?

-Yes.

-Cus I’m also an ‘asset’, cus you invested time in me? We aren’t friends, we’re temporary associates, partners with an expiration date. You’ve made that clear.

-I’d rescue you, but not because of that.

-Then why?

-I cannot stand to see you hurt.

“Well wasn't that a merry contradiction? If you weren’t trying to do exactly that, then what were you?”

Silver bowed his head.

-And I'm not talking about the river.

-What are you talking about then?

-Tell me Gold, all these terms - associates, partners, friends. Does it really matter, isn't it all just semantics?

Gold soughed.

“Changing the subject now?”

-Perhaps, but it represents how you feel. “And you don't feel anything towards me.”

-How I feel doesn't matter either.

-Then what does? “But that matters to me, and you feel absolutely nothing towards me.”

-Team Rocket.

“Of course, Team Rocket.”

-Then you have nothing to worry about, the mission to take down Team Rocket won't be affected.
-How are you so sure?

-It know it won’t. The way I feel hasn't changed and wouldn’t change no matter what you say. I promised to help and I will.

-Gold, you…

-It’s okay, you don't have to say anything. I get it.

The brunette fought back another onset of tears.

-I’ve… I’ve learned my lesson, I won’t get ahead of myself again, I’ll keep within my boundaries. And you're right, it's cold, we should head back.

He attempted to stand as his knees buckled instantly and he crashed back onto the flooded shelf.

-Oww--

-Grab on.

An open palm appeared in front of his face. Hesitantly, he clutched onto the silent aid. Silver pulled upward and left his arm outstretched.

-We don’t have to travel any further today. I’ve found a safe place, we can treat your wounds and sleep. Let’s go, Typhlosion is already there.

Gold nodded and reeled up the precarious icy path, leaning on the other’s shoulder. He smiled bitterly as he held onto the steady support.

His heart was in shambles and his dreams were all but shattered, and still, for whatever wicked reason Silver continued to treat him with benevolence. It defied all logic and confused him to no end, and, above all, compared to his damaged hands and feet, hurt a million times more.

Chapter End Notes

and one more for this chapter: link
He woke up and blinked a couple of times, focusing his vision. He had no idea for how long he’d been sleeping, as it was impossible to tell night from day in the perpetual darkness of the cave. He also did not feel a single bit better from when he’d started; for all he knew it could’ve been a handful of minutes or multiple hours.

Reflexively, he lifted his arm to check the Pokégear clock, but the trusty device was not attached to his wrist. He did recall taking it off earlier to allow Silver treat his wounds. It was excessive, honestly, in his opinion, but the redhead insisted on taking over after he’d carelessly splashed his palms with alcohol and slapped on a couple of band-aids. With a stark look of disapproval Silver removed the sticky patches and re-assessed the situation. He went in and cleaned the messy lacerations with utmost care, applied antibiotic ointment to the especially ragged ones and covered them up with gauze. He then commanded the other to remove his torn up slacks and similarly tended to his legs.

Gold staunchly remembered the gentle fingers prodding, wiping his bleeding cuts, the encouraging whispers as Silver went over the gashes on his calf and the warm, tender touches as he applied the adhesive wound closures.

The brunette squeezed his eyes shut again, trying to contain the fresh tears. He had already sworn to himself multiple times - no more wishful thinking. The was nothing warm or gentle or tender about the other teen. Silver hated him. Silver wanted nothing to do with him and was merely securing his health for their upcoming mission. That’s why they were taking this premature break, that’s why a water bottle and a pack of painkillers sat by him on the neighboring rock, and that’s why he was tucked in an emergency blanket he did not remember wrapping himself into.

He bit the inside of his cheek and stared upwards in a desperate attempt to suppress his quivering lip. He did not understand. If Silver despised him, then why ensure his comfort, why go the extra mile? He’d rather his rival just chucked a box of bandages at his mug and called it a day than any of this.

Hoping to somehow distract himself, he surveyed the ceiling, the walls and finally their provisional camp. Both their bags were neatly stored on a dry plateau, Typhlosion snored evenly in the back, and the aforementioned redhead was perched about a meter away, reading. Gold rubbed his face and cleared his irritated throat.

-What time is it?

-4:23.

-AM?

-AM. I was going to wake you in 7 minutes, but seems like that’s unnecessary.

Without looking up Silver gestured at Gold’s left.

-Have breakfast and prepare to set out. We’re getting an early start.

The boy shifted his gaze to his side. Next to the water and pills was a brown plastic package with
Gold reluctantly tugged at the thick wrapper. Inside were more brown packets bearing a variety of labels. There were crackers, an energy bar, diced Aspear Berries, pasta with meatballs, a few condiments and utensils along with a miniature chemical heater. He squinted, struggling to read the scaled down instructions in the lightless chamber. Silver noticed the slight vacillation.

-Just add water to the green packet and place it under the meal in the box. It should be ready in 6 minutes or so.

-Ah, okay.

He did as instructed and waited for it to heat while chewing on a salted cracker. He’d accepted that granola bars were his way to go until they’d reached some sort of civilization, so having a warm meal in this frigid cave was rather unexpected, but very welcome. He studied the other packs in the interim and caught sight of the repeating logo stamped on the exteriors - a wing spread Skarmory and prominent lettering printing ‘Department of Defense’.

-Aren’t these military issue? Where did you get them?

-Yes, they are, but one can purchase them online nowadays. Beats packing a portable stove.

Gold took out the preheated envelope and ripped the tab off. He nodded.

-It sure does.

The savory smell of spices and marinara sauce immediately enveloped his senses. He inhaled and drowned a whole spoonful in his mouth. The portion was evidently smaller in volume, but despite the other’s assessment, the precooked meal was not bland in the least and could’ve easily rivaled the dinner they had that second night at the inn.

He slowed down, replaying the memory. That was before his major commitment, before Silver had acceded to their alliance and before Gold had acknowledged his hopeless crush. Firmly, he clutched the plastic spoon in his fist and breathed through his teeth.

-Of course it had to be meatballs…

-Huh? It’s random. Too bad it’s not to your taste.

-No, it’s just--

-I got Pidgey pesto. There are 24 menu options each year.

-No, no, ignore me. It’s great, Silver. Thank you.

He forced both the patty and brewing tears down his throat. Did he regret it after all? If he hadn’t contended to join his rival, if he hadn’t offered his Pokémon, if he hadn’t sworn to be Silver’s support, he wouldn’t have to have gone through any of this, wouldn’t have had his heart broken and wouldn’t have his soul crushed. He’d instead be probably out and about rambling at the National Park, poking at Brandon and Sam and redeeming his winnings on the buffest caught Pinsir yet.

He noticed large salty droplets land on the pasta, the MRE’s insulated packet and his trembling
hands. He couldn’t keep his emotions together in the end. He’d said that it was okay, that he had learned his lesson, but how, how could he carry on, how could he uphold the partnership and pretend that nothing ever happened between them, when every little thing made the ugly, harrowing wound in his chest open anew?

Now entire body shaking, he bore his eyes into the mushy blend of proteins and carbs. He repressed the urge to flee from the pain, to run and hide. If he’d impulsively rushed into the raging blizzard again, he realized, it would gain him nothing - he’d still feel as depressed as before so it would just end up being complete waste of Silver’s curative efforts.

Did he truly regret his personal choices, though? Through the heartache Gold conceded - he had not regretted a thing. It was unavoidable. He knew that regardless of time, circumstance and outcome he would’ve fallen for Silver again and again.

Trampled and dejected, the tender emotion within him had not extinguished by a iota, it kept burning deep inside, overwhelming, ardent and fierce. Regardless of the mutuality, Silver was the person he cared for the most, his dear and precious friend, his one and only special someone. He’d given his word to accompany the other on this mission, and even if that meant crying himself to sleep every night, he would not dare leave his partner’s side and would not allow his feelings hinder the progress towards their objective.

Stubbornly, he forced the remaining meatballs down his throat and drained the half finished water bottle. He then stumbled to his belongings, stuffed the accumulated trash into his bag and strapped the Pokégear to his wrist.

-I’m done, we can go whenever.

The redhead briefly looked over. He did not comment on the obvious red blotches on Gold’s face or the puffy eyes and simply got up.

-Let’s go then.

The rain let up for a while as they were passing the open area between the two connecting caverns, opening a break among the stormy clouds. The stolid mountains surrounding them on every side stood silent and black. Yet the distant ridges, capped with snow, the winding river and the crashing waterfalls all glimmered wondrously in the silvery moonlight. And it was absolutely breathtaking.

Gold paused on a rocky ledge, taking in the cold brilliance. He had been yearning for a moment like this ever since the sunset he’d seen from Goldenrod mall’s outlook. He wanted to share this connection, this experience with Silver, the picture perfect snapshot from a travel magazine brought to life. A sharp pang stung his chest as the chilling wind pierced his hollow shell. In a cruel twist of fate, time after time, the more he’d wished for something, the less likely it was to happen.

The fates, or more precisely Silver, did not take pity on him for the rest of Mt. Mortar either. Notoriously flooded through the first part, it turned into a grueling hike up an edge of a sheer, almost perpendicular cliff. The redhead referred to the path as a ‘convenient shortcut’, but to Gold it clearly sounded more like ‘readily available suicide’. He’d never considered himself acrophobic but the vivid realization that the thin line between life or death was defined by a fickle rock or a tiny slip kept him on his toes. All blisters and sores were pushed to the margins, entire body focused on the footing and the tight grip on the wall. There were a couple of close calls that he’d preferred to never think about ever again and if it weren't for Gengar's last second shadow support, he would've certainly ended up a as mangled mess on the cavern's floor.
They trudged ahead rigorously and some inordinate amount of time later finally emerged at a wider and much more stable platform. The light from the cave’s imminent exit was flickering just a sweep away. Gold exhaled a lungful and carelessly dropped to the floor.

-That’s it, I’m calling it. You can kick my ass later, but I’m taking a break.

Silver quietly sat down a few steps away. Usually stoic, he looked rather pale and shook up as well.

-No, I hear you, it was a rough pass.

-Totally an understatement. I almost died there, like, twelve times! Holy balls, you do this thing often?

-Almost dying?

The brunette burst out laughing. He'd been aware that there was positively nothing humorous about this, but with his nerves in disarray and knees still shaking he was nearing an almost hysterical state.

-It’s not funny, I swear. I just--

-Well, I'm sure it's not difficult to infer from my... history that I've quite commonly been on both ends.

Gold's laughter died out in an instant.

-Hiking. I was talking about hiking. I'm sorry, Silver.

He covered his kneecaps with his palms.

-I know you've been through so much... I did not mean it like that at all.

-You don't have to apologize, Gold, I know you didn't. None of this is your fault.

Dolefully, Silver gazed at the other teen, meaning to say a lot more. That he was the one supposed to be apologizing, that it was his fault that Gold got pulled into his selfish conflict with Team Rocket, his mistake for fostering this fragile relationship he knew was never going to last, and his failure for not realizing it sooner.

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, the words never making it past his lips.

Out of the hellish cave and exposed to the daylight’s clouded rays, Gold finally got his chance to check on the Town Map. The GPS was entirely out of whack on the lower levels and, as for their perilous climb, he had other things to obsess about than their tentative travel distance. He’d hoped that they had at least gotten in reasonable range of Mahogany, but to his utter astonishment the little marker moved two whole quadrants right and one up, indicating that they already were way into Route 43. Miraculously, Silver’s precarious shortcut allowed them to bypass a huge chunk Route 42’s mountainous terrain, two waterfalls and both highland city’s west and north toll booths. No question about it, it was impressive, but thinking back at the narrow stretch, he doubted he’d ever volunteer to do it again.

Silver wasted no time and continued to scale the rocky hill even outside of the murky underground.
Advancing a couple of large weathered boulders, he made a decisive stop on a plateaud slab that dangerously hung over the canyon below. He sat cross legged and procured four quarter sized boxes from his bag to set aside. He then extracted his tablet as well and laid it flat on the closing flap’s coarse fabric.

He waited for Gold to catch up and called out.

-You have a flying type now, correct?

The other boy warily peeked over the edge of the rock and scampered over. The scenery beyond the drop was certainly eye catching - a mountain river zigzagging through the distant valley, the rolling hills and large body of water glistening far north. The cliff separating them, though, gave his the same visions of painful death as Mt. Mortar's gorge. Gloomily, he wondered if it was going to give him lingering PTSD.

-Yup.

-Then it will be of use.

The tablet picked up a signal and promptly started loading the terrain map overlay. Out of the dozen rendered pins Silver picked the four in the middle and drew a circle around them. He then pointed to the lowlands extending beneath them.

-All of these are radio towers. You can see two of them right there in the basin and there’s two more on the other side.

The other stared ahead, trying to make out anything resembling the such. There were some huts further out by the lake - two stories high at best - and a couple of suspiciously tall trees in between, but other than that there was nothing worth writing home about. Unless…

-By ‘towers’ you mean those pines, right?

-Correct. It's quite common for them to be disguised to blend with the environment.

-They aren’t doing a very good job, are they?

Silver nodded in accord. He'd always thought that the phony contraptions were rather contrived and honestly quite an eyesore.

-No, they’re aren't, but it's difficult to mask something inherently taller than its surroundings.

-Would they look like bloated palm trees if we were in the tropics? Or like, mutated cacti in the desert?

-Most likely.

Gold grimaced, imagining the ridiculous picture, and Silver pushed two of the plastic boxes into his hands before they’d get any more sidetracked.

-I need to confirm something at the Lake of Rage, but for that we’d have to curb the radio signal without drawing Team Rocket’s attention. I’ll have Gengar show Togetic how and where to attach these on the closest tower and then they could split up and take care of the rest.

The brunette twirled a unit in his hand. Long wiring sticking out on both ends, it felt way too light and tiny to be able to house any kind of explosive, but then again, he was no expert on the subject.
Foreseeing it Silver intercepted the question.

-They’re radio jammers.

He propped an elbow on his knee.

-Also did you assume that my sole solution to a problem is blowing it up?

-No!

He eyed him, unbelieving, and Gold promptly capitulated.

-Okay, maybe a little bit.

Silver rocked his head.

-If it were that simple. But destroying infrastructure we’re also heavily reliant upon manifests poor choices on multiple levels.

For the second time he released his ghost type and passed him the jamming devices.

-At this scale the devices could only cause a temporary interference, but that would be enough for the task.

Gold mirrored the actions with Togetic. Finally, his newly evolved partner was getting his very own assignment. Nodding at the winged biped, he ushered him to join his mission buddy up front and turned his eyes back to Silver.

-Sure. So, what’s the task?

The other wrapped up Gengar’s finishing instructions and sent him and Togetic off. As the boys watched the odd pair float away into the distance, Silver shared a simplified map to both of their Pokégears and set a timed countdown at the top of the screens. He then packed the tablet away and got to his feet.

-I’m going to steal Team Rocket’s prized experiment subject from right under their noses.

Rather than descending straight to the valley floor the teens took the long, roundabout route overreaching the farther side of the mountain lake. According to Silver’s rationale there was a lower chance of running into a patrolling Rocket member and a much simpler way of disposing of one if they did.

Knowing the implication, Gold tried his best to not dwell on it.

He kept tabs on the indicators upon the other’s request and pinged him every time there was an update. He wasn’t quite sure why he’d been entrusted with the task as the redhead had always been one to monitor all incoming data himself, but of course, he was more than happy to help.

The first two locations lit up in quick succession, placing a miniature ‘online’ icon above, while the others remained static for almost the entirety of their downhill hike. The third one activated as they entered the marshy wetlands and Silver made a quick stop to perform an injection of his controversial painkiller.

Gold, meanwhile, grew progressively more antsy. He’d been assured by his companion of the
relatively low risk factor of this operation, but the fact that Silver had just resorted to drugs and sight right in front of him brought some very severe doubts.

The lake appeared completely still from the top of the hill and moderately calm on the approach, but the closer they got the less that assertion held its value. If not for the literal term in the title, he could’ve easily taken the turbulent body of water for an ocean or sea at the peak of a storm.

Rampant, the gusts picked up huge crests of foam and freezing water, creating chaotic whirlpools on the vacillating surface. The battered fishing boats swung back and forth, hitting the siding boards with heavy thunks, grinding the already disintegrating paint. No wild Pokémon, flying or water, were even remotely in sight. A natural phenomenon girdled by a mountain range - Lake of Rage truly lived up to its name.

The fourth and final marker flushed black and Silver straightened up. The morning weariness was all but gone from his features, eyes lit with an unfamiliar flare.

-It is time. Recite your instructions.

-Track the map and countdown, survey the area for hostiles and shut them down upon approach.

-Good. Once I activate the jammers, I’ll have 15 minutes total until the voltage fries them to cinders. Keep Feraligatr on standby and send him to fetch me in case of premature hardware failure, if I do not return in the allotted time or any other emergencies. Got it?

-Yeah… but are you sure you don’t want us to come with? His type is the most suited for this.

-No. While I’m at the lake I’d have no means of auditing the responder status or any reliable communication. With Gengar and Togetic gone, you two are our best fallback option.

Gold wavered, but nodded curtly.

-Okay, I’ll have him ready just in case.

The redhead handed his messenger bag over and flipped his Pokégear open. He slid his finger to the activation screen, when the shorter boy’s palm hovered over his wrist.

-I, um…

Never making contact, Gold set his hand down and squeezed the black satchel between his arms instead.

-Try to be careful out there, Silver. All right?

-I shall.

He lowered his pointer and clicked.

-As long as it’s an option.

Cloaked by some invisible force, the atmosphere in the basin tangibly changed. The whirlpools stalled as a violent ripple ran through the loch. It felt as if even the winds stopped their motion, waiting, biding their time until the main act came on stage. Gold held his breath in tense anticipation when loud, blaring roars resounded through the stretching plains. He saw a fin, then another surface over the dark waters, followed by another blood curdling cry. Large, snake like bodies twisted and splashed, augmenting the rush and turning the currents into one giant vortex. In
it’s very center, topping them all, towered a colossal red figure.

Silver tore off before Gold could even open his mouth and sprinted straight into the water, simultaneously releasing Sneasel and Golbat from their confines.

-Go, Ice Beam!

The feline sprung ahead and covered the rising tides with a thick layer of ice. His trainer leapt, grabbing Golbat by his feet, and sled on the ridged glaze. They veered among the waves, dodging the upsurges and brutal tail swings alike. For every Ice Beam Sneasel fired a frozen splinter at the writhing horde and Golbat hurled a toxic Sludge Bomb.

The Gyarados sensed the sudden intrusion and charged in blind fury. The swells grew into plunging breakers under their movement’s momentum. Silver sharply changed his course. He surfed one crumbling slab after another, luring, driving the enraged creatures further into the lake. Far enough from the center, he threw an arm up and shot a hot yellow flare.

-Sneasel now, single him out!

Never stopping, the Pokémon lunged off a crest and launched a long streak of jagged crystals in front of the Red Gyarados. It thundered, cut off from the swarm and thrashed aiming to break the ice.

-Encircle, then Blizzard!

Sneasel skid a large radius around the beast as the temperature dropped twenty degrees below zero. A white crust formed on the coiling body, freezing and trapping the tail and lateral fins. The Pokémon flailed, crushing the narrowing ice ring and sending sharp fragments into the air. Silver ducked and then kicked off the cracking platform. A shard flew a millimeter away from his head and another narrowly missed his shin.

-Agility, then Blizzard again, bind his movement!

He waited for the strikes to land, floating on Golbat’s limited pull and calculating the right moment. It was only a matter of time for the rest of the Gyarados to return from their distraction.

The petite ice type unleashed his third attack and the teen swayed and released his hold.

He dropped right behind the flaming serpent’s nape and firmly grabbed the upright fin. Gyarados clamored and slugged sideways, viciously trying to shake off the offender.

The sheet of ice below them split with a raucous grate and the wrestling opponents both sunk deep under the freezing water.

This was one of the most reckless things he’d seen a person do on their own volition and just observing the scene made Gold’s hair stand on its end. He watched his partner and his Pokémon speed into the fray, expertly maneuvering the crashing waves and lethal lunges. He saw Silver spiral and then zoom out of sight and bright flash light up the sullen skies.

He’d almost forgotten about his immediate task when the Pokégear buzzed, announcing the five minute break point. He moved to check on the jammers when he heard rumbling laughter from his
behind.

Vigilant, he spun around, one hand scrunched in a fist and another ready on the Poké Ball belt. A stocky man in his 50s stood a few steps behind him. He was wearing tall fishing boots, vest and a long luminescent raincoat that markedly tented over his bulging beer gut.

-Holy Arceus, you are timing him?

The teen eyed him up with distrust, switching his stance only slightly.

-Who are you?

The middle aged fisherman glanced at the digits glowing on the Pokégear and busted another hearty laugh.

-So you are! Remarkable!

He walked closer and struck his arm out in a greeting.

-I’m Wesley, the owner of this resort.

-Resort?

-Well of course, the Lake of Rage Resort. I keep my residence away from the camping facilities and the tourists, but since the uproar on the lake even the ones that made reservations for the weekend cancelled them despite the no refund policy. Even the die hard enthusiasts passed on the rare challenge, so I was surprised to see the two of you suddenly show up at this shore.

Gold sized him up one last time, evaluating his words and then relaxed, pulling on a friendly smile.

-Sorry, did not mean to be rude, guess I didn’t expect to see anyone here either. Nice meeting you, I’m Gold.

-No worries at all, I do appreciate good company.

The duo shook hands and turned back to the spectacle unraveling on the raving lake’s surface. They watched Silver leap and ride the Red Gyarados into the water and then rebound seconds later. Momentarily, he lost his grasp and got thrown high into the air. He clung onto Golbat’s outstretched legs and kicked off again, this time landing closer to the water dragon’s head.

The brunette held back a gasp and Wesley exhaled something between a huff and a whistle.

-For all my life I’ve argued fishing was a sport, but, my friend, your buddy takes it to another level!

He procured a pair of tiny binoculars from one of his numerous pockets and exclaimed in genuine, almost childlike excitement.

-Oh, how wonderful it is to be young! Isn't he just something else?

Gold glimpsed at the map one more time and then shifted his gaze towards the fierce aquatic strife and Silver’s dangerous acrobatics. He clutched the rigid shoulder strap with both hands until it dug painfully into his bandaged palms.

-Yes. Yes, he is.
related arts: one and two
Sneasel kept firing Ice Beam after Ice Beam, while the flying Pokémon fluttered above, reading into his trainer’s movements and sporadically sending an Venoshock or an Air Slash Gyarados’ way.

Silver sprung off the scaly nape, propelling himself upwards. Golbat caught him mid-leap and launched towards the opponent’s crowning fin. Gyarados whipped his head, causing the teen to land just a sweep too far. Silver scowled, pulling himself up with one hand. In another violent lash he was in the air again, yet this time the positioning was perfect. With a quick burst Typhlosion was out of her Poké Ball.

-Right ahead! Thunder Punch!

Plummeting down, the fire type extended her fist and slammed right behind the Gyarados’ spiky head crest. An electrifying jolt ran through the serpentine figure, engulfing it in static. Shocked, the Pokémon’s entire body writhed and convulsed, contorting at ugly angles. The built up ice crust cracked under its sheer weight first in sprawling spider webs and then in deep, grinding rifts. Barely conscious and heavily tilting sideways, the giant Red Gyarados was collapsing.

At one fell swoop Silver clasped at Typhlosion’s recall button and lobbed a Dive Ball at the crumbling water type. Just as both Pokémon disappeared in the red amorphous light, the trainer plunged into the dark waters once again.

The countdown hit ten as Typhlosion smashed Gyarados with a searing bolt of electricity. Gold cancelled the Pokégear’s cautionary vibration and stared hard into the storming lake. The trio disappeared out of view. Impatiently, he shifted from foot to foot and then snatched Wesley’s binoculars out of his hands.

-Sorry, I really need to borrow these.

Adjusting the lense for his eyesight, he stared into the distance. The rest of the Gyarados pack loitered aimlessly among the bubbling crests, outrage swapped with inextricable confusion. Voided of their leader, they glided and roared almost pitifully, lost and completely disoriented.

Gold shook his head and zoomed in some more. It wasn’t the goddamn Gyarados he was looking for. Locating the approximate area he’d last seen his partner, he scoured the topical floes and broken billows. Gradually, large red blobs began rising to the surface. Counting in double digits by now, one after another the electrocuted Magikarp floated up, each enough to give him a tiny heart attack. He cussed angrily at the inert fish. Why couldn’t they be blue like their standard evolution? Or any other fucking color for that matter.

He spun his head back and forth, anxiety levels skyrocketing with every dead Magikarp. There was
Sneasel, slicing his way out of a ridged ice chunk - did he use it as insulation? - and just a leap above was Golbat, drifting in circles over the smaller Pokémon. They were acting quite placid, given the situation, and if Gold were to guess, they looked like they were having a casual tiff, instead of zealously searching for their absent trainer. He felt anger swelling in his insides - Silver was fighting alone in the riotous lake - did they really not care?

The Pokégear buzzed one last time and the stacked zeros flashed before him in a hazy blur. In wild desperation he clamped the Poké Ball’s release button and frantically gestured to the middle of the reservoir. Unlike the other's negligent Pokémon, he was not going to take any chances.

-Feraligatr, go! Please find him!

The bulky water type nodded and got prepared to dive in when a vehement splash erupted mere meters from the shore, dousing the spectators in gelid water.

Silver stood atop the massive red beast, one hand on it’s prominent head fin and another holding onto his shoulder. He rode the Gyarados closer and retrieved him with a swift click. As the sturdy platform began to dissolve beneath his feet, he sprung off and landed on the pebbly gravel. He dithered when his soles hit solid ground and briefly crouched on one knee for support.

Gold dashed towards him, carelessly urging the glasses back into Wesley’s hands.

-Thank Arceus! You’re okay! You are okay, right? Are you hurt anywhere? Oh shit, you’re bleeding! Hold on, alright? Let me just--

Silver held up a hand, cutting the agitated rambling, and looked past him with an ominous frown. Haltingly, the brunette followed the other’s stare. The older man was standing behind them, enthusiastically clapping his hands, a look of utter glee on his face. Gold spread out his arms in defense.

-Oh, um, that’s Wesley. He’s good.

Tossing them another suspicious glare, Silver wiped his bleeding nose with a sleeve and pushed himself up. He lumbered to the side and off the slippery shore and summoned Typhlosion. Briefly, he leaned into the warm fur and let his eyelids flutter. Then, composing himself, he extended his arm in a beckoning gesture.

-My bag.

The other unfastened the strap he’d been fiercely holding onto for the last twenty minutes and returned the pack to its owner.

-How’re you--

-Cold.

He grabbed the bag and ponderously fumbled around. His hands were shaking, as was the rest of his body, skin pallid and lips blue from exposure. He retrieved a handful of chemical heating packs and smacked a couple on his forearm to start the reaction. Stiffly, he lifted the jacket and shirt and slapped the toasty pads on the center of his chest, nape and lower back. He wallowed a bit, struggling for reach, and then added another one between his shoulder blades.

Gold gazed at him with a look of pure relief.

-You gave me such a scare. Seriously, Sil--
-Not now.

Again, he was stopped with an offhand gesture. The redhead took another long moment to unwind and absorb the kindling heat. His limbs once more regained sensation and heartbeat decreased to an acceptable rate. He brushed the dripping mop of hair out of his eyes and walked up to Wesley, who’d been patiently ambling in the sidelines and letting the boys catch up.

-How may we help you?

-Help me? Oh, no no! You’ve done enough already. I’m here to commend you and your absolutely outstanding performance! I haven't seen anything like this since, well probably since I've been your age myself!

Heartily, he offered his hand in greeting.

-As your friend said, I'm Wesley. Huge fishing enthusiast and sole owner of this mountain resort.

The teen pondered as he clasped the other’s palm.

-Mountain resort… hm, I might’ve read about it. A while back an up-and-coming businessman purchased a deteriorating angler station and essentially turned it into a gold mine. Mr. Wednesday, if I’m not mistaken?

-Oh, so you know! Yes, yes indeed that’s me. How should I address you?

-Soul.

-Ah, pleasure to meet you, Soul. Gold.

He nodded at both of the boys.

-Prodigious! Truly fantastic! But since you're on my property, one thing before I get carried away...

He nodded conspiratorially.

-I’m sure you’re aware that electrofishing is strictly prohibited in the beautiful region of Johto.

Silver sighed inwardly. So that’s what the man was actually after. Mercantile vendors and upstanding civilians were frequently more of a hassle than armed adversaries. Yet, they had to deal with either.

-I’m also aware that you are bending the facts to your own benefit. Unlike the resort, the reservoir itself is federal property, that you happen to heavily rely on for your recently declining revenue. I'm sure the tumult at the lake is not doing service for your sales and marketing either. So, which would it be now - forfeiting the catch to rangers and reporting misconduct of the residents for additional poor publicity or keeping it as casualties of a timely and efficient hazard control for quite the opposite?

Wesley boomed.

-Ohoho! Reeled in like a Remoraid! I like your way of thinking - you have the makings of a fine businessman yourself, young man. I was simply going to add it to Team Rocket’s rap sheet, but I might go with your idea instead.

Silver curiously raised an eyebrow.
-What about Team Rocket’s rap sheet?

-Oh, not much from me. Just the fact that they’ve been messing with the lake for the last month, scaring off both fish and tourists. They’ve even set a 1000 Pokédollar toll on the northern booth before Route 43, quite illegal too, I might say. A few things here and there, but the profits are plummeting!

The redhead cocked his head. Petty, predictable - just as he’d thought.

-Seems like I hit the nail on the head.

-Well, of course! And there isn’t much I can do either - I’ve already submitted a police report, several actually, and never heard back. I hired more security for the resort, but sadly that’s as far as my authority goes. And you know, in addition to all of this the lake has gone completely out of control in the last couple of days. Gyarados poppin' out of nowhere, Magikarp splashin’ - entire ecosystem out of whack. Everybody’s been avoiding us like a rabid Sentret.

-Sorry to hear that.

-No, no, sorry for dumping my problems onto you, I was the one who got carried away after all. Of course, I’d never intended on turning you in for zapping some Magikarp. The spectacle alone was worth ten times more than that.

He fanned his arms.

-Let me thank you for your efforts! Not sure if you’re just passing by or camping, but you may stay at the resort for as long as you like - almost all of the huts are available, take your pick!

-I appreciate the offer, but we’ve already made a reservation.

-You did? Superb! You must be one of the few that hadn’t cancelled. Then please go ahead and use any of the facilities - fishing boats, kayaks, rental Surf Pokémon, anything.

Silver sensed trickling iron on his lips and swabbed at his nose again.

-I’d say I’m good on fishing for tonight.

Wesley nodded in reconciliation before his eyes once more lit with enthusiasm.

-Ah, yes, yes, very understandable. You should probably take it easy for tonight. Oh, how about hot springs, then? We have the best ones in the region - perfect recipe for relaxation after a hearty battle! I’ll even personally drive you there. What do you say?

