Olivine Romance

by Snowden

Summary

Jasmine is an adult now, but even as her fellow gym leaders mature and begin exploring their sexuality, she remains notoriously shrewish and abrasive towards romance and sex. An old middle school pest returns to try to win her heart, and in the process, uncover the reason for her unnatural hatred towards men.

Notes

Rated Explicit for eventual lemons. Ongoing work. Feel free to R&R.
At its heart, this is a story about a young woman having her first experience with sex. As such, there will be plenty of indelicate language, and, eventually, lemons. Take this as fair warning. Do note, however, that I wanted to treat the subject with a certain amount of respect and realism. It's the same experiences and issues I, and so many others, have had to deal with as we mature into adults.

This is my own canon, but it's more or less based off the games (as opposed to the anime or manga). The naming scheme is a little inconsistent I admit (e.g. Red is the hero from the R/B/Y, but Ethan is the hero from G/S/C); despite that, I hope you can follow without too much confusion.

With that said, I politely ask for any criticisms or reviews, and hope you enjoy reading.

Part I - The Gym Leader Summit

"I'm sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends." I watched the proverbial knife dig deep, deep, deep into his heart, and my only emotion was anger. Anger at him, for forcing me into this situation. Anger at myself, for inviting it. The world makes me angry, and this drama is one of the bigger reasons for it. But I'm shy, so I can't go ballistic on his ass, like I so dearly want to right now. That would be improper, and I'm terrified silly what others would think of me then. So I just give him a half-hearted smile and say - nothing.

My name is Jasmine, by the way. I'm the leader of the Olivine City Pokémon Gym. I'm twenty-one and five-foot-four and happily single. Okay, maybe not happily, but I am single by choice. It's no big deal, to me, but for everyone else I know…

"I'm sorry," said Volkner. "It's just, well… Is there someone else?"

"No," I answered.

"So, it's just… you don't want to see anybody."

"More or less."

I sounded so much chipper and calm than I really was. Volkner certainly sounds more upbeat than he must be inside. His lips are smiling, but his eyes are welling up. Best to get out of here before the waterworks start.

He stepped away, shoulders held high. Don't kid yourself, Volksy, I bet you feel like a Metagross meteor-mashed your heart right now! Don't beat yourself up over it, either, because it's me, not you. Well, okay, it's you. I don't know how my brain works, but it has no interest in you, romantically, whatsoever. It was good chatting with you!
His tall, lanky form hung limp as it disappeared through the lobby doors. I wonder if this one will forget me, or fawn over me for awhile. By recent trends, probably the latter, maybe to the point of stalking. Unrequited love is such a Ghastly thing, forgive the pun. At least I won't have to entertain his awkward conversations about his Pokemon prowess anymore. Thank God!

With that out of the way, I'm well able to enjoy the rest of my day. Which means lunch with my friends at the Café le Rei.

I didn't especially like Café le Rei. It was too average and un-notable, from its white-washed walls to its generic menu. It had but one thing going for it: it was right across the street from the Battle Tower, and not some miles up the hills of Olivine City. So, while I'm working in this part of town, and while this September is unusually, disgustingly humid, convenience trumps taste.

Below my nose lay a merely-edible, half-eaten panini. To my left sat the gym leader of Goldenrod, Whitney. To my right, Celadon's gym leader Erika. Across the table from me was Lyra. They all hadn't known each other very well for very long, but since they all knew me, we formed a group and began hanging out. Lyra was the newest member of our troop, and Whitney and Erika were initiating her into the complex social web that was the Gym Leader Summit.

"There are dozens of regions, each with their own official gym systems. All of them have to be certified by the Pokémon League, which means they have to follow certain rules and guidelines. This summit helps us keep current on the rules, and helps us become stronger, since gym leaders have to maintain competitiveness." Erika explained this in her usual placid, gentle tone.

"Yeah, not anyone can be a gym leader! They wouldn't let us run a gym if we lost to too many pip-squeaks!" Whitney chimed in.

"Uuhh. Uuhh." Lyra nodded along, hopefully not just pretending to understand. "But, wait," she interrupted. "If you guys are so strong, how'd I beat you all?" Lyra had recently become the Johto League Champion. It was a surprise she had come this far in Pokémon-battling without understanding anything about the organization behind it.

"Because that Typhlosion of yours is absurdly strong!" exclaimed Whitney. True, she had basically leveled the entire Johto League, including me, with Typhlosion's Overheat attack. Thanks, Whitney, no need to remind me about it.

"Well, I just let my Pokémon do what they like." I had learned that her Pokémon actually love her, a lot, and were so strong because they wanted to protect her. She really needed it, too. She can be a complete ditz at times, like when she mistook a human hotel for a pokecenter (and freaked out when the bellhop took her pokeballs).

"How do you manage?"

"Oh, I trust my Pokémon!"

"I mean, in everyday affairs. Your Pokémon can't help you with your bank account."

"Oh," smiled Lyra cheerfully, "my boyfriend helps me with the math stuff."

"Boyfriend??!!" was shouted in unison, including me. Whitney, having known Lyra the longest, was
the most shocked.
"When did you get a boyfriend? Who?"

"Oh it shouldn't be a big surprise! Me and Ethan figured out we liked each other this summer."

"Congratulations!"

"Wow!" squealed Whitney, piercing my eardrums. I winced, then slouched back into my chair, attempting to not be a part of this conversation. Lyra was a newcomer, she could be forgiven the quaint look she threw me when I divested myself of the celebrations. Whitney and Erika, however, should have known better.

"I'm in-between boyfriends," said Whitney, exasperated.

"But you're always in-between boyfriends. When are you going to settle on one?"

"Never, dating is too much fun! Hey Lyra, did Ethan ever figure out how to dress?"

"Yeah, I go shopping with him, no worries there anymore."

"Good, because those were an awful set of shorts, they ought to be burned and buried."

"Don't mock him! He doesn't deserve that."

So on and so forth, the banal twittering of young women and their obsessions. I was getting bored, until Erika tugged my sleeve.

"So, Jasmine, has there been anyone to catch your eye?"

"Not interested," I responded succinctly.

"Oh, come come! Tell us."

"Yeah, there has to be one?"

"None."

"What about that guy who you've been talking to lately?"

"Hmph." I'm not going to repeat myself.

…

"It's okay if you don't have someone special yet. You'll meet him, someday," Lyra added, hopefully and starry-eyed.

Whitney rolled her eyes. "You don't know Jasmine that well."

"Can you just tell us why? You're always so uptight over dating, is there a reason?" I wanted them to think I was 'just not ready', but Erika saw through my poorly built facade.

"It's because… I'm a lesbian." I tried sounding sincere. Lyra and Whitney covered their mouths and stood back in awe and shock. Erika patted my head playfully.

"Don't be silly," she advised, even though she was stifling a smile. Whitney and Lyra relaxed, now thinking themselves fools for being duped so easily. That goes to show the overblown importance
they put on others' sexual-orientation. Lyra recovered faster from the embarrassment.

"If you don't want to tell us, we can drop it," offered Lyra. I mustered a petty smile for her kind suggestion. Whitney and Erika would have loved to have pursued this, since they never let up any other time. Not today, though. Either in consideration for me, or at the behest of our new friend, I was let off the hook. Finally- a minute is too long to be retreading this subject.

Except Erika couldn't resist one last barb before immediately switching topics, cutting off even a come-back:

"You're such a shrew, Jasmine. Speaking of Sandshrews…"

We ended the meal and broke off to our various functions around 2:00 P.M.

They were holding practice battles at the open-air arenas, ostensibly to foster casual competition and friendship between gym leaders and other prominent trainers. I was not really up for a fight, so I stood by in the shade and watched. There were three or four other like-minded spectators nearby, and a few dozen more at various points around the field. A pool of ten or so trainers took turns challenging each other.

Nobody expected anything spectacular here; it was, after all, unwise for a trainer to show off their special tactics before official tournaments. In fact, there was supposed to be a championship tournament after the gym leader qualifications were over. I knew I wouldn't even be considered for competition, though. My mind was focused on the qualifying matches; those determined if I could keep my job as Olivine's gym leader. Anything beyond that was unimportant.

Whitney was also present, but in the trainer line-up. She came back from a close-cut victory, sweating from the summer heat. She tried to stand next to me, but I couldn't help but step one foot leftwards after taking in her body odor.

"How come we have to qualify for gym leadership? Seems bossy to me, each gym should run by whoever wants to do it most!" Whitney exclaimed/whined.

"Because gym leaders get a salary from the Pokemon League, remember? They want their money's worth."

Whitney was referring to the fact that we were forced to take a graded three match course against League representatives, and another six matches against fellow Gym Leaders. Failing the grade meant no more title and a trip to the unemployment office. There were degrees of failure. Lower-scoring individuals would have to put in extra effort to avoid forced-resignation, such as community service or Pokemon fitness programs or trainer strategy courses. The best scorers get pay raises.

"I sure hope mine are easy," she went on, referring to her opponents.

"They scale your grade against your opponent's skill level. Don't you pay attention? Where's Erika?"

"I pay attention! And Erika's inside with the Kanto crew throwing a bridal shower? I think."

"What?"
"One of the guys is getting married next month, his fiancé is being welcomed into the Kanto club. Sounds fun, but she said it was invite-only. Party-pooper."

"I hope she's ready for the gala tonight."

"Oh, don't worry about that. I worry about you, though, you like to skip parties without telling anyone."

"Hey, good idea!" I tried sounding sarcastic, but maybe I sounded too enthusiastic. That was always a problem of mine, miscommunicating my intended emotion. I just don't see any reason to work on it, though.

"Woah! Watch this!" Whitney pointed at the spiffy black-dressed indigo-head coming onto the field. "She's really good. Watch her fight."

The lady's opponent was a little kid, by comparison, a teen in a yellow jacket. I wondered how the brat avoided baking up in that thing. He was eager and loud, once the action started.

"Go, Charizard!" The dragon-like lizard burst from its pokeball, letting off blasts of Flamethrower into the air. "Let's mash em!" he screamed. Really? 'Mash em'? I looked to Whitney's favorite, as the cool-colored lady summoned an Umbreon out. The little black mammal looked weak compared to the Charizard, but it stood its ground none-the-less. The lady pushed a hand through her indigo-dyed hair, also looking confident.

"Umbreon, huh? That means it has strong defenses! But that's no match for Seismic Toss!" This brat was kind of smart, but not really. I think his Charizard had more brains, because it took off and rapidly gained altitude. That'd been my move as well, to avoid the nasty, annoying arsenal Umbreons are known for.

"And go, do it Charizard!" The Pokemon seemed reluctant, but dove anyways.

"Defense Curl!" was all I heard from the other side of the court. Umbreon crouched into a ball. Charizard tried to tackle the creature and grab it, but instead it was as if it had rammed into a rock. Charizard flapped back a few steps, clutching its head.

"Just fly in and grab Umbreon, like we trained, Charizard! Charizard?" The kid didn't even notice the Confuse Ray Umbreon had fired immediately after, sending Charizard into a dizzy status.

"Argh! Okay, stay cool… no, heat it up!" I was angry again, I wanted this kid to stop belching lame puns with every breath! "Use Fireblast!" Charizard stomped itself straight, and then let loose a pentagram-shaped fireball. Umbreon took the attack head on, flinching as it did so. The Dark-type wasn't down, but it was hurting.

"Like to play with fire?" the lady asked, returning his lame puns for another. She retreated her Umbreon and sent a new pokeball out. Out came an evil Pokemon, not to be trifled with: Houndoom.

"My fire against yours! Charizard, Fireblast!" Yet this Fireblast missed as Houndoom dodged to the side, then charged in for its own attack. "Bite!" came the command, which Houndoom executed almost instantly. It was too fast for reaction; I thought perhaps the trainer and Pokemon had a psychic link. The Houndoom locked onto Charizard's throat, taking it down in one stroke.

"Wah?! No way! Awwwww!" The whining did not cease as he was forced to take his Pokemon back. He fiddled with his other two Pokeballs, stunned.
"I told you she's awesome!" Whitney chided me (even though I never argued that point). At that moment a profile picture from the faint reaches of memory floated back. I recognized the woman, or thought I did. I could be wrong about the face, but what other high-level dark-type specialist would be hanging around Johto?

"That's Karen. She was in the Elite Four a few years ago. Of course she's good."

"She's okay," chimed in a voice beside me. A guy stood there, watching the match intently. He looked my age, maybe a few years older; I couldn't tell much else from his dress or demeanor. Who was he? Why was he listening to our conversation? Why did he look a little familiar?

"Say what?" I asked. He glanced sideways, barely, as if surprised someone actually addressed him.

"Karen, she's ranked 14th in the region right now. Decent." That was all he said.

"You are?" I asked him, annoyed. He seemed more annoyed, and inched away without replying.

"That's rude," I said. Yet another example of the depraved masculine half of the human race. Was it any wonder I didn't want to be associated with them?

"Woah!" Whitney blurted. I turned to see the smoking remains of a Venusaur disappearing into a Pokeball. The kid cursed under his breath, and threw out his last comrade, a Wartortle. I bet he's regretting slacking on training it, compared to his other fighters.

"Water Gun!" It was pointless. Houndoom simply took the wimpy stream of water, and counterattacked with a Solarbeam. How a Houndoom could know Solarbeam was beyond me, but it was super-effective and Wartortle was 1HKO'd.

"Thanks for the breather," Karen said, laughing at the puddle of misery that was her challenger.

"Well I'm beat. Let's go get ready for the party."

"Sure..." I said, looking back over my shoulder at the rude, mysterious young man as he stared off into space. "Men," I muttered under my breath with disdain.
"Jasmine, you're not serious, are you?"

"What's wrong with it?" They were the best I had!

"Those are church clothes, Jasmine, this is a gala. You have to have something more... festive, right?" Erika acted like the de facto big sister of our group. Normally polite and reserved, even on the gym floor, put her in a formal dress and she could always be counted on for her socialite aptitude and assertiveness. By far the most mature female in my circle of friends. By contrast, I must look like a spoiled brat right now.

"No!" I answered. Despite my undying respect for Erika, her frequent mommy-attitude caused a lot of squabbling and inane arguments.

"Come here!" she dragged me into her hotel closet and began rummaging through her dresses.

"That's so like you, Jasmine, always the modest one."

"I like how I dress."

"Yes, but you'll stick out like a weed in a rose garden! Come come!" She rough-housed a jet-black backless halter dress onto me. I struggled the whole way.

"Quit it!" My protests were useless.

"See? That looks good! Dare I say - sexy?"

"Don't be so coarse!"

"Lighten up, you're twenty-one, not a little girl."

"Thanks for pointing that out," I said with lava-like sarcasm. Everyone else made fun of how young and childish I looked.

"What's with that reaction? Maybe if you actually ate something...." She eyed my scrawny figure over with a disdainful eye. "I haven't fit into that since high school. Oh well, can't be helped for tonight. You'll look splendid- but let down your hair."

"No!" It was too late, my hair clips were snatched away and my mini-tails fell out.

"Much better."

"I regret coming here."

"Oh do cheer up. Maybe you'll meet a cute boy tonight."

My mood right now? In a word: RARGH!

Minutes later…

"WOW!" A double squeal of joy could only mean Lyra and Whitney have arrived. They ogled at me in Erika's dress.
"Never seen you actually dress up, Ms. Jasmine!"

"Hmph."

They, for their part, were impeccably dressed for gaiety. Erika was in a long green sleeveless cheongsam. Whitney was in a short skirt and strapless top. Lyra was similar, except with spaghetti straps. Between the four of us, there was a little too much bare skin for my liking. Not that my opinion on the matter was heeded in the least.

"Don't be a baby."

"Lighten up, have fun!"

"They're right. Relax, and enjoy it. You don't have to flirt with the boys; just say no if they try to pick up on you. Goodness, you have enough practice doing that."

Whitney, Lyra, and Erika's answers, in turn, upon hearing my protests. I looked down at myself, gripping the tissue-thin fabric by the hem.

"Let's hurry, the bus might leave without us," Whitney motioned.

"No need, I already made arrangements." The three of us stared at Erika with quizzical expressions. What exactly did she mean by that?

Five minutes later, we got our answer.

"Wonderful!"

"Awesome!"

"Neat!"

"Hmm."

Erika, Whitney, Lyra, and my own reaction, in that order, when a sleek limousine pulled up the drive. We were currently out in front of the Solace Hotel and in ten minutes we wanted to be at the Calloway Room at the Pokemon Battle Tower. The gala had already started, but Erika insisted we arrive "fashionably late". It's so "Everyone will notice us when we enter!" as she had put it. This was the only part of the plan I agreed with, as it reduced the time period I would be forced to stay at the party. The driver ushered us into the cabin (not without checking us out!), and we were on our way. The three of them chatted non-stop the entire way. In the middle of the conversation:

"Where's Ethan? Is he coming?"

"Not tonight. He's on the boat coming from Kanto right now, he'll be in late."

"That's unfortunate. I had wanted to meet him properly," Erika said.

"Haven't you? He was the Kanto Champion, I would have thought-"

"Sadly, no."

"What's this about Ethan being a Champion?" asked Whitney.

"Oh, funny story. He's not anymore, but after I took the Johto Championship last January, he didn't want to fight me for the title, so he took off and cleaned up the Kanto League. I thought he was
scared of me at the time, but it turns out he liked me too much to battle me seriously."

"Jeez, and you're dating him?"

"Well, yeah, he was beaten like two weeks after, so he came running home tail between his legs. But at least he got up the courage to confess the next day. Ha! The dork! I would have said yes a long time ago if he had just asked!"

"Hehehe!" Whitney laughed.

"I see." Erika nodded.

I said nothing, but rolled my eyes.

"Eh, I wish he could be here tonight, the Johto crew wouldn't mind a rematch," Whitney said.

"So all the Johto League Gym Leaders will be there?" Lyra asked.

"Naturally, it's being held here after all. At least a hundred Gym Leaders have shown up for the conference, and then there's hundreds more officials, trainers, and other wealthy fans. It's a real who's-who in the Pokemon-competition world," Erika answered.

"Sweet! Maybe I'll see Silver there!"

"Hey, that means Morty will be there too!" Whitney became excited recalling this fact. Her eyes opened wide and I swear they were reflecting stars.

"Whitney!" I tried to shush her.

"What's that?" asked Lyra and Erika simultaneously.

"Morty, the Ecruteak Gym Leader. I had a huge crush on him when I was younger. So did Jasmi." Too late, I clamped her mouth shut. She flailed at my face until I let go.

"Oh really?! Maybe we can get him and Jasmine to hook up!"

I slumped into my seat, thinking. These friends of mine loved me, so why did they always make fun of me and bother me about going out and having fun and boys? They knew it irritated me, they knew it, and they still do it, every single day! It made me mad and I wanted to just get this over with and go to the lighthouse and cuddle with Amphy.

"Oh, guess who else might be there."

"I don't know. Wait, is it a guy?"

"Yes, but don't get your hopes up, he's married."

"Who?"

"Well, I heard from my professor that they're having to prep security for the convention tomorrow, personal bodyguards and stuff. That probably means we're getting a visit by the Man himself."

"Wait, you don't mean…"

Even I perked up at this- "**HE's here?**" I said, genuinely surprised, and shocked.
"Yep, Steven Stone, in the flesh."

Let me give you a short history lesson. The Pokemon League World Championship was founded 98 years ago, and is held once every four years. The best of the best compete for the top spot on the globe. Any given trainer has a one-in-ten-thousand chance of even qualifying; to even make it to the 2nd round twice in one's lifetime was a divine miracle.

Steven Stone won the World Championship three times. His official league record does not contain a single defeat. He is not merely a champion, nor a legend, he is a God, a Myth, among trainers. And currently, he is also the Chief Executive Officer of the Pokemon League. That's not even considering his other achievements, like his tenure on the Hoenn Elite Four, president of the Devon Corporation, and a world-renowned geologist, paleontologist, and archeologist.

A momentary silence occupied the limo cabin. When we came to, the conversation turned to Pokemon affairs. Lyra, being the only non-gym leader, was now being poked fun at for her ignorance. Among League employees, the in-joke treasure trove was endless. The topics and humor broiled on- I even found something to add every so often- until another interesting bit came up.

"When was the last time Stone won?"

"Um… '04 I think. Though it was kind of a bum championship that year, everyone else had given up. Oh, right, that was the year…"

She paused, and we hung our heads in silent penance for a moment. No one likes remembering such an awful tragedy.

"Speaking of championships, the current champion should also be here," Erika observed, pushing us past the difficult topic.

That was a given, the current champion was socially obligated to attend the summit. Still, anyone who won that title was awe-inspiring in the extreme and created a buzz wherever they went.

"Um, that'd be Red, now."

"Awesome! I still remember when he came to my gym."

"Me too! He's soooo handsome."

"And kind!"

"Don't remind me."

And there they go, boys, boys, and more boys. Besides having learned of the suspected presence of three males who may or may not become important to me in the near future, I heard little of value in that limousine ride. Come to think of it, I couldn't wait to get to the gala, if for no other reason than to go off alone.

The ball was in full swing by the time we arrived. Once we got past check-in, we moved into a chaotic sea of bodies and noise. The center floor was already filled with dancers, the best getting urged to the front and the mediocre flowing in and out of the crowd like microbial proteins. The four corners of the enormous room were filled with tables, each catering to a different taste in atmosphere.

"Oooo!" Whitney squealed and jolted off towards one such area. It looked like it was the hip, neo-metro look. In the far corner they were playing classical music and pretending they were in the Victorian era; this was my destination. I successfully gave my friends the slip and floated away. A
nook opened into a windowed vista, overlooking the coastline. I sat down here and enjoyed the relative quiet of the place. En route I had found an itinerary and began reading it. There wasn't much scheduled. The idea was for people to mingle and create their own fun; programs might spoil the mood. We missed the welcoming ceremonies, and the only other major events were a band and an address by the Pokémon League Chief Human Resources Officer. Not interesting, unless he announces pay hikes for us. I leaned back and sighed.

"How were the practice matches?"

"I didn't join them."

"Why not?"

"Meh."

I found myself listening to the next table over, where two men had taken up seating.

"If you weren't going to fight you could have helped the staff prepare."

"You mean I could have helped you," came the reply.

"Not just me. Everyone's working here, even the gym leaders partying out there have to wake up for seminars tomorrow. It's the least you could do for an old friend."

"Well then, forgive me. No one here is worth sparring with anyways."

"How can you be sure about that?"

"Karen showed up to the practice matches and rolled over everyone else. If they can't put up a fight against her, I don't need to bother."

"Doubtful. The best are probably keeping their Pokemon fresh for the reviews."

"Then why should I go and bust their teams up before then?"

"You are right, you shouldn't, and that is why I wanted you to help run admin."

"Meh."

Sounds like they don't get along. I tipped my head back, for the first time seeing four men dressed in black suits standing around. One was eyeing me, and not in the lustful sense- he gave me an ice-cold stare. I jolted round to see who exactly needed bodyguards, and had two big shocks at once.

"Oh, did we startle you? You don't have to move."

"It's okay," I answered to the elder of the pair. There was no mistake, this was the same picture featured on political magazines and competition annals; this was Steven Stone. My mind raced, searching for something appropriate to say and not make an ass of myself in front of the CEO of the Pokémon League.

And beside him? None other than the youth who had so rudely brushed me off at the practice matches. He didn't even bother looking at me this time. But now that I look at him again- he seemed too familiar, as if I'd met him somewhere else, but I couldn't place him…

"Good evening," I bowed my head. "My name is Jasmine."
"Pleased to meet you. I'm Mr. Stone, of course, and this is my young friend, Red. Where are you from?"

Red? The world champion?!

"I'm this city's gym leader," I managed to sputter out.

"Oh, I see. That's convenient for you. Are you enjoying yourself?"

"A little."

"Well, I hope that changes for the better."

That's funny, he's so much nicer to me than to his friend. I guess the same could be said of me and my friends too.

"Well, thank you. I won't intrude any longer; besides, I could use a pick-me-up." I rose, bowed, and lilted off. Stone waved goodbye as I exited the veranda.

A few minutes later:

"No way! You met Stone! The Stone?!

"Yeah, turns out he's kinda nice to strangers, too. But I guess it was a bad time, he was with someone and they weren't getting along."

"Do you know who?" I didn't want to tell them it was a personal feud with the current world champion, so I waved my head in the negative. "That's too bad."

I wandered off again, having run into the group out of accident and still not wanting to hang around them. I couldn't return to the veranda, and there was no where else private and quiet to hide out at, so I just drifted.

The crowd was still on their feet, mostly hanging around and chatting. I tried recognizing as many of them as possible: fellow gym leaders, famous trainers, politicians, businessmen, random associates and a few acquaintances. It felt awkward, though, as I never felt in the mood to join in or talk to anyone. The conversation was mostly pointless, affairs and interests that were inane or out of my field of knowledge. Silly things came up, often, such as jokes about the latest pop-sensations. Pratting about past victories and losses, but so few were exciting these days.

Blah blah blah, that's all I heard, and the more I dwelled on it, the worse my boredom got, the more irritated I became, and the more flustered my emotions got. Was I having a panic attack? What was there to panic about? I needed something to distract me!

A group of trainers were showing off their contest Pokemon, including a cute one I'd never heard of. It looked like a Treecko, but that wasn't quite what it was- too spiky, less lizard-like and more snakish. My feet followed my eyes, and soon enough I had attained some measure of calm watching this curious little grass Pokemon do somersaults.

After a particularly difficult set, the Pokemon gave a dramatic flourish, I forgot where I was, and laughed aloud. Ten seconds later my phone buzzed with a text message.

"You're cute," it read.

I didn't recognize the phone number. It could be Whitney or Erika playing a prank, but where would
they get a hold of a stranger's cell phone? No way— I bolted upright, rotating around, looking for spies. Someone was stalking me. No one was paying attention to me though; they were all enthralled by the acrobatic grass Pokemon.

The phone buzzed with another text message.

"And you're cuter when you're upset."

"Who are you?" I tapped into the phone and mashed the send button. Who was spying on me? Who was teasing me? I wanted to know, and when I found them, introduce them to my fist.

"Would you like to know?" came the answer.

I didn't bother replying this time. I was wading through the ballroom, eyes darting from one face to the next.

"Wrong way." Now the mystery texter is taunting me! How ignoble!

An idea popped into my head. It wasn't surefire, but it was worth trying. The phone was back open and the unidentified caller's number was highlighted, but instead of hitting 'message', I pressed 'dial'.

Through the din and gentle roaring of the collective host, I heard what I was searching for: a ringtone, the theme to the Ghost Eraser movies. My feet stealthily carried me in that direction. Being my height, it wasn't too hard to slip beneath the human foliage. If I could only catch them off-guard…

Another message: "That was clever, but it won't work twice. Keep trying, though."

I called again, but now no Ghost-Eraser tune sounded out. They must have silenced their phone. My ears did catch something, though, the buzzing of a silent ringer. Gotcha!

I sprinted towards the noise, now within mere feet. My heart leapt, then fell through my ribcage. There was the phone, sitting on a table, there was my number buzzing in its display. But no culprit was in sight. A message was typed out on the inner display: "Told ya." They'd used the old dump-the-tracking-device trick. My shoulders slumped, embarrassed and frustrated. It took a few moments to figure out who the real smartass was here, though, as another idea lit up in my mind. I grabbed the phone and looked in its directory. 'Dad' was near the top. I dialed that.

"Hello," said an old geezery voice. I coughed in reply.

"Morty, what's up, have a cold?"

"My apologies," I hung up.

Checkmate!

It took some time searching the ballroom, and then more time sneaking up on my target-

"This belongs to you."

He stared blankly at his cell phone. The surprise gave me enough time to slap the bastard across the cheek. I called him that.

"Cheeky bastard."
"You are cute when you're upset."

"Morty, you're twenty-two, act your age."

"I would ask you the same thing, but then you wouldn't be half so adorable." I slapped him again. By now everyone was staring at us. Morty rubbed his cheek, where it had turned bright red.

"Jeez, you still hit like a karate pro." I had nothing to say to that, the pain could speak for me.

Morty smiled despite the sting, clearly enjoying himself. His blonde hair was rumpled, probably from being held up by a headband most other times. His body was athletic, probably because he still biked, hiked, and swam when not pursuing his myth-hunting hobby. His eyes were tired and deep, like outer space, and I could sense that underneath the jokes he was thinking of something completely different.

You see, we had a history. It could be summed up in a line: I was pragmatic and he was idealistic, and never the twain shall meet. Or they did meet, but violently and catastrophically.

"I've gone three years without having to put up with your antics, I'd as soon make that four. Do not play games with me."

"So I take it you're doing well?" he asked.

"Yes, I was doing well."

"What do you mean, 'was'? I hope you're not implying I'm the reason for your interrupted bliss."

"I never respected you, never liked you. But, at the very least, I expected you would have grown out of such childish behavior when we left middle school, but you know what? The entire Indigo charade proved you'll never be anything more than a nuisance and a scoundrel. So, yes, your very existence is a blot upon my life."

"I'm sorry, I really am. However, when throwing accusations of "childish behavior" around, just keep in mind I'm only trying to be your friend. You could stand to take a joke."

"Friends don't send provocative texts to each other! Friends don't bully and tease each other!"

"Oh? That's not what I hear. You seem to be in plenty of hot water with your own acquaintances these days." He began circling me, making me uneasy by walking to my periphery.

"Where did you hear that?" I demanded, turning to keep him in my sight.

"Sources."

"Tell me!"

"Maybe I'm only guessing. Maybe I have spies. Maybe I'm psychic."

"No mind games, tell me who it is."

"Ah, can't. It would be a great unkindness to them, especially given your violent tendencies." He began strafing again.

"Tell me!" I grabbed him by the collar to hold him still.

"Temper, temper, you don't want to dig the Battle Tower's grave, do you?"
Those listening perked up, perhaps irked by the weak come-back. Or rather, it sounded weak to them, but I was fuming. Some context is necessary.

October 5th, 2003

Let's go back nine years. I was twelve, entering Ecruteak Middle School. My family had temporarily moved to Ecruteak due to a complication in my parents' careers. It wasn't that I hated Ecruteak specifically, merely that the town was somewhere not-named-Olivine. I missed my city by the sea, and said so, vocally (read: twelve-year-old balling their lungs out), before eventually being dragged to a dingy townhome and thence thrown into a new school system with a new dress and a pat on the back.

"My name is Jasmine *mumble*mumble*mumble*" and my surname was lost amongst inaudible stammering. Before me was a class of strangers who all seemed bigger and older than me. Of course I was nervous and embarrassed, and self-conscious to a degree that my cheeks were fire truck red. My head came down in a deep bow to hide my shame. There was a modicum of understanding by my new teacher as she ushered me to a remote corner of the classroom.

"Psst." From the next row over came a hushed plea for attention. I turned and surveyed my caller.

"Huh?" 'It' was a 'he', and he had messy blonde hair that he didn't care for at all, and a smug smirk on his mouth that eschewed an averagely handsome face. Not that I was going to give him any credit for his good looks. "What?" I whispered back, hoping no one else heard.

"Are you a Pokemon trainer?" he asked, pointing to the Pokeballs poking out of my backpack.

"Shhh!" I didn't want to get in trouble for talking in class. My cheeks were already red from the fear of it, and I bolted my eyes to the book to make sure I was keeping up.

A minute passed, and I took a momentary glance to look at the boy. He was busy looking like he was paying attention, but in reality was juggling a pair of Pokeballs behind his back. Impressive dexterity skills, but I stifled any sign of being impressed. Besides, there was something wrong with this picture. My own hand crept to my backpack pocket.

"Hey!" I whispered, angry at realizing that I'd been robbed.

"Hmm?" He was slightly grinning, and just giving me a sideways glance.

"Those are mine! Give them back!" I held out my hand under desk level. The boy refused.

"Don't you want to know my name?" he said.

In answer, I grabbed his hand, and the Pokeballs fell to the floor with a loud plastic thud. Every pair of eyes in the room turned towards us, most prominent of them was our instructor's. I swore I was done for. My eyes closed and I held my breath.

"Morty! Don't you dare corrupt the newcomer on the very first day. Leave her alone," she said sternly. My eyes opened, I began to breath, but only slightly; I was a little surprised when she automatically went for the boy.
Did he have that bad a reputation? I wondered. I stooped over to collect my Pokeballs, and got a wet finger stuck in my ear for it. A whisper was passed into the offended orifice.

"Meet us at the gym during lunch, it'll be worth it!"

Curiosity, accursed curiosity, tis the only explanation for sneaking off to the gym during lunch period. Inside were six or seven guys and two girls. They were all chattering excitedly and waiting. Not even wanting to be seen, I hid behind the bleachers and watched the proceedings.

They were just milling around, though. Nothing organized happened. It felt like they were waiting for someone, their leader, probably the guy who had embarrassed me in class. At the thought of the prankster my temper rose.

"Boo!"

I didn't jump in fright, I whirled around and slapped the perpetrator in the cheek. He stumbled a bit, shocked at the counterattack.

"Jeez, sorry." Morty strolled out onto the floor, or strutted, to be accurate. He acted like he owned the place.

"'Kay guys, we've got half an hour! Let's get working!"

"D'ya have it?" Eager, expectant faces turned to him.

Morty grinned and unzipped his backpack. Inside was an old binder of some sort. The edges were stained in crimson; at the time I thought it was blood. The boys babbled, the girls squealed.

"Hey, new girl! You're a trainer, right? Come help us!" Morty waved me over from my hiding spot. Reluctantly, I tiptoed forward.

"What's this about?" I asked, sounding angry to hide my unease.

"Don't you know?" one boy asked.

"Hey, don't pick on her, she's not from around here, remember?"

"What's going on?"

The blonde boy waved behind him, towards the far set of bleachers. Specifically, at a narrow gap between the bleachers.

"Jon found a break in the wall while snooping around the bleachers last week. It looks like it leads to the old basement, the one they sealed off."

"Why go down there?" I never should have asked.

"Because…" Morty looked side-to-side, conspiratorial eyes and grin and all, with his minions nodding eagerly in anticipation, "…it's haunted."

"OoooOOOOoo0000000000000!" Sound effect courtesy of the gaggle of students.

"It's not haunted," I insisted, rather dourly and feeling cheated out of a lunch period.

"Oh, you have no idea," Morty said. "You haven't heard the stories…"
"Like the cheerleader who went crying to the locker room because her boyfriend broke up with her. They found her body stuffed into a tiny air duct, all twisted and broken and ugly!" piqued in one of Morty's buddies.

"And the teacher who went crazy! No one ever got the whole story, but her last words before running out were 'the paper-cutter, why? WHY?' And they said she never took her left hand out of her pocket…"

"And the message written on the kitchen wall- in blood! And no matter how many times the janitor whitewashed it, it always came back the next morning!" added a third.

"It's still there, behind the freezer," Morty finished looking smug. "And the best is right here." He pointed to the gap in the wall with one hand and held out the binder with the other. Inside were jammed all manner of papers, clippings, collages, and artworks.

"Every game night the janitors have to clear off the bleachers beforehand, and they dump all the trash into one bin. I had to do this for detention last year, and when I actually looked at the trash, I found this!"

He lifted a page showing a crude crayon drawing of a teacher being chased by a paper cutter, clutching a stump of a hand.

"There's lots more… the piano player who was found hung with his piano strings, there's a short story about the bully who got lost in the basement for three days, the Magikarp heads found in the beef stew, on and on. Someone's recording these stories, predicting them, maybe even causing them. But no one has ever seen them leave behind the scraps… they just appear."

They seriously went googly-eyed in admiration of Morty's knowledge. He stood and exalted in the attention. Then he motioned towards the hole.

"I bet you whatever's writing these ghost stories lives down there, and we're gonna find it!"

"Um…"

The other guys backed off, giving Morty three good steps of distance.

"Yeah... so... by 'we' I meant me and you," said Morty.

"Why me?" I asked.

"'Cause you have Pokemon."

"Why does that matter?"

"It might be dangerous..."

"This is silly," I declared.

"Is not!" he yelled back.

"Is too, and I'll prove it!" I marched towards the hole in the wall and jumped in.

"Wait up!" Morty hurried to follow me inside.

It was dark. It was cold. It was damp. It smelled.
It was not haunted.
I firmly believed this and marched forward.
"Tell me you at least have a flashlight!"
"Here."
Cht cht, fwoosh!
A flickering flame lit up, creating a blob of light in the darkness. Morty handed the lighter over to me.
"What are you doing with a lighter? Do you smoke?!"
"No! Lighters are important for occult rituals, any ghost-hunter will tell you that!" I stared him down.
"How do you think they light all those candles?" Not impressed, but I wasn't going to waste any more time down here.
We were pretty deep in now, and I couldn't be 100% sure which direction led back to the opening. Nor did I realize how cold it was going to be down here. I had to hold myself with one arm to keep from shivering. Something loomed up ahead.
"Morty what is that?"
"Hehehe."
A hand reached under my dress and flipped the hem up, exposing my panties.
"Eeek!" I screamed, whirled around, and tried punching the pervert. To my shock, no one was there.
"Morty I'm going to kill you!"
If this entire ordeal was a hoax to get me down here, well nice going pig! I'll make you pay for this!
"Morty!!"
There was no sight nor sound of the teen.
"Morty this is not funny, come here and take it like a man!"
In reply, nothing.
I stumbled along, trying to find my way back. No good; I must have lost my orientation, and only ended up by an old pumping unit.
"Ehehehe…"
"Ha!" I dashed ahead, chasing the giggle. Nada.
Something tugged at my dress again, I whirled to get them, but my dress was stuck. I fell face-first onto the mucky floor.
Something light fell on my face. I reached up and grabbed it with an iron grip, hoping to catch Morty. It wasn't Morty, it wasn't even sentient.
"EEEEEEKKKKK!!!" It was my panties, my bottom was suddenly exposed and I was
screaming and furious and felt over-the-top violated!

"That's enough!" I screamed. I chucked my first pokeball. "Magnemite, go! Flash!"

The little ball-of-steel pokemon burst out and immediately obeyed. The electrical sparks fused, lighting up the entire basement at once.

"Wah!?!?"

"Haunt haunt haunt haunt! Hehe haunthaunt!" Before me floated a jaggedy blob of ectoplasm, laughing its non-existent ass off. Otherwise known as a Haunter.

"A Haunter?!" My face grew red. Behind the Haunter, Morty stood in a trance, victim of the Pokemon's Hypnosis. "Dang it! Magnemite, Thundershock it! Thundershock it dead!"

Haunter laughed and disappeared into the cement floor, letting the Thundershock fly over it and hit Morty.

"YOUCH! Huh? Wah? Jasmine, are those what I think they are?"

Eh? Noooo! I realized I was still holding my panties. I dashed behind a support stud to put them on.

"Your stupid ghost is just a stupid Haunter, idiot!"

"Oh… That makes sense."

"Don't just stand there!"

"Buhboo!" Haunter's face appeared out of the support stud inches from my own. I fell back in shock, flailing.

"Get away you dirty perverted ghost!"

Magnemite floated over to help me. Haunter's eyes lit up, staring Magnemite down. Magnemite stopped, confused.

"Haunt haunt! Larlirlrl." Haunter released convoluted streams of nether, enveloping my Pokemon. Twas a Nightshade, and the confused Magnemite dropped to the cement.

"No!"

"Hehehe!"

"Jasmine, what's wrong? Where's the Haunter?"

"Over here doofus!"

Haunter appeared behind my neck and put his big, slimy tongue all over it. I screamed again. Morty was by my dropped backpack, rummaging around.

"No more!" I chucked my second pokeball. The basement suddenly became much more crowded.

"ONIIIIIIIX!" My twenty-seven foot rock snake circled around, eager to fight. You can bet he was gonna fight, and kick ghostly tail!

"Rock Throw!" I ordered. Haunter sensed the danger and flew away. The debris hit the wall right as
it phased through the surface.

Magnemite's Flash faded as the Pokemon fainted. We only had Morty's dim lighter now.

"Hmm…" What would this thing do now… oh. Right.

"Onix, Rock Throw at me!"

"Oni?"

"Do it!"

More debris hurled straight at me. I jumped, just in time to see Haunter appear under me, trying to grab my panties again. He got a face full of rubble instead, knocking the ghost silly.

"You know, I'm going to catch you, so I can beat you up over and over and over…" I declared, just as a red and white thing flew past my head. The pokeball hit Haunter straight on, flashed, wiggled a bit, and then lay still. Morty sprinted over and scooped it up.

"Alright, my first Pokemon!" he declared with an excited glee.

"Hey!"

"Yeah?"

"That was my pokeball!"

"So?"

"That was my fight! My Onix beat it!"

"But I really wanted a ghost Pokemon! You wouldn't be a good trainer to it."

"Give it back!"

"No!"

"I said give it!" I screeched. Morty stuck his tongue out and clung to it the tighter. He snatched the lighter too, and made off with our only light source.

"I've had it with boys today! Onix, Earthquake them all!"

"Onix!" The ground rumbled and tossed and broke apart, and it seemed like the whole world fell to dust.
As it turns out, the old basement was not sealed because it was haunted, but because it was unstable. Onix's Earthquake triggered a collapse beneath the gym that left behind a hundred-foot-wide sinkhole. It slowly swallowed the entire gym and part of the rest of the school. Thankfully no one was hurt and no one found out who caused it. To this day, though, Morty refuses to apologize and refuses to let up about it. Worse, every time he brings that stupid ghost out (now a Gengar and the leader of his team) I light up red remembering what it did to me.

"Love your dress, by the way," he said casually.

"Shut up, I never wanted to so much as hear about you ever again!"

"Oh that's funny, since I've been hearing a lot about you recently."

A figure in the background inched away. I recognized him.

"Volkner?"

The young man flipped around without a word and departed.

"Guess you didn't know, me and Volkner are buddies. Now what's this about you being a misandristic little shrew?"

"You're… Volkner's buddy?"

"Jasmine, don't you know anything?" Morty sidled up to me, closing the gap between us, and making me uncomfortable.

"Don't touch me."

"Why not? What's there to touch, anyways?" he said, pretending to rub a pair of invisible boobs. I fumed. By now the girls had found me, and so did Morty's crowd, and quite a few others.

"This is sexual harassment!"

"Hey, are these your friends?"

"Morty!" Whitney shouted, and promptly hugged the guy. Then head-locked him. Typical of her. Morty took it good-naturedly.

"Whitney, been awhile! Oh, Lyra too! Congrats on the League Title! Oh, and this one's a stranger, but lovely nonetheless. I gotta say, you've found quite the company Jazz!"

"Do not call me that!" I retorted.

"But the music is about to start! Hey, let's all sit down together!"

"Yeah!" Whitney chipped in. Erika and another lady from Morty's group began chatting amicably.

"Sure," said another. The others nodded and I was left behind to stutter, lip trembling. Morty patted me on the head.

"Lighten up."
He tailed them to a seat while the band began playing. The head singer was speaking in the mike.

"It's been hard times, I know, for everyone, but especially hard on our gov. workers, our soldiers and firemen and aide workers. They're fighting the terrorists, and the madmen, and the hurricanes, and wildfires, and hunger; and way overseas they're alone and away from their families. So before we get this party in gear, I just want a slow melody, to honor the hardworking men, women, and Pokemon putting their lives on the line for all of us. This song is for them, it's called 'Lonely Bones'."

Just what I need. A song about missing your special someone.

This gala was getting worse and worse.

I couldn't stand there being sour, with the lyrics whispering on:

"Heart's gone cold,  
So far from home,  
No one to call my own,  
Fillin the hole,  
Where is my soul?  
She's on the line,  
A voice on the phone..."

I hate this.

I slipped into an empty seat, hopefully unnoticed.

"Missed ya."

Morty smiled.

Everyone else stared at me awkwardly.

I needed to divert attention. How?

"What were you talking about?"

"Oh, yeah, the music." The chatting resumed.

I listened, of course. I didn't add anything either. You know how these conversations go. Blah blah hey you blah blah this is so funny blah blah blah. One thing leads to another and by the end everyone is confused as to how they arrived at the strangest of subjects. It's even worse on one's sanity to suddenly pay attention in the midst of things. For instance:

"I like to lick it really hard for a minute or so."

"What?!" I snapped-to hearing this tidbit. "Did I just hear that right?"

"Yes, Jazz, it's exactly what you're thinking."

What a pervert! Oh wait… That face he's making…
"Jerk."

"We were talking about sewing. What did you think we were talking about?"

"Jerkass," I reiterated. Besides, why would a guy get into a conversation about sewing? This smells like a trap.

"Seriously, Jasmine, what were you thinking? You strike me as the type."

"What type?"

"The one who over-reacts at the mention of anything the tiniest bit sexy because you're actually thinking about it 24/7 and embarrassed about the fact."

"I am not a disgusting perverted male!" I shouted, throwing a dirty napkin in his face. He wasn't the least bit fazed, or dissuaded.

"You're saying you don't have the least bit of interest in that stuff? Mmm? Or maybe…"

I glared at him, fuming.

*I'll strangle you! With barbed wire!* I tried to telepathically drill the message into his head. It did not work.

"Jasmine is too shy, she'd never say one way or the other how she feels about it," Erika offered.

"But sometimes you can read between the lines."

"And what are you reading right now?" Erika asked.

"Well, sometimes when you say one thing, it means another. And sometimes, when you hate something with a passion, it's more like a fascination. Which leads me-"

"Oh stop bugging her, it's not so important," another lady chided.

"Really? I was pretty sure it's the norm, at least."

"Not everyone is like us, bro," another of Morty's friends said sternly.

By now, I had an inkling as to what they were at, but I didn't want to say it aloud. How could anyone say that aloud? It's improper! And gross! And-

"He means sex, Jasmine," Whitney explained.

"I know what he means!" I screamed loud enough to startle the musicians up front, and gained an audience equaling the population of this ballroom.

"Ehe." Not funny. I shrank into my chair. The music resumed and most people turned back to their own business.

"Really, I find that hard to believe," Morty chipped in again. "There's a difference between knowing and knowing."

"Shut up Morty. Everyone's different when it comes to this."

"Really?" Morty leaned forward in his seat, grinning and glancing about the table.
I wanted to stop him. I wanted to tell him to shut up, or physically stop his jaw from moving. But, something stopped me, held me back. Dread?

"Who here's done it? Come'on, show your hands!" Morty looked round the table, encouraging them with wild waving. No one offered, till he raised his own hand high towards the ceiling. "Come on. Jeff, I know you." Jeff raised his up, not looking particularly happy about it. Then the next guy. Then one of Morty's lady friends. Then- oh God- Whitney's appeared in the air. One by one the rest of the table raised their hands, till only two others were left. I looked to Lyra and Erika.

"Tell me we're not all animals," I begged.

Erika slowly raised hers. "We're adults, Jasmine, you should expect this," she said gently. My teary eyes turned to Lyra.

And, wilting, but achingly, her hand crept skyward as well.

"Lyra? Lyra?!"

"Well, me and Ethan… you know… we like each other a lot."

I'm going to cry.

I'm serious. I'm crying. These are tears blurring up my vision.

"It's not like it's a big deal." Whitney came to my side.

"Don't cry!" Erika took my other arm. I couldn't help but bury myself in the proffered arm. This was not me. This pitiable weeping creature was not the same ironclad gym leader of this very city. That girl had guts, resolve, nothing shook her ego. That girl and this one couldn't be the same.

Pull yourself together you brat!

After a few minutes, the sniffing stopped. My emotional high passed into glumness. The aftermath of that little disaster passed by, forgotten for the moment by the others. As for myself…

Why?

Why'd they have to pick on me? More accurately, where'd my youth go? My innocence?! How was it possible that everyone had grown up except me?

No, that's not the way to phrase it. I was the mature one. I can keep my head high, my virtue intact. It's everyone else, as soon as this imaginary barrier called "adulthood" had been breached they forget everything about what they were taught and chuck themselves headlong towards hedonism. It's not like this was the first time I'd thought about the subject.

There were times when I was shocked by the stories of my old schoolmates; upstanding kids who ended up smoking, or on drugs, or partying wild, tattooing their bodies, in the dumps, or gambling-addicts, or worse. That's not just it, either. Everyone moves on, everyone grows up. Sometimes it's not so repulsive, sometimes it's as happy as it is shocking; my cousin joined the military, Beth moved overseas, Aron got married at 22. I'm happy for them, really, proud even, but to me, when I knew them, these are all things that only existed in the future, always in the future. The fact that it was happening, this becoming an adult thing, stressed me out; it was coming too fast.