The teen just moved his head from side to side.

-Unfortunately, we do not have the time. Can you drive us to the fishing village instead? We could definitely use a lift.

-Well of course! My truck is parked just a little ways off, I’ll get you there in a jiffy!

The man cheered and started his way uphill, saying he needed to warm up the engine.

Gold recalled Feraligatr and watched the other boy reunite with his Pokémon. He leered as he saw them nonchalantly approach their trainer and instantly disappear in red light. He expected them to be reprimanded for their conduct, but Silver wasted no time on anger or disappointment whatsoever. Was he even cognizant of their behavior?
They left the windy shore and loaded into the battered vehicle. Its once roomy cabin was filled with fishing gear of all kinds - rods, lures, bait, buckets, tackles and nets. Wesley apologized for the sloppy mess as the teens wedged themselves in the back seat.

-Bear with me, my friends! I might be a businessman, but first and foremost I’m a fisherman. An avid one at that.

He stepped on the clutch and slowly eased from the muddy side path onto the rutted road.

-Once I drop you off, I'll order to pick up those Magikarp, so stop by the visitors center later, you're in for a feast! But for now, how about you two share some adventure stories? If you do this kind of stuff on a daily basis, I'd be absolutely thrilled to hear it out.

Silver renounced with a light sigh.

-We don’t really, this was a one time occasion. Maybe you could share your experiences instead? You've mentioned something about that earlier.

Thankfully, Wesley was more than eager to oblige. It felt like he'd been waiting for his moment of glory since he first set eyes on them. He rambled throughout most of the trip, sharing fables of the passed youth and even a few about his business falls and successes.

Gold had to admit that the older man was a great storyteller, animated and persuasive in his presentation. Part of the craft, probably, he conceded. He listened to the epic narrative, giggling at some parts, and making surprised noises at the others, all the while stealing occasional glances at Silver. Mostly keeping his eyes closed, the redhead offered a comment here and there but otherwise turned the reigns of the conversation over to Gold. Detached, he swayed in accord to the frequent bumps and countless irregularities of the road. His face had grown a much healthier color since when he'd gotten out of the lake, and if Gold hadn’t known better he would’ve thought that Silver was meditating. Obviously, something was very very off.

Wesley drove them to the appointed lodge and shortly departed, waving out of the window all the way until he faded out of view. Without further ado Silver unlocked the door with a card key and lurched inside. He dropped the bag midway into the lighted room and veered right for the bathroom.

Gold heard a thunk of plastic followed by a nasty retch. Hastily, he whipped up a glass of water in the miniature kitchen and hurried over to the other teen.

-Silver, are you alright?

The redhead was kneeling on the floor, bodily hanging over the enamel bowl. He raised his head to respond and then hurled again. Gold walked up and placed the glass and a towel on the edge of the tub beside his companion. He gently moved the dangling red strands out of his way and tucked them in the upright collar of his jacket.

Quietly, he waited for Silver to get the MRE’s contents out of his system and recover. At last, the other flushed and closed the lid, seating himself on top. He swallowed the prepared water and wiped his mouth on the fuzzy cloth.

-If I’d known the bastard was going to take the scenic route, I would’ve declined.

Gold nodded with sympathy.
-I'm astounded you were able to hold it in for as long as you did.

-It wasn't as awful in the beginning, but when we entered that rugged tract I thought I was going to choke my guts up right then and there.

-How are you feeling now? Do you want more water?

-No, I'm fine.

-What even happened? I don’t remember you getting seasick before.

-Concussion, I presume.

-Oh no--

-It’s just a mild one, nothing serious. I got off rather lightly.

He stripped his soaking jacket and tiredly dropped it to the floor. Gold noticed a fresh bruise stretching from under the shirt sleeve all the way to the other boy’s elbow. The angry red already began morphing into lurid purple. Silver moved his shoulder back and forth slightly and then did a full rotation.

-I’ll have Gengar confirm, but I sense no fractures or tears. Must’ve been the same time I tapped my head.

He exhaled.

-Water could be as hard as concrete when hit at velocity and unfortunate angles.

The brunette dismally regarded the contusion as he ghosted his fingers just millimeters above.

-I’m sorry...

-It's just a bruise, it'll heal. What’s important is that we’ve made it in time, the objective is met.

One by one, Gold watched Silver remove his used heating pads and dump them in the trash. At the final pack the boy faltered and clutched onto his forehead, briefly closing his eyes.

And there was just a concussion, those were just some fractured ribs and that was just a gunshot wound. Gold felt his insides constricting at Silver’s stoical calm, just like that first night at the motel. How many more bruises and cuts before it’d be deemed enough, how much longer until one’s body caves in and breaks?

He rocked his head, replaying the last hour in his mind for the umpteenth time.

-You’re fucking crazy, you know that? Completely and irreversibly nuts. My heart stopped a dozen times just watching you back there at the lake.

-You’re dramatizing, I just did my part.

Gold looked at him dumbfounded.

-Dramatizing? Silver. Injured, you charge into a pool of murder snakes, basically skate on icicles through a tsunami and then casually hop onto their outraged mutant of a boss. You electrocute the entire lake, sink underwater and then do not resurface for a whole five fucking minutes.
Unvexed, Silver folded his arms.

-I suppose. Your point?

-And there I am, stuck on the muggy shore, unable to leave or budge cus it’s my doggone task, waiting for the timer to run down. Can you even imagine how terrifying it was counting those darn Magikarp, thinking that every next one could be your lifeless body?

He stared him straight in the eye.

-My point is, I’m being completely serious.

-Then are you meaning to undermine mine or my Pokémon’s competences?

-What? No, of course not. Well, actually, your Pokémon maybe. Did you know that they just hung out there while you were potentially drowning, without a bother in the world, never burdening themselves to find where you where, what you--

The redhead stood up and evened himself with the other’s face.

-First, you are transgressing your promise. Second, you are mistaken. My Pokémon knew exactly where and what I was doing. They would’ve never went on standby if my life was veritably in danger.

-That’s not the problem--

-No, it isn't - you are. They have it in them to trust me and you don’t. So maybe it’s you who should have in a little more faith in me, huh?

Gold recoiled, burned by the trenchant words. This was not what he’d intended to do, this was not what he strove for. He was merely expressing his concern, he’d never planned on inciting a fight or belittling his partner in any way.

Desperately, he tried to make amends before he’d ruin something that could barely be ruined much further.

-I do. Believe me, I trust you wholeheartedly! I just…

Flustered, he broke eye contact.

-I cannot help it, I care about you. And I absolutely cannot stand seeing you hurt either.

Silver abruptly changed in face. He sat back down and rested his hands on his knees.

-Leave me be. I’m going to take a bath and ice my shoulder.

-Sure.

The brunette turned around and exited the small lavatory, closing the door behind him.

Solemnly, he surveyed the furnished area. Their new temporary dwelling was considerably smaller than the outlandish suite. It had two narrow beds aligned to the far wall, a square wooden table with matching chairs and the tiny kitchen that he’d already acquainted himself with. There were no additional rooms besides the toilet, but the cabin was equipped with a fenced up porch with a second set of dining furniture.
Gold wandered around the room and sat down on one of the chairs. He took a moment to examine his own injuries and check on his inventory. The dressing on his hands was rather ruffled since the rocky pass, and, though the bandages on his legs stayed put, soggy as they were they weren’t much more serviceable. He rummaged through his bag for medical supplies and first of, instead of bandages, he came across a heap of brown plastic packaging, a crumbled emergency blanket, a water can and an empty bottle of antiseptic. Trying not to think about it too hard, he emptied the trash along with the spent container. Well, he did deplete it earlier in total lack of hindsight and utter overkill.

He picked up one of the pamphlets laid out on the table and searched for ‘Visitors Center’ on the crudely drawn map. Wesley had invited them to a feast later, but what he really hoped to find was a working PC. Not only did he need to restock on disinfectants and gauze, but also refill the Pokémon items.

Deciding it was more logical to re-dress the wounds after a shower and not prior to it anyways, he scooped the card key off the floor and moved to the exit. He lingered at the door for a moment and then called to his partner.

- Hey, I’m going to the Visitors Center, do you need anything?

The response came at once.

- Yes, stop by the postal services and pick up the package. Box number corresponds to the one on the card.

- Will do. Anything else?

- No.

- What’s in the package?

- All of our gear for tomorrow.

Gold let loose of the handle and stared past the paneled boards. It’s not like he wasn’t aware of the proximity of the impending mission. He was, very much so. He dreaded it with every fibre of his being. Even the struggle to subdue his intense, afflicting emotions towards Silver had only temporarily numbed his overwhelming panic. One simple phrase was all that it took to bring it all back.

He felt liquid, paralyzing fear pool in his gut.

Tomorrow. It was happening tomorrow.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The dark, forever overcast skies keenly complimented Gold’s melancholy as he walked through the deserted fishing village. Far more resembling a ghost town rather than a tourist destination, it stretched all the way to the lake, counting over 30 individual huts. A few of them had lights or muted voices coming from within, but not a single soul was willing to leave their shelters. And for good reason - it looked like it could start pouring again any moment.

The only humans he saw on his way were a couple of men in dark clothing that he’d initially taken for Team Rocket grunts. He ducked out of view and inspected them from afar. They strolled down the main path past his cover, idly chatting about some new radio program and not paying much attention to their surroundings. They were armed and wore custom uniform, but he couldn’t locate the bright red ‘R’ patch on any of their gear. Probably just those security guards that Wesley mentioned hiring earlier. He cruised out of his hiding spot as casually as possible and headed for the rectangular lodge at the end of the street.

The Visitors Center was much more life asserting than the dreary outside, with upbeat country music and illuminated signs, but just as empty. A plump lady waved him a greeting from behind the counter as soon as he took step into the heated space, excited for a rare customer. He asked about a PC and then mechanically nodded when she proceeded to give him vividly specific instructions for the trivial ask. Apparently, if he ‘walked to the gift cards, swooshed sideways, stopped at the large stuffed Gyarados and did a swifty at the aquarium display’ he would arrive at his destination. He was positive that a ‘far right corner’ would have sufficed, since the store was barely a hundred square meters in area, but the lonely cashier was clearly bored. She showered him with the current deals, showcased a few of their best fishing rods and tried to sell him a limited edition crocheted Magikarp hat all the while as he scanned his trainer card, dropped off the unused Repels and replaced them with additional Revives and Full Heals. She driveled about the various activities one might engage in at the resort as he deliberated between an Ether and an Elixir, and babbled about the great benefits all the employees get as he restocked on fresh bandages and disinfectant. She’d just started on a lengthy speech about their miraculous healing hot springs when he logged off his account and turned, cutting her mid sentence.

-Where are the postal services?

The exemplary employee beamed and pointed at the window.

-That’s just a building away, you can actually see it from here. It’s currently closed, though, due to lack of orders.

-Can you open it? I have an order and I need to pick it up. It’s urgent.

-Sorry dear, that’s not up to me. You’ll have to contact the rangers, they're in charge of the facilities.

-Okay, where do I find the rangers then?

-Try the main gates, but if they’re not there they'd be on patrol somewhere on the resort grounds.

Gold breathed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It wasn’t the simplest assignment unless it turned
into a crusade, was it? He thanked her and walked out, graciously declining the jumbled directions. The resort’s entrance was a klick and a half up the main road and ostensibly required no ‘swooshes’ or ‘swifties’ whatever the heck that even meant.

Thankfully, the rangers were present at their designated post, glued to the radio receiver on the wall of their station, and not planning to leave anytime soon. He went to inquire about the elusive post office, but they too spread their arms. According to them, they had, indeed, been in charge of building access until recently but upon a sudden request from the management the responsibility had been passed over to the security.

Increasingly annoyed, he sped back to the last place he’d seen the guards and after a few loops around the huts found them at the opposite side of the campsite, still discussing the damned podcast. The shorter of the duo made a gesture similar to that of the rangers, claiming that their team personally had not received any orders or keys to the aforementioned facilities and that Gold would probably be better off asking the workers at the Visitors Center.

Fuming and tired of the convoluted situation, the teen barged into the cozy cabin and slammed his hands on the counter, demanding the cashier to open the darn post office.

Unperturbed by the brusque advance, she threw her arms up.

-Can’t, I’m afraid! I’m not authorized to unlock anything but this building, and I would hate to lose this job, so maybe if you explain the situation to the rangers--

Gold griped. Silver was going to bury him and this jolly bunch of righteously uninvolved people alive if he didn’t find a way to get this over with and pronto. Chiding himself for not doing this from the get go, he flipped his Pokégear open and dialed the last registered number. In few words he recapped the circumstances and changed the device’s setting to loudspeaker.

-Caitlyn! Caitlyn, can you hear me?

The lady’s eyes notably rounded.

-Mr… Mr. Wednesday?

-Yes, that's right. Caitlyn, this young man and his friend are very special guests, please assist them in any way you can. I grant you clearance to open any onsite facility upon their request and if they wish to visit the hot springs feel free to call up Greg to bring in the shuttle. Did you get that?

-Y-yes, sir.

-The catch would be delivered to the kitchen within the next hour, they’ll contact you when it’s ready.

-Thank you, sir.

-Thank you and keep up the good work!

With that Wesley disconnected. Rather pale from the interaction, Caitlyn disappeared into a staff room behind the counter and returned with a dangling bundle of keys. She guided the boy out of the store and locked the front door right after. Fearfully, she raised her eyes and whispered.

-I truly apologize, sir, for my negligence. You should’ve warned me from the start.

He balked for a second. Sir? Now wasn’t that an attitude swap now that she realized she was
talking to her boss’s acqu...

-...son.

-What?!

He gaped at her, completely have missed the beginning part of the statement.

-You’re Mr. Wednesday’s son, aren’t you? I’ve heard him muse about a heir on multiple occasions, so he must’ve been talking about you. All the staff had been speculating and then there were the rumors. Betsy and I were thinking--

It was Gold’s turn to throw his arms up. He had no idea who this Betsy was and why the heck he was getting pulled into any of this. He was just trying to retrieve a goddamn package, for fucks sake.

-Hold on for just a second!

-You kinda do have his hair. And surely the resourcefulness--

-I’m not his freakin’ son!

-It’s okay if you prefer to keep it secret, I promise I won’t tell a soul.

-I’m not keeping anything a secret. We’ve met Wes-- Mr. Wednesday on the northwest shore and had a heart to heart about fishing.

She regarded him with uncertainty.

-That’s why you have his number on quick dial?

He dragged a palm over his face.

-Look, Caitlyn, please open the postal services for me. You can ask Mr. Wednesday himself about his rumored children later, okay?

-I understand, if that’s what you wish, this will remain solely between us. And you know I cannot ask that, I do value this job.

The teen inwardly sighed. “Yes, so you’ve said. Those sweet deals, stacking benefits and the miraculous hot springs”.

Gold lugged the large hefty box into their cabin and dropped it in middle of the room with emphasis. A trophy for his long fought quest that never meant to be a quest to begin with.

He noticed minor changes in the hut's limited interior. The beds were pushed together into the far corner, table and chairs aligned by the wall. Silver was seated in one of them, a towel over his shoulders, tablet plugged into a wall socket.

-What took you so long?

-Ugh, you don’t wanna know.

-Try me.
He mulled it over in his mind and then relented.

-Well, to kick it off, the Visitors Center lady dicked me around the entire resort for forty minutes in a ludicrous search of a PO key - first the rangers, then the security - and since neither of them knew where to get it, they sent me back to her, where she then completely blew me off. I hit up Wesley to end this stupid charade, but once I did she started interrogating me, absolutely convinced that I’m his blasted kid.

Silver sniggered.

-Well, what a turn of events. Surprised I hadn’t learned this sooner.

-I can’t believe ya’ll! What the hell is wrong with you people?

-I see no issue with the situation.

-If you find it so amusing, you go act the role of Wesley’s son!

-I cannot do that. After all, you’ve already so brashly taken the spotlight.

The brunette scowled. He wanted to sulk in peace for once without the whole world picking on him, and of course his rival was not gonna be the one to give him a break either. He looked at the other teen, expecting scorn, but saw no hostility in his expression. In fact, the warm, benign fire he had grown to adore so much in the first place, was right there, behind the piercing grey eyes. Was Silver trying to cheer him up in his own, roundabout way?

He allowed himself a tiny smile.

-Fine, I’ll play VIP of the night. Maybe I’ll even arrange dinner to the door instead of making us go all the way to the cafeteria like some lowly plebs.

The other nodded seriously.

-Glad to see you finally embrace your heritage.

Gold lowered himself on a chair and fumbled the hood’s aglets in his hands. They were clearly joking, but at the same time it reminded him painfully of events that seemed to have been from another lifetime. Surrounded by Silver’s explosive substances, they sat in the crowded kitchen, exchanging snarky remarks, bickering over safety precautions. He stared into the faded pattern of the fishing hut’s carpet. If only they were always like this - amiable, peaceful. Apart, and yet together.

Barely audibly, he soughed.

-You know, my real father’s no successful businessman with a hot springs resort or an accomplished fisherman with a fat pocket. All I heard is that he’s just some sorry ass deadbeat that promised my mum a long happy life together and dipped as soon as he’d learnt she was pregnant.

He bent the plastic casings, testing their curve.

-I’ve no idea where he might be now, my mum never talks about him. I want to believe that she has gotten over him, but even then, she’d rarely dated and never married even years later. She’s a wonderful person, she deserved so much better.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pang of guilt thinking about his single mother. She’d been so good to him
all his life, working two jobs, selflessly providing for him when was little, supporting him now on his rebellious adventure, saving his money and sending him gifts. And all the while all he did was get annoyed at her genuine concern, lied to her and willfully put himself in danger.

He felt the aglet snap between his fingers. An inconsiderate son, a terrible friend and a dreadful, unreliable partner.

-I should at least give her a call before the… before tomorrow.

He looked up at Silver, who’d been respectfully quiet throughout his monologue.

-You probably didn’t care to hear any of this. I’ll shut up now.

-One does not choose their family. For better or for worse.

-I guess... Do you keep in touch with your parents?

-My mother is dead and father is, well, missing.

Gold twisted the woven drawstrings between his fingers, temporarily cutting the blood flow. There, again, he’d done it again. He shouldn’t have fucking asked.

-I’m really sorry, I...

Silver merely shook his head.

-I barely remember her, she died when I was very young. And as for the latter, I would’ve much rather preferred him deceased as well.

The brunette flinched at the other’s cold candor. As much animosity as he'd harbored toward his nameless parent for ruining his mother's love life and self esteem, he'd never go as far as wish him death. But projecting his own experiences on the other boy had always been nothing but pointless. He did not know the depth of Silver's and his kin's relationship and had no right to judge just based on this statement. Besides, the only other time he remembered the other ever mentioning his father was when he'd referenced his rigorous gun training, and by no means was that a positive recollection for anyone.

Not intending to wait for the other to recoup his thoughts, Silver got up and slashed the box's seal with a flip knife. He retrieved the familiar brown wired rectangles and evenly stacked them on a chair. He then pulled out two tasers, a stun gun, half face masks and a few more items Gold couldn't recognize, and lastly two sets of protective gear. He laid the latter flat on the table and addressed his companion.

-I’d meant to go over this a few days earlier, but in our case, better late than never. You wouldn't need all of it aside from the vest, so pick what feels comfortable and doesn't restrain your range of motion.

Gold released the tortured cotton straps and looked over. That must’ve been right after Silver had received the uniforms. Once more he lowered his head in remorse. Why was he such an irredeemable fuckup?

-Should I do it now?

-Yes, now. Put it on and try moving around.
-Sure, okay.

He moved up, grabbed the bulletproof vest and pulled it over his head. It alone significantly weighed him to the ground. He then hesitantly belted on the elbow and knee pads and eased into the thick gloves. He looked around, feeling something amiss.

-No helmet?

-No. Vision would already be limited in the underground HQ, so I deliberately skipped it. And unless you've extensively trained to wear one, it will only impede your performance.

-Got it.

Awkwardly, he walked a small circle, feeling like a stuffed Farfetch’d. First he removed the gloves, then the elbow pads. He crouched and hopped a couple of times and discarded the knee protection as well.

-I think I’ll just stick to the vest. I doubt I’d be any good with all of this stuff dangling off me.

-That’s what I thought, but I didn’t want to void you of your options.

Silver gathered the rejected gear and tossed it back into the box. He kicked it under the table and stood across from the other boy.

-All right, time for a quick review.

He gave the brunette little to no time to prepare. Assuming an offensive stance, he charged. He grabbed the other’s stretched out hood and readied a punch, as Gold ducked and threw his elbow in the attacker’s face, grabbed him by the neck and kneed lightly in the groin. Silver escaped the hold and spun around, now grappling the shorter teen from behind. Again, Gold thrusted his bent arm and concurrently stabbed the other's foot with a heel. He felt acute pain explode in his own limb and he yelped, hopping on one leg. He could practically see the soggy bandages bunch up over his wound, finally bringing the blister situation to a head.

Silver watched him bounce, hands on his hips.

-Not terrible. Except for that last part.

Gold screwed his eyes up and carefully set the throbbing foot down.

-Sorry, I need to redress it, I think.

-Go ahead, then.

-I’ll try make this quick.

The teen dropped back down on a chair and pulled the bag to him. He’d planned on doing this just once and after the shower, but the urgency status just switched from yellow to code red.

He left his shoes off once he was done and tucked them under the mini wall heater by the kitchen, hoping that at least today they’d have the time to properly dry. Comparably refreshed, he returned to their improvised training rink. Silver unplugged the headphones he’d temporarily attached to his Pokégear and stashed them away.

-Well, it seems to me you have the basics covered, so before we practice any more of that and wrap it up, I’ll show you how to break out of some standard choke holds.
The other teen nodded, prepared for the instruction.

-Put both of your hands on my neck and hold on tightly.

Gold obeyed, placing his palms on Silver’s pale skin. The redhead briskly withdrew and dove down and sideways with his torso. He straightened, freed from captivity in an instant.

-A two handed frontal choke - most common and easiest to bypass. Take a step back to your strong side and bow right down. This way your entire body strength targets the thumbs - weakest part of their grip. Try it out.

Now he applied steady pressure to Gold’s neck. The other drew back and ducked, almost perfectly mimicking the demonstration, breaking out of the grip.

-Good. Make sure your head doesn’t hit my forearms or wrists, it should be a clear dive downward. Now do it again.

They rehearsed another several times over until the brunette was able to execute it without flaw and then moved on.

-This one, you’re already familiar with.

He backed into the wall and once more urged Gold to plant a hand above his Adam’s apple. Swiftly, he twisted the balls of his feet, shifting his body and smacked a palm over the other’s outstretched arm. Gold’s hand fell to the flat surface behind and Silver threw an arm over his head, pushing him down and strangling him completely. He released and stepped away.

-As you see, the pivot and the palm strike instantly disarms the opponent, setting you up for the wrap. If you’d had more awareness back then in the forest, you could’ve escaped my hold.

With a quick smirk he added.

-Of course, this wouldn’t work once you’re suspended in air.

Gold gingerly touched his collar, brushing his fingers over the ugly bruise that had just started to fade. He remembered the keen state of shock he’d been in, the panic. There was no way in hell he could’ve avoided Silver’s assault. Still, he repeated the motions and tried to imprint it in his mind.

-And since we’re at it - the front to wall arm lock.

Upon request Gold twisted his partner's arm behind his back and pressed him into the cold panels. Silver grabbed onto the captured arm with his free hand, pushed down, loosening the grasp and tapped the brunet’s foot. He then threw a mock hit to the other’s face, drove an arm around his neck and secured the unaccounted loose limb. As usual, he then relaxed his posture.

-Fasten your locked arm - that way they won’t be able to twist it further - shove both hands downward, distract them with a foot jab and only then go for the elbow strike. The order is very important. If you try to swing your free arm in the beginning it will hyperextend your shoulder joint and even potentially break it. Same goes for regular armbars.

The redhead lead the discipline for another hour varying the attacks from new to old, pointing out faults and giving tips as they moved. They took a short break when Togetic and Gengar returned from their assignment and resumed once the Pokémon concluded their report. Silver adjusted the
taser’s voltage and described to Gold the mechanics of a stun gun. Using the same prop, he then explained how to use a real firearm in case the other ever got his hands on one. For the last time they sat down and dissected the HQ blueprint, confirmed that all gear was operational and secured the finishing details of the plan.

Finally, Gold stood up and on fatigued, wobbly legs transported himself to the bathroom. Though he strove to focus, to concentrate his mind on the mission with all his will, to keep his act together, he felt just so damn overwhelmed. The closer they got to the deadline the less confident he felt in, well, everything. It was terrifying and, worse even, imminent.

He stared past the streams of hot running water and, sparing a second for consideration, flipped the shower valve and plugged the drain with a tub stopper. At this point there was nothing he could do, besides pretending to whisk away from his burdens in in the coveted body and soul healing hot springs, that they were never actually going to attend.

He exited the steamed up room, just to be met by a the smokey comforting aroma of herbs, baked potatoes and fried fish. Two large plastic containers sat on the table along with a pair of bright orange hats. The redhead rested his elbow on the wooden top and gestured at the spoils.

- She brought the food herself, concerned by the fact that you never showed up at the diner.

He picked up the jaunty Magikarp hat and propped it onto his head.

- These were included as ‘an apology for her former ineptitude’. Seems like your royal influence is working.

Gold goggled, barely containing a burst of laughter. If somebody had told him that the offish, unflappable teen was willingly going to wear a crocheted fish, he would’ve sued them for slander that very instant. Yet Silver really was trying to relieve the atmosphere and cheer him up. He walked over, taking up his regular spot at the table, and smiled at his companion.

- It suits you.

- You wouldn’t have guessed, but his was my ultimate weapon all along. Team Rocket, slain by scandalous fashion.

This time the shorter boy actually chuckled.

- That’s silly, Silver. You don’t have to, I’m alright.

The other removed the absurd headpiece and opened his packaged dinner.

- Are you? You looked like you were about to pass out when you left for the shower. At least I had the decency to not break the door down.

Gold immediately flushed and buried his face behind the upright lid of the container.

- I uh…

- I know, you were just worried about me. Like you were earlier today. I’m not used to it and sometimes I do not understand, but do know that I am grateful. Thank you for that.

Once again Gold got stunned by Silver's plain honesty. It was staunchly straightforward, but also it
was the first time ever that the other boy had thanked him. Actually thanked him, not offered a curt nod or wave or partial gratitude. He felt his body temperature rise and could gaudily hear the racing heartbeat behind his eardrums. More than anything right now he wanted to gather Silver into the biggest, fiercest, warmest hug and never let go. But he stayed in place, absentmindedly chewing the buttered fillet. He could not. After all, there was this food, the gear, the solid wooden table between them. And the vast, searing, impassable chasm of yesterday's rejection.

He lowered his eyes, trying to blink the bitter sting away.

-Don't mention it.

They stuffed the leftovers into the compact fridge and prepared to tuck in. Silver pushed the rectangular frames apart just enough to get through to the rightmost bed. He threw off the ironed covers and got in. Gold did the same with the cot to the left. It was tiny, smaller than even his twin back at home, but he was glad to again sleep on a soft mattress than on the damp, frozen ground. Only issue being that he couldn’t sleep at all.

Blankly, he stared into the hut’s slanted ceiling. He’d acceded to Silver's suggestion to take a dose of Ambien in order to be able to rest, but so far the drug had done nothing but spike his chronic anxiety. Their little afternoon back and forth alleviated his pressing disquiet, but now in the silence of the dark room, the panic rebounded with a tripled force.

He laid still under the quilted duvet, petrified, barely breathing, arms straight by his sides. Another moment and he'd definitely hear his teeth begin to clatter.

-Hey, Silver?

-Mmm?

-Were you scared? Before your operation at Ilex.

-No.

Gold huffed into the sheets. Of course not, why did he even bother. One does not ask a Hoothoot if they’re afraid of the dark and does not question a Magmar if they’re resistant to heat.

-But that might’ve been my greatest mistake.

-Huh?

-I was confident in my plan, arrogant, I turned a blind eye to quite a number of important factors. Thinking back, I would’ve done a lot of things differently. But I’ve paid my price, there’s no going back.

He put his arms behind his head, musing.

-Fear is not always negative, you know. It is more like a double edged sword - it can either paralyze, debilitate, or stimulate and move one forward. It is up to the user to learn to harness it, to overcome, to turn it into a driver instead of a hindrance.

The brunette thought to himself, “Easier said than done”, as Silver went on.

-But as time passes, one gets accustomed to fear, the natural instinct of self preservation gets
numbed and that’s where bravery turns to recklessness. As with most things, it’s all about balance.

Gold realized how long and thorny of a path he’d to yet take to ever reach this point, so he said nothing, suspecting the other mostly voicing this to himself.

-And are you scared now?

-A little bit, I suppose. There’s always a probability of error, but we’ve worked hard for this, I trust the mission to wind up a success.

Or so he said. And yet Gold found it no less grinding trying to expel the severe, biting chill penetrating his very core. He shook in trepidation, muscles no longer under his control.

-Sure, yeah...

He felt a warm hand close around his trembling fist. It squeezed, ushering him to loosen the grasp.

-It will be okay. You’ve said it once yourself - whatever happens, I’ll have your back.

Across the narrow divide, Silver lay facing him with a soft, genuine smile.

-And you’ll have mine.

Gold didn’t know if his heart was going to leap right out of his chest or stop altogether. Whatever this was topped even the giddy hat jokes and the charitable medical treatment. Why? Why was the other doing this? Why was he acting this way? Did he enjoy toying with Gold’s feelings so much that he was going to give him hope after breaking it apart and taking it all away just a day prior? Was this deliberate cruelty or just thoughtless compassion?

His wired mind went into overdrive and body rigidly tensed up.

In the end, he surrendered. He relaxed his palm and allowed the redhead to slide his fingers beneath it. There was no more strength to resist and no more desire to run. He decided he’d let Silver do whatever he pleased with him, and, for what he cared, his dignity and pride could all but go to hell.

Gently, he brushed his digits over Silver’s and then, once again, tightened his hold. Never breaking the silence, he breathed. Shallow, shaky. The deepest, rawest emotions burning gleamingly behind his open eyes. How much he’d revered him, how much he’d longed for him, how much he’d wanted to freeze time and stay like this forever.

Silver did not retract his arm after he felt Gold’s pulse abate and breathing even. He did not recoil when the brunette twitched and drew his hand closer in his troubled sleep. He lingered, lightly caressing the other’s knuckles with his thumb. After all, he wasn’t quite sincere. Whatever he’d said to the other boy earlier - he was afraid. Not of Team Rocket, Giovanni or even death, but of the mere possibility that if something went wrong and he wouldn't be able to get there in time, wouldn’t be able to protect him and, most crucially, that Gold would no longer be willing to, able to look at him the same way after what he was about to witness tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

related arts: one and two
Silver zipped up his jacket over the black kevlar and adjusted the folded face mask on his collar. He strapped the bag around his shoulder and looked over at the other teen.