They didn't need to make it worse by shoving the issue in my face like that.
What am I going to do?
"Jazz." The perpetrator's voice floated over the table.
Ignore him.
"Jazz."
Ignoring you, leave me alone.
"Jasmine."
"What?!"
"Seriously, relax. It's nothing to be ashamed of."
"I'm not ashamed of being a virgin, I'm proud!"
"Of sex, Jasmine, of sex. It's not a cardinal sin."
"Morty, please."
"Tell you what, I'll make a bet." He raised his voice.
"Huh?"
Morty tapped his glass, gaining the table's attention again.
"Hear ye, hear ye, ladies and gentlemen, as I make this solemn prophecy. By the tick of New Year's Day, some three months far, our dearest Jasmine and her virginity shall part, and she will be made the happiest woman in Johto."
Some laughed, some cheered. I wanted to start crying again, but held back, barely.
"Seriously?" Whitney ejaculated.
"That sounds ostentatious, Morty," said Erika. "And who do you think will do the honors? You?"
Morty was taken aback, but only feigningly so.
"Me?! Well now that you mention it- but alas, only if the wind blows so; I merely state she needs to be laid, and will be, by next year. Count on it."
"I'm sick."
I got up and left. No goodbyes, no tantrums, nothing. Just left.

Need I explain? Need I?! Must I justify myself before all these buffoons, these cretins, these bastards, these PERVERTS?!!!

My head and my feet were storming. I felt well within my rights to create the drama-equivalent of an F5 tornado and God save the soul who tries to stop me! I should strangle them! All of them! Not just
Morty, who deserves it ten times and more for all he's ever done to me… but Erika! And Whitney too! Why didn't they defend me? Why'd they take Morty's side? What is wrong with everyone! Why is everyone against me?! I hate them! I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate I hate HATE HATE THEM!!!…

Wow… Take a deep breath. Calm down a little. Think.

Why me, huh? Don't just rage on and on, vent your rage. Answer your own question; get mad but be productive about it!

So think! What is wrong here? Why are you being ganged up on?

I was a virgin, in a world full of non-virgins. How was I going to come to terms with that? Give in, and accept the inevitable? Was such a thing even possible? Could I ever, even in my fantasies, sleep with a boy? Or should I close myself off, become a hermitess and grow old without ever seeing my body invaded? I'd be the gnarled, batty witch of Olivine City, all alone, but at least then I'd be innocent…

NO!

I deserve better! I deserve to be happy! I deserve to live my life on my own terms! There is nothing wrong with being single, with being untouched, inviolate! Even in this modern world I refuse to believe I am not a proper human, cannot live a normal, healthy human life, without giving into lustful urges, urges I don't even possess! I will live how I want! I will be as sexual or asexual as I want, and not let anyone, not Morty, not my friends, and- God smite me if they even try- my own parents tell me otherwise! That is my solemn vow!

But…

If I believe in these words so strongly, and I do, I know I do…

Why am I crying?

I'm alone, on a slick wet bench, looking out onto the starry night sky above a black ocean, and I'm in tears. I thought I promised myself, so long ago, I would never cry again, but there's something wet puddling in my palms and it's not the ocean spray. I want to stop. I want to be stronger than this. I want to be that woman I'd promised I'd be when I took up the gym leader job. So why can't I stop?

Why?!

It's as if…

There's something there, just out of reach. A memory I can't remember, and even though it stays in the dim regions of the mind, it still haunts me from so long ago. It's like a dark cloud- as I'm searching for it, dashing from one memory to the next, bringing to surface every misfortunate, miserable experience of the past ten years, it's there, torturing me, causing me to break into a fresh set of tears. Those memories, those cursed memories…

…

…for every time that Morty humiliated me in middle school. Calling me names, picking on my childish looks, preying on my temper and stubbornness. How he corrupted every friendship I tried to create with the opposite gender- poisoning their minds with thoughts of a "relationship", and not the innocent kind: insinuating into their male minds they could "have" me if they tried hard enough.
…

…of Volkner, and Kyle, and Peter, and Troy, and Terrence, and the hundred other boys and men who thought they could have me. The better ones, like Volkner, so shy and modest it was disgusting, but at least they respected me, or at the very least respected my wish to remain single. But then there are the others: Kyle, who stalked me for weeks until I called the police. Percy, who had it in his mind I should have been drooling at the prospect of being asked out by him. Edward, who when rejected, went into a rage, called me obscenities and spread lies about me. The bitter, soul-draining feeling of warding off so many unwanted advances has been taking its toll on me for a long time now.

…

…the frequent heckling of my Mother, who always asks about my relationship status. And although she means well, there’s this hint in her voice that I’m doomed without a man in my life. Innocently vicious remarks about my career, what others think of my status, and how if I don’t pick a good man soon, I’ll fall prey to a bad one. And as for Father, he’s no better- not because of what he says or does, but the way in which he never, ever defends me, or shushes Mother, and acts like my personal troubles don’t matter.

…

…getting left behind during couple’s night. Being a third wheel when another friend brings her boyfriend. Being the ignoble subject of blind dates, or signed up to dating websites without my consent. Being pushed away from social groups, not actively, not out of maliciousness, but purely by the way I just didn’t fit in. It’s at a point now, if Erika and Whitney abandon me, if I can’t even keep their friendship, I might never reach out for human contact ever again.

…

…and memories of being called out for being a virgin, at a public gala, by a so-called "friend", in front of everyone.

…

Over it all there’s a pall, a dark cloud, a miasma that poisons my life. A reason why this one issue, this "boy" issue, has to be my greatest fear and woe. But in my present distraught mental state- I just can’t remember it. I can’t get at the heart of the matter. And realizing that, I broke down and cried. Not softly, not to vent my anger anymore, nor channel my sadness, no longer caring to remember, or think, or feel rage or sorrow or any other emotion; I just wanted to let it all out and sob till the end of time.

At some point I simply ran out of tears. I was tired, and achy, and didn’t care about anything or anyone or even my own immediate situation. I was just relieved when sleep finally came over me, because it meant an end to this miserable night.
I say goway! I toired!

Despite my mumbling protests, the buzzing noise continued. After a further minute of incessant aural irritation I was finally aware enough and irked enough to do something about it. My hand flailed around for the source of the sleep-murdering vibration.

It was in my handbag. Of course, it would've been my cellphone buzzing. Who wants to talk with me, anyways? I don't want to talk with them. I'll just tell them to shove off and return to snoozing.

I fumbled around, blindly trying to get the electronic device into an operable position. Seriously, I should invest in voice mail. -Grr, which end is this? It's so hard to tell with groggy eyes!- That's one more thing people can pick on me for, no voice-mail. It makes me look relatively pre-historic in this age of techno-gadgets. Isn't text messaging good enough though? I would think, with texting being newer and hipper and more convenient, voice mail would just go the way of the Kabutops. Anyways, pre-waking babbling aside, I finally got the phone right-side up.

"Hewwo? Who idis?"

"Jasmine! It's Erika!"

"Why you call me? You mean last night. You side with fwat boy."

"Jasmine, oh my gosh, what happened to you? We were so worried, we couldn't find you anywhere!"

"Meh. Not happy with you. Shush, lemme sleep."

"Where are you?! Jasmine! Please don't hang up!"

"Blah!"

"Jasmine, it's 10:08! You're late for the certification exams!"

"OUCH!"

"Fuck!"

Oh, I know I shouldn't swear and at any other time it would be extremely uncharacteristic of me, but...

"fuck!"

There I go again! But what else am I supposed to say after realizing my tardiness, flailing about, forgetting I was on a bench out in the open, and falling over onto my face! At least the grass muffled my language; I would die if Erika heard that word out of my mouth.

"Are you okay??"
"Yesh. I t'ink. I just slept on a bench, that's all. Urgh, I'm all a mess." More thanks to sleeping on a park bench in front of the beach than falling over, but still. My hair was frazzled and even my scalp felt soggy. There was sand in my shoes, and the grimy feeling of sea-mist all over my skin. My eyes were still refusing to open fully, and didn't like the glaring eat-straight-through-the-eyelids sunlight. My gala dress was in relative ruin, having not been made for lying down in, let alone sleeping in the elements in.

"Don't fuss, just hurry! When you get here, I'll have stuff to wash yourself-"

"Erika," I interrupted her.

"What is it?"

"I don't want to see you today. At all."

And I hung up on her.

I suppose one night was not enough to get over what had happened. Hopefully, sooner than later, I can forgive them, and we can be friends again. Not today, though.

"Ouch!"

My back hurts… and Battle Tower is still a mile away!

I tried running, stopped for want of breath, started again, nearly tripped over myself, and ground to a halt. My little lungs begged for air.

Must… keep… GOING!

Ten minutes later:

"How late … am I?" Ellipses there for the giant inhalation needed. I had tried to run, but the dress shoes hurt my feet and threatened to trip me over. I tried to take the shoes off and then run, but my bare feet hurt even more: my soles seemed masochistically determined to find every rock and pebble on the road from there to here.

Nonetheless, I had arrived.

"You're so late you're lucky, little girl." Blue hair, blue eyes, outlandish fantasy skinsuit, breasts the size of my head- it could only be one person.

"Clair."

"If you sign up in the next, oh, ninety-seconds, you might just get into the K-block. You should know that Lance is supposed to be judging those fights-"

"Thanks!" I gave her the most curt bow and continued sprinting towards registration. For whatever speed it would give me, I took my pokeballs out and flung my handbag away. Nothing but the bare necessities…

"Registration is now CLOS-"

"Wait!" Without thinking I chucked my pokeball onto the desk. Magnemite appeared in a flash and landed with a thump on the table. The staff member was not amused. I huffed and puffed the final few yards, whereupon I collapsed on top of the table alongside Magnemite.
"I need to register."

Mr. Preston looked down on me in obvious agitation. He ran the Pokemon Center here in Olivine; they must have drafted him for the exams.

"I see. Do you have your I.D.?”

"Wah?"

Of course I have my I.D.? It's right… here… in my non-existent handbag…

"I don't have it," I said, bitterly smiling.

"I can't sign you up with no identification."

"For God's sake, you know who I am!"

"Eh. Rules are rules… Miss Jasmine."

"There, you just said my name! Can't you let it slip?"

"Nope." Was he enjoying this? No, by his expression, he's just a natural-born hard-ass.

"Please? Can you just hold registration open while I go get it?"

"Maybe… if you hurry."

"Thank you!"

For the third time in this young morning I found myself dashing away, without the real energy needed to do so.

"No!" My handbag wasn't where I tossed it. My vision darted to every corner and direction, scanning the ground, hoping I had just misplaced its landing. It was useless, there was no sign of it.

"Jasmine! I think you dropped this."

"Oh thank goodness!"

It was Lyra, carrying my bag in her arms. I reached out to take it, but she only half-offered it to me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well, Erika and Whitney are really worried about you. She told me how you hung up on her. Is everything going to be alright?"

"Yes, yes, only if you give me my bag. Tell them I need more alone-time, 'kay?"

"Okay. And Jasmine, I'm sorry for what happened."

"Oh no!" I put my hand on her fore-arm, trying to reassure her. "There's a history behind this; Erika should've known better, but I can't blame you for not knowing."

"Still…"

"Can't talk now, sorry, bye!"
Truthfully, I didn't want to talk to Lyra. Of course I didn't blame her, but she was still involved in last night's debacle, however tangentially, and that wasn't a subject I could afford to revisit. Not while my career was on the line.

Just my luck today- as I ran back towards the registration, hopefully the last sprint required of me this morning, my sole found the lone loose carpet-staple in the floor.

"EEEEEEK!" I screeched from the pain pulsing up my leg.

"Eeek! Eeek! Eeek! Ouch! Ouch! Owwww!" Oh yes, I continued to screech and yelp, one exclamation for each step it took to get back to registration. Pain is not that big a deal when my future was on this line. Still…

"Oww! Oww! Oww! Oww! Ouch! Ouch! Owwiieee!!!"

I slapped my state I.D. on the table. Mr. Preston simply shrugged in resignation.

"Put me in!"

I ought to be preparing for the exam. I ought to be going over notes, memorizing league rules, planning for the live-battles, checking on my pokemon. Instead I am massaging my feet in the lobby fountain. Of course it's wasting precious minutes before testing starts. Of course it's unsanitary in the extreme. And of course I would be lectured if caught by the staff. But it FEELS. SO. GOOD!

Please understand, Mr. hypothetical public-health-nazi, I NEED this. My feet are in excruciating pain. They are torturing me, practically begging for a reprise. If they don't get the relief of a cool, pain-numbing bath, I might as well become an invalid. How can I take the exams if I can't even walk? I'd rather die than be bound to a wheelchair for the rest of my life.

Fine, fine, I admit: I'm nervous and frazzled. Ranting is merely a way to channel my frustration away from the real issue. Or rather, "issues", plural. The anthropomorphized catastrophe that is Morty and everything surrounding him; and the more immediate issue of how to keep my job.

Nine pokemon battles awaited me today. Three against league officials, six against my fellow gym leaders. Depending on how well I do, I could get a pay raise, or lose my gym leader title. In my current state, I expected the latter, depressing as the thought was.

"Attention. K-Block participants should now report to Battle Hall Sixteen." The announcement repeated again. It was time.

I entered Battle Hall Sixteen with an unhealthy dose of apprehension. The other gym leaders of the block were milling around, waiting for the proctor to arrive. Some glared at their competition, others stared into the ground. Only a few were tending to their pokemon. The gloom in the air was palpable, and became self-reinforcing- my own mood was plummeting.

Let me explain.

A-Block was reserved for the top tier of gym leaders. They were strong enough and competent enough to need special testing in order to challenge them. They also partook in special training, because they were expected to represent the Pokemon League in more than the ordinary capacity.
One would need to be as strong as Clair, for example, in order to qualify for A-Block.

B through I-Blocks were more ordinary, and assigned strictly on a first-come, first-serve basis.

J-Block was our special-needs/equal-opportunity (read: handicapped) block, as required by national regulations.

And then there was K-Block.

K-Block existed solely to make subpar trainers even more miserable. It's where all the rejects, outcasts, lowlifes, and baddies of the Pokemon League end up during the summits.

Miss your battle quotas for two straight years? K-Block.

Third-time probation? K-Block.

Your gym doesn't meet upkeep codes? K-Block.

Register late for exams (like me)? K-Block.


Stage protests accusing the League of corporate corruption? K-Block for you!

As part of the punitive measures included in K-Block, the battle exams begin almost immediately, with no time to prepare, and typically against a notoriously tough proctor. Some crazy gym leaders relish the prospect, and intentionally come to K-Block for the fights. Looking around, I'm sure I can spot a few fitting that description. That one guy wrapped in a parka, for instance, and is that Lt. Surge? Sometimes, they didn't just want to fight a tough proctor, these kinds of thugs enjoyed beating up the weaker gym leaders that make up K-Block. I hope I don't have to battle anyone like that.

"Listen up, mongrels, you're here for a reason! Do as I say and maybe a fraction of you will get away with a pay cut! Now line up against the wall!"

With the voice of a drill sergeant, our proctor arrived. As Clair promised, as I should have expected of K-Block, it was none other than the former League CEO and Elite Four leader, Lance the Dragon Master. Our grades are supposed to be scaled against the skill of our opponent, but nonetheless, I couldn't help but audibly gulp.

Lance motioned to two assistants, also Dragon Masters by their apparel, as they set up the battle floor.

I fumbled towards the wall, trying my best to get into the middle of the line. Being first or last was never a good idea here, and everyone seemed to know that too. They pushed and tugged, vying for the center while trying not to attract attention from Lance.

"Stop diddling with each other! Just take a spot!" Lance's outburst spooked the group. The mass of bodies quickly solidified into an orderly line. In the bluster, I found myself second to last; hardly a fun place to be.

The battles began. Lance and his subordinates took one gym leader each, allowing three battles to be fought at a time. Each round was 3v3, and we'd be fighting 3 rounds in a row.

"I hope I don't get Lance," said a stranger in front of me. The first testee saw her Tangrowth blown
away by Lance's Dragonite in a single hit. Lance smirked with satisfaction, before shouting for a new round. The Tangrowth user reluctantly healed her pokemon. A few minutes later, and lasting barely longer than the first round, the Tangrowth was again wiped out. By the third go-around, the gym leader looked broken, and Lance seemed almost happy about it. By contrast, the other Dragon Masters didn't seem so keen on destroying their foe's confidence.

"Please not him," I prayed.

This state of affairs continued as the line wound down. What had been gloom and apprehension before was quickly turning to panic. I gained a new appreciation for why the last few spots in the line were feared: being at the end allows you to witness everybody else go down in flames beforehand.

"Next!" Lance shouted.

My turn.

"Go, Magnemite!" My first Pokémon, who I knew desperately needed to be leveled. I cursed myself for even considering bringing it. It was the junior of my two Electric/Steel Pokémon: my middle-school Magnemite had long since evolved into Magneton. Magneton was also here, though, and my Steelix, of course. Still, the redundancy was going to hurt me, especially if…

"Dragonite, Earthquake!" Magnemite didn't even get to move, let alone defend itself, let alone attack. The seismic waves ripped through the ground, disjointing and fainting my Pokémon.

"Magneton, go!" I prayed and hoped Magneton's greater defenses would hold up. "Use-"

"Earthquake!" The attack that preyed on the common weakness of both Magneton's types- yeah, it was an instant knock-out. Not even its Sturdy ability could save it, such was the difference in power. My knees were shaking.

"This is some really pathetic defense for a Steel-type trainer!" Lance exclaimed. Did he get off on torturing gym leaders? Is he a sadist?

"Steelix!" My last Pokémon, and he was also weak to Earthquake. Never mind he carried the move himself, it would be useless against the flying Dragonite. The best I could hope for is… Rock Slide?

"Steelix, Rock Slide!"

"Earthquake, once more!"

The seismic waves arced out yet again, hitting Steelix. Even from where I stood outside the arena, I could feel the vibrations shaking me. At Steelix's range, even a normal attack like that would be painful. Even through my own despair, I felt my heart going out for my Pokémon.

Steelix survived, barely, and pounded the ground with his tail. It was fortunate that these floors were purposely made up of dirt and clay, like in my own gym. In moments it was broken up into debris. Steelix launched a wave of it in Dragonite's direction.

"Dodge and Earthquake again!" Dragonite flickered to the ceiling, avoiding most of Steelix's attack.

"No way!" I whispered, fearing.

Dragonite slammed to the ground, causing a fourth and final Earthquake to ripple outwards. Steelix collapsed, momentarily fainted and officially out.
"The battle is over. I win," Lance declared, the opponent and judge at the same time. The bastard.
"That was terrible. You'll have to do better if you want to avoid consequences to your Leadership status."

I had only one reserve Pokémon, a Graveler. I had been neglecting her for a long time, and wondered if she would even obey me. Besides, she still held that terrible ground weakness. I bit my lip in frustration.

Even though it wouldn't be any help at all, I switched her in for Magnemite.

"Round two!"

"Graveler!"

"Earthquake!" was all I heard. Graveler rolled over a few times, stopping in front of me.

"Magnetron?"

"Earthquake!"

It was hopeless. Yesterday I had been crying over my social life. It was unfair, I had spent all my tears back then! I can't handle my career dive-bombing too! And yet, here I was, down to Steelix, again.

"Use Rock Slide, but aim higher!" The first Earthquake hit, predictably, weakening Steelix to near-critical. This time, Dragonite was prepared for the Rock Slide, and immediately hugged the ceiling. The debris' aim was better, now, however, and clipped its wing.

"Rock Slide again, quickly!" I implored.

"Extreme Speed!"

Dragonite's wings stretched fully out, then shattered the air. The hefty Pokémon skittered around the edge of the arena in the blink of an eye, catching Steelix from behind. Steelix's Rock Slide churned the ground but was nowhere near the mark.

"Rock Slide! Behind you!"

"Earthquake!"

Steelix's tail thrashed the ground, breaking it apart. It tried to launch the rocky conglomerate towards its rear, but Dragonite wasn't even there anymore. The dragon thumped the ground once, on Steelix's flank. The seismic waves arced, and the battle was over.

"One more round. Heal up." As I turned to take my pokeballs to the healing machine, I caught Lance in the corner of my vision. He wasn't smiling or gloating, though. He was shaking his head, and frowning.

The usual tone indicated the machine was finished. It always pained me, these things. I felt like it was unnatural, forcing my Pokémon to be healed through them. Nature made healing a slow, smooth process. This was a forced, artificial recovery. It was worse now. I was making my Pokémon fight a battle they couldn't win, taking damage they shouldn't have to. It was all unfair!

No challenger ever came in with something as obscenely powerful as that Dragonite! Why should my Pokémon have to be on par with it??
Quit whining! Think about Steelix!

My gaze wavered between my pokeball, with Steelix inside; the arena, chewed to rubble; and Lance-who had not even bothered to recall Dragonite yet. Things began clicking into place for me. It wasn't a way to win. But I didn't have to win, so much as…

"Let's get this over with. Round three!" Lance shouted, now again wearing that big, evil, piss-worthy grin on his face.

"I'll be wearing that stupid grin in a moment," I muttered.

"Go, Graveler!" Graveler came out, looking worse despite the healing.

"Earthquake!"

"Endure!"

"Gaavva." She didn't even obey me. She tried to tuck herself in, I suppose to Rollout, but that was pointless. The Earthquake wracked the ground around her, fainting her.

*I'm not done, yet* - I thought, even though I probably was. I sent out Magneton.

"Haa!" Lance cried out from the opposite line. "Don't you have anything new? Dragonite, you know what to do."

Dragonite slammed the ground, and the waves arced, and-

Did nothing. Magneton stood by.

"Oh? What's this?" I wasn't about to tell Lance that his constant Earthquaking, and my Steelix's tearing up the landscape for its Rock Slide attacks, had crumbled the surface down to a fine dust. It was the consistency of sand, now, and sand doesn't transmit seismic waves as efficiently as compacted dirt. Lance was a Dragon-type user, his Pokémon probably borrowed all kinds of tactics, moves, and abilities. His knowledge of all the different types would be shallow, however. I wouldn't expect him to know the fine details of Ground-type attacks.

"Flash Cannon!" Magneton charged up a shot. Its metallic surface shimmered, using its own skin like a mirror to focus light energy. It fired.

Dragonite took it on the wing. The force was such that it whipped around a half-circle. I had finally got a hit in!

"Fire Punch."

Dragonite continued its circle into a large arcing motion, and suddenly it was right next to Magneton.

"Dodge!" Useless. Damn useless. The heat-enhanced punch went straight through Magneton's defenses. It fainted, a searing dent visible on one of its heads.

"I'm sorry." I retreated Magneton back to its pokeball. "Steelix, this is it. I'm sorry."

"Fire Punch," Lance commanded. Dragonite used Extreme Speed on its own to close the gap in a blink; it was a sign of expert training for a Pokémon to compliment its master's orders with its own moves. Just seeing it nail Steelix with an ultra-fast Fire Punch brought home the difference between me and the elites of the Pokémon League. At this point, even considering what would happen, I wasn't really in the fight. I was adrift somewhere, contemplating a life after being a Gym Leader.
"Rock Slide!"

"Dodge."

Dragonite whipped out of range of Steelix's Rock Slide. It swooped around for another Fire Punch.

"Get out of there!" I shouted, tepidly, to my Pokémon. Steelix did so.

"It's out of the rubble, use Earthquake now!" Dragonite slammed the ground.

"Magnitude, 7." Steelix's Magnitude sent its own waves throughout the arena. Dragonite instinctively lifted off, avoiding the attack. Yet, it wasn't useless. The Magnitude and the Earthquake cancelled out, saving Steelix from being knocked out.

"Steelix, get back on the loose dirt."

"Fire Punch, keep up the pressure!"

"Dragon Tail!" Dragonite ran right into it. It didn't even know what happened, nor did it have time to figure it out. My behemoth metal snake flattened its foe's noggin with his tail, hurting the dragon and sending it back to Lance. Its pokeball blinked rapidly several times, then dimmed.

"Well, that's new," Lance commented. He tried chucking the ball out again, but it refused to open.

"Dragon Tail knocks them out of the battle for a short while, you should know this," I said, with a faint sense of hope.

"Oh I do… but Dragonite should be able to resist it. He really is that strong. I wonder why not now?" Lance's grin was gone. In fact, his entire demented tone was gone. He sounded more thoughtful than gloating. I had expected- what, shock?- out of him when I turned the tables. Not even that. He just stood still in thought. I still had yet to actually faint any of his Pokémon.

"It can't be helped." He shrugged his shoulders. "Charizard, go!" And the fiery lizard appeared. And before I could react, Steelix was staring down a Fire Blast and its entire upper body was glowing crimson.

"This round and set are over. I am the victor." Lance trotted over to me, staring me eye to eye. His demeanor completely changed again. He was no longer thoughtful, nor maniacal. His voice had the sound of calm seriousness, a tone fitting of a League Champion. "You can wait for the summary near the end, and you're still going to have to fight the six matches against your fellow Gym Leaders, but I can tell you this right now- that was completely underwhelming. You'll not be able to keep your job."

"That's not fair!" I screamed at him.

"Fair? Fair?! If you wanted a fair match you should have avoided the mistakes that brought you to K-Block! This is not fair for a reason, it's punishment for your failings!"

"What failings?!" I screeched. He refused to answer. I lurched off, holding myself tight, to keep from shaking apart.

The sidelines came into my field of consciousness, promising a brief respite from the emotional violence of the defeat. I sulked over to them and took a seat, knees tucked into my chest. Some Gym Leaders were already beginning their matches with each other. Some looked happy, some looked gloomier than me. I recognized Bugsy in the crowd. He seemed oddly sad and happy at the same
time. After he lost his match, he saw me and took a seat at my side.

"Tough day, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I nodded in agreement.

"Lance ran you over too?" he asked.

I nodded again.

"That's fine. I think it'll all work out. A girl like yourself, you'll do okay, right?"

I nodded, but now reservedly. I hope he's not trying to come on to me. I can't deal with men in general, let alone weepy losers trying to use me to soften the burden of their own failings. Besides, how was I supposed to cheer someone up, with me being in my own sorry state? Damn it, Bugsy, go away!

"You're getting fired too?" I asked.

"It looks that way. But it's okay. I'm happy."

"Why?"

"Do you know Kris?"

"I remember her."

"She just confessed to me yesterday. She's going on a tour of Kanto, and I want to go with her. I was going to have to put my position at the Gym on hold, so… this works out. I can always come back and fight to get my job back, right?"

"Mmm."

"I really want to see Celadon. You're friends with, Erika, right? I wonder-" and he went on without seeing if I was paying any attention.

He wasn't interested in me. He had his own girlfriend. They sounded happy together. He'd even throw away his job for her. Was love worth that?

And what he said, could he come back? Or really, could I come back, reclaim my Gym after this? Was it possible? Did I want to?

At that moment, a crack and a collective gasp sounded throughout the room. The light of a dying Thunder faded from the air. In its wake, a decimated Dragonite lay fainted. Above it stood a Raichu.

"Well, whadya know!" Lt. Surge stood laughing his butt off.

"That's impossible," Bugsy said. Lance stood agape at the scene, obviously thinking the same sentiment. The Raichu proceeded to quickly chew through Altaria and Charizard, and the so-called "Lightning Lieutenant" became the first Gym Leader to defeat Lance today. I believe the popular terminology for this kind of occurrence is: "curb-stomp!".

"What was that?!"

"I saw it," said a stranger. "Dragonite wasn't looking too well before the match. Maybe it's sick?"
I would have pondered this further, disbelieving the notion that a Raichu could defeat the monstrous Dragonite, but my name was called out. A middle-aged guy in a sweat-suit wanted to battle. I obliged, if only because I wanted my mutual matches over quickly.

Six rounds later, I stood at 2 wins, 3 losses, 1 draw. The draw came courtesy of a Graveler Self-Destruct, used against my will and almost certainly out of spite. Steelix carried me through in my two victories, but he wasn't enough for the rest. This portion of the exam counted as far less than the official matches, anyways, so I was doubtful that a flawless win streak would salvage me from Lance's prediction. When finished, I took the seat nearest the commissary desk. I only wanted out of there as quickly as possible.

Someone tapped my shoulder.

"Pryce!" An unexpected face in a sea of gloom. I actually smiled. Here, finally, someone's company who I could enjoy. A man, no less, the only one I trusted.

"How are you doing, Jasmine?" He took a seat beside me.

"Terrible."

"That's a bother." The white-haired veteran's smile turned to a slight frown. He saw me shivering (partly from my emotional state, partly from the excessive air conditioning) and without a word, spread his blaze-blue long coat across my back. I snuggled into the wooly interior, not wanting to say so, but deeply appreciative.

"I… I don't want to be a bother to you, Mr. Pryce. I'm not a decent person to be around at the moment, so I understand if you just wanted to say hi and-"

"Nonsense." He took my hand and gripped it.

"You're much too lovely a young lady to be saying such things. There is more for you to achieve in life than what a few lost battles could overturn; these are only setbacks."

"Thank you." From a man, or a boy, this would be flattering, and therefore, flirting. I wouldn't be able to tolerate it. But I knew Pryce and what he had been through, and I couldn't fault the old man for anything. It kind of put my own suffering in perspective.

"How-w-w did you do?" I asked him. Even in his old age, he still insisted on leading Mahogany Town's Gym.

"It was tough, but in the end I passed with flying colors!" He smiled jestingly. "It was over quick. I heard about you and Bugsy being stuck in K-Block so I came to see how you two faired."

"Hehe. Bugsy."

"I'm glad you think it's funny, but love is not a game- it's truly sublime."

"So you know already?"

"I do."

"About me," I clarified.

"Ah? I wasn't aware you had fallen for anyone. It would be quite uncharacteristic of you, to say the least."
"Oh, so you don't... you were just talking about Bugsy. I see."

"Why, did something happen?"

"Not really," I lied.

"Mmm?" Wrinkled old mentor used Inquisitive Eyes on me. I deflected it with Steely Gaze. Inquisitive Eyes are not-very-effective. My silent little inner dialogue brought a slight grin to the corners of my mouth. Pryce took that as a sign to allow him to get to business.

"So, well, I took the liberty of picking up your exam results. I have them here." He unveiled a stack of folders and shuffled them till the sought-for file came on top. "Not pretty, I must say so myself. But it's not the end of the world."

"Meh."

He opened the folder and read aloud.


"-revoked, I know-"

"-put on probation. Must demonstrate improvement in all categories by December 10th or else forfeiture of Gym Leader License will be enacted."

"Pr-pr-probation...?" I stuttered the word, several times.

"You may not have seen this, but I was watching your matches, and the one right after. Did you not notice Lance never, not once, healed his Pokémon today? His Dragonite defeated all comers, until Steelix. Steelix put up a bigger fight than anyone else, and eventually forced Dragonite to retreat, even. Your Steelix was the reason he subsequently lost to the Lieutenant. You should have seen Lance's face when he approached the desk. He was dumbfounded! He personally told the grading officials to not revoke your license."

"I'm... still a Gym Leader?"

"Jasmine, I've known you since you were a child. You were such a sweet child, too. Then one day you changed, and I don't know why. But I wouldn't say for the worst. You became colder, but also more... hmm... determined. It's refreshing to see a lady with some resolve in her, these days. I know you have both traits in there, the resolve to see this through, and the happiness to sustain it. Let me see them both once again, eh?"

"I'll try," I said, embracing the geezer tightly.
A Prison Called Life

Considering the previous night, I think I can be excused for going straight home that afternoon and flopping into bed. I woke up around 2:00 in the morning, long enough to attend to necessities and set my alarm. I remember dreaming something, but can't remember what it was. At 7:30 I was up, and by 8:30 I stepped into the Battle Tower facility once again. Today was reserved for written exams.

"What Pokémon makes use of a Sun Stone for evolving?" I read. That's easy, it's Bellossom.

"What is the minimum required Pokémon per challenger during a federated qualification match?" That's not so easy. I guessed three, as I vaguely remember federated tournament matches also requiring three Pokémon per side.

"Explain in detail what situations a trainer may receive a Gym Badge despite not defeating the Gym Leader." I believe that if a Gym Leader is unable or refuses to discharge their functions, a trainer may request a substitute Gym Leader for battle. A trainer is also eligible for a Gym Badge if the match was interrupted, if the match involved external factors that biased the match towards the Gym Leader, if the trainer performs acts of service to the community that demonstrates their mastery of Pokémon, or if the trainer successfully completes a challenge under the statutes of section… 5… I think, of the Gym Leader rulebook. Eligibility is determined solely by the Gym Leader, and complaints and violations of section 5 should be registered with the regional Pokémon League's Ethics and Internal Affairs department.

"What is the maximum distance a Pokémon Gym may be located in relation to a Pokémon Center or other facility capable of handling emergency treatment and healing of Pokémon?" I remember my gym being about halfway to the maximum distance to our Pokémon Center, so… two miles times two is four. Four miles.

Thus went the exams, one question after another, after another after a mind-numbing another. Some were open ended, others multiple-choice, others requiring short essay answers. Only a third of them really dealt with Pokémon themselves, most were concerned with the statutes and rules governing competition. The hardest were the gym facilities requirements- I never bothered with the intricate setups many gym leaders use, so I didn't have half the rules governing that kind of stuff memorized.

This intellectual marathon lasted, barring some short recesses, for eight hours. My brain throbbed unremittingly from the pounding it had received. Tired, exhausted, relieved, I slumped over the desk after turning my answer booklet in. Inwardly I thanked my mother for nagging me to study during the previous week. I was going to put it off till after the gala, but given what happened there, her forced study-sessions had proved to be a god-send.

Ugh- Mother.

Despite her well-meaning, and as seen here, occasionally useful advice, I couldn't stand to live with her again. If I lost my job at the gym, I wouldn't be able to pay for that cramped prison I called an apartment. Then I would be forced to stay home, and would be under her thumb 24/7.

Chores, every day. Not merely house-keeping; dishes, laundry, vacuuming and the like. I despised un-cleanliness- one of the reasons I switched to Steel-types was because they were much cleaner to keep than my Rock-type Pokémon. So, those kinds of chores were not a bother. It was the superfluous stuff that got on my nerves. For example, weeding her vegetable garden. And organizing and cleaning for her book clubs. And delivering goods for her catering service (shouldn't I get paid for that?)
"Ugh."

I needed to get past this probation, fast.

"What's the matter?" Bugsy sat beside me again.

"Nothing," I replied.

"How do you think you did?"

"I passed, probably."

"That's good. I mean, did you also pass your battle exams?"

"Not quite. They put me on probation."

"Ha, me too!" he said with a quiet laugh. "Doesn't matter. I already told them I'm quitting. Wonder who they'll pick in my place."

"Do you think they'll go for another Bug-type specialist?"

"Yeah, probably. I told them they could look into the National Park Bug-Catching Society, they have a lot of good trainers in there who'd like the job."

"That's good."

"Yeah. I'd hate to leave it in the hands of some punk who wanted to change the gym. There's a history, there, you know? With the Ilex Forest nearby, Bugs have always had a place in that town."

"Mmhmm."

He sighed.

"I miss her."

"Kris?"

"Yeah."

"She's not here?"

"She had family business to take care of before the trip. But she'll be here tonight."

"That's good."

He sighed again. We talked for another ten minutes, mostly about Pokémon, and then saw each other off. I was left with a strange feeling. It was just a normal conversation, so why did it unsettle me? I couldn't puzzle it out.

Time ticked away as I contemplated the daunting task of overcoming probation. There would be extra work to do, certainly. That was expected, and my life wasn't so busy that it'd be a great impediment. On the other hand, probation also carried stricter standards for my gym leadership. I'd have to keep the gym maintenance score perfect, and bring my win ratio up. That latter requirement was my primary fear. My ratio had been dropping like a rock in the past year. It felt like the trainers were getting much better, the battles that much harder. I don't know if I have the confidence to do it
"Results for the written and battle exams will be assessed and sent to you via e-mail within two weeks. This includes any additional information such as pay raise notifications or remedial action instructions, so please be patient until then."

"And remember, the Gym Leader Tournament will be hosted tomorrow starting at twelve noon. Be sure to visit registration in the main lobby and sign up by no later than ten o'clock if you are interested. Instructions and rules can also be found in the lobby."

"Enjoy the rest of the summit, and see you next year!"

The closing announcements for exam day faded from the intercom. The remnants of K-Block sat around, inwardly distraught or weeping in relief. The area was slowly being vacated. I wanted to stay, though.

What I wanted was to not socialize. I haven't had any alone time for myself in the past 48 hours. I haven't visited Amphy at all. I haven't even had time for my Pokémon team. Like I said, those healing machines are unnatural. They do their job, but the Pokémon don't get the rest they need.

A yellow sliver caught my eye. Erika was patrolling the hallway outside. She was wearing a sun-colored yukata with maple-colored floral print. My first reaction was to admire the garb; my second was the sudden and horrific realization that I was still wearing Erika's dress from the gala; my third was the compounded horror of how I must have appeared to the many young adult males in the room today:

- this dress shows off my entire bare back!
- and the hem's less than halfway to my knees!
- And it's all wrinkled and crap!
- I look like a little slut!
- Noooo!

My final reaction was to dive for cover behind the media desk, not out of shame, but to hide from Erika. The bob of black hair poked its way through the door, pivoted about for a few seconds, then retreated.

"She's gonna kill me. I ruined her dress and now she's going to kill me. She's going to get me while I'm sleeping and pour poison down my ear. I don't want to die!" This was my panicked excuse for hiding from her. Truthfully, I still hadn't come to terms with what happened the other night. I didn't want to come to terms with it. I wanted Amphy.

Amphy is simple. Amphy is loving and undemanding. Amphy has no aspirations on my virginity (and damn that bastard of a man-child Edward for spreading that bestiality rumor!). I'm like a little child who needs their pillow when they've had a nightmare, and Amphy is my pillow.

Thoughts of snuggling with Amphy motivated me to motion. I got up, patted down the dress, and walked out of the classroom, though not before checking for Erika.

The lobby was semi-crowded, and the sun flared on the horizon, hazing the room in red light. I tensed a little, because I spotted both Erika and Morty, at the same time. The former was stalking the main entrance. The latter was waiting in line for tomorrow's tournament. Whitney was by his side,
and the two were chatting lividly. I was pondering how to slip by, when opportunity presented itself in a gift-wrapped box. A large crowd burst from the hallways, making a ruckus and disturbing the peace of the lobby. By the looks of the trainers, it must be A-Block. Perhaps they were just told of new pay raises, or how special and powerful they were, or something obscene like that. Whatever, they put the room into momentary chaos and gave me an avenue for escape.

I dipped into their midst, and began heading for a side-door.

"Jazz! Jazz it's really you!"

NO! I ducked, swiveled, and tried to identify my accoster. A large, burly man in a cowboy hat was barreling down the lanes.

"Clay!" Another voice shouted from behind me. A woman dressed in punk fashion and white-dyed hair ran out to embrace the man.

"How yer doing? How's your sis? Roxie doing a'ight?"

I face-faulted.

Literally. Face met floor, and my nose hurt for it. I will say it was mainly due to losing my balance out of panic and not the sheer surprise factor like in anime.

But still- WHO NAMES THEIR CHILD JAZZ?!

Yes, "I mad".

I caught a glimpse of Erika drifting my way, probably hearing my middle-school moniker and coming to investigate. Thankfully she hadn't spotted me. A convenient wall of people formed, so I darted for the side-door and was out.

"Free," I sighed.

In twenty minutes I could be feeding Amphy, playing paw-paw with him, holding his nuzzle in my hand. Rubbing my hand through the yellow-and-black, fine-haired fur. Amphy would want to snuggle, and then play cards. He was smart enough for Go-Fish, and always wanted to play once-a-visit. Thinking about it considerably lightened my mood. Not that I felt completely better, but- I wanted to try being happy, for at least a minute. I tried skipping.

"Hehehe." I giggled.

This dress was actually pretty comfortable. If only no one had to see me in it!

"I'm home!" I announced.

"Amphy?" I lowered my voice. The Pokémon might have just woken up. He has to sleep through the day, of course.

"Amphy?" No reply.

The lighthouse was essentially an elevator/staircase with a two-floor suite situated on the top. I was
now roaming the first of these floors, searching for my most beloved (and occasionally most troublesome) Pokémon. To my consternation, he was nowhere immediately to be seen, and the floor was quiet.

I checked Amphy's bed, but it was vacant. I put my hand to the fabric. It was warm, and crackled with light static electricity. Amphy had recently woken up, then. My search continued onto the second landing. The mast where the Pokémon kept vigil during the night was also vacant. The automated machines that directed Amphy's Flash into the sky were still on standby. The windows were closed, keeping the room stifling hot. I opened them to let the evening sea breeze flow in. The sun was clipping the western horizon, casting the ocean in ever-darkening shades of rouge.

I spotted a bulbous tail, like a Christmas ornament, swishing back and forth. Amphy was sitting at the railing outside, staring off into the sea. He looked preoccupied; I decided not to disturb him for the moment, but just watch.

He wasn't doing or watching anything in particular. It was like he was contemplating something.

I don't understand Pokémon psyche too well- obviously they're smart enough to follow commands, and they have their personalities and emotions. But, do they think the same way we do? Do they philosophize? Do they become depressed and try to reflect on it?

Was something bothering Amphy?

An itch assaulted my throat, prompting a small cough. Amphy's long ear twitched.

"Ampha ampha ampho! Aooouuu!" The creature perked up and found me. "Pharooo!" I smiled. No, most Pokémon couldn't speak in the human language, but I imagine these random utterances had a real meaning.

"Come here," I motioned. Amphy shook his head.

"Amp!" He thumped his tail on the floor twice in succession. That was his way of saying "no, you come here!". I obliged. I was worried about my sandals so I took them off first, then sat on the edge, dangling my legs through the railing. The ocean waves broke on the rocks some one-hundred feet below us.

"What's the matter?" I started stroking his long neck. Usually he arches into it, wanting me to scratch or massage. Or when he's annoyed, he jerks away. This time, neither. He sat still and was silent.

"Something the matter?" I repeated.

"Rooo." A low coo, nothing else.

"I'm sorry," I said, as if I understood him. "It's okay. I'm having a bad time too."

"Roo."

"I can tell you about my life and you can tell me about yours. How's that?"

"Roo."

"Well, there's this guy, I've known him since middle school, and he has been, since the very first day, an irredeemable ass. He plays pranks on people, preys on their fears and insecurities. He always goes on and on about others, making jokes at their expense, but never takes a joke on himself. He has no humility or consideration! What's worst, a good deal of it is crass jokes about sex. The man has no
"Roo."

"What kind of world do we live in? Does it really revolve around who's poking who in which hole? I mean, what's left there for love? I can't understand men at all. I wish there was something to their logic beyond what their dick tells them, but I can't see it."

"Roo."

"He wanted to have sex with me."

"Roo."

"There are men who can, at least, keep what they really want private. Boys like Morty, who shove it out into the open? It's more than being perverted. Men are men, they can't help it. But they can and should control the way they express it! What Morty did was just wrong. That goes beyond deviancy, that was designed to get under my skin. That kind of crap really sickens me."

"Roo."

"I don't want to open myself to just anyone. It should be special, sacred, even. I don't know. I don't know."

"Roo."

"At this rate, I don't think I'll ever give it up. Certainly not to him."

"Roo."

"And to think, he had the gall to claim he'd bed me by New Years!"

"Boys!" I muttered. The rant left me exasperated. "You're the only one I can trust." I hugged Amphy tightly.

"Ampha."

"The world is a terrible place, Amphy. Be glad you don't have to deal with it."

"Ampharoo." The boy Pokémon nuzzled my arm.

"Do you want to play cards?" I asked. Amphy dislodged himself and pitter-pattered inside.

"Okay." But instead of his quarters, Amphy alighted on the mast.

"But it's not that dark yet," I protested.

"Kouou!" He shook his head. He pawed the lever to manually start the machinery. Humming noises emanated from within the walls and ceiling.

"What's the matter?" I asked. Did my bad mood infect him too? I tried holding him, but he pushed me away, little paws smacking my hands down.

"Fine."

"Muuuu." He tapped both his ears with his paws. I stood staring. He repeated the gesture thrice,
before I realized he wanted me to put on music. I took out the radio and set it beside the mast. Tunes
from the Goldenrod Tower filled the room. It started with hop-hop.

"Mu." Amphy tapped me, making me change the station until we landed on a modern orchestrated
piece. "Aoo."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"Kaaooo!" I barely understood this utterance in time, turning my back. Amphy took up his
customary posture, lying down with tail held up. His Flash lighted. What had been a dim, late-
evening-shaded room instantly turned brighter than the midday desert sun. I couldn't even look in
Amphy's general direction. The whirring noises indicated mirrored lenses sliding into place. They
focused the light into a beam, then sent it rotating out into the sky.

"You sure you'll be fine?"

"Rooo! Ampha!" It might not mean anything, but, and I realized it was the same with humans, it's the
tone, not the words, that conveys real meaning. Amphy's cry had a "leave me alone" tone to it. There
wasn't anything I could do. I departed, carrying out the same glum mood I came here to dispel.

"What's wrong with him?" I wondered.

A few minutes later I was down on the streets. It was fairly dark without the extra height of the
tower- the sun was below the horizon down here- and the streets lamps hadn't turned on yet. I found
myself groping along and having a hard time of it. That is, until, for a moment, the rotating beacon
swept through the street, lighting it up.

"Hmm." Amphy was guiding me home. I smiled, but only faintly.

I pay 72,000P a month for this. My nose is wrinkling. Three days ago I had given the room a cursory
 cleaning. The organization did not survive the interim. My last breakfast lay on the desk, a bowl
 filled with stagnant milk. By its side lay my little netbook computer, which was opened and out of
 battery. Laundry and sheets lay strewn everywhere, the result of a frenzied search to find clean
 underwear. Dust had built up on every surface.

Beneath my own mess, the apartment itself was not particularly high-quality: Cheap carpet, easily
stained. Power outlet covers coming unscrewed. Dents, scuffs, scratches appearing on plain white
walls, slightly soiled. Internet access: profanity-worthy. Toilet jams infrequently, but usually with
terrible luck of timing. Mildew building up in hard-to-reach corners of the bathroom. Hot-water lasts
for exactly six minutes, twenty seconds, give or take four seconds.

"Ugh." Erika's dress was added to the great pile of laundry. I'm not taking care of that tonight, it can
be done tomorrow.

I don't want to go to sleep. Or rather, I can't, I'm too agitated. Morty, exams, probation, Amphy, I
have too many worries and stresses at the moment to find slumber, even when unconscious bliss
sounds exquisitely welcoming to me right now.

What to do?
I'm hungry.

What's there to eat? I opened my fridge.


How about the pantry? No cereal. No soup. Rice, but the jar is near-empty. Flour- no eggs in the pantry. Waffles? No syrup.

"So, tortilla. Where are you? There you are." I plopped into my twin-sized bed, tortilla roll in mouth. It's late, so I don't want to go for groceries. Tomorrow.

Everything's tomorrow.

The Summit ends tomorrow. I'll have to be there to do some paperwork. While I'm there I might as well watch the battles. It's going to be difficult or impossible to avoid Erika, so I'll have to make up with her. I'll root for Whitney in the tournament. I'll go grocery shopping in the afternoon, and put my dirty clothes into the washer before I leave. I'll have to throw on something dirty while it runs, unless… I got up for a moment to check my closet.

"Um… no." I had one outfit that was still clean: my high school uniform. The gala dress was bad enough, I couldn't go out in the uniform if there was the slightest chance Morty could spot me in it. Morty. I hope he loses, badly, tomorrow. Back to laundry; I wanted my summer dresses cleaned before the work-week, which means I'll go out in shorts and… ugh- T-shirt.

I slid back into my bed. Sheets went over my head. I moaned out of frustration. I buried my head into my pillow.

These are the motions of an ordinary, empty life. Without friends, without hopes and goals, life just devolves into a matter of survival. It's an endless accumulation of small, tedious chores to keep us clean, fed, watered, facilitated, and rested. It's a routine that creates loneliness and nihilism. I don't like it.

I thought that maybe that was the reason so many girls dove into a relationship. But if that's the case, I don't like that either. Where were my options?

Suicide. That'd get rid of the tedium real quick.

Hell no!

I hit myself over the head with a fist in reprobation. That was no way to think. I would gladly join the military, much as I loath it, before I went down that path.

But still-

"Oh woe is me!" I chanted several dozen times.

It was a long while I spent staring at the cover of my pillow. My clock read 10:32, but I still wasn't tired enough to fall asleep, nor motivated enough to get up. I crawled out of bed only long enough to use the facilities and grab my netbook. The tournament wouldn't kick into gear until one o'clock. I set my alarm for eleven. Make that eleven-fifteen. Sleeping in is a guilty pleasure for me, but tomorrow I'll indulge. I think I deserve it.