- Are you ready?

The brunette fumbled with his hoodie, making sure the vest was concealed and patted his side pockets. He’d packed most of his belongings the evening before, was more well rested than he’d been in days, had a sumptuous breakfast and actually wore dry clothes for a change, but as for his partner’s question - both physically or mentally, he’d never felt less ready in his entire existence.

Working up a bravado, he managed a weak grin.

- Yeah.

The other nodded, adhering to the commitment. His features were steadfast, fixed, a polar opposite to yesterday’s placid nature.

- I’ve expressed my confidence in the mission’s success and I stand by it, but I wish for you to bear no delusions. This is not training, not practice, not a game. Today we are waging war on Team Rocket, so we must accept the risks that come with it.

Reflexively Gold tried to swallow, but his mouth ran dry as sand. Silver pressed on on.

- It goes without saying - in a fist fight you will get hit, in a knife fight you will get cut. Getting shot through a bulletproof vest might not kill you, but it still hurts. Firearm confrontations heavily hinge on the offender’s tactical skill and proximity, so if you’re unable to dispute, take cover and stay alert, a moment of retaliation would eventually come. Do not expect to get out of this unscathed, but try to minimize the losses.

He asserted.

- Look out for injuries and do not hesitate to use the drugs you bought earlier, they will give you a boost when you most need it. Any changes to the plan, emergencies, unforeseen circumstances should be communicated immediately. And one last thing.

Silver bore his pupils into Gold’s.

- I realize you have certain convictions about this, yet I need you to leave your empathy in this room. Their numbers greatly exceed ours, statistically, the odds aren’t in our favour. There’s no way around it - it’s us or them. You hesitate for even a split second, you lose. Not a badge, not money. Your life or lives of the ones you hold dear. Do you understand?

- Y...yes.

- Good. Then we shall set out, it is time.

He tapped his wireless earpiece and moved the knob on the Pokégear, tuning the frequency. He then placed his palm on the round handle of the cabin’s door and twisted.
The shuttle they’d ordered the night before arrived at the Visitors Center strictly at the appointed time. Upon request instead of going the hot spring route it took them the opposite way to Mahogany’s northmost toll booth. The driver seemed oddly agitated throughout the entire ride and kept sneaking covert glances at his early passengers. He talked about the nice weather they were having recently - which they clearly weren’t, the favorable fishing conditions - which was not the case either, and the exciting weekend festival that they should check out in just a city over - which they would, although for different purposes. He meandered from one senseless topic to another and eventually got to the focal point of the largely one-sided conversation.

-So will you be visiting more often now, right? Mr. Wednesday must’ve been sharing the intricacies of running a business with you. It's no easy feat, I know.

Gold rolled his eyes. Caitlyn clearly had no intent on keeping those false assumptions to herself and he could bet that Betsy and the entire resort staff was running wild on rumors by now. The older man rambled on, cementing his suspicions.

-Mr. Wednesday truly revamped this place, I’ve not been happier since I started my job at the Lake of Rage Resort. All of my colleagues would agree, ask anyone! So please let your father know what a blessing he’d been to the community. I’m positive you’ll follow in his footsteps as well.

The boy sighed at the obvious flattery. Trying to appease their boss’s alleged offspring was not a bad strategy, except for one major flaw.

-I appreciate the sincerity, Greg, but I gotta be honest with you here as well. I’ve never claimed to be Mr. Wednesday’s son, nor did I confirm it.

Greg nodded at him with understanding before returning his eyes to the road.

-Ah yes, Caitlyn mentioned your desire for privacy. Do not worry, our conversation won’t leave this shuttle.

The brunette plastered a palm over his face. This guy as well. Also did he not hear how contradictory that sounded? Gold debated whether to go on a lengthy rant about unwarranted theories or leave it as is, when Silver interjected, gesturing for the driver to stop. Confused, the employee parked on the side of the road.

-We aren’t there yet, it’s another kilometer or so to the booths.

-No, this is just fine.

The teen handed him a seasonable tip and got up, waiting for the shuttle’s doors to open.

Greg seemed to be panicking. Pleading, he looked at Gold.

-Please let me know if I’ve said anything to offend you, I truly did not mean to--

The shorter boy got to his feet as well and joined his partner in the aisle.

-I’ll tell your boss you all did a great job, okay?

-O...okay.

-Have a good day then.
He called out with a seconds delay, but both boys had already stepped past the vehicle’s sliding doors. They made a sharp right off the road and entered the dewy grass. There were no trainers in the area this early in the day and, besides the perennial dampness of the surroundings, the journey felt rather painless. Temporarily muting the incoming transmissions, Silver addressed the other’s indignant frown.

-What’s with the long face? You should be proud of your loyal underlings.

Gold just moped at the comment.

-Ugh, give me a break, will you? You see how this misunderstanding had totally gone out of hand. They all just went ahead and agreed on it by themselves.

He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair.

-Also none of this is my achievement either - it’s yours. Doesn’t that bother you?

-It doesn’t. I’m against drawing attention to my person in general.

-Kinda hard to avoid if you’re wrestling genetically engineered monsters bare handed, isn’t it?

The brunette lifted the corners of his lips as Silver threw him a sideways glance.

-In regards to that, I’ve confirmed that Wesley retained no physical records of the fact and neither does he know my name.

-Ah.

The other boy pondered, recalling that specific exchange - Wesley indeed, had not carried a camera on him and even if he did, he’d been way too excited to use any kind of technology besides the compact binoculars. As for the other matter... Gold stopped mid stride. He’d been so immersed in his anxiety that the false introduction totally slipped his mind.

-Are you concerned that it will somehow leak to Team Rocket?

-Just another precaution. Public, criminal, federal records - according to them I’ve never existed. Wouldn’t want to accidentally sow any discrepancies, would I?

-I guess-- wait, hold on! Never existed? How’s that even possible? What about your trainer card then? And the gyms--

The redhead retrieved the rectangular plastic from his chest pocket and, pausing for a moment, held it in front of Gold’s face. The photo only faintly resembled its owner, face wider, lips a completely different shape, hair much shorter and a darker color. The printed name matched the one Silver gave Wesley on the chilly shore.

-Fake, as you can see. Including you, only three living people know my real name.

Silver stashed his ID and Gold dithered, struggling to pin the emphasis of the phrase. He’d seen how protective the other had been of his identity, their first couple of encounters included, how
reserved, but never had put that much thought into it until now. Hastily, he ran through the limited interactions he’d seen his partner have with any other people that he could pick off the top of his head. Silver had not once disclosed his true name to either of them.

So which one was it - on ‘only’ or ‘living’? An honor or a curse? From what it sounded it might've been the latter for Silver, but for him, he decided, it was, beyond doubt, the first. Something as trivial as a name, a word one used in a greeting, in a goodbye, referring to another in a conversation, asking for their opinion, confiding a painful memory, celebrating a success. Something he’d shared with others daily so casually and without thinking, was so divergent for Silver. And the simple knowledge that some way, somehow he’d made it into the list of those three select people, made it so much much more special.

He looked at the other’s fist moving swiftly along with his body and, without giving a second thought, grabbed onto it with both hands. The taller teen stalled and turned.

-What is it?

Clasping the other’s calloused hand, looking at the stern face, Gold completely lost what he was about to say. Apologize for his late realization, express gratitude? Both, neither? Why was his head such a fucking mess? Never finding the right words, he let loose. As his arm was about to fall to the side, Silver clutched his palm.

-I don't know what this is about, but we don't have the time.

He spun again and dragged him through the marshy trench. Staggering just slightly before he caught up, Gold wordlessly followed his companion.

Silver.

Silver. Silver. Silver.

He repeated the precious name over and over in his head, never getting tired of it. A treasure he’d had from the beginning, one he didn’t fully appreciate and yet one worth a million others. He stared into his partner’s straightened back, his waving fiery hair. He wondered if it was possible to fall for someone harder day after day, if there was a limit to one’s emotion.

The other boy tugged, stepping over a rotting tree, and Gold’s gaze got drawn to their hands joined together in a tight lock. His heart skipped a beat. No, there wasn’t.

They snaked between the shallow puddles, hanging branches, sprawling shrubs and eventually, skirting the Rocket plagued toll booth, emerged at the last section of Route 43’s paved road. Their destination was a straight shot from there and, as the rays started to fight their way past the leaden clouds, the duo reached the mountain town’s lovingly carved welcome placard.

Mahogany Town, much like its lowland precursor, had preserved the traditional style in its architecture. Smaller by a wide margin and isolated by the rocky ridges, it gave the visitors a visual impression of being transported a century or two back in time. ‘Home of the Ninja’ and ‘Glacier Maze’ were ones of the few titles it bore throughout its history, but now, as with most things, the proud slogans were turned into shameless advertising.

The layout was similar to that of a standard precinct less than 10k in population and tourist-based economy and consisted of two main streets with all the prime attractions, shops, gym and Pokémon center and a sprawling web of smaller ones dedicated to rentals, utility buildings or residential
areas. Team Rocket’s hideout, or ‘souvenir and drug store rolled in one’ was notably part of the first set. Situated in the smack center of the shopping district it bore huge cheesy signs for the ‘Best Ball prices on the east side of Mt. Mortar’ and ‘Raging deals on the one and only RageCandyBar’.

Gold had observed it countless of times on the digital blueprints, but even then got its real life incarnation caught him off guard. Weathered and shabby it stood there leaning on one side, giving off the vibe of a doomed family business swinging a desperate marketing campaign rather than a criminal organization HQ. The stores around it were closed, due to the wee hours, off season, or, perhaps, the frequenting group of men in black uniform loitering at the entrance. They looked like they were in a middle of a argument, swearing and passing around a single radio while brandishing it like a bat.

Before they could get into earshot, Silver swung into a neighboring parking lot and crouched by a wall. He lowered the volume with a tap and gestured for his companion to switch on his own custom headset. He then opened his Pokégear, punched in a sixteen digit access code and hit ‘pair’. Instantly, Gold’s auditory senses flooded with a squall of radio noise.

“Beedrill-5 standby, Beedrill-2 initiate movement, over.”

The transmission changed.

“Marksman on overwatch, over.”

Then again.

“Tauros-1 move to Union Square.” “Tauros-1 copy, affirmative out.”

And again.

“Team leaders, report to HQ once in position. Squad...”

One by one, Silver sorted the incoming radiocasts, subsequently narrowing them to four, three and finally two.

-I’ve acquired all the critical info, sticking higher level channels from now on. The Radio Tower takedown will commence in thirteen, no--

He glanced at his wrist.

-Twelve minutes. Use this time to verify your gear and prepare.

Shortly, he was typing again.

-The third is a private line for us and our Pokémon. We’ve gone over this, to switch use the side buttons or double click the…

The goons’ rowdy clamor, the blur of milspeak, Silver’s rapid fire instructions all made Gold increasingly giddy. He felt his vision fail and limbs turn to lead as he melded with the wet pavement. Through a heavy haze he stared at the white lines and digits on the asphalt. Why was he sitting on the ground again? Wasn’t it dirty and wet? He'd come here to do something very important, didn’t he? But what? And what was this water in his eyes? Sweat? Rain? He sensed fuzzy movement and heard somebody call him from somewhere far far away.

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked forward. Abruptly, Silver slammed their
foreheads together. The sharp pain pulsed and resonated through his skull, breaking the viscid trance.

-Snap out of it. Now.

Gold hissed and drew back, reflexively covering the trauma with his hand. The other was kneeling in front of him, stringent, unflinching. His daring, bold and beautiful Silver. That never complained, that never backed down, that was prepared to light the match and burn it all to the ground.

The ineffable contempt for himself, the shame, the guilt he’d been accruing, repressing for days resurfaced at once, grounding him in reality firmer than the rough advance. He was exactly as weak and worthless and cowardly as he thought he’d been. The confidence and the audacity he’d brought with him in the beginning were nothing but frauds. He could not control the fear, the hurt, he could not harness them and turn into a weapon; all he could do was generate more fear and more self-hatred. That was it, that was all he had - this spiral of self-destruction and crippled morals. But if they were enough to keep him standing, to keep him from plunging down just like he did now, for what it was, he was going to take it. Defiantly, he locked gazes.

-Thanks, I needed that.

Silver nodded and pushed himself off the ground. He extended his arm and helped the other boy up. For the second time today he asked.

-You ready?

And for the second time Gold lied.

-I am.

Gold once pictured his partner march into the enemy's HQ purely as a mental exercise, a metaphor, but never had he imagined that to be the actual intent. He'd expressed his concerns about it the night before, but the redhead had been as frank as ever.

-You’ve seen the layout yourself - the hideout has three exits and only one entrance. The emergency vents are sealed from the inside, making them inaccessible, so that leaves us with one option. Besides, there is no real sense in being furtive about this - the numerous cameras plastered in and around the building will capture our actions regardless.

The brunette contended with uncertainty.

-What if you disabled them like you did with the Radio Tower or mall? That'd be piece of cake for you, right? Being in their system and all.

-The system you're talking about is a shared entity among all of Rocket's stations. Its data is limited and is distributed among all members with a varying degree of clearance. The sole reason I was able to take advantage of it and gain access was because it allowed external connections and I had the admin’s credentials. The servers in the HQ, though, are wholly isolated - they keep the surveillance, research and development highly secured. Do you think I would've gone through the trouble of reverse engineering that earpiece just for fun?

The teen silently pondered as Silver continued the explanation.
-This base is essentially a bunker, physically and digitally. I will attempt an override once we reach the control room, but until then it's out of our hands.

-I see.

Gold stared into the swirls of the wood grains on the table. So there really was no other way. It all seemed logical in its simplicity, but that didn’t make it any more safe. Nervously, he dug his nails into his knees. As if ‘safe’ was any longer applicable to either of this.

Much less perturbed by the dire circumstances, Silver nonchalantly waved his hand before moving onto the next topic.

-Just do as I’ve instructed on the approach and it will all be fine.

"It will all be fine, it will all be fine," Gold muttered under his breath as he followed his partner down the street to the souvenir store. The bickering gang had already retired, leaving the shaded alley even more glum and foreboding.

Without further ado, Silver flung the doors open and entered the shop.

The interior was nothing special and looked much like any other dingy outlet in the boonies. There were two aisles - one primarily dedicated to junk food and the other housing a mix and match of Potions, Poké Balls and odd trinkets manufactured at least a decade and a half ago. A row of standard fridges sided with the right wall and another, solely filled with alcohol, was positioned in the far corner.

The doorbell jingled, signifying the teens’ entry. Right off, four pairs of hostile eyes turned to them in dissent. The leftmost goon pointedly sneered.

-Shop’s closed today. Beat it, kids.

Feigning ignorance, Silver cocked his head.

-Why keep the doors unlocked, then?

-Tch. It’s closed when I say it’s closed. Now scram, if ya wanna live.

The teen upright ignored the threat and walked up, taking position between two of the men. The taller grunt smacked his hand on the desk beside him and menacingly hung over Silver’s face. He jeered, hand balling up into a fist.

-Oi, ya picking a fight?

The redhead glimpsed at the side of the Rocket’s belt and counted the markers. No rank, as he’d thought. These were merely fresh recruits - most likely former thugs or gangsters - who joined in hope of exhilarating action, but got shot down for the Goldenrod offensive due to lack of experience. Unfortunately for them, this was not an opportunity to blow off some steam either.

-What if I am?

Before the goon could strike, Silver grabbed him by the nape and slammed hard into the vinyl counter. A dull crack echoed in the store and the fake marble splattered with red. The boy spun around and flung his arm at the second man’s neck and then, with a forward shift, drowned a fist in
the last enemy’s solar plexus.

Stretching his fingers, he stepped over the motionless bodies and walked to the alcohol fridge. He typed in a sequence of numbers on the pad to its right and idled as the cooler to slid sideways, revealing the staircase underneath. Finally, he turned to the cowering cashier. The man was exhibiting none of his former bluster.

-Please don’t hurt me! I’m not with them, I swear, I’m just an contractor evading some taxes!

-Of course you are.

-No, no, please believe me.

Silver flicked his head at Gold who’d been silently waiting behind. The brunette nodded and readily drove his stun gun further into the trembling man’s back.

-Have you triggered the panic button yet?

The man sputtered, eyes wide and face pallid.

-I haven’t! N-no, I haven’t--

Silver pulled the black mask over his face and gazed straight into the hidden security camera above the counter.

-Then go ahead. Let them all know - this is an invasion.

Chapter End Notes

related art: link
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I know, it’s been a while, but I’ve really got no excuse. More or less figured out the next one tho!
Anyhow, enjoy~

tw: people die when they're killed

Everything was happening too fast. Way too fucking fast. A horrible blend of blurred flickers, ringing snaps, pained outcries and muffled swearing all merged into a daze of red neon and the continuous blaring of the intruder alarm.

In a lightning motion, Aipom and Sneasel slashed through the flying sets of orbs and Silver took out two foes with a low sweep. He swiftly rebound and slammed another Rocket grunt into a wall right behind Gold’s back.

A new enemy wave appeared in the hallway and the taller teen spun his head. Gold felt a forceful tug on his wrist and immediately after the narrow passage got drowned in Typhlosion’s billowing smoke. With a loud bang a bullet sliced through the floating particles and hit raw concrete.

A characteristic crackle of an incoming transmission shuffled in the boy’s ear.

-Focus. Left in 15 meters.

Hastily, Gold fastened the safety goggles over his mask and sped after his partner into the pitch darkness onward. More screams and more cussing, more heavy thuds on the ground. Another gunshot and another miss. He shoved a flailing, hacking figure aside and instinctively strained his eyesight. Senses dulled by the fumes and the unravelling chaos, he ran blind, much like that day in the cave. Only this time around he knew exactly where he was going, the detailed blueprint imprinted, burned into his synapses. He could recite it in his sleep and was positive that past today it would come haunt him in nightmares long after.

The smog started to thin as they cut sideways at the fifteen meter mark and sprinted down the dimmed corridor. Sneasel sprung ahead and shot a wide burst of Ice Beam, covering the entire trap zone with a thick layer of sleet. Silver sled after, kneeling, and strictly two thirds in slapped a block of C4 right above the moulding. As soon as the group reached the other side, Typhlosion spun and smashed both fists into the frozen surface. The blistering flames of the Fire Punch liquified the coat in an instant and, followed then by the Thunder Punch’s jolt, activated all the tiles at once. A booming roar added to the horrid plethora of the jarring noise. The forcibly liberated Pokémon claimored and wailed, lunging from their designated spots. As a solid wall of ice blocked off their path on one end, Silver snapped a button. An explosion reverberated the bunker’s walls, succeeded by two, then three more lesser ones. There was screaming and whistling on the other side, but the chain of controlled Selfdestructs, at this point, was impossible to thwart. The compounded impact methodically blew through the both concrete and frozen crystals, smashing them to splintered rubble and leaving heavy clouds of dust. Heaps of debris and ice piled in the track, blocking their pursuers way through the west wing completely.
Silver released Gengar and tossed him a black bag. He watched the Pokémon vanish into the shadows and then briefly turned to his companion. Gold nodded and together the duo coasted down the steep staircase to the next floor.

At the middle of the flight Silver stuck an arm out, forcing Gold to halt. Briefly, he tuned into a radio channel.

-Three people, Pokémon out, more support coming from the northeast and above.

Gold picked two of his Poké Balls and waited for the next command. With a sharp tug Silver wrested the pull ring and lobbed a flash grenade around the staircase’s corner. A burst of blinding light flooded the passage, casting long silhouetted shadows and, again, filling the air with shrieks.

-Ten and two o’clock, another at four and one straight above. On my signal.

Silver dove down and, circling around the edge, uppercutted the man lying in wait by the doorway. He thrusted him backwards into a stunned Koffing and caught a flailing punch from the left. Mercilessly, he twisted the offender’s wrist, pushing downwards, and slammed him head first into the ground.

-Go!

Flaaffy rolled into the hallway, visible static glowing on her fur.

-Golbat, Protect!

Flaaffy dropped the suffused Discharge. Three Zubats and and Enemy Golbat plunged lifeless to the floor, while the rest of the Pokémon fixed in mild paralysis. Not giving them time recover, Gold swapped his electric type with Hitmontop.

-Hidden Power!

Murky orbs circulated around the spinning vortex and darted in calculated curves. The remaining poison types began to topple as well. The special ground move was super effective.

As Silver knocked the last grunt unconscious they heard heavy footsteps echo in the distance. Two squads of four men each were nearing them from both ends of the hallway. Switching the comm channel, the taller teen surveyed them intently - higher ranks, additional gear, armed and specialized respirators. Fuck.

Swiftly, he struck an arm out ahead.

-Golbat, Haze!

Spinning on his heels, he yelled to his partner.

-Safeguard, NOW!

Gold obeyed, giving orders for the newly appeared Togetic. Nervously, he tapped the radio button.

-What is it?!

-Double check your mask, keep tabs on your Pokémon's health. They're planning to use a nerve agent.

The exclusive use of poison types, the Rocket’s heavy duty masks, the blacked-out flasks hanging
off their hips - there was no mistaking it. If they hadn’t released it already, they were going to and very soon. And yet - why? This hadn’t been an uncommon strategy in warfare, it was lethal, highly effective, but using a deadly neurotoxin in the confines of their own base?

-We’ve got less than a minute until Safeguard and Haze wear off. Assume effects of a doubled Toxic after that until I identify the kind.

Silver ran a hand over the back of his head to check the straps of his own gear. No, they definitely had not dispersed it yet. If they had, the grunt who’s face he’d dragged across the floor would have suffocated on the spot. And yet, all of this could only point at several things - the Rockets were luring them in, they were finally recognized as a threat and within minutes the HQ was going into a base-wide lockdown.

Two enemies sweepingly closed in, forcing Silver to dodge and counter. With a spinning kick he put distance between them, giving him an extra moment to think. So which one was it? VX, VG? No, he dissented inwardly - none of the V- series or carambates unless they were intending to put the whole base on an indefinite quarantine. It had to be something non-persistent, volatile and with a lower vapor pressure.

He narrowly evaded a lunge at his gut and struck his arms down in a cross block, catching the sharpened knife and screwing the offender's hand in a wrist lock. Never letting go of the kneeling man’s arm, he jabbed the blade into his ally’s carotid. Blood gushed from the artery, splattering the floor and walls.

So Tabun, Sarin, Soman? Or one of those new synthesized compounds with Toxic and Sludge? They all had similar effects, but the potency and limit of exposure varied by a wide degree. With no spectroscope at hand, fortunately, there were other ways to check.

Punting him hard into the wall, Silver ripped the protective mask off the first goon’s face. He lingered for a brief moment, counting every breath. On the second he saw the man wheeze and claw at his throat as his entire body convulsed and a clear liquid blended into the pool reddish-black. Sarin or the Sludge compound then. Silver tapped the transceiver button.

-Forty seconds. Make the most out of it, then withdraw.

Sneasel was out once more, hacking his razor claws into an Arbok’s throat, Hitmontop slammed a spiked toe into a Weezing’s bulging side and Golbat Air Slashed through a Muk. Silver re-positioned to handle an armed goon in the far right.

Gold stood rooted in place, aghast by the scene transpiring before him. He’d heard his partner’s words, he’d seen him and the Pokémon clash with the their numerically prevalent foes, and yet he couldn’t budge. The blood, the roars, the discharges. Pokémon and humans mixed together in utter carnage. He could perceive it all clearly without the smoke through the filters of his goggles. Blazing lead pierced Golbat’s wing and Sneasel sliced through a grunt’s Achilles tendons. A clang echoed from behind as a bullet struck a timely Detect, when Silver leapt in front, shielding him from a shiv strike. The edge slashed at the teen’s forearms, spraying both him and the boy behind.

- Gold, focus!

He voiced again as he kneed the facing man in the groin and pushed that same knife at him, slicing the mask open. He then grabbed the handle, twirled and flung the blade across the room, sinking the jagged metal into another grunt's shoulder. The adversary groaned, clutching onto his arm, and dropped the loaded pistol to the floor. Shoving Gold aside, Silver snatched the taser from his hip and struck it into the base of the closest assailant’s neck.
The brunette stumbled, blinking his partner’s blood from his eyes. The terror ensnaring his entire being vehemently boiled into sheer rage. Silver shouldn’t have, wouldn’t have gotten injured just now if he hadn’t been such an helpless, worthless scum. He’d done nothing but falter and force his friend to rescue him again and again. Where was the burning hatred he’d fostered in that parking lot, where was the fiercely stubborn inner resolve?

He felt a grip on his shoulder and a pair of brass knuckles colliding with his nasal bone in a nasty crunch. His vision flashed white and he fell ass first to the filthy ground. A boot pressed into his head and bang echoed just above. Through a daze he saw Silver stagger and cling to a wall on the other side of the hall, as the man tightened his grip for another shot. Gold's body went numb with horror. Onerously, he reached for his own taser and in a frenzied motion stuck the static nodes into his enemy’s shin.

The grunt’s large frame shook under the voltage and slumped. Gold pushed off with both hands and rolled sideways, barely avoiding the crushing weight. He scrambled to his feet and twisted his head back and forth, scattering droplets of warm blood that already started leaking through. He didn’t care, he could still somewhat breathe through his mouth, he had to find Silver.

Another goon charged him upfront and he ducked, just like he did in training. On reflex, he thrust a knee between his legs and smashed their heads together in a violent headbutt. His ears rung and vision once more fogged up with the pain. Through a blear of consecutive motion and sound he suddenly found himself fixated on the distinct metal rings of a muzzle pointing right at his face across the room.

A succession of shots and both his to-be assassin and the man behind him collapsed to the ground. Silver was standing a few meters away, handgun outstretched in his arm. He was bleeding from above his temple, sticky red mixing with dirt and sweat. His sleeves glistened faintly in the flashing lights, yet his hold remained steady and firm. He was injured. But he was alive.

The brunette weakly lifted an arm, pure relief mixing in with the shock and anger.

-Silver--

-Recall your Pokémon.

The redhead kicked out a pistol out of the passive grunt’s hand and picked it up. He clicked on the mag release and after a moment’s inspection slid the cartridge back in. He racked the slide and pushed the firearm into Gold’s trembling hands.

-Safety on. Seven more rounds. Now keep going.

With wavering uncertainty Gold accepted the gun. He’d hated the idea of hurting others, more so taking a life. That was inconceivable, that was out of the question, that was against everything he’d stood for, against everything he believed.

Or at least that's what he'd thought all the way up until now. His partner was right in the end - their fates were very much binary and it was purely up to them to wager the outcome. If Silver hadn't ended those two Rocket grunts, Gold would be the one with his brain spattered on the floor, and if Gold wouldn't have tasered that other goon then Silver might've... Silver could've...

He tucked the weapon behind his waistband. He didn't even want to begin to imagine. But if somebody, anybody ever dared to hurt Silver again, he realized, he wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger.
The siren drummed with increased intensity as a tremor rolled through the building's structure. It was different from the earlier spontaneous detonations, more grounded, and seemingly coming from all directions at once. Gold spun his head in alarm.

-Lockdown?! Now?

-Eliminate a guard post and three response teams to get recognition? Rather high standards from control. Or, perhaps, low. No matter, we're reaching B3F at any cost.

The stairway finally came into view as they veered right. More enemies appeared up front and more echoes were coming from the back. Hoards of Pokémon, wave after wave came charging in, their trainers deliberately giving them orders from the rear.

Sneasel shot three Ice Shards, trapping the enemy Arbok and two Ekans with piercing spikes, and Golbat absorbed a combined Sludge Bomb with a shield.

Gold edged to ask why Sneasel still hadn't been withdrawn, but within seconds of the perpetual onslaught it became strikingly clear - aside from Golbat and his natural resistance, he was the only one with high enough stats to continue the offense all the while enduring the effects of the crippling poison.

A set of Magnemites floated up in front of them, forming an ominous, rapidly spinning electric vortex. Silver looked just past them and stopped dead in his tracks.

-Take cover!

An ice wall sprung up on the spot and the teens ducked on either side as an explosive barrage sunk into the glazed barrier. Sneasel built up layer atop layer, struggling to maintain integrity as lead mercilessly penetrated the forming crystals and the chemical agent steadily chipped at his waning health. Silver sidestepped and shot a couple of test rounds at the armed enemies. The bullets curved, attracted to the static twister and fell flat on the floor, never getting even remotely close to their targets.

Wracking his brain, he registered Sneasel's HP dropping to red. The lockdown shutter had also most certainly moved past the midpoint and they had to act and fast. If only he'd had his old team... Briefly, he closed his eyes and angrily cursed at himself.

No fucking time for that, shut the hell up and concentrate.

Objective: B3F.

Obstacles: electromagnetic barrier, nerve agent, two gunners with M16s - one in front of the staircase and one to the left, partially shielded by a wall.

Dire. He'd seen worse.

He radioed Gold.

-Get ready. We're making a dash for the staircase.

The other teen slowly turned his head, eyes growing to the size of saucers. He shook his head in apprehension and wildly gestured at the fatal volley on the other side of the wall. The other cut him short.
We don't have a choice. Let's go, on the count of three. One.

Ignoring Gold’s obtrusive panic, Silver took off his blood stained jacket and wrapped it around one hand.

Two.

He snatched a new stun grenade and held it in the other.

Three!

In a sweeping motion, he knocked a hole just above his head in the faltering ice cover and chucked the metal cylinder far down the hall. He then swiped past several Poké Ball switches at once.

-Typhlosion, Fire Blast!

A burst of blinding light, three red flickers, a second of still silence and a wall of ice turning to a moving inferno. Desperate, misguided mag drops and a piercing, blood curdling scream.

Silver grabbed onto a scorched Magnemite through his jacket and heaved it at the imminently closing door. A jarring screech filled the hallway as the orb wedged under the hatch and metal dug into metal.

With a swift turn Silver sprinted sideways, avoiding a blind barrage, and tore the rifle out of the center gunman's blistered hands. A fusillade and splatter of blood stained the corner and left wing.

The teen stayed on standby as Gold warily caught up and slipped past the hatch. He recalled Typhlosion and, knocking the disfigured steel type out of the way, slid under himself. With a sharp clang the armored barrier closed shut.

Silver leaned on the stairway's railing and glimpsed at the fresh wound slicing through his upper arm. He exhaled. For someone who'd just attempted to outrun a machine gun he'd been incredibly lucky. Discounting the forearms altogether, he wrapped a wide band of medical tape over the laceration and pulled his jacket back on.

Still severely short of breath Gold looked up at him, distressed and sorely guilty.

-I’m sorry, it’s all my--

-Don’t.

The brunette bit his tongue.

-Right. How are y--

-Fine. You?

He gingerly prodded his face.

-Yeah... Ow!

-Use the drug if you can't endure it. Heal your Pokémon. We won't get another breather like this.