The next four hours were spent mindlessly playing SimKingdom. I don't remember falling asleep.
The Bet

The alarm was preemptively snuffed out, and I continued into dreamless bliss. It was 1:00 P.M. before I woke up. By the time I snacked on the celery sticks for breakfast, threw the clothes into the wash, showered, dressed, and ran out the door it was already 2:10.

Battle Tower was remarkably quiet. There wasn't a single Gym Leader in the lobby, just the staff and a pair of regular trainers. I thought most people had already left. I asked the receptionist about the vacancy, but she ignored me at first.

"Excuse me!"

The receptionist seemed resistant to pulling her eyes from her computer screen.

"I'm so sorry. Do you need help?"

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

She pointed towards her monitor. "Oh, yeah! Everyone's on Floor 3. The tourney just got hot! No one's missing out on it."

"Really? Where is the tourney?"

"Floor 3, Battle Halls 1 and 2. Better hurry, they're already on the quarter finals!"

I gave her a short bow in thanks and ran off.

The elevator was too slow, so I took the stairs, two steps at a time. The upper landing was crowded, even skinny-me had trouble weaving through the excitable trainers. Still, before long I had pushed my way through into Hall 1.

The crowd was gathered around the arena, but no one was fighting. I tugged at the sleeve of a by-stander.

"Excuse me, what's going on?"

"They're seeding the next round."

"So you're waiting for them to announce the match-ups?"

"Right."

"Thank you very much." She nodded and dove back into the fray. Like her, they were all jostling for a better view of the arena before the match started. Battle Tower had mentioned how problematic spectator seating, or rather, the complete lack thereof, was. I wasn't about to put my frail body into the mosh pit, so instead I began circling the exterior. I was torn between finding a seat, and finding my friends. I wanted to see them, but at the same time I didn't want to confront them over my recent behavior. The thought of it distracted me as I picked my way through the forest of bodies.

"Woah!"

"Oh, hey." I nearly bumped into him, and it took a second to recognize him.

"You're Lyra's friend, right?" he asked.
"Yeah… Ethan?" I conjured up the image of a high-school youth in cargo shorts, hoodie, and ballcap, with spiky, overgrown hair and doofy grin plastered onto his face.

"You remember!" he said. The years-old image did not match with the person standing before me. He hadn't grown, really, but rather, aged. That, and he was in a business casual suit, and his hair, still dark, had a more conservative cut to it. What's more, his expression was different. He looked much more tense and serious now. Mature, that was the right word.

*People change,* I reminded myself. I guess it can be a good thing.

"How've you been?" he asked.

"Good enough," I replied. "I heard you and Lyra are dating?"

"Yeah… Since June."

"Ah. I hope you treat her well." It was difficult trying to remember events from six years ago; I'll blame the stress and lack of sleep. What I can recall is a hot-headed youth throwing himself at my Pokémon team five straight times, losing every time against my Onix. Then Lyra showed up. The pair had been touring Johto somewhat in tandem, sometimes journeying and camping together, sometimes racing off in different directions. After she arrived and understood Ethan's predicament, she helped him calm down and think up a decent battle plan. The next attempt Ethan earned my badge without much trouble.

"That's an interesting way of putting it," he said with an ever so slight gesture of amusement. "I beg your pardon, but have you seen Lyra? I was looking for her."

"I was looking for her too. I haven't seen anyone," I answered.

"Ah."

It was pure coincidence that, not three seconds later, a piercing voice rang over the din.

"Morty you're such a derp! A true derp-a-derp's derp!"

"That's Whitney. Follow me." I took Ethan by the hand without explaining to him that Lyra was probably in close proximity to the name caller.

"Screw your ghosts! As if my Normal-types care about your Shadowballs! Don't treat me like a ditz just because I'm a woman!"

"No, I treat you like a child because you act like a child."

"I am not a child!"

"I've yet to see the proof, honey."

"I'm twenty-one years old, old enough to know that you don't have to act like a too-cool-for-you dickwad to be mature."

"I'm waiting for a rebuttal that doesn't involve name-calling."

Whitney and Morty stood up against each other's faces, brows sweating from a heated argument.

"This isn't about Pokemon, is it? Jasmine was right, you only think with your dick."
"Still resorting to baseless ad hominem. Listen, there's no need to keep arguing the point."

"No, there is! I'm not letting you trample over me!"

They continued on.

"What's this about?" I asked.

"Morty was trying to get Whitney to take a bet based on their next battle. He took to insulting her Pokémon to try to goad her into it."

"Hey!" I turned my head, in surprise. "Erika!"

"Good afternoon," she said. Her manner of greeting had no trace of worry or anger or confrontation. If anything, she sounded relieved, and amicable. Perhaps I'll get lucky after all and avoid revisiting the gala disaster.

"Have you seen Lyra?"

"Right here!" She announced her presence by throwing herself bodily onto Ethan's back. Ethan nearly crumpled under the tackle, but somehow managed to hold up.

"Missed you. Where have you been?"

"Looking for a drink machine. Here you go." He pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to her.

"Thank you!" She smooched him on the lips. I winced. PDA, good miss! Learn the meaning of it!

"So what was this about a bet?" I asked.

"Apparently many of the competitors made bets among themselves. Morty has been fairly aggressive with his."

"What are they betting?"

"Various things. Mostly money, but I've seen a few Pokémon, rare items, a nerf gun, and a bike voucher pass hands." I nodded and turned my attention back to the quarrel.

"Quite frankly, I don't think you're capable of beating anyone still left in the tourney." Morty patted Whitney's head. She immediately slapped his hand away.

"I don't need your assessment or your bet, I don't care about how good you think I am or what I'm capable of, and I certainly don't give a frick about your money. Take your bet and screw off."

"Really?" Morty grinned, mischievously. "What if I offered 100,000P?"

Whitney had been in the middle of stomping away, but she froze mid-step. "There's no way you have that much," she exclaimed.

"True, but..." and Morty tossed something into her hands. "That's worth 150,000P, minimum, let alone what's inside of it."

"This really what I think it is?" she uttered.

I struggled to break in between two other spectators to see what exactly he had tossed to her.
"Yes, it's a Master Ball."

"That's worth a fortune!"

"Not even. That's not just a Master Ball. That has a Darkrai inside."

"There's no way." She clicked the button and chucked it to the ground.

"Draki! Dovani!"

"But- it's supposed to be a legend! They don't really exist!" Yet, quite contrary to Whitney's claim, the jagged shadow-bodied form of a real, living Darkrai floated before us.

"Where'd you get it?"

Morty shrugged in answer. "He's yours if you beat me."

"I don't have anything to match that," Whitney uttered. She stood dumbfounded, but obviously hooked. Understandable, it was a flesh-and-blood legendary Pokémon, who wouldn't want it? I couldn't even conceive of how Morty came into possession of the thing. Certainly not by catching it. He must have some back-alley contacts. Team Rocket, maybe? They had resorted to illegal Pokémon trade just to stay afloat. But if that was the case… Morty, what exactly are you up to?

"Is that a Darkrai?"

Several more figures pushed their way into the arena. The onlookers were already agape at its appearance, but these new arrivals were positively marveled. Erika recognized the foremost.

"Sabrina!"

The woman ignored Erika completely, and pointed at the Darkrai.

"Whose is that?"

"Mine. Sort of." Morty shrugged again. "I'm its owner, for now."

"What's it doing here? How'd you get a hold of it? Do you intend on using it in the tournament?" Sabrina threw out questions rapid-fire, sounding more as if she were discharging commands.

"I was about to offer Whitney the Darkrai if she beat me in the tournament."

"How do you know if Whitney will face you? Have they announced the seeds?"

"No. It's just a what-if kind of bet, only valid if we face each other."

Sabrina bit her lip.

"I'd take that bet, if you don't mind," she said forcefully.

"Oh?"

"Me too," said another, a man with an incredible beard shaped like a shark jaw.

"Everyone wants my Darkrai, do they?"

"No one can afford that, you idiot," Whitney pitched in. Her gaze kept gravitating to the Pokémon, and it was obvious she wanted it just as badly. "I mean, what kind of money would you want in
"Oh, 500,000P. But, you should know, it doesn't have to be money I get." Morty said this carefully, deliberately, as if he had planned for it.

"Like what?" "What is that?" "That is?" said the three other Gym Leaders in unison.

Morty leaned into Whitney's ears and whispered something. Whitney's eyes bloomed.

"What did you say to her?" Sabrina demanded.

"That's typical of you, so typical," Whitney told Morty.

"Of course, I'd offer the same to Sabrina. And that other girl, I saw her win earlier so she should be in the running. Sorry, mister, but this offer's only good for girls."

"I have the money," the shark-beard said. He was completely serious, and by his answer, must be fairly rich.

"What did you want?" Sabrina demanded again. Whitney whispered into her ear briefly, and then Sabrina's eyes opened wide too.

"You're not serious."

"You're a psychic, read his mind."

"I don't use my powers for such things," Sabrina said. She stared down Morty, who made an earnest gesture in the affirmative.

"Fine. It's not like he'll win, anyways," Sabrina said.

"I don't want to," Whitney whined.

"Do you not have any confidence?" Sabrina scolded her. "Do you have any idea what a Darkrai is worth, what one can do with it? 500,000P is a dirt cheap price to wager against it, let alone his demands."

"But…"

"I don't care about you, but I don't intend to lose, and therefore, whatever I have to put up is meaningless."

Whitney's eyes darted from herself, to Sabrina, to Morty, to herself, and finally came to rest on the Darkrai. The Pokémon turned in slow circles, taking in the crowd, completely disinterested in the debate over its eventual owner. Whitney shut her eyes and shook her head.

"Fine, fine, I give."

She turned to stare down Morty, her expression that of a simmering Gyarados. "You're right, it doesn't even matter. You're a lazy sob who doesn't train his Pokémon properly, there's no way I'm going to lose."

"Well then, let's just see how the seeding goes," Morty smiled, victorious.

Despite her decision, Whitney seemed off-kilter and very angry. She saw me and Erika and huffed her way over.
"Hi Jasmine," she said, but not really looking at or heeding me.

"What happened? What did he want?" Erika asked first, because I was afraid I didn't want to know. Whitney fumed silently for a moment, then answered.

"He wants me to be his fuck-buddy for a night," she said flatly.

We waited impatiently for the seeding announcement.

"Who's left in the tournament?" Lyra dashed off and came back with a bracket. "Have a pen?" she asked Ethan, who proffered a pencil for her use. She began eliminating names, until she arrived at the final eight.

"Morty, you (Whitney), Sabrina, I think that grandpa was Drayden, Calvin, Volkner, Fiora, and Maylene."

Whitney instantly flew into a pitched tantrum. "THAT BITCH??!"

I would have winced, had I not reflexively steeled myself the instant I heard that name called out.

"No fucking way! How the fuck did she make it to the quarter finals?!?"

"Whitney, language!" Erika cautioned.

"No! That is the one person I won't hold back on! She's worse than Morty!"

As you may guess, there is a history here, and even I, Whitney's childhood friend, was not privy to all the details. I do know that Whitney was badly defeated by Maylene during an important league tournament. And by "badly" I mean a humiliating 6-0 affair, Maylene's Lucario treating her team like a puppy with its first chew toy. Still, the worst of defeats doesn't warrant holding a lifelong vendetta. Whitney has made me to understand that something personal happened between the two of them after that match.

"Well, you've only got a 1 in 7 chance of facing her," I said, hoping to assuage her.

"Fuck, I want to fight her!"

"But what about Morty?" Personally I was hoping Whitney wouldn't see either. Fighting Maylene could only end in reigniting their feud, while Morty had that grossly uncivil bet to take into consideration.

"Oh, hell, I could beat him... But... fuck, I don't know. Damn. Morty first. He'll lose that Darkrai to someone else if I don't face him. Maylene can come later... Fuck a damn fuck!"

"Whitney, it's bad enough to be cursing, but be careful with that particular word," I advised.

"What? Oh."

"And seriously, don't do this. Morty could get lucky and then you'd be on the hook for... I couldn't bring myself to say it. "I'm not even sure betting is legal," I added.
"But it's a Darkrai. Do you have any idea how strong that thing is?"

"Yes. A little. No."

"He could rick-roll this entire tourney with just it, if they let him! And it has mind control! Think about it, we could get discount day every day of the year!"

"Now that's illegal. As in, against the law illegal," I warned.

"Sorry, just saying. We could play a good prank on Morty, too, that'd show him up. I wonder, if I won the Darkrai, if I could use it in the next round against Maylene…" We took another look at the Darkrai, who had yet to be recalled. It floated serenely, monitoring its multitude of spectators.

"Looks like you don't get a choice; sorry Whitney." Whitney pivoted towards Lyra, then in the direction Lyra's finger was pointing.

The large video screen hanging from the ceiling displayed the match-ups for the next round.

**Hall 2:**

**Volkner v Calvin**

**Morty v Sabrina**

**Hall 1:**

**Drayden v Fiora**

**Whitney v Maylene**

"Awww whatever! At least I get payback." Whitney took to circling me and Erika, tennis-shoes beating the floor much harder than was necessary. Was she more mad or happy?

"Hey Morty!" she belted out.

Morty and Sabrina were eyeing each other fiercely. They each were already anticipating their own battle.

An announcement- "Would participants please report to the judges. Would spectators please vacate the arena. I repeat-" came over the intercom. Morty and Sabrina began walking off in tandem.

"Morty, I was talking to you!" Whitney stopped him by planting herself in his path.

"What is it?"

"Don't you dare lose before I get to you."

"You want the Darkrai that badly?"

"No, not that badly. I'll take it, but the real pleasure's going to be mopping that pretty grin off your face!"

"Well, then, the bet's on?" he asked, unfazed by her threats.

"Yeah, it's on!" Whitney stood defiantly, forcing Morty to walk around her as he left. They say there are seven sins, and Whitney's greatest was easily discerned: Pride. This outcome did not surprise me.
"Darkrai, come back." The legendary Pokémon disappeared in the usual sheen of digitized light. Morty continued holding the Master Ball aloft as he exited, saying this: "Be careful, you might just lose, and I'll hold you to it."

I glared after him. Is he serious? Did Whitney seriously just accept that bet? Why were they suckered so easily? And to think of my best friend getting in bed with him… no! No! No! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!

The unwanted imagery rebounded against my mental and moral bastions, causing me to feel dizzy. My stomach sank, feeling too heavy for having eaten next to nothing today.

"I don't feel well," I said aloud.

"Are you sick?" Lyra asked.

"No, just this atmosphere."

This wasn't what I had in mind by wanting to watch the Gym Leader Tournament. It had gone so far beyond competition. To think they were putting their Pokémon into harms way for, what? Sex? Trophy Pokémon? Revenge? When someone puts their Pokémon out onto the field the Pokémon need to trust that their trainer is doing it for all of them; that they do so for the fun of competition, to see who can excel and win, and have some thrills doing it. This isn't that. This is wrong.

And I felt powerless to stop it.

Erika led me to a stage so that we could watch Whitney and Maylene battle without being packed like Magikarp. Lyra followed slowly, or rather, took her time chatting and sight-seeing. A few of the Johto crew got a hold of her and they started up conversations, leaving me alone with Erika.

"Are you really alright?" Erika looked concerned for me. I gestured towards the arena.

"I'm sick of people acting like kids."

"Why do you say that? It's within their rights, they're grown enough to make decisions for themselves."

"Why is that? Why is it suddenly okay to be hedonist weaklings after you turn eighteen?" I slumped against the podium. "I feel terrible for their Pokémon."

"The Pokémon don't know any better. To them it's just a battle, the same as always. It doesn't matter why their trainers send them out, because they fight for themselves too. They want to compete too."

"That doesn't excuse the trainers."

"You're right," Erika said. She patted my shoulder, the image of a big sister. I wonder if actual big sisters are like this, or if we'd end up fighting more often than supporting one another. I couldn't tell, being an only child.

"Hey Erika, do you have siblings?"

"I do, a little brother. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"Hmm?"
"It's nothing."

I understand, Erika, why you give me that look. You want to address the night of the gala, the hostile phone call the next morning, my emotions and the rift that erupted over them. But you're holding back, because you don't want to tread on me. What am I supposed to do with that?

How much courage is it going to take to say "I'm sorry"? More than I can ever muster? When was the last time I apologized? Really apologized, not just an automated excuse? Have I ever? Am I that selfish, that stubborn? I thought I promised not to apologize after that incident. My actions aren't my own, they're the end product of Morty's manipulations, take your guilt-tripping and accusations out on him!

"It will be alright," Erika said.

"Sure," I said.

"It will, trust me."

"How can it be alright? Why do men do these things? Why are women okay with it?"

"Why? I suppose why anyone does anything is one of those questions that you and I can't answer. Maybe a philosopher could, or a neurobiologist. I don't have an easy answer for you, so I can only say 'it just is'. But, Jasmine, I'm concerned for you."

"Don't go there," I warned. She was going to go there. She was going to say it, point it out and put me to shame, for not fitting in, for not growing up.

She was staring at me, making me uncomfortable. I averted my eyes, not wanting to face her.

"Go where? What's bothering you?"

"You!" I huffed.

"Jasmine, if I've done something wrong, just tell me about it."

"No." There were no sins in the catalogue for being stubborn, were there?

"I only want to help you, nothing more. I don't want to force you into anything, or change you into someone you're not. I only want to help."

"Honest?" It's not that I don't trust your intentions, Erika, but that I don't trust what you're trying to do will help. There's a disconnect between what you think is good for me and what I want for myself!

"I promise," she said.

"Still, no."

"Is it Morty?" she asked.

"Don't push me."

"I'm not trying to accuse you of anything!"

"Good, I don't like that."
"Please! Will you at least listen?"

"I can't exactly shut my ears off," I said sarcastically.

"Then please listen. I want to say I'm sorry. I mistreated you during the gala."

What is she apologizing for? The nerve of her!

"I knew those kinds of subjects made you uncomfortable, but I pushed too hard anyways. I let Morty have his way with your feelings, I did nothing to stop him and I didn't follow you out to make sure you were okay or safe. I'm deeply sorry for everything."

"You don't have to apologize."

"But I want to."

"You shouldn't," I reiterated.

"Hush! I'm not done," she took up a more commanding tone. "I'm not saying that Morty was right, far from it. He is every bit the perverted, womanizing moron you believe him to be, and a discredit to his gender. But you and I are adults now, and grown up. Not to the extent that Morty exemplifies, but many men, and yes, even women, are becoming sexual. It's normal, it's how life begins and continues. You don't have to be a part of it, either, I won't ever fault you for not wanting to take part in it. I just want to know how you feel about it, to talk openly, to say something other than 'damn it all!' and stay silent otherwise."

"Why isn't that enough?" I demanded. "You know well enough how I feel on the matter, so why not let me in peace?"

"Because, I want you to be happy, but I don't think you'll be happy so long as you refuse to acknowledge that this side of humanity exists and can't learn to co-exist with it, at least."

"Co-exist? With what? Wagering sex for Pokémon? If that's what sex is supposed to be, no, I won't accept that kind of stuff. It's demeaning to everyone involved."

"No, Jasmine, I'm not saying you have to condone that."

"Then what?"

"That's Morty, that's the outliers, most people aren't like him."

"Hard to believe when all the others jumped aboard for a chance at that Darkrai."

"Well…" She didn't reply right away.

I know, I know. It's a Darkrai. Everyone has their price and a Pokémon straight out of mythology isn't cheap. Erika was put off balance by my point. I got the feeling even she wanted the Darkrai, and would have taken up the offer had she been in the tournament.

"It's… it's still an outlier, I think. It is, after all, a legendary. And remember, we're Gym Leaders, we didn't get to this position unless Pokémon meant that much more to us," Erika said.

"Hmph."

"That's still besides the point. I wish you could be comfortable around the subject, so you could enjoy people's company, even if they start joking about sex or the like. I think if you and I talked
about it, you'd find it's not such an abhorrent subject, and you'd feel more comfortable around others. I'm not saying you should get laid like Morty claims. You're not a bad person for wanting to stay a virgin; on the contrary I think it's rather admirable. But if you let your fear of sex get in the way of interacting with others-

"I'm not afraid," I said defensively.

"Oh sorry, I mean, your dislike of sex-

"I don't dislike it," I added.

Erika was taken aback.

"Really?"

"Just shut up. You don't know what you're talking about." I threw this out without thinking, and immediately regretted doing so. Erika drew back, emotionally pained.

"I don't want to explain, but could you please stop prattling on about sex? It's not the real issue here."

"What is?"

I just told you I didn't want to explain! I'm about to hit something! Where's something soft and non-sentient I can pummel?!

"Yo, what are you two doing sitting, they're about to start!" We were interrupted by a familiar voice. Lyra popped into view, dragging Ethan in tow.

I don't want to apologize to Erika; that's just my nature. But it didn't feel right leaving her worried about me either.

"Can we just talk later? This whole summit has put me on edge. I don't feel up to this heart-to-heart stuff."

Erika nodded. "Then let's cheer Whitney on."
"You're not serious? Are you trying to cop my style?" Maylene held a hand in the air, palm-skyward, looking bemused and politely aggressive.

"I'm the natural red-head, you dye-jobbing twat!" Whitney threw back at her, looking hostile and impatiently aggressive. Her statement was true: Maylene's hair matched Whitney's fire truck veneer.

"Boo hoo, so be it. I only dyed it this color because he's got a thing for red-heads, you know that. Maybe that's why he was into you in the first place?" Maylene shrugged. "But, then again, it must have been a fluke lapse of judgment," she broke into an evil grin, "considering I've had him for the past four years, and you had him for all of, what, one? Less? How many boyfriends have you gone through in that period?"

"Ten, bitch, and every one of them was a better lay than that cardboard cutout you're humping at night!" Whitney fired.

"There's only so much one can do when your partner's got the abs of a wet pancake." Maylene flexed her perfectly toned body for contrast.

Whitney fumed.

"This is exactly what I meant," I told Erika.

"No, I'm sure it's all in good fun," Lyra said, waving my accusation aside. She's much too naïve. If these two had knives instead of Pokeballs, we'd be skipping the police and medics and just be dialing the morgue.

"Contestants, if you please," the judge said in a gentle tone. Obviously, he was a man of infinite patience to bear the opponents' bickering without flinching. His hand went down, signaling for the match to begin.

"It's not like a Pokémon battle has any bearing on your sad love-life, but, I can't let you take any kind of consolation from a fluke victory here. I'm going all out and winning this," Maylene taunted, drawing her pokeball.

"You're a fake in everything you do do. I would say you think only with that imaginary johny-john between your legs, but that wouldn't even make up half a defective brain in your case. You've got no style, no tactics, no brains, and no chance!" Whitney readied her pokeball.

On a certain level, I had to admire the pure theatre these two put into their mutual hostilities. It's a rare talent to come up with that level of vitriol on the spot.

Eyes glaring daggers, the two unleashed their first Pokémon. Whitney's Porygon-Z appeared, followed by Maylene's Machamp. -The latter never saw it coming.

"Machamp is unable to battle!"

Maylene peeked out between her raised arms, raised out of reflex as the backwash of an explosion died down. She carried an expression of shock, to put it mildly. "What the hell was that?!!" she cried.

I hadn't seen it very clearly either, but I had a good guess as to what had happened. Whitney had
made sure to summon her Pokémon out as quickly as possible. The Pokémon, a Porygon-Z, instantly attacks, using the flash created by the unsealing Pokéballs to cover its actions. A single Hyper Beam from the artificial Pokémon and nearly anything would be one-hit KO'd. From Whitney chucking her Pokéball to Machamp hitting the floor took all of 2.75 seconds.

Whitney was beaming, if in a devilish, maniacal sort of way.

"See what I mean? You just assume you can Close-Combat steamroll through my normal-types, so you send out your strongest Pokémon first. Well look what that gets ya now!!!"

Maylene recovered her poise.

"So what. It's not like I don't have five more who can do the same thing. And look, wickle Pory-poo is just about fainted and it's not even been hit, yet," she countered. She sent out her second Pokémon, Medicham, which quickly finished the dazed Porygon-Z with a High Jump Kick. Whitney recalled her Pokémon, not looking concerned in the least.

"Go, Clefable!"

An explosion rang out, not a second after the pokeball unfurled. Medicham hit the side of the arena's force-field, cleanly KO'd.

"How many times do I have to drill it into your head? You don't think! You never think about anything but brute force!"

Does Whitney realize she's pretty much relying on the same thing? Maylene looked angry but not scared in the least.

"Go, Hitmontop! Triple Kick!" Every kick landed, KO'ing the Clefable before it could recover. "Wasting Pokémon on kamikaze attacks seems shameful, if you ask me. You have a different plan?" Maylene asked.

"Nope!"

And for the third time, the flash of the pokeball gave way to the much brighter flash of a Hyper Beam. Hitmontop looked as if it would bear it, continually spinning on the spot it landed… but on closer inspection, it had fainted while still rotating. A beaming Lickilicky sat on its hind, exhausted but triumphant.

"You're fucking with me… THREE HYPER BEAMS IN A ROW??!!" The look of fear Whitney had been seeking finally crept into Maylene face. At about the same time, I realized Whitney's strategy: her normal types couldn't stand up to Maylene's fighters in straight combat. But if she could knock them down instantly with Hyper Beams, she could trade Pokémon. And considering she got off the first strike… oh muh gosh, she's one up! She could win!

"I don't even need everyone to be super-able to use Hyper Beam, either," Whitney added. "As long as you sent out your toughest Pokémon from the start, I could counter it with my strongest. Then my second strongest Hyper Beam, then my third, and so on down the line."

With mounting horror, Maylene watched her Croagunk fall to the exact same pattern. Whitney now stood tall, almost rife with anticipation. Even Girafarig, drained by the Hyper Beam and fully expecting to fall in the course of Whitney's strategy, appeared excited.

"Lucario!"
"Finally got it out," Whitney muttered. Lucario moved in to finish off Girafarig.

"Wait!" Lucario hesitated. "Sword Dance!" Lucario complied, performing an artful display of martial maneuvers. Its muscles and nerves strained, increasing their tension, buffing Lucario's considerable power.

"What, you're going to give me room to breathe? My strategy was already full-proof without you giving me some slack!" Whitney shouted.

"I think you forgot what Lucario did to your team. Don't you dare underestimate us!" Maylene shouted back.

A peel of laughter ripped through the spectators. Even I couldn't help but giggle. I'm sorry, but watching a professional like Maylene come unhinged and belt off hammy, clichéd one-liners like that is too funny! Maylene glared at us, the crowd. Don't be that way, Maylene, you're too funny! And no, you can't take it out on us. If you're mad, take it out on Whitney! If you can…

"Girafarig, Thunder Wave!" An almost invisible shell of electricity burst through the arena. Lucario tried defending - but it was pretty useless, it was hit with paralysis. Its movements became choppy and twitchy.

"Close Combat!" Lucario pulled itself together, executing a leap into the air, closing the gap between itself and Girafarig. Girafarig's horns glowed, preparing a Psychic. Too slow, however. Lucario's fisted paw flew in directly at Girafarig's head. The latter flinched, expecting a deluge of punches. It didn't come. Lucario stood motionless, overcome with paralysis.

"Hyper Beam, fast!" Whitney exclaimed. Her Pokémon heaved its head aloft, charging the shot and firing. The floor before it blew apart, a cloud of dust billowing up and enfold ing the pair.

"What happened?" Whitney asked.

Lucario's form stood, still motionless, still standing.

"Is he fainted?"

But, as the dust cleared, the figure evaporated.

"Double Team!" It was an after-image, an illusion. "Girafarig, find him, fast!" Girafarig couldn't, it had fired off its second Hyper Beam and was far too sluggish.

Lucario, paralysis and all, blinked into existence behind Girafarig. The first blow was a downward hammer-blow. The second, an upper-cut, the third and fourth were consecutive horizontal chops, and from there sixteen or seventeen more blows landed consecutively. Close Combat, indeed.

"Girafarig is unable to battle."

"Good work, you did more than enough," Whitney whispered to her Pokémon. She looked up to Maylene and Lucario, and raised her voice to them. "No, I didn't forget about Lucario. Four years and I've never forgotten about that battle!" She tossed her fifth pokeball.

"Extreme Speed!"

Miltank appeared, firing its Hyper Beam the moment it came out. The beam attack was instantly met by Lucario. The Pokémon pierced through the beam, hurtling forward, then running, then inching its way through the energy. The force of the two's attack cancelled each other out, and the yellow flash
dispersed. Lucario, hurt though it was, still stood.

"Close Combat!" Miltank didn't stand a chance. Whitney looked pained, as her favorite Pokémon went down in a flurry of blows.

"Two against one," Erika muttered. I glanced at her, sharing in her nervousness.

Whitney, don't you know your Hyper Beam-spamming strategy was inherently nerve-wrecking? It all but guaranteed a close fight till the end! What are you going to do now, after that slip-up?

"What're you so worried about? She's got this!" Lyra exclaimed happily.

Indeed, Whitney was all grins. Her whole figure radiated confidence. She fingered her last pokeball, as if savoring in the moment.

"Whitney, please enter your last Pokémon." She chucked the ball.

"Go, Togekiss!"

Whitney has a Togekiss?! Since when?! I've known her since middle school and she's hidden this Pokémon from me?

"Lucario's part Steel? Ironic, you're so proud of your Fighting types but your favorite one is weak to itself! Togekiss, Aura Sphere!" Togekiss fired off a concentrated burst of chi energy.

"Dodge!" Lucario rolled out of the way.

"Again!"

"Extreme Speed!" Lucario sprinted around the arena's edge- unusually, slow enough to follow with the eye, but still too fast to react to.

"Go airborne!" Togekiss flapped itself near the ceiling.

"Come on! Close Combat!" Maylene shouted. Lucario leapt into the air, but couldn't connect. Normally it was so agile it could fairly walk across the ceiling if it wanted to, but the damage and paralysis were critically slowing it down. Yet, every time Togekiss aimed an Aura Sphere for the kill, Lucario would suddenly disappear, either using Double Team or Extreme Speed.

"Aura Sphere!" This was Maylene's command. Lucario let loose its own chi-energy ball. Togekiss wasn't expecting a ranged attack, and took the attack in its abdomen.

"Hmm." Whitney stood in thought.

"Close Combat!"

Lucario tried, again, but its jump simply wasn't high enough.

"Damn it, get down here!"

"Fine! Togekiss, special Roost number two!"

"Oitahi!" Togekiss landed and tucked itself in, attempting to regain health.

"Bullet Punch!" Lucario disappeared, forcibly exerting its nerves into action.
"Gotcha."

Lucario stood, its fisted paw an inch from Togekiss. The Bullet Punch had backfired, straining its nerves too much and causing its muscles to lock up again. Togekiss, in turn, was not even fazed. The Roost was merely a ruse, Togekiss was preparing its own attack. In less than a moment, an Aura Sphere appeared in Lucario's face. There was no dodging this one. The Aura Sphere erupted.

Lucario spun across the floor, flopping end over end, then lay still.

"Lucario is unable to battle. Contestant, please send out your last Pokémon."

Whitney smiled.

"So her real strategy was to corner Maylene into only a few Pokémon. As long as Togekiss doesn't have to win an endurance battle, it has the upper hand over almost any fighting type." Erika made this assessment.

"I knew it," Lyra chipped in.

Maylene picked herself off the ground, from where she had dashed out to check on Lucario.

"Well, played, bitch," she said, quietly. She retreated the fainted Lucario back into its Pokeball. She handled her final pokeball with care, then, grudgingly, let it onto the floor.

"Togekiss, Hyper Beam!" The beam of light energy lanced across the arena, blasting Maylene's Pokémon the moment it was unsealed.

"No sell," Maylene uttered, her face morphing from despair to fiendish triumph. "Golurk, Dynamic Punch!" A Pokémon burst from the dust cloud, hurtling itself towards Togekiss with reckless abandon. Togekiss lay on the ground, attempting to recover the energy lost from its last attack. Even if it were mobile, this Pokémon was far too explosive to dodge. It smashed its fist into Togekiss' wing, pulverizing it.

"What is that Pokémon?" Whitney exclaimed. I could ask the same. It was nothing like anything I had ever seen. It resembled a Grecian colossus crossed with a robot. I'm five-foot four, standing on a stage that gave me an extra four feet above the arena floor, and this Pokémon still stood up to eye-level with me. The gargantuan figure held back, waiting for its next order.

"Togekiss, can you move? Aura Sphere!"

"Hahaha!" Maylene laughed. Togekiss picked itself up into the air, gathered its remaining reservoir of strength, and launched another Aura Sphere. The energy bounced harmlessly off the chest of the opponent.

"What was that?!!" Whitney exclaimed.

"It's a Pokémon, obviously," replied Maylene. "Golurk, Stone Edge! Dynamic Punch! Ice Punch!" She belted off a long series of straight-forward attacks. Every time she opened her mouth, the Pokémon barreled forward, disregarding its own defense to land another blow on Togekiss. Togekiss, at the desperate beckoning of Whitney, launched Aura Sphere after Aura Sphere, attempting to find a weak point in the armor-like shell of the foe. Nothing worked, every last attack bounced off, and was soon met by a flaming, or ghostly, or rock-covered fist. It was all Togekiss could do to duck away and Roost its health back.

"Gah! Air Slash!" It struck me she should have tried that from the start- Aura Sphere was not
inherently super effective against fighting types. A flying attack would be, however. Togekiss swept its wings forward as it dive-bombed this "Golurk" Pokémon. Vacuum energy clung to the leading edge of its wings, and as it swept through the foe, the massive colossus lurched backwards, finally registering some damage.

"Dynamic Punch!" The Air Slash wasn't enough, not nearly enough. The giant merely turned around and smashed Togekiss before it could swoop away. Its other wing took the beating, permanently grounding the Pokémon.

"Grounded. Finally, finish it off with Earthquake!"

The opposing Pokémon pounded the ground with both fists, sending seismic waves across the arena floor, shaking the room and pulverizing Togekiss's entire body.

"Togekiss is unable to battle! Whitney has run out of eligible Pokémon, Maylene is declared the winner. Thank you for your participation. Challengers, please meet in the middle to shake hands."

Whitney disregarded the request completely, instead opting to rush to Togekiss' side. Tears were streaming down her face.

"What kind of Pokémon was that?!" she cried. Maylene approached her.

"That's a Golurk. You should broaden your horizons a little more, then maybe you'd know about Pokémon from beyond this rink-a-dink region of yours."

"How?! How?! Why did nothing work?! Why?!"

"Because it's a Ghost-Ground type, silly girl."

"But…"

I thought Maylene was a fighting type specialist? Whitney thought so as well.

"That's not a Fighting type!"

"Since when are gym leaders restricted to one type of Pokémon? We're perfectly entitled to bringing in other types to cover weaknesses. Hell, you halfway understood that yourself, bringing in that Togekiss. What's there to complain about?"

"It's not fair!" Whitney cried, and cried tears too.

"Shut up! You're becoming unsightly. Go cry in a restroom."

"That's too harsh," I said. A victory and a defeat were one thing, but these pair made it personal and now the one side was carrying it over into crass insults. It made my blood boil, and worse, because as much as she might deserve this, Whitney was my friend and I hated seeing her being bullied like this.

"See, I'm just better. Now go suck up to your girlfriends, I've got a date with that boy with the Darkrai. I heard it was up for grabs? That'll be a sweet gift for Brawly-boo. Not that you'd know, whoring selfish pit that you are. Seriously, stop crying out here, it's disgusting. Go blubber in your friends' arms or something."

"That's it, I'm killing her," I said, popping off the stage.

"Jasmine, stop!" I shook off Erika and made it halfway to the arena. My head was throbbing and my
hands were shaking, and I was fairly sure I was about to use violence as a first resort against this girl.

"Lyra, help me!" My advance was halted by four hands grabbing me about the arms and shoulders. I struggled, unable to march any farther. Gaining just a bit of leeway, I whipped around to face my friends.

"Do you want to stand there while that woman gangs up on Whitney?! While she insults her and insults her and then goes out of her way to insult her friends too, us?! You want to abandon Whitney just like you abandoned me?!"

Erika flinched. Lyra spoke up.

"Of course not! But…"

Erika gathered herself:

"You'll get into much more trouble if you don't calm down! Please, think of yourself!"

"I can't calm down!"

"Lyra?"

Lyra paused, thinking. Her attention was caught by something on the video display, which caused her to yank me by the arm. She was surprisingly strong. I was dragged several yards before realizing what was going on.

"Morty's match is still going on, we'll go watch that while you blow off steam, kay?"

"I'm not leaving Whitney to that vixen!" I said.

"Leave Whitney and Maylene to me. Please?" Erika begged.

I pretended not to listen, but deep down, I didn't want to cause trouble, not really; and I couldn't stand being judged for that either. I had already overplayed my social standing with the outbursts at the gala. So, even though I couldn't apologize or accept her overtures, outwardly, and I still desperately wanted to avenge Whitney, I slacked, and let myself be dragged away by Lyra.

"She'll rescue our Whitney, trust her," Lyra said.

"Meh."

"That can't be good." The crowd in Hall 1 was downright tame compared to the human hurricane that was Hall 2. I couldn't tell if the roars were cheers or jeers, it all melded together into a perfect cacophony of ear-splittingness. I tried grabbing a random spectator.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Hey, get off." He shrugged me off and returned to roaring in the general direction of the arena. Men- ugh!

I tapped a woman, who was also riveted to the scene. "Excuse me, what happened? What's going
"on?"

She answered without taking her eyes away.

"Sabrina's Alakazam just took down Darkrai."

"You're kidding!"

"No way. It's true."

How is that possible? That Alakazam must be something entirely uncompetitive!

I struggled to get a view of the arena, but there were too many people, and they were practically jumping over themselves to get a decent view. Flashes of energy erupted like a firework show's finale, indicating something was going on beyond the wall of bodies.

"Jasmine," someone caught my shoulder. It was Lyra. She pointed to the video display mounted on the wall. It wasn't particularly large or high-definition, but at least I could see what was happening.

And what was happening was an Alakazam, hovering in the air, in deep concentration. Tendrils of psychic energy lashed outward from it in every direction, striking the perimeter, the ceiling, the dirt floor, everything but its opponent.

"Keep it up!" I heard Sabrina shout through the video.

"Keep sniping! One at a time!" came the voice of Morty.

"Gar!" Gengar popped out of the ceiling, unleashing a Shadow Ball attack. It zigzagged across the distance, before meeting the psychic barrier surrounding Alakazam. The shadowy miasma burst apart, washing over the barrier. Alakazam was unhurt, but I could guess how much concentration and stamina was being used up maintaining that kind of defense- hint: lots. Alakazam retaliated with a Psychic, cracking the ceiling tiles apart where Gengar had been a moment before. However, the ghost Pokémon itself had phased back into the structure.

"Alakazam, concentrate!"

"Gengar, wait for the opening!" The battle settled down, turning into a tense waiting duel. While Gengar hid in the walls, the video feed showed replays from earlier in the fight. An oft-repeated scene was Alakazam, taking numerous special attacks from the almighty Darkrai. However, in a split-second opening, it launched a Focus Blast, that not only nailed the Darkrai for super-effective damage, but also blasted the legendary dead in the face for critical effect. So that's how it managed such an incredible feat: Alakazam wasn't just strong, it was also extremely lucky.

Even so, that meant it was already weak by the time Gengar showed up. Which means a single Shadow Ball might drop it...

The clock ticked off minutes, second by second by second by second by second...

Sabrina sensed it first.

"Psywave!" The tendrils surrounding Alakazam coalesced into a solid bubble, which then radiated across the entire arena. A loud "snap!" sound indicated a hit, but where? Sabrina and Alakazam both searched frantically for their target.

"It's below," I uttered, remembering my own experience.
"Garrararara!" Alakazam's shadow shivered, then morphed into the three dimensional form of the ghost. Gengar leapt up, grabbed Alakazam about the waste, and dragged it inside its own shadow. A flat blob of darkness was all that was left of the Pokémon. It was one of the most surreal things I've ever seen.

In the sub-window showing Sabrina, she could be seen mouthing off multiple silent utterances, in what I could only assume were family-unfriendly phrases. She closed her eyes, concentrating. She must have been attempting to communicate with her Pokémon telepathically. It didn't appear to be working. Time passed, the female human growing anxious, the other human wiping his brow, also anxious.

"Phah!" Like corks off champagne bottles, the pair of Pokémon popped out of the shadow.

"Nice Shadow Sneak, Gengar," Morty complimented his Pokémon.

"Not like any Shadow Sneak I'd ever seen," said a nearby spectator. For myself, I've seen Gengar—well, it was a Haunter back then—pull it off plenty of times. It'll attach itself to its victims' shadow, then attack them from it. Morty would use it to play pranks on the girls in 7th grade. However, this was the first time I've seen Shadow Sneak being used to pull the foe into its own shadow. That's…kind of cool, I have to admit. To think of a strategy like that, and teach your Pokémon to pull it off too; it's just too cool not to admire—Damn it, I hate giving Morty any credit!

"Alakazam is unable to battle. Please send out your next Pokémon." The board indicated this would be Sabrina's last. The same was already true of Morty's Gengar.

"This is too ironic. I take down a freaking Darkrai but lose Alakazam in the process, and now the final is a mirror-match?" Sabrina said. She face-palmed for a moment, before tossing her final pokeball.

It was a Gengar.

"Gengah!"

A non-psychic type on a psychic team? Just like Maylene! How many gym leaders were forsaking their type specializations these days?

"Shadow Ball!"

"Icy Wind!"

"Shadow Sneak!"

"Thunderbolt!"

"Shadow Ball!"

"Shadow Sneak!"

The battle became frenetic, as the trainer pairs belted off command after command. Even so, the Gengars were flying around the arena, phasing in and out of the ceilings, floors, columns, even spectators. They were acting and reacting much too fast, constantly using attacks of their own volition without waiting for orders.

"The floor!" Sabrina shouted. Apparently her Gengar knew what she meant, and sprayed the ground with a Sludge bomb.
"Get out of the floor!" Morty shouted.

Was it to avoid the poison seeping into the ground? No-

"Garr!" A Thunderbolt arced through the air. The sludge drew in the electricity, conducting it directly into the ground. Morty's Gengar attempted to rise into the air, passing through the electrified sludge and taking damage as a result.

"Garrah garrah!" It made a weird face, an unsettling projection that hit the opposing Gengar with an unseen force.

"Thunderbolt! Aim high!" Sabrina was trying to force Morty's Gengar back down into the sludge. Her own Pokémon lit up, but just as quickly, fizzled.

"When did you get off a Spite?" she wondered aloud.

"Just now. Icy Wind!" Morty said.

"Confuse Ray!"

It was like Lance two days ago. The Pokémon were acting on their own. Whether through their own creativity, or from training and preparation done in advance, they were acting beyond the simple commands they received from their trainers. They were adapting to the moment-to-moment situation of the battle, using attacks in novel ways, combining them, reacting instinctively and attempting to counter with terrain and abilities.

Thinking back to the battle with Lance, and the time my Steelix countered his Dragonite's Earthquake twice, once with Magnitude, and once by pulverizing the ground- But those were strategies I got from experience, and I had to relay them to Steelix. If I were as good as these two, Steelix would already know how to counter Earthquake on his own, and would have done so without my command. That would have shaved off critical seconds to his reaction time.

"Shadow Ball ice!" one yelled out. A dark explosion tore through a sheet of ice clinging to the ceiling. Shards of ice rained across the arena, forcing the opposing Gengar to back off and creating breathing room for the former. The latter tried to regain the momentum with its own Shadow Ball, and the first fired off a second. The Shadow Balls crossed each other's path without colliding, and both Pokémon strafed out of the way. They circle-strafed each other, firing four more pairs of Shadow Balls, all missing. They finally settled down on their respective sides of the arena. And not one word had come from the trainers since that first command.

This was what it meant to be a great Pokémon trainer, I realized. This is what separated K-Block and A-Block members. This is the kind of level of competition I needed to aspire to if I was going to keep my Gym Leader position. But it seemed so impossible to keep up…

"Icy Wind!"

"Shadow Ball!"

The gust of hail-imbued air washed over Sabrina's Gengar, draping it with ice. Its own Shadow Ball had already been launched, clipping Morty's Gengar in the back as it tried to dodge. It fell to the ground, vulnerable for an instant. Sabrina's Gengar was unable to capitalize in time; both Gengars recovered and floated into the air, awaiting their next command- but not just waiting, I realized, they were already mentally preparing themselves, thinking how to best carry out whatever command their trainer issued.
"Shadow Ball!" "Shadow Ball!" Both trainers ordered their Pokémon to attack at the same time. As before, the Gengars attempted to strafe aside. Yet, the cumulative slowing of the Icy Wind took its toll on Sabrina's Pokémon. Morty's Gengar dodged clean. Sabrina's took the blast full force in its chest. It staggered to the ground.

Morty's Gengar wasted no time. A hand signal from Morty told it exactly what to do—A traditional Shadow Sneak, his shadow lashing out at the foe, inflicting damage. Simultaneously, it connected their shadows, giving the Gengar a fast lane to his foe's position. Sabrina's ghost tried one last Shadow Ball, but Morty's Gengar was already zooming along the Shadow Sneak, gaining the foe's backside. From there it was a mere full-power, point-blank Shadow Ball from dropping Sabrina's Gengar to the ground for good.

"Gengar is unable to battle, Sabrina is out of eligible Pokémon, Morty is the victor!"

The quarter-finals were over.

The crowd erupted. Morty himself hunched over, more relieved than exuberant. It wasn't a momentary gesture either; his Gengar, beat up though it was, looked to be in better condition than him. The Pokémon floated over to check on his trainer. He lightly tapped his shoulder. Morty's head lifted, saw his Pokémon, smiled, and hugged it.

You would think he'd be a bit more lively, considering that he had just earned a night with Sabrina's body. Great, I'm gritting my teeth at the thought of it now. I hope he really is too stressed out to carry on with the bet. Not to mention, by virtue of winning he has another match to go through. He can still lose, right? I swear someone has to stand up and give me the satisfaction of seeing that pervert put in his place!

And as for his "prize"? How was she holding up?

Predictably, nonplussed. She stormed over to confront Morty.

I was tired of craning my neck to watch the video displays, and the crowd was dissipating enough for me to edge inward. I wanted to listen to their conversation, so I forced my way through the jungle of humans, and the occasional Pokémon. I found the pair in bitter argument.

"You are such a poor sport. You wanted to win so badly you just had to bring in the Darkrai. Well-Congratulations!"

"Hey, you beat it after all; it's not like it's invincible."

"After you were down by three Pokémon! I had that match won without your filthy legendary."

"Well, gee, guess what, that's the kind of power you were playing for."

"It's still disingenuous."

"What is?"

"Bringing it into the match."

"There was nothing in the bet that said I couldn't; I wouldn't have made that bet otherwise."

"I think you're lying. You weren't going to use it, until it looked like you'd lose. It looks desperate of you. You want this that badly?" Sabrina put her hands to her hips.
"Er, well… oh, hey, Jazz!"

"Don't call me that," I said. Morty brushed past Sabrina to make his way over to me.

"I'm not done with you," the psychic gym leader yelled. Morty gave her one of his trademarked hand-waves.

"Just give me a minute." He turned back to me. "Hey, how're you holding up?"

"Better, your antics notwithstanding," I replied testily.

"Sorry you think that."

"Don't just ignore me!" Sabrina marched in between me and Morty.

"Hey! I just need to a minute I said!"

"Morty jilting a lady? That's a first."

"Hey, Morty! Are you making fun of Jasmine again?" Lyra arrived.

"No, actually, she's putting the smarmy quips over me this time."

"Morty!" Sabrina grabbed Morty's collar.

"Woah! Hey! No violence!"

"We've got a score to settle."

"Tonight, please, just give me a moment."

"No, listen to what I have to say. I'm a woman of honor, I'll settle this debt. BUT, mark my words, I won't forget this half-baked trick you pulled and I WILL get you back some day."

"Fine, but please!" He managed to separate himself from Sabrina's invasive personal contact. He again turned to address me, or rather, me and Lyra both.

"You two watched Whitney's match, right? She won, right?"

"No, she lost," I sneered. Knowing Whitney, she was probably over her crying fit by now, but that would just mean she was in full-on revenge-mode and demanding an immediate rematch. Something I doubted Maylene wanted.

"She lost?! Really? You're kidding."

"I'm not the compulsive liar here, Morty. She lost and she's upset and I would very much recommend giving her room if I were you."

"Yeah, but… damn." His hand ran through his sweaty, luxurious blonde hair. His gaze quickly ran the gamut from floor to ceiling to lala-land and back. He was flustered, as if his grand plan had gone slightly awry. Yes! But wait! What was his plan and how'd it screw up? I want to know!

"What, Sabrina isn't good enough for you, you wanted Whitney too?" I quipped.

"Well, not exactly Whitney too," he said glumly, holding his head. "You heard about that already?"

"I was there when it happened."
"Oh, right. Didn't notice you."

"Seriously, you look out of it. You've got another match in fifteen minutes. I think you're better off resting yourself and your Pokemon. Meanwhile, I think I'll go tell Maylene about your team line-up, give her a little extra nudge. I couldn't stand to see you receiving a threesome tonight."

"Hehe. That's quite a naughty mouth you got there. Got over your shyness in that department already?"

"Not really, I'm just very, very mad about something right now, and you're a convenient target." I also secretly wanted to put him down, in any way possible. I had committed the sin of actually admiring him during the battle, and I needed an excuse to shunt him back into the 'un-cool closet' part of my mind. While time and his natural dickedness would undoubtedly do the latter anyways, what I wanted was instant gratification, but popping his ego proved frustratingly impossible at the moment.

"Well, you do have a point, I ought to go rest them up. And please don't go helping Maylene," he begged, with a hint of sarcasm. I glared at him. "No, really, please don't," he repeated, sounding more sincere. "I'm kind of at my ropes end, and getting advice from someone like you is like handing the opponent a cheat sheet."

"Don't patronize me," I warned.

"I'm serious, you're way too smart. I'm wondering why you didn't enter the tourney yourself. That would have scared the crap out of me."

Shut up Morty! Obviously you hadn't heard about my humiliating loss to Lance. And I still think you're lying; after that display your Gengar put on, how can you possibly think I'm in the same league as you, let alone your better?! Get off my case!

"Ah well… My time's up," he stated, looking over to an impatiently waiting Sabrina. "Fine, fine. Sabby-darling," he called to her. "Here, walk with me to the clinic. We can talk about tonight on the way."

"I look forward to it," Sabrina said, in a strangely forceful, gleeful tone. On the one hand, I want to believe she's plotting some way to finagle the Darkrai out of Morty's possession. But… the way she acts and talks, that jeering, lustful posture- I'm getting the sense she's looking forward to it…

No way! She didn't care about who won the bet! She would have gone with him anyways! It's a straight hook up!

"What a wretch! Morty, you…!!" I exclaimed, as the pair walked off. Lyra eyed me with a puzzled, concerned expression.
"Feeling better?"

"No."

"Can you at least avoid a felony?"

"Depends."

"Need more time?"

I didn't bother looking Lyra eye to eye. I was watching the replays on the video screen. It was just like Sabrina claimed: her psychics had thoroughly outmaneuvered Morty's ghosts, putting her up five to two. Then Morty sent in Darkrai, which proceeded to devastate everything with Dark Voids, Nightmares, and Dark Pulses. It was an inelegant slaughter, unopposed until Alakazam threaded a last-ditch, miraculously aimed Focus Blast through several airborne Dark Pulses and straight into a rapidly strafing Darkrai. It was a thing of beauty.

At times like this, I question my choice of Steel specialization. They're not a weak type, by no means, no. But their strength is their endurance, toughness, and nose-to-the-grinder resiliency. Ghost and Psychic types, and the elemental types too, all had a beauty to themselves: it's the flashiness of their attacks, and also the grace of seemingly choreographed high-speed battles, where the tension hinges on the instant-to-instant actions of the contestants. Like a high-speed ballet, or a quality Wuxia martial arts film.

Maybe that's why Morty trained his Pokémon to act on their own. When the action happens in the blink of an eye, a Pokémon can't afford to wait on the orders of its trainer. If we were to use a crude sports comparison, they were playing hockey and I was trotting along playing football… Considering how much they make fun of football here- Meh, I don't like that comparison. Maybe I'm actually playing chess to their checkers? That sounds like a better analogy for me- but it doesn't take away this inferiority complex I've suddenly developed.

What did Lyra think? She's doesn't care either way. She's still smiling, as if she was disconnected from the whole proceedings. She never takes her battles seriously. She's the avatar of good fortune, the way she can slack off and still be the Johto Champion. It's all thanks to her Typhlosion. I wish Steelix was that strong. I wonder which was stronger, Morty's Darkrai or her Typhlosion? If I had to bet, I'd put money on the latter. Sorry, but Darkrai doesn't seem so legendary after getting KO'd by an Alakazam, fluke or no.

Why do some people get all the luck? Lyra and her bloody Typhlosion! Erika has the admiration and respect of the entire Kanto crew. Whitney was popular with girls and guys, making all sorts of friends and netting any boy she pleased. And Morty? He has the looks, the respect, the social circle, that suave charisma, and Pokémon prowess! And on top of all that, he acts like a jerk and gets away with it!

Ugh!

"I'm getting a milkshake." I needed something to calm me down. I never intended to sign up for the tournament because I wanted to enjoy today, not spend it fussing and fuming.

"You'll miss the semi-finals," Lyra said.
"I can do without."

"Kay."

I plucked myself up off the ground and made towards the exit. There's a cafeteria downstairs, and although their food is even worse than Café le Rei, the desserts are as good as any fast food. Fattening, to be sure, but Erika makes fun of my lack of curves anyways; I could stand a pound or two. Slippery slope logic, of course, but... ugh, I want a damn shake!

"Wait up!" Lyra caught me at the stairs.

"I thought you were going to watch the semis?"

"Yeah, well, I think Erika wanted me to keep an eye on you. You do tend to disappear."

"True."

I still have to talk to Erika. But I don't want to...

Courage!

And milkshakes! Yes, plural- multiple milkshakes! Small ones.

And I can procrastinate on it, right? At least until the evening, after the tournament. Hey, maybe if what's-his-face, king beardedly, beats Morty, I'll be all happy!

"You want a milkshake too? I have some spare cash," I offered.

"Um, ok."

As we walked through hallways, Lyra piqued up, eyeing me.

"Hmm?"

"Tell me, is this usual?" Lyra asked.

"What?"

"Everyone fighting."

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's a little depressing, I think. I mean, friends are supposed to help you relax, right? But it seems you three have gone through a lot of trouble lately."

"It's just the summit, it's probably the most stressful time of year for our jobs," I lied- somewhat. The part about the summit being the worst part of the year was dead-on. But, I've noticed, Erika and Whitney and I had been bickering more often in the past year. Most of it was external, and I had thought we'd get over it once the stresses died down.

"Oh. Well, I hope I'm not being too blunt, but I think you all should learn to laugh. Take a joke, relax."

"I'll be fine," I replied, noting how her advice was addressed to all of us, but seemed directed at me.

"Sorry! Just my two cents. You guys are so fun and interesting, I'd hate to alienate you."
"Don't worry about it."

We arrived at the nigh-vacant cafeteria. If we hurried, we'd be able to catch the tail-end of the semis.

"What kind?" I asked.

"Choco-fudge! With oreos! And raspberries." Lyra exclaimed this before even glancing at the selection.

"I think you're thinking of an ice cream shake, and I don't think they serve those."

"Hey look, yes they do!" She skipped over to the far corner of the dessert section. So they do. Eh.

"What are you getting?"

"Vanilla."

"Teehehehe!"

"What?"

"That's too stereotypical, Jasmine."

"Seriously? Come on, it's just my favorite flavor."

"It's too much! I mean, what's next? A four-door sedan? Au natural make-up? Two kids, a Herdier, and a three bedroom house in the 'burbs?"

"So?"

"Vanilla milkshake, vanilla coke, vanilla cake, vanilla nightlife, vanilla bedlife-"

"Stop it!"

"What would you have for drinks if you threw a party? Sprite?"

"Red merlot."

"WINE!?!?! PFFFTTTTTT!" Lyra could not contain herself. What the hell was wrong with wine? Alcohol is alcohol!

"Don't laugh at me!"

"HAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Stop!"

"I mean, really? Wine?!"

"I'm not going to pay for that if you're going to make fun of me."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she said, still clutching her laugh-wrecked gut. "I'll stop… Hehehehe. Sorry. Hehe. Now! I'm done."

I locked eyes with her. She put on as straight a face as she could muster…

"PFFHAHAHAHAHAHA!" She burst into a new round of laughter. I ignored her and turned to the
"Two small vanilla milkshakes, and one choco-fudge raspberry creamshake."

"Ah, I see. 1950P please."

Freaking expensive!

I silently cursed corporatism as we made our way back to the third floor. Because of the condiments, we took the elevator.

"Third floor," I told Lyra, who had one free hand to my zero. She pressed the button; then, due to the sluggish pace of the elevator, lit the buttons for every floor from 4 to 16. Lyra, you prankster, that's going to creep people out.

"Bored?"

"Yep!"

As soon as the doors opened for our floor-

"It took THREE MONTHS to come up with that strategy!"

Yay! More drama.

I cautiously approached Erika and a bawling Whitney.

"Is she still crying?" I asked.

"No, not still. She became upset and tried confronting Maylene, but was rebuked, and now she's back to crying," Erika corrected.


"She's taking this pretty badly," Lyra said.

"Yes, worse than I expected," I said.

I joined Erika in bracketing our crying friend.

"Milkshake?" I offered her my untouched milkshake. She took it out of reflex, the noisy slurps intermingling with sniffling and sobs.

"There there, there there," Erika said softly.

We spent five minutes gently milking the tears out, giving reassurance and comfort. The milkshake, more than anything, helped towards that end. She greedily slurped the entire thing down in less time than it took for me to finish a third of mine.

"It wasn't so bad. You put up such an awesome fight, you could have won. You'll win next time. For sure."

"No! Should've won now."
"You should have, you should have. Next time, for sure."

"He's gonna think I'm trash now. Trash! He's still with her? Four years now? Four years?!"

"Who's this?"

"Brawly!" she wailed.

"From Hoenn?"

"Brawly-boo! That was my nickname! She's taken everything from me!"

"There there," Erika and I both hugged her. She looked about to break down again, so I offered my original half-finished milkshake. It was whipped out of my hands and drained in two minutes flat.

"You can tell us. Let it out."

"He was my Brawly-boo! My Brawly-boo. Mine! I loved him, loved him so much! That-that rotten little minx showed off some fancy pansy kung fu at a show, and he got hit like a stupid oaf by a Luvdisc arrow, and… and… buh-buh-battled for him, in the next Trainer Invitational, she swore she'd beat me at my own game and she ruined me, made me look like t-t-t-trash! Waaaaaaa!!"

It's not worthwhile to recall everything she said over the next ten minutes verbatim, because it was fragmented and very frequently interrupted by fits of tears and whimpering. The sum of it was, as I understand it, that Maylene stole Brawly from her by means of showing off, first in a martial arts contest, then a Pokémon tournament, and finally in a double-date - that is, Brawly invited both of them on a date at the same time, and Maylene's flirtations won out.

"What about all the other boyfriends you've had since then?" Lyra asked innocently.

"They nothin but cwackheads! Fratty-patpinks! Fwashy monkeys with nothin worth dating! Why you think I keep findin new guys? I don wan anyone else, I want Brawly-boo!"

I tried my best to ease her, as did Erika. Inwardly, though, I was sighing and shaking my head.

THIS! This is why men, even the best of men, are a bad idea. You attach yourself to them and they let you down- it doesn't even have to be their fault, primarily, it can be work, or disasters, or family; but all too often it is their own flaws, their boorishness, arrogance, lust, gutlessness, or any other little sin that will break your heart. Whitney, Whitney, just realize that Brawly is bad a person for leaving you and isn't worth the commotion. He's the real villain, and Maylene, while also an evil woman, is not your primary antagonist.

"I hate her! I hate her!" Whitney sounded as if she might be swinging back to the anger phase. Wasn't there supposed to be seven phases of grief, and progressive, rather than cyclical?

"I hope she dies!"

"Oh! Well, would you feel any better if she was humiliated as badly as you?"

"Of course. I want her to rot in hell! Bake her guts in bad wine and all that!"

"Mmm." Lyra nodded and began fiddling with her cell phone.

"Don't say that. Don't be hateful, hatred is bad- cry it all out. We'll get you through this." Erika soothed her with her most motherly voice.
"Like this?" Lyra handed over her cellphone, a digital image set on its display.

"Yeah, just like that! That face is perfect!" Whitney said this with a mixture of vindictive glee and underlying snuffling. The picture showed Maylene, looking absolutely horrified, or utterly defeated.

"Thanks. If only it were real…"

"Yeah, if the Golurk had only been touchable, I'm sure that's the face she would be showing right now. Is it photoshopped?" I addressed that last sentence to Lyra in a whisper.

"Huh? No, I just downloaded it from the intracon. I mean, look, she just lost."

"What?"

"Aye, 0-6."

Sure enough, on the nearest video display, the semi-finals' scores scrolled by, showing a defeated Maylene and---

"God damn it!" I cried.

--- a victorious Morty.

---

I was playing Mother Swanna for Whitney while Erika and Lyra went off to gather tissues and information. A loud 'ding!' heralded an announcement over the intercom.

"Due to greater-than-anticipated interest, the final match has been relocated to the Main Outdoor Stadium. This match will begin in 50 minutes, at approximately 4:00 o'clock. Spectator seating is available, and as usual the match will be available for viewing on intracircuit television and the Battle Tower Live Website, under "Current Matches". We hope you have enjoyed your stay at the Johto Battle Tower Facility and wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors."

"Do you want to watch the match?" I asked the question to a pile of red hair, because her face was still buried in her arms.

"Who's in it?" came the mumbled reply.

"Morty and …" I had to check the boards, "…Volkner."

"Not Maylene?"

"Morty beat her, remember?"

"Oh. Yeah. So he still hasn't lost?"

"No."

"And his bet?"

"He'll probably be enjoying Sabrina's company tonight, possibly Maylene tomorrow, or tonight as well if they're feeling amoral enough."
"Hehe."

"What's funny?" I asked, even though her laugh wasn't at all joyous.

"She's gonna cheat on Brawly-boo. I'd never take that bet up if there was a chance I'd cheat on him. She doesn't deserve him."

We had spent an hour calming her down and cheering her up. I couldn't bring myself to scold her for putting an obviously defective character like Brawly on a pedestal. Firstly, that would have put all of our carebear efforts to waste; secondly, I genuinely felt sorry for her and didn't want to hurt her feelings.

It was strange to me, though. I had known her for nine years, almost, and never knew her to keep a crush for so long. She "dated" Morty for a week in 7th grade, and just as quickly got bored and dumped him. Boyfriends came and went like holidays. Crushes were short and soon forgotten. As example, there was this Jon fellow, who she crushed on for a month. She would drool at his picture and obsess over the details of his social life every waking minute. But when it became apparent he wasn't interested, she got over it in two hours flat. It was that fast that she went from Wynaut-level waterworks to smacking a volleyball, laughing, and horse-playing.

Four years ago, I only had a vague sense she had been dating someone from Hoenn, didn't even know who it was. We hadn't been able to keep in touch as well as I'd liked, due to our gym leader jobs. So, it came across as just another one of her flings, and nothing serious was going to come out of it. I also knew the relationship ended around the time of the invitational three years ago, but never figured out that the Maylene confrontation and the breakup were connected.

This, however, was a shock. Four years, and she not once hinted at this latent crush of hers? Four years and she seemed perfectly fine, perfectly content to continue to run through love interests like other girls went through dirty laundry. Could she possibly have been dealing with this every day since, letting it eat and gnaw at her? It didn't seem possible. Her demeanor had been too genuinely upbeat, optimistic, happy-go-lucky, ball-of-energy- in short, her usual self. She's either a Pokewood-class actress, or else today's defeat triggered something deep inside her. But if it was the former, I was worried, deathly worried. It wasn't healthy keeping that kind of emotional strain to oneself. Let us in, let us help you!

...

Ugh... Great, I realize I'm such a hypocrite. I shut Erika off in the exact same way. I just didn't want to be judged! What's your excuse, Whitney? I won't judge you, I promise!

"Are you going?" she asked.

"No. Wait, go where?" I asked back.

"To the finals."

"Oh, no. Well, actually, only if you do. I'm going to stay by you."

"Thanks. But, if you want to see it..."

"Ha! Oh, I don't know if I could stand to see Morty win. The guy he's going against is kind of a wimp, honestly. If his Pokémon are the same way, then he doesn't stand a chance. Morty is too good."

"Yeah... Ah."
"What's that?"

"Who do you you think would win, Brawly or Morty?"

"I've never seen Brawly battle. Why do you ask that?"

"Wishful thinking."

"Tell me." Whitney turned her face away from me. Embarrassed?

"Tell me!"

"No, it's too farfetched."

"Please!"

"No!"

"Please!? I won't be your friend if you don't tell me!" I punctuated this threat with pokes to her ribcage. This got her to chuckle, while she tried fending my assault off.

"I'll never ever ever speak to you ever again if you don't tell me now!"

"Oh don't you start!"

"Never! I'll be your sworn rival, forever!" This was Whitney's own technique for getting her way, way back in 7th grade. The irony of me using it was causing her to giggle.

"No! No! No! I said no! No! NO!!!!!! Fine!" She gave in to the incessant barrage of pokes! "Fine, fine, I give!"

"What were you thinking?"

"I was wishing I could fall in love with Morty instead of Brawly," she turned to me, eyes still moist, but lips formed into a sheepish grin.

"Huh?"

"I know what you're going to say - 'but he's a dirty pervert who deserves nothing but a shoe up his butt' - but he's really not such a bad guy."

"No- well, yes, that is what I think of him. But I'm confused- I didn't think that would stop you from going after him. Why not?"

"Well, I don't know. I fell for Brawly, but Morty is so perfect, and he's single, and he and I get along… but my heart doesn't do what the brains tells it to. Feelings, how do they work?" She knocked her forehead and shrugged. "But…"

"But what?"

"There was one thing."

"What was it?"

"You," she said.
"Like I said, I never expected you to limit your romantic activities based on my opinions. I wouldn't even feel right by making you do that. The world would probably depopulate to extinction if I had my way," I told her.

"Jasmine, you really don't get it?"

"Get what?" I asked.

"The way Morty picks on you."

"Because he's a scoundrel."

"You truly don't get it." Whitney shifted nervously.

I stared at her, blankly. Just get out with it already!

"You're the only one he treated that way."

"Huh?"

"He likes you."

...

The first stage: Denial.

"No! No!! **DO NOT SAY THAT!!**"

The second stage: Anger.

"He has the goddamn gall to treat me like that and expect me to believe he has feelings for me?! Does that *fucking asshole* have the goddamn brains to realize I will NEVER love him?!!?"

The third stage: Bargaining.

"I've gone through how many overtures from men I couldn't accept? Men who were still light-years better men than he is! He would need several times his natural lifespan just to make up for the crap he's put me through! And then, and then only, would I allow him the pleasure of *working* for the permission to like me! Maybe then, after a millennia of sucking up and playing penance, I might consider accepting so much as a *love letter* from that morally-defunct pigshit!"

The fourth stage: Depression.

"No! I won't accept this. I can't. It's inhuman. It's moronic. The world is warped. I hate this. I hate this! Why? Why'd you have to go and say that? Ugh! That's... Wrong. I swear if I start crying again heads will roll. No. Just no."

The fifth stage: Acceptance.

"I don't get it. Why do you think he likes me? Why does he act that way if he does like me? Why? Why??!!?!!"
'Nine years, and so? Don't tell me such a preposterous thing like "Morty likes you" and expect me to take it easily."

"You said "fuck". That's the first time I've ever heard you cuss. Is it that big of a shock?"

"YES!"

"Well I didn't mean for it to."

"Hey, if someone said to you 'Brawly likes you', how would you react?"

Her eyes brightened for a passing moment. "I'd be ecstatic!"

"No! After what he…" and I paused, remembering that, although I think she should have the same disdain for Brawly as I have for Morty, she doesn't, and still loves him. My analogy flopped apart.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Sit down, let me explain!" I had begun stomping back and forth in front of her. She grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me down beside her.

"I didn't mean to be so blunt. I've barely talked with him here, and I haven't seen him much in the past few years. So, now might be different. But, seriously Jasmine, back in middle school? He was fawning over you, big time!"

"Are you serious?"

"Like a newborn baby poké."

"No. He was teasing me, calling me names, belittling me day in and day out!"

"That's what young boys do when they like a girl."

"Why?"

"Because they're stupid!"

"Of course!"

"It's still the truth. It was so obvious to everyone else, and we were all wondering when one of you would make a move. But neither of you ever did."

"Why would I make a move? He was just a bully in my eyes."

"You can be dense, true."

"Don't make fun of me."

"That's practically your catchphrase," Whitney said.

"Don't make fun of me?"

"Yep."

"Only because everyone does."

"You're too easy to pick on, that's why."
"Whatever. Why did Morty never confess?"

"That's the thing. We were all confused by that. You know I spent a year with him in high school before moving to Goldenrod." I nodded, vaguely remembering that. My family moved back the summer after I finished middle school. Whitney had stayed in Ecruteak for one more grade. She continued, "Well, he kept giving mixed signals to other girls. He would flirt with them and ask them out, but then he would back off. He acted like he still had a crush on you. But then he would turn right around and chase after whatever girl. You know what it felt like?"

"What?"

"Like he couldn't decide if he liked you romantically, or liked you as a friend. He did say these weird things sometimes, like how he wished he could be your older brother."

"That's creepy."

"Not the way he said it."

"How can something like that not sound creepy?"

"He had chivalrous intentions."

"Yeah right."

I tucked my knees in, adopting Whitney's fetal position.

"So you think that stupid boast at the gala was his way of coming on to me?"

"Maybe."

"What would you do, in my position?" I asked.

"Me? I'd go for it. If Brawly were acting like this to me- I'd die for that reality."

"What you were saying earlier, why you didn't want to go for Morty…"

"Because he might have feelings for you. I didn't want to screw with that."

I bit my lip. Even if it were Morty and I didn't give a damn if she pursued him, she did swear off him for my sake, not his.

"Thank you," I said.

"Mmm."

"Mm."

"Nnnh."

"Hmm?"

"I'm thinking about Brawly again."

"Oh." Her mood could sink just as quickly as it flared, and it did so now. I wanted to comfort her, but I was too busy depressing over this new revelation. It was all too easy to reject strangers and not bother myself over the consequences. There was no attachment, no history, and as soon as they left,
their personal feelings had no bearing on my life. This was different. Morty had been there for almost half my life. Chances were good our lives would continue to intersect, what with our common Gym Leader career. He wasn't going away. And, until these past five minutes, I only thought of him as my personal arch-nemesis. It wasn't a simple matter of not liking him- I didn't. What I truly did not want was him liking me.

Why did that bother me so much?

The clock passed the three-quarter-hour mark, meaning fifteen minutes until the finals match. Erika finally returned, a box of tissues and more desserts in hand.

"Now why do both of you look like the apocalypse?" she wondered aloud.
"Lyra is with Ethan. They're finding seats for the match— we could go too, but I doubt we'll be able to get decent seating… It's unbelievably crowded. Seriously, what's with you two?"

Whitney and I mirrored each other, knees tucked tight and heads burrowed in folded arms. Neither of us answered.

"Do you guys even want to watch the battle?"

We simultaneously shook our heads.

"What's the matter?"

"Maylene is a fat—"

"Morty is a big—"

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

Loud, distinct footsteps interrupted our replies. Our heads swiveled, following the extremely irritated figure of Sabrina as she marched by us.

"Those are quite some boots she's wearing," Erika noted. She turned back to us. "Do you think this has something to do with Morty?" she asked.

Whitney and I nodded in unison.

"Would you like to go watch the battle in order to find out what that was all about?"

Whitney and I nodded in unison.

"Then let us be off," she said, beckoning us. We clumsily got up, sore, cramped, but otherwise lively. Erika led the way, in the direction Sabrina had come from.

Psychic-type gym leader, team leader is an Alakazam with a sky-high special attack. That's about as much as I knew about her. She seemed aggressive and assertive when I met her. Did she really view the bet as a kind of sexual game, where losing was almost as good as winning? I find that hard to believe. Aside from the impropriety of it, logically, Morty offered something valuable that he didn't want to give away, while Sabrina wasn't risking any kind of loss at all. If what I suspect is true, he needn't have bothered with the bet in the first place, if getting laid was his objective.

Remember, Jasmine, boys are stupid, they don't think logically. What about girls? I can't accept Sabrina's promiscuity, but if that's what she's comfortable with, then I have to admit she went about it logically. She got something that she wanted so… but… it isn't logical to be putting one's body on the line in the first place! This is assuming that my assessment of what had transpired between her and Morty had been accurate.

"Erika, what kind of person is Sabrina?" I asked.

"She is very much like you, in personality. Very headstrong, very determined, very stubborn, and confident. Unlike you, though, she also has a mean streak, fiercely competitive, and if rumors are to be believed, your complete opposite as concerns acts of intimacy." Thought so.
"She's a slut?" Whitney inquired.

"Ohohohoho… not quite." Erika chuckled.

Whitney and I raised a brow, and eyed each other. What was that supposed to mean?

"Tell us!" Whitney pleaded.

"Please don't," I pleaded.

Erika answered anyways.

"They say she's into BDSM."

Silent pause.

"I don't think Jasmine knows what that means, Erika."

"It means she's a dominatrix," I said.

Now the raised eyebrows were directed at me.

"Where would you learn a thing like that? You hiding a porn stash from us?"

"NO!"

"Really?"

"Really!" How had I got hooked like that?! Now they think I'm a secret pervert or something! Don't they understand that it's impossible to escape this slimy subculture if one wants to use the internet in any remote capacity? "I stumbled on it on the internet," I told them, truthfully.

"You mean on a porn site."

"No! No way!" I pinched Whitney for her impudence.

"Ouch!"

"It was on a SimKingdom forum. I saw it in a thread title and thought they were talking about a resource strategy."

"That's such an old game, Jasmine. Which means, you've known about BDSM for how long? When did it come out?"


"Seven," I answered.

"Seven! Oh my! Our little Jasmine, hiding dirty secrets like this for seven years!"

"I am not hiding anything! I do not associate with that kind of stuff! I left the thread the instant, the instant, I figured out what they were talking about!"

Will I ever escape this incessant teasing?! It's not even boys and relationships anymore, it's all this irrelevant sexual stuff!

"You would have been fourteen then. Such a tender age."
"The thread was four years ago. Back on topic!" I screeched (mildly, I didn't want someone to mistake this for a rape attempt). "So, if Sabrina is a deviant woman, and she's angry, and she recently lost a bet to Morty that would result in her… oinking… him, what can we conclude?"

"Oinking?"

"Don't make fun of my euphemisms, I have to work hard to come up with them. Back on topic!"

"I'm sorry, dear, but the fact that you use creative euphemisms in the first place is quite an amusement."

"Erika!"

"Apologies, apologies! What were you saying?"

"I'm trying to figure out what made Sabrina upset."

"I see. Alright, let's go about this logically, shall we? First, don't discount the fact that it may be totally unrelated to Morty."

"Yeah, her dad could have died, or she stepped in ice-cream."

"I doubt that." Actually, there was about a 50/50 chance of it being something like that, but that sounds too boring and my intuition told me otherwise.

"What do you think?"

"She wanted that Darkrai very badly, more than anyone else. She might be peeved that she didn't win," I speculated.

"She would be over that by now, I think. Her personality lends itself to short temperamental bursts, then fades into cold, calculated rage. She'd sooner plot revenge than waste more than an hour throwing a fit, unlike certain other people," Erika said, patting Whitney.

"You know this how?"

"I've been on the receiving end of her antagonisms more than once," she said.

"Okay, so she was probably planning to steal the Darkrai, but her plan fell through. Or she was planning on humiliating Morty, but her plan fell through. Something like that."

"Perhaps."

"Maybe Morty wouldn't have sex with her?" Whitney asked.

"And maybe Morty will join the priesthood," I retorted. "Hmm. Maybe he wanted to try something so disgusting she couldn't stand it?"

"Ha! No, I don't see that happening," Erika said. "It would be the other way around. Perhaps she asked to do something so gross and Morty declined, thus abrogating the bet?"

"Ugh. I don't want to imagine that."

"Maylene… maybe he wants to do Maylene instead?" Whitney wondered.

"Sounds plausible," I said. "I also wouldn't put it past Morty to find a way to antagonize her without
resorting to Nature Channel topics." The other two giggled.

"If she's a dom, maybe Morty got her to be the sub? You think that would be enough to piss her off?" Whitney said.

"Maybe. I don't know how he could convince her to do that. A new bet?"

"He coulda tricked her into it. You know Morty, he's pretty damn good at mind games."

"Very true."

"Hmm. There's a lot it could be," Whitney said.

"I know, it's frustrating," I said.

"Why do you care so much?" Erika asked the both of us.

"We're girls, we love drama!" Whitney exclaimed, to which I nodded. "I wanna know what's going to happen between Maylene and Morty, too. Maybe I can use this to get Brawly back."

"Oh, I see. And Jasmine? How about you?"

"Vengeance-minded curiosity," I offered as explanation.

"Well you are certainly more approachable concerning the subject today. Usually you would simply keep silent."

"Chalk it up to stress. It's not like I'm changing my stance towards the whole thing."

"Indeed."

The noise level increased audibly as we approached the Main Outdoor Stadium.

"How many people are here?"

"There should only be a few hundred. What's with the crowd?"

We broke through the final exit into broad sunshine.

"Jasmine, is this usual?"

"No."

The entire stadium was filled. It was the third largest venue in Johto, nominal capacity of twenty thousand, and people were jumping over each other to find standing room.

"I did notice the parking lot and buses picking up in traffic the last hour. I assumed regular trainers were just coming back after the summit ended. But this is a little much. Is some event scheduled today?" Erika asked me.

"One sec," I said, and darted off. The public computer terminals were operating, thankfully. I typed out a header. "Oh, wow. What? WHAT?!"

"What's up?"

"How come I didn't see this?"
"What is it?"

I pointed at the terminal. "Well, it's complicated. Look." On the surface was the week's schedule for the Battle Tower. The bulk of today was dedicated to the Gym Leader Summit. Most other functions had to be cancelled to make room for the summit, including the normal Trainer Challenges. It was effectively closed for business while the Pokémon League conducted its business. The summit was scheduled to be over by now, so a certain bulk of trainers would be here waiting for the Tower to reopen. What caught my eye, however, were the two highlighted topics on the schedule.

The first- "Gym Leader Tournament Finale! This year's Gym Leader Tournament has been hotter than anyone thought imaginable! The final match is a thrilling battle between Ecruteak's Morty and Sunnyshore's Volkner! Now open to the public! Free admission! Come watch the best of the Gym Leaders clash!" This was dated just over an hour ago.

The second, dated a week ago, and probably the primary reason for the overpacked stadium- "Exhibition match. Following the Gym Leader Summit, a special match has been offered by the Pokémon League for your entertainment. This once-in-a-lifetime event will feature legendary trainer and Pokémon League CEO Steven Stone against the current World Champion, Red. Open to the public, free stadium admission, or tune in on Channel 8."

"Oh!"

Mr. Stone's partner, when he was at the gala, the guy I thought was so familiar. That was Red, the World Champion! How had I missed that? Wait, never mind, Stone told me who he was, I just wasn't paying attention. And Red had also been sitting right next to me during the practice matches! The strongest non-retired trainer in the world! Right beside me! I seriously should have gotten advice from him then. Oh wait, he had been kind of rude. Scratch that. Still! I would have liked to see his Pokémon up close. I can't tell this to anyone, but I still think his Pikachu is adorable, and find it admirable that he can use an un-evolved Pokémon and win with it.

"So they came to watch Steven and Red duke it out, but got Morty and Volkner as a warm-up act. Lucky crowd."

"Hmm."

"What are you thinking, Jasmine?"

I was thinking a great deal of things, but didn't want to bother them with the deeper stuff.

"I won't be able to stay for the Red versus Steven match, I think. I need to bring Amphy food before he lights up tonight." A legitimate excuse.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I have an idea."

"For what?"

"I can stay for Morty and Volkner. I think I can get us a better view. Come with me."

Back in the hallway, I scurried onward till I found what I was looking for. My head darted from left to right, making sure no one could see us.

"Here."
I led them through an unmarked door, and down a stairwell.

"What's this, Jasmine being naughty?" Erika intoned.

"Hahahahaha!" Whitney was the one who laughed.

"For your information, I am in no way against breaking rules from time to time for a little fun. As long as you use the word 'naughty' by its literal definition, yes, I am a "naughty" girl. Don't giggle." They really wanted to, I could tell. "These corridors are used by medical staff, so they have to remain unlocked. Hurry uoooffff!" I rounded a corner much too fast and collided with a person going the other way.

"You!"

"Ouch, fuck, who-" she said. I shoved her away, hard enough to hurt her, which was the intention. But I didn't want her dead, exactly, so my next action was to turn around and tackle the already lunging Whitney. It took Erika's help in restraining her. Her hands were still stretched out to their maximum, aiming for the interloper's throat.

"I'll kill you!" Who else could provoke this reaction from Whitney? Maylene sat on her tush where I had shoved her over, dazed. I fully expected her to taunt Whitney, or perhaps even jump in and start a three-way catfight.

But, contrary to my expectations, she picked herself up, unsteadily, and ran away without a word.

"The hell? You get back here and take your beating! I'll show you a karate chop or ten!"

"Whitney!"

We held her until she went still.

"Unnh."

"You can't attack others like that."

"Sorry." She broke free, but remained calm. "I thought she hit Jasmine."

"No, we just ran into each other." So much violence! We're acting like a bunch of boys. I can't wait for this summit to be over so that everyone's nerves can go back to normal.

"Why was she in a hurry? She didn't even bother saying anything," I asked.

"Hey, did you guys just see- oh, hey!" And yet another figure burst into the hallway, panting and out of breath.

"What's the commotion?" And six more people walked down the hallway from the opposite direction.

"There was an accident," was all I could muster, utterly stunned.

Erika, Whitney, two body guards, Lance, Volkner, Red, and Steven stared blankly at me.

Morty, though- he just grinned.

"You're not supposed to be here," Lance said quite sternly.
Mr. Stone held up a hand. "I'll deal with this."

He approached me. "There was a young lady who rushed past us. What happened?"

"W-w-we-we ran into each other. It was an accident." I was stuttering, badly. My face had gone flush.

"Is that so?" Stone didn't believe me! Do they think I attacked Maylene? I did push her down... oh crap! What am I going to do? Blame it all on Whitney?

"I'm the one at fault." I turned around, to witness Morty take the blame. "I'm the reason the lady was upset. She's just an innocent bystander," he said, indicating me.

"What are they doing here? This is a restricted-"

"Lance, I told you I've got this." Mr. Stone turned to me again. "I'm terribly sorry for suspecting you. I am also sorry that I do not remember your name. You're the Gym Leader for this city, correct?"

"That's right," the words had to be forced out of my mouth. He stared at me, and it took an embarrassing second to figure out he was expecting my name.

"Mikan, Jasmine Mikan." My mother's surname.

"Pleased to meet you again, Ms. Mikan. Now about your presence here..."

"That's also my fault," Morty interjected again. "She's a friend."

"Oh! I see." Mr. Stone's demeanor turned from stern to surprise to exuberant. "You know Morty do you?"

"I do," I wish I was lying.

"Excellent! I've got an idea. How is your singing voice?"

"Terrible, sir."

"No, I won't take self-criticism. Let me hear you."

"No! Please, sir, it's really bad."

"I insist."

He is the Pokémon League CEO. One does not refuse one's head boss lightly.

"Mary and Mareep did walk,

Quietly through the snow,

And everywhere that Mary went,

The world was sure to glow."

"Quite fair. Good, very good. Come with me. Your friends may come too. Now for you, Morty, I'd like an explanation as to why a young and beautiful woman is in tears."

He passed me by to converse with Morty. I could practically feel the aura of power and prestige exuding off of him. It made me feel faint.
What did he want with my singing voice? Would I get in trouble for being down here? What did Morty do, and why are there now two girls (myself excluded) upset with him? I watched Morty and Mr. Stone converse, hoping to allay my confusion, but I couldn't make out their hushed voices.

"That's quite crude of you, Morty. I recommend you be more discerning in the future." Mr. Stone was finished with him. He turned to the rest of the group. "Let's go, the crowd is getting anxious."

I'm the one getting anxious!

As we walked along, I heard Mr. Stone talk on his cellphone.

"Change of plans. I'm not feeling up for singing today, so I found a substitute. Yes. Yes, it's a young lady. She has a good voice. No, don't be like that. I have a wife and we're quite in love, but thank you for your input. No. Well I'm terribly sorry but as you well know I've been taken for three years now. No. No! I'm going now, be sure to inform the announcers."

"Please don't hang up! Steven! Steven! Ste-" The faint shouting over his cellphone cut off abruptly. Mr. Stone pocketed the device, shaking his head.

Another man, tall with wild blonde hair, wearing a green cloak and a fierce expression, appeared waiting for us at a juncture.

"Ah, Palmer, just the man I wanted to speak to." He and Mr. Stone fell into deep conversation, leaving the rest of us to our own whims. By our direction, I guessed we were circumventing through the stadium's lower hallway, heading towards the main entrance. In that case it would be a long walk. I wanted to stick close to Erika and Whitney, but in the shuffle of bodies I was forced to the outer edge of our trio. It wasn't long before unwelcome company fell into step with me.

"Hello again," Morty said.

I ignored him.

"Oh not the silent treatment. You know that's the worst possible punishment for me."

"Congratulations on your victory," I said, hopefully pumping the tone with enough acidity to get the point across. "There! Does that fulfill my social obligations?"

"Hardly; after receiving such a compliment, I should return it in kind. And thank you, by the way, it was easier than expected."

"Eh."

"Well, since one compliment deserves another, how should I repay your kind words? Oh I've got it: You are very beautiful today, dear Jasmine, especially with your hair down."

Considering I'm in a t-shirt and shorts and haven't properly washed-

"Touché."

"Were you watching the matches? Well, you being you, I can't expect you to be watching mine, but maybe Volkner's?"

I glanced at the blondie trailing at the tail-end of our convoy.

"No, I was comforting Whitney."
"Ah. Is she still upset?"

"Yes, but not as much since you beat Maylene."

"I thought you said you didn't watch the battle?"

"We saw the results on the board."

"Pity, pity. It was a good match. Fun, even."

"Fun? It was a 6-0. You used the Darkrai, didn't you?"

"From the start. I actually only have the six Pokémon on me. I figured since it's a dark type, and Maylene is a fighting-type specialist, I should send it out first and get its shot in, before I was cornered with it later in the match."

"Right, and you went flawless."

"What can I say? It was dumb luck."

"Liar. Sabrina is right, it's a cheap Pokémon." To this Morty shrugged. Even the way he battles is dirty. Are there no redeeming features to this guy?

"Where'd you get a Pokémon like that?" I asked.

By way of answer he mimed a zipping motion across his lips. He's not going to tell me.

"Then tell me why Maylene's upset just now."

"She lost the battle, of course."

"I don't believe you. That was an hour ago, she wouldn't still be here."

"I really can't say then."

"Did it have to do with the bet?"

He shrugged.

"I know what the terms of the bet were. You're pretty vile."

"It's not a big deal. Well, it's less than a little deal now."

"What does that mean?"

He mimed the zipped lips motion again. Over the years that had become code for something secret that nothing less than torture could extract from him. One was better off dropping the subject. But, failing that subject, I had nothing else to talk to him about.

He thought otherwise.

"So what brings you down to the catacombs?" Morty asked.

I tried ignoring him again, but the way he kept his eyes focused on me was unnerving. Several seconds passed, but he wouldn't let up.

"I was getting a better view for Erika and Whitney," I said, finally.
"So you wanted to watch me fight now?" You sound too eager!

"No!"

"You wanted to watch Volkner fight."

"Why should I care about him?"

"No reason. Unless you were reconsidering your stance towards him."

"What stance?"

"He and I are buddies, he shares everything with me. Us blond ditzes have to stick together after all."

"Blond men can't be ditzes. And what did he say about me?"

I thought back to the past week. Volkner and I had met at orientation at last year's summit, but only briefly. This year he had made one of the more awkwardly shy, yet determined efforts to court me that I had yet experienced. He had been so modest, in fact, it had taken me a few days to realize what he was getting at, which is why I suffered his company longer than I might have.

So what did he tell Morty after I rejected him?

"Nothing that I already didn't know about you," Morty answered.

"What did you tell him?" I asked.

"Quite a bit. Brother to brother talk deep into the night, if you will. But I guess the sum of it was to not take it personally. It's not his fault, it's hers. Or, yours, I should say."

"I'll smack you."

"Go ahead, a little pain is so little a price for telling the truth."

"I…" I raised my hand, not one to give threats idly. However, I was keenly aware of Mr. Stone trotting behind me. Still, Morty deserves something.

"You're such a violent little girl," Morty added. "Ooof!" My fist pounded into his soft tummy. "See?" he squeaked out.

"That's what I learned from you in middle school. Boys don't listen, they need pain to convey messages. That 'talk with our fists' shonen crap is instilled into you from birth. That's what I have to do to get across to you boys."

"That's really not a healthy attitude for a girl to have. Men won't respect you if you try taking them on with brute force."

"They respect me enough to leave me alone, after a good whack. All of them except you."

"Never mind me. Even if they leave you alone, it's not out of respect or fear. Men are boys, they will always think that, in the one area of brute force, they will always be better than a girl. They leave you alone because they dislike you."

"What are you getting at?"

"Men don't like violent girls. Because they don't like them, they don't show them the same respect
and niceties they show towards other women."

This set my blood boiling.

"I don't care if they hate me. If they can't treat me the same whether I'm a female or male then I feel completely justified using force to keep them off my back."

"Funny."

"It's not funny."

"Well, how is that working for you?"

"Most men leave me alone without-" and I had fallen into his trap. Most men don't need physical reminders to keep their distance. Only one person seems to bother me repeatedly, and no matter how many times I smack, pound, and punch him, he always comes back. My time-honored method for dealing with boys has had the exact opposite effect with one boy I hate the most. Bastard!

"You see my point?" Morty asked.

"So why do you keep bothering me?" I asked.

"What can I say, I like tsundere." He smiled, and shrugged in exaggerated manner.

The… this… this… bastard! My thoughts raced back to the conversation with Whitney. Does he seriously like me? Is he attracted to me because I've been so belligerent towards him?

Boys (Morty) are stupid. They tease girls they like. Girls (me) bully them back in order to get them to shove off, because girls don't like being teased. Boys only understand teasing, bullying, pain, etc. In boy language, a girl bullying him is the same as saying she likes him.

Oh my god, it all makes sense!

The revelation hit me hard enough to freeze me mid-step. Morty stopped to stare at me.

"What's wrong?"

I regained my composure and dashed forward before we fell behind. I turned to Morty and whispered to him.

"Let me make this explicitly clear: I have no feelings for you!"

"Hahahaha! Of course not, if you say so."

He brushed me off. The nerve of him!

"Well? Don't tell me you had feelings for me."

"You're cute." He began patting my head, like a child, before I batted his hand away.

"Tell me the truth," I demanded.

"This is refreshing, hearing you so excited about the topic of love."

"Don't make fun of me. Tell me the truth!"

Without warning, he pulled me into a side passage, cornering me against the wall. I was trapped, and
he stood there not a foot in front of me. What was he going to do? His eyes bore into me, deep orbs, colored in unnatural shades of brown- I felt like I was staring into twin Jupiters, with twin black holes at their core. His lips were parted, slightly.

His hands raised to my head.

"Don't you dare touch me," I warned, tensing up. The noise from the group had passed, leaving us completely alone. There was no one here to intercede. My hand fell to my last resort, Steelix's pokeball. I was shaking.

"Hold still," he commanded.

"Get off me!" To no avail, his hands grabbed at my hair, tugging, pulling, and violating. Something was extracted from his pocket and affixed to my head.

"Rapist!" I screamed.

No one heard, but Morty stepped back.

"Not to my taste, but whatever," he said, as if admiring his handiwork.

My hands delicately went up to my head. What they found there was a shock, because it was all too familiar. He had put my spiky mini-tails back in place. I hadn't set them since the gala.

"What was that? You creep! You damned creep!" I attempted to kick him in the ass but he dodged out of the way, laughing.

"Hurry up, I think Steven wants you. And ask Erika for her blouse, you don't want to go out with that ugly t-shirt on."

"Jasmine!" Erika's cries came from down the hallway. "Jasmine!"

"I'll kill you, one of these days," I spat out as I passed him by.

"Cheer for me," he retorted.

__________________________

20,000 people packed the stadium benches. That's five digits. That's four times more people than I have ever seen in one place. The most I've seen in my entire life, barring television. Speaking of, some number six or even seven digits long would be watching on television too. Add in an unknown, mind-boggling number of Pokémon. A truly incomprehensible number of sentient beings. Every last one of them is staring directly at me.

And they expect me to sing.

…

How did I get into this situation?!?!
"Right, so I'm not much of a singer, but the promoters were lazy and didn't arrange for one, so I got stuck with the job. Would you mind taking over? It's only the regional anthem, no one's going to judge you, and you have a beautiful voice."

Lying lazy lizard. He was dumping this embarrassing task on me. Even the legendary, mythical Steven Stone can't escape the stereotypes of his sex. On any other occasion, from any other person, I would tell him to shove off. But I can't. Not because he's the greatest trainer in recorded history, or that I was in awe of his presence, or that I respected him. The simple matter was, I'm on probation, and he's my boss (or my bosses' bosses' boss, but technicalities aside-). I did have a choice, I could refuse without official reprimand. But, that was not going to help my standing with the Pokémon League. Doing him this favor might. So, I chose my career over my dignity.

"Hurry over here!"

"Huh?"

As soon I assented, Erika pulled me into a side room.

"You don't want to go out in that, do you?"

I looked at myself. Yes, short-shorts and t-shirt were perfectly acceptable for a live performance before 20,000 people. If I were a 10 year old, that is.

"Do you have something extra? Oh…" I uttered. Erika was already taking off her blouse and skirt and tossing them into my arms. I took off my own clothes and handed them to Erika.

"Where's your bra?" Erika asked. Her head tilted to one side, curious.

"In the laundry."

"All of them?"

"Yes! What's wrong? Not like there's anything to hold up." Sad, but true.

"Uhuh. Take mine." She forced her B-cups onto me. They were too large, but Erika wrestled them onto me anyways.

"These are really uncomfortable."  

"Hmm." She eyed my chest. "Right, yes." She bent down and removed her socks.

"What are you doing? Hey, stop it! Stop!" Too late, her socks were shoved into the bra cups.

"There, now you have boobs."

"You want me to go out there with fake boobs?!"

"It's a silk blouse; if you go braless they'll see your nipples."

/poker-face

We exited the impromptu dressing room. I tried, with all my might, to keep a straight face and
dignified posture, even as I earned the entire male cast's undivided attention. Welp—better this than the alternative…

Before I realized it, we were strolling out of the main entrance and into the canyon of the stadium. The air was like a thick haze, heavy with the roars and cheers of the massive crowd.

"So many people," I said. Red glanced over at me.

"Not really. It's not that big a stadium." He was utterly calm, bored even.

"What's Indigo League's capacity?" Stone asked.

"105,000, for the main arena," Red answered.

105,000. Five times this. No wonder I'm awed at this sight and he's not even remotely fazed. Red is the global champion and Indigo isn't even the largest in the world. He's been here before; it's completely normal for him.

Knowing that didn't make me feel any less nervous.

Palmer stepped forward to begin the introductions.

"You may watch from the bench seating, over there," Mr. Stone said to Erika and Whitney. At least I kept my promise to them—front row seating, best in the house.

After a short speech and other introductions, Palmer's voice boomed out: "And now, as representative of the Battle Frontier Organization, I would like to extend my thanks to the hosts of this year's Pokémon League Gym Leader Summit. Please give a big round of applause to Johto Battle Tower Manager Dahlia!" The applause was duly given. "Mayor Adoch of Olivine City, who was not able to join us today." Polite applause given nonetheless. "And in his stead, representative of fair Olivine City and its beloved Gym Leader, Jasmine Mikan!" With this a great cheer broke out, and Palmer waved me forward.

I took the steps, one at a time, trying, with all my might, to not sweat, not hyperventilate, not stutter, and prayed fervently that I wouldn't make a total mockery of myself.

"And now, would you please stand as Jasmine leads us in the regional anthem."

This was it. There I was, at the podium, the mike a few inches from my mouth and turned on.

And the eyes of 20,000 lay on me, waiting for lyrics.

*Please don't let them make fun of me.*

I began.