Snatching the rifle up Silver removed the magazine, slapped it upside-down on his palm and then
shoved it back with a snap. A little less than half. All things considered, twelve to thirteen 5.56mm rounds were a reasonable catch even if they wouldn’t be able to procure more. A thing that concerned him, though, wasn't the eventual lack of ammo, but the fact that Team Rocket hadn't once utilized the transmitter. It was clear that they were stalling. Could it be that they were aware of his possession of one of their earpieces? Or were they merely biding their time for the precise moment? Not nearly enough data and too little time, all they could do was focus on the immediate objectives.

-All of the lab staff and equipment is housed on this floor, so I doubt they’d use the nerve agent a second time.

He racked the slide and tested the sights.

-Of course that doesn't mean we're anymore welcome. We’ll have to break through.

Ready to descend, he began walking, when Gold's hand weighed on top of the rifle.

-Hold on, I have an idea.

Gold straightened his posture and picked out his starter’s Poké Ball. Silver gazed at him, considering the suggestion. For someone who’d been cowering in the corner moments ago, he looked rather dauntless. The taller teen nodded and then threw the gun over his shoulder.

-Very well. Might work even better than the alternative.

Without uttering another word, both boys backed into the metal shutter, and summoned their Pokémon. A wide shield of Protect glimmered ahead and Gold cleared his throat.

-Feraligatr, Whirlpool then Surf!

A gusting wind instantly shoved them into the cold surface as the torrents crashed and walloped, rapidly enveloping the narrow, confined space. Under enormous hydraulic pressure the waters rushed ahead, cascading, plunging down the chute.

The misplaced gunshots, the startled screams, the liquid gurgling all drowned in the foaming squall of the double combo water attack. Counting down seconds of roaring silence, the redhead stuck out his arm in a signal to halt. The invisible barrier dissipated and so did the incessant deluge, leaving but a number of trickling streams.

Silver nimbly climbed down the stairs, first to inspect the damage. The wash rippled in residual swirls from the stairway to the very end of the open circuitous area. Keeping just above knee deep, it partially submerged the trainers and their haphazardly scattered Pokémon. Most were dazed, but still conscious.

A Rocket grunt shakily got to his feet and, holding on to his knees, hacked up a mouthful of water. He turned to the floor’s entrance and his face contorted in fury. He snagged the gun from his holster and pointed it at the intruder.

-He’s there! Get him!

A loose projectile flew Silver’s way, followed by a few delayed Sludge Bombs. The teen simply leapt a few steps back and smirked underneath his half-face mask.

-Sneasel, Blizzard.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Somehow these action chapters are just really rough on me.
I truly appreciate everyone's patience!

And again~

tw: people die when they're killed

The loss of the Ilex assembly and storage facilities put an enormous strain on all of the consecutive planning and logistics. With no outpost in direct vicinity to the Goldenrod Radio Tower, they were forced to reproduce the full manufacturing cycle in the limited quarters of the HQ and redirect the shipping routes under unrealistic deadlines. A series of last-minute briberies and 24/7 outposts on both north and west toll booths made it marginally passable, but, indubitably, all this resulted in cutting corners in development, delays, upsurge of expenses and an almost quintupled load of work on Petrel’s shoulders.

The man was undeniably pissed. Not only had he to juggle the new situation with the equipment while Archer was out rounding and preparing squads for the assault, but also clean up after his other colleague’s spectacular blunder. Of course, the Ilex sector’s admin faced instant demotion, all ranks annulled and clearances stripped, but that did little to alleviate the royal fucking mess Petrel had to deal with now. What made it even worse, they got little to no headway in finding the suspect. The worthless man’s and his no less worthless subordinates' reports made no bloody sense, there was not a single frame of footage salvaged from the hideout’s cameras and all physical access had been cut off by the squads of police still solidly rooted in the Ilex Forest.

Borderline unintelligible through the typos, almost cryptic, the paper kept going in loops like a broken record. Sure, the man might’ve lost his shooting hand and was currently under permanent lung ventilator support, but that was still no excuse for the sudden mental meltdown. Compulsive, he repeated the words ‘red’ and ‘ghost’ multiple times in a span of a few sentences. The grunts’ accounts of the circumstances shed barely any light on the utter fiasco either. All Petrel could make out, yet absolutely refused to believe in, was that the entire facility and all of its staff were taken out by a single damned kid.

While still in the area he first moved to check on the underground trainer association that was known to hold large areas of the metropolis and the nearing forest. After a few raids on their sites and a couple of friendly interrogations the theory fell through as utterly implausible.

He then ruled out the residual competing gangs and the police. A cursory audit revealed neither them being capable or having the guts to take on the region’s core syndicate, rejuvenated or not, in such a bold, impetuous fashion.

Dreading the possibility, he lastly looked into the professional team from three years ago. A corps of highly trained individuals that lead an organized, intricately orchestrated attack on Rocket’s headquarters and, eminently, succeeded.

He scoured any available data on the primary members, whether it were public records or ones of
their own account and found nothing recent or worthy enough of attention. They were primarily still anchored in Kanto with none, at least apparent, plans for expansion. Only exception being the female operative, that had remained off the grid ever since the last takedown.

He stared at her data file, anger building with the resurging memories. Had she not made her escape that time, had she not warned her teammates of the ambush, the outcome might have been very very different. And the person that enabled her to do that was none other than their own fucking agent. The arrogant punk that outranked Petrel within mere months after transferring into the upper division, the two-faceted brat that unexpectedly sided with the enemy, the backstabbing cunt that leaked classified information and sabotaged one of their most ambitious projects. The sorry fuck that ultimately got what he deserved.

Petrel closed his eyes and urged himself to calm down. He was getting sidetracked, the bitch and her petty sidekick weren’t, couldn’t be the perpetrators this time around. The latter for sure. He might’ve once been a top operative, an excellent agent, the admin conceded with a frown, but like anyone else, he still was very much human, flesh and bone. And according to the records, there wasn’t much left of either. Petrel had seen the footage, he’d read the autopsy report - the treasonous scum was dead.

And yet, the qualm, the worm of doubt squirmed and swathed him more and more with each passing day, the words ‘red ghost’ possessing his mind. What if the odd wording wasn’t just maniacal rambling, what if it was a code phrase or sorts, a warning?

Reviling himself for the senseless paranoia, he re-entered his credentials and tabbed into the archive. He lingered for a moment and then placed his hands on the keyboard.

Fuck it.

Rank: >A. Status: Deceased.

Silver was typing commands into the console with an almost inhuman speed, swapping between two screens on the fly. Each time the moving wall of text halted on either, he’d rapidly slide to the adjacent machine, punch in two long strings and immediately slide back.

Anxiously, Gold spun his head back and forth between his partner and the sprawling surveillance grid on the wall. Still anchored to their previously set route, the large-scale displays flaunted the intruders’ most recent exploits. The trashed convenience store, the utterly demolished trap zone, the blazing corridor and the frigid catacombs, all spattered with human and Pokémon bodies. Shot, poisoned, cut, burned, frozen. Suddenly feeling very queasy, he followed the sequence in horror, fearing, loathing the fact that it was of their own doing.

A growl echoed behind the wall, drawing the teen out of his minute daze. Much more dynamic, the picture in the last rightmost monitor was actively airing the vicious strife ongoing outside the locked doors of the control room.

The two Pokémon fought off enemy influxes with marked brutality while protecting their trainers on the other side. Sneasel struck two armed men with a Metal Claw and Feraligatr slammed a Weezing and a Golbat into the floor.

The teen yelled into his built-in microphone.

-Feraligatr, to your left!
The bulky reptile reeled in response and caught a writhing Arbok that was about to sink its venomous fangs into his skin.

Gold squinted, focusing his eyes on the hectic feed. He wasn’t the least thrilled with the idea of separating like that, but Silver had assured him that it was a no issue.

-Stay on the defensive and let Sneasel take the lead, he’s done this more than you’ve had Pokémon battles.

-Yeah, but what if--

The redhead pointed at the monitors.

-We’re at an advantage for a while, you’ll be our extra pair of eyes.

He walked over to the first row of computers and sat down.

-Use the resources while they last. Now give me some space, I need to concentrate.

The machine was beeping non stop. Silver had pulled the second keyboard towards his desk and was switching between the two with almost matching frequency. After an innumerable signal he shoved the inputs and slammed a fist on the desk.

-Shit.

Gold spun his head in concern. Before he could speak a sharp thud reverberated the metal doors, partially caving them in with force. The padlock screeched with strain and Gold stared at the moving figures on the screen in alarm. Driven into the gates by the same Arbok, Feraligatr roared and thrashed, struggling to break free from the binding wrap. Two Rocket goons were encircling him, drawing guns at his head.

The teen’s feet grew cold. Frantically, he searched for Sneasel with his eyes. Where the fuck was he?! Where the fuck was he when he was needed the most?

A triple snap echoed in his earpiece and the feed blurred with black. Gold held his breath as the audio went eerily silent. Gradually, the stains drewled down the camera lens, revealing the grisly scene behind. Arbok was sprawled on the ground sliced in two, tail twitching. A firearm lay beside it, loosely held by lifeless grunt’s arm. The second man was downed a few meters away, throat slit and spouting. The dark streaming crimson, it was everywhere.

A knot of bile rose in his throat and Gold moved away from the monitors, covering his mouth with a hand. Flashes of the gruesome wounds, the smell of burnt flesh, grunts’ glassy eyes gouged themselves into his mind, horribly intertwining with the gore on the screen. Overcome by the piling images and the stench of his own blood, he hurled.

With trembling hands he grabbed onto the back of a chair and turned to his partner, yearning, so desperately seeking… what? Comfort, salvation? Proof that they were still human?

Silver had not even looked up from his study. Entirely absorbed, he was muttering something under his breath, eyes frantically darting from line to line of code. He entered another elaborate command and then kicked the floor as the PC speaker uttered another beep.

Deliberately avoiding the camera feed - Sneasel seemed to have handled it without his help - Gold
took a sip from his flask and forcibly tried to pull himself together.

-Silver... is something wrong?

Irritably, the other drummed his fingers on the keyboard.

-Yes.

-Can I help?

-No.

Silver wrinkled his nose and for the first time shifted his gaze. He looked at Gold, the floor and then at the grid of flickering monitors. Lightly, he rocked his head. What was there to say? That one gets used to this, that he shouldn’t internalize it, that this is okay? Of course it wasn’t, it never should be. And yet so cruelly and frequently reality determined the reverse.

-I know. But the sooner I crack this the sooner we’re out of here.

Another gunshot resounded outside, another shriek. The brunette’s fingers dug into the faux leather.

-Are you still trying to crack their server?

-Yes, but they’re intercepting my every move. I can get into the system, but I cannot gain control. My root gets revoked almost instantly.

-I see... They aren’t all mall servers then.

-You wish they were.

Silver dropped, burning his eyes into the LCD.

-I’ve made 67 varying attempts, but so far they’ve predicted it all. The most I’ve managed to stay logged on was 46 milliseconds - that’s barely enough to run a bare bones low level system script, much less a full override and unless--

He cut mid sentence.

-No, wait. You’re absolutely right. The mall!

-Huh? What--

Silver had already seized the keyboard and was once more typing. Faster even than he had before, if that were even possible, fingers but a blur on the lettered plastic. He’d been plagued by tunnel vision, blinded by the single-minded approach. He did not have to gain full control, the root. The override wasn't the objective. Escape was. And for that all he needed was a spark, a cinder to start a wildfire.

He ran the routine for the 68th time. Just as the login logs flashed on the screen, he pasted a single command and hit submit. The main machine signed off with its characteristic sound and the open console started flooding with cascades of monochrome text. Stretching his fingers, Silver audibly exhaled. He then pulled out his own tablet and plugged it into the setup on his right. Briefly looking up, he addressed his companion.

-All right. Within 30 to 40 seconds the entire system will go into full reboot. Before that I’ll trigger
the evacuation alarm and jumble Rocket’s transmissions. We’ll quit getting updates on their positioning, but so would they.

He got up and readjusted his goggles and mask.

-Get the C4 ready. Along with the reboot the lockdown will start its reversal and the cameras would temporarily shut off. During that time we cover the east sector, circle around and gun for the north staircase. All clear?

-...Yeah.

Silver placed a hand on the over boy's shoulder and gave a small squeeze.

-Hang tight, we’re halfway there.

Gold nodded and Silver threw a final glance at the surveillance grid.

-Time to keep going. What’s going to happen now is complete chaos.

Petrel paced around his office, looming over the techs' hunched backs. Not only was the fucking brat alive, but he also managed to destroy half of the first level, effortlessly crush three C-rank squads and completely annihilate two special B-rank agents. What happened on the lowest floor was the most embarrassing lapse of all. Following the devastating ice move, Petrel and part of the staff were forced to flee the control room in haste and re-assess the strategy. A few members were left behind as an obstruction, but from what it seemed, they weren't able to hold the fort for all that long.

He stopped at one of the machines and snapped, causing the man to jump in his seat.

-What is it? What’s he doing?

-Still trying to break in. I’m stopping him so far, but he’s getting more and more inventive, I’m not sure if I can--

-Sure as hell you can. Revoke his permissions, remove his user, do your fucking job.

He shifted and neared the other goon.

-You. Any more intel on his ally?

-No, nothing.

-Nothing at all? Cross-region criminal data banks, federal records, gang archives?

-No, sir.

-Fuck. Keep looking.

Irate, Petrel tapped his foot on the floor. It was rather fortunate that the second brat didn’t turn out to be the notorious female agent from way back, but it raised reasonable questions. Just who the hell was he and how the heck did he get roped into this operation?

-Boss, boss, I think he gave up!
The first tech was waving his hand, pointing at the static array of breach attempts.

-See, he’s not trying anymore, he’s... Oh, shit.

-What?

-Shit, shit, shit, shit!

-What?!

-He’s... he’s encrypting our files. Recursively, using a new key every time.

-Huh?! Purge the script then!

The tech was in panic. Sweating profusely, with shaking hands he began sending off SIGKILLs in a hysterical fervor.

-I can’t! There’s no longer one process, the children are growing exponentially. Boss, we need to reboot!

-Denied. The lockdown must be retained.

-But, boss, at this rate we’ll lose all our data. Research, internal boards, everything! A fourth of the entire archive is already unreadable.

-Fuck.

Petrel repeated, staring into overloading process log on the laptop’s screen. Bloody punk. This was the last time he’d let himself get outdone. He picked up the radio and hit connect.

-All remaining C squads to B3F hatches. B-98 and B-25 cover the emergency exits, B-54 to main entrance.

Never removing the device from his ear, he turned back to the tech.

-Okay, now do it. Be sure to bring it back as soon as you can.

Just as the tech pulled up the reboot dialogue, a third type of alarm roared in the confined quarters of the HQ and all of the radio lines went dead.

The Rockets were in disarray. The entirety of the staff poured into the dimmed out corridors with raucous clamour. First the intruder alert, then the lockdown and now an evac alarm, nobody knew what was going on anymore, the utter lack of communication just adding oil to the fire.

By the time the teens escaped the east microelectronics sector, the frenetic mass of people morphed from a perturbed and indignant crowd to an almost uncontrollable stampede. It was all just as Silver predicted and probably even worse.

Hands tied in a lock, the duo shoved past scientists, lab techs and guard grunts through the narrow corridor towards the north wing. They’d get recognized now and then, but evading a bullet or a strike was but a matter of ducking behind another member of staff or starting a tiff in the crowd.

A rush thrust them in a wall, causing them to momentarily break contact. In frenzy, Silver searched for his companion and, finding a familiar sleeve in the mob of black, yanked hard. The other boy
stumbled and regrouped, returning a shaky thumbs up before trudging forward.

At the staircase the redhead snatched up the taser and sunk the charged diodes into the closest grunt’s back. The man jolted and wavered, tilting his entire frame and then, with the full weight of his armored body crashed on the flailing people behind. There was holler and a cuss and the riot started anew. With a heave Silver dragged Gold up the remaining steps, finally emerging at the second floor.

With no side labs or offices, besides the amplifier room, and the majority of the staff still stuck on the lower level, B2F gave amply more space to breathe. Facing suspiciously little disturbance, they sprinted down the long corridor heading west past the blinking lights. Just before the turn to the stairway Silver tuned into the comm channel.

-One flight left, we’re taking the second emergency exit.

In response he heard a second of static and a distant murmur.

No.

He halted instantly and spun on his heels.

No. No.

In a single motion he flung Gold into the nearest wall and ripped the fogged up goggles off his face.

No. No. No.

Eyes widening, he swiped the blade off his hip and sliced right through the impostor’s neck. The disjointed figure slackened, dissolving into a slop of pink goo. He dug a foot into the inert pile and fixedly tapped his ear.

-Where is he?

A voice much lower and much gruffer than Gold’s readily connected on the other end.

-Well, what have we here?

Silver froze. That man. The voice drawled on.

-You’ve messed with our radio, so I figured it’d be only fair to borrow yours. Long time no see, partner.

The teen clamped onto the blade’s rugged handle as sounds of struggle echoed on the other end.

-Don't, Sil-- Ugh, get off me! Don't, you hear me! Don’t come, it's a trap! Fuck--

A blow and a cry and Gold’s voice once again got reduced to muffled groaning.

-How thoughtful of him, but I don’t really need your reply. I’ve seen you protect this boy. You will agree to my conditions.

Silver’s jaw clenched.

-You--
The complacent smirk was audible even through the constant static.

-I never thought I’d get to say this again, but…

And so was the cynical sneer.

-AG-47 to B3F, sector C. This is an order.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

For how much trouble the previous two caused me, I hammered this one out in three days. Uh-uh.
¯\_(ツ)_/¯

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Silver walked up to the desk and dropped a stack of wired explosives. He then set down the M16 and discarded two pistols, a taser and a set of blades. He unlatched his Poké Ball belt, dumping it next to the weapons, and removed the detonator from his inner pocket. Lastly, he pulled off his goggles and removed the mask.

-Is this it?

Petrel nodded at the grunt by the door.

-Search him.

The teen stood still while the Rocket checked all the remaining pockets, his pant’s waistband and around the ankles of his boots. He heard a familiar click as a pair of handcuffs got clipped over his wrists. Taking a moment to survey the surroundings, he ran his eyes diagonally over the enclosed space.

The admin’s office was only slightly smaller than the control room, housing two large server blocks, a workstation and a long conference table that was hastily transformed into the new surveillance and control board. A tech had his face buried at his portable computer, typing madly - probably trying to undo the encryption damage - while the man to his right scrupulously calibrated the camera feeds that had just gotten back online. An agent equipped with an assault rifle was positioned in each corner of the room and two more grunts awaited by the exit.

Petrel sat at his desk in the center of the suite, while another armed man stood beside it, tightly holding onto his renitent captive. Gold bore a fresh bruise on his cheek in addition to his already injured nose. He looked ruffled, but otherwise unharmed.

He jerked when he saw the redhead, groaning through his gag, and made an attempt to step on the taller man’s foot. The grunt silently moved aside and twisted the teen’s arm behind his back, pushing his face into the cold surface of the table. Gold moaned and receded his efforts.

Silver watched a flashlight and a pair of syringes being added to the pile on the desk as Petrel lifted his hands in a mock welcome.

-Well, with that out of the way, let us celebrate our long awaited reunion!

-Release him. That was our deal.

-What’s with the rush? I’m sure you can spare me a few minutes, especially after all the mess the two of you caused around here.
He got up, walking around his desk in a wide arch.

-I’ll have to admit I did not expect to see you here, or anywhere for that matter. You know, for all these years I took you were dead and rotting in a trench somewhere.

Silver slightly tilted his head.

-Likewise.

-Oh, how so?

The boy made a half rotation and rocked it to the right.

-Wishful thinking. I’m glad to see you’ve gotten my parting gift, though.

The smugness faded from Petrel’s features. On reflex, he lifted a hand and traced the ugly burn marks covering the right half of his face. A volatile substance that ignited as soon as he’d broken the classified envelope’s seal. An untraceable explosive that he failed to link to any source.

-That was... you.

-Honestly, a failure on my part, seeing that you’re still up and breathing. A lot of your colleagues were much less fortunate. But, B-31, you’ve made yourself quite a career nonetheless. Or, pardon my form of address, have you given yourself a promotion while I wasn’t around?

Petrel lurched, covering the distance between them in three quick strides. He grabbed onto the teen’s hair and slammed him head first into the wall, dragging his face on the rough cement.

-I wouldn’t display such insolence in your position.

The teen spat a clot of blood and uncomfortably angled his head.

-Are you - cough - still that jealous of my position?

Petrel shoved him further into the wall, cutting his ability to speak.

-I’ll make you wish you were dismembered in that basement.

He jabbed him one last time and stepped back.

-You will regret having the audacity to survive and for ever trying to get in Team Rocket’s way. I will take everything from you, down to your last sense of belonging, last shred of dignity. And I’ll start with your little friend you were so gracious to bring along. I’ll tear his skin and shatter his every bone. I’ll sever his limbs. Deliberately, slowly. So by the end of it he would no longer be able to scream. I’ll throw his sordid remains at your feet and make you wait, watch while he bleeds to death. Then I will do the same to your Pokémon. Over and over you’ll see your partners’ light extinguish from their eyes and you’ll have no one to blame but yourself.

Silver pushed off the wall and held his gaze.

-Quite an elaborate fantasy. Keeps you up at night?

-Run your mouth all you want. And if you’re thinking I’m going to kill you in the end, you’re mistaken. That’d be too easy of an out for someone like you. Once I’m done I’ll throw you into confinement and ensure that you spend the rest of your wretched life in misery, pain and despair.
With forced nonchalance, Petrel lifted his arm.

-As a matter of fact, why put it off? We do have some time before the main show.

He flicked his fingers at his subordinate. The man drew Gold’s hand from behind his back and clamped onto his pinky. He snapped.

Gold’s eyes bulged as a guttural groan broke through his gag. He flailed with his entire body, futilely trying to escape the steadfast hold.

Petrel folded one of his own fingers.

-This is for the trap zone.

Another muted snap and another anguished moan.

-This is for your fire show on B2F.

Silver’s eye twitched, expression darkening considerably.

-I’ve pondered the possibility of sparing some of you in the beginning, but the moment you’ve decided to lay hands on him, you’ve signed your very own death sentence. Not a single one of you is getting out of here alive.

Petrel clicked his tongue and nodded at the grunt again. Snap.

Tears streamed down the brunette’s face, collecting in little pools on the polished wooden surface below.

-For your improvised ice sculpture display. And how brazen. Is that still denial or already anger?

A crackle drew his attention and Petrel picked up the radio.

-Affirmative. Yes, waiting for the final signal.

He set the bulky receiver back down on the desk.

-See what your radio stunt made us resort to?

He made a side gesture and Gold's captor moved up his hands.

-But it matters not now, the setup in the Goldenrod Tower is complete. Before we continue, though, there’s just one thing that I do not understand.

He reached and roughly twisted the brunette’s chin, forcing him to face upwards.

-Gold, Trainer ID 652417, 16 years old, blood type B, born July 21st, residence New Bark Town, lives alone with a single parent. Average, dull, mediocre at best. You were blessed with the opportunity to have worked with numerous top class agents in the short burst of your career. Even that blue-eyed bitch was up to par. But this one doesn’t make the cut. Not even close. So, AG-47, do entertain my curiosity - why him?

In the momentary vacillation Gold bolted, swinging his body forward. With a sharp jerk he threw his head up, thrusting his skull into Petrel’s mug with all his might. Blood spouted out of the admin’s nose and he spat, swearing, covering his now broken nose with a palm. Silver lifted the corner of his lips.
Well, there you have it.

Petrel stumbled back and hawked at the man clutching onto the teen’s arm.

-Do it.

The grunt locked Gold’s limb between his elbows and twisted. A fourth snap echoed in the room.

-ARRGH!!

The boy tossed and screamed, face red and contorted with pain. His right arm slipped out of the Rocket’s grasp and uselessly fell to the side, screwed at an unnatural angle.

Petrel patted his nose with a tissue and re-connected to the radio.

-That’s it. Playtime over.

He turned to the first tech.

-Activate it.

A faint buzzing resounded in the HQ, pulsing, gradually multiplying. The grunt loosened his grip and Gold plunged to the floor, writhing in pain. His body convulsed as he coughed, hand clawing at the straps of the gag. Petrel kicked him over and nodded at the other man. The grunt readily complied and removed the coarse fabric. Gold retched for the second time, spewing nothing but bloodied saliva.

Silver grit his teeth, counting down seconds. Please endure it, Gold. Just a bit more. Just a little longer.

Petrel merely scoffed.

-Naturally, the effects would be augmented given the amplifier’s proximity, but this is quite underwhelming. There I was worried he might prematurely end himself by choking on his own spew, but seems my worries were for naught.

He turned back to the standing teen.

-Of course I figured your earpieces weren’t just for communication. Impressive work duplicating them, but also rather pointless. I’ll let you keep yours just for the sake of it, after all, you’ve at least earned the front row seat to witness the results of your own failure.

The man at the computer flagged his hand.

-Boss, passing the threshold. Enabling the next row.

-Yes, go ahead.

The white noise skipped, leaping in frequency and a score of blinking lights switched on the stack of C4s in concert. A horrid screech boomed somewhere above.

Petrel jolted, snatching the detonator off the table. Violently, he smashed the cancel button. Feeling zero resistance, he shook the device and then chucked it on the floor, driving his foot in the pieces of hollow plastic. He stomped forward and dug his fingers into the redhead’s throat, trembling with fury.
-You-- What did you do?!

A second screech added to the first and a shock ran through the building’s foundation. The tech
yelled from his seat.

-Boss, boss, the tower, it’s--

-Fuck! The Radio Tower?!

-No, boss, Burned Tower. It’s crumbling right as we speak!

-WHAT?!

He turned back to Silver and growled through his teeth.

-You’ve never planned on handing yourself in, have you?

-Just as you’ve never planned on letting him go.

A shrill noise pierced the air and in a split second the radio wave frequency reversed.

The Rockets crashed all at once, immediately pressured by the geometrically manifolded
gravitational pull. Unable to even utter a sound, they rolled on the cold ground, clutching onto their
heads in agony.

Silver sprung to the table and smashed his head into the packed surface. Sneasel emerged and,
swiftly circling his trainer, hacked his claws through the steel bands of the handcuffs.

In a sweeping motion the teen hoisted a few of his belongings and retrieved his belt. He then
clicked the button again and recalled the Pokémon, swiping the earpiece in the last moment. He
leapt over the desk and thrust the device into Gold’s ear. Fiercely, he jerked his partner’s Poké Ball
belt and bag out of another grunt’s hands and forcefully dragged the boy off the floor.

The noise reached its crescendo and a blast thundered above, tearing through the paneled ceiling.
Right as a slab of concrete crashed down, the two boys busted out of the admin’s office. They ran
down the same corridor, avoiding sprawled out bodies and bursts of crumbling rubble. Silver
kicked a squirming Rocket aside and bolted up the filthy stairs. At the end of the flight he stopped
and pulled out the glass syringe. Brusquely, he removed the cap and stabbed Gold just above the
elbow. He held him by both cheeks, waiting for his eyes to regain relative focus.

-I’m so sorry. You did good. But we cannot stop here, the place will be up in the air in under five
minutes.

The brunette blinked several times, struggling to maintain consciousness. His skull was still
splitting in two and his arm burned with searing pain. Involuntary, he slumped, body no longer able
to handle the continuous injury. A light prick added to the crippling ache and he felt an unfamiliar
sensation spreading throughout his tissues. Mere seconds later his body felt springier somehow,
lighter, the strain from the fractures now but a rhythmic pulse at the back of his mind.

He saw the Silver nod and stretch out his arm. Arduously, he pulled himself up and staggered up
the rest of the steps, finally catching up to his partner.

A bullet flew millimeters past Gold’s neck and Silver spiraled, thrusting the teen into the curved
railing with one hand. With the other he snatched up his pistol when three shots sunk into his
chest. He stumbled, frame caving in and knees buckling with the impact.
Gold’s eyes locked with Petrel’s. Stolen damping device lodged in his ear, the man was climbing the stairway, cleanly aiming his gun right at Silver’s head. Gold's muscles moved on their own volition. He clamped his hand over Silver’s and fired. Over and over until the trigger aimlessly clicked, hammer hitting an empty chamber, until he saw the older man tumble and fall back down the stairs. He let the gun loose and latched onto Silver’s chest.

The redhead slacked to the floor, breaths coming in shallow rasps and streams of blood oozing from his mouth. Gold clung onto him, chanting in dread.

-No, please, no, no, Silver, please...

A chunk of concrete fell somewhere behind and Gold heaved, toiling to throw the other’s arm over his shoulder. Silver shifted, groaning, and hacked up another dark clump of blood.

-Ugh…

Gold cried out.

-Silver, you’re--

-Fine. Vest. We should… go.

He leaned on the other and they both swayed, making their way down the long halfway demolished corridor of B2F. They circled around the second staircase when a blast tore a wall open mere meters away, bearing the wads of rebar, and the ground beneath them went in deep fissures. The last Electrode finally blew its fuse.

They passed a Rocket buried in rubble and narrowly avoided a gush of hot steam from a ruptured pipe. A tremor shook the walls for the countless time and a slab of ceiling crumbled over their heads. Gold felt an arm cover his scalp as Silver shielded him from above. His clothes torn and filthy, he was covered in dust; temple, shoulder and hands caked with blood. He stared somewhere far ahead, searching, stubbornly, frantically searching for escape.

Gold wavered in his spot. He was at fault for all of this. If he wasn’t stupid enough to get himself caught, Silver wouldn't have returned for him, wouldn't have eaten three bullets for his sake. If it weren't for him at least one of them would’ve been able to get out of here alive.

No longer seeing a thing past his outstretched hand and remnants of his strength draining from his exhausted body, Gold caught a thought boring itself into his mind. This was it, they were going to die.

The roaring sound of destruction, the screams of anguish, the utter panic flooding his eardrums. They were going to die.

The high-tech base crumbling right before his eyes.

They were going to die.

The brilliant, breathtaking person standing beside him, hurting, bleeding.

They were both going to die.

Desperately, he clutched to the other’s jacket with his good arm and looked up in wild determination. He knew he did not deserve the other boy, he’d never had. And yet, he couldn’t
abide, couldn’t resist. He pulled himself up, pleading, praying, that his faltering voice would reach his partner.

-Silver, I--

Again and again the three precious words drowned in the deafening carnage. He squeezed his eyes, holding back tears. Selfish, so terribly, gruesomely selfish. But if this was the last thing he was going to do in his life, then so be it.

Just as he placed his mouth on Silver’s, the floor under their feet collapsed.

Chapter End Notes

Beautiful fanart by wea-telefonica-1
Chapter Notes

If anyone's interested I have this playlist I've been listening to on repeat while writing, well, all of this. Feel free to check it out and make any suggestions of your own. I'd be thrilled to hear what kind of music you associate with our preciousmetal boys!