"Oh beautiful and gracious skies,

  Look down on our fair land,

To see a world of peace and love,

And all who share hand in hand,

Working for a future shining bright,
Our unity is our guiding light,
Through dark nights we take a stand.
Never forget the toils past,
Their sacrifices made to last,
The future we yearn for in ours souls,
Near as tomorrow our hope -hiccup!- does grow.

For Johto we shed our joyous tears,
For Johto we set aside our fears,
For all of us that Johto bears,
The journey of life shines on!"

I'm gasping for air, feeling like a train wreck, nerves absolutely frayed, and I just hiccupped in the middle of the regional anthem in front of thousands of people!

I'm done for!

...

They're all applauding.

I can't believe this.

They didn't care. They had sung right along with me, ignored the hiccup, and when I finished, they broke out into wild cheering. It's enough to think that the people of Johto are really as good-willed as the anthem suggests they are. I bowed, less to receive their praise than to hide my blushing face.

"Thank you very, very much, Ms. Mikan, that was a beautiful performance. Now, who's ready for a different kind of performance? Eh?!" Palmer took control of the mike. The crowd exploded into more cheering. "Maybe a little showmanship, maybe the kind involving some white-hot Pokémon battles, do you want to see that?" Another sudden leap in the stadium's volume. I took my leave as quickly as dignity allowed. Palmer spent another minute firing up the crowd, while Volkner and Morty made their way to the stage. Morty stopped to have a few words before he went up.

"You were pretty good. Pretty voice, very nice tune."

"I'm not taking compliments," I said.

"Well that's not going to stop me from giving them. Are you going to let them rot in the air?"

"Hmph. Get on with it. Go be a cheap scum and finish this quickly. I'd rather watch Red and Mr. Stone's battle, but I'm short on time."

"You think I'll win?"

"With Darkrai? Easily."

"You're underestimating Volkner." He pulled close to me, and whispered in my ear. "Tell me, why
did you become a Gym Leader?"

I pushed him away.

"Why? You've got a battle, go fight it and stop asking me stupid questions."

"Just answer me." He stood, waiting for an answer. If he doesn't get one, might he hold up the match? He would, he's not averse to that kind of impropriety. Better make up an answer.

"Because I like Pokémon."

"You could've been a breeder, or just keep Pokémon around without ever training or battling with them. I'm asking why you became a Gym Leader." He came closer again, invading my personal space.

I didn't know how to answer such an introspective question on the fly.

"I just wanted to."

"Okay, if you don't answer, let me try. I think you do appreciate a good Pokémon battle. You were always feisty, loved competitions during class and gym, loved to solve puzzles, and most of all, loved to battle. That's something you really like. Becoming a Gym Leader is proof enough how important it is to you."

"Even if that's true, what does that have to do with anything?" This impudent man! I'm not ashamed to say I like battling, nor that I'm competitive. Nonetheless, how dare he try to psychoanalyze me!

Morty bent in close, his hand reached around my shoulder, keeping me in place and from running away. His voice came across very low, seductive-like:

"Watch us. Watch us very closely. You'll be… amazed. I promise." And with that promise, he drew back, grinned, and left. Moments later he joined Volkner on the stage as Palmer prepared to introduce them.

I touched my ear, the warmth of his breath still lingering on my skin. Morty, what on earth are you playing at?

Palmer's voice boomed out. "Let's get this show started! Trainers, forward!"
Morty versus Volkner

Morty: handsome, arrogant, confident, manipulative, childish, perverted, conceited, blasphemous, savant idiot. Decent sense of fashion. Loves outdoor activities, myths, the occult, paranormal, and travelling. Hates being ignored, enjoys being criticized. Preys on sexual tension and innuendo. Gym leader, Ghost type specialist. Known since 7th grade. Makes fun of me, plays pranks on me, verbally assaults me, possibly has a crush on me, or is just playing with my feelings.

Volkner: handsome, modest, meek, indecisive, boring, childish, inept, honorable, respectful, oblivious. Awful sense of fashion. Cocky when it comes to Pokémon battles, cowardly in most other areas. Enjoys technology and tinkering, hates leeks. Gym leader, Electric type specialist. Known for a few days. Definitely has a crush on me, recently rejected.

If Volkner was truly a threat to Morty, then this Pokémon battle could be a good one. But, even if it were a good match, who should I root for? Neither of the competitors appealed to me; and yes, it was precisely because of my difficult personal history with each of them. Had I known Volkner longer, or had he not made a point to hit on me, I would certainly be rooting for him. Morty had the greater share of negative experiences attached to him. But as is, Morty, for his infinite number of faults, was a fixture in my life, a known quantity. I'd trust him not to rape and murder me, at least. Volkner was a stranger, a creeper, an unknown that I couldn't trust.

So, when the two young men stepped up to the trainers' boxes, I found myself hoping both would lose. And, just to spite Morty, that they would put on a dull, mistake-filled, unwatchable match.

"Trainers, please send out your Pokémon. Match, IGNITE!" Palmer's hand went down, signaling for them to begin.

"Go, Darkrai!"

"Go, Raichu!"

Morty started with his power house. Volkner began with his team leader. Neither side was going to waste time.

"Thunderbolt!" Raichu fired off an electric bolt. It arced through the air, cracking the ground Darkrai had occupied a moment before.

"Keep your distance, Thunderbolt!"

"Dark Void!" Darkrai let loose a sphere of pulsing black energy. Raichu scampered backwards, dodging it and unleashing its own Thunderbolt. Darkrai was hit, but shook it off.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Dark Void!"

The commands were simple, actually. The initial scene repeated several times over- A Dark Void, dodged, and a Thunderbolt, shrugged off. The trainers had little to do, under the circumstances. Each Pokémon was vying for range: Darkrai attempting to get close enough to land a Dark Void, which would, for all practical purposes, be an instant knock-out. Raichu was keeping itself at long range, trying to wear down the legendary with constant Thunderbolts. Each time it stopped to let loose, however, Darkrai gained more ground, or better field position.
"Raichu is Volkner's most seasoned and agile Pokémon. If any of Volkner's team is capable of kiting the mighty Darkrai, Raichu is it. Will it be able to pull this off?"

I looked to my left. Erika was seated next to me, then Whitney, who had her smart-phone out. She was getting a live-feed of the match, and listening to the accompanying television commentary.

She caught me looking at her.

"I'm recording it. I want to fight Morty later," she explained.

"Oh."

"Quick Attack outbound!" Volkner yelled, realizing too late that Raichu was in a bad position. The fat electric rodent picked up speed, sprinting along the arena's boundary, attempting to get around Darkrai.

"Dark Void!"

Darkrai let fly another sphere, this time leading Raichu's path. The Pokémon dropped to the dirt, knocked unconscious.

"Wake up! wake up!"

"Dark Pulse!"

Darkrai unleashed dark energy into the air. It used its preternatural powers to corral the energy, focusing it into a more powerful blob, and launched it directly at Raichu. The subsequent smack was audibly painful. Raichu was flipped into the air, then landed with a thud.

"Raichu is unable to battle!"

"That was some Dark Pulse! That's not a little ten minute KO, Volkner's Raichu is going to be out for quite some time."

"You think that was overkill, maybe?" The commentators on Whitney’s phone explained how Darkrai had enhanced its attack, but I was watching the trainers' faces.

Volkner was still confident.

Morty was surprised. At what?

"Please send in your next Pokémon," the judge, a pudgy, clean-shaven middle-aged man, said to Volkner.

"You know, you're not the only one here with a legendary," Volkner shouted to his foe. The headsets each trainer were given beforehand magnified their voices, allowing the whole stadium to hear their mid-battle banter.

"Oh really?" Morty replied. "Let's see it!"

"Both trainers are firing up their language! Which legendary will Volkner bring out?"

"Zapdos, go!"

Oh wow. A Zapdos?
Sure enough, a Zapdos appeared.

Lightning fairly crackled off its wings. The legendary bird soared high into the air, gaining distance on Darkrai- just like Raichu. This must've been something his whole team trained for.

No wait, distance wasn't the only thing a Zapdos would want height for-

"Thunder!" came Volkner's command.

"Too noisy! Go after him!" Morty commanded.

The air lit up beneath Zapdos, yellow and white-hot flashes streamed down, pelting the entire arena. But in the moment it took to unleash the powerful Electric attack, Darkrai flew up to appear directly in front of Zapdos.

"Dark Void!" At point-blank range, it couldn't miss. Zapdos fell to the ground, asleep.

"Dark Pulse!" In exactly the same way, Darkrai leisurely unleashed a wave of dark energy, concentrated it, and then sent it into Zapdos' body.

"Is it done?"

"No, it's asleep, but still healthy. It is a legendary bird, after all."

"Oh what? Again!" Morty cried. Darkrai repeated its attack, but the Zapdos, unconscious but still undefeated, shook. Dark Void is an artificial form of sleep, it's not like the Pokémon can't try to power through the drowsiness and get back into the battle. Zapdos was attempting just that.

"Zap!!!!" It did awake, electricity coursing across its wingtips.

It was futile. A third focused Dark Pulse was already ready and flying. Zapdos was hit underneath the beak, sent flying onto its back, and remained still. This time, there were no signs of heaving, shaking, or struggling. It had fainted.

"To take three of those Dark Pulses? That's one tough bird! Still, Morty's Darkrai is one unstoppable beast."

This was worse than a poor, sloppy battle, or even a good, tight battle. It was a brutal curb-stomp by that wretched blondie and his ill-gotten legendary. I bit my lip. Was this what Morty wanted me to see? Him utterly dominating his opponent? Did he think a cheap, one trick pony was going to impress me?

Volkner showed no signs of defeat, just a little consternation. Morty was all smiles. The crowd was roaring and hollering. The one-sidedness actually excited them; they were borderline giddy to see the mythical Darkrai in action.

"Electivire!"

"Virre!" I've never seen one of these before. It looked kind of odd, if you ask me, like an Electabuzz packed on too many rare candies. I suppose it's similar enough to its pre-evolution capability-wise: speedy with powerful electric bolts, but not much else.

"Electivire! Raichu is definitely Volkner's team leader and his favorite, but between you and me, Bob, I think Electivire is his strongest fighter. Let's see if it fairs any better than Raichu or Zapdos."

The television commentators- their tone bugs me. It's a kind of gleeful sarcasm. They knew as well
as I did Darkrai was nigh-unstoppable. Even under the remote chance that he stopped it here and now, Morty would be at such an advantage, it'd be impossible to overcome.

"Dark Void!"

"Dodge!" Electivire took a single step back, tilting its head casually, letting the sleep-inducing sphere fly by. "Thunderbolt!" It charged up a shot and fired, striking Darkrai square in the chest. As if it cared. The bolt petered out without causing any lasting damage.

See what I mean? Not only is it cheap and powerful, look how well it's tanking those lightning attacks! Volkner's finished.

"Dark Void! Dark Void!"

"Dodge and Thunder!" Volkner called. Couldn't he come up with a better strategy? Both of them are relying on brute force and their Pokémon's reflexes and strength! Trainers exist to help their Pokémon with their brains, not set them on autopilot! With a dumbass non-strategy like that, the more powerful Pokémon always wins- and that'd be the stupid Darkrai!

Morty, you're not impressing me, you're pissing me off!

Yet each Pokémon dutifully obeyed its orders.

Darkrai fired the (relatively) slow moving Dark Void. Electivire side-stepped and charged up its nodes. Darkrai used the cover of its first Dark Void to close the gap, and launched a second at much closer range. Electivire was engulfed in the coursing tendrils of darkness. It slumped into a sitting posture, unmoving.

"Dark Pulse!"

Darkrai obeyed.

Electivire sprung to life, blitzing forward.

The echo of the Cross Chop rebounded across the arena; I could hear it loud and clear from my seat.

"Vital Spirit, asshole!" Volkner shouted. Morty watched in horror as his Darkrai went down.

"Darkrai, Dark Pulse, don't waste time focusing it! A normal one!" he cried, hoping that his Pokémon hadn't been KO'd.

"No way. Follow through Electivire!" If one Cross Chop wasn't strong enough to down a legendary Dark type, the four consecutive Cross Chops that followed certainly would. Finally, Darkrai fell.

"Vital Spirit, the ability to completely resist sleep effects. Who knew such a useful ability belonged to Electivire?" This from Whitney's smart-phone.

Morty held his face. He waited, probably deliberately, for the judge to remind him to recall Darkrai and send out another Pokémon. He spoke to Volkner as he did so.

"Well, good thing you didn't have enough money to cover the bet."

"That's the best you got?" Volkner asked, smugly.

"That's all I got," Morty replied. "This sucks. Even if I don't have to hand over Darkrai-"
"I don't want your cheap-ass legendary, Morty."

"Seriously? Go Mismagius! I think I could've swept your team if I had known about the Vital Spirit ability. Now… not sure if I can win, period."

Morty, you liar! Stop messing with him! Volkner snapped your crutch in two, oh boo-hoo! Fight for real instead of relying on that insipid legendary! I know you're perfectly capable of battling without it!

Volkner thought the same way, making a sign equivalent to 'fuck off', making sure to hide it from the cameras. "I don't need any of your leftovers," he spat out. And these guys were supposed to be friends? Seems like something's gotten between them. How many people are you going to tick off today, Morty?!

He shrugged Volkner's insult off.

"Contestants, please continue."

"Right. Considering Vital Spirit, I bet I can do this- Thunder Wave!"

Mismagius let loose an almost invisible sheet of electricity, intending to paralyze Electivire.

"Hahaha! Thunder Punch!" Because, to my utter surprise, Electivire barreled straight through the Thunder Wave, gaining speed as it did so. As if it ignored the paralyzing wave- no! It's absorbing it! The electricity was being drawn into its nodes. What the hell?

"What the hell?" Morty echoed my thoughts, word for word, as Electivire connected its lightning-primed fist with Mismagius.

"Motor Drive."

"Not even possible!" Morty declared.

"He's got Vital Spirit, how can it have two abilities?" I asked aloud. An ability to resist sleep, and an ability to turn incoming electrical attacks into speed boosts? At the same time? That's unheard of!

"You've been teaching your Pokes to combine attacks, you don't think I was going to face you without an ace of my own?" Volkner said.

"And you kept this secret? We've been friends how long?"

"Eyes front."

Electivire fairly blinked out of existence. Its speed after a Motor Drive boost was fast. Even at this distance, the eye couldn't follow. It hit Mismagius with another Thunder Punch. Mismagius's body flashed briefly, becoming paralyzed itself.

"Thunder Punch for the KO!"

"Recall! Rotom!" The digitization of Pokémon happened nigh instantly. Mismagius retreated back into her pokeball, and was replaced with Rotom. Electivire's punch sent the little electric ball flying across the arena. It was powerful enough to trigger the force fields, smashing Rotom into the invisible barriers that protected the crowd. Rotom stood still, then shook, then hovered into position, mostly unhurt.

"Will-o-Wisp!"
"Recall!"

Volkner switched his Pokémon out, copying Morty. Instead of Electivire, a new Pokémon took the burn. It was a rodent I've never seen before. It resembled a cross between Pachirisu and Sentret: really cute, but honestly out of place in a high-level battle like this.

"Emolga, Tailwind!"

"What's an Emolga?" I asked.

Whitney looked it up quickly for me. "It's an Electric Flyer, it's from the Unova Region."

"That's not even our country."

Rotom blanketed the arena with Ominous Wind, attempting to catch the tiny opponent. The natural wind had picked up suddenly and viciously- I'm guessing it had something to do with the whirlwinds the flying squirrel unleashed. The billowing air disrupted Ominous Wind, dissipating it.

"Eh, try Shadow Ball."

The Emolga was much too fast, even faster than Electivire. Every direction it wheeled and banked, the wind seemed to follow, pushing it even faster. Rotom could not turn fast enough to aim, let alone hit it.

"Fast! Rotom, try Ball Lightning!" An attack I've never heard of.

"Emolga also has Motor Drive, will an electric attack do anything?" a commentator mused.

I was expecting something new, but instead, Rotom fired a perfectly normal Thunderbolt at Emolga- or rather, Emolga's general direction, as the flying squirrel was zipping about too fast.

No, wait, this isn't a normal Thunderbolt. Rotom kept firing it, creating a continuous beam. It finally connected with Emolga, but only served to increase its speed even faster. The laser-like electrical beam danced across the arena, never letting go of Emolga. It was like a tesla-coil light show.

"Thanks for the speed boost. Emolga, Electro Ball!" An attack based on the user's speed- faster is stronger. And between the Tailwind and constant Motor Drive boosts... oh crap. Morty, are you ready for this?"

"Rotom!" the Pokémon cried in its static-ridden, synthesized voice. At the exact moment Volkner ordered the Electro Ball, Rotom unleashed a Shadow Ball, which zipped along the Thunderbolt it had been streaming onto Emolga. The duel spheres raced towards each other. A flash erupted, the air crackled with static, and everyone in the audience was forced to shield their eyes.

"Ball Lightning is, in fact, a combination of Thunderbolt and Shadow Ball. The Shadow Ball is given a positive electrical charge, which then allows the Thunderbolt to act as a guiding wire when fired. Not simple to do, only a Rotom can pull this combo off," Morty explained.

"Why so proud? All that to survive one attack?" Volkner retorted.

"Nope. That same Shadow Ball polarized the air with a positive charge. The same air your Emolga is so happily zipping through right now. The same Emolga who uses its Motor drive to absorb the electrical charges around it."

"So?"
"So, your Emolga now has a strong electrical charge on it. If Rotom were to charge its Shadow Balls with the opposite charge…"

Rotom sparked, unleashing a flurry of Shadow Balls at Emolga. The Pokémon rode the wind high into the air, swerving and diving, to no avail. The Shadow Balls were locked on and dogged it at every turn.

"Emolga, ground yourself!" Emolga flew straight towards the ground. If it reached the ground, it could dissipate its charge…

Emolga landed, but three Shadow Balls banked into it from all directions. Ripples of mist emanated from the impact.

"Flash! Electro Ball!"

"Shadow Ball!"

Emolga climbed upwards, hurt. Sparks erupted, creating a blinding flash.

"Doesn't matter, Emolga was polarized again from the last barrage- we still have homing." More Shadow Balls, plural, flew towards the center of the light. Rotom could create multiple projectiles, but they wouldn't be as strong as the large, singular bursts that Gengar used.

The blinding light was replaced with a misted explosion. A second light lit up above us.

"What? They should've hit!" Unfortunately for Rotom, what hit was the Electro Ball, sending the light-weight Pokémon spinning. Even as it flew across the arena, Emolga was already racing in front of it.

"Shadow Ball!" Rotom fired off two, both easily dodged by Emolga. The rodent responded with another Electro Ball from above. Rotom was blasted into the ground.

"Below!"

"Pain Split!" Morty cried in desperation. Rotom made a sucking motion, drawing in vitality from Emolga and equalizing their damage- but it didn't look that effective. Emolga had been burned the entire time, and was taking steady damage from it. An Air Slash knocked Rotom skyward.

"Ominous Wind!"

"Thunder!"

Emolga was faster. A column of lightning descended from the sky, catching Rotom dead in its center. The seared light bulb fell to the ground, as the triumphant Emolga soared up high.

"Rotom is unable to battle!"

"What a hit!"

"Wow!"

"It's like speed chess!"

"The guided Shadow Balls missed, Tom!"

"It's because, Bob, Rotom forgot to switch charges; its last attack would have changed Emolga's
polarity. It needs to switch the polarity of its own attacks accordingly. Positive, negative, positive, negative, like that."

"Pokémon aren't responsible for those kinds of decisions, the trainer is. That was all on Morty."

Various crowd members, the commentators on the smart-phone, and the announcer were all abuzz. I checked the score: it was 4-4. It seemed like a lot more had happened up till now, but each side still had a majority of their team up.

"Isn't this exciting?" Whitney asked me.

"Mmm," I answered, not minding her.

"Who are you rooting for?"

"I… don't know. Neither. It's boring."

"Then why're you on the edge of your seat?"

"I am not." I tried to scoot back, discreetly. In truth, only an inch of seat had been supporting my butt.

"You're such a cute liar," Erika said, shoving me playfully.

"No!"

"Admit it, you're interested."

"In the match, not the trainers," I tried excusing myself.

"As if there's a difference."

"Only so far as it's a good match, I could care less about the trainers beyond this battle." That was an understatement. This was an intense match, very well played on both sides, at least since Electivire came out. One would be lucky enough to get this kind of action at the World Tournament. On the other hand, the trainers could go scuba diving in a volcano after this, for all I cared.

"Look, Morty's sending someone out!"

"Spiritomb."

But Spiritombs are slow!

"Tailwind!"

Just as I thought. If I were in Volkner's position, I'd keep up the Tailwind. Those Electro Balls that flying rodent flings out are highly dependant on their velocity for damage- and a faster Pokémon can launch the ball at a higher initial velocity. The way that Emolga is lapping the stadium in under two seconds right now, an Electro Ball on the stationary Spiritomb would be devastating.

"Electro Ball!"

"Destiny Bond!" Morty yelled, much louder than necessary.

"Cancel, Air Slash!"
The slight purplish glow that flashed across Spiritomb's form was the indicator of Destiny Bond activating. But I'm a little confused - if he was planning on a take-you-with-me tactic to deal with Emolga, why'd he broadcast it?

Emolga performed a super-speed flyby. The wake created a razor-thin vacuum, neatly cutting Spiritomb in half. The vaporous "face" of the Pokémon was bisected. It retreated back into its keystone.

"Um… Trainer, is your Pokémon fainted?" the judge asked Morty. Spiritomb's keystone sat perfectly still. Morty smirked, waving the judge off.

"You should've gone for the kill," he told Volkner.

Volkner seemed to understand… a moment later, I did as well. As long as Destiny Bond remained in place, it was a guaranteed mutual KO to knock it out. However, while Emolga circled, the burns from earlier were getting progressively worse. Morty could afford to wait this out.

"I'm not playing your game." Volkner said. "Retreat. Lanturn, go!"

"Lanturn?"

It's a fish Pokémon! What's it going to do, Splash? How's it supposed to move around?

Just as I thought, the water-type Lanturn flopped around uselessly.

"Magnet Rise!" The bulb on the end of the Lanturn's dorsal fin lit up. After a moment, it rose freely into the air.

"Didn't think it could do that," Morty said. I remember a local group of researchers that passed through Olivine a little while ago. They were there to study the Lanturn family, since there was a large population living just offshore. During a visit to my gym, one man saw my Magnemite float using Magnet Rise. The researcher commented that they were trying to teach the same move to Chinchous, but that it was proving difficult. I suppose they succeeded after all.

Meanwhile, back in the present:

"Heal Bell!"

"Crap- Taunt!"

Spiritomb was stuck in its keystone, the moment to unfurl gave Lanturn the time to execute the Heal Bell. Its bulb shivered; a clear, almost melodic bell sounded out. Soft mist wrapped itself around Lanturn, then travelled over to Volkner and his pokeballs. There goes Emolga's burn.

"Wait, Toxic Lanturn instead!" Morty ordered.

"Counter it!"

I thought he meant a literal Counter attack, which confused me, but instead both Pokémon hurled poisonous sludge towards each other.

"Heal Bell!"

"Now Taunt!"

"Spiriblawawawawawa!" Spiritomb's vapor shape-shifted, forming into a grotesque depiction of
Lanturn. Lanturn was attempting to heal itself, but the Taunt caught its attention. It turned on the Spiritomb, lighting it up with a Thunderbolt. Spiritomb retreated into its keystone, popped out to antagonize Lanturn again, then retreated again to withstand the incoming Hydro Pump.

Taunt seems to work on Pokémon more often than not. I've tried teaching my Magneton to ignore it, to no avail. I wonder if it's something in Pokémon psychology which the opposing Pokémon exploits, or if it's a kind of psychic manipulation?

It was working all too well here.

"Argh! Hydro Pump only!" Volkner implored. True, as long as Lanturn was going to attack indiscriminately, it might as well use the more dangerous attack. Spiritomb couldn't afford the water dissipating the vapors that made up its body, so it remained stuck in its shell.

"Lanturn looks exhausted!"

"It's not built as a power-hitter, but it's been using Hydro Pump many times in a row. It'll tire out fast doing that."

"Not to mention the Toxic building up in its system."

"I bet Volkner is hoping Lanturn will calm down in time to use another Heal Bell."

"Retreat. Emolga!"

"There it goes! He'll force to it to calm down by recalling it! Smart move."

"Destiny Bond!" Morty called.

"You can't afford to sit around this time."

Morty's face contorted. The Toxic was working slower than it had for Lanturn, but it was getting there. Spiritomb's face sagged as proof.

"What are you going to do, Morty?" I whispered. The crowd was excited, but less so than me. My heart was pounding and my hands gripped the seat edge to keep from trembling. This battle had me riveted. The people in the stands... they're clapping and hooting, but aren't roaring as much. They don't understand; they don't enjoy defensive wars as much as I do. Besides, this was turning into a very strategic defensive battle, precisely the kind I aspire to perfect.

Erika kept glancing over to me. She was looking for some hint as to who I supported. It was difficult, concealing my little jumps when Morty scored a hit, and even harder to keep from wincing when his Pokémon took a blow.

"Yahoo, kick his butt Morty!" Whitney, much less ashamed to throw her support in for the man who had tried to extract sex from her.

"Electro Ball!"

Is Volkner going for the sure KO? Is he ignoring the Destiny Bond?

ZZZT! BWOOOSH!

The Electro Ball blasted the ground an inch to the side of the keystone.

"Missed!" Morty taunted. The oaf should shut up, it was a deliberate miss, Emolga is trying to
provoke Spiritomb. Why should he have to do that? It's already fainting from the Toxic…

"Missed again!" A second Electro Ball seared the dirt.

"Electro Ball."

"Confuse Ray!" A beam of light shined outward from the keystone. Emolga was caught in the beam just as it hurled an Electro Ball. Morty had used the first two misses to calculate its attack pattern, and timed the Confuse Ray accordingly. The fact that Spiritomb didn't need to come out of the keystone to use Confuse Ray caught Volkner off guard.

The result? The Electro Ball veered slightly off course; instead of missing, it glanced Spiritomb's keystone.

A sharp crack sounded out. There was a momentary flash, and a thin, almost invisible beam connected Emolga and Spiritomb. Emolga froze up, crashing into the ground. Spiritomb's keystone stood still, with no energy or any other signs of activity.

The judge eyed both Pokémon carefully.

"Both Emolga and Spiritomb are unable to battle. Contestants, send out new Pokémon."

"You're way too hasty, Volkner. You could've stalled there."

"Not my style. Besides, it was toting a Leichi Berry and Sucker Punch. Couldn't let that set up."

"Now how'd you figure that out?"

"Watched your battle against Lt. Surge."

"You what? You were supposed to be on your own prelim."

"I used Zapdos to finish it quickly. Really wanted to know how you'd counter an Electric type, if we ended up facing each other down. And, here we are."

"Heh." Morty half-smiled.

"Well, who's out next?"

"Why don't we throw same time, surprise everyone?"

"Good idea!" They readied their pokeballs.

"Dusknoir!"

"Electivire!"

"Kkk! We were supposed to bring out someone new, douche!" Morty raged (feigningly- he never seriously loses his temper).

"Why should I do that? I thought I'd just scout your team, keep my ace hidden till he's needed. Your last poke is Gengar, of course, but who'd take over from Drifblim? I knew you changed out the balloon after the prelims, too weak to electricity. You were scared you'd meet me, weren't you?"

"Will-o-Wisp!"
"Luxray!" Volkner barely switched in time. Morty had tried to use Volkner's monologue to catch him off guard. For the second time, Electivire was saved from burning.

"Luxray huh. Damn it, Guts isn’t it?"

"You got it. Wild Charge!"

Dusknoir was pretty well off, as far as defenses went, but it had given a free attack boost to Luxray. The lightning lion charged at full speed. The pair collided, Dusknoir vainly trying to block. It was sent back five yards, then lifted its attacker and heaved it across the field. Luxray turned around and charged again.

"Kkk, Shadow Sneak!" Dusknoir's shadow convoluted, warping into multiple twisted arms that lunged after Luxray. Luxray nimbly dodged, weaving in, out, in, out, bolting forward suddenly to gain ground, then being forced off by the density of shadowy scythes.

"Crunch!" Luxray found its opening, darted in on Dusknoir's flank, then bit it viciously. Dusknoir fell.

"Dusknoir doesn't appear to be as strong as the rest of Morty's team."

"That's hard to judge. A Guts boosted Luxray is quite powerful. It may have simply overwhelmed it."

"My guess is that Dusknoir is new to Morty's team. Duskulls aren't native to the Johto region, so I think this Pokémon was acquired during Morty's trip to Hoenn last year."

"You remember that?"

"Right, he put a good showing at the Lilycove Ultra-rank Smart Contest."

"I remember that," said Whitney, nodding in agreement. The TV drones recapped Morty's loss in the semifinals of the contest. Whitney and Erika followed along avidly; I didn't. Contests aren't my gig.

"Recall, Luxray." Volkner ordered his Pokémon back before Morty even had a chance to call out a new fighter.

"Hey, wait, Dusknoir's not done yet!" Indeed, Dusknoir was slowly picking itself up.

"I can fix that," Volkner said calmly. Lanturn appeared, and gave one quick Thunderbolt, finishing the greatly weakened Dusknoir off for good.

I tried thinking back. Gengar should be Morty's last healthy Pokémon. Volkner had Lanturn, Electivire, and Luxray, all were in good condition. This battle was now one-sided.

Morty, you promised me you'd show me something amazing. If that was supposed to be a good match, congratulations, I'm impressed. I would have been satisfied just with Electivire pulling the surprise Vital Spirit/Cross Chop and taking down Darkrai. But no, it's been a good, close match throughout. Now you're down in a hole, and I can't help but feel you don't consider your promise fulfilled yet. So, prove me wrong. My expectations are rock-bottom, it shouldn't be hard. Show me what you can do!

"Gengar!" Morty finally brought out his team leader.

"Gengah! Hasu haunta haunta haunta!"

The Pokemon spotted me sitting on the sideline. His tongue stuck out and mimicked his old
evolution's cry. Obviously taunting me, bringing back many grotesque memories from middle school. I stuck my tongue out at him in response.

I've changed my mind. Beat that sick pervo Pokémon to dust, Volksy!

"So are we going to do this?" Volkner showed signs of impatience. Funny, he was so timid when he was talking to me. It's like there's a completely different personality to him during battles.

"Gengar, pay attention! We're in a clutch and I really need your all this time."

"Gar!"

Trainer and Ghost Pokémon faced their opponent with determination.

"Heal Bell!"

"Confuse Ray!"

Gengar lit Lanturn up. Despite its confusion, its bulb rang out true. The signs of Toxic disappeared, and assumedly, Luxray's burn as well.

"Shadow-five."

"Thunder Wave!"

Gengar dove into the ground. The Thunder Wave swept through the field, failing to hit its target.

"Forward!"

Lanturn levitated through the air to new a position. Gengar popped out of the ground that Lanturn had been floating over a moment before. It had a Shadow Ball in hand, which it launched at the retreating opponent.

Lanturn turned, its bulb shined, and a luminescent shield appeared before it. The Shadow Ball fizzled through, grazing the Lanturn, but not badly. Lanturn's bulb shook, and a small tidbit dropped into its mouth. It happily munched on the snack, head-bopping side to side as it did so. The bruise mark from the last attack disappeared.

Gengar fell back into the ground.

"Cold Surf!"

"Curse."

Surf. There's a rare move. I've only seen it used effectively out of water a few times before- but when it is…

Lanturn poured an incredible amount of water out of its mouth. More than could be explained by human physics, but to a Pokémon, creating excess elemental water was possible, if difficult. The arena was soon verging on becoming a swamp, and the shallow crater Lanturn was blasting around itself a swimming pool.

"What's it doing?" Whitney asked.

"I'm not sure," Erika said.
"This is how water types compete effectively on dry land— they get rid of the dry land," I explained. While Lanturn was busy trying to flood the arena, Gengar popped up at the far corner of the battlefield. He made a strange sign with his claws, then materialized a shadow-bound needle. He presented this needle to his abdomen, visibly paining himself.

At that exact moment, Lanturn flinched.

"Gengar, up high, don't hide in the ground!"

"Thunderbolt!"

Lanturn let loose several Thunderbolts at the retreating Gengar. Gengar was fast, but lightning is a tad bit faster, and Lanturn had fairly good aim. The ghost was hit several times over. He was taking on damage and wouldn't be able to sustain too many more—

"Not yet, you bastard!" I whispered. Come all this way, strut your stuff and then back it up with tactics I've never dreamed of, and you dare end it by taking a few measly Thunderbolts from a weakling like Lanturn?!

Lanturn flinched, the Curse taking effect. The pause gave Gengar an opening, not enough to counter attack, but at least enough to hide back inside the earth.

But… Lanturn continued to flood the place. And it wasn't just to create a swimming environment for itself. I hope Morty realizes the danger Gengar's in…

"Phase two!"

Lanturn cried out, building its power.

From its bulb crackling beams burst forth, targeting the terrain in every direction. Wherever the beams touched, the water froze. Ice Beams— Just as I had guessed when I heard the term "Cold Surf."

"Gengar get out!"

"Stop!" I cried aloud. My shout was completely lost in the roar of the crowd. But, whether by intuition, or his sixth sense, Morty turned to see me explode. He put a hand to his ear, showing me he was paying attention but couldn't hear. I waved at him to stop.

Too late. Gengar knew enough on his own that Lanturn's combo would reach him through the groundwater, that he would freeze if he stayed underground. The ghost popped out into the open. Just like Volkner wanted.

"Thunder Wave!"

Gengar was halfway out of the ground, slipping through the shallow pool of water. The liquid conducted the electricity faster than the air, nailing Gengar in less than the blink of an eye. Paralysis gripped his body. It was so powerful and so sudden that Gengar locked up completely; his levitation failed and he fell into the water, stiff as a brick.

"Alright, Surf!"

Morty turned to me. I was waving frantically, warning him, berating him as best I could from 50 yards away. He put up his hands defensively, I shouted and waved my fist at him. He looked helpless. And even if he couldn't hear me, I can hear him just fine. They give the contestants a mike
for a reason! Speak up!

Morty shrugged, refusing to ask what I was doing, refusing to look at the battlefield, as if he was giving up.

But then, his demeanor relaxed, made a gat-gun hand single, and pointed it at me. As if to say "Just kidding. I got this."

Lanturn gathered the whole of its artificial pond together, racing towards Gengar with all the fury of a tsunami.

"Gengar."

Lanturn was on top of it, but at that precise moment, Curse kicked in and the big fish winced. The water crashed down, blurring all view of the fighting.

"Where's Gengar?"

He was nowhere to be seen. Volkner, and pretty much the entire stadium, were left scratching their head.

"Lanturn, freeze the ground again, start with your shadow!" Lanturn proceeded to turn the entire arena into an ice rink. Yet, no matter what it turned to ice, there was no reaction. For good measure, it blasted its own shadow several times, both with water, ice, and electricity. Nothing.

"Trainer," the judge said, addressing Morty. "You're aware your Pokémon cannot leave the arena."

"I'm aware."

"That includes more than 20 yards underground, 100 yards above ground, places such as the stadium structure, light fixtures, screens, the crowd."

"Right."

"Your shadow as well. And your opponent's shadow. Off limits."

"We're good." The judge stepped back, frustrated.

Lanturn continued to tire itself out and take periodic ticks from the Curse. When it became apparent Gengar was not resurfacing, Volkner ordered it to Rest. The Sinnoh gym leader readied his pokeball immediately, expecting Gengar to strike while Lanturn was asleep. Nothing happened.

"Why would I do something like that? Lanturn has Sleep Talk, doesn't it?" Morty said.

"Tell Gengar to come out already. I can stall this out if I have to," Volkner threatened. Morty shrugged. "Seriously, it's killing the tempo."

Lanturn shook off its Rest-induced sleep, but lacking an opponent, floated aimlessly.

"So that's it, huh."

The judge approached Morty again.

"Hey, mister, if Gengar doesn't appear soon, I'm going to assume it's exited the arena and it'll be disqualified."
"Oh don't do that."

"I will if I have to. Just bring it out for a moment to confirm it's here."

Morty shook his head.

"Please! He's still in the arena, I promise."

"Thunder!"

"Lanlan?" Lanturn turned to its owner, apparently asking for more specific directions.

"Thunder the whole field!"

Oh, so Volkner thinks Gengar turned invisible, based on Morty's conversation with the judge. Lanturn proceeded to grant us a spectacular light show. The columns of lightning rang against the air, growing so intense that some hats and beverages were blown away from their owners.

Yet, when the artificial thunderstorm faded, no Gengar appeared. Lanturn flinched again, the Curse doing its job.

"Damn it Morty stop being a stall-hack! Lanturn, Rest!"

"Finally!" As Lanturn went to sleep, Morty shouted out his order. "Nightmare!" If Curse was causing Lanturn to flinch, Nightmare instantly brought it to wild, uncontrolled spasms. Its Magnet Rise gave out, and the fish flopped to the soggy dirt.

"Where'd that come from?"

"Not even a clue."

"Is this some kind of trick?"

"Recall, Lanturn!" The Rest had completely backfired. On Whitney's smart-phone, the program showed a stats screen. One corner displayed the estimated health remaining of the battling Pokémon—4 blanks for Morty, 3 for Volkner, and the rest various shades of the rainbow. Lanturn's was a pixel-wide sliver of red. It barely made it back to its digitized shelter before fainting.

Volkner took his pokeball, pounding the fist of his other hand into the ground.

"Gengar, say hi to Volkner." Gengar appeared.

Right in front of Volkner.

Or more accurately, it "grew" out of Lanturn's pokeball.

"Gengaaaahwhwhwhahahat!" Volkner reacted as boys do, by instinctively punching the offender in the face. His fist went right through the incorporeal Pokémon.

"Where'd you come from? Don't tell me- no way."

"Gengar was hiding inside Lanturn the entire time."

"Impossible."

"Very possible, Gengars can shape-shift."
"And the paralysis?"

"The thing that left the ground? Substitute. A fake."

Bastard! That's what Volkner was clearly mouthing.

For myself- Bastard! Magnificent bastard! I thought this to myself. I was past brimming on my seat, I was up and hopping on my toes.

This! This was the kind of battle that reached into my heart. This was just like that time I saw my first battle with…. It was exciting, the Pokémon were powerful, the trainers were brilliant!

I looked at Volkner. He still had the upper hand.

I looked at Morty. He was the underdog at the moment, but gaining momentum.

Who did I want to win?

Call me a hypocrite, call me tsundere, say I got caught up in the moment, or that I was cheering for the underdog, or the one with the cooler tricks, or the prettier face- but I was cheering for my childhood friend, the friend who had done nothing but cause trouble for me. I wanted someone I knew to win. For a moment, for this one battle, I can forget all the bad history, right?

"Kkk. No choice then. Electivire!"

"Electivire's back."

The battle continued.

"Duck-"

"Like hell you're playing hide and seek again. Shock Wave!" The attack blinked through the air, instantly. Rather, it filled the entire space between Electivire and Gengar, all points simultaneously. An unavoidable attack. Gengar was hit, slightly hurt.

"It'll hit, but I don't think that kind of attack will slow Gengar down."

"Right, and as Volkner demonstrated, Electivire is more adept at physical combat, not these long-range pure elemental electric attacks."

Gengar shrugged off the damage and dove into the ground.

"No way you're getting away."

Rotom. The Pokémon's image popped into my mind. Damn, that was it, Volkner's a fast learner.

"Dig!" Electivire stood still for a moment, closing its eyes. It suddenly leapt into the air, cracking the surface of the ground at a spot 10 yards away. A surprised Gengar flew out of the hole, helped along by a Thunder Punch.

"So, you used the Shock Wave to put an electrical charge on Gengar? Copy-cat."

"I've done your trick one better. Electivire can use the nodes of its antennae to sense every electromagnetic field within a fifty yard radius. There's no way you can hide!"

"Gengar!" Gengar regained its posture. However, Electivire was hot on his tail. He was forced to
take refuge into the air, but got a Thunderbolt for his efforts.

"Shadow Ball!" Gengar's altitude kept him safe from Electivire's punches, but also gave the latter room to dodge Shadow Balls. It dodged four, and used Thunderbolt to intercept two more. Gengar looked tired and strained.

He can't keep this up. Think of something!

"Curse? Gengar can't afford to take the kickback again. Confuse Ray?" That's what Morty tried next. Electivire was duly hit.

"Crap!" Because, in its confusion, Electivire decided it was a great idea to call down a Thunder. Gengar dodged easily, but the column crashed into Electivire, activating Motor Drive. As soon as it regained its senses, it vanished in a sizzling *zap*.

"Your back!"

Electivire used its speed boost to jump high into the air, bringing down a Hammer-Arm Thunder Punch combo that pounded Gengar into the ground.

"Sub!"

Electivire practically teleported, crushing the fake Gengar beneath its fist. It instantly broke apart. The decoy was not enough to slow it down for even one second. A small crater appeared in the mud, where the Electric Pokémon launched off towards the retreating Gengar. Gengar threw up several Shadow Balls. Electivire punched them out of existence. It blew in, throwing jabs left and right. Never minding the fists themselves would just phase through Gengar, the lightning coursing through said fists would cause an impact.

"Shockwave!" A flash, and Gengar was hit.

"Icy Wind!"

"Shockwave!"

Two waves raced towards each other. The Electric one was instantaneous, cutting through the slower Ice one and hitting Gengar. The icy sheen wasn't disrupted completely though, and managed to hit Electivire. It tried to close in on Gengar; the frost from Icy Wind clung to its legs and slowed it down by a crucial amount, allowing Gengar to get just out of range.

"Shockwave, again!"

"Confuse Ray!"

"Thunderbolt!"

Shockwave hit, Confuse Ray and Thunderbolt collided and cancelled each other out. Electivire burrowed into the ground, Gengar Icy Winded the surface beneath it, but had to dodge a Thunder called in from underground. The ice shattered, and out of the shards came a Thunder Punch. Gengar used Disable to seal off Electivire's Thunder and a phantasmal Substitute to block the Thunder Punch.

"Just Shockwave again!" Electivire did so, zapping Gengar for minor damage.

What's the point of using Shockwave? Gengar was already polarized enough for tracking purposes.
Was it to strengthen the charge for a Thunder? But Thunder was just disabled! Wait… if my hunch was right…

"Shadow Ball!"

"Zap Cannon."

ZZZZZZZZ!!!

"ORRAAOOUUU!" Electivire roared, collecting all of its energy. Pure bits of energy floated off, vaporizing into sparks, increasing the power and voltage surrounding Electivire. It held its hands out, parallel to each other, aiming directly at Gengar. Gengar attempted to strafe around, but Electivire adjusted with lightning-quick, minute adjustments.

"Delay, Shadow Ball- oh sh-"

Electivire fired. The concentrated ball of lightning, intense as a miniature sun, flew off Electivire's arms like a railgun.

"Dodge, underground!"

Pointless. Gengar tried to phase into the ground.

"Gengar has to become incorporeal to go underground, and in that case, it can’t discharge the huge electrical charge Electivire's built into it with all the Shockwaves." Explanation courtesy of Volkner, grinning. He watched with quiet glee as Gengar raced in and out of the ground, round the arena, and into the sky. The Zap Cannon projectile was slow, but relentless, and was closing the distance little by little.

"Crap! Uh- reverse-two!"

"Electivire, catch him!"

"Unreverse! Prep Shadow Claw!"

It happened so fast, I had to rewatch later in slow-mo to see it all.

Electivire sprinted in front of Gengar, aiming a Thunder Punch. A Shadow Ball appeared, unfurled sometime earlier. It blew up in Electivire's face. Gengar used the opportunity to fly by, putting Electivire in the Zap Cannon's path. Electivire recovered, caught the lightning projectile between its hands, pivoted on its foot and rail-gunned it directly into a downward-slashing Gengar.

The arena lit up. The crack of electricity splintered against the force fields. The area of impact was encased in a surreal glow.

"No nap time!" Morty yelled. Was that a command or an imploration?

"It's over."

Volkner appeared triumphant.

"Gengar is… able to battle!" cried the judge.

I wanted to cry, or laugh. Gengar balanced on one foot, like a statue. Even though it survived the powerful blast, it was now paralyzed. Not the weak, inhibiting paralysis that happened to Lucario earlier today. This was a full-body lockup. Gengar shivered, very slightly, obviously fighting to
move even a small inch. He couldn't. Electivire was guaranteed at least one free attack. That was all it needed.

"Thunder Cross Chop."

Oh god. Zap Cannon couldn't finish Gengar because Electivire was a brawler, not a sniper. This, on the other hand, was going to…

I closed my eyes.

"Is there anything Gengar can do in this situation?"

Electivire kicked the statue-miming Gengar over. Its fists coursed with electricity, building to a level equal to its Zap Cannon's. It raised them together, high over its head.

Morty's eyes, darting from Volkner to Electivire, back and forth, back and forth, struggling to figure something out.

"Hypnosis!"

NO!

"Vital Spirit you dimwit!" I yelled, as loud as I could.

Gengar's eyes lit up.

Electivire's hands fell down-

…

And dug into the dirt either side of Gengar's head. The electricity dissipated into the ground. Electivire slunk into Gengar's body, snoozing.

Morty jumped, fist-pumping. He threw a look towards me, taking off his headband and waving it at me.

Volkner was in full face-palm mode.

"You nerdy pain-in-the-neck, you figured it out," he said aloud.

"I always do."

"What did he figure out?" Erika asked.

I wanted to know too.

How?

How'd he bypass Vital Spirit? Why is Electivire asleep?!

"Your Pokémon has an ability," Morty stated.

"Yep."

"Called Motor Drive."

"Yep."
"And that's its only ability."

"Right on the money," Volkner confirmed.

"So Vital Spirit... was a lie?!?!?" I asked aloud.

This is absurd!

"How'd Electivire get out of the Dark Void?" This was my question, but many people throughout the stadium were wondering just that. The commentators on TV were just as baffled.

"What clued you in?" Volkner asked.

"Eh, first- before sleepy-head wakes up- Shadowball."

"No! No, don't. No need." Volkner recalled the sleeping Electivire to its pokeball. He addressed the judge. "I'm throwing the towel for Electivire." The judge nodded. Within a few seconds, a "TKO" symbol appeared over Electivire's status on the screen. "Now, tell me how you figured it out."

Morty held up his fist, and unfurled fingers one by one.

"One, it's impossible for a Pokémon to have two abilities at the same time. I heard in the Kalos region there's a university where they're attempting to help Pokémon switch between their natural abilities, but as far as I know, they've only managed to switch after rigorous training. Not in battle, and certainly not using two simultaneously. But, I had doubts, trust me."

"Ok."

"Two, you said you watched my earlier prelim matches. I bet you watched replays of me versus Sabrina and Maylene too. I've been pretty reliant on Darkrai's Dark Void the whole time. You would've been preparing a counter measure for the sleep effect." Volkner nodded, affirming his suspicion.

"Three, Lanturn ate something to heal itself. That was a Sitrus berry, wasn't it?"

"Yeah," Volkner said, growing unhappy, then angry. Luckily he contained it. "Go on." He's kind of scary looking when he's mad, I think.

"Conclusion- you gave Electivire a Lum Berry, to counter Dark Void. You kept dodging the Will-o-Wisps because it had already used the Lum Berry, and a burn would hamper its combat abilities too much. You fed me a lie about duel-wielding abilities, to stop me from trying to put Electivire to sleep again."

"You're too damn brainy."

I'm aghast. That was... Incredible.

"Well, whatever. I'm impressed. Seriously, I am. But, face reality, Morty. I outplayed you the other 70% of the match."

"You still think you've got what it takes?"

"Gengar's paralyzed and damaged pretty bad. Yeah, I think I do. Lanturn, go!"

Volkner let Lanturn out.
"I can take it down in one hit," Morty stated.

"Too slow. Healing Wish."

"Shadow-oh."

To watch Lanturn faint on its own, and a misty ghost of itself rise into the air, was a strange experience, like a point-specific lucid dream.

"Come back, Lanturn. Luxray." Luxray appeared. The ghost-shell of Lanturn descended, covering Luxray, enshrouding it. There was a soft flash. Luxray stood, sparks sizzling across its back. The status on the monitors showed the Electric Pokémon was at full health, perfect condition.

"You've got nothing left. A paralyzed Pokémon."

"Hey, Volkner, you know what we're playing for?" Morty asked suddenly.

"I never took your dumb bet, Morty. I don't want that freak-show."

"That's not it. What we're really playing for."

"Cash prize, bragging rights, the usual." Volkner was irritated.

Morty glanced in our direction, looked down, shook his head.

"I'm sorry. Remember the other night?"

"That one? Not really. I don't feel like revisiting it."

"Really?"