>>> LINK <<<

also dis chapter had me _(:3 ╰_ANGLE_)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They got dragged hard on the dirt, leaving a long rut in the wet gravel. Right as they were about to crash into a ragged rock, Silver released the Escape Rope’s handle and kicked off. Bracing Gold with both arms, he twisted, rolling sideways on momentum, and slammed back first into a standing tree. He untangled his hold and pushed himself up, gasping for air and clawing his fingers into the damp bark. That was close. Way too close for his liking. Another instant and they would’ve met the same fate as the numerous Rockets now buried deep under the remnants of their own headquarters.

Wiping the blood from his eyes, he regarded the havoc in the shopping district. They were a ways off, yet he could clearly see the jagged depressions in the blast’s epicenter. Deep vertical cracks zigzagged the broken asphalt, digging into the adjacent buildings, reducing whole slabs of concrete to coarse rubble. A tall pillar of smoke rose from the ground and blended with the ominous storm clouds above.

The reversal transmitter had always been a wildcard. There were far too many moving parts to make a calculated assessment - the Electrodes’ erratic nature, the unpredictable blast sequence, the vicinity of the amplifier just to name a few. It had never meant to be used in such a reckless manner and yet B-31 left him with no choice. Of course, the growing commotion and Gengar’s ability allowed for the preliminary setup, but what would’ve happened after was entirely out of his hands. Add a concentrated six kilo demolition charge to the mix and the chances of survival dropped significantly for all parties involved. They were lucky to have escaped at all and even luckier to have escaped in one piece.

He stooped by the other boy and gently lifted his head. Gold was just barely conscious, muscles weak and eyes fluttering. He slumped in his partner’s arms as Silver ran a check on his injuries. The nose had already stopped bleeding and there wasn’t much he could do with the broken fingers and arm with the supplies at hand. The trauma was certainly unpleasant, but not life threatening. He squeezed Gold’s healthy hand and ushered him to relax.

-It’s okay. You’ve held out long enough.

Giving him a few more moments to wind down, Silver flicked his fingers and summoned the biding ghost type from the tree’s long shadow. He retrieved the Pokémon with a click and then turned back. Sadly, he gazed at his partner’s tortured expression. B-31 was right. There was no one to blame for this than himself.
Silver took a deep breath and hoisted him up. He groaned at the added weight and grabbed onto the trunk, regaining balance. Then, onerously, he started walking. The sooner they got out of here, the sooner Gold could get help.

Plagued with double vision and head ceaselessly spinning, Gold ran through a long corridor flooded with flashing neon lights. There were bodies everywhere. Dismembered, burned and suffocated. Moaning, wailing, screaming. Human and Pokémon victims of a bloody massacre. Or perhaps just mere casualties.

Something grabbed onto the boy’s ankle and he yelped, booting it back in panic. A man’s arm fell away as its owner gaped at his assailant, pleading for help. His head and shoulders were sticking from the brash, the rest of his body crushed by the piling debris. Gold frenziedly shook his head, a single phrase glued to his lips. I’m sorry, I cannot help you.

He sprinted further, stepping, kicking, jumping over the countless hands stretching in his direction. I cannot help any of you.

At long last, the hallway came to an end and he was faced with a steep staircase. Blindly, he started running, for the lack of anywhere else to run, when he noticed a familiar figure looming at the very top. Gold scampered after him, climbing step after step, stumbling, falling, losing count of how many times he had to get up. As soon as he’d get closer he’d stretch his arm, but every time his hand would slide through air, never reaching his partner’s. He tried shouting, calling out to him, but the redhead remained elusive and unattainable as ever, face covered by a long shadow.

Suddenly, a shot boomed in the stairway and Silver’s silhouette plummeted to the ground. A dreadful blossom of red spread over his chest, soaking his clothes, skin and the floor below.

The other boy’s blood froze in his veins. No, please, not again. He scrambled up the remaining steps and leaned over Silver’s face. Two vacant, dilated pupils stared back at him, never being able to see again. Digging his fingers into his partner’s sodden jacket, Gold screamed.

He jerked awake and lurched, abruptly propping himself up. A jolt of excruciating pain shot through his arm and he bit down, stifling a groan. Hesitantly, he looked over. There was no gore or blood, just a sweat drenched shirt and a large, cushioned sleeping bag draped over his knees. A splint bound three of his fingers and a black padded cast tightly strapped to the bend of his limb. He tried to move it again and earned another sharp jab to his elbow. Weakly, he ran his hand over the nylon cover, the cast’s course material and his tender skin.

It all felt very much solid, physical. And given how much that fucking hurt right now there could only be one conclusion - he was alive. He did not know how, but he was still alive. And if he was, then...

Trying not to aggravate his fractures, he leaned on his left arm and pushed. He found himself in poorly lit room filled with boxes, cables and a tall metal safe in the farthest corner. A fan lazily rotated on a compact desk and a processor blinked with colored lights right under.

Silver was situated across, slouching on the opposing wall. A messy bandage circled his head and long bands of gauze spiraled all the way up both of his arms. Sneasel perched beside him, holding a clawed paw over his trainer’s heaving chest as a faint mist emanated from below, covering the raw skin with a frosty veil.
The surge of relief at his partner’s sight immediately got crushed by a spate of searing shame. Silver had repeatedly risked his life for him, while he had become what he’d feared most - a burden. A grievous, glaring burden. Had he done a single thing to contribute in the fight against Team Rocket? His Pokémon struggled when it mattered the most and he himself had only retaliated when his partner was forced to cover for him with his own flesh.

Silver had foreseen this from day one. If only Gold had taken the word for it, swallowed his egotism, his vanity and pride and left that fucking inn. If only he’d never insisted on pursuing this unequal partnership.

The last moments in the accursed base flashed in his mind all at once. And this is how he repaid him. He screwed his eyes shut, drowning in guilt. Arrogant, greedy, self-centered fool.

He forcibly shook his head and then lifted his gaze. Testing if the other was alert, he breathed.

-Silver, are you awake?

The redhead shifted a bit and then languidly cracked one eye open. Gold bit his lip. This is where he apologizes for his abhorrent conduct and prays that Silver is still willing to speak to him after. The words stuck in his throat and he stuttered.

-Th-thank you.

He strained to maintain eye contact.

-For everything. For saving my sorry ass. Twice. Um, three times. No, definitely more. For coming back, for getting me out of there, for treating my wounds. Again. For tolerating me even if I… when I…

He swallowed a swell of tears. He knew how much Silver detested this. He was definitely going to get scolded, but there was no way he could renounce his acts. Not after the awful self-indulgence he displayed just because he’d assumed he wasn’t going to survive.

-I’m so sorry, I had no right to do that, I just… I’m...

Silver angled his head, now surveying him with both eyes.

-Extended exposure to pain can and will cause shock. I cannot blame you for passing out.

The brunette closed his mouth and fell silent. Passing out? That wasn’t at all what he meant. Had the other really not registered the nonconsensual advance? Or was it some form of misplaced courtesy? Just in case he agreed to shut it, while Silver continued to speak, voice husky and dry.

-I’m the one who owes you an apology. I should’ve been more observant, I should’ve held your hand tight, I shouldn’t have let them have you. I’d hoped you’d never experience what you did back there. Gold, if you’d ever forgive me, I cannot even begin to say how sorry I am.

Gold's expression went from mildly baffled to utterly incensed and then to despairingly woeful in a matter of seconds.

-What are you... You realize that if it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t even be here, right?

Silver did not reply. He gestured to Sneasel to step away and reached for a new elastic bandage pack. Gold saw the horrible, livid bruise stretching over the entire left side of his chest, radically inundating all of the older and paler contusions.
-Are they… broken?

-Yes.

He lowered his head in remorse. More fractured ribs, more hurt and more guilt.

-I’m so--

-Stop this. He was aiming for your temple. This merely hurt me, but it would’ve killed you.

-You couldn’t have known, it all happened so quickly!

-I took my chances.

Gold grimaced, replaying staircase scene’s ghastly variations. And the inevitable, crushing despair.

-What if you died in my stead?

-Then it would’ve given you a chance to escape. Unlike yours, my life is expendable.

The sitting boy rounded his eyes, appalled. What the hell was he saying? Silver’s life - expendable? No, no, no, nobody’s was. As hypocritical it might’ve sounded at this point. Not Silver's, not his, not anyone else's.

Of course, Gold didn’t want to die. He'd never been this close to the edge and the sheer understanding that this frail and fragile existence could be ended in but an instant, the very notion of death - it was terrifying. He did not want to die, but even much less did he want Silver to. So why had the other insisted on being so blatantly offhand about it? Gold could never discern or comprehend. This was as real as it got, this was no longer a joke.

He froze, forgetting the sores and the strain as a blanket of sickening dread enveloped him in morbid realization. To Silver it never was.

-Silver, you...

Starting with his hands and quickly spreading throughout an ice cold chill swathed over his body.

-After you've beaten Team Rocket, after you've found Giovanni, after all of it, what were you planning to do?

He began to shake, involuntarily, uncontrollably, his voice shifting to a high pitched treble.

-Silver, please tell me, what were you going to do?

Avoiding his gaze, the other teen hung his head.

-I’m sorry for that as well. I’m sorry for a lot of things. But trust me, this is for the best.

Gold’s heart sank.

-No…

-You’ve seen me for what I am today, what I do. Weren’t you revolted, sickenened, horrified? No, of course you were, I saw your eyes in the control room.

-No, I--
I’ve been doing this ever since I could remember, ever since I’ve completed my training and even before that. I have more blood on my hands than I could ever cleanse. You’ve heard him, haven’t you? Tell me, what is my true name?

-Silver--

-Not according to them.

-No, it’s Silver--

-Say it.

Feeling the word being pried from his vocals, Gold’s voice dropped to a whisper.

-AG-47.

-There you go. AG-47, Team Rocket special ops, first division. AG-47, the youngest agent with the highest body count in both B and A-class. AG-47, the mindless weapon that feels no grief and no pain. Well, AG-47 is going to do this world a favour and rid it of Team Rocket, Giovanni and his wretched self along the way. And not like before. This time once and for all.

He seized the bandage in his grasp.

-Those things that he threatened me with? Not a fantasy or a projection either. They’re but a mere recollection, a pretty solid one at that, of the events from three years ago. He might’ve omitted some details and added some of his own, but he wasn’t lying. If not for me and my erroneous actions, my partners would still be breathing, they’d still be alive.

The elastic band tore in his hands.

-That’s why I went to the lengths that I did, that’s why I cannot let anyone else die in my stead. Not again. Not you.

He briefly hooded his eyes.

-But it is fine, it will all be over soon. This never meant to and no longer has anything to do with you. Once I’m gone, your life will return to normal, to what it’s been before. You’ll keep collecting badges, training with your Pokémon, you will forget this hideous misguided detour. It’ll be but a nightmare that never happened. You don’t have to concern yourself with any of what transpired today either, I’m taking responsibility--

A punch drilled Silver’s already bruised face, driving his head back. It was awkward, clumsy, lacking focus and zeal. Still, he took it, displaying no intention to either block or evade. He knew he’d deserved it and then certainly much much more. He was going to let Gold beat him black and blue for all he cared. For ruining his life, for scarring him beyond return, for drawing him in and pretending that there’d ever be a happy ending. He prepared himself for the impact, yet the next blow never came.

Gold was kneeling before him, tears rolling down his face, fist clenched in a tight ball.

-Forget? Never happened? For the best? How dare, how fucking dare-- How dare you say things like this? How dare you make choices for me?

He looked at his partner, gaze filled with hurt and betrayal.
-How can’t you see that I love you, you idiot?!

Eyes wide, Silver slowly turned his head.

He must’ve misheard.

-You… love me?

Gold must’ve overdosed on painkillers. Probably both. This was not plausible. There was no way he felt this way. Not towards him.

-No, Gold, you--

-I’ve always loved you. I might’ve not realized it right away, but I am sure of it now. Ever since you kicked me out from behind the lab, ever since our first battle. All this time. While we trained, while we argued, while we ate breakfast or lunch, while we hiked through that stupid mountain, while we fought Team Rocket, while we were together, while we were apart. I have always, always loved you, I love you now and I always will.

He wiped his eyes with a sleeve.

-I know you don’t feel the same way about me, you’ve made it clear before. It’s paralyzing, it hurts. I’ll work hard to accept it. But please, please stop saying these horrible things. Please stop putting all of this on yourself. Responsibility, my ass...

He suppressed a snivel.

-I… still have no idea how to deal with it, I still don’t know what to think or do with myself. But all of those people, all of those Pokémon. I did it. I killed them too!

He shuddered and uncurled his fist, placing it on the ground.

-We’ll work through this somehow, we’ll figure it out. I don’t know how, but we’ll do it. Together. Just please, Silver, don’t ever say things like that, don’t make choices just because you decided on your own what’s better for me, don’t leave me just because…

He heard a faint shuffle as the other moved from his spot. Silver hovered his fingers in the air, looking ostensibly bewildered and lost. Before the other could make up his mind and withdraw, Gold wrapped his hand over his partner’s. There was blood under his nails and purple bruises speckling his skin. It was bandaged just as the rest of the arms, the reddish-brown already beginning to seep from the other side of the dressing.

Physical wounds. The visible, temporary kind. The ones that sliced deepest and hurt magnitudes more never lay on the surface and couldn’t be mended with mere antibiotics and gauze.

Shamefully, Gold mumbled.

-I’m sorry I punched you.

-I had it coming.

Silver removed his palm from his partner’s hold and Gold's gaze fell on Sneasel who’d been quietly waiting by the fan nearby. The ice type’s resolute, unblinking expression, so similar to his trainer’s, wrung the boy’s heart as much as Silver's admissions.

"Wasn't lying", "always had him with me", "still be alive".
He covered his mouth in horror.

-Sneasel. He’s the only one left...

-Yes, he is.

All of the cryptic words and statements, the growing list of taboo topics. It all had become so painfully clear. Silver's reason for fighting and Silver's crippling regrets. The burdens he bore day after day, year after year, all this time, all on his own. Burdens large enough to fuel this endless self-loathing and heavy enough to push one to wish for their own death.

Gold balled up his hand again as the simmering guilt morphed into boiling rage. In an impulse he realized that if given the chance, he would've gladly dumped a whole magazine worth of lead into that admin’s face all over again. And then done the same to his lowly henchmen and anyone else that dared do this to Silver.

Seeing the other’s abrupt shift in expression, Silver just tiredly rocked his head.

-I appreciate the sentiment, but no need to trouble yourself.

-But they--

-Yes, they did. They did other things too. And now most of the ones responsible are dead. B-31 was an exception. Him an a few others were actually smart enough to flee the region before the final rounds. I spent years trying to track them down, but even then some managed to escape.

He called Sneasel over and waited for the Pokémon to settle between his legs. He patted his head, lightly stroking the fine grey fur.

-You know, I've hesitated for the longest time. I've polished my technique, I've studied advanced systems security and worked on synthesizing explosives from scratch. But in the end none of it mattered. It proved impossible to do what I’d planned on my own, without forming a new party. I struggled in the beginning, I doubled down on my training methods and forced myself to draw a very strict line. All of my Pokémon have a perfect understanding of their roles. They are able to operate both as a team and independently if need be, requiring minimum input from me as a trainer. They are set to release on the event of my death.

He pressed the button on Sneasel’s Poké Ball and watched the ice type dissolve in red light.

-But in all of this my biggest mistake was failing to draw this line with you. Because when I did, I believe it already had been way too late.

He tumbled the orb from one hand to another.

-I have never planned for these… circumstances and, quite frankly, it’s hard for me to understand. No matter how you look at it, I'm not a good person, Gold. I'm a criminal, an outlaw, I always have been. All I can do is cause ruin and pain. How could you be okay with any of this?

Gold looked at him with genuine sorrow.

-Of course I’ve realized all that, or at least suspected. People don’t normally go stealing Pokémon or talk about ‘neutralizing’ mob bosses as part of their daily routine, you know. It unsettled me, scared even at first, but to me that had never been what defined you. Your strength, your wit and your unyielding resolve. Your singular candor and raw nerve. Your innate kindness. Yes, kindness. What you've just said about Pokémon is more than proof. Silver, even if you refuse to see it
yourself, you're incredible, absolutely incredible. You're the most extraordinary person I've ever met.

Silver grit his teeth. He still couldn't fathom what was going through the other's head. How could Gold look past all of the terrible things he'd done so easily, without turning back? How could he forgive all this murder and hurt? And terms such as incredible, extraordinary? There was nothing there to see. At the end of the day he was no better than B-31 or any of the other scum that he'd despised and vowed to destroy.

And yet, Gold's pain was so abiding and sincere that there was no way he could be denounced for dishonesty. So intense that it made Silver's own chest ache with yearning. This was so perversely twisted. Could he really indulge himself like this, and in between operations at that? He'd planned on dropping Gold off at a hospital and severing all ties as soon as he'd treated his own wounds and be done and over with it. In order to protect the other boy's life and his real, still existing future. But after hearing what he'd just heard and seeing what he'd just seen, he couldn't decide what would be more selfish after all - following through or letting him stay by his side till the end.

The other boy stifled another sob and the Poké Ball rolled out of Silver's palm. He placed his hand on Gold's cheek, tenderly wiped the hot tears. Hesitating for but a moment, he spoke.

-I am sorry, Gold. I cannot give you what you want.

The other held in his shaking breath, resisting the urge to lean in. Of course, not that he expected anything else. Silver had been dealing with things much more serious than a lovesick boy’s confession, his answer had been long established. But it still hurt. Just as bad as it did when he first heard the rejection. He squeezed his eyes, trying to shut out the escaping tears, when a soft touch propped his chin upwards.

-But I’ll give you all that I can.

Huh?

-I don’t know what this feeling is. It makes me weak, vulnerable. It is confounding and, honestly, rather disturbing. I cannot put it under control no matter how hard I try. But at the same time it makes me feel... warm. As if at last there’s a place where I am welcome, where I am accepted.

He managed a little smile.

-I don’t know what this feeling is. But just this once, if you'll have me, instead of fighting it, I’m willing to give it a try.

Gold refused to believe his ears. This wasn’t a clear ‘yes’, but it wasn’t an overt ‘no’ either. He lunged forward for a hug when a sharp pain crunched his broken limb. Halting for but a second, he wrapped his healthy arm around the other boy.

-Oh, Silver. Silver, you...

Laughing, weeping, Gold cried into the tangled red strands.

-Believe it or not, but I’ve never been in so much pain and so fucking happy at the same time in my entire life.

Silver said nothing in return. He wrapped his arms around Gold and tightened the embrace, bringing him closer. Just like the first night in the tiny hotel they held onto each other. Feeling, breathing. Tuning to the frenzied rhythm of their racing hearts.
Nothing else mattered in the world. And if they were meant to burn, then they were going to burn together.

They drew apart and Gold wiped his eyes yet again. Momentarily, his expression turned serious.

- Before I get too swept away with joy there's one thing I need to make absolutely sure of.
- Hm?
- You're not still planning on killing yourself are you?
- I...

The other opened his mouth and then closed it again. Gold didn't waver.
- I see. But I’m not giving up.

Again, he clutched Silver's hand.
- I promise I'm going to change your mind.

For Silver, for all of Silver’s Pokémon, alive or deceased, and, finally, for himself.

Before his partner could dispute in any way, he twisted his head, giving his surroundings a second view.

- By the way, where the heck even are we?

Silver let the subject slide without contest.
- My storage unit in Violet City.

The brunette hummed, counting back inside of his head - Mahogany, Ecruteak, Goldenrod, Azalea, Violet...
- Violet City?!
- Check for yourself if you'd like.
- No, I just… What day is it? How long have I been out?

The other chuckled lightly and glanced at the digital clock on the large computer screen.
- Relax, it's the same day. It's only been four hours and thirty six minutes.

Gold’s mouth hung open. Four hours and thirty six minutes. It took them a good day to overcome Mt. Mortar’s pass, nap breaks included, but tonight they managed to escape the HQ, cross the ridge and settle down in a whopping four and a half hours?

He deadpanned.
- Tell me honestly. Did we teleport?
- You’re well aware that Teleport doesn’t work this way. We followed a series of connecting underground rivers and waterfalls. I couldn’t secure the entire route ahead of time, so I admit it was quite a gamble, but Gyarados got the job done. We’ve covered almost a hundred kilometers downstream this way.
-Oof.

Arguably, this was way more impressive than an elusory psychic move. He exhaled and stared at the other teen.

-You pull stuff like this and then demand I hold back on ovations? I'm idolizing the fuck out of you.

Squinting, Silver tilted his head.

-Is that a threat?

Gold grinned.

-You know it. And this is just the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

related arts: one and two
The Ilex storage facility was gone. Mahogany base demolished. Burned Tower in shambles.

Like a house of cards everything was falling apart. Methodically, precipitantly.

AP-31 swore up and down that the radio blackout was a temporary malfunction and so was the sudden recalibration of the transmitter frequency and yet no more than ten minutes later all communications were cut with the HQ. The last thing he’d received from any of the Mahogany personnel was a curt message with a single four symbol cryptonym.

Archer leaned back in his executive chair and closed his eyes. Such shameless, insatiable vanity. The man must’ve suspected, if not known of the assailant's identity prior to the attack, yet he chose to keep it all to himself. Not only that, but he also thought he might’ve stood a chance against the younger, yet nonetheless superior agent. Ranks existed for a reason, and having barely scratched A-class AP-31 must’ve understood this better than anyone, and still… The admin put a hand over his face. Add the plain and innumerable stupidity.

He’d staunchly remembered the first day boss showed up at one of their Kanto outposts with a kid, no older than five or six, and threw him into the special training regiment. Giovanni was explicit with his instructions - cut the child no slack, show no mercy and treat him no other than any of the current members, regardless of age or skill.

Of course, the boy was a joke at first. The mascot, the punching bag, the boss’s self-indulgent little pet project. Nobody dared to defy their leader’s will, but neither did they perceive the purpose of the experiment. The kid was useless in field, struggled with weapons and could barely speak or move by the end of their standard routine. He was just dead weight, bringing the whole squad down in the ranks of the organization.

This lasted for a year, maybe year and a half, but eventually the scrawny brat proved every single one of them wrong. He was tenacious, daring. He executed his orders with a ferocity inherent only to a child that new nothing but. Unflinching, he’d accepted pain, and the same way he’d inflicted it. He never cried, he was willing to take risks nobody else on the squad would. Sometimes Archer would wonder if the kid had a death wish for all the feats that he pulled without giving it a second thought or batting an eye. Yet time and time again the young agent and his Pokémon emerged victorious, unharmed, but more frequently covered in blood - his enemies’ or his own.

The boy’s rapid professional growth intrigued the admin rather than caused envy. Agile, sharp, immaculate. An ace in combat sambo and a stellar shot. In just five years Giovanni’s cruel whim bloomed into a perfect and deadly weapon.

He kept close tabs on the deft subordinate ever since he'd breezed out of C-class, hauling an impressive record, and even pondered recruiting him to his own squad. But AG-47 had duped them all. Three years ago and now again. Like the legendary Ho-Oh he’d risen from the ashes, seeking to hunt them down in an act of burning, personal vengeance.

To a degree, Archer could respect the resolve, as he could also respect raw ability and skill. What he absolutely couldn’t was flagrant, recurrent treason.
He lifted a hand and tapped his ear three times in short intervals.

-Marksman and overwatch switch positions to scheme 7. Ground squads secure the underpass on north and west ends. Team Taurus set explosives in sectors 2 through 9.

He shut the encrypted channel and leered, gazing over the metropolitan city dozens of stories below him. Ranks were there for a reason and in this setting the brat stood no chance against him. Whether it was strategy, combat or Pokémon battles. He had the whole city in the palm of his hand and if the teen dared to contest it, then he’d be waiting with open arms.

AG-47 might’ve started this lethal game of chess but Archer was surely going to be the one to end it.

ATTENTION, ALL CITIZENS OF JOHTO. WE ARE TEAM ROCKET. AFTER THREE YEARS OF PREPARATION WE HAVE RISEN ONCE AGAIN. WE HAVE TAKEN OVER YOUR CAPITAL AND WE’RE NOT STOPPING HERE. JOIN US IN OUR CAUSE OR PREPARE TO FEEL A WORLD OF PAIN. ATTENTION, ALL...

Silver switched off the endlessly looping announcement and rested his chin on his hands.

-They mined the city.

The duo was sitting in front of the elaborate computer setup, drawn to the screen. A miniature camera grid of three by three blinked in the top left corner and a script ran in the main console on the screen. Gold reflexively stiffened.

-They what?!

-I’m positive of it. The recording cut after the introduction and before the recruitment call. They meant to make a more compelling case for their newfound power, but due to the recent lack of options they were forced to resort to the standard intimidation technique. The only fallback they currently have is terrorism by common means.

-Will they really do it, though?

-The Rockets are rather known for theft and Pokémon related crime than mass extermination, but since they’re making a public announcement of this scale, they need to take their precautions. It’s a failsafe, bargaining power against any opposing forces, whether it’s the police, competing factions or us. The day of the festival was chosen on purpose as well - one, to reach the most amount of people and, two, to use the crowds as human shields if need be.

Gold angrily dug his nails into the skin of his palm.

-This is disgusting.

-Dirty, true, but effective. Worst part is, the same strategy wouldn’t work against them.

-What do you mean?

-They are swift to discard their agents, so holding a hostage won’t do much good for negotiations.

Something about the phrase rung in a very macabre way and the teen wavered.

-Have you… been in this situation?
-Both ways.

His partner had always been candid in responses to these kinds of questions, but now that Gold finally had context, even partial, each little comment, every new detail made Silver's experiences feel so much worse. So if he didn’t want to heedlessly unearth something even more painful, this was the time to quit talking.

-I… see. And the ‘options’ you were talking about, you meant the transmitter, right?

Silver didn’t seem swayed by either change of topic.

-And the beings in the Burned Tower.

-Oh...

The redhead clicked, repeatedly pulling up the data. Gold must’ve still been under the effects of the white noise when the Rocket tech made his report and neither was he alert for the initial check on the indicators. Silver angled the screen, showcasing the list of blank images.

-The night cam is shot, but the thermal cam managed to acquire some interesting results before going as well. For a split second the temperature dropped to 90 degrees below zero, then, as if ignited by a spark, spiked to over a thousand Celsius. It was over in an instant.

Gold muttered under his breath.

-Holy shit, it worked.

-Yes, but that is now beside the point. There's no data to support the creatures' further activity or potential involvement and I checked - among weather stations and radiation gauges across the region, neither had registered a thing. Thus, I'm discounting their existence altogether for the time being.

With that Silver got up and walked to the armored safe in the corner of the room. He noisily unlatched it and pulled out two weighty boxes, setting them on the table, and a tall firearm that almost reached his shoulder in length. He perched one end on the box beside Gold and pulled a handle, checking the chamber.

The other teen blanked, outright staring at the long metal handguard and barrel.

-You own a sniper rifle.

-Unofficially. So?

-Didn’t you say that you… didn’t favour guns?

-But a whimsy I cannot uphold. I’m unable to fight the same way I would if I were fully healed and the original Goldenrod strategy is now obsolete. I need to work the new options.

-Obsolete?

-I’ve never meant to disable the radio so prematurely, yet the server’s security and the subsequent escape proved to be much larger hurdles than I’d anticipated. I have no current info on their tactical campaign and I’m positive that by now most of the assault teams have moved from their original positions. There's no time to decipher their new frequency hopping algorithm either.

He picked up an empty magazine and started shoving in bullets one by one.
-I’ll take out the contending snipers and get my hands on one of their comm devices. That way I’d both gain the necessary intel and clear my path prior to engaging the tower.

Gold nodded seriously. The obvious intent no longer worried him as much as it would have a mere week ago.

-O...okay. What about me then?

-You’re staying here.

Now this was something that he did not foresee.

-What?!

-You’re injured, Gold. I would not expect you to keep fighting after what happened in Mahogany.

-You’re way more injured than me! A few broken fingers is nothing compared to… compared to you. I’ll just take the drug again and--

Abruptly, he shut his mouth and lowered his gaze. No, he should have foreseen this, he’d done this before. He’d done this multiple times and look where it fucking got him.

-Sorry, you are right. I’ve been enough of a burden already. As much as I’d wanted to go, I’d never forgive myself if you got hurt over me ever again. If you’re telling me to stay here I will.

Silver put down the polished rounds and looked at him, eyes softening.

-You’re still on about this?

-Of course I am, you--

-I’ve never considered you a burden.

Disbelieving, Gold lifted his eyes.

-You haven’t?

-Rash, disorganized, hasty, perhaps, but not once a burden. The reason for my proposition is your own safety, but if you’re set on coming I shall not hold you back. Do keep in mind, though, that going into this injured poses its own difficulties.

-You’ve been doing it.

-I have and by no means is it a pleasant experience. This time the pain will be with you from the beginning. Even with the drug, it will be there, with every step, every breath. It’s not a matter of pride, but of physical stamina. So again, if you think you’re unable to handle it, I’m urging you to reconsider.

Gold fell silent. Had he tumbled off a skateboard and broken a limb, he would’ve insisted on playing hooky for at least a week before leaving his room, drowning himself in overblown pity, junk food and some trendy TV show comprised of 10 seasons minimum. He would’ve unapologetically let his mum and friends entertain him, bring him snacks and spoil him rotten.

Of course, neither had he the luxury or time to do any of that. They didn’t have a week. They didn’t even have a full day. All they had were a couple of hours to regroup, get to Goldenrod and commence with a plan that was no longer foolproof. And unless they wanted to waste everything
they've worked so hard to achieve, the timeline was non-negotiable.

He put a palm over his shoulder and slowly moved his right arm back and forth, testing if he’d be seeing stars with every swing. Painful, sure, but not star grade per se. Then he curled and uncurled his still functional pointer finger and thumb. Also passable. And given the mitigating effect of Silver’s wonder drug, as long as he wouldn’t be required to do push ups, he might be just fine.

He conjured a smile.

-I’m okay, I promise.

Pausing for a bit, he added.

-I’ll be careful, I won’t get in your way. You don’t have to protect me.

Silver regarded him closely for a few moments and nodded.

-Okay, I trust you. Keep on your toes and do not resort to heroics. Rely on your Pokémon. If anything goes south - flee. And unlike last time, I actually won’t be able to offer you protection. Not all the way at least.

-It’s okay, you’ve done more than enough already--

-No, not because of that.

-No? Why--

The redhead slid the last bullet in and set the mag aside.

-We’re splitting up. I’ll start from above, and you from the ground. We shall converge in the Radio Tower. I was going to do both sections myself, but seems like we can save some time.

He ushered Gold, who had suddenly turned very pale, over to the screen again and pointed at the already familiar Radio Tower, mall and warehouse blueprints.

-Listen carefully, this is what we’re going to do.

As all of Silver’s previous strategies, the plan made sense. And as Silver had mentioned several times already, it meant war. Even more so than the savage action that took place in the defined quarters of the HQ. This time they had to operate in a densely populated city with hospitals, subways, schools, offices, apartment complexes and a couple hundred thousand of unwitting, innocent people.

Though Gold managed to keep it more or less together compared to their previous review session, the comprehension that he’d have to spend at least a third of the operation apart from Silver, alone in a Rocket crawling underground made him want to puke on the spot. He’d sincerely wished he had any of that gall from the Slowpoke Well left in him, but the events of just a few hours prior, along with the days following up to them, extinguished any and all of the still smoldering cinders. If those had even existed in the first place.

And yet, he had to do it no matter what. Associates, partners, friends. He understood now, they always have been but mere semantics. What was happening between him and Silver went beyond any label or term. It was rare and precious. It was special. And he was not going to let Team Rocket
or anyone else in the entire universe dare take it away.

The other was still busy typing, so Gold decided to proceed with the prep by himself. He picked up the Rocket uniform from one of the boxes and stared at it stupidly, planning his next move. The bulletproof vest wasn’t much of an issue thanks to the velcro on either side, but the grunt sweatshirt’s sleeves were just too long and narrow to fit over the cast. He tried rolling one up and tugging it on anyway and promptly gave up, hissing and swearing as the splint’s hard plastic stuck into his hand.

Silver noticed the awkward and futile attempt and sighed.

-I told you to wait. Here.

He took the garment from Gold’s hand and with a swift motion tore the black fabric just above the elbow and then split the remaining sleeve at the seam. Carefully, he pulled the shirt over the cast and over the other boy’s head. Then he held the second shoulder up, making it easier for Gold to slide in his arm. Lastly, he folded the dangling shreds and tucked them behind the cast’s padding.

-Use my raincoat to conceal the emblem until we get to Goldenrod, then you can just toss it.

-Um… sure, thanks. What about you, though?

The other shook his head. He briefly returned to his computer, wrapping up whatever he’d been working on, and then retrieved what looked like a modified SWAT suit with a bright red ‘R’ patch on one of shoulders from the roomy safe.

-I’ll change on site. This wouldn’t fit under a raincoat anyway.

He fetched a large snowboard case from another box and stooped, packing the rifle, gear and two sets of spare magazines while Gold studied the repetitive Swinub pattern on the coarse polyester. He looked at the tall transport and then at the thin cloak he was supposed to wear that sat on a nearby pile.

-You know, we kinda don’t match now.

Silver halted for a bit, followed his gaze and then snickered.

-Why not? You broke your arm while snowboarding in the mountains and now I’m carrying it for you.

-In October?

-The Mahogany ski resort has been open since the beginning of the month. You had your fill of extreme sports and now you’re back in Goldenrod for the festival. It checks out.

Gold furrowed his eyebrows.

-Okay, the first part maybe by a huuuge stretch, but the second.

-Well, you couldn’t have known that the festival would be, in fact, cancelled.

He zipped up the bag and stood up.

-Anyhow, it’s about time. There anything else you need?
The brunette grabbed the coat, draping it over his shoulders, and took another good look around. He had all the necessary gear distributed among his pockets and he’d already taken a dose of the potent painkiller. Technically, he was ready.

-Yes. Just one more thing.

-Sure, but make it brief.

Gold walked up to the taller teen and got on his tiptoes, leaning forward. Quickly, he lay a soft peck on Silver’s cheek and then just as quickly drew back. Feeling the deep blush taking over, he fought the urge to hide his face or look away.

Silver cocked his head, lightly tracing his fingers over the spot on his cheek, and smiled.

-I’d say I prefer this to the punches.

-R-right?

He quietly moved in front and brushed Gold’s bangs out of the way. Running his fingers through the dark hair, he placed his lips on the other boy’s forehead.

-Right.

He lingered just for a moment and then stepped aside.

-We should get going now, the car is already waiting.

Gold felt his heart rate soar and his insides turn to jelly. He froze, unsure if he was hot or cold anymore, goosebumps flooding his skin and sweat trickling down his back at the same time. Feeling weak and almost light-headed, he stared openly at his partner.

The pale skin with just a hint of a blush, the gentle grey eyes, and the softest, most beautiful smile.

He balled up a hand over his wild and pounding heart.

I love him.

I love him so fucking much.

Chapter End Notes

Related art: link
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I. AM. SO. SORRY.
I quit my old (shitty) job and started a new one, and as I was trying to fit in, Inktober happened. Then there was suddenly family, life and, well, me plainly not knowing how the heck to continue. But I think I have a grip on it now *fingers crossed*
Thank you so much for sticking with (Slowpoke) me!
Please enjoy~

The jarring broadcast, looping over and over, the dark smoke pillars, rising haphazardly over the city’s skyline, the multilane highways jammed with hundreds of cars, the screech of police sirens, the growing panic and the unconditional lockdown. Just in a few hours the region’s capital turned from a festively bustling city to a hotbed of chaos.

Despite it all, the taxi driver hadn’t said a thing. He arrived on the dot, questionlessly loaded Silver’s overweight board case into the trunk and drove through forty minutes of backroads, odd turns and the suburban private sector to right to the instructed coordinates.

Were he a bit less terrified, Gold would’ve questioned Silver how much he’d paid the man for the trouble, but at this point it was the least of his worries. Knees traitorously trembling, he struggled to remain still as he fixated on the tinted window. The smoke was visible all the way from the north end of Route 35 and the ceaseless honking exuded even through the thick forest separating them from the main junctions.

Hesitant to break the hushed unspoken agreement, he flipped his Pokégear open and typed.

‘That smoke. They haven’t already, you know, have they?’

Silver’s response popped up in an instant.

‘No. Riots.’

Before Gold could finish his reply the device gave another buzz.

‘You might want to keep the raincoat after all.’

Not quite getting it, he turned to his partner and saw the other glower at his screen, still typing. On the little screen glimmered a dozen GPS pairs, changing with increasing frequency as Silver entered new parameters. The sight was hypnotizing in sort of an eerie way, like watching a repeating pattern or an optical illusion. Alternatively, it looked like a countdown.

The cabbie took one last turn onto a dead end street and then parked on the non-existent sidewalk. With no further exchange he waited for the duo to disembark and then took his leave, promptly fading beyond the trees.

Warily, Gold tightened the raincoat over his shoulders while Silver made a few final taps and twirled the comm device tighter into his ear. He deliberated for a second, listening, and then swiped his hand over the Poké Ball belt. Gengar materialized in a flash. The ghost type swayed
back and forth, adorning his surroundings, grinned and dove into the brunette's shadow.

Involuntarily, the teen shuddered. The stony silence, the building tension and the sharp temperature drop brought by the Pokémon's heat sink just added fuel to the cold, coiling knot of nerves solidly rooted in his lower belly. And did quite the opposite to his body’s resistance to passing the fuck out.

He watched the taller teen reach and hoist the rugged transport over his shoulder and start walking. The moment Silver turned to make the first step towards the fence, on impulse, Gold shot his arm out, grabbing his partner’s sleeve. The other paused and angled his head with a probing look.

A silent inquiry hung in the air as the brunette's fingers dug deeper into the coarse fabric.

“Don't go.”

More than at the Lake of Rage, more than at Mahogany, more than ever he wanted to cling and hold on to him for dear life.

“Please don’t go. Don’t you realize just how dangerous this is? How risky? How improbable?”

No, of course he did. Silver understood it better than anyone else and yet it was nowhere close enough to stop him.

“What if we don’t make it through the next hour? What if the plan fails? What if I’m never going to see you again?”

The mere thought made Gold’s fingertips numb and blood freeze.

“All I want is for us to be together. Without condition, without fear of torture or death.

Didn’t Silver ultimately want the same?

“I want to smile with you. To laugh, to cry, to hold your hand. Now that I finally can.”

It can be this way, can it not?

“Screw Team Rocket, screw Giovanni. Let the police handle it. The feds, the army, anyone fucking else. Let’s run away--”

Gold painfully grit his teeth, bringing the perilous train of thought to a halt, struggling to repress the dread, the desperate plea, the plain, human desire for normalcy.

Ever since the morning, the dam he'd arduously constructed to hold these parasitic notions in check had been going in cracks and fissures. It was toxic, suffocating and, above all, remarkably selfish. More selfish than his continuously stubborn presence, more selfish than the unwanted kiss in the base.

He locked his eyes with Silver’s and immediately drew back. Behind the still mask of determination he saw a look of raw, biting and abounding sorrow. Or was it, perhaps, remorse?

Gold let the sleeve go and guiltily averted his gaze. He’d rather swallow his tongue than spill an ounce of his spouting drivel.

He bit into the side of his cheek and murmured.

-Just uh… please take care, Silver. And don't die out there, okay?
The other rocked his head in a very “I don’t make promises I cannot keep” kind of way, but out loud he voiced.

-Same to you.

He reached and gave Gold’s trembling hand a little squeeze.

-Don’t let it cloud your judgement. See you in the tower.

With that he sped ahead, threw a hooked wire over the fence and abruptly pulled himself up. In a leap and swing he flung his body over the barrier and ultimately out of sight.

The north gate was as much of a disaster as the roads leading up to it. Split from the vehicle traffic, Gold and another few dozen of sorry fucks were crammed into an airless space meant for a least half that. It reminded him, oddly, of the mall at the peak of his flyer trick, just a degree more hostile. Progressing at a negligible rate and defying all laws of physics, the queue added more new people in waves, compacting the existing occupants and causing frequent and heated tiffs. It was impossible to manage the positioning at any given point and most of Gold’s efforts went at mitigating aimless clashes and shielding his compromised limb.

Wedged between two illegally tall grunts and a burly man with patchy hair, he turned on his tiptoes and made an attempt to hijack the conversation. Mostly to divert them from starting another row and partially to test a hypothesis.

-So, uh, you guys heard any status updates from Mahogany?

The resulting responses matched Silver’s verdict almost perfectly. There were a few surprised “What’s in Mahogany?”, two “They recruited me after the Ilex incident, but I bailed cus like hell I’d go to the boonies to be a conveyor slave” and one blunt “Spew another word on it and I’ll break your other arm”, which placed a decisive period in the discussion.

Obviously, there were no problems in Mahogany, everything was running like clockwork and any changes to the takeover schedule were fully intentional.

This was the story they decided to run with and, given the recent lapse in communication and last minute refactoring, it was the most rational way to handle it whilst not losing face in before both supporters and enemies.

Of course, the squad leaders and anyone with enough clearance knew exactly what kind of embarrassing situation they were in. Encrypted radio channels bursting and all the remaining admins scrambling to reach coherent solution - Gold could imagine the frenzy that took place among the Rocket’s higher ups in the first few hours after the loss of their HQ. The people in the toll booth, though, were confronted with none of the sort. Fresh recruits signing up on the spot, recent hires and backup forces from the neighboring cities were summoned to Goldenrod for quite the basic purpose - crowd control and intimidation.

One way or another, the distraction fulfilled its purpose and the conversation gradually shifted from threats to a vocal competition for the worst former injury. Curiously, but a few stories included actual battle trauma, most of them stemming from negligence or bland idiocy. The three notable cases were: forgetting to flip on the safety and thus shooting one’s toes off, getting stabbed by a pencil at a seasonal department sale and accidentally sitting on a Slugma. He was about to the
gritty details of ingesting a Sunkern’s Seed Bomb as a dare, but it was his turn to pass the security checkpoint.

The guard took no issue with the teen’s fabricated RocketID, merely rocking his head at the topic of their debate, kids-these-days in general and the organization’s declining standards, so one apologetic shrug and a dismissive nod later the brunette finally squeezed past the exit and back into the murky outside.

To his surprise there was no rain and no wind. A wide grid of tents and shelters covered a wide area by the entrance, stretching past the gates and surrounded by several armored trucks along the perimeter. There was a portable PC, medbay and a load of supplies ranging from Fresh Waters and Potions to reusable TMs and rental Pokémon. As far as weapons were considered, firearms were off limits for his rank, but he easily managed to procure a smoke bomb and comm device similar to the one stashed in his inner pocket.

Another ten minutes of checks and jumbled instructions and him and his new companions were deemed ready for field work. Hastily, they were herded out of the temporary encampment and to an empty parking lot, stuffed into what looked like a re-purposed public bus and, allegedly, shipped off to Goldenrod’s center.

The smoke and the chaos looked much worse up close than he'd pictured from the fleeting safety of the remote freeway. Storefronts smashed, trash burning and car alarms going off in a horrible cacophony. The entire uptown was swept with anarchy.

Through the transport’s dirty plexiglass Gold watched three hooligans loot an electronics store and another puncture a parked sedan’s tires.

Suddenly, a petrol bomb hit a side window and the teen jumped in his seat. Two more crashed into the windshield and the driver floored the gas pedal. A muted scream, an impact, a soft hump. Swallowing, Gold moved away from the glass and focused on the road in front. Just as he grabbed onto the headrest for support, the bus bobbed once more and then, swerving hard, came to a complete stop. It tilted and creaked, leaning heavily on one side, tires no longer supporting the weight.

The doors flew open and the driver barked at his disruptive cargo.

-Your stop. Deal with this, then fuck off to the Civic Center or wherever. Now out!

The grunts complied, pouring out of the bus, agitated and itching for action. A chorus of flashes lit the street and a guttural roar spurred the start of the battle.

A Molotov landed half a meter away, followed by another and Gold released Hitmontop entirely on reflex. The fiery cocktail hit Protect’s shield as the teen deployed an additional Wide Guard in front of him and his compulsory allies. He stared past the fluid armor, hoping to get a view of the attackers, yet witnessed but a huge, hastily assembled barricade hedged by Leech Seeds and Toxic Spikes.

Two Grimers slid along the ground, poisoning the path, greedily absorbing the barbed roadblock, and a Koffing bombarded the structure with Sludge. The enemy Drowzee emitted a Psybeam and a Psyduck doused the opponents with Scald, while a Tangela extended its vines with a malicious intent. The poison types balked, dispersing, and Gold prepared for another charge.
Oddly, there was none. A flick of a lighter and the septic gunk ignited in seconds, spreading, enveloping, setting the flimsy barrier ablaze.

A sight from a horror film. Human, Pokémon cries, a stench of burning plastic and flesh, a screech of metal and raucous, sickening cheers of victory. A steel sheet crashed down and a single rioter scrambled from under the flaming debris. He barely got onto his feet, when a jeering grunt scooped him up.

-Where d'ya think you're going?

A punch to the face, a spurt of blood and a garbled cough. Gold spun his head, drawn by the grating and all too familiar crunch. With a moment’s delay he recognized one of the trainers he’d fought on Route 35 in the defenseless, writhing kid. There was no more challenge in his gaze, no defiance, just overwhelming, cold terror.

Before the Rocket goon could strike again, Gold instinctively moved in between him and his victim.

-Stop it! What are you doing?!

The man lifted an eyebrow in genuine surprise.

-Huh? What does it look like? Teaching brat a lesson.

-Can’t you see, he’d already lost! You don’t have to--

The grunt reeled, turning his entire body menacingly towards Gold’s.

-Oh, I don’t? Wanna take his place then?

He was larger than the teen, bulkier, stronger, that much was obvious. And even if Gold could somehow manage to take him out with the practiced throat blow technique, what would he do with the dozen others? Not in a million years could he pull off what Silver had done in the base and certainly not with one arm.

He darted his eyes side to side, imploring, searching, begging his peers for support. A few averted their gazes, one shook his head, while the rest merely sneered at his noble action.

Defeated, he stepped back, hating himself for his helplessness.

-...no.

-Attaboy.

To the unnerving sounds of the resumed beating and the group’s gleeful hoots, Gold turned his back to the scene.

Don’t.

He heard another strike and sharp rasp.

Don’t let it do it.

A smash, a skull crack, minute silence and a collective sigh of disappointment.

Don’t let it cloud your judgement.
He thought Silver had directed these words solely at his romantic feelings, but it seemed they had a much broader application. Still, he struggled. Was tolerating cruelty part of this judgement? Was endorsing violence part of the deal? It was easy demonizing Team Rocket and excusing slaughter as self-defense, but what could he really call himself now? He’d just turned into a murder accomplice of a person, whose only sin was choosing the other side. The side he was still partial with.

A new ring of vines encircled their group and slew of Stealth Rock floated off the ground. Reflexively, Gold placed a hand over his Poké Ball belt. He did not want to fight them, he did not want more bloodshed. But if he expected this plan to advance there was little he could do but bite his tongue, squash his ailing morals and, dutifully, play along.

Silver sprinted up the emergency staircase of an office high rise, checking with Golbat’s sonar every other level. On the 39th floor he abruptly halted, re-adjusting his scope. Swiftly, he gestured at Sneasel and then flung the door inwards. A perfect glaze coated the tiles, covering everything from the vacant corridors to the stacked cubicles. The feline tore off first kicking off the painted wall. A burst of red and Sneasel shot an Ice Beam across the split room. Silver fired.

Gold paced back and forth in the putrid sewage duct, hopelessly clawing onto Silver’s raincoat. The strife with Goldenrod’s citizens hasn’t ended in one, two or even three confrontations. Getting nowhere close to the city center, the backlash grew in intensity, as did the response in ferocity. Just on the fifth riot the teen was able to toss an uninterrupted sequence of Sand Attacks and slip away into one of the alleyways, conclusively escaping conflict. Hidden from the skirmish by multiple rows of dumpsters, he made his way west and refused to look back, covering his mouth, struggling to contain the pressing sickness.

Don’t let it cloud your judgement.

A mantra he’d hammered into his head. Dilemmas he’d only faced in reading. A trolley problem meant to be hypothetical, an ethics question he’d never known how to answer - save the five men from the rolling train or just the one?

He found the closest manhole and let Gengar push it out from the inside. He then looked around once again and began his descent. At the second level he stopped, checked for patrols and jumped over the rail. Exactly four and a half blocks into the underground, he split with the ghost type and headed west towards the docks.

Silver hadn’t contacted him once since the start of their operation. No texts, no voicemails, no transmissions. No communication at all. Arguably, he himself was preoccupied with his part of the mission and, truthfully, rather late, but it was so very unlike the redhead to discount the schedule with zero notice. It’d been twenty-five minutes and still no correspondence from his partner.

At thirty-five he intercommed Gengar, re-confirming and re-validating his position and at forty he pulled up his contact list, anxiously boring his eyes into the still pixels of his partner’s name. At forty-two a soft crackle rung in his ear he stopped dead in his tracks. Breathlessly, he maxed the volume.

-Silver! Silver, you’re there, aren’t you?
Rugged breathing came from the speaker accompanied by a considerable amount of static. He shoved the device further into his ear.

-Silver--

He was cut off by a hoarse voice.

-Gold. Status.

-I... uh, status, yes.

Hastily, he pulled up the underground map, just to be sure, and recited the already well memorized coordinates.

-All clear, now at sector 1-16, drain pipe 13, west-central docks. Underpass sealed off on north end just like you said. Silver, please tell me you’re okay, you sound--


There was a hack and a strained, prolonged silence. Gold nervously clasped the coat for the hundredth time, feeling icy, inexplicable dread.

-Something’s wrong, I feel it. I’ll come get you, just tell me--

-No. Stay.

A laboured groan and an audible cough.

-Open the valves. All of them.

He slumped on a wall, leaving a bloody trail on the paint behind. Pressing a palm over the oozing wound on his neck, he ran his eyes over the room and coughed up a chuckle.

Fourteen. All in, back to back, no recourse and no fallback, armed and shooting to kill. AA-12 had sent fourteen men after him. Silver knew it was him, he’d recognized the style and brutality. And surely, he’d expected an ambush, just not quite so soon.

In a way he felt flattered, glorified even. Had he still been with the force this would’ve easily earned him a fat promotion and a brand new rank, possibly few letters in one swoop, now that he'd personally cut the competition.

How ironic. Twisted, cruel. But, then again, as if any of this ever wasn’t. A child soldier, a turncoat, a captive, an exile. A martyr, a murderer. A dying teen with a hole in his throat and fourteen specially trained agents, already dead, lying amongst heaps of broken glass, ice, lead, bodily fluids at a top floor of an abandoned corporate jail.

He pulled out a padded emergency bandage from a side pocket and with one hand wrapped it around his collar, as tight as his waning strength would let him. Pain taking over and vision blurring, he closed his eyes.

If there was anything, something, someone, somebody that wasn’t twisted, evil, or cruel in all of this - it was Gold. The boy that had nothing to do with it, that was compassionate, selfless and pure. The boy that blazed brighter than stars and burned hotter than flames. That could’ve left at any given moment but, despite all, decided to stay. That cried for him, bled for him.
That said that he loved him.

“Please take care, Silver. And don’t die out there, okay?”

Arduously, Silver changed his posture and forced himself to breathe. First carefully, shallowly, and then stronger, deeper, to the point where it was too painful to go on. Through strain, he drew another lungful, coughed and tried his vocals. Still functional.

He hadn’t died yet. He hadn’t choked on his own blood, hadn’t gone into anemic shock. This was not over.

He wiped his Pokégear on a pant leg and turned the knob to switch the channel. He could’ve typed, but now, more than seeing Team Rocket’s demise, more than witnessing their leader’s dead body, more than anything, he wanted to hear his voice.

A familiar tenor connected on the other end and Silver exhaled, relief spreading through his chest and heart kindling with warmth.

-Gold. Status.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

I really doubt I can make the next chapter happen by the end of the year, so just in case I'm gonna say
THANKS EVERYONE FOR YOUR SUPPORT AND HAPPY HOLIDAYS

This has been a crazy ride so far and there's still more to come!

Enjoy, and see you in the next decade~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The transmission cut soon after the instruction and Gold painfully clenched his fist. He’d known it the second he heard his partner's voice. This was not right. Silver was not fine. He was injured to the point that he could hardly speak, and in imminent and mortal danger. Whatever were those 'complications' he mentioned couldn't have been a one time occurrence and it was precisely why he told Gold to stay where he was.

The brunette clasped onto the metal handle in front of him, physically holding himself from tearing off and rushing into the city in search for his partner. Stupid, stupid Silver. Even now, hurt and alone, even after saying he couldn’t, he was trying to protect him. Even if it could possibly cost him his life.

Don’t let it cloud your judgement.

Out of all, this was the hardest one yet. Was this why Silver looked at him the way he did when they last parted? Was this the choice Silver had to make before sending his Pokémon to their demise? Was there a compromise, a middle ground or it had always been dealt in ultimates? Priorities, promises and personal impulses. The prices for collective life and individual death. Or in this case the reverse. Gold's heart refused to accept it, but with his mind - he understood.

Digging his boots into the ground and leaning back with all of his weight, he pulled. The rage, the hurt and the terror. Desolation and despair. The feeling of utter powerlessness. Everything he felt at the moment he put into the lurching motion.

The handwheel creaked and he groaned through his teeth. What he really wanted to do was scream and shout and call out to Silver in anguish and frustration. This wasn’t fair. It didn’t have to be this way. They shouldn't have to go through this.

The threading finally gave and Gold dropped to his knees. He stared at the black reflection in the stagnant puddle as a grind of metal resounded somewhere from below. Loss. He’d never truly experienced loss, never fought it, and never had to learn to live with it. If he could help it, he prayed he’d never would.

Swiftly, he brushed his hand over his Poké Ball belt and got back up. Aipom and Feraligatr appeared at once and he hovered the Pokégear screen in front of their faces. Getting a sign of
confirmation he started running. One blinking indicator to another, one rusty crank to the next, over and over they tugged, rotated and pushed, moving the manual locks of Goldenrod’s main drainage system.

At the end of the sector, he stalled and synced their progress with Gengar. His left arm’s muscles screamed with strain and his bandages had all become loose. He wasn’t sure if it was lymph or blood streaming down his fingers and he didn’t care. Taking note of the next destination, he set out again.

He had to trust his partner. Unequivocally. If Silver said he was fine, then he was fucking fine. This wasn’t a goodbye.

Silver sat immobile, listening to any foreign sound or scuffle, counting the beat of his erratic pulse. The bleeding seemed to have subsided for now, but he knew too well how any rash movement would easily turn this non-lethal vascular injury into quite the opposite.

He tightened his grip over a handgun when Sneasel appeared in the doorway and held his breath. Whatever report he was about to receive was going to decide his fate.

The ice type ran up to his trainer, looked at him sternly and then moved his head to and fro. Silver relaxed his shoulders before stiffening them again. No more backup. Interesting. AA-12 must’ve been fully confident in his men’s ability, or had predicted exactly this outcome. Either way, a missed opportunity, if you’d asked him.

Probably for the first time since the incident with Blue had he been driven into a corner like this. Weak, beaten, gravely injured. Another squad, even unranked, was enough to finish him off.

So what was this then? A test? An evaluation? A perverse welcome?

He briefly closed his eyes. Neither. It was a game, a gamble, and one of many. AA-12 was toying with him all along. The killing intent was serious, that much was clear, yet at this stage it did not matter if either party lived or died, as long as it prolonged the sport’s duration. All the admin did was move his figure on the board. Now he was but stalling, waiting for the opponent’s retaliation. This was a pattern meant to repeat itself, while AA-12 bode his time and basked in sick enjoyment, all due to the conviction - he was certain of his victory.

And Silver was going to give it to him.

He wrapped his fingers over his left wrist and, maintaining his grip, firmly pulled forward and straight. A faint clack and the ball of his arm bone slid back into the shoulder socket. Wincing, he bent forward and plucked a discarded earpiece from the viscous red. He inspected the casing and, barely cleaning it, placed it into his free ear.

A soft bump on his knee and he saw Sneasel drag his rifle to him extracted from under a disfigured body. He nodded and brought his wrist closer to his face, squinting, working out the symbols on his Pokégear’s cracked screen. B4F, B3F out of bounds, B2F partial access, total submersion sixty-three percent. Dam levels nearing critical in the southwest.

Unlike AA-12 he was in no mood or capacity for games. But since he was being forced to play, he’d make sure to end this within the next turn. Gold had made his move, now it was his job to finish his.
Gold sped after his Pokémon down the dripping chute towards the combined sewer’s main collection point. Among Gengar and his team they’d managed to shut off most of the seawater balancers and all of the functioning groundwater pumps. Silver’s overrides locked any outside digital access and the camera spoofers provided ample cover for the larger part of the mission. By now, he was positive, secrecy was superfluous – all of the northernmost utility holes and drains must have already started leaking and flooding the streets and drawing quite the attention.

As they were nearing the final stages he made sure to check with the radio twice or even thrice as frequently as before to keep track of any unexpected enemy moves. The Rocket’s ground channels buzzed with frenzy. Riots suppressed some places and restarted in others, subway blockages, warehouse access, squad redirection and digital interference reports. At least on a few of those charges he knew exactly who was to take credit.

Patrols now appeared at every major junction, station entries and any emergency pathways to the warehouse and Gold was forced to shift his approach. About halfway into the final sector he recalled Feraligatr and nearing the second to last wastewater valve had to retrieve Aipom.

Eternally grateful for his face mask and the poorly lit corridors, he walked past the distrustful Rocket goons, raising his arm for an occasional salute.

Five, no, six people on each floor. Another couple down south and Arceus knows how many up north. There was no way, physically, he could open the remaining valves himself and using his Pokémon would immediately place a giant red flag over his head. And judging from the concentrated expressions of the patrolling grunts, negotiations looked very low on their list. Most likely they were ordered to fire at will at seeing anyone or anything even remotely suspicious.

Out of his allotted tasks, this was the part he dreaded the most and the present state of affairs brought it from bad to worse. He hadn’t heard from Silver in an hour and thirty three, his arms and legs were buzzing with fatigue and any existing strategies pretty much amassed to ‘just go up and do it’. Mind on fire, he struggled to come up with a viable solution that didn’t result in a sure and painful death, but every next scenario got grimmer than the last.

Counting down seconds to the final marker on his GPS, he walked alongside two Rocket goons, taking in any architectural details that might be of use. The tunnel was much wider than before and was separated by a long canal of mixed sewers heading towards the water treatment facility fork. Narrow metal bridges connected the sides every other fifty meters and there was a staircase to a utility exit at the end of each block.

Solemnly, he iterated through his options. He wished his mind had worked the same way, or at least remotely similar to Silver’s so he could make decisions on the fly and switch schemes with unyielding confidence. He sighed in defeat. Of course, he wasn’t Silver and this plan was all he got.

Following his temporary companions past another two bridges, he picked up his pace and took a sharp right on the third. Not saying a word, he proceeded to the other side and, as soon as his soles hit concrete again heard a gruff voice call him out.

-You! Yeah, you! The fuck you goin’?

He pointedly ignored the chill in his gut and the inquiry as he marched to the set of spigots and valves and set his feet at shoulder width. He could practically see the Rocket remove his safety and
point a gun at the back of his head.

-Punk, 'm talking to you!

Working the tremor out of his voice, he pulled on his finest thug impression.

-P-piss off, would ya? I’m taking a leak.

-Fuckin’ here?

-Ya, here. It's a fucking sewer, waddya want?

With a trembling hand he fumbled with his buckle, never really unlatching it. Thankfully the canal was loud enough to hide his bluff. He forced a cocky sneer.

-Or you just raring to see my dick?

Laughter erupted around them and Gold turned back around. Pretending to zip up his fly, he hovered over his belt. Now. Now was the time. Determined, he clicked three buttons at once.

-Go! Whirlpool, Gust, Protect!

A concert of flashes, choir of shrieks and an expanding water vortex. Kiloliters of drainage springing from the duct below, wrung and swept by the two attacks. Separated from the Rockets by a liquid wall of spinning rubbish and gunk, Gold cried.

-Feraligatr, now!

The large biped faced the valves and pulled, handle per hand, right as a barrage of bullets sunk into the barrier of Hitmotop’s Protect. With a horrid screech, the dam gates opened and the twister rose, feeding on the increased flow. Gold smashed two recalls and grabbed onto Feraligatr’s scaly back fin.

-Hydro Cannon.

The water pressure quadrupled and the whirlpool spun completely out of control. Picking up debris, Pokémon, people and anything not bolted to a wall, it grew exponentially, encompassing the entirety of the brick tunnel. He’d lost all feeling of direction and even through his goggles could not discern a thing in the churning waste soup. More bullets flew by and a burst of pain exploding in his left side. Feraligatr twirled, shielding him and then swiftly shifted his course. The sturdy support slid out of his grasp.

Unsure if he was floating or sinking, he flailed in panic. There was no telling of top and bottom and right and left all but have switched places. A blur of objects. Garbled voices and distant bangs. Light flickers among total darkness. A pandemonium of his own making.

Suddenly, a snake-like arm wrapped around his ankles and steadily crept up, weaving, twisting his legs. He pushed at it, but instead of facing resistance his arm went right through. Slimy, cold, it felt like it was pulsing all around him, drawing him into its core.