Volkner stared him down.

Morty sighed.

"Sorry, pal. Even if you don't remember, I gave you a promise. But, I'm going to have to break that promise."

What are you saying Morty? Breaking your word is nothing! Are you trying to stall him to think of a strategy? Argh! End it! Finish him or get finished! Just be over with it! I can't stand the waiting!

"Talk later. Let's finish this," Volkner said.

"Right." Morty nodded.

Each trainer stood tense.

"Thunderbolt."

"Light Screen." Gengar put up a shield, blocking the Thunderbolt. The paralysis had weakened- but not enough. Just freeing its upper limbs, Gengar was still crippled and couldn't float.

"Thunderbolt, always Thunderbolt," Morty muttered.

"Always. Unless I need to win. Luxray! Crunch!"

"Shadow Ball!"
The shadow attacks were so slow now, Luxray simply walked around them. It made its way over, wary.

"Watch for Hypnosis. Use your X-ray vision to guide you, don't look at its eyes," Volkner cautioned. Morty winced. That was his last shot. Too bad for him, but the same trick never works twice.

"Sorry. It's just a Pokémon match," Volkner said.

"No, it's not," Morty said, cryptically. His head bowed.

"Crunch." Luxray ducked in, quickly, taking Gengar by its jaws.

Morty's head shot up.

"GENGAR! EXPLOSION!"

The arena went dark. It was only a second, but the entire world went dark. Or rather, the explosion was so bright, the sun was momentarily blotted out, and all that was left was the brilliant dot where two Pokémon had been locked in combat.

Then the stadium burst.

All four walls of the force field lit up. The fire and smoke of the massive explosion shot into the air, obscuring everything. I, Erika, and Whitney covered our ears against the booming noise, echoing and re-echoing across the stadium walls.

Morty and Volkner had to duck. Even the force fields were struggling to keep all the energy contained.

When the dust finally cleared, Luxray and Gengar lay on the ground, charred and out cold.

"Medic!" the judge called immediately. White-uniformed staff raced out to the field, potion injectors in hand.

Explosion. A suicidal attack of monstrous power. I had rarely seen it, but had been warned against casual use. Even my Graveler, who could've learned it, doesn't have it. I opted for the less dangerous Self-Destruct.

"Both Pokémon are unable to battle. This match is decided."

"So you went for a draw?" Volkner muttered. He looked down, taking in the outcome. "A draw. Poor sport."

"It's not a draw." Morty raised a single pokeball.

"The match is over! Morty of Ecruteak is the winner!"

Volkner realized his mistake.

Gengar, Dusknoir, Spiritomb, Rotom, Darkrai, all KO'd.

But not Mismagius.

Red-healthed, paralyzed, but not KO'd, she had sat out practically the entire fight after the briefest of appearances. She had not succeeded in landing a single attack. But, she had not fainted. And that
was all that was needed.

Morty released Mismagius, who appeared faint and woozy. Her eyes found the scoreboard, and for all her injuries, she lit up. Morty ran over and grabbed her, hugging her tight. Then he hugged Whitney, who had leapt off the bench the moment his victory was announced. Then several other fans, who had jumped down from the stands. They shouldered him, and carried him off to the field. The 20,000 occupants of the stadium went overboard, reducing all hearing to nil before their deafening accolades.

Morty and company took a lap around the arena, waving and blowing kisses, before heading to the exit.

I watched them go by. I was smiling.

Morty was my nemesis, and yet, I was glad for him. He had started off feeling invincible. But, remembering what he had told me before the match, it seemed like he expected Volkner to overcome the monstrosity that was Darkrai. Morty was then pushed into a corner, facing adversity like nothing I'd ever seen before. He had used his guile and trust in his Pokémon to complete a comeback victory for the ages.

This was a strange feeling. Upon reflection, it was an awful feeling. I don't want to cheer for him, I don't want to have positive feelings for him. I'll get caught in a trap and before I know it I might actually consider him my friend. And then he'll backstab me. He'll let me down, he'll hurt me. He ALWAYS does. Every time.

I scrunched my eyes, trying to purge these feelings from my heart and mind. I exhaled, deep and slow.

It's no use.

I saw him exit the arena atop the shoulders of his fans, laughing and roaring with them. As he disappeared under the arch, he held his hand aloft, a victory fist. And, from the way he lifted it, the slight angle to it… No, there was no doubt. That signal was for me.

My body, wound tight, tense as a coil, finally relaxed.

I breathed.

…

Yes, Morty, I will admit. That was amazing.
"Would you like to go congratulate him?" Erika asked.

"I'll pass," I said, with a sly smile. She responded in kind.

I know what you're thinking, Erika. "Oh look, she's impressed, she's vulnerable- aim for the weak spot and strike!" I may be impressed with him, but you can take your little romantic machinations and shove it. This does not mean I will be friends with him, much less his lover.

"Well, bye!" I said.

"Wait! Do you have to leave? I wish you would stay for the last match."

"I really have to, Amphy needs food. He gets grumpy if he doesn't eat before nightfall."

"Ah, well… There is an after-summit party tonight, would you be able to come then?"

"Eh. I'll think about it."

Hmm, do I want to go to this party? Considering how the gala went… Mmm… No.

Proposition duly thought about and rejected. See? I'm a woman of my word!

"Oh." Erika looked disappointed. "Well, if you must leave, may I walk you out? There are one or two things I'd like to discuss before you go."

"Alright." If she dares brings up a conversation containing the words "Morty", "Romance", "Love", or "Sex", I will Extreme Speed out of there so fast, she'll be coughing up dust for a week. We began strolling out of the stadium enclosure side-by-side.

"So, I'll be going back to Celadon tomorrow evening," she said. I nodded, expecting this.

"However… I'll be back in a week."

"What for?" I asked, curious.

"I'm taking an extended leave of absence. Things have not been going well, exactly, so I will be leaving the gym for a while."

"You're quitting? Is something the matter?"

"No, not quitting. Not permanently. I'm simply taking a long break. One of my protégés will become the acting gym leader while I'm gone."

"Why?"

"I can't say."

"Whhhyyyyyyyy??" I asked, adopting Whitney's whiny voice for when she's not getting her way. Erika giggled.

"Let's just say the politics around Celadon are not friendly. Hmmm… you could say there's an unhappy lame duck in office, and they're using their residual powers to settle a personal vendetta."
I've gotten caught in the middle. I think it's best for the gym if I hid out of town until the new officer is sworn in."

"Sounds dicey. Are you sure everything will be okay?"

"Don't worry, it will be alright. Besides, it's become quite a robotic existence there, I am absolutely yearning for a change of pace. So, to my point- I'll be staying in Olivine until January or February."

"Really?!"

Thank you corrupt politicians! For your ethical failings, I get to see my bestie on a daily basis for five straight months! Squeeee!

Of course I suppressed my inner elation, and presented only a smile and laughter for my friend.

The rest of the walk was filled with delightful chatting: Intricate plans for what we planned to do over the autumn, where Erika could find a nice rental home, and how I would finally have the chance to play tour guide to my home city.

"It'll be like the summer I stayed over at your place," I said excitedly.

"Much longer, actually."

"They have a casual tennis league, we could join as a team."

"Sounds splendid."

"Are you set for cash? Will they pay you while you're on leave?"

"Only for the first month. But don't worry, I have plenty saved."

"That's right, your flower business." In addition to the gym, Erika ran a nationally renowned flower and fragrance business.

"Yes. I think I might open a branch here in Olivine- the climate is perfect for growing chrysanthemums."

A minute spent discussing flower arrangement later, we arrived at the exit.

"Well, this is it," I said.

"One more minute. Jasmine," Erika said. Uh-oh. She has a serious face on. "I'm worried for you."

"About me and boys?"

"Well that too."

We hung still, letting an awkward moment pass in silence.

"I don't mind talking about it, but maybe when we have more time," I said.

"Well, I appreciate it. But, what I was more concerned about, is your probation."

Who told you about that?!

"Yes?"
"I just want to say, you have my… and Whitney's, and Lyra's, full support. We'll be there for you the whole way. And I have ideas for how to help you through it, too."

"Th-thank you!"

I embraced Erika.

"I'll call again later tonight, in case you'd like to go to the party," she said. Fat chance, but I nodded to her. "Or if you'd rather, I could come over. My plane is not till late, we could have that chat." I shrugged.

"See you soon," I said, she said her goodbye, I turned and left, and that was that.

The moment of truth was drawing closer, I sensed. What was I going to tell her? The actual truth? The half-truth that I had been feeding society these many years? A completely new lie, to throw her off track?

As much as I wanted to find and decide upon a rational course of action that most benefitted me- the one thing that felt like the worst solution was the thing I wanted to do most.

Run away.

Avoid the issue.

Bury it like the wretched, fetid corpse of a memory it is.

Rationally, it was the worst thing to do. Emotionally, it was my only option. All the frank discussion and intellectual persuasion would not get me to unearth it. The only thing that could bring it out was an equally strong, opposite force, of the same kind as it- an emotional force.

I pulled out my phone. 5:08. I was at the steps to my apartment, and it would take another fifteen minutes to get to the lighthouse, if I hurried. That should be just enough time to get there and let Amphy eat before he goes on duty. Apparently, if he has to eat while he's luminescing, it causes stomach irritation, and he becomes a pain to deal with. While I care for Amphy because he's my Pokémon and I love him, I am also officially responsible for caring for him, to ensure he keeps Olivine Bay properly lit. We haven't had a shipwreck here in twenty years, almost, but the possibility always weighs on the back of my mind.

"Food… food… food… where are… ah." I found them sitting at the bottom of my pantry, under a pile of grocery bags. They were single-serving packets of food, both dry and wet, in a variety of flavors. Amphy liked the wet food, and usually had me microwave it for him.

"Oh please don't." I looked outside, at the sky. It was beginning to cloud over, and I was afraid it would rain.

"Weather?" I wish I had a TV. I opened my little netbook, each second taking away precious walking time.

"10% chance for rain. Ew." Cloudy Castforms littered the Johto region board. If not tonight, it was definitely slated to rain for the rest of the week.

I dashed off.

The lighthouse came into view at 5:36. Running most of the way had put me out of breath, forcing me to use the elevator.
I nearly dashed out, heading straight for the stairs to the second landing.

"Aiiieee?!?!" I tip-toed to a startled halt, catching something in the corner of my eye.

"AIEIEIEIE?!?! What are you doing in bed!" I stomped my way over to the delinquent Pokémon. "C'mon, you've barely enough time to chow, then it's off to work!" I nudged the slumbering form with my toe. There was no response.

"Hey, wake up!" I nudged him more forcefully. Amphy tucked himself into a tighter ball. Why you little!

"C'mon, wake up! I've got food and you've got a job to do!" After a few embattled minutes of provocations, Amphy was no more awake than when I arrived. I picked him up, body and all, and sat him upright. He tried to wrap himself into his blanket.

"Unt-uh." I ripped the wooly refuge away.

Amphy stared at me with eyes full of resentment.

I quickly left to microwave a packet. Upon returning, Amphy was stuck in a ball, blanket woven around itself.

"Hey, I've got dinner. What are you doing?!"

I dug in, struggling to untuck the Pokémon. "People don't battle Pokémon, Pokémon battle Pokémon! Amphy stop this, or I'll bring Steelix out." I wasn't even certain Steelix could safely fit inside the room.

"Phooo."

"Are you sick?" I put my hand to his head, then stomach. After a silly game of cat and mouse, I managed to grab a hold of his tail bulb. The one sure way to tell if an Ampharos is sick is to inspect its bulb. The cellular photobodies that produce light and electricity inside of the bulb are produced by an organ interconnected with the lungs. They're unusually susceptible to infection because of this proximity. If the bulb appears cloudy or darker than usual, it is a sign of sickness.

Amphy's bulb was dull, but free of impurities. That means a low photobody count- possibly caused by a rare disease or severe depression, but the most common cause would be excessive sleeping. I wonder which one it was…

"Chow down this instant! There are fishing boats and passenger liners and tankers out there relying on you! Don't let them down!"

Amphy reluctantly ate his food.

"And no more sleeping in! It's not like you don't get to lay down and powernap through your job too! If I could sleepwalk through my battles, you think I would be on probation?"

Amphy slurped down the last morsel.

"Here." While he had eaten, I had prepped instant hot tea. Amphy slowly lapped this up.

I didn't trust him to not go back to bed, so I followed him upstairs and saw to it that he lighted up. The usual dance of machinery ensued and a beam of illumination pierced the night air.
"Thank you."

"Ampha."

I sat down in the door, back to the frame and head facing away from the blinding light.

"What's the matter with you? You've been stubborn lately."

"Ampharos!"

"I missed a good matchup to get you dinner, and you're sleeping! How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Amphoo…" which sounded like "sowwy…" to me.

"Whatever. I had a long day. I can't believe it, I didn't even really do anything. But, a lot happened."

Quite a lot. My head was flush with the events of the day. Too much had happened, I couldn't process it all at once. Singing before a national audience was a first, and hopefully, singular experience. Whitney's rivalry with Maylene rose to new heights, and I finally found out the root cause of it. Many great Pokémon battles had been fought. Coming to watch them had proved valuable, despite the headaches involved. I felt inspired to become a better competitor, and had gotten some ideas on how to do that. Between my new ideas, and Erika's reassurances, I felt a lot more confident going into probation than when I lost to Lance.

Maylene and Sabrina showed me how useful diversifying one's types a little could be. Until today, I had stubbornly clung to the belief that specializing in one type made one better, because of familiarity. As the old kung-fu master said: "I do not fear the man who practices 1000 punches once each. I fear the man who has practiced one punch 1000 times." Turns out, the best solution is to practice one punch 900 times, and two other punches 50 times each. In other words, I need new Pokémon, non-steel types… On second thought, I could use more steel types too. Steelix was the only Pokémon who carried his weight on my team.

From a spectators' standpoint, the battles themselves were spectacular. If I hadn't been personally attached, Whitney and Maylene's would have been downright funny. What little I caught of the other battles on the video replays were pretty cool too: I especially liked this trick Candice's Froslass pulled with Barrier and Mirror Coat. Sabrina, and especially Volkner, had fought with skill and determination; they and their Pokémon never gave up.

And then… there was Morty.

Morty, Morty, Morty.

What am I supposed to do with this idiot? How am I supposed to feel towards him?

Three years of absence from my life hadn't softened any of the ill will I held towards him. Three days of interactions had turned my entire opinion of him topsy-turvy.

He was a better trainer than I remember. I always knew he was clever. On the other hand, I always believed he was too lazy, too lacking in discipline to train his Pokémon properly. The same way he sidled out of doing homework or going to P.E. classes, I was under the impression he habitually skimped out on training, leveling, and organizing his team. Even if he was smart enough to win, his Pokémon would never have the discipline or capability to carry out his schemes in the middle of battle. I was wrong- oh so very wrong. By some miracle, he had buttoned down and put in the effort to make them strong.
The result? A trainer who I believed was on par with Red, the world champion.

I could no longer deny his prowess on the field.

His character, though? Could I trust him to have changed in that department too? It seemed impossible to me.

Was this time going to be different? Does the fact that he disciplined himself and changed his old lackadaisical trainer habits also indicate he's changed his lousy treatment of others? His actions these past three days indicate otherwise. He treated me like a child and belittled my virgin status; he pissed off his closest friend and beat him in a nationally-televised Pokémon battle; tried wagering to get my friend in bed with him; successfully played two other women into his bed; and acted like a wise-ass the whole way through.

Even now, he's probably lounging at the party, basking in victory, forcing Sabrina or Maylene or both to hang off his arm, eagerly waiting for later tonight when he could ravish them.

If he weren't so good looking and suave acting, he'd be recognized for the creep that he really is.

He wants to impress me? Ha! He's going to have to do more than "change". He needs to have a damn good reason for these actions of his, and apologize for them. Maybe then, I can forgive him. Maybe then we can progress from "mortal antagonists" to "friendly acquaintances".

"Blah!" I yelled out loud in frustration.

What's the point?

I've been here before. I trusted him; I gave him a chance to show me he was a nice person, and he messed up.

No, that's putting it too kindly. He betrayed me.

These thoughts poured through my head as I slowly made my way down the lighthouse stairwell. Each and every mark against his moral character surfaced and played over and over in my head. No matter what I did I could not rid myself of the thought of him.

'He likes you'. Whitney's words. They clung to my conscience like a Remoraid. I can't escape those words. Was it even possible, for all the crap, for my incessant self-denials, for my endless list of grievances, that I liked him too? Impossible! I am me, these are my most personal, inner-most thoughts, and in this deep refuge of the mind, I still harbor enmity towards that individual. I will never allow him the pleasure of my body!!! Simple as that!

...

Then why can't I stop thinking about him?!

Just as I was saying, "Damn you Morty, why you?! Why me?!" I reached the bottom, and my phone rang.

"Hello Morty," I answered. Loud dubstep music was playing in the background, drumming my ears and making it difficult to hear the caller.

"Jasmine? It's me, Erika."

"Who?"
"Erika!"
"Erika?"
"Yes, me."
"Oh…"

"Were you expecting Morty to call?"

"…"

"Anyways, I was wondering if you were going to come to the party." Just over the phone the
dubstep was getting to me. I hate music like that- not necessarily the genre, but when they turn the
subwoofers so low that you feel it in your chest, not through your ears- that grinds on me in the most
unpleasant way.

"I'm pretty tired, and feeling faint. I don't think I can make it."

"I see," Erika said, clearly disappointed.

"How's Whitney? Is she there?"

"Oh, Whitney. I wish you were here to see it. She and Maylene are drunk- very drunk. Brawly is
here too, and they're fighting over him. They're so tipsy, though… It's quite a sight."

"Did you say Maylene is there?"

"Yes, she's here."

Looks like Sabrina got first and sole dibs tonight.

"So is Whitney fighting with her?"

"It's not fighting, so much as… flirting, let's say, with Brawly."

"Flirting, as in…"

"I don't think you would like the details. At least they're not nude."

"Too much info."

"Thought so."

Too much info indeed; my imagination started off on its own. Images of nibbling and petting came to
mind. I squashed the imagery by picturing Muks playing in sewage.

"And what about Lyra?"

"She's playing drinking games with Ethan, Lizzy, Jeff, and a red haired guy, I forget his name. He
seemed like an old acquaintance of hers."

"Uhuh. Well, I hope you have a good time, give my regards to the girls, and tell Morty to lay off
Sabrina for me, if you see him, 'kay?"

"About that…"
"About what?"

"Sabrina is at the bar- she's probably the most drunken person here. Morty stopped by to chat with some people, but now he's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, gone. Nowhere to be seen. I doubt he'll be bedding Maylene or Sabrina tonight."

"Huh."

What does that mean? Is he having trouble 'downstairs'?

"Who did he chat with?"

"Oh, let me think. Just Whitney, a young lady with rosemallow flowers in her hair, and Volkner."

"Did he get into any trouble?"

"No, everything was civil and polite. I will ask Whitney what they were talking about, in a bit, if you'd like."

"Please."

"Very well. It's nice seeing you interested."

"Not in that way," I retorted sharply. "I'm trying to find out something concerning Morty. It'd put my mind at rest if I could know for sure. That is all."

"And that something is?"

"Can't say, not until I know the answer."

"Very well, I will respect that. I'll see you tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah, I'll be at the airport."

"Alright, then, goodbye."

"Bye."

Morty's not at the party. Sabrina and Maylene are. He's not going to have sex with them. Not tonight, anyways. Most people leave for their home regions tomorrow, so the chances of collecting the wager any time soon is slim-to-none.

Why pass it up?

Don't all men lust, constantly, incessantly? I can't imagine a pervert like Morty going out of his way to create a bet just to get sex out of women, winning, and then being a no-show when it came time to collect.

What the hell?

I repeated this to myself, over and over.

I stormed around the lower floor of the lighthouse, pondering and questioning and becoming excitable.
"Ugh!"

I paused a moment at a doorway. The Glitter Lighthouse Public Library. It was a tiny auxiliary branch to the main Olivine Public Library. The latter was a large, luxurious building, but it was located way up in the hills. Olivine's literary constituency wanted something closer to the coast, and this was the only available public space. Seeing as a good number of beach-goers came through, it was full of cheap romance fics, mainly geared towards middle-aged women. For the men, one shelf was dedicated entirely to action thrillers, for the cruises, but that was about it.

I sometimes browsed the stock, usually perusing the nonfiction section. I found myself walking in and starting there.

"Guide to Olivine City". Read that a thousand times.

"Psychology of Pokémon". I need a psychology for boys and girls, not Pokémon.

"Beacons of Safety: National Lighthouses". Irrelevant.

Meh! Real life was the cause of all my problems. Where's some escapist literature?

I continued through the thrillers, then through the slice-of-life novels, and ended up in the young women's section.

"How many of these books are actually about love? They're just slutty fantasies," I said to myself.

Why? Why is it so popular? Is procreation so vital that nature had to build in such uncontrollable desires to force us? It's gone so far that there's an entire trashy book industry for women to wet themselves over. I mean, really, why resort to books? It's not as if any decent looking woman couldn't have a dozen men at her beck and call whenever she so desired. The fact that this exists, that we had to invent idealized partners to fantasize over, doesn't that confirm my worldview of a sleazy, bastardly male population? But… but… those kinds of men fill these kinds of books to the brim. What does that say about the women who lust over them? That everyone is a hedonistic chimp, waiting for the next round of pleasure, without any regards to actual love?

It's sad, but true, I think. The whole world is ruled by lust. I was brought up to believe a lie called love. I dearly wish I had never known, I most dearly wish I could be above those urges…

But then I think of him, and a shiver goes up my spine and across my shoulders, my gut sinks, my stomach feels light, and my heart speeds up. I told myself, these are signs of adrenaline, because he scared you. You're still afraid of him.

But… but… it's not that, is it?

I want to believe I'm special, but here I am, angsting over the dilemma; angsting over a boy, and trying to prove to myself that I'm better than that, that I couldn't possibly have feelings- and I'm failing.

I thought I was a good girl with too much to accomplish in life and no need of love. Against all logic, though, I picked a certain book up, some classic but trashy novel about unrequited love, and started reading from the middle. I started reading because… I'm not really sure; it's one of those things you just do. Perhaps I was momentarily piqued by love and romance and sex and the over-blown eminence our world places on it. Perhaps I was a victim of hormones. Perhaps the stress of the day had lowered my guard for a moment. But I was reading about prince charming cheating his way into the heart of an overly sweet, putridly sweet lady, and it was quickly heading towards the dirty parts. "His eyes dwelled restlessly on her buxom chest." Gross! I set the book back on the shelf at that.
Then I just had to think of Morty. If I had words for my feelings, they'd go like- "Why should he be any better? Why should he deserve me?" Which I don't know what to make of. But it bothered me, and I got curious, and I opened the book back up, starting again at the trashy part.

Well…

I admit: I've masturbated before. But, I did it for the self-pleasure, and only that, and never imagined anything fancy. Besides, it was rare; once or twice a month, and it's been much longer still since the last time. And every time, I felt guilty, and dirty, and not myself. I regretted it. I tried passing it off as hormones, or for mere health reasons. I never wanted to imagine what I was doing was connected to romance.

But now, I'm reading about "faint love's touches" and, god-forbid, "his sturdy penis slipped about her mound". Ugh! How banal! How disgusting! But god and devil I was bothered! All the tingling feelings over my body, on my breasts, in my crotch, were tripping signals to my brain, begging me to read on.

And I did. I did, taking in the poorly written prose, reading each dirty word, each repulsive description, while one hand flipped the pages, and the other… slowly glided… southward.

... "Mmh. Mmh. Mmh. Ungh!"

... I'd no idea how honest and sexy I could be, stooped over an open book, standing bent between two tall shelves in a dark corner, a petite girl with a hand down her skirt, fingers working furiously in alternating rhythmic motions, up down up down with my four extended, thumb rubbing circles over my delicate spot while the index and pointy fingers thrust inside my vagina- and it was the first time I had actually used them that way, but don't think me so evil because it felt sooooooooo good! And what made it better? Because in my mind those thrusting vestibules weren't my digits but his member, and he wasn't who he usually is but a perfect gentleman and mighty sex-god. OH, but it was better than that! It was a fantasy that really might be true, that I could share my body with this person I knew, that I could change him, learn to live with him, love him, and when the time came, I could receive him just like this, and feel this feeling without any guilt… NNNGH!

When the orgasm came it was stronger than any I've ever experienced, so much so that my pelvis shivered, which rode up and down my body, visibly, and my legs buckled under the muscle tension, and my face was flush from panting so hard because I hadn't taken a breath for so many seconds. I was so idiotically in love with my pleasure then, I didn't notice anything else.

So I composed myself, tired and happy, flipped my skirt aright, closed and shelved the book, and made to leave, all in one smooth motion, when I looked forward and nearly screamed.

A person was standing there. No, not just a person. It was Morty.
"Hello," he said.

I didn't reply. I couldn't.

"Jazz, are you alright?"

I backed up against the bookshelf. Morty entered into the room. He eyed me, suspicious. I stared back, silent, shivering. I was still weak from my self-indulgence.

"Sorry to intrude. Whitney said you'd be here, so I came over to chat, have a word or two. Thought you would be upstairs with Ampharos, though. You're really quiet, is everything okay?"

I can't say anything. I'm scared. I'm having a breakdown.

He saw me. He saw me in my one, singular moment of weakness. He knows, and now my life is ruined. The carefully crafted persona, not merely the personality I wanted to show everyone, but the one I wanted to be - the meek, innocent maiden I truly thought I was- toppled. Burnt at the figurative stake. I could deny and ruse against it, I can easily discredit Morty to the world, I can save my pure image from the judgment of society.

But I could not wipe his memory. The one person I desired to keep out, the only person I absolutely had to maintain my dignity before, was now present, mere moments after a stupid, singular, uncharacteristic lapse in judgment.

"Jasmine?" He called out. I turned my face aside.

Don't look at me!

"Jasmine?" Morty stepped forward. I stepped back.

Don't come near me!

"What's wrong?" He reached a hand out. I flinched away.

Don't touch me!

"Did I do something wrong?" He stopped, stared, puzzled. "I mean, recently?"

I shook my head. Not to answer him, but to deny his existence.

"Okay…" He turned to the side, staring at the rows of books. "If I came at a bad time or something, I'm sorry. I just had something to tell you; it's kind of important to me. So will ya listen?"

A bad time? Don't play it off so coyly!

I said nothing.

Morty said nothing for a moment. His eyes wandered across the shelves, absently reading titles but not registering them. What would he do? What would he say?
"Ahhh." He put a hand to his lower back, pained. "I'm beat. Seven battles in one day. Sabrina and Volkner, damn, they're tough. Maybe I should take a vacation."

What's with this chit-chat? Aren't you going to say anything at all about what just happened?

Morty slumped into a seated position on the wall. He stared at me through his drooping bangs. His headband was clutched in one hand.

"You look shaky, are you sick? Have a seat."

Am I sick? That's rather a fetch to say considering… unless…

He's feigning ignorance! He's going to let it slide for now. I don't have to confront him. Or else he really didn't see me. Either way, I'm off the hook, for now. I released my pent up breath, relaxing, just a tiny bit.

"What are you doing here?"

"Ah… you can talk." He relaxed himself, just a bit. "You look like a rapist walked in."

I nodded. "Yes."

"Well firstly, I want you to know, I would never do that. If that's what you're worried about, it's okay. It's okay, really."

It's not okay, I'm not worried about you raping me. Even if you had, it's not the worst possible outcome. At least, if you did, I could scream non-consent.

"Am I the problem? Do you want me to leave?"

"Yes," I said automatically, not thinking it through.

What do I do? If he leaves he can imagine whatever he wants and I have no way of knowing or controlling it; But if he stays I have to suffer his presence. It's a miserable Catch-22.

"Well, sorry. I hiked it all the way here, so I'll need some rest before I go."

"When did you get here?" I asked, tentatively.

"I came to chat with you."

"Not why, when."

"When? When?" he repeated. "Weird question. Just now."

"Were you stalking me?" I asked.

"No! I swear. I just came in and saw you. What, do you have something hiding in here? A secret boyfriend?"

I wouldn't call a trashy romance my 'boyfriend', but yes, I'm hiding 'something'. There was no need to tell him that, however.

"Nothing. I was bored and was looking for something to read."

"Okay. I believe you." No inflection to indicate sarcasm; he was being serious.
He's either lying or telling the truth. Either way, he seems pretty dedicated to keeping it secret- which means, if he knows, he's being considerate of my dignity. If he really is clueless, then me prying into what he knows will make him suspicious. Maybe I should let him say whatever he has to say and then kick him out.

I took a seat across from him. The library was small enough, so that, with my legs and his legs spread out, our feet were almost touching. His legs stretched out, trying to connect the soles. I drew back into a curled position.

"So why are you here?" I asked.

"Ah. Well, after I finally escaped Palmer, I had some time to myself. I got into a thinking mood. Thinking about the past few days, the past few years. How things have gone, all the funny and sad turns life takes."

"Get to the point."

"The point? Heh. Well, I've been thinking about the people in my life. My mom, my dad, my coworkers, my friends. Whitney, Mary, Danielle, Lizzy, Jeff, Volkner. I've done right and I've done wrong to each of them."

"Mostly wrong, I imagine."

"Hey, let me finish. Like I said, I've been in a reflective mood concerning all of my relationships. I thought I should talk with them, and really get to know them, be honest with them. Life is short and I felt like I can't let people drift out of my life anymore, not without understanding each other. Do you get what I'm saying?"

He's being uncharacteristically introspective.

"What triggered this?" I asked, coldly.

Morty looked away, fidgeted, struggling for words. He was acting insecure. I can count the number of times he's let down his guard in public on one hand. This is… disconcerting. But while I had him this way, I might as well take advantage of it.

"What happened? You're the one acting weird."

"Eh…"

"You're never honest or coy. Out with it."

He gulped.

"My grandma passed away, last month."

"Are you…"

He shook his head. He's serious.

A death in the family. I can't comprehend, nor relate. No one in my family has died, and even if someone did die, I wouldn't feel anything- they all live far away. I'm not close to anyone but my parents, and even that's a stretch to say.

It's… unsettling. I feel like I ought to be sad, to be able to comfort him, but I don't know how; I don't even know how I should feel about this, how I should react.
"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's not so bad. I barely knew her. What hurts, is seeing mom. She's… not taking it well."

"Oh."

"I don't want to talk- I don't want to focus on that."

I had the fleeting feeling that I shouldn't let him let it go. If he's having trouble, I want to try help. It's the humane thing to do, even if it is Morty we're talking about. Any other time and I would press him. Not now, though, not in my state.

"Like I was saying. I wanted to connect with the people I knew. While I'm here, in Olivine, I thought it would be a good opportunity to have a heart to heart with you."

"What could we talk about? I don't want to see you."

"That hurts. If I bother you that much… I'll be off, soon. I just want to say my bit. But first… I have a question. Will you answer?"

"Ask, and we'll see."

"I mean, it's a really personal question. I just want to know if you'll be honest. Not with me. But yourself."

I hate word games! Out with it!

"What is it?"

His demeanor was such an odd concoction of pitiful and longing. It made me nervous; I held myself tighter.

He leaned forward on one elbow, his eyes glancing towards his lap, before resting intently on me.

"Jasmine…"

"Yes?"

"Are you happy?"

"…"

Amphy's ray of light passed the window four, and five, and six, and seven times. Morty leaned back, but his gaze never left me. He's waiting for an answer, an honest answer, that should, by all rights, never come.

"No," I said.

Hearing the truth hurts. Admitting the truth one denies to oneself…

"I…" He raised his hand. I paused.

"Do you think you would be happier if you had never met me?"

I quivered, then nodded, in the affirmative.

Morty let out a long sigh. He brushed his hair off his forehead.
"I picked on you a lot during school, didn't I."

"Whitney helped me figure that out. I don't really care about what you did back then. We were kids."

"We were," his voice trailed off into the chambers of the lower lighthouse.

"It's everything you've done since."

"I thought so." He paused a moment. "That's what I came here for. I know I hurt you. At the gala, in middle school, during the Johto Festival. I thought I was doing the right thing for you, but I never took your own feelings into consideration. I never meant to hurt you."

"That-" he cut me off with a wave.

"Three years ago, at Indigo Plateau. I know I messed up. I never meant to hurt you, but I made mistakes and bad decisions, and I had so many chances to stop it but I didn't. I know, that incident, more than anything, hurt you."

"Three years ago… yes, I hate you for that. More than anything else, that was it."

"Because I hurt you that badly, and it blew up," he mused.

"No. That's not it at all. Thank goodness Erika's friend existed, or maybe I really would be ruined. I realize you weren't the perp who did it, you were just the idiot enabler. No, what I hate was that you convinced me you could be trusted, and I did. Every ounce and fiber of my being, and every friend and family member told me otherwise, but I let you into my trust. And you messed it up. You betrayed my trust. Because that's you, that's who you are. You aren't going to change."

"I see. That's fair."

He got up.

"Where are you going?" I scrambled to a standing position, while he headed for the door. At the corner of the exit, he halted, turning to face me.

"I know it means crap to say this, but… I care about you. I care about what you think of me. If I'm the greatest evil in your world, then I'll go. Say the word and I will never bother you ever again."

I couldn't respond right away. When it felt like I wouldn't, he turned to leave.

"Wait!" I said.

He turned back.

"You can't fix it like that," I said.

"I don't want to upset you anymore," he said.

"It doesn't matter. You and I met. It's a fact, it's a memory that I cannot forget. Just like I will not and cannot ever forget everything you put me through, including Indigo. You leave now, and that's all I'll have of you. An unhappy memory. You honestly think that will fix things for me?"

"No- but I can stop it from getting worse."

"It will get worse. I know what bad experiences do, how they fester throughout a lifetime, how they blow up years down the road, at the worst possible moment. You say you care about what I think of
you? I hate you! You leave and I will continue hating you. There won't be any forgetting, or healing, or mellowing. You can't fix it by leaving."

"What should I do then?"

"Change." I rattled this word off with authority, a forcefulness I didn't think I could muster.

Morty shrugged.

"I can't change who I am. I'll always be that 'pervert' that corrupts your pure and innocent life."

"It does not matter. You have to. That's the only way you can fix what you messed up."

"I can't."

"You can't change. At all?"

"I am who I am. I like partying and flirting and romancing and hookups- and yes, sex. You don't. I thought I could make you happy if I could bring you into that world a little. Maybe I was wrong; it looks like I just made it worse on you."

"Sex? Sex?! Always sex. Sex isn't the biggest problem."

"What is?"

"What do I care what you do in the bedroom? Not one wit. As long as you could bloody well keep it in the bedroom. It's not about being a pervert. You know who's a pervert? My dad. But he never airs his dirty laundry; he keeps it well hidden and it was a miserable accident that I even found out about it. No and no. What irks me, what infuriates me, is that you have to put your deviant tendencies on display, and drag everyone else into your corrupt world. You force your own sexual proclivities onto people, onto me, those who have no interest in playing your game. And it's everything you do in the process- just this week, you made fun of me for being a virgin."

"I'm sorry."

"Say it like you mean it! That hurt! That hurt a lot!"

"I am deeply sorry," he said emphatically.

"And beyond that. Making bets for sex? Using a bait you knew not one gym leader here could possibly pass up? I fully expected you to be humping Sabrina right now."

"I called that off. Maylene too."

"Why?"

"Hmm." he shrugged, averted his gaze, shifted his weight across his two feet. "You've got a point. I don't want to change who I am, what I like, where my priorities lie. But, I don't want to hurt anyone because of that. I think it's too far gone in your case. But others, I still have a chance. I turned them down because I didn't feel right about the bet."

"Truthfully?"

"Yeah. I do want to change, in a way. I want to make sure my fun isn't at others' expense."

"That's it."
"What's it?" he asked.

"It's about consideration. It's about being truthful. It's about being kind, and honest. Honesty. That's something I have never gotten from you. That's how I want you to change. That's the only way I can forgive you. And stop sleeping around. And keep the crude jokes to your own inner circle. But most of all, be honest with me."

He inhaled a big breath, then let out it out slowly.

"I can do that last one."

"Then show me."

"Okay."

I paused a moment, to plan out my line of interrogation.

"What's the reason Maylene and Sabrina are mad at you?"

"Like I said, I turned them down."

"They shouldn't be upset for that."

He fidgeted. "Let's say I flirted with them when you weren't looking. I might have wooed them. They were looking forward to it."

"And?" There's more.

"That's all."

"No it's not."

He stood still, thinking. I moved closer.

"I… I… she… Maylene. She threatened to call the cops. I promised her the Darkrai outright if she would sleep with me. Sabrina heard, she wanted the Darkrai. I tried diddling my way out, stupid crap like saying who was best in bed, or who won a Pokémon battle could have it. It wasn't working, so I called it off."

I eyed him, still suspicious. He stared back. There was an emotion in his eyes, and it took a long while to figure out what it was, because I had never, not once, seen it in Morty.

"You're afraid," I said.

"Yeah. Of a lot of things."

"You could go to jail, just for what you did. Sexual harassment, extortion for sex. All it would take is for one of the girls to complain."

"Yes, that's one thing. I don't think I would go to jail, but I don't want to take that risk."

"And what else?"

He sighed.

"The Darkrai isn't mine to give."
"Huh?"

"I borrowed it, from a friend. Eusine, I think you'll remember him."

I remember… yes, of course, that lunatic: an incredibly awkward, incredibly ill-dressed oddball that tagged along at the Johto Festival trip four years ago. So, he's the true owner of the Darkrai? That explains how Morty got a hold of it.

"Yeah I remember him. It was a bluff?"

"The bet? Yes. A stupid, dangerous bluff."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I'm stupid, and having a second brain down under doesn't help. And… I made a promise to Volkner, to meet him in the finals. I wanted to cheer him up, after you- eh. I was going to throw the match in his favor, make him look like a hero who beat a legendary."

"But you didn't."

"I got caught up in the moment. He beat Darkrai earlier than expected with Electivire. His duel-ability bluff got to me, and I wanted to battle seriously."

"That it?"

"Y-yes."

"Are you lying?"

This interrogation was nerve-wracking, on both of us. He had something more to say, beyond all these revelations about today. I was worried, stressed, unsure of what I was doing, what I was aiming for. But for once, I had Morty totally at my mercy, and I wanted to get at everything I could. If he leaves my life, so be it, but I want to rip off that mask and see what's truly underneath before I kick him out.

"Are you lying?" I repeated.

"No. No… Just, the battle… the other part of it was that I wanted to win, to show off."

"To me," I said.

"Yes, you, and a few others."

"Who else?"

"It's personal."

"Honestly?"

"I can't say. It would hurt them, so, sorry, I can't tell you more."

I weighed this explanation. Was there someone else in his life? A romantic interest? Maybe family? A friend? Is he misdirecting me, when in reality he was showing off solely for my sake? That… that last one seems most plausible…

He could always be lying. He is so good at that, even now. I think, because I've never seen him act
this vulnerable, that he's more inclined to be honest. But, precisely because I've never seen him act this way, I can't be sure this vulnerability means he's being truthful.

There is one way to find out.

"You're going to change, and be more honest. That's what you're telling me."

"Yeah."

"You're being absolutely honest right now?" I asked.

"Yes." I looked him eye to eye.

I tensed, trying to compose myself even as my heart race. These next questions were it. It would be tortuous, but after everything Morty had said, and what happened just now- I've got to be brave, and deal with the consequences, because hiding and running away has only ever brought me misery. I braced myself.

"Then tell me," I commanded, "What did you come here for?"

"To say I'm sorry. For everything."

"What did you see when you got here?"

"The lighthouse was open. Ampharos was on watch, so I assumed you were here. I let myself in, and found you."

"And what did you find me doing?"

"Putting a book away."

"And?" I asked, even… even as my heart skipped a beat, and my breathing ceased.

"I saw you schlicking."

I flinched. It was the answer I wanted. Not the one I expected, not the one I liked, but the one I wanted. The shameful truth that I could not accept, known and now shared between us.

I wish I hadn't done that. But I had. I wish he hadn't seen it. But he did. To leave it at that, to bury it here and go our separate ways, to not truly know what he saw and having no way of controlling what he thought of it and letting him live the rest of his life apart and this being his final memory of me- a girl who secretly masturbated, and the false impression of a young woman whose entire persona of innocence was a mere façade- to let him think I was a whore for the rest of his life- I could not live with that.

After saying that, he could not look me in the eye. I drew closer.

"Morty, it's not what you think."

"I don't think anything of it. I won't judge or speculate. I'll believe anything you say."

"I'm…" I halted, before I could go on. It was difficult, framing my thoughts into words.

Deep breath.

"Remember what I said earlier. I despise the attitudes surrounding sexuality in our society. I don't
want to be a part of it, and I don't want to draw attention to myself for it. Just because I… I… have… the same human… urges as everyone else-" I needed another deep breath here; "-does not mean I have to accommodate a promiscuous culture."

"I won't tell anyone," Morty said.

You had better not!

"…"

"I promise." Morty reached out, slowly, taking my hand. "I promise, I will never breath word of this to anyone."

"No- there's one thing more important."

I'm still trembling. His hands were warm, and sweat-covered. Mine, I realized, were cold. The sweat made them slick; Morty clenched his hands tighter to keep from losing mine.

"I'm listening."

"You. I can't have you thinking what I did today is… it's not permission to think of me in that way."

Morty smiled, came closer, put his forehead to mine, so that we were looking directly into each other's eyes. I did not feel threatened this time, though.

"No matter what you do, I will always think of you as a snow-white angel."

I reached up, and gave him a gentle, painless slap on the cheek. "Don't say such things."

"I'm sorry."

I walked past him, through the darkened corridors, fingers tracing the rough plaster of the walls. He followed, silent save for his footfalls. We arrived at the door to outside, which I opened.

The night air had turned foggy, dense. It was cold, and damp. There would definitely be rain tomorrow. Amphy's light could be seen as a solid beam, reaching far into the murky depths.

"This is goodbye," I said.

He turned to me, stepped back a foot, and bowed, at the waist, a deep and most formal bow.

"I want to say, I apologize, for hurting your feelings."

"It's just words." I used both hands to raise him back to a standing position. "Just words."

"I know. It's all I can offer."

"No, it's not."

"Do you want me to leave? Forever?"

"If you don't change, yes. I can't take it anymore. Not from you. Not after tonight."

"And if I change?"

"I will consider accepting that apology."
"Okay. I got it." He shifted in place, making as if to leave, but not quite.

"Hug?"

"No," I told him.

"Then, bye, for now."

For now. As if I will see you again. As if you can become a person I could accept. Someone who doesn't say things like 'You will be laid by New Year's Day!'. Someone who can control their hedonistic urges. Someone who doesn't play on other's insecurities. Someone I could like… someone I could… love…

His scarf lay flat across his back. He put on his headband, adjusted it, and began walking away.

I may never get him in this mood again. I may never see him again. As he trod through the grass, shoulders hung limp, me contemplating his words and intentions, I realized that I had forgot to ask one question.

"Morty?" I cried out, timidly.

He stopped, waiting, saying nothing.

"Do you have feelings for me?"

He never turned, I never saw his face.

"Yes."

With that, he disappeared into the night.

Part 1 - End

Chapter End Notes

Hope you're enjoying the story so far. Part 1 was all about the Gym Leader Summit, which serves as the setup for the rest of the story. Part 2 will mainly deal with Jasmine's Gym Leader duties and the task of tackling her probation, while Morty continues to try to win her over. Feel free to comment, praise, criticize, or send me a message if you have questions or just want to chat. All input is welcome.
"It is the common assumption that Pokémon trainers may not carry more than six Pokémon with them at any one time. This is false. The factual truth is more technical in nature. A trainer may not designate more than six Pokémon on his person as battle-ready, and no official match can be conducted with more than six Pokémon per side. The myth that one cannot physically carry or be accompanied by more than six arises from the system built into the Pokémon PC network that designates Pokémon as battle ready or inactive automatically. Common digitalization and storage settings act to automatically retrieve recently caught Pokémon, as they would be considered inactive otherwise and cannot be used in matches. Their inactive designation cannot be changed except at designated PCs and other league-sanctioned facilities. For convenience sake, newly caught Pokémon that would be designated as inactive are automatically digitalized, retrieved, and stored by the system. This gives the illusion that six is an absolute limit. However, a simple setting change can disable this system, and any trainer is allowed at any given time to simply take and let out the entirety of their Pokémon collection. There is no actual mechanic to physically limit the number of Pokémon that can be carried and used at one time, and it would be highly unethical to implement one if it were possible. Thus, the rumor of a six-Pokémon limit is a great misunderstanding. This limit is solely applicable to League sanctioned matches and activities. If, in fact, six were the limit, a great deal of tasks and functions would be rendered impossible- for instance, the transportation of bulk Pokémon caches from region to region, or the deployment of large number of Pokémon for the purpose of labor- constructing a highway or skyscraper, for instance. For that reason, it is not against the law to carry more than six; however."

Bravo! Your exceptional impersonation of a robotic drone is unsurpassed! There is no discernible difference between your monotonous lecture and that of a computer-synthesized voice-over. We are, truly, humbled by the level of mastery you have attained over the bore-me-out-of-my-bleeping-mind-big-brother-robo-drone language. That persistent sound of slight, insect-whisper-level tapping you hear in the background? I would, with all my heart, love to say that that is the sound of our continuous applause in recognition of your achievement. However, that would be a lie. The truth is, that is me, applying forehead to desk, repeatedly, ad nauseam.

"-consequences for exceeding the six Pokémon team limit are applied on a case by case basis; but in case precedent thus far it has never been any less than a technical null mark applied to official matches. Casual, unrecorded matches are not governed under these rule sets."

"SHUT UP!" I screamed.

"Keep in mind that the National League Committee Ruleset supersedes regional rule sets when conflict arises."

"I DON'T CARE! I CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE OF THIS KINDERGARTEN CRAP!" The lecturer continued unabated, and I was left looking like a very silly girl yelling into her computer in an otherwise empty apartment.

Well, empty of other living beings. At the moment, it was very much filled to every corner with papers. The Gym Leader Human Resource and Corrections Committee could not be half-assed to go
digital, instead preferring the asinine and environmentally unfriendly medium of a six pound binder to enumerate the rules and procedures of probation. Do you have any idea how heavy six pounds of bound paper is?!?! You could use it as a murder weapon!

Three and a half hours of perusal later, those six pounds of sheets were now scattered across every nook and corner of my room, half my kitchen and a third of my bathroom. In the middle of it sat me, a very unhappy girl, sitting before my computer, listening to a mandatory yet haphazard recital of the entire Pokémon Trainer's manual via video lecture. The lecture lasts for two hours, every weekday. This will last two weeks. After that, we get to spend five weeks covering the Gym Leader's manual.

There will be a comprehensive test.

An 'A' is required to pass.

The abbreviated study guide is fifty-four pages long.

...

Welcome to Performance-cited Gym Leader Probation.

a.k.a:

HELL

"The average owner has 1.79 Pokémon, however, the average trainer has 12.5 Pokémon, of which-'"

My head slumped into my arms. This was pointless.

Our lecturer was a flat, flabby, middle-aged man I didn't recognize from anywhere. He lumped useless trivia together with no coherent organization, nor cared to explain how any of it was relevant or vital to our performance as Gym Leaders. Our only respite was some over-anxious Gym Leader messaging the lecturer with questions, which inevitably sidetracked the man into even more tedious monologues. The worst of it was, we had no way of knowing if the test would be based off of the printed notes or this man's drivel. As if I was going to sit here attentively for two straight hours on the off-chance something he says will show up on the test!

"In the last ten years there has been a trending of ever-larger Pokémon collections. With the so-called "Pokedex Phenomena" sweeping society, certain segments of trainers believe it a viable goal to catch every single species of Pokémon on the planet, regardless of the feasibility of this goal or the trainer's ability to care for such massive, one-thousand-plus collections."

I stopped there. There was no way I was going to listen to this. Most of it was utterly trivial and self-evident, things anyone obtaining a trainer's license would know. Besides, I passed the Gym Leader Summit exam with a 92%, I should be fine on the probation exam, as long as I studied a little.

Hmm...

The lecturer had no way of knowing what his students were doing on the other end of the net. I was about to walk off and clean my room, until-

"Recent studies have called into question the mental health of Pokémon that are part of large collections; that as the size of the collection increases, the ability of the trainer to attend to their individual needs decreases."

He has a point, for once.
I dove into the garbage heap that was my room, snorkeling, so-to-speak, my way through a sea of paper, clothes, trash, bedding, pillows, boxes, etc. My first objective was quickly fulfilled—pencil and paper. My second objective was difficult to find, and due to a counting error, I spent five minutes searching for something that was not actually there.