The pressure in his ears soared and the glasses dug into his skull. Two hungry white orbs staring at him from below, a severe lack of oxygen and a sub-zero, all-encompassing terror. No, he was not floating up. He was drowning.
Silver hung his M107 over the jutting roof cant of the financial center building. He removed the lens protector and adjusted the scope. Scrupulously, he zeroed in on every visible floor of the towering structure across and inspected the layout.

Save for the initial assault, he’d faced hardly any resistance on his way here. Either the Rocket’s forces were redirected elsewhere or the admin was, indeed, giving him a chance to respond.

The most senior agent in the existing force and Giovanni’s right hand, AA-12 was brilliant in his craft - ruthless, result oriented, efficient. But at the same time arrogant, possessive. Prideful.

Perhaps, exactly for that reason he refused to simply raze his enemy to the ground. Like Silver that night in Ilex he chose to make a point, and just like Silver he was going to pay for it.

Finalizing his position, the teen took off his Pokégear and placed it on a ledge in front at eye level. He watched the pixels fill and spread through the city, painting its nervous system black. It looked almost symbolic. A tree of life poisoned at its crux, a lifeline and a tightening noose.

The last indicator flushed and he moved away when a notification popped on the screen, blocking the previous view. A grid of indicators flipped through numbers at an alarming speed - heart rate through the roof, body temperature plummeting, blood oxygen saturation critical. Gold’s vitals were going haywire.

Immediately, Silver synced his ghost type’s coordinates and then hit connect.


Dark, viscous sludge enveloped his body, binding his limbs and crushing his bones. Dizzy and faint, he’d certainly gone past the breath hold breakpoint and it felt like his lungs were about to collapse. There was nowhere to go and all he could see was dusk.

As he slipped in and out of consciousness, his mind went to Silver. Exactly as he feared, he was never going to see his partner again. He was going to die of asphyxiation in a sewer and then get dissolved to pulp by a slew of Grimer and Muk. He couldn’t keep his promise after all.

Pain colored his vision white as Feraligatr’s clawed hand dug into his waist, dragging him out of the living vice grip. A jerk and swing and he was forcefully propelled upwards. His head broke the surface and he gasped, sucking in the pungent air.

He blinked away the haze and stared at the flooded tunnel. The urban cesspool had turned from a pile of floating garbage to a snapshot from his nightmares. Emergency lights pulsing red, long tentacle-like shadows on the walls and whirl of boiling purple. Devouring everything in its path, it crept once more Gold’s way.

He spun his head to locate the staircase and, fighting through the sludge, made an attempt to swim. He felt another tug from below when a wave of blinding light deluged the area in pink. The liquid body surged in ripples and then in crests as the poison types roared in agony.

A second pink flare, a temperature drop and a ghoulish laughter. Gold slammed Feraligatr’s recall button, praying he’d be in range, and scampered to the escape. He did not know how and why, but Gengar was here. And now that he was, they were saved.
The ghost waited for the teen pull himself out of the septic waters and then turned to the foes below. A glare of crimson eyes, a moment of complete stillness and another blood curdling cry.

Gold slammed his shoulders into the iron disk again and again, bruising his skin and tearing the coat’s fabric. His eyes watered and throat burned from the toxic fumes and he was ready to pass out of exhaustion and pain.

Finally the lid shifted and he thrusted one more time, busting it out of its hooks, scrambled to the surface. On shaky limbs he crawled to the closest wall and plunged to the littered floor. Once more he summoned Feraligatr and pointed at the gushing maintenance hole. Gengar’s Mean Look would only persist until the Pokémon decided to leave the sewage chute.

He coughed and tried to normalize his breathing. Everything hurt. Every single cell of his body twisted in spasms and he felt like his systems were about to start shutting down one by one.

Weakly, he rotated his left palm and his stomach involuntarily contracted. The blisters were no longer bleeding, but oozing thick, greenish pus. Combined with the scent of Grimer’s venom and decomposing flesh the sight had become too much to bear. He retched repeatedly, emptying his guts onto the wet pavement. Among the undigested chunks of food and sludge there was a considerable amount of blood.

Trembling, he retrieved the prepared antidote from his back pouch and splashed a good helping onto his skin. He then ran over the rest of his body and applied the cream to the gross infected cuts covering his shins and forearms. Almost at once the lacerations spouted puffs of white, sizzling foam.

He lifted the soaked sweatshirt and squeezed his eyes for a second, dreading to see a horrible gaping hole in his side. There was an indent caving the vest’s plating, but no piercing or permanent damage. Wheezing in minute relief, he grabbed the next bottle and flushed it down his mouth. The severe gastric poisoning certainly explained the clots in his bile, but if he wasn’t bleeding externally, why was there now more of it on the ground? Hot, streaming, pooling all around him.

A thud rung just a meter away and the teen twisted his head. Right by the displaced dumpster Feraligatr lay still in a puddle of red.

Gold’s body grew numb.

Slipping, falling, he clambered over to his Pokémon and snatched a Revive off his belt. He sprayed on one, two, three leaking and infected gunshot wounds. He then grabbed another one and sprayed that as well. A Full Restore, a Hyper Potion, a Full Heal, an Antidote. A Fresh Water, an Awakening. Uselessly, it rolled off the rugged skin, neither repelling, nor absorbing. Out of viable items, the teen smashed the Poké Ball button again and again.

His earpiece beeped incessantly and, never bothering to check the caller ID, he pressed accept. Silver’s stern voice connected through the speaker.

-Gold, do you copy?

-Silver, he...

-Are you injured?

-Silver, Feraligatr, he…
Wildly, uncontrollably, he started sobbing right where he was sitting, wailing into the tiny speaker of the receiver. This wasn’t real, he was still under the effects of Gengar’s malignant aura, this was just a lingering nightmare.

Silver stopped talking. There was a long silence followed by a soft whisper.

-Gold, I’m sorry.

-I didn’t, I couldn’t… He protected me… If it wasn’t… Gengar was there, but we...

The incoherent sentence was once more drowned by an onslaught of tears.

-The items, they’re not working--

-Gold.

-I cannot recall him. Why? I just did, why can’t--

-Gold, listen to me.

-Why aren’t they working? None of them are w--

His partner’s voice hardened.

-I will not comfort you. I cannot. It hurts. It is not okay.

-Silver, I couldn’t--

-Stop, listen. It’s hard, but I need you to be selfish now. Tell me, are you safe?

Warily, the brunette turned his head left to right, vision blurry and head in disarray. The dim alleyway looked deserted, but only as far as he could see through the daze and falling rain. Honestly, he answered.

-I don’t know.

-Are you injured?

-No I... I don’t know.

-Do you know where you are?

-No...

There was but a slight pause.

-Okay, then tell me one thing. Do you still want to live?

Gold faltered, gravely pondering the question. Did he want to live? What had happened, was happening to Feraligatr was his fault. If he’d planned this better, if he’d taken precautions, if he’d didn’t let go of his fin. If he was smarter, faster, stronger. Was he allowed to live in another’s stead? Did he deserve to? He’d promised to change Silver’s mind but now here he was, scrambling to find a reason while being on the inquiry’s receiving end.

-...why?

-Because your next actions depend on it.
-Then... do you?

-Yes.

Gold’s heart twisted in pain and more tears rolled down his face.

-Silver...

-I need an answer.

-Yes.

-Good. Then do exactly as I say.

He wiped his nose with a sleeve and cried, nodding feebly.

-Please, Silver, please tell me what to do.

-Leave him.

-But--

-There’s nothing you can do.

-I cannot--

-Yes, you can. Leave him, mark the spot, we will come back later.

-O-okay.

-I need you to infiltrate the tower and start ascending. Make as much noise as possible. I’ll provide cover from above.

-I... sure.

-Listen for the announcement and once confirmed turn yourself in.

Gold wavered. Wasn't this backwards from what he'd just said? How did turning himself in would ensure his survival? Had this always been part of the plan? Struggling to see anything past his Pokémon's inert body, he murmured.

-I... I don't understand.

-You will. I assure you, by that time, not a single soul would be daring to hurt you.

Silver confirmed the headshot and reloaded the chamber. The Rockets may have become wary of windows, but as long as Gengar’s Hypnosis was in effect, that was but a minor complication. After all, the perception of ‘window’ was what mattered, and not its actual vicinity.

He drove another bullet into a grunt’s temple and gave Gold a green light to proceed to the next floor.

Their little sortie was but a mere distraction. He’d never intended to take the Radio Tower by storm and as long as this kept at least some of the Rockets at bay, then it was more than enough. The real
response team, though, was already en route and was going come knocking on his door any minute now.

He slipped in another shot and moments later heard the thrumming of footsteps and a loud metal bang. The hatch flew open and a squad of seven people poured onto the roof. They surrounded Silver at once, and kicking the rifle out of his hands, drew their guns. A senior grunt stepped forward and forced him to turn and face up, digging a sole into the teen’s dislocated shoulder.

-Any last words, punk?

Silver calmly raised his other hand and gestured at his ear with a flick of a finger. The man narrowed his eyes, but did not budge. A Rocket wide communication cut the existing transmissions. Volume artificially increased and the announcer’s voice almost desperate, it blared through all of their earpieces simultaneously.

ATTENTION ALL. DO NOT SHOOT CODES AG-47 OR G-179. I REPEAT DO NOT SHOOT CODES AG-47 OR G-179. UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCE. I REPEAT…

The assailant lowered his gun and switched the channel, listening on a private line. He beckoned his teammates with a hand wave and then dragged the redhead off the floor with a forceful heave.

-I wouldn’t consider yourself lucky. Boss wants to see you.

He was escorted through the wide lobby, up the stairs and to the elevator. With a programmed ‘ding’ the steel box closed its doors and zoomed all the way to the top floor. A slight shift in gravity and in under a minute the group stepped onto the polished glass of the observation deck.

Silver suspected that AA-12 would take base there out of all places - single entry point, clear view of the city and a complete impossibility to get a clean sniper shot due to high winds. Add the glare and ten layers of tempered glass and it was as good as a bunker. Or, depending on how one looked at it, a tomb.

A number of desks were brought from the lower levels along with monitor desktop setups and a few communication stations. Three techs hammered their keyboards, methodically switching channels and issuing orders, and a team of four armed men circled the perimeter.

Like with their previous Rocket rendezvous, Gold was already there. Detained by one of the admin’s agents and awkwardly handcuffed from the front, he stood aside staring at the floor. Silver offered him a curt nod and then faced ahead. He couldn’t bear look the other boy in the eye after the events that had transpired in the past hour, and what he needed right now he was focus. All the focus he could possibly get.

AA-12 twisted on his heels, deserting the overlook’s spectacular view to greet the visitors. Disregarding everyone else, he bore his pupils into Silver’s.


-Much obliged.

-Although if you do take criticism, work on your timing. I’d expected you to arrive way sooner.

-Was merely waiting for a formal invite.
-How very courteous of you. But now that you're here, tell me, are you enjoying the sport so far?

-Quite. Although I’ve added a rule to your little game to make it fair. Hope you don’t mind.

-Mmm, which is?

-While playing with the lives of others make sure to put yours on the line as well.

-Does that still let me play with yours?

-Of course. Only now that you’ve missed your window, it has conditions.

The admin’s expression sullied.

-How many explosives?

-In addition to yours - two dozen, give or take.

-So, if I'm understanding correctly - I kill you or that sniveling sidekick of yours and you set them all off?

-You're understanding correctly. Kill, cripple, harm in any way. The sensors on our bodies would pick up the spike and trigger the remote detonation. Try searching or threatening us and I’ll trigger it myself.

-Just to be on the same page. What if you die on your own accord? Say, of blood loss.

-Still applies. Besides, whose fault would that be in the first place?

Archer furrowed his eyebrows. Unlike gas, liquid did not expand. And, compounded with the conductive nature of saltwater and high flammability of sludge, a single detonation was enough to set off a chain reaction that could send acres into the air.

As he’d assumed, this was an ultimatum. AG-47 had borrowed their hostage strategy, built upon it and taken it to the absolute extreme. He was prepared to blast the entire capital to shreds, dragging his ally, Team Rocket and hundreds of thousands of civilians down with him. The largest terrorist attack in the history of eastern regions and the grandest organized suicide was just a click away.

-The citizens?

-Doomed, obviously.

-And you consider this a suitable price for our heads or, perhaps, your own suicide?

-Minus the last part, I fail to see how this differs from your original plan. Blowing the mall, the hospital, the railway station to assert your supremacy?

The teen cocked his head.

-Or were you just bluffing?

The older man faltered, for the first time in years of his lengthy career feeling on the other side of the interrogation table. The agent in front of him was not the detached kid, mindless pawn or misguided rebel he’d known from the past, he was something way more formidable. For the first time in years he did not feel fully in control.
Not getting a response, Silver shrugged.

-So you were. Unfortunately, I am not. Then why the long face? Don't you commend efficacy over ethics? I'd be killing two Pidgeys with one stone, do you truly care for a thousand or few in casualties?

He pressed on.

-I wouldn’t believe you’re asking out of compassion either. The Lavender initiative, the Gambler’s takedown, Silph Co. I can continue. I’ve personally heard you issue the order. Or did my minute adjustment suddenly shift your moral compass?

-Something shifted your sanity and that one basic instinct.

The teen emitted a strained chuckle.

-Oh, you mean self preservation? AA-12, you of all people should know. I’ve been issued death and I’ve rebuked it. I’ve sought it and have been denied. Whichever way it is, sane or not, I am not afraid.

Archer said nothing. He walked up to Gold who hadn’t spoken a word since his capture, and commanded him to face up.

-You. You are about to die for his petty whims. Were you aware of this?

The brunette gazed at him for a long moment, eyes hollow, unblinking, and then simply nodded. Revolted by the boy's blind loyalty, the admin turned back.

-You've brainwashed him well.

He paced a semi circle in the round room, pairing numerous scenarios and outcomes in his head. AG-47’s self-destructive notion had no visible loopholes. There was no room for negotiation. The only life thread was the single and remaining unknown.

-Your demands?

-I thought you’d never ask.

-Do not tempt me.

-I require you to cede full command of Team Rocket and pass it to me.

He waited for the admin’s undivided attention.

-And then I want you to shoot yourself.

Archer halted mid step.

-Ha! A daring pipe dream. Even for you.

-You can leave the honors to either of your subordinates. I’d be fine with that too.

-And what makes you certain that will happen? My subjects are loyal.

-Are they? Again, a death of one person or the demise of thousands. Friends, teammates, the whole legacy. I’m sure you don't care for the fodder you so painstakingly gathered downstairs, but some
do. The trade offs are obvious.

He casually gestured to the side of his neck.

-I can only stand to lose so much blood. You may take your time, of course, but the rule doesn’t change.

The room felt eerily quiet. Or has it been so for a while? Neither of the Rockets had moved from their posts or declared their intent, but the atmosphere had grown palpably heavier. AG-47’s psychological net had been cast and was inevitably going to narrow and collapse.

-So, Team Rocket executive AA-12, what would it be?

Reflexively, the man backed off.

-You…

-I see you need another push. How about you think of your whore Ariana while you do it? She must’ve saved you a good spot in hell.

Taunting further, he curled his lips.

-Excuse my language, special agent C-11, was she? Let her soul rest in peace.

Archer grabbed onto his gun, blood boiling with a long-forgotten rage.

-Don’t you dare insult her, scum! She was worth a thousand of the likes of you!

He marched towards the teen and the surrounding grunts concurrently drew their rifles. At gunpoint, fuming, he stopped himself just a meter away.

-Fucking brat! How do you know her name?!

-Because she gave me mine.

The admin dropped his arm. He stared at the young man in front of him, aghast. For once he regarded him not as an object, a target, an enemy, or a threat, but another human. The emergency bandage on AG-47’s neck was soaked with blood, and he was swaying lightly on his feet. He probably wouldn’t have been able to stand if not for the operative holding him by the handcuffs behind his back. And yet, he bore the same unyielding defiance in his gaze.

The fair skin and the long fiery hair. The unkempt look in lieu of the standard zero buzz cut had thrown Archer off at first, but now that he looked closer, the semblance with the deceased agent was evident. Those fierce grey eyes, though, belonged to somebody else.

The love of his life’s sudden demotion and disappearance, the spreading, spiteful rumors, the looks and the whispers, the infinite grief and AG-47’s steady climb from pits to power. It finally clicked.

-You’ve grown so much.

Once more he lifted his gun and pushed the muzzle below his chin. AG-47 had won and he had lost. This was checkmate.

-I accept. Team Rocket is yours.

He smiled.
-Giovanni would be proud.

A click, a bang and a deafening silence.

Chapter End Notes

related art: link
TEAM ROCKET IS MINE

The message aired exactly once and then the region fell into radio silence. The channels no longer broadcasted the previous announcement, there was no music, no programs, no commercials. From a certain standpoint the blackout was much more eerie than the alternative.

The Rocket communication channels were, though, exploding.

First the hold on all underground activity, then the ceasefire, featuring two agents so wildly apart in rank that there was no circumstance under which they’d be affiliated, and now this. Following a short lapse in communications, a thirty second broadcast was sent to all Rocket stations. A soundless security footage, the video featured a verbal exchange between AA-12, their stand in boss, and a red haired teen, allegedly the infamous AG-47. The interaction heated by the second and after a series of back and forths the admin smiled, brought a gun to his own head and fired.

Just as the confusion reached its peak, the individual transmissions cut and another organization wide announcement rung though all the Rocket speakers.

“Attention all. This is AG-47, per record the highest ranking agent in the existing task force and as of today the new leader of Team Rocket.

The shared recording is proof of my assignment as well as AA-12’s voluntary and immediate resignation.

Until further notice, complete lockdown must be maintained. Border patrols are authorized to fire at any deserters regardless of affiliation. Squads ranking B and higher must report to the Radio Tower 6F by 2000. All other teams to proceed with their previous instruction.”

Silver moved the dangling tube to the side and leaned back in the black executive chair. He’d requested the control center to stay in the observation deck while he himself moved to the Radio Tower’s director’s office. Ridded of his bulletproof vest and tended to by medical staff, he sat in the large lit room as a steady supply of type AB flowed into his veins.

Of course, he’d realized how fickle his authority was, how enraged and confused some of his underlings must’ve been, how many bubbling theories were now floating in the mass of the organization.

For the fresh recruits and lower ranks it hardly made a difference, just being another exciting topic to gossip about, but for the upper echelon and anyone closely associated with AA-12 and the old chain of command it was a huge shake up. An enemy they were ordered to kill was now sitting in their boss’s seat.

The info on Silver’s defection, subsequent capture and Pokémon’s execution had never been publicly shared, but anyone with high enough clearance was able to access it via Rocket data bank. What had happened after, though, was strictly off record.
He soughed, tiredly pressing 'accept' for another incoming call and looking at the roster of agents in front of him. For this arrangement to work he had to face all of these matters head on and, invariably, conduct some serious restructuring.

Gold was picked up from the makeshift infirmary and lead down a series of connecting stairs and corridors towards his next destination. He knew the way, in all truth, he’d memorized the darn blueprints, but Silver requested he’d be accompanied by an armed guard at all times.

In the middle of the tenth floor they took a right and stopped, faced with a plain wooden door.

Hesitantly, he knocked. There was a moments delay and then a voice echoed from the wall speaker to the left.

-G-179, you may enter. B-93, return to your post.

The grunt saluted and walked the other direction while Gold waited for the buzz and then let himself in.

Silver was seated at the desk in the center, actively issuing orders over the radio. A half full blood bag hung on a pole behind him, while another IV set with clear liquid sat to the side, waiting for its use. Judging by the teen's tormented expression it seemed like he hadn't had a second of rest since the stirring events on the observation deck.

Hand still clasped over his throat, Gold quietly moved up and stopped about a meter from the large table. Silver lifted a spread palm, signaling another five minutes.

-Yes. Yes. Affirmative. No, let them. Add more squads to the southern gates and cover the shore. Yes. Authorizing use of flares.

The brunette idled, passively listening to his partner issue one command after another. There was a number of mentions of the military, one of a missile threat and at least two of internal strifes.

The reality sunk further in his mind. The person he was looking at, his rival, partner and precious someone was now the leader of Team Rocket. A title drenched in tears and splattered with blood. A name that cost astounding amounts of physical and mental fortitude and was going to cost even more.

Silver ended the call and briskly switched channels, reciting a lengthy set of timestamp coordinate pairs. He paused and coughed, trying to regain his voice, and then dialed control. A dozen more orders or so later he requested a strict non-contact interval, save for a complete emergency.

-The internal hierarchy is in shambles. Seems like AA-12 pulled agents from different squads to send to kill me. It plays into my long-term strategy, but for now it’s a nuisance.

Finally, he removed the earpiece altogether.

-Thankfully, the non-involvement deal with the military still stands due to the detonation threat, so I have some time to set this on track.

He sighed and turned his attention to his partner.

-But enough of this. How did the treatment go?
Gold cleared his throat and croaked a reply.

-F-fine.

Silver offered a sympathetic nod.

-Gastric lavage isn’t a pleasant procedure, but we were fortunate to make it in time.

The other teen barely nodded, moving his hand to his upper forearm. His fingers drove into the black fabric and he suppressed a cough.

-Am I… disturbing?

-No, I’ve blocked out thirty minutes. Nobody should bother us.

-I see.

A strained silence hung in the room and Silver broached the subject.

-I’ve passed the coordinates along. A team is on their way to fetch him.

Gold’s digits dug in further and body shook just slightly. Ever since the call in the alley he was trying to hold it in. While he was throwing the rest of his Pokémon into battle at the Radio Tower, while waiting for his partner to show, while standing through the appalling conversation at the deck, while getting stripped out of his drenched clothes and getting a thick plastic tube shoved down his throat. For his Pokémon that hadn’t known, but evidently felt that something was amiss, for Silver that was hanging fiercely to his own life, for the lasting success of the plan. But now, out of mortal danger and alone in the room with his partner he felt like the wall was crumbling.

Silver got up and, tugging the IV pole along with him, walked around the table. He put his arms around the other’s frame and pulled him into a firm embrace.

Gradually, the violent sobs subsided turning to soft whimpers and then to shallow breaths. Silver parted just slightly, giving his partner space, and Gold lifted an arm to wipe his nose. Still avoiding the other’s gaze, he murmured.

-It… it doesn’t get... better, does it?

-No, it doesn’t.

Gold bit his lip.

-What does one do then?

-Internalize, make peace, lash back. That is up to them.

-Then what did you do?

Silver exhaled.
-I think you know the answer. I’ve started a war.

Gold stayed quiet as Silver stroked his back.

-I’m sorry, Gold. It hurts and it will keep hurting. It might numb over time, fade to an ache, but it will never go away. It is there to stay.

His hand paused for a second before continuing again.

-There nothing I can say in comfort and I cannot take this away. But please know that I am here for you. Always.

The other buried his face further into the damp fabric. He mumbled into Silver’s shoulder.

-How many times did you… have to… go through this?

-Enough, that by the end of it I’d preferred to feel physical pain to anything else.

He removed one arm and gently tilted the other boy’s head up.

-I was not lying when I spoke to you that time. Sitting among corpses, bleeding, alone in that deserted office building I was certain I was going to die. One more squad, one more push and it would’ve been over.

Gold’s lip quivered and he violently shook his head. Why did the other have to bring this up now of all times? He’d already been vanquished with grief and blind with tears. And knowing, imagining that Silver might’ve, in fact, died alone in some blasted office drove spears through Gold’s chest.

-Silver, don’t…

-You know of my relationship with death - I’ve dealt it, I’ve yearned for it, but ever since my childhood, never was I afraid.

-Stop it, Silver, please…

-But today I was. I thought about it, looking at my bloodied hands, my soiled uniform, seeing my pulse dropping - I did not want to die. And not just that. For the first time ever I wanted to live. To live for something other than hatred or revenge. And that's you.

Softly, he brushed the dark hair.

-Thank you, Gold. For finding me that night in the forest, for not letting go, for all your sacrifices. For staying right here with me.

Gold’s heart stuck in his throat and he felt the burn on his eyes yet again. How did his partner always manage to do it? To shatter his heart and then seal it together in a span of one sentence. To carve a wound, deep and ragged, and then nurse it right back.

Fluttering, trembling, he placed a palm on Silver’s cheek. He whispered.

-May I?

-Of course.

Silver leaned in and their lips touched. Coarse and chapped but so so warm.
Gold felt blood rush to his face and time slow. What might’ve lasted seconds was an eternity. Parting, he frowned and looked into his partner’s eyes.

-Silver, you’ve nothing to thank me for. I love you and I will never let you go.

Silver did not respond. Instead, he wiped Gold’s streaming tears and kissed him again.

He stood at a miniature stage before the crowded floor of the Radio Tower. A pair of men geared with rifles were posted on either side and Gengar lurked in his trainer’s shadow. Twenty four remaining agents eyed him with intent, expressions ranging from severe disdain, blunt disregard and utmost bewilderment. Just the looks on their faces was enough to determine their record of service, privity and affiliation with AA-12 or either of those fourteen agents he’d neutralized in the financial center.

Precisely at 8:00 PM Silver lifted a hand and the audience fell silent.

-Upper divisions of Team Rocket, I’m pleased to see your perfect attendance. Some of you might’ve had certain reasons to flee the city the moment I was appointed, but I appreciate you making it simpler for everyone involved. Now, let us cut to the chase.

He moved from his spot and walked in an arc by the wall.

-I am going to be frank with you. I am the one responsible for the destruction of Ilex and Mahogany and I am the one that mined and flooded the Goldenrod sewers. It was also me who assisted and backed the fall of the Silph Co. three years ago.

He proceeded, ignoring the stark sound of disapproval.

-I have always disagreed with my father’s archaic policies and I disagree with the purpose of this amateur rejuvenation agenda now. Under my command Team Rocket would not squander its potential on cursory effort. I shall share my long term strategy, but before that I require a single thing from you - absolute and indisputable submission.

He ran his gaze over the restless crowd.

-I understand, of course, loyalty is earned with time, but since we’re short on that I’m willing to cut some corners.

Raising his voice by a notch, he commanded.

-AU-78, AT-65, step to the front.

The mass parted and two men walked to his side of the room. One of them bore a look of stoic indifference, while the other sported a sneer.

-Are you going to order we shoot ourselves too?

-Or are you gonna bend over and let me take you one last time?

Silver shrugged.

-Neither. But I’m glad you’re aware why you’re here. Any last words?
The second grunt spat at the teen.

-Oh, I’m aware. I’m aware how your petty act of treason failed and then you got locked away and passed around like a filthy ass whore. I would never submit to a cunt I saw sprawl on a floor and beg for his life.

The teen rocked his head, concurrently drawing his gun.

-If that would be your final say then so be it.

He lowered the muzzle to the grunt’s crotch level and pulled the trigger. The man dropped to the ground, writhing and screaming. He hacked, spilling blood.

-Fucker… you f-fucker…

-You know how long you will last with an open pelvic trauma like that? Seconds. And correction. At that point I begged for nothing but my death.

The man no longer spoke, merely convulsing, and Silver turned, addressing the audience.

-Since I promised to be frank, I’ll provide some context. During the Silph Co. takeover I allowed my allies to withdraw by giving myself up as a shield. I’d anticipated to get captured and killed. I was not.

He shifted his attention back to the remaining grunt.

-You, however, partook in no such indecency. I’ll let you off easy. Last words?

-Hail Team Rocket, Hail Giovanni!

-Commendable.

Again, he lifted his firearm and shot. The second operative plummeted down, a clean round wound adorning the center of his forehead.

-This man instead partook in my partners’ execution.

He re-holstered the gun and walked a few steps.

-You’d say I brought this upon myself. That these men acted upon orders or sick revenge. Perhaps? But so am I. You must understand why I’m doing this publicly from A+ and all the way to B class, instead of behind closed doors like it was done to me. I will not tolerate defection. I will not shut you away and hold you on life support for my perverted enjoyment. I will kill you.

Nonchalantly, he spread his arms.

-Now, before we move on. Any comments, concerns, complaints?

-Filthy scum!

There was movement amidst the crowd and a blade sunk into Gengar’s viscous barrier. A third gunshot resounded on the floor.

The audience had seemingly stopped breathing. There was hushed murmur accompanied by a muted thud. Silver twirled the pistol by the trigger guard and then moved his head, making sure to connect with every available pair of eyes.
-I told you. I will kill you. Regardless of my age, appearance or past, I am superior to you in every possible way, whether it is rank, skill or wit. Ask your colleagues buried in the ruins at Mahogany. Or the chosen fourteen lying dead on the fortieth floor of the United Bank building.

He lowered his gaze.

-Now let me inquire again - any more comments, concerns, complaints?

This time there was no response whatsoever, just a choked, awkward silence.

-Good. In that case listen closely, these are your new assignments.

Gold stared at the grainy camera feed of the Radio Tower’s security camera. Silver outright rejected the idea of his presence in the same room with two dozen irate Rocket agents, but, after some convincing, agreed to let him view the address via surveillance. For the lack of audio feedback, upon Gold’s request he’d left the comm channel open as well.

And yet, despite the assertion, Gold now questioned his choice.

How could somebody kiss so tenderly and then kill so callously not but an hour later? Was there redemption after all the sin they have both committed? What was his place in this ocean of murder and deception? And what did that Rocket agent mean when he threw all those vile accusations?

The one way communication shut off and the teen knew that it was over. Hastily he vacated Silver’s seat and went to stand on the other side of the desk, once more ignoring the chair in front. He’d known that Silver would never hurt him, never raise a gun like he did with his subordinates, but still, the cold, brusque tone of Silver’s voice, the ferocity of his actions sent chills down his spine.

The door opened and the redhead walked in. Immediately, he slumped into the large leather sofa in the middle of the office and covered his face with an arm.

Gold tottered towards him, hesitantly joining him on the seat.

-Silver, are you--

The other just lifted a hand like he did earlier and the brunette shut his mouth. He bore his eyes into his bandaged palms, the rugged texture of the cast and the worn leather of the broad office furniture, anywhere, just to avoid spurring Silver on further.

Several unaccounted minutes later he heard a voice to his right.

-Do you know why I picked this office over the observation deck?

-Um. Strategy?

-Couches. These fucking couches. I knew I couldn’t leave control alone anytime soon, so I chose a space where I could actually rest without sitting up. This is the first time I ever used them.

He turned his head to face the other boy.

-I’ve just killed the last of my assailants, the ones I couldn’t find all these past years. I did it quickly, humanely, not like they ever treated me. They’re finally dead, gone, and yet, I feel no
satisfaction. I don't feel anything. Nothing at all.

He shook his head and buried it in his hands. For a long moment he kept still, breathing stiffly, ostensibly fighting his inner demons.

-Nevermind, forget it. This has nothing to do with you.

He was about to get up, when a hand caught him by the wrist. Gold looked up at him, gaze imploring and pained.

-What part of ‘I love you’ don’t you understand? Whatever’s bothering you, whatever’s weighing you down. Tell me, let me share the pain. It has everything to do with me.

Silver halted, pondering, and then sat back down.