At last, I alighted on my chair, the fruits of my search before me. I silenced the lecture and put my music-list on autoplay.

Before me were eight pokeballs. Here they were, all in a row, my faithful companions. That last bit of the lecture reminded me that I was not spending as much time with them as I would like. It was time to account for them, take inventory so-to-speak. That'd be the first step in my "Get-Off-Probation" plan.

Okay, here we go.

I drew three pokeballs on the paper. These represented my absentees.

1) Amphy- at the moment, sleeping his pretty little head off in the lighthouse. My pride and joy, and my closest friend (sorry, Erika!) However, I'm not entirely sure how good he is at battles, because he has to spend all of his time dedicated to his work. On the flipside, because of his job, he's the neediest and gets the most attention.

2) Magcargo- I wanted him for my fourteenth birthday, before I decided to switch from a Rock-type specialization to a Steel-type specialization. Nowadays he spends nearly all his time with my dad, helping him with his metalworking hobby. Dad basically takes care of him and acts likes his owner; he even uses him for pickup battles against his work buddies. Despite that leniency, Magcargo is still technically my Pokémon.

3) Sunkern- A Pokémon I caught on a whim during a hike through the countryside. More of a window-sill ornament than anything, currently loaned to Mother to serve as a live centerpiece for a party she's catering. Mother wants me to evolve her because a Sunflora would look prettier. I agree, but can't be bothered to actually put in the effort.

I wrote short notes for #2 and #3, things I'd like to do for them, help improve their lives, train them, and how they might be useful if I decided to use them for Pokémon battles again. #1, Amphy, was a case all to himself and could take up a short novel, so I skipped his section.

Absentees accounted for, I turned my attention to the eight present. As I got to each in turn, I let them out of the pokeball and fed and watered them.

4) "Choir."

"Corsy corsa!"

Corsola, a.k.a Choir, because she liked to sing. Another relic from my Rock-type days, caught because they conveniently congregated by the shoreline. I haven't battled with her in years.

5) "Pineco."

Pineco let out a chippy sounding cry. "Chhtchht!" (it's really not possible to render the cry into written letters). She never really used her name much to talk. At one point I fancied evolving her into a Steel/Bug-type Forretress, but Pineco was so difficult to train, I gave up on it.

6) "Oddish."
"Oddish!" A gift from Erika. I was content to leave the cute thing out of battles. Unlike its evolutions, Oddish exude a pleasant, fresh-smelling odor if watered regularly. Erika specially bred this one for me, as it gave off a jasmine scent. Right now, I sprinkled water over her leaves, causing her to dance under the shower. "Good girl." The smell of eastern flowers overtook the odor of old laundry and bad cooking.

7) "Magnemite."

"Magzzzzzzzttttt." A metallic cacophony greeted my ears. I rapped the Pokémon to get it to shut up. Magnemite is the younger of my power-plant pair. Terribly underleveled and weak, but not for lack of usage. It was the third Pokémon on my battle roster, but tended to get KO'd too quickly to gain any experience. That was something I definitely wanted to work on.

8) "Magneton." It greeted me with a deep bass cry. It was one of the first Pokémon I connected with. Besides being a stalwart ally and #2 on my battle roster, it had served in all manner of capacities. During the hurricanes, when power goes out, I can use Magneton as a generator. During dark campouts I've used it as a giant flashlight. Once upon a time we even used its Spark attack as impromptu fireworks for a Summer White Festival. It didn't really have much of a personality, though. The only thing it seemed to enjoy was watching TV or me playing computer games.

9) "Graveler." A lump of guilt bore its way through my heart.

"Gravaaa! Grrrrrr!" I had used Graveler near constantly when I first became a trainer. By her history, she should be as strong as Magneton. Nowadays, I barely pay any attention to her. She's messy, and dirty, and scatters rocks and pebbles every time she comes out. She's a little dim-witted, and she never meshed well with my Steel-centric strategy. I felt bad, really, because I couldn't bring myself to love her.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to feed her. She ate slowly and reluctantly, and seemed eager to go back into the pokeball.

10) "Voltorb."

"TOORBBB!"

"CHYAA!" Voltorb bolted out of its pokeball and bounced around the room at high velocity. I ducked for cover, waiting till the little thing settled down. Like Graveler, I didn't especially like Voltorb; unlike Graveler, Voltorb was inexorably attached to me. Even if I thought it was a hothead and prankster and yelled at it and batted at it, it bobbed and weaved and nudged and snuggled as close as it could with me. Introspectively, it acted very much like the stereotypical hormone-driven human males I was always driving off. I couldn't bring myself to part with it, though, because it was my first Pokémon. I had gotten it as a gift for my tenth birthday.

After a game or two, writing my notes for Voltorb and feeding it with a battery, I sent it back.

11) "Steelix-" I said, just as I stopped halfway through the motion of tossing the pokeball out. It suddenly occurred to me that Steelix is 33 feet long and weighs several tons. It wouldn't be prudent to let him out in my 14x10ft, second floor bedroom. I dashed out to the balcony and let him out there.

"ROOOAOOA!"
"Steelix!"

"ROARGH! SCHHHTEELXXXX!" he roared, loudly and excitedly. I wonder why some Pokémon cry their name, others use animalistic roars and grunts, and some use a combination of both? Steelix was the latter- the more pumped up he was, the less he echoed his name and the more he simply roared, shaking the nearby structures from the volume.

Onix was my second Pokémon, I think, caught on a camping trip. I thought I was going to be an archeologist back then, and wanted anything and everything related to rocks. Steven Stone had recently won his unimaginable second global championship, for which I adored and idolized him. Anything and everything related to geology, archeology, history- basically anything earthy and old- became my obsession.

As I grew older, I came to hate Rock-types, their multitude of weaknesses, their messy habits, their looks. I liked my Onix but he simply wasn't keeping up in Pokémon battles. I had begun reading about the rare Steel type and desperately wanted to specialize in it. The fact that Mr. Stone was known to use Steel types only pushed me farther away from rocks and closer to the shiny new metallic Pokémon.

Besides Mr. Stone, there was a point in my life when I idolized my dad too. In a short period of time he not only moved us back to my beloved Olivine City, but he also helped me evolve Onix into Steelix. The fact that my boring rock snake was suddenly a shiny new metal snake had me ecstatic. I admit, I was a little impressionable at that age.

Steelix became my mainstay, the leader of my battle team. As far as battles go, he's everything I love in a Pokémon: giant, strong, tough, resilient, the ability to be patient or aggressive on command, obedient, versatile. The vast majority of my wins come beneath the crushing weight of Steelix's Iron Tail. Sometimes I volunteer to do landscaping, and Steelix serves as my multi-purpose excavator/wheelbarrow/plow/weedwacker/cement-mixer/soil-tumbler/sand-blaster/water-bucket. I'm accustomed to riding around on his head- if the water isn't too deep, I can even ford through rivers and lakes on top of him. His top speed is 56 miles per hour; I use him for transportation so I don't have to pay for a car (terrible acceleration though, needs more VROOM!). If Amphy gets (takes/demands/whines for) all my love, Steelix has my undying respect.

"Steelix, open wide!" He did, and got a whole pack of treats at once. He munched them down happily.

"Don't eat these." I tossed the other seven pokeballs into his mouth. "I've got a lot of paperwork to do, so I want you to take the team to Crescent Bay Park and play and relax and do whatever. You can have dinner from the cliffside quarry while you're there. Got it?"

Steelix nodded.

"Don't tunnel through the city property, and be back by 9:30, 'kay? Bye now!"

I felt the minor tremors he made as he slithered off. Despite my warning, the spikes of his hide dug into the yard. I winced, knowing I'd have to patch that up later. Oh the joys of Pokémon ownership.

The lecture was over by the time I returned to my computer. My hand-written list lay across the keyboard. I went down the side, reciting the Pokémon to myself.

"Ampharos, Magcargo, Sunkern, Corsola, Pineco, Oddish, Magnemite, Magneton, Graveler, Voltorb, Steelix." Eleven Pokémon. At times it seemed like too many. Amphy alone could swallow up my attention for weeks at a time. I've had to close down the gym just to tend to him. It was a pity,
if we took all that time and used it for training, he'd be as strong or stronger than Steelix. Instead- eh, it was not for me to decide. Amphy had an important job ensuring the safety of hundreds of ships. I wasn't allowed to pull him off duty for something so banal as Pokémon battles. They made it quite clear that I'll forfeit my ownership of Amphy if I interfere with his duties. It's such a drag. The others get whatever time I can spare, which wasn't a lot. Like Sunkern, I often lent them out to friends and family, just to give them someone to socialize with when I was busy. I made sure to spend two hours a day, four days a week training, but Steelix and Magneton wolfed down the Snorlax's share of that time.

Somehow, someway, I was going to have to find a way to spend more time with them. I need to become their best friend again, so that they'll trust me when it comes time to train. Because, when that time comes, and knowing what I'm up against, I will have to train them harder than anything they've ever experienced.

I looked about my room, in a little bit of a daze. So much work, so little time. My mind wandered over the previous week, and the summit before that. It dwelled on my e-mail inbox, filled to the brim with messages. Actual paper letters and bills covered my nightstand.

People. Every one of those messages represented a person in my life.


They all want something from me.

The name popped into my head. Flashes of memory brought me back to the night at the lighthouse. How could one little question and one little one-word answer mean so much, bring out so many conflictive feelings? That night had been so difficult, so tumultuous, one of the worst I've ever gone through. Far worse than the night of the gala. No sleep, none whatsoever. There are scars all over my wall from all the pokeballs I slammed against them in frustration. I was drained, insolent, bitchy even, the next morning. Barely managed to see Erika off on the airplane. I didn't say much during the goodbye, partly because of how upset and confused I was, and partly because I was afraid of going berserk on Erika for no reason at all.

Fortunately, for the rest of this past week I've managed to bury the matter under a mountain of work and worry, forcing my employment fears to the front and center of my conscience, where they belonged. It was enough just to remember his existence and I was already getting angry. I shook my head, reaffirming my priorities.

"I don't have time for a stupid romance!"

I really didn't. I didn't have time for humans, period. All my time had to be dedicated to my Pokémon, first and foremost; from now until December 10th. Until then, Morty can bugger off.

"ARGH!" I braced myself, and then went to work on a ten-page worksheet on the topic of movesets.
A Gym Leader's Duty

At 12:45 the next Monday I received a text from Erika:

"Sorry, but I forget to mention that I'm arriving at the seaport. Please meet me there at 1:00 PM, as arranged earlier. Look forward to seeing you!"

Quite considerate of her to tell me this, after I lugged it all the way to the airport, located in the cusp of the inland valley. The seaport was on the direct opposite side of the city. That was ten miles away. Furthermore, my primary transportation method, Steelix, was at the gym, training.

"I'll never get there in time!" I moaned aloud.

I sat on a bench, flustered and aching my brain for a solution. I could call a taxi. Heck, I'm at the airport, I don't even need to call one, I can just go to the reception desk and order one. I checked my purse: 150P, enough for a bottle of water, maybe. Not a taxi ride.

"Shoot. Where's a flying type when I need one?" Hmm. What to do? If only I had Steelix… Ah! I'm an idiot.

I searched about the airport and found what I wanted: the Pokémon Mini-center. Next I called the gym, praying someone would pick up.

"Hello?"

Oh thank goodness!

"Connie, it's Jasmine." Connie, one of my underlings.

"Oh hi Jasmine. Aren't you coming in today?"

"Yes, later. I have matches scheduled at 4:00, right?"

"Um… no, 2:00."

"Shoot! Um… okay. That means you need to do something important for me. Is Steelix there?"

"I saw him out back a little while ago."

"Okay, here's what you need to do. Call him back to his pokeball, and then upload the pokeball into the PC network."

"Alright…” I guided her through the process, wincing a little as I gave her my private password (funnybunnies!1010)."

"All done. So, see you at 2:00?"

"Right." Yeah! Sure! If I somehow manage to meet Erika, get her back to her rental house, and then screech over to the gym in under an hour. I wish humans could digitize themselves like Connie just did for Steelix.

"See ya later!"

The Mini-center had a service charge, unlike the free League-run Poke-centers. My water bottle
money vanished, reminding me it was still far too hot outside for mid-September. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to complain. A flurry of robotically efficient maneuvers later, and Steelix emerged onto the parking lot.

"Schteelix, Schteelix!" he cried. He was a little dazed from the rapid change of environments.

"Stay with me!" I snapped my fingers at him (or rather, made ineffectual, clumsy motions with my fingers, as I can't actually snap them). "We're at the airport, we need to get to the seaport, ASAP! Got it?"

He answered with a roar, ducking low enough so that I could vault onto his head. I clung tightly, and together we roller-coasted off down the street.

"DING!" A new text message.

"Oh, I also forgot to ask, do you have any delivery services available? A rental truck or somewhich?"

Firstly, no, I don't know anything like that; secondly, I have no money for that. Lastly, I can't text and drive, even if my vehicle is a giant fully-automatic living creature!

We passed through the shopping district, creating a stir. Traffic became heavy, and I was forced to decide what the lesser hassle would be: go pedestrian and use the sidewalks, or take the road and wait on cars and traffic lights?

The sidewalks are too narrow, I'd run over the pedestrians. Roadhog it is!

Me riding atop Steelix and cruising through the streets garnered quite a few weird looks. Most people recognized me, some made faces, others waved. I tried waving back at the polite ones so as to keep up a beaming exterior. After all, as Olivine's Gym Leader, I have a reputation to uphold. Inside, all I could I think about was the fact that the clock read 1:06 and I was already late for our rendezvous. Wasn't tardiness the reason I'm on probation in the first place?! Grr! Faster!

"Faster! Faster! Outa my way Slowpokes!" I belted this at the sedan in front of me, trundling along at five miles under the speed limit. Hopefully no one actually heard me say that.

We exited the shopping district. To my front-left there was a clearing and a canal zone beyond that. The seaport lay roughly in that direction, I recalled.

"Steelix, shortcut!"

The dry canal was built to protect downtown Olivine from hurricane surges. Seeing as there are no hurricanes today, I decided it would be repurposed for Steelix racing.

"FASTER!" It took a while, but eventually Steelix's hind sections gyrated like a massive turbine engine. His spiky segments scraped the concrete, creating sparks as they whirred against the surface. The traction gained propelled us along at motorboat speeds.

"Yaaaaaa!" The wind whipped in my face; the infrastructure dotting the canal edge passed us by in fractions of a second. I was hooked on a drug and its name was SPEED. "Fastah!"

This is fun!

Who said Steelixes were slow?
"Schteelix!" my Pokémon happily called out. His head pulled more tightly inline, like an ice-skater, and his lower segments churned even faster. He was trying to gain even more velocity. I'd never ridden him when he was going this fast. I don't think I've ever ridden a car going this fast!

The world began to blur, obscuring my vision, feeding the speed-induced euphoria. A white-on-blue sign, depicting an anchor and some text, barely registered as we snapped by it.

"Woah! We're here!" I cried. Steelix dug his spikes in, coming to a screeching halt. It took many agonizing seconds to stop our forward momentum, leaving a trail of smoking gashes behind us. This was the price a behemoth Pokémon like Steelix paid for high top-speed: terrible acceleration, and likewise atrocious deceleration. Moving, stopping, and changing the direction of several tons of living steel does not happen instantly. This was why Steelix could never land the first shot in a Pokémon battle. I winced a little when the last squeal of steel-hide-on-concrete rang away into silence.

"There."

The docks were close by, and I had already found my objective. It was a ten foot drop from Steelix's head to the floor, but I leapt it with the grace of a gymnast. A lone flower of elegance grew, like a beautiful weed, out of the industrial drollness of the dockworks.

"Erika!"

"Jasmine!"

"Erika!"

"Jasmine!"

GLOMP!

We collided together in a Ursaring-trap embrace.

"It's been forever!"

"I know, like, ten days!"

"Too long!"

"I'll never leave you again!"

"You better not!"

Sisterly kisses and hugs had us enmeshed in each other.

Erika finally extricated herself and stood back.

"You look terrible. How much sleep do you get?" she asked. Her hand wandered up, lifting my disheveled bangs off of my brow. She's probably staring at my bleak, blackened eyelids right now.

"None. It's the only thing I could find to filch time from. This probation is terrible!"

"None. It's the only thing I could find to filch time from. This probation is terrible!"

"There there," she said, hugging me again. "We'll get you through this."

"Thank you! Oh, yeah, sorry I'm late."
"No matter, I've been kept busy," she said.

"Why'd you come by boat?"

"Ah! It was the cheapest way to transport everything." She waved towards the dock, where the *SeaGallop 9* was anchored. A group composed of men and Machokes were unloading one piece of luggage after another. They had made a pile the size of a Wailmer.

"How much of that is yours?" I wondered aloud, starting to worry when I saw them unload a pair of 7-foot trees and a stack of bonsai plants.

"All of it," Erika answered.

"!!!

Erika! Is this a vacation, or is this an urban renewal project?!

"By the way, did you find a moving service for me?" she asked innocently.

The haulers plopped another heavy cardboard crate on top of the pile. The entire pile creaked menacingly, as if daring to topple over.

"There is no such service for, uh, this magnitude of cargo, Erika."

"Oh dear." A look of supreme consternation crossed her face. She really didn't think this through, did she? Meanwhile, the men finished unburdening the ship. One came up motioning for Erika to sign off the delivery. She did so, dazedly.

"35,000P, yah?" asked the worker. Erika nodded. She turned to me.

"Are you sure there's no way?" She beseeched me with tears welling in her eyes. Or not, but I tend to exaggerate my friend's feelings.

"You've got 35,000P worth of stuff? That's half my rent… That's too much for me. You'd need to hire a professional house mover for that much, and they only take reservations."

"But… there must be…"

I watched as she deflated into a pitiable pastiche of her normal self. Such a trivial matter, and she looks like she's about to cry!

But the tears won't flow, I knew. That'd be beyond indignity, and the most dignified Gym Leader in the Johto-Kanto area could not suffer to be a public spectacle.

Nor was I going to entertain or risk such a situation, miniscule as the chance might be. There was one solution. It would waste an enormous amount of time, but I brushed the thought off.

"I'll have Steelix haul it."

"No, you're too kind."

I ignored her apologies and protests, and went to work. There was practically free rope lying all over the place, which I used to tie most of her luggage to Steelix. He gripped the two largest pieces in his jaw and tail, respectively. When he was overloaded, only half the pile had been depleted.

"Meh, we'll have to make two trips." It was 1:37 by the time I had everything secured. "Ugh, I'm
gonna be late."

"Late? You have an appointment? You can leave it here, I'll manage," Erika said apologetically.

"No way," I shot back.

"Then just do this one trip and I'll take care of the rest."

"How, carrying it on your back?"

"I…"

"Drop it, my city, my rules," I said. She yelped, because I sensed she was about to oppose me, so I preemptively stepped on her toes as I returned to Steelix. I hopped aboard the bed mattress tied down to his head, then patted the cushion beside me.

"Let's go!"

"This is really too much." She alighted beside me.

"No way. For you, I'd deliver the world. You mean too much to me."

"Don't say things like that. I… Well… Hah… Ah… Just remember, I'm the big sister in our relationship."

"Ha! I wish you really were. Now shush and tell Steelix where we're going."

"I can't," she replied innocently.

"Huh?" If she didn't even know where she was staying, I'm gonna-

"How can I tell him where to go if I shush?" she said.

I belted her shoulder with my fist, playfully.

"Start north, on… um… I think it's Ca… Caw… something that starts with a C."

"Steelix, Cadence Street." Steelix obeyed, setting off. His movements were surprisingly dainty, being extra careful to hold his passengers upright and keeping Erika's luggage from getting damaged. Good boy! Once I was sure everything would hold, I turned back to Erika. "You're supposed to be the big sister here. Why so unorganized?"

"Oh… Sorry, I really have no excuse," she said. "Though, why did you say that just now?"

"Say what?"

"That you wish I were your sister."

"Because," I said, and then it was my turn to be embarrassed. "An only-child has no one to relate to, growing up. The way you and I are so close and get along, sometimes really well, sometimes hostile; I feel like you're what a big sister would be like. I wish I'd had you there for my whole life, not just a parcel of it. It would have helped. You're my role model, you know."

"So that's how you think of me?" she said, eyes averted.

"Yeah," I said.
"Ahhh." She fell silent for a moment. "Steelix, turn here, left." Steelix complied. "What if you did have an older sibling? Or a younger one?"

"If only, if only. I hope they would be like you."

"What if you had a brother?" she asked.

"Ugh... at least he wouldn't hit on me," I said.

"Oh, you never know."

"Erika! You're as dirty minded as Morty!"

She laughed.

Following tentative directions, and briefly getting lost, we entered a quiet residential area buried in the hills. The road wound its way through the troughs and vales, with elegant housing lining either side. The ridges were covered in tall deciduous trees. It gave the impression that each house was nested within its own shaded lair. The various branches in the road led off to different subdivisions. We eventually came to a T-intersection, the road diving off in two different directions.

"We're going left, right?" I asked nervously.

"Yes, how'd you know?" Erika replied.

"I had a hunch." Left led downhill and towards a cluster of modest homes. I had hoped she wanted to go that way, or else we'd be heading right and into Aerie Lane: the richest neighborhood in Olivine City. To give an idea, my monthly salary wouldn't pay for one week's worth of mortgage for the cheapest home in there. I knew Erika's floral business was doing well- I didn't think it was doing that well.

"Oh, those are nice homes," Erika said, noticing the outward-most fringes of Aerie Lane's affluence. She was staring beyond the security gate at a grand Wrightian-style manor. It rose four immaculately architectured stories into the sky. What parts weren't made of brick were clad in expensive elderwood siding, and from the looks of it had received a recent paintjob. The lush flora arrayed around it meshed well with the subdued, royalesque color scheme the home sported. A pair of marble Luxray statues overlooked the driveway entrance. I sighed. Neither of us would ever be rich enough to be invited to a dinner party at a home like that, much less juggle the prospect of purchasing one. Erika continued her longing gaze as Steelix turned towards more humble abodes.

We finally arrived at an old, one-story market set-piece with plastic siding, some of which was fraying off.

"Welcome home!" I declared. The time was 1:57.

A glance at the clock and mental calculations told me I was never going to make it back to the gym on time. It was only a question of how late I wanted to be. Ten minutes, at best, if I ditched Erika here and now.

Yet, it seemed to me that ten minutes was too much. If I had to wait ten minutes for something, I'd lose my temper and do something about it, or give up and find something else to do. To me, there was no real difference between being ten minutes late or sixty. I had already made the error, it wouldn't compound my crime too much to extend it further. That is to say, it's no worse a crime for being ten minutes, twenty, or two hours past schedule; the only thing that counted against me was the fact that I was late at all.
Thus the slippery slope that leads to bad decisions.

"Do you need to be somewhere?" Erika asked.

"Yeah. Back at the dock, to fetch the rest of your stuff," I replied. "No telling how trustworthy the dockhands (who we had watching it for us) are."

Erika smiled.

"Thank you so much for doing this for me."

"No problem! You're my bestie."

It was 4:02 when I rolled into the gym. That's how long it took to retrieve the latter half of Erika's luggage, trolley it to her vacation home, unpack, let her settle in, give Erika a guidebook and a quick rundown of local grocers and eateries, have a mock battle between Oddishes, share tea and discern fortunes from tea leaves, make plans for tomorrow, hug, tearfully say goodbye, and navigate my way back to my workplace.

"I'm here!" I announced. A quick survey wiped the smile from my face. Connie, Ted, and Janina were attempting to keep a large, unruly crowd of trainers at bay. The latter pair's job became all that much harder as I pulled Connie off. The mass of trainers' semi-bored state of irritability picked up into a nastier impatience when they caught sight of me. Shouts and jeers came flying into the back office.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"What's going on! Is that it, huh? 'What's going on' she asks. 'What's mowing the lawn' she asks. 'What's holding up the prom' she asks. Chaos is going on!!! Where have you been?" Connie demanded.

"Errands. I was held up."

"We've got tons of trainers and they all want a piece of you!"

"Connie, calm down! You're hysterical."

"Yeah, so what? Tell me to calm down?! Your sick ass is dawdling and we're swamped! I said two! Two o'clock damn it!"

I sat stonewall as she unloaded more and more profanity over my head. When she ran out of breath, I broke in.

"How many are actually eligible?" I asked, referring to my policy of requiring at least two victories over my subordinates before challengers are allowed to face me.

"What? I don't know, none of them, all of them? They've got it into their heads that you had a piss-poor showing at the summit and now they think they can challenge you right off the bat!"

"Where's the leader! Get er out here!" came a shout from outside.

"This is ridiculous."

Where in god's realm did they learn about my summit disaster?

"Why didn't you call back saying you were going to be late?" Connie demanded. I waved her off.
"I don't care what they think; I'm in charge, two victories or no challenge! Why didn't you enforce that?!

"There were too many! You abandoned us!"

She wasn't going to be any more use, I saw. I glanced outside the office door, taking in the medley of people come to pick a fight with me. From appearances, most were the usual pissant beginners who never stood a chance of reaching me.

"Fine, I'll take care of this." I was not exactly mad, but certain circumstances call for judicious employment of feigned 'unbridled wrath'.

I leapt outside and bounded up to the second floor balcony. The crowd continued to shout, jeer, and heckle my gym trainers and me. Even when I faced them down, the harassment did not let up.

Fine. They asked for this.

"Steelix!"

"SCHTEEELIIIIX!!!"

I deliberately materialized him several yards in the air. His massive bulk fell, impacting the earth. His roar hammered the air, and the ground shook in great oscillating waves. The crowd struggled to keep their feet, bobbling like stupid clowns on broken tricycles. Their hands weren't available for balancing, seeing as all of them were forced to cover their ears against the massive tumult Steelix's roar unleashed.

That got their attention. I took a deep breath. Better to start softly, I thought.

"Hello, and welcome to the Olivine City Gym. I am the Gym Leader here; my name is Jasmine. If it helps your preparation, I am a Steel-type Pokémon specialist. Do you know about Steel types? They're quite strong and sturdy. Actually, they're incredibly sturdy. Stubborn, you could say. It takes a lot of power to budge them. My Steelix, for instance, weighs seven tons; I doubt all of you together could lift him a foot above the ground. So to say, it takes a lot to rouse us steely types. A lot of force to move us. A lot of heat before we bend. A lot of abuse before our emotions rile up. Yes, quite a lot of pressure before that threshold is passed and the hard grinding of metal starts in motion. But once it starts, there is no stopping it. And I am terribly, terribly sorry to inform you that that threshold has been crossed."

My voice sharpened.

"What did you think, crossing the threshold of that doorway behind you? Did you assume that, because Johto is a democracy, that it's a free region, you could do whatever you wanted? Wait, could you, ALL of you, possibly think that this is your story? Your adventure? Did you think ALL of you were going to be a champion someday? That every gym is just another page in your own epic conquest of the Pokémon League? Did you think you're a hero entitled to your own fairy tail ending?"

My voice heightened.

"This is not a fairy tail! This is not a pokewood movie! You are not a hero! And this gym is not a democracy! It is a dictatorship, and I am its despot! Here, in this gym, my word is law."

Murmurs broke out. They weren't happy with the tone I was taking, or the words I was choosing. Steelix silenced them with a great crack of its tail.
My voice turned malicious.

"So what? You have a few badges, you have a few hotshots in your pokeballs, think the world's yours, huh? I'm just one more target dummy to knock over on your way to Indigo? You heard some Pidgey-brained rumors that the Gym Leader was a shy, sensitive girl who would break down and cry and give you the badge for the great effort of walking in the door?!

My voice broke into a scathing shout.

"You break into my gym like hooligans, you harass my subordinates, you ignore the rules written in big, red, 500 point font on the front door, you demand a match against the Gym Leader and you think it's your divine right to a badge, like it's some sort of cub scout trophy?! You think I'm some sweet, soft, caring, down-on-my-luck doe-eyed loot piñata? You think you asses are entitled to the whole world?!

My temper roiled over, and my voice cracked into a heathen roar over their heads.

"You listen and you listen well, babies. I am Jasmine Mikan, Gym Leader of Olivine city, one of the eight most powerful trainers in the Johto Region, and you don't have a snowflake's chance in hell of beating me! You disobey my rules and I WILL CRUSH YOU!"

The look in their eyes- like Stantler in the headlights, frozen stiff with shock. It was delicious. I toned my voice down, just a little.

"Now there's a billion of you and one of me, the evening's wearing on, and the league says I have to give everyone a fair shot, so we're going to have to do something about that. Here's the game: you all versus me. One Pokémon per trainer. Everyone still standing after sixty seconds gets a proper match. Got it?"

"Wait, wait," volunteered a smarmy young man near the front. "You versus us? All of us? Even sixty seconds apiece, that could take a whi-" he was interrupted by the crash of Steelix's Iron Tail. I chopped the air, glaring at the interloper.

"Did I say I was going to take you on one-on-one? No, I said I was taking you all on at the same time! One hundred v. one. Sixty seconds, starting NOW."

I glared down upon them, blood burning, eyes burning, heart burning, spirit burning fire-hot. No one seemed to get the idea.

"Tick-tock! I said BRING IT ON!!"

A fatty clod decked in fishing gear was the first to get the hint. He reached into his vest, pulling out a Net Ball. "Seaking!" He let out the pokeball in a hesitant, softball-slinging motion.

Before it even tapped the ground, the rest of the crowd chucked their chosen partners into the air. It was a magnificent wave, red and white sliding over itself before crashing into incandescent glitter. From this emerged all manner of Pokémon; tiny and large, cute and intimidating, strong and clever.

I checked the clock on the wall behind me. The seconds-hand had just passed the quarter mark. 16:07:15, by military time. Target end time: 16:08:15. Sixty seconds.

"Get em! Hydro Pump!" "Earthquake!" "Bullet Punch!" "Iron Defense!" "Magnet Rise!" "Endure!" "Hi Jump Kick!" "Fire Blast!" "Body Slam!" "Bullet Seed!" "Head Smash!" The commands of the trainers filled the air. The crescendo of orders jumbled together, confusing their recipients. Each Pokémon paused, for just a moment, making sure they were hearing and obeying their own trainer.
rather than someone else. That slight pause was all I needed. Steelix already knew what to do. Even so, I felt like shouting out anyways.

"Steelix, Fissure!"

My Pokémon roared, lifting himself high. His tail pierced the ground, like a massive, three ton spear, crackling the underlying bed of rock.

"Woawoawoah!" Connie cried, as did many others. The trainers, not even in the epicenter of the battle area, recognized the danger and beat a hasty retreat. Their Pokémon stood no such chance.

The ground shook, then split asunder. Fault lines split open, the ground simply vanishing beneath opponent after opponent. Startled yelps, furious roars, all manner of doomed cries emitted from the mass of Pokémon. Ranged attacks intended for Steelix went amiss, blasting temporary allies. The leading edge of the foes, a Houndoom, was swallowed whole. Considering the danger that pokemon presented, I was quite pleased.

Pleased? Perhaps that was an understatement.

"BWAHAHAHAHAHA!" I indulged in laughter fit for a supervillain.

"Iron Defense, and then Fissure again!" Steelix used Iron Tail to deflect a half-aimed Ice Beam, then used Iron Defense, and then resumed playing tectonic tambourine.

The thing with Fissure is, it's not supposed to be accurate. It is very difficult, when one is deforming the general landscape, to ensure that a chasm appears right below an opponent. More often than not, the breaks in the earth stretch off in random, useless directions.

However, that's really only applicable when there is only one target. I have one-hundred targets.

Single random cracks in the earth are swallowing a half dozen foes at a time. The chaos caused among the enemy pokemon and the panic induced in the opposing trainers was giving Steelix time to launch even more Fissures. The decimation continued unabated.

"Schteel!"

4:07:52, the clock read. 23 more seconds. Steelix settled back. His Fissures had run their course, and Steelix had no more power for more of them. No matter. A good many trainers had thought they were getting away easy because they chose Levitators or Flying-types. Fissure would not be effective against these; it was time to go anti-aerial.

"Stone Edge," I ordered. Stalagmites pierced forth from the crevices. Steelix cracked the earth again and again with his tail, sending precise seismic waves, which caused the sharpened rocks to violently unearth and send themselves skyward. He managed seven snaps in rapid fire. Spires of stone struck Pidgeottos, Tropius, Noctowls, and Koffing from the air.

"Enough!"

4:08:15. Sixty seconds had passed.

Strange creatures emerged from the dust, each fading echo of the battle causing them to flinch. Their eyes were wide open, gaping at the jagged, devastated moonscape that used to be the gym floor.

I was busy counting. Tortuously, some Pokémon were climbing from the rubble, others daintily hopped from ridge to ridge. They looked to their trainers, hoping for guidance, or a respite.
"Hmm. Seven. Eight. Nine… nope, eight," I said, as one Rhyhorn toppled back into a rift. "Drats." I was hoping to clear out everyone in one go, but I wasn't getting out of Gym Leader duties just yet. I addressed the crowd.

"Those who have a healthy Pokémon may visit the healing machine in the lobby. Those whose Pokémon were knocked out, please recall your Pokémon and exit the gym. I will need the gym floor cleared very shortly."

Connie, Ted, and Janina met me at the bottom of the stairway.

"That was so cool!" Janina cried.

"You went all out there. I haven't seen you do that for a long time," Ted said.

"Congratulations, we got a call from the seismology department. Again," Connie said, holding up the gym's wireless phone in emphasis.

"Shoo them off," I told Connie. "Thank you, it was all Steelix though," I told Janina and Ted.

Minutes later, the gym rumbled again. Steelix was using Earthquake to undo the damage to the gym floor, prepping it for the terrain renewal system. In truth, I had the gym renovated several years ago just to accommodate his crust-busting attacks. It was essentially a reinforced steel pool filled with a special mixture of clay. An automated system of water pumps and blast fans liquefied the clay and then solidified it, creating a hard but pliable surface. The machinery and structures had cost me a fortune, in the form of a loan that I was still paying off, and would continue to pay off for the next three years (assuming I kept my job).

All this meant Steelix could destroy the ground to his heart's content; the machines would restore it back to new in under three minutes. By the time the process was done, only six challengers were left. The other two must have gotten scared and called it quits. I noted that the smarmy young man had survived. He forwarded himself, eager for a battle. He was giving me a condescending look, as if to say, "I took your best shot. Got more?" That look made me want to slap him. I inhaled. It would be a trap to get upset just because I couldn't knock him out during the general melee. The best response, now that the rabble is gone, is to be professional.

"Hello again," I said, addressing the six surviving challengers. "I apologize for the unpleasantries earlier. I usually require two victories against my subordinates before I accept a challenge; however we had an exceptional crowd today and were forced to expedite matters. Allow me to introduce myself properly."

I gave them a small, head-tilted smile.

"My name is Jasmine. I am the Olivine City Gym Leader and will be pleased to test your abilities in Pokémon battles today. Please determine amongst yourselves the order you'd like to battle. There is no rush; according to league rules I will accept rematches for as long as the gym is open, which will be until 8:00 today. There is a healing machine and a PC in the lobby for your convenience. The battles will be three versus three with no other limits. Now then, I will await the first challenger at the head of the arena."

That concluded my carefully practiced spiel. I turned and left them, making my way for the office. I had a feeling that the smarmy young man would bully his way to first in line. The three other men and two women would line up behind him in whatever order. They were welcome to watch the battles from the crosswalk, of course, to collect hints and such. I wasn't about to volunteer that
information, though.

At the office, Connie approached me.

"You know that guy?" she said, phrased not as a question but a lead-in.

"Yes." She obviously meant Mr. Smarmy. That expression of his made him pop out; there was no losing him in a crowd.

"Please crush him."

"Hmm?"

"He was insinuating some pretty fucked up things to me during the riot. I want you to go all out and crush him."

I nodded. "If you tone down the profanity, I will be sure to annihilate his every hope and dream."

"Thanks."

Elixirs for Steelix. Power restored. All set.

I exited the office, trio of pokeballs in hand. The trainers were gathered around the lobby entrance, waiting for battle. No surprise, smarmy face was first up.

He was dressed in the loose jacket and slacks typical of Hoenn Cooltrainers. His hair was slick with gel and spiked in the front, beneath which lay a cocky set of blue eyes. His mouth was permanently twisted into a grin. Smarmy facial expression, like the world owed him something. An earring dangled from one lobe. Guessing from his form, I'd say he had your average adventurers' athletic body underneath the suit. Maybe not. He seemed like the kind of guy who bulked up at the gym: all artificial muscle. Pathetic. A tattoo peeped out from under his right-hand sleeve. Overall, he might have been seen as attractive by another girl— you know, the kind of girl who feels compelled to douse herself in makeup before her "date" wakes up in the morning. For myself, just on looks alone I'd toss him into the reject pile. Not nearly as good looking as Morty or Volkner, or even Ted, honestly.

I glanced at my sole male subordinate. Short, wimpy-figured, and a wift of dark hair. Stammers a lot. Wears shorts every day, even in winter. Eh… yeah, still preferable over the tatted cool-guy.

I turned back to my challenger. No danger of being distracted by his looks, I assured myself. He's merely an opponent. According to Connie, a chauvinistic prick too. I don't like losing in general, but I certainly am not going to lose to this man.

Still, he managed to survive Steelix's rampage, and I don't remember which Pokémon he had. Best to play it safe, then.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"Name's Warren. Yeah, I'm ready." He threw me a wink. "But first, why don't we spice things up a bit? Boring badge fight is boring, you know? Let's play for something real. A bet-"

"I don't allow wagers here," I said, loud enough to cut him off mid-sentence.

"Ah-"

"Please send out your Pokémon."
"Fine, fine, killjoy."

I know I'm a killjoy. I like it that way.

"Magnemite!"

"Graveler!"

Magnemite, to scout his team first. A Graveler, as it turns out. Probably avoided the Fissures with its Sturdy ability. He plans on Earthquaking my team. It's also immune to the Magne-line's electric attacks. Fortunately, it's a slow thing.

"Rock Polish!"

"Magnet Bomb!" Magnemite hummed. Warren lifted an eyebrow. He didn't see anything, but that was because the initial projectile was made up of electro-magnetic energy and was invisible.

Graveler, oblivious, rolled itself in place.

"Earthquake," the Cooltrainer ordered next.

"Grava?" The Pokémon was confused, because it was wondering how an Earthquake was supposed to hit Magnemite's current position.

"What's the matter?"

Graveler turned towards him, revealing Magnemite's position- namely, glued against Graveler's face. The rock-type Pokémon tore at the foe, rather uselessly. Its arms were too stubby and inarticulate, and Magnemite was clamped on tight. The Magnet Bomb and Magnemite's Magnet Pull had interacted strongly, binding the two Pokémon together.

"Huh?"

"Flash," I ordered. Magnemite was in the most optimal position for that. Graveler rocked on its rear end, blinded. "Supersonic." Magnemite hummed, then screeched, sending dissonant, mind-jarring vibrations directly into Graveler's rock-hewn skull.

"Earthquake, just land on top of it. No, not like that!" The trainer spent a frustrating half minute trying to explain to Graveler what he wanted it to do. Although the Supersonic wasn't helpful, I'd say the trainer caused the bulk of the Pokémon's confusion. Well, even with Reflect up, Magnemite would never survive a pointblank Earthquake.

"Magnemite, please Self-Destruct."

"Zzzzt."

ZZZZZZZTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!!!

A ball of fire engulfed the two opponents. The crack of the boom echoed and re-echoed across the walls. The shockwave lashed out, sending debris every which way. One chunk of rock flew past Warren, nearly nicking him. I gasped.

"Woah!" He flinched. "Hey, where's the force fields?" he cried.

"They're on," I assured him. Inwardly, I was cursing myself. I had sworn I turned them on this morning. Had Connie deactivated them in the meantime? I glanced at her, but she shook her head.
and raced off.

"Graveler, that get you?"

"Graval!" It stood tall, not egregiously harmed. It was just a Magnemite, after all; even a Self-Destruct wasn't going to do that much harm. I wonder why I had got my hopes up.

"Magnemite, recall. Magneton, come out." I exchanged the fainted Pokémon for the fresh one.

"Kay, now we're getting somewhere. Earthquake, and I mean it this time!"

However, Graveler was slow to respond. Magnemite had done its job: create a small opening for Magneton.

"Magnet Rise!" My Pokémon rose into the air. The Earthquake, finally executed, passed harmlessly beneath it.

"Whatever! Rock Throw!" Graveler hurled chunks of the terrain. They bounced harmlessly off of Magneton's metal casing.

"Thunderbolt." A tongue of electricity poured into Graveler, dissipating into the ground without doing damage.

"Um…" Warren looked a little stumped.

Yes, I know Ground types are immune to electricity. I'm only screwing with you. With Magneton floating in the air, there is nothing a Graveler knows that can touch him. I have one of my own, I would know. Outwardly, I let off the slightest hint of a smug grin.

"Whatever." He ran through Graveler's entire moveset, Rock Throw after Stone Edge after Rock Slide after Double Edge after Bulldoze. Magneton floated serenely some twenty feet in the air. Like a UFO raining lasers, it continued to dish out ineffectual Thunderbolts, for no other reason than to demonstrate how one-sided the situation was.

"Stealth Rocks!"

Graveler unleashed sharp, hard-to-spot shards throughout the arena.

"Hey! Gym Leader!" Warren shouted. My name is Jasmine, I told you that. Twice.

"What is it?" I asked politely.

"Do you only have electric attacks?"

"I believe so. I'm not entirely sure, though."

Warren smirked. He's thinking Graveler can wear Magneton down, tiny fraction by tiny fraction, so long as Magneton continues to fire useless Thunderbolts.

"Rock Throw!"

"Oh, I forgot. Iron Defense." Magneton gleamed faintly. It wasn't apparent, but the composition of its metallic casing had changed, stiffening. I ordered this repeated twice more. Now, "tiny fraction" would not be in the same galaxy as describing what infinitesimal damage was being done to Magneton. Despite this, Graveler continued to launch rocks at it.
"Smack Down?" Warren said.

I froze.

Graveler aimed another rock, and let loose. The projectile flew past Magneton, missing by several yards.

*Phew!*

"Damn it!" Warren pounded his fist into his palm. The smarmy grin was long gone from his face.

"Smack Down! Until you get it!"

Three more projectiles, missing by even wider margins. This felt dangerous, but my moment of fear passed. Certainly, if Magneton touched the ground, it would be vulnerable to Earthquake. However, it appears Graveler has never practiced this move and its aim was atrocious. Even if it managed to hit, Magneton could always use Magnet Rise again. The Iron Defenses would allow it to survive an Earthquake or two. Still, I was mortified that I had forgotten about Smack Down. I couldn't stand to take any more chances.

"I apologize, I'll be serious now," I said to my opponent. "Magneton, Flash Cannon."

All anyone saw was the sharp, silvery flash. The bullet of light energy split the air too fast for the eye to pick up, nailing Graveler. The one shot was all it took to down the rock type.

"Your next Pokémon, please."

"What a…" and he mumbled something else under his breath, something starting with a 'K' sound.

"What was that you were saying?"

To my surprise, the Cooltrainer spoke up.

"I said I'm not losing to a cunt like you."

My temper flared. A soft voice from the distant past interjected, an instant before I blew up on the offender.

"Profanity is the attempt of a weak and feeble mind to express itself forcefully," I recited. "I hope you will remain civil for the rest of the match." Wise words courtesy of Mr. Pryce. Besides, when they started cussing out, you know you've gotten under their skin.

"F- frack it. Magcargo."

Yet another Pokémon I owned, what a coincidence. Good, I should be able to predict it too. The newcomer eyed the air above, keeping tabs on Magneton. It unfurled a plume of white-hot ash in the direction of Magneton. Magneton attempted to dive away; a hasty Light Screen prevented a sidelong blow. A Lava Plume attack, no surprise.

"Magneton, return!"

"Eruption!"

"Oh…" Magneton was zipped back to its pokeball, while the ground within 10 yards of Magcargo burst into searing spouts of lava. I could feel my own skin drying from the intense heat. Good thing Magneton was heading back into his pokeball.
"Whaat? What?! Didn't you…” Cooltrainer Warren seemed confused. "Didn't you order it to Return?" he finished.

"Return? Oh, you mean the attack, Return. No, I'm switching Pokémon."

He had thought Magneton was about to melee Magcargo; that is why he called for the close-range Eruption. Instead, the imposing form of my team lead filled the arena. Steelix dragged his tail from side to side, slowly, menacingly.

"You wasted all of Magneton's setup to switch?" he asked. Oh, he thought Return was an attack based on the assumption I wanted to keep the Iron Defenses active. Time to correct him.

"Iron Defense and Magnet Rise are of no help against Lava Plume. Holding your ground against a dangerous opponent just because you have status boosts is a silly mistake. Too many trainers fall into that trap. Steelix, Earthquake."

Warren flung his pokeballs, switching out Magcargo for a Ludicolo. Its vegetative body swayed smoothly, absorbing the Earthquake tremors with negligible damage.

"Hydro Pump!"

"Magneton!"

"Magcargo!"

"Thunderbolt!"

It became a high-speed game of switching and offense. I knew I had to end this fast, because of Magcargo's dangerous Lava Plume and the Stealth Rocks homing in on every new switch-in. Magneton's Thunderbolt lit up the Magcargo like a tesla coil, piling volt after volt into its body.

"Lava Plume."

Magcargo withdrew into its shell. Burning ash plumes billowed towards Magneton- not quickly, but Magneton didn't have the room or range to dodge.

Stay in and attempt to Thunderbolt through it? Or switch for Steelix again? I had one single second to decide, and two more to act.

"Steelix!"

The ash cloud rolled over Steelix's form. The ground beneath me shook, evidence of the Pokémon's agony-induced thrashings. The cloud of ash and smoke obscured the battlefield. I held my breath.

The cloud slowly lifted.

"Schte..." It looked bad. The steel hide was glowing. I wouldn't dare touch it, or else I'd lose my hand. Steelix moved, impossibly slowly. He was about to faint.

"Earthquake."

Predictably, Warren switched out to Ludicolo. It was redundant, however. Before the seismic waves reached the other side of the arena, Steelix collapsed.

"Two down," the trainer said, the smarmy smirk returning to his face. Magneton reappeared.
"I wouldn't switch," I cautioned him. He stared at me, as if trying to decide if I were sincere or trying to use reverse psychology.

"Magcargo."

I was being sincere.

"Thunderbolt." The familiar flash and buzz signaled another bolt of electricity diving into Magcargo's shell.

"Again."

"Lava Plume!"

I had a good feel for Magcargo's reaction speed and stamina now. It could withstand no more than two Thunderbolts, max, and was slower than Magneton. They attacked simultaneously, but my Pokémon got the first- and last- hit. Magcargo curled into its shell, fainted.

"Ugh! Flippin brattin colly-whackin-" the verbiage went on and on. Not one word was actually illicit, however. I do have to admire the willpower needed to not cuss in this situation, especially for a such a profanity-prone individual such as him.

"Ludicolo."

The final stand-off was anti-climactic. His Ludicolo was purely offensive; all of its moves were easily countered by a single Light Screen. It had nothing to protect against a simple Metal Sound/Thunderbolt combo. Ludicolo rolled over, done for, and the match was mine.

Warren was fuming. It would be no understatement to say he was as red as a Tamato Berry. Still, he kept his foul-mouthing internalized. He knew I could kick him out of the gym if he antagonized me, and I was certain he'd want a rematch.

Across the room, I spotted Connie fist-pumping. My subordinates clapped, politely. The other trainers nodded, taking in the lessons learned and planned for their own matches.

I basked in the warmth of victory for a moment. Then, it was time to heal my team. That finished, I called for the next opponent, a curvy, rambunctious woman.

"Next."

"You were swept 3-0?"

"By a Baltoy."

"A Baltoy."

"Yes."

I was frowning and being very grumpy, because the experience had been so ridiculously illogical that an extended round of pouting was almost mandatory. Losses were a part of the job. Being soloed by a single Pokémon was a little humiliating, but expected every once in a while. Yet, when it
happens, and when the beatdown comes at the hands of a prehistoric kid's toy, "humiliation" does not do my emotional state of mind justice.

"It's not even evolved!" I blurted, angrily.

"You're nitpicking, my dear. You still defeated her." Erika took a small sip from her cup of sake. We sat across from each other at a downtown café. It was late, 9:50 by the time I finished my gym battles and probation lectures.