-It’s not a happy story.

-I know it isn’t.

-Fine. I’ll tell you everything.

Chapter End Notes

related arts: one and two
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

I died a little while writing this.
Increasing the rating of the story as I should've a few chapters ago.

tw: noncon

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-I’ve seen my father in person four times in my life. The day they took my mother away, my first
day of training, my graduation to C class and at my trial. Needless to say neither of those were
positive experiences. My mother never returned, the training left me with two broken bones the
very first week and many more later, I had to shoot my Pokémon with own hands and I received a
sentence for reformation while the rest of my partners got executed before my eyes.

Gold’s expression soured and Silver digressed.

-I suppose I’ll start from the beginning.

My mother was a C rank agent with incredibly promising prospects. She was a brilliant strategist
and an excellent shot. She frequently participated in operations way beyond her class and was due
for a promotion. She also was my father’s pet. I’m not sure how long it lasted and I don’t know if
she’d been the only one. She probably would’ve still been alive if she’d agreed to an abortion, but
Instead, she decided to bear the child she’d never planned to have. I’ve no clue how she managed
to pull it through, but she turned down her promotion and transferred to a base in Johto away from
the primary branch in Viridian and the main action.

He ran a hand through his hair and briefly looked up.

-Of course this was all before my time. I had to reconstruct the chain of events from whatever
scarce official records, decade old rumors and gossip. Long story short, her ruse was found out, she
was detained and I was sent to a limited access facility. I barely have memories of the event itself,
but I do remember the look in her eyes and the silent goodbye.

Silver felt Gold’s palm cover his. He rocked his head and turned his hand over to let their fingers
interlace.

-This was also the last time anyone referred to me by my name. From then on I was but a set of
numbers. Yes, you know the ones. Out of all human interactions, I recall biweekly homeschooling
sessions and scheduled syncs with my caretaker while receiving supplies. Other than that I was left
to my own devices. There was a small kitchen, seating area and a library stacked with random
technical literature and manuals. None of those were suitable for children, but for the lack of
options I read all of them several times. It was mundane and lonely, but now I’d call my solitude
pleasant, knowing what would come next.

At age six I was fetched from my temporary home and brought to a new facility. There I was
assigned my first Pokémon and admitted to special training.
He shifted his gaze to Gold.

-Before I continue, I think I must again clarify Team Rocket’s ranking system. While on the outside it might look like regular mafia or a criminal syndicate, internally, its structure resembles a military branch more than anything else. Any new recruit starts with rank R by default and may climb all the way to A+ with due time and effort. While getting from R to M might take but a few months due to the onboarding incentive program, say, C to A might takes years. An advanced course is offered to anyone past rank F, allowing them to pick their occupation. Upon completion they could get scouted and assigned to squad based on their specialty. For example, mine was sniper and I was attached to squad Seadra, assassin unit three.

Gold looked at him, utterly bewildered.

-At six?

-No, of course not. That happened much later, although you bring up a good point. Upon my father’s order I’ve skipped the R to F interval and was thrown into training way beyond my physical ability, skill level and, not to mention, age. While admitting me was indeed an exception, no further ones were made throughout the entire regiment. As any child in that situation, I could not live up to the expected standards. I was useless, I could not run as far, lift as much, shoot as well or sometimes do any of that at all. I ended up passing out a third into every training session.

Whatever mercy my fellow trainees might’ve had for me at first had drained away as soon as they realized what they were in for. Toiling away, working hard up the ranks just to be stuck with a kid that permanently kept their points at the bottom of the scoreboard. While the numbered codes were meant to erase one's identity, the training was designed to build up teamwork. If one person failed the whole group did. Teams with top scores got rewards and faster promotions and the ones on the bottom extended training and discipline. You can imagine the amount of disdain accumulated and pointed my direction. But, perhaps, this was by design as well.

Gold untangled their fingers and got up, angrily gesturing in the air.

-How dare they?! It wasn’t your fault. I bet they still ate crayons and collected Caterpies when they were six! I know I did.

Silver shrugged.

-That it might be, but when personal gain is on the line fairness becomes secondary.

-This is inhumane.

-It certainly is.

-It’s child abuse!

The other just laughed. It was hollow and dry and gave Gold a sick feeling of dread. Silver raised his voice by a notch.

-Are you suggesting that I should’ve called the police?

Gold instinctively drew back.

-I uh....

-Or maybe the child services?
-No, I…

-Unfortunately, we don’t live in a world where justice is the basic default. And, believe it or not, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Gold sat back down and lowered his head. Silver continued.

-The first two years were the hardest. I barely remember anything past the utmost and unending exhaustion. I was tossed unconscious into my quarters and when I woke up the cycle started anew. I thought at that time that, perhaps, I was meant to die. That this was punishment for my mere existence and every day was there to end it. Foolishly, I rebelled. I trained harder, stronger. And then one evening I did not collapse by 1800 and walked out of the combat hall on my own two feet. That day I thought maybe, after all, I can defy all odds. And I did.

The team did not get into top rankings for another year, but was no longer scraping the very bottom. By age ten I completed the training and was faced with the final test. I passed it with flying colors.

Gold shuddered and averted his eyes.

-The exercise was there to test one's ability to carry out orders without question, to face one against a dilemma - self or others. The only dilemma I was faced with was to point the gun at my Pokémon or myself. I thought about it over and over, desperately calculating alternatives while clutching the loaded pistol. Limited to a single bullet in my chamber, I couldn’t find anything else. If I chose against it, they would’ve killed all of my squad’s Pokémon in turn, and in my case, possibly the rest of mine. There was no contract or guarantee that any would be spared in exchange for my life either. Any step sideways resulted in many more deaths than one, so I picked the only viable option - to shoulder this forever. I released Ursaring and, before I could meet his gaze, fired.

Gold’s body shook. With anger, with sorrow, with grief. He wanted to say something, break something, someone. A world without justice, where children were forced to kill and carry burdens no adult should, a world where Silver recited such heart-wrenching things without batting an eye.

-I was commended for my loyalty and received my new rank: C-47, specialty: marksman. A few departments scouted me right away and I was granted a request form to fill the empty slot in my party. I hadn’t used it until almost a year later.

Gold clasped onto the sofa's edge and clenched his teeth, suppressing his own tears.

-I’m sorry, Silver. I’m so sorry.

-You know, when you indicted me, in a sense you were right.

-No, I wasn’t! I had no idea what I was talking about! You’re none of that, you’re--

-It’s true, though. It felt like I’d lost a piece of myself. As I was sent to more and more missions, the more and more ruthless I’d become both to my enemies and myself. I was given a target and I didn’t care how many I’d kill before I got to it.

I took most of my missions solo, never requesting a spotter or a support squad. Sneasel and the rest of my team filled in the roles of what were supposed to be other agents. And even though marksmanship had been my primary specialty, I’d taken on close combat missions as well. Krav Maga, Kali, Combat Sambo, I’ve been trained in all of those. I was small, agile, I fought enemies twice my size and five times my weight. If I couldn’t wrestle them, then I’d slice their tendons and shoot their vitals. I was fearless, reckless, but never invulnerable, so frequently victory came with a
price of ugly wounds and open fractures. I did not mind. I thought if I could still breathe then I could bleed.

Bitterly, he smiled.

-The old man must’ve been thrilled. His little experiment had gone without a hitch. And probably nothing would’ve changed if one day I hadn’t met her.

Sitting with his back to a grey concrete wall, he surveyed his surroundings. It started off as a minor political dispute and had turned into a full blown turf war. He was out of usable Pokémon, his squad was long gone, escape routes effectively cut off and radio smashed to pieces. His arm hung flat on his side, blood trickling down in streaks and the provisional bind on his abdomen had already drenched in crimson. A few more minutes and he wouldn’t have been able to move at all.

Leaning his head back, he stared into the crumbling ceiling. He’d never tried to imagine what his last mission would be like. It could’ve been anything, honestly, starting with the frequent recon and undercover missions, to the mass takedown operations. This was not the first time he arrived at a near fatal situation, but neither one before this had been so utterly hopeless.

In a sense, it was liberating. No more fighting, no more loss and no more pain.

He reached around his belt and picked off his last grenade. He’d been out of bullets in his semiautomatic for an hour and had just used the last smokebomb. He sized up the distance to the next structure and made a rough estimate - with a certain amount of precision and some luck he’d be able to take the operatives on the far right. He then pulled the pin and stepped out of his hiding.

Suddenly, a gloved hand grabbed him by the arm and tugged with force. He stumbled down a dark staircase into a dim lit room just below the spot he was holding. An underground path he’d absolutely no prior intel on.

He blinked, adjusting his eyesight. The masked figure before him lifted one hand in exasperation.

-Idiot, what are you doing? You would’ve gotten killed. Didn’t you see--

-Three snipers on the rooftops, 2, 5 and 9 o’clock, two men behind the barricade on the right and one on the left.

-Then why--

He scrutinized his new foe’s appearance. They weren’t wearing the grey khaki gear like his enemies on the outside and neither did they wear the modified SWAT suits the Rockets were equipped with. It was an unbranded black uniform with a wide belt, knee and elbow pads, topped with a thick hood.

He raised his hand with the grenade, spoon still being pushed down by his thumb.

-Reveal yourself.

-Woah, easy there. Way to treat your rescuer.

-Rescuer? Who are you aligned with?
His companion sighed and pulled down the hood and scarf covering their face. Long brown hair fell to the shoulders and a slither of light illuminated the blue irises.

He tilted his head. A girl? Well, it wasn’t uncommon to employ female operatives. The thing that struck him the most was how young she looked. Perhaps not as young as him, but she’d certainly still been in her mid teens.

She placed her hands on her hips.

-Yeah, rescuer. But you’re right, I’m neither the Spearows or Team Rocket. Now, do you mind putting the pin back?

-Only once you've told me who you are and what you want from me.

-A little brash from somebody about to commit suicide, don’t you think?

He balked but didn't let go of the grenade.

-This is none of your business.

-Of course not.

-There was no other way.

-And this passage you’re standing in? But I bet you felt so cornered, so instead of doing your homework you picked the easy one out.

-I was going to take them with me. And if you don’t spill your guts, I’ll take you instead.

-Eager to die, aren’t you?

Body growing weak with pain and knees buckling, he was getting sick of this. If the unnamed agent pulled him into this dungeon just to taunt and ridicule, then he’d rather just end it.

He started to raise his thumb.

Another palm clamped his own and softly pressed down on his finger.

-Alright, alright, I get it. You’re serious. Don’t blow us up, I’ll tell you.

With that she sat down cross legged and placed her chin on the back of her hand.

-Name’s Blue, been tracking Team Rocket’s operations for about a year now, intercepting any outstanding emergencies and political assassinations. This is one of them. I was supposed to jeopardize and disable this entire operation, you included.

She twirled a hair strand in her fingers.

-I incapacitated two of your… colleagues, the Spearows took the rest as part of your guys' conflict. You were the last one.

-I see. Torturing me for information won’t be any use if that’s what you’re planning.

Blue rolled her eyes.

-Torture? No, I’m not going to torture you, dummy.
Dummy? Silver squinted at the address.

-Your demands then.

-None, I just… I just couldn’t kill you.

He squinted at her further and she threw her arms in the air.

-Yeah yeah, don’t give me that look! Totally unprofessional. But when you sat there in the rubble and stared into the ceiling, when you exhaled like that and readily stepped into the gunfire, I knew I couldn’t kill you.

-If this is meant to denigrate me, it’s not working.

-Jeez, you’re a hard one to crack, aren’t you? Look, I don’t know what I’m gonna do now either.

She eyed him from below, mulling.

-And it seems like you’re in need of medical attention. Say, how about we call this off? In that state you’re not gonna reach your target anyways and I haven’t met my quota. Lose-lose, win-win, you decide, but we both live. Whaddya think?

He exhaled and placed the pin back in the grenade.

-Fine, deal.

-Sweet! What's your name then?

-AJ-47.

-Oh, A+ at your age? Impressive, but I meant your actual name.

-Don't have one.

-Hmm okay. Well, you can tell me later.

She got to her feet and pulled her hood back on.

-This tunnel goes all the way to the other side of the building. You can then escape and signal for your guys to pick you up.

Waving goodbye, she grinned.

-Looks like I’m stuck to your unit for the time being, so I’ll be seeing you again. Don’t die before that, okay?

She then turned around and sprinted down the chute in the opposite direction.

-I’ve met her on several occasions after that. It was an odd and risky arrangement, but I finally found something to look forward to in my dismal routine.

Following our encounter, I got harder, more nuanced missions. Once, twice I ended up heavily injured, but also earned more time for recovery. Time that I used to sneak off and spend with her.
Regardless of the circumstances, she was always cheerful. She teased and joked with me, she treated me like a younger brother or a long time friend. We shared battle stories and exchanged knowledge. She taught me how to hack and I told her all I knew about compound explosives. I spoke about Ursaring and for the first time let myself cry in someone’s presence. She was the second living person to learn my name.

Gold stared at the other’s placid expression, the somber smile. A maelstrom of emotions boiled inside of him. Happiness, joy. That's what he was supposed to feel. Silver just shared a positive memory with him, the sole and only in this giant chasm of despair. He was meant to feel happy for him, it was only natural, that was what one did for their friend, their partner, their loved one. Then why did he feel so peeved? Peeved, anxious and extremely guilty.

Painfully, he bit into the inside of his mouth, struggling to quash the toxic feeling at its root. How could he? How dare he? Now, after everything they've been through.

"Come on, say something," he urged himself. "Say something nice, say that you're glad that Silver met one decent person that cared for him, that treated him well. Say that you're happy for him."

Silver noticed none of the other boy’s inner turmoils and faithfully proceeded. Gold missed his window.

-Eventually, Blue shared the specifics of her mission. It was much broader scope than I’d initially imagined. An intricate political orchestration years in the making devised to tackle all organized crime in the region, to expose the corruption, extortion and theft. She’d passed on intel I’d never considered and unmasked schemes of grandeur that made my head spin. Pokémon cloning, illegal neuroenhancement, financial pyramids, limitless offshore, internationally backed crime. The police and the government, the cartels and the corporations. Everyone tied so deep together, profiting, controlling, exploiting.

It took me two full weeks to go through the data due to its sheer volume before giving my answer. The second dilemma was much simpler than the first.

You see, I'd never known anything else. I’d receive orders and I’d execute them. Ambush, steal, kill - it was all the same for me. The basis for my service wasn't my choice but the lack of thereof. But now I felt that I had one to make. To do my father’s bidding till the day I die or take a risk and do something that I thought would make a difference. Without much deliberation, I picked the latter.

The last solo mission for code 47 as an agent of Team Rocket was synced to the date of the takedown of Silph Co.

He turned to Gold, who had finally forced himself to face up.

-It made a lot of noise even outside Kanto, I’m sure you've at least heard of it.

The other teen nodded.

-Of course I have, it was all over the news back then.

-So that happened three weeks later. Our first attempt was a failure.

-No...

-My role was very minor compared to everyone else. Red, Green and Blue and their respective squads were the driving forces of the operation, while I was just the insider leaking coordinates,
Of course I was cautious, vigilant, but the Rockets ended up being one step ahead. They figured there was a double agent among their ranks and used it to their advantage. They planted false data, which I then unknowingly broadcast and we were met with an ambush. Blue's team got destroyed and she was captured. I knew I had to act and fast, for the more I stalled, the more time she’d have to spend in the interrogation room.

My third dilemma and a true test to my alignment - to stake it out and pretend this never happened or save her life and give up mine.

I took down the guards, I broke her out and gave her Sneasel, letting her use the escape route I’d prepared for myself. I then relinquished ownership of my Pokémon and commanded them to flee. I held my former colleagues off as long as I could and then I turned myself in. I’d known what I was about to face. Or at least I thought I did.

Dreading to hear what came next, Gold watched his partner close his eyes and draw in a lungful of air. He’d now felt a thousand times more guilty. If he’d just had the audacity to get jealous over his partner’s deceased friend, then maybe he did deserve to get his second arm broken. And possibly his legs as well.

Silver stalled for a moment and then exhaled.

-I still have nightmares about that evening and I’m certain will have for the rest of my life. Getting dragged down a dimmed corridor, thrown onto the floor of some basement. The polished shoes and the commanding voice.

He personally came down there to revile me for treachery and rub my failure in my face. To tell me that I neither deserved my name nor the cryptonym I was given. And to announce that neither Blue nor Sneasel got away.

"Privilege, knowledge, power. You were given plenty of assets, opportunities. But since you could not appreciate any of them, I shall take them all away. I shall force you to live with the weight of what you've done, I'll break the last of your will, I shall reform you."

Those were his last words before he ordered to bring in my Pokémon. As I learned, they never ran but hid on the outside, hoping, waiting for their trainer to come back.

They were always too loyal, too pure, too good for someone like me. I knew this was a goodbye.

Unblinking, he fixated on black coffee table in front of him.

-They mutilated them and forced me to watch. They did it slowly, with utmost and exceptional cruelty. They left each of them to bleed and then never dealt the final blow.

Finally, when they were done, they left me there, handcuffed and gagged, surrounded by my partners' maimed bodies. There wasn't a thing I could do to ease their pain. I counted down their last breaths and witnessed the light leave their eyes.

Petrified, Gold sat fused with his seat. He realized that, to an extent, he'd known all of this. Silver had told him that the Mahogany admin's threats and accusations were much more than just that. But hearing his partner spell it out loud, relive it made Gold's hair stand on its end and blood freeze. He did not know what to say. What even was there to? That he's sorry? That it's not his fault? That there’s light at the end of the tunnel?
"I cannot comfort you. It hurts. It's not okay."

“Enough, that I preferred physical pain to anything else.”

Silver's words rung in his ears as silent tears rolled down his cheeks. For a moment he didn’t even recognize that his partner was still talking.

-I wasn’t sure how long I'd spent there - two, three days - judging by the state of decomposition. Then a new squad dragged me out and locked in another basement. It was much smaller than the previous one and I was told I was in for solitary confinement. Of course, that was a lie.

For years there was a rumor going around the task force, claiming that AG-47 was invincible, that AG-47 felt no pain. They came in twos, scared to be alone in a cell with a trained assassin, striving to test that theory. They tortured and raped me day after day, wishing to break me, thinking that I refused to cry and beg as an act of pride. But in truth, there was nothing left to break. Blue was gone, my Pokémon were dead. They have already taken all of it, it was all crushed and shattered to pieces. Besides, what pride is there to talk about when you lie in a pool of you own bodily fluids, where was dignity if all you can see are flashes of white?

But, of course, I felt everything. Every stab, every thrust. Sometimes I was so numb with pain that I wondered if I were alive or dead and hoped I were the latter. I rubbed my wrists raw on the filthy handcuffs, wishing I'd simply bleed out, but they bandaged me up and changed the shackles. I refused food and they put me on an IV. I was denied even the choice of death.

I didn’t know how much time had passed since my capture. Weeks, months? I was a hollow shell, that unfortunately still possessed nerve endings.

Eventually their visits dropped in frequency and I'd assumed they’d gotten bored, but in reality something else was going on. One day my torturer came in with a deep gash on his face. He kept probing the stitches and griping about 'that damn pest'. He was furious and particularly rough, yet this gave me something that I had long given up on - hope. They were claw marks, just like Sneasel’s, just like the ones he left on his foes. And if Sneasel was alive, then so was Blue. The plan hadn't failed, they were still out there somewhere, fighting.

I waited. By this point the grunts had stopped coming in pairs, no longer viewing me as a threat. The infamous AG-47 was now a mere punching bag, a cheap sex toy, he had no sting or bite.

The next time my captor came along I let him have his way with me one last time. And then I broke his neck. I took his key and uniform and fled what was meant to be my grave.

I was famished, injured, weak, I couldn't put up much of a fight, but I knew that if I hadn’t handled it then, they would’ve found me again.

For being there as long as I have, I never quite paid attention to my surroundings, I'd no idea which city this was or how many levels down did the basement span. I didn’t have much to work with, but one thing stood out from the beginning. The sweet, grainy smell of ethanol on all of the Rocket's uniforms. Whether they were using it for manufacturing drugs, fuel or something else I couldn’t tell, but if they had at least a single drum onsite, my next goal was clear.

I located the storage and disposed of the security. I then punctured the containers, cut the wires, busted the climate control and jammed the lock. Then, finally, I made my escape.

Fleeing from the guards, scampering to the surface, I’ve never been so glad to see Sneasel. He was right there, in front of me, in the flesh, living and breathing. He took out my pursuers and helped
me block the exits. We made it to a safe distance just in time before the building went up in flames. So you know, pure ethanol’s flash point is one of the lowest in all of flammable substances - just 12.5 degrees C - so it’d been a race against time, not humans, the moment I touched that thermostat. Nobody except from me escaped from the burning chemical prison.

Finally, Silver tore his eyes away from the sorry table and turned his head. Gold’s face was deathly pallid. He was no longer frowning or crying, just staring ahead of him with a look of pure terror.

-Did... he know?

Gold’s voice was shaky and pitched.

-Did your... father know about... this?

-Possibly. But the organization was collapsing, his allies falling like flies. I’m sure he had no bandwidth to focus on anything other than his imminently crumbling authority. And even if he knew, I doubt that he cared.

-What kind of monster--

A new wave of tears swept over Gold. He spasmed, unable to utter another word. What kind of monster did this to their child? To their Pokémon. To anyone. What kind of inexcusable sadist must’ve one been to conduct, endorse such absolute cruelty? And also what inexplicable fortitude must’ve one had to survive this?

He felt a palm land on his head and lightly ruffle his hair. He refused the initial impulse to lean in. Why? It was him who was supposed to be comforting Silver, not the other way around. Offering him a sturdy shoulder of support and not taking the first chance to weep uselessly into his clothes.

-I’m so sorry Silver--

His partner had been so painfully blunt. He hadn’t glossed over a single aspect, hadn’t flinched and hadn’t shed a tear white reciting those horrendous events. The fact alone wrung Gold’s heart and smashed it into a million pieces.

-I’m so fucking sorry, I’m--

How, just how could one be so strong, so tenacious? How could one find it in them to keep going, to be able to smile and laugh, to show compassion after all they’d been forced to endure?

-Sorry, I’m so--

Silver cut him off, voice firm.

-Don’t be. I told you this because I promised, not because I sought sympathy. They’re gone, it doesn’t matter anymore.

Gold shut his mouth and hugged himself with one arm, struggling to subdue the shock, the horror. He found himself unable to.

Silver removed his hand from Gold's hair and pulled back.

-Tell me, what do you see when you look at me?

The other wiped his face and blinked several times, weakly lifting his head.
-What… what do you mean?


-I don’t--

-A ruptured colon or a stab wound. Both hurt, both bleed, so what sets one injury apart from the other? Humiliation? But isn't that also subjective? Murder, torture, sexual assault - they’re all acts of dominance. They're meant to defile, to assert one over the other, they're almost identical at the core.

He gestured with his arm.

-You watched me address my subordinates this evening. I laid it out in front of them, I acknowledged all of it. I’m sure they’re joking about it behind my back as we speak. But even so, they will follow and will obey me.

He then looked Gold in the eye.

-What I am saying is - I will accept your judgement, whichever it may be, but I do not want your pity.

Gold scampered to find a reply, but the other had already gone on.

-Following my escape, I took base in Cerulean and gave myself time to heal. I brute forced my way back into the servers, now that my access had been revoked, and I rewrote the records, confirming my own death. I searched for more bases, supply warehouses and manufacturing hubs. One by one I pinpointed them and burned them down. Apart from that first one, I’d always checked for prisoners and left at least one escape path.

By then Team Rocket had officially disbanded so no one ever raised suspicions, linking the chain of arson to the RGB initiative that had ultimately shut them down.

He leaned back just slightly.

-For the three and a half long years I worked tirelessly on myself. I’ve dabbled in subjects way out of my previous scope. I studied politics and read research papers on economics and regional history. I made sure to keep tabs on the new legislature, scientific development. I took several advanced courses in chemistry and electronics.

If Blue had taught me something during our short time together, it was information, not fists or firearms, that was the deadliest weapon. It held more power than nukes, it could manipulate entire governments and break the strongest of alliances.

Of course, I’d kept myself in shape as well. From time to time, just to verify my skill, I’d set a list of benchmarks and then force my way into street fights with the worst odds possible. I’d time myself, assign handicaps or set a rule that shouldn’t lose a drop of blood or suffer a single blow.

I procured an off market sniper rifle and experimented with explosives.

I went after each one of those people. Every single scum that participated in my Pokémon's murder, every vermin that dared to lay a finger on me. Some fled the region and some went completely off the grid. Today, I weeded out the last two.
Again, he faced Gold who had somewhat calmed.

-Now one final target remains.

The other teen murmured.

-...your father.

-My father.

Gold brooded, still trying to digest the unending stack of disturbing facts. His own neglectful parent hadn’t even come close to the sheer sadism the other’s had committed. His partner had all the reasons to wish his kin death. And yet, something about the situation felt off. It did not fit. After all, hadn't Silver’s father already been dead?

When Silver spoke to AA-12 on the observation deck, he’d mentioned a woman. C-11, Ariana? That was precisely when the admin got so bent out of shape. He looked genuinely offended, he threatened to shoot Silver, and then, he changed his mind and shot himself.

But, again, if he did care for this Ariana, who’d Gold assumed to be Silver’s mum, then why would Silver label her as a pet? It didn’t make sense, as didn’t Gold’s original conviction. AA-12 couldn’t have been Silver’s blood relative. And if AA-12 couldn’t, then...

His eyes rounded as he ultimately connected the dots.

-No fucking way.

-Looks like you’ve figured it out.

-Giovanni, he’s the final target and your--

-Biological father. Yes, he is.

Gold just stared. Silver hadn’t ever been particularly subtle about it either. He’d referenced him at the meeting with the Rockets earlier and dropped multiple mentions during the talk now.

-Then Ariana and AA-12...

-Had been in a long-standing relationship. AA-12 suffered greatly through his partner's unsolicited affair and death. I’d wondered sometimes whether he pushed himself so far through the ranks just to get closer to his boss and then to stab him in the back. But maybe he got so wrapped up in his own ploy that ended up believing in his loyalty instead. Suppose now we’d never know.

Gold buried his face in his arms. This was too much. All of this was too much. Silver's horrible childhood and gruesome past. His appalling heritage. Among other titles, Silver wasn’t just the new leader of Team Rocket, he was the rightful heir to it.

-Why didn’t you announce it to them?

-Announce what?

-If you knew you didn’t really have to go through any of this - Ilex, Goldenrod, Mahogany - if you had the claims for Team Rocket from the start. Why didn’t you?

-I do not wish to be acknowledged on the basis of mere inheritance. It hadn’t been disclosed at the start of my training and I have no intention of doing it now. Blood ties and past do not decide my
worth. They must submit to me regardless or face the consequences.

-But then AA-12--

-AA-12 realized because I gave him a hint. It was underhanded, true, but I was running out of time.

The brunette again fell quiet for a bit, thinking, and Silver adjoined.

-That being said, I’m not planning to keep it a secret either. I did not attach the audio to the security recording merely to avoid sowing even more confusion. Very few remember or know of agent C-11’s existence and certainly, neither of them know her true name. So if any witnessing parties on the deck or elsewhere had figured it out, they’re free to handle the information as they please. Speculate, start rumors, keep to themselves - I shall not persecute them either way.

Gold timidly nodded. The horrid picture was coming together.

-And Blue. Did she survive?

-Yes.

-Thank Arceus… Please tell me you still keep in touch with her.

-I do not.

The teen muttered, afflicted.

-W-why not?

-When we last parted I made her promise to never contact me again. She’d always been forthright and so far she’d kept her word.

-But… wouldn’t she want to help?

-That is exactly why. If you recall, I turned down your offers multiple times as well.

Gold did. He remembered it perfectly, but from where he stood now it felt like it was a decade ago.

-Still, you agreed in the end. If you had options, though, why did you…

He shook his head.

-I mean, she sounded so much more experienced and capable and fitting than… me.

For the first time in a while Silver’s expression grew completely unreadable.

-Do you regret it? Now that you’ve seen it. Now that you know.

-It?

-It. Us. Everything.

Gold dithered. Less than two days ago he’d asked himself this same question. Sitting in the cave, depressed and broken over the misconceived rejection, having no idea what he was about to go through. He’d watched his partner almost drown, get stabbed, strangled, shot to death. He almost had the same happen to him.

-I don’t.
The sheer brutality and the endless hurt. No matter how much he wished to reject it, just like Silver’s late Pokémon, Feraligatr was dead. No matter how much he wished to believe in it, just like Silver’s partners, he was not coming back.

He looked at his bandage that had again started to bleed red from the other end. Today, if Silver’s gamble hadn’t panned out he would have been personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands. Yet even without that, he could be liable for at least a few dozen. The sewers, the warehouse, the base in Mahogany. He no longer had the right to look into his mother’s eyes, to ever face Professor Elm or his friends.

But did he regret it? The answer did not change.

He lifted his head and held Silver’s gaze.

-This has been the most challenging, harrowing time I’ve ever lived through. I’m disoriented and confused. I have no idea how to stitch back the disjointed pieces of my life. I’ve never been in so much pain. But if I had to, I’d do it all over, because it had all been my choice.

He balled up his fist and placed it over his chest.

-I promise, I will train. Harder than I ever have before, I will put my all into it. Then, I will be able to stand for myself. And I will be able to protect both of us. For my only regret in all of it is not being by your side when you needed it the most. So please, Silver, do not ask me this ever again.

The other’s eyes softened.

-I won’t.

-And as for your other question. What, who do I see? I see the bravest, strongest, most radiant person in the entire world, sitting right here beside me. The person I love with all my heart and that I want to believe feels the same for me.

Silver angled his head and breathed.

-Trust me, he does.

They removed the bulky back pillows and wedged themselves onto the narrow leather sofa. After twenty minutes of continuous work Silver had finally finished going through the unread messages and wrapped up issuing late night orders. He looked at the clock, sighing, and set up an early alarm.

-Leadership had never been my strong suit. For years, I’d declined every single promotion to squad leader in lieu of perceived independence. And yet, here we are.

Barely breathing, Gold lay still on his back. Silver's arm was hooked under his neck and the other hugged him tightly from the left. He acutely felt his partner's body heat, his heartbeat and the soft cadence of his breath. It was intoxicating. It was exhilarating.

He shifted his head just a bit and offered a tiny nod.

-I think you’re doing a fantastic job.
-You do?
-Yeah.
-Well, we’ll see what tomorrow brings.
-You expecting something?
-A few things, but they're not fully up to me. The gears have already been set in motion.
-I see.

The brunette yawned and Silver followed. He whispered.

-Yeah, me too. It's been a long day.

Softly, he bumped their foreheads together and squeezed the other boy's hand.

-Goodnight, Gold.

Gold returned the gesture and smiled.

-Goodnight, Silver.

Chapter End Notes

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