"Once! She got me in the first rematch. Everyone else took three or more tries! And I only won the first match because she made a really silly mistake. I mean, if you're going to use Gravity to Earthquake a Magnet Riser, keep in mind it nullifies your Levitate too!" The Baltoy was caught on the receiving end of Steelix's Earthquake after nullifying its own ability, and her other two Pokémon were easy enough to deal with. Afterwards, she made sure to reverse Gravity up and down to suit her own needs. Magnemite, Magneton, and Steelix were helpless.

Oh, but that's not the worst of it. Let's sound off: Power Split to steal my offensive thunder? Check. Trick Room screwing with me and my Pokémon's senses? Check. Telekinesis lifting Steelix in the air, removing his Electricity immunity and ability to Earthquake? Double check! And, and, and- I- I must mention the coup-de-grâce of absurdity: SINCE WHEN DOES ATTACHING A TV ANTENNAE TO YOUR HEAD LET YOU USE ZAP CANNON?!?!

"Oh do stop pouting. You had plenty of victories, it sounds like."

I sighed. She was right. Memories of the rest of the matches seeped in, filling me with a warm, fuzzy glow.

"What was your record?" she asked.

"14-4," I answered.

"Four losses? Oh dear." Her head waved ever so slightly, her eyes rolled from side to side: the mixed result of deep concern and insobriety.

"What? I only have to win half my matches. I'm at better than 3 to 1." 

"How many trainers?" Erika asked.

"Six."

"Oh, poor thing."

"What?! I'm doing pretty good."

Erika put her cup down with extraordinary care, setting it beside four others. Come to think of it, she's the only person I know who drinks sake like tea. She's also a very gentle drunk, but at times can get really weird. I felt one of these episodes coming on.

"You poor, pitiful thing. You haven't read the rules on probation, have you?"

"I did."

"But, then, you must know your win ratio is not counted per battle, but per trainer."

"Huh? What does that mean?"
"Divide your losses by the number of challengers you faced. That is your true win ratio, according to the League."

"Wait, I don't understand. Run that by me again."

"Ah, it is a bit mathy. Alright, think of it as an algebra equation. You have your variables." Erika, in swooning, dainty motions, arranged two piles of salt and pepper packets, as well as a collection of used sake cups.

"Each cup is a trainer, you see? And each packet of salt is a loss, and each packet of pepper is a victory. Your victories and losses, to be clear."

"Okay."

"Five cups here. Now, once a trainer wins, they leave you alone, because they have their badge."

"Mostly," I nodded. "Sometimes they come back for rematches."

"We don't care about those. So we have five cups, so the most losses you can have is five. Let's put them by the side for now." She put one packet of salt by each cup.

"I see," I said, thinking she could really do without the visual metaphor. But, she seemed to be having fun.

"Now here comes your wins. Let's say, you got all these wins against the four trainers." She scooped up the pile of pepper packets and distributed them on the other side of the cups. There were at least twenty packets spread out aside the cups.

"Now, guess what? The league does not care about them- at all!" Without warning, she slashed at the table surface, sending the pepper packets across the room. The waitress and customers of the café eyed Erika, a little startled. I waved them off, sheepishly, even as Erika sniffed the empty cups. Her nose wrinkled. "There was tea in these before there was sake," she muttered. She lifted her eyes to me. "Green tea." She sounds like the staff had committed a grave and mortal sin. "Where was I? Oh yes. Victories, losses. You see, the pepper packs, ergo your victories, mean nothing in the equation."

She began playing with the salt packets, as if they were animal cookies. "Now, if you had five challengers, then let's say you lost twice, which means two badges given, two trainers with badges. The other three go home empty handed." She plopped one packet each into two cups. "Now your loss ratio is two out of five. Your win ratio is the the remainder. You have 'won' over the other three trainers by not letting them have your gym badge. Thus, your ratio is three out of five, or 60%. Understand?"

I would have understood without the elaborate cups and condiments metaphor, but I nodded anyways.

"So wait, this means I can't lose to a trainer at all? I have to keep beating them, no matter how many rematches, because, if they win, even once, that brings my win ratio down?" I asked in disbelief.

"Correct, my dear and brilliant Jasmine."

"I have to sweep an entire day's worth of rematches? That's not fair!"

"No, Jasmine, you have to sweep an entire lifetime's worth of rematches."

"Lifetime? You don't mean..." I uttered, the full realization coming upon me.
"Yes. You cannot let an individual trainer beat you, ever, less your win ratio go down." Erika's eyes lay upon me, a serene expression coming over her. It was pity, I realized, mixed with a little affection, caring, and drunkenness. "I am ever so sorry for your position. Why, even the best Gym Leaders in the nation struggle to reach 60% lifetime ratios." Her fingers traced invisible patterns in the air. "50% for an average Gym Leader such as yourself? Ah! Tragedy. Well, at least you have the benefit of a fresh start."

I was busy calculating the matches from the past week in my head. Including today, I was at 75 wins and 16 losses. But according to Erika's explanation, I was really at 16 losses out of 25 trainers. Two-thirds in the red. I had thought I was doing well, when in fact, I'm in a massive hole already.

"Oh god!" I cried. "I'm at 36% win ratio. Thirty-six percent!" My head promptly met the table surface. Erika leaned over to rub and pat my hair.

"There there. It's still early."

"It's not fair! How come it's so hard?! How come we have to win so much?! Tell me why! Why do we have to be perfect against all these trainers?! Why didn't I know about this? Why is the League so stupid?!"

"You never knew because you didn't have to know. The usual requirement is so low, something like 20%, most Gym Leaders never need to bother. 50% is a cruel hardship they've inflicted upon those under probation!"

She's trying to use her soothing tone of voice, but the sake has warped it into something strangely upbeat. It was pissing me off. My temper was already bad enough at the discovery of my atrocious win ratio.

"But why?! What's the point? Why must we have to win and win and win? There'll be trainers out there who've never beaten a Gym Leader, so they'll never get their badges, and that's expected? Are we seriously here to deny them a shot at their hopes and dreams?"

"Jasmine."

Erika's tone had undergone a jarring change. It was forceful, loud, and commanding. The sharpness caused me to bolt straight up. The expression on her face was no longer a mellow, drunken haze, but hard-eyed and deathly serious.

"Do you know what the duty of a Gym Leader is?"

"To test trainer's capabilities," I answered, sure of myself and yet knowing that was the wrong answer.

"Wrong!" she shouted, and I flinched. "We are here to crush their hopes and dreams!"

She went on, no longer shouting, but her forcefulness did not waver.

"The Pokémon League is not a civil service. It is a business and a regulatory body. Its primary responsibility is to ensure the safety and ethical practice of Pokémon battles. Its secondary function is to govern the business of professional Pokémon battles.

We, as Gym Leaders, are the filter through which League candidates must pass. There are hundreds of thousands of aspiring trainers, and only a tiny fraction can be allowed to make it into League play. Our job is to whittle those hundreds of thousands down to a few hundred. If it were simply a matter of perseverance, such that every trainer with a stubborn streak could collect eight badges and enter
the League, the system would be inundated. The tournaments could not handle the load, the
invitationals and seasonals would be swamped, another superfluous layer of testing and elimination
would be needed, and, above all, the payouts would be split piecemeal till the allotments came to
chump change. It would be entirely unprofitable for business. And, never, ever fool yourself into
thinking this is not a business."

"Money?!" I squeaked. "This is all about money?!"

"Where do you think your salary comes from? The League isn't funded by the government."

"We're pledging our lives to the spirit of competition, we're having our Pokémon hurt and be hurt,
we're battling other humans with all the rage and emotion of a real war, all for money?!?!" I
screched.

"It's an entertainment business. The League offers the public at large spectacle, and the public pays
for it, through ad revenue, tickets, and merchandise. We are paid to facilitate the recruitment process
for the Pokémon League. It is as simple as that."

I knew this, on a background level. I was dimly aware of how the League functioned, and how I fit
into the overall process. Yet, it had never occurred to me to question my place in that system, or even
reflect on it. But now, with the cruelty of probation bringing it into focus, it struck me as an
excessively hollow, passionless thing.

I thought about the countless trainers who I've fought. With enough time, perseverance, and training,
I yielded my badge to most of them. Not all, though. A quarter, maybe? A third?- never won against
me. The other two-thirds beat me. Yet, the overwhelming majority of them could never hope to be
good enough to conquer all eight of the Johto leaders. They'd find their match in one or two of us,
different Leaders whittling off different segments of the trainer pool. So that, only a small percentage
would ever find their way to Indigo.

The rest? They'd need to move on, find something else to do with their lives. Why are most of my
challengers so young? Because only teens and young adults can afford to travel the region and
attempt to break into League play. If they can't make it? They get older and suddenly mama and papa
stop paying the bills and they need a real job. Competitiveness fades, families are started,
responsibilities multiply, bills pile in, and without a steady income, most trainers give up. Only that
small fraction that gets into the League circuits are paid well enough to make a living out of
Pokémon battles. An even tinier fraction can find other jobs in the field, like being a Gym Leader.
But, fractions, truly; the vast lot of them are screwed.

"Good god," I said. "We're not just crushing their dreams. We're destroying their careers."

"Yes, we are." Erika resumed sipping on a new cup of sake. Her moment of blunt realism had
passed.

"That's so… tragic," I said.

"Almost as tragic as being a Gym Leader for six years and just now figuring it out."

"I knew the facts… I just never thought of it this way. All those people, and we're crushing their
dreams." Just like the League and Probation was about to crush my own dream.

"Their dream is to be the very best trainer. For every battle, there must be a victor, and a loser. For
there to be a best trainer, there can only be one victor, and many losers."

"I don't like it."
"But it is what it is. It's not as if you can change the system." She finished her sixth cup of the night.

A whisper of a fantasy crossed my imagination. A gallant young woman sets out to tear down the repressive system that she was once a part of.

If only… But no, something that big was beyond me. Beyond any one person, probably. I can only focus on my own situation. I can't beat them but they sure as hell won't beat me.

"It hurts. It hits too close to home," I muttered, upon more reflection.

"Hmmm? What does?" Erika asked lazily.

"Don't judge me," I said, as warning. "The reason I became a Gym Leader. Well, one of the reasons. I loved Pokémon battles, and not much else. I couldn't do much else. I don't have any other talents, or skills. My grades were only average. I was good at battling and I got a lucky opportunity. Do you get me?"

She stared impassively.

"I'm not necessarily a Gym Leader because I want to. I'm here because it's the only thing I can do. If I can't make it as a Gym Leader, I don't know what I'd do for a living."

Erika said nothing.

"You're not listening," I said, grumpily.

She did not stir.

"You're not awake are you? Seriously." I sighed. The woman acts like she can handle her sake, but she's such a lightweight. I waved a hand across her face. Her eyes remained focused on the air three inches in front of her nose. No response otherwise.

She was going to force me to bring her home, wasn't she? Fine, fine. I rummaged around her purse. "Cab money is coming out of your wallet, okay?" No answer. "I take that as permission." Now, to figure how to lug this woman out the door.
Ecruteak Special Order

I fingered the sheet of scrap paper nestled in my hand. It had been painstakingly compiled during Thursday afternoon's video lessons. While the process of eliminating 490 Pokémon down to less than a dozen, weighing and comparing each and every single candidate multiple times, had been mentally taxing, it was still preferable to Mr. Dronesington. The end result was a list of a mere ten Pokémon from around the nation. This was my wish-list.

"Water Absorb for Mantine," I muttered to myself. The pencil residing behind my ear came out, striking downwards to jolt another note onto the page.

At that moment the train hit a snag and the pencil head went flying. My beautiful list was ripped down the middle.

"Aww." I stared at the mangled remains of three hours of hard brainwork. There was no spare paper to copy it over, either. Dejected, I slumped back into my seat. Erika gave me a cursory glance before returning to her book.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"A novel."

"What's it about?" I asked.

"Such things as would make your virgin heart flutter," Erika answered.

I eyed the cover, full of scantily clad women fawning over Heracrossian men. I found myself staring, and beginning to drool. That book…

Look at all those fair, luscious, delicious, ravishing, untainted, immaculate, virgin leafs of paper. Would oh would Erika let me borrow one, just one? Any one would do, I would be perfectly content to violate mere margins. Though, to be sure, the chapters ends are what I truly yearn for. So much blank space, it's just begging to be pierced by the graphite of my instrument.

"Hmm?" Erika caught me enraptured. "Do you want to read it?"

"No, I want to desecrate it," I replied.

"Oh naughty naughty."

I sighed, and leaned into the side of my seat. Outside the window, Route 38 passed us by. The hedges abutting the rail blinked by too fast to be seen, just blurry fudges of green. The pastoral valley beyond was filled with Miltank farms passing lazily into and then out of view. Much further in the distance, the rugged forests and mountains barely moved. Picking the motion of the peaks was like watching the hour-hand of a clock- having no perceptible movement, except when you don't stare at it for a few seconds. It was this difference of relative motion that made me appreciate the view.

Today was Friday. One good thing about probation, it didn't stop the paycheck from arriving in the mail every other Friday morning. That meant I had a little extra money, which was now being put to use to ensure I kept getting a Friday morning paycheck. We were on a fully (if cheaply) funded Pokémon-catching expedition. I had three days, and I wanted three new Pokémon on my roster before I returned to Olivine. The first on my wish-list required a long trip to the other side of Johto.
"Ding! Attention. We will be arriving in Ecruteak in ten minutes. If you are planning on getting off, please attend to your luggage and remember to use the left-side exits. For those planning on staying aboard, our next stop will be Goldenrod City in 5 hours."

"That's our connection," I told Erika.

"How long is the layover?" she asked.

"A little over an hour. Time enough to catch lunch."

"Oh good. I know this little place from when I last visited, a nice fiesta diner, why don't we go there?" she suggested. She was staring right at me as she did so, with an overeager look to her.

"Um, okay."

The farmland ended and the trees suddenly got much closer and much, much taller. This was how I knew we had arrived at Ecruteak. The city is hidden from sight by an ancient deciduous forest. From ground level, the only visible sign of civilization was the venerable Tin Tower reaching high above the treetops.

The train station dumped us onto the end of the major avenue running through town. The boulevard was lined with elms and dogwoods, whose leaves were already starting to show their autumnal colors. They were the same trees I remembered from my brief childhood here. The human infrastructure, not so much. My finger traced the outline of an unfamiliar shopping district. Everything was much newer, more modern, more aesthetically pleasing than I recalled.

"Say, this place you're taking me to. Is it old or new?" I asked Erika.

"Old. The owner has been around for forty years. He and his wife opened it up when they were just starting out in the world. They had a lot of children and all of them help run the place now. I had a lovely meal and chat with the owner last year; it left a wonderful impression," Erika said.

"You're talking about Treyarch's, aren't you?"

"How'd you guess?"

"I lived here for two years, remember."

I let out a little half giggle. Treyarch's Café and Grill was, by far, the best dining in Ecruteak. Unless you counted the Kimono Girls' place, but I don't consider that a restaurant so much as fine entertainment with a meal on the side. Besides, it's expensive as a Lickitung's all-you-can-eat buffet bill. Treyarch, by comparison, is affordable, and the sushi burgers are soooooo good!

"Whitney and I would go there after school all the time. She'd usually chat up the boys."

"Oh really? What did you do while that went on?" Erika inquired.

"Me? I was usually dragged into the conversation," (kicking and screaming, literally, I didn't add). "I got set up on a blind date my last year of middle school there. It was terrible, just terrible. Eighth graders are so clueless, he ruined the whole meal, dumped spicy sauce over everything thinking it was soy sauce. I'm a little bitter about it."

"Why?"

"Because that was the last time I went to Treyarch's."
"Really? You've never been back to Ecruteak since?"

"Well, no." I generally avoid Ecruteak like the plague on account of one singular male inhabitant. Eh…..

My days have been spent unhappily preoccupied by probation. Morty-related stress has been relegated to the wee time it takes for me to fall asleep in bed. The former stress, while weighty, had a straightforward solution. Win matches, get off probation, simple, easy. The issue of Morty had no easy answer. I had the impossible problem of wanting him to not like me. Not merely for him to not stalk me, not bother or bug or tease me; I did not want his affection, period. But even the most forceful and explicit rejection was not enough to erase his feelings. What's worse, I don't hate him enough to pull a nuclear option to get rid of him.

I realized, through many nights' worth of anguished introspection, that I like him enough as a person to not want to hurt his feelings. He had teased me, and violated my sense of dignity to be sure, but looking back on middle school, he also helped me. He kept the more abusive boys away from me, and took my side in arguments. It was his incessant, nerd-tastic conversations about the Pokémon League that first gave me the idea of becoming a Gym Leader.

He plays pranks on people and then turns around and volunteers for community service. He gambles for money and then fights local loan-sharks. He goes out on one-night-stands and then refuses to take advantage of women. His whole persona is a mixed bag.

The only way I could think of to kill his affection would be to hurt him so badly, that he'd hate me for the rest of his life. I don't want him to hate me, that's too extreme.

But I don't want him to like me, either.

There's no good solution in sight, so I just really really really do not want to see him. Yet, here I am, stepping into his home territory. I silently prayed that coincidence would not conspire against me today.

"Something the matter?"

"It's nothing. Just a little uneasy, coming back here after being away so long," I said.

"That's unfortunate. I really like the feel of this town. It's very… aromatic," Erika said.

"Is there any city you don't like?" I wondered. Even Celadon is relatively urbanized, and she still praised it for the local flora.

"I don't like Fuschia, as a matter of fact. The place is one great tourist trap. And hot, and dry too."

"Never been."

"Really?"

"I've only been to Vermillion and north. Never south."

"You wouldn't like Fuschia either, I'm guessing. Maybe Cinnabar."

Our conversation continued all the ten minutes it took to find Treyarch's. The diner was nestled between two big, modern retail stores. Treyarch's looked like an old bug squished between them. The architectural dissonance looked ugly, but I saw plenty of shoppers hopping over to Treyarch's, so it must be good for business. From a distance, the interior looked pretty packed.
"Hope we have enough time." We made our way over.

Inside was just as homely as seven years ago, if more crowded. Luckily the line moved at a respectable pace. We waded into the melee of people, hoping I was actually in a line and not standing behind a random bystander. The crowd was crushing, with no order whatsoever for those waiting to order and those rushing to find a seat. Erika said she wanted to try a different line and I lost track of her. It was hard enough to keep my own spot and peruse the menu board.

The menu's different, I noted. They have salads and sicilian pizzas now. Sushi burgers were gone, though.

"Hi. Can I take your order?" the cashier asked.

"I'd like, um.. a macaroni salad and some water," I said, tentatively.

"Will that be all?"

"I'd like a Treyarch Club combo with a dash of stubborn and side order of cuteness," came a voice directly behind me. A hand landed on my shoulder.

I whirled about, shocked and speechless.

"What a coincidence."

"Morty! Why are you here?!"

The guy was decked out in hiking gear, with sweatband over his forehead and a tight-fitting t-shirt over his toned chest and abs. He was sweaty and smelly and oh-so-manly looking at the moment. It made me want to puke.

"That's my line!" he said, grinning. I frowned. "Hey, I promised to leave you alone. I can't help it if you come barging into my hometown and visit my favorite diner. So let me ask, why are you here?"

"You, you-"

"Is it because you miss me?" Morty asked.

"You insolent jerk!"

"Excuse me, are you together?" the cashier asked.

"Yes!" and "No!" rang out in unison.

"Yes, we are. I've got the bill," he told the cashier.

I grabbed him by the arm.

"I've got the bill," he insisted, in a low, patronizing tone towards me.

"I will not-"

"Just how much do you have in your wallet?" he asked. It might as well have been a rhetorical question.

"Ten-" 10,000P? Nope, only half of that, 5,000P. The macaroni salad cost 600P alone.
"Fine. You can pay." Look what money does to people. Compromises their integrity and values, that's what. I hate money.

As we waded through the crowd towards the tables, Morty tagged along behind me. "Why are you in a hurry?" he asked.

"To escape you, of course."

He held up a numbered card to show me. "We're on the same order, so you're stuck with me, unless you don't want your food. I'll eat it, I'm pretty damned hungry."

"Curses," I said, deadpan. "Then find a table for three." To my surprise, he already had. A booth, actually, hidden away in a corner.

"Expecting company?" he asked.

"I'm here with Erika. And to answer your question, we're just on our way through, we have a train for Blackthorn to catch in 45 minutes."

"Oh, the ever lovely Erika is here. I must have missed her."

"45 minutes. Don't waste my time. I'll have you pay for new tickets if we're late."

"Gladly. Ah, there's Erika!" He's not taking me seriously.

"Oh, a pleasure to see you again." Erika greeted Morty with a brief hug.

So there we were, sitting, eating, and chatting amicably, as if this wasn't some contrived coincidence of the gods.

The conversation was very ordinary and mainly consisted of catch up. Erika explained that she was staying in Olivine for a few months, and Morty complained about how boring his gym was recently. He'd been hiking this morning just to get out of the stuffy place. I avoided the topic of probation and fed him stories about Amphy, who was becoming more and more of a hassle to deal with.

"So, I can't imagine you came to Ecruteak to talk with me," Morty said, proving he wasn't as oblivious as he let on. "What brings you to this old piece of real estate?"

"We're passing through. I'm on my way to Route 45 to catch a new team member."

"Skarmory?" Morty guessed.

"Whah? How'd you guess?" I wanted to keep it a secret from him.

"It's the only Steel type out there," he explained.

"I'm not obligated to use all Steel types!"

"No, but what's the point of being a Steel-type specialist when you only have three or four of them? You have more Electric types than Steel types, if I remember correctly."

"You're right," Erika answered for me. "She also has just as many rock and grass types. She's a regular rainbow for someone who considers herself a Steel purist."

"Erika!"
"What? It is your fault."

"Yes, one which I am rectifying with this very trip!"

"So, who'd you bring to help you?" Morty asked.

"Everyone." My purse was sagging from the weight of ten pokeballs. Even Magcargo and Sunkern had joined the expedition: I had made a point of requisitioning them from my parents. "Except Ampharos, of course," I added. With his mood dive-bombing, I doubt Amphy would come even if he was allowed.

"You can fit everyone in there? How many do you have?"

"Ten," I answered. I placed them, one by one, on the table. I pointed out each in turn. Mentally, I was tallying their types. To my dismay, Erika and Morty's assertions were correct: I was all over the board. I thought I had at least four steel types on my roster, but apparently I've been including Pineco in that tally. I'll need to evolve her first if I want to count her as a Steel-type, though.

Morty eyed them over, counting and contemplating.

"Only ten? That's all? That's your whole roster?" he questioned.

"Yeah. How many do you own?" I asked.

Morty sat back, closed his eyes and began mumble-counting.

"Forty-three," he said at last.

"Forty-three!" I looked over to Erika.

"That's a bit more than me," she told me. "I'm not surprised though. To be as good as Morty, one typically needs a large collection."

"Oh really. How do you take care of them all?" I asked.

"PC stasis, mostly," Morty said offhandedly.

His hands began flicking at my pokeballs. Remembering his penchant for juggling other's property, I scooped the lot of them up and set them on the seat, out of his reach.


"Hey, you aren't one of those people?" he asked accusingly.

"One of those people who don't like Pokémon being treated like robots? Yes, yes I am."

Morty shook his head.

"Bleeding heart, I swear. See, Pokémon have no conception of time while in stasis. The only time that matters to them is when they're fetched out, that's when they're living their life. It's not like they feel like they're imprisoned in a computer or something. It's like sleeping. Even proven to increase their lifespan. It's a scientific fact. Read PokeGeographic sometime."

"Doesn't matter!" I fired back. "It's not about the Pokémon, it's about their trainer being a callous master who doesn't care enough to tend to them."
"Eh…” he leaned back.

"Erika?” I turned to my friend for support.

"You both seem to have good points,” she said simply.

"That's not how you back up a friend."

"How am I supposed to do that, exactly?"

"You say I'm right and he's wrong."

"I think I should make a terrible friend if I was dishonest," she said calmly.

"Come on, just back me up here."

"I'm afraid I can't conscientiously do that," and she shrugged.

"You're mean."

"You think if she treated humans half as nicely as Pokémon she wouldn't be so unpopular," Morty said. Erika laughed aloud.

"Who says I'm unpopular? I get plenty enough attention from the men," I exclaimed.

"That's because your looks cater to certain fetishes," Morty said, reaching over to hold me by the chin. The same appendage quickly found itself pinned to the table by an elbow.

"Pedo."

"Ephebo, technically. Could you release my hand please?"

"There's no difference. No. How can you be so good at steering topics towards the carnal?"

"Pedo refers to young children, ephebo is young but sexually mature women. Pretty please? And the answer is practice."

"That's not very lady-like," Erika noted. Regretfully, I let him have his hand back, which he began nursing.

"You're saying I get so many suitors because of…" and I made a cupping motion across my stunted cleavage.

"There is a sizable demographic for it," Morty said. The fact that he practically admitted the fetish for himself, in such a calm, analytical manner pissed me off. TO NO END.

"You're blushing," Morty told me.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"You are too," Erika added.

"I am fuming. There's a difference."

"When it comes to you? No there isn't. You don't fume when you're mad, you do when you're
flustered about something sexual. Like your chest size."

"That's not true."

"That reminds me of a joke Whitney once told her," Erika pitched in. "We were discussing the difference between the well-endowed and the not-so-well-endowed. Whitney explained it was a matter of curvature. Stacked breasts are only as large they appear, but small bumps are actually only the tip of an enormous hidden knocker."

"How did Jasmine react?"

"Red as a rose."

Morty nodded in a knowing manner.

"What's with the frown?" he asked me. "You don't have breast envy, do you?"

"Hardly!" I tried gathering my argument, but it was difficult because it wasn't easy to explain in one short comeback line. I held up a hand for silence.

"I don't have 'breast envy' nor do I care. I'm simply irritated that breasts are considered a sexual asset of any caliber, and even more irritated that such crass jokes as that exist. As if the "not-so-well-endowed", as Erika so kindly puts it, should need the comfort of such jokes. It's a terrible indictment against society that young women derive their self-image from the size of their mammary glands."

"Have you ever considered joining a debate team?" Morty asked.

"Don't you dare undercut me!" I cried.

"It doesn't matter how angry she gets, it just adds to her charm! It's seductive, it really is. She's a real succubus," Morty said to Erika, ignoring me completely. I rapped him on the arm, to get his attention.

"Definition of Sarcasm: disguising insults as compliments," I quoted.

"Irony: taking compliments to be insulting," Morty shot right back.

"I hate to interrupt your little word war, but Jasmine, you ought to finish that soon." Erika nodded towards my meal. I looked at my salad, hardly touched. Worse still, my stomach let out an audible growl a moment later.

"Leaving?" Morty inquired.

"I told you, we're heading to Blackthorn."


"So you're going to Blackthorn to catch a Skarmory. I haven't caught a new Pokémon in a while. A year or so. Sounds fun. Wish you the best of luck. But sounds like so much fun. Wish I could go," he said aloud. He leaned back into the chair, staring at the fan on the ceiling.

"But… I can't. Mmm. Hmm. Why not?" he continued. "It's the weekend. Gym's closed. Nothing to do, no one to do, no movies to see, no appointments. Man I sure miss getting out into the country. I just got paid too. Fine, I'll go."
"No."

NO!

"What? I'll be on my best behavior."

"Your "best" behavior is still in the bottom 10% of humanity!"

"That's too harsh. It's not like you can stop me, I have my rights."

"Remember what we talked about in the lighthouse?" I said. Erika piqued up- I hadn't breathed a word of me and Morty's late-night rendezvous to her.

"I remember someone didn't give me a hug goodbye," Morty said.

Me: Duel-wield facepalm.

"I can help you. I happen to know a little about Route 45 and Skarmory. It'll be fun. I can even show you this great little get-away. There's a nice swimming hole, and a terrific view. You can see all the way to Mt. Silver. It'll be great!"

He looked at me with his best puppy face- which itself wasn't much to look at.

"I wouldn't mind," Erika said.

"He's not coming."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because! He's a jerk! He'll get in our way! Might I remind you, this is not a vacation, it's a business trip with a specific objective, and a wisecrack party-animal like him will screw everything up. He is not coming!"

"Too bad." Morty had his smartphone out and was tapping on it rapidly. "It's done. I'm coming." He turned the screen towards me. A receipt image indicated a ticket to Blackthorn.

"You can do that?" I asked.

"It's a smartphone, it can do anything."

"Can it make me a sushi burger?" I wondered.

"Yes."

"No it can't."

"Yes it can."

"No it can't."

"Yes it can."

"No it… we're not going to sit here repeating ourselves are we?"

"Yes it can," he repeated, grinning at his own insolence.

"Prove it."
"Already done."

"Oh? Where's my sushi burger?" I mimed holding an invisible burger bun between my hands. "Not seeing it." Morty remained silent, but unfazed.

"Gah! Whatever, it doesn't matter, I don't want you to come."

"Too bad. I already have the ticket."

"Let me see that!" I snatched his phone away from him. "How do I cancel this?" I fiddled with the buttons and menus, trying to figure out the interface.

"Sorry, no refunds," Morty said smugly.

I returned to the receipt image, and sure enough, "No refunds available" appeared near the bottom in small print. Although, on second glance, this ticket looks different from the one I purchased.

"You bought a plane ticket," I said. Morty stared at me, not comprehending. The awkward stare continued for a few more uncomfortable seconds. "We're taking the train," I explained.

"Uh…" We waited some more for that to sink in. "Fuck! Give me that! How do I switch over! How do I…?! I thought-" he snatched the phone from me and frantically pounded at its interface.

"Sorry, no refunds." "Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Five more 'damn its' followed, in escalating pitch, till he sounded like a little girl having an emotional breakdown. I smiled smugly, enjoying his anguish. Erika remained nonplussed, concentrating instead on her soup.

"Well, that's blown." Morty turned to me. "So, uh, wait for me at the airport? Well, wait, I'm on a plane, so I'll get there first… I guess I'll wait for you two."

"You could be there for a while. Train doesn't get in till 10:30."

"10:30? Okay, I'll meet you there and then, kay?"


"Oh, and doesn't your plane depart the same time as us?" I asked, smugly knowing the answer.

"Yeah… crap." The Ecruteak airport is much farther than the train station. He'd have to high-tail to make it to his flight.

"I'll be taking my leave then." He started to run off, stopped, and turned, only to find a napkin thrown in his face.

"No zingers!" I declared. "Just get out of here." With a stupefied look on his face, he did so.

"Come on," I commanded Erika as I quickly stood up. "He'll show up to the station late; we can ditch him beforehand."

We entered the restroom to take care of business and wash.

"You were awfully quiet back there," I observed.

"Self-preservation. The space between you two is not exactly the safest place in the world,
figuratively speaking," Erika said.

"What do you make of this?" I asked her.

"In my opinion, I think you're too harsh on him. He's such a nice and level person to chat with when you aren't around, not half so uncouth by himself. It's only because you react so badly that he baits you. If you treated him like any other person- well, as far as you're concerned, as any other male would do- he wouldn't antagonize you so much."

"He likes me."

"Really?" She took the statement with mild surprise. "Are you sure?"

"From his own mouth."

"As in likes you, likes you?"

"To be specific, he has feelings for me."

"That's... wonderful! Why don't you date him?"

"Why don't I? Why should I?! Are you kidding me?!"

"No, not at all. I'm asking specifically what you dislike about him. He seems like perfect boyfriend material."

"Because he has a Y chromosome. That's all the reason I need."

"Oh good grief. If you absolutely had to have a relationship with someone, if you were forced, I think he would be your best option."

"I'd sooner die."

"He's smart, funny, handsome, he can be very caring and passionate. You're both very interested in Pokémon, and even if you don't see it, he deeply loves his Pokémon. I don't see what you have against him."

"HE IS A GUY! Can you not understand that?"

"Can't I? Are you really, truly, against relations with the opposite sex? Are they that abhorrent to you?"

"Yes! And Morty, he is the worst of them!"

"I don't believe that. I don't believe you even believe that."

"Listen! It takes more than a few nights of conversation to get to know him," I said. "I've known him for years and years; he's cavalier about every decision he makes, he's obsessed with his own pleasure and ego, and he never thinks of how his actions can affect others until it's too late, and then he says "sorry" like it means anything. Oh, and for him, everything revolves around sex."

"Oh I highly doubt that."

"Trust me. Besides, I'm really not fond of that cockiness of his. It's like he has an alpha-complex. Not one ounce of humility. It gets annoying."
"But you enjoy the teasing," Erika remarked.

"Do not!"

She shook her hands dry and drifted away, to hide an eye roll, I'm sure.

"He's too… too… I don't know. Too extroverted for me." I finished washing my hands and face.

"And you are introverted, my dear. Opposites attract."

"Hey, you know what matter and anti-matter do when they attract? Kaboom!" I splayed my arms outwards for emphasis, splattering my and Erika's faces with little wet droplets.

We made our way through the throng gathered by the door. I looked around, taking in Treyarch's quirky décor one last time. Hopefully it won't be seven years before I come here again.

"Let's go," I said.

"Miss! Miss!"

"Huh?"

I turned to find one of the café runners heading in my direction. She dodged several customers till she stood before me.

"Are you Jasmine?"

"Yes, that's me."

What could she want with me?

"Here's your special order. Chefs send their compliments; they loved that someone remembered their old recipe. So, uh, there you go. Have a nice day!" The runner handed me a to-go box and disappeared. I opened it up, baffled.

"A sushi burger?"

I ended up eating the sushi burger on the train. I have a principle that says I never take handouts, and also I do not accept gifts given out of spite or mockery. Principle was flung out the window after a half hour of hunger pangs. The burger was every bit as delicious as I remembered it.

"So why did we have to hurry?" Erika asked me. I finished picking bits of shredded shrimp off my lips.

"I told Morty we'd get there an hour after our actual arrival. With any luck, we can scoot out of the station before he wises up."

"That's not very nice. After he spent so much to buy the plane ticket just to spend time with us?"

"He's got a lifetime's worth of pranks on his ledger, I think I can be afforded one or two misdeeds of my own."
"Fine, fine." Erika sighed. "You know I wish you two would just kiss and hitch up already-"

"Eww! No!" I interjected.

"-but that's a futile argument. Still, why'd we have to leave the café in such a hurry? The train wouldn't have left any earlier."

"Because-" and I stopped short of answering. She had a point, and now I look stupid. When I found the real reason within my subconscious, I still didn't want to air it.

It was because Morty had gotten to me. He's getting under my skin, saying things about myself that I would rather deny. The bit about my fuming actually being hormonally-induced fluster: it was true. Back in middle school, I would shout and berate others upon any little mention of innuendo. I hadn't wanted anyone to know such things affected me, and by extension, to think I was interested in such things. It was immature of me, I knew, but embarrassment and pride do not make for mature decisions.

"I was a little emotional, that's all."

"Mmm. I see," Erika said. "By the way, I'd still like that heart-to-heart you promised me."

"Yeah, but not now."

"Of course not now, we're in public."

"Right."

"But sooner than later, please?"

I nodded, staring at the headrest in front of me.

The train ride bore on. The afternoon devolved into evening, the sun began setting, and we approached Mahogany Town. There was a brief stop, where we picked up take-out chow-mien chicken and noodles and brought it back aboard. Generally Erika was engrossed in her book, while I sat at the window, contemplating the universe and human misery. Our longest conversation was a three minute discussion on Erika's plans for the Olivine branch of her company.

"Maybe, in case you lose your Gym Leader position, you can run the shop for me," she suggested.

"I don't want to think about it."

The ride remained uneventful. It was utterly dark by the time we hit the mountains. A hand tapped my shoulder.

"Hello?"

I looked over my shoulder. An unfamiliar young woman greeted me. She had the appearance of a garden wife, and I noticed a pleasant, earthly aroma coming off of her.

"Excuse me, but I was listening to your conversation earlier. Do you work in the perfume business?"

"No, not me, my friend does. She runs an aroma and houseplant business."

"Oh really? Is it local?" the woman asked.

"No, it's in Kanto. Celadon," I answered.
"Oh really?! Do you mean Serene Grace Nursery and Aromatics?"

"That's the one."

"Oh! Then… Excuse me," the woman addressed Erika. "Does that mean you are the Celadon Gym Leader Erika?"

Erika looked up, a bit surprised. Her business was nationally famous, but she looks surprised to have fans. Her expression was bemused, as if saying, 'I've got fans? What do I do with them?'

"That is me," Erika responded.

"Oh wonderful! I'm in love with your products! Oh, and your battling style! I'm a trainer, a self-styled Aroma Lady, you see. Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Violet."

"Pleased to meet you, Violet."

With that awkward introduction out of the way, the pair launched into an hour-long discussion on every conceivable topic related to grass-type Pokémon: their behavior, which ones they liked and didn’t like, the relative attractiveness of various aromas and perfumes, distillation techniques, their experiences in western Kanto and eastern Johto, successful experiments, and so on. I quickly ran out of things to contribute, so Erika moved back to sit with Violet.

I had just about tuned the flower-fanatics out, when Erika mentioned me.

"I think it's charming that she loves the scent of her namesake. I even bred her an Oddish with the scent."

"Oh that's neat. Jasmine, then was it? If you're not in the aroma business, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a Gym Leader," I said, casually, not thinking it mattered.

"Wait, you're THE Jasmine?!" Violet exclaimed.

"Huh? I guess so," I replied, now carrying the same dazed look Erika sported earlier. The lady lifted herself out of her seat to speak face-to-face. I was forced to turn in my seat and stare up at her, a position that made me feel vulnerable.

"I've wanted to meet you so badly! Ah! Well, I didn't imagine I'd meet you here, though. I'm trying to win the Johto gym challenge, and I only have two badges remaining. I'd love to battle you, if you don't mind! You are, in my opinion, the best Gym Leader in the region, based on the stories I hear."

"I, uh…" I really don't know what to say about that. At the very least, Clair is better than me, probably Morty, Pryce, and Whitney, and Chuck might be able to beat me because of type advantage. "I don't think I deserve such high praise."

"Nonsense! Will you battle me, sometime? I mean…"

"I don't know…" I said, unsure. This was awkward.

"I mean, I don't know if you're getting off in Blackthorn too… Ah, but it's rude of me to just ambush you like this too, I should wait and visit your gym, shouldn't I?" Her eager joy faded to such sincere disappointment, it tugged at my heart.

"It's okay." I gave it a moment's thought. "If you want, we can battle tomorrow? I'll be in the area. It
won't be an official match, of course, I'd need the gym facilities for that…" I double-checked myself. Yes, those are the rules. Official gym battles required the proper facilities, including working force fields, a pokerecorder for analysis and assessments, and usually an unbiased judge to officiate. The rules made it impossible to hold an official, badge-yielding match anywhere but the gym itself. I continued, "Unless we convinced Clair to let us use her gym, and I highly doubt it, we can only have a friendly match. Is that okay?"

"Oh, I'd love it! Any chance to test myself against someone like you… it's thrilling! Oh, and perhaps I could battle Erika too?"

"You sound rather eager," Erika said. "I can't turn down such enthusiasm."

"Forgive me, I know I'm rude and blunt. I… I'm on a journey, you see."

Erika and I tilted our head, noting the change in Violet's tone.

"What kind of journey?" I asked, hoping to coax her on.

She began talking, but without her kid-like enthusiasm.

"I'm from Goldenrod, originally. When I was young, maybe fifteen, I set off on a Pokémon journey. It was your typical teenage fantasy: finish the Johto gym challenge and fight to become a champion. I wasn't half-bad, either, earned three badges quick enough. Then I was… sidetracked. Life got in the way, and I had to give up the whole journey-thing."

"And then?"

"Well, fast-forward to today, and I've found myself with a lot of free time and many, many regrets. I decided to pick up where I left off, and try to finish the gym challenge."

"You sound like you've been through some tough times," Erika offered. Violet nodded.

"Yes. You could say I'm using this trip to push past it. It's not easy, you understand. He left me."

Erika and I remained silent, registering what had been confided to us.

I didn't know what to say. Should we just pretend she hadn't revealed that? Or tell her unfelt words of condolence?

"No worries. You are doing exactly what you need to be doing. There will be happier times," Erika said.

"No worries here. It hurts, sometimes, but I feel like it's getting better. Well, since I found myself free, I wanted to pick up where I left off- and maybe try to get past this… this last part of my life."

I nodded.

To comfort and care for someone… sometimes I find it so difficult to show them. I have trouble mustering such feelings for people, strangers and friends alike. There are times when I logically know I should care, but I can't muster the emotions. It's a defect of mine, and it makes me feel terrible. Even when I do put my heart out for someone, I don't know how to express it properly, because I have so little experience.

There was no trouble in relating to this woman, though. She was wronged by a man, that is something I can really sympathize with. I want to show I care, but what can I do for this lady?
"If it means anything to you, then I will battle you, tonight. And I will find a way to make it count as an official match, if I can," I said. That should be good, right?

"Oh… that's too much, too kind. Thank you."

"You came from Ecruteak, didn't you? Does that mean you managed to beat the Gym Leader there?"

"Ah, yes, it was not too difficult."

She beat Morty, which means I shouldn't underestimate or coddle her. If I lost, so be it, it will help her feel more confident. If she lost, I can always offer an invitation to my gym.

I reached over, telling her, "I've got my whole team ready, they're right…" and paused. My pokeballs weren't in my purse. "Maybe I stashed them with the spares," I said, referring to the heap of empty pokeballs I was going to try to catch Skarmory with. They weren't there either.

"Erika, have you seen my pokeballs?"

"They were in your purse, last?"

"They're… oh, shit." Not even the embarrassment of being caught cussing could override this feeling of sudden panic. "I left them at Treyarch's."

"You left them?" Erika asked.

"Who is Treyarch? Are they riding along with you?" Violet looked about the train's interior.

"I left my Pokémon team in Ecruteak. I lost them," I said, dumbly.

'Oh shit!' indeed.

"Jasmine, don't panic." Erika said.


"Breath," she implored me. "Don't think about what may have happened to them. Don't fear. Don't stress. Think only about solutions. Think about how we can fix this."

HOW THE FUCK ARE WE GOING TO FIX THIS?!?!?! THEY'RE ALL AT THE TABLE, SURROUNDED BY STRANGERS, THREE HUNDRED MILES AWAY! ANYONE COULD TAKE THEM! A THIEF, A CROOK, A PERVERT! WHAT IF THEY GET OUT? WHAT IF SOMEONE LETS THEM OUT? THEY'LL BE SURROUNDED BY STRANGERS AT NIGHT AND WON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO! WHAT IF THEY'RE LOST? WHAT IF THEY'RE IN DANGER?!!?! HOW AM I GONNA FETCH THEM? WHAT IF I NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN?!

I looked up. Erika was staring at me with fearful eyes. Or rather, I saw the fear in my own eyes reflected in hers. I was shaking uncontrollably; my arms, though I tried clenching myself, spasmed outward in pained jerks. Kaleidoscope-like thoughts conjured images of ten pokeballs, tossed in a garbage, pawned by a street thug, smashed beneath a truck tire. Ten little souls, abandoned.

"Where are you going?" Erika asked, as I slowly got to my feet.
"I'm going to stop the train," I said.

"Do what?"

"I'm going to stop this train. I'm going to make it turn around."

"How? Wait!"

"I don't know. The emergency lever."

"No! Stop! Violet, help me!" Erika frantically asked Violet. The two of them grappled with my limbs- I didn't care, I clawed and shoved and hit my way free, before being tackled to the ground. Other passengers jumped to their feet, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Let go of me!" I screamed.

"Think! Calm down and think rationally!"

"I'm going to turn this train around damn it, so let go of me!"

"No! I won't have you going to jail!"

"Let go! Let go! LET GO! I swear if I have to derail this train I will get my Pokémon back!"

"I can't let you do that!"

"Why not! They're my Pokémon! My Pokémon!"

"I know you care about them, but you can't sabotage a public vehicle!"

"I don't care! I don't care who I inconvenience, I want my Pokémon back now!" I screamed and writhed and tried every convulsion known to the human anatomy to try to break free, but the two women's weight pinned me like a bug on a board.

"Why the fuck do you have to get in my way! Get off me you bitches!"

"We can work something out. We'll call the Ecruteak police, we can think of something that will actually work. But please, calm down!" Erika was near in tears. Serves her right for assaulting me.

"DING! This is the conductor speaking. We are now approaching Ice Path Station. We'll be making a scheduled stop until traffic on the Icicle Line allows us through. This shouldn't be more than fifteen minutes, and we will probably arrive on time. No promises though. So just hold tight and I'll update you folks in a few."

"The conductor! If I speak with him, he'll listen! He'll turn the train around!"

"They're not going to turn the train around for you!"

"Fine!" I went limp for a moment. Erika and Violet relaxed, giving me the opening I wanted. I burst out and leapt towards the back of the train. The two women gave chase.

By the time I reached the caboose, the train had begun slowing. We were approaching the station, a collection of lights far down the other end of the train.

"Wait! Stop!"
I ignored Erika's pleas. Anxiety gripped my whole being- though it was much stronger than what the word 'anxiety' implies- it was more of a mortal fear.


Erika appeared at the rail.

"Where are you going?!!" she cried.

"To get my Pokémon!" I shouted.

"You're going to run back? All the way to Ecruteak?!"

"If I have to!"

"Stop! Please stop!"

"Why? WHY?!?! They're my Pokémon! Even if I have to marathon the equator, I'll get them back! Do you know how much I care about them?!?!!"

"YES!!" Erika finally blew her top, screaming back at me. The train had come to a stop, and now Erika, and Violet behind her, were framed by the narrow silhouette of the doorway. Their figures diminished, further and further, as I continued running into the darkness.

"Yes! I know how much you care about your Pokémon! I know how you love them! But I care about you just as much as you care for them!"

I trotted to a halt, looking back at her.

"You're like a sister to me! Like family! And I'm about to wretch because my sister is doing something really stupid right now and is just going to cause more trouble without ever bringing her Pokémon back to her! And I think of those Pokémon, and they're in a diner and even though I'm afraid for them, I still hope that the restaurant staff would have the mind to pick up the pokeballs and set them aside, safe and sound- but then I think of my stupid little sister running off into the wilderness in the dark, miles and miles away from civilization, and I'm terrified! Terrified! So come back here before you kill me!"

I stood, breathing heavily, not having the oxygen in my brain to think clearly.

Another figure, one of the train operators, appeared at the doorway.

"Misses, is everything alright?" he asked. He looked out, spotting me in the dim fringe of light. "Oh, hey! You should use the side exits, miss! It's dangerous on the tracks at night!"

I couldn't make out Erika's face. But, I could hear her. She was sobbing.

"Is everything alright? Is anyone hurt?" the operator asked.

I walked back, slowly, extreme trepidation and physical exhaustion addling my stride.

The operator helped me back aboard, looking confused and hoping for an answer.

"We will be fine," I told him, slowly, without politeness or reassurance. Violet filled in for me.
"There was a misunderstanding, sir, but I think we got it figured out," she said to him, and led him inside.

Drivels of tears marked Erika's cheeks.

"I'm... I'm..." I tried saying sorry, but couldn't. "I'm scared," I said instead.

"Why do you do this to me?! Of course you're scared! I'd be too, if I lost the most important person in the world to me. But won't you think of my feelings at all?" Erika cried.

The most important person to me? Amphy came to my mind. But, he's safe. Besides, he's a Pokémon. Pokémon aren't people, they're creatures. But to me, maybe that makes them all the more important. They don't hurt me like people do. They give me joy when people bring me nothing but nuisance and sorrow. I have ten Pokémon I care for more than any human in this world.

And so, not thinking it through, I said something I would regret for a lifetime.

"If I had to choose between my Pokémon and you, I'd choose my Pokémon, every time, no matter what."

Erika stared at me in shock, for a moment, and as soon as the words left my mouth, I knew I was wrong.

Yet, to my utter surprise, Erika grabbed me in a hug. "That... that hurts, Jasmine." she said. "But I understand. I won't ever make you make that choice."

Was it that easy for her to forgive me? That was the meanest, most spiteful thing I've ever told someone, and she can just let it go, with just a hug?

She parted her embrace, took my hand, and led me back to our seat. Violet was just finished feeding some fib to the operator and other passengers. Something to put my little freak-out in a better light.

I, myself, was consumed by all manner of emotions. None made sense, and none convinced me the situation was any better than before. What helped, though, was the running. The surge of adrenaline that had pushed me over the edge a few minutes before had been purged by physical exertion. I stared about the cabin, in a daze, coping with conflicting thoughts and sore nerves.

Erika was busy with her phone. Violet kept an eye on me, asking me how I was feeling every few minutes. The train eventually started back up again. As we climbed into the mountain lines, it was not going nearly as fast as it did earlier.

My friend turned to me. She appeared composed, but the signs of recent drama hadn't yet left her countenance.

"I've made some phone calls. Someone will visit Treyarch's, and if they can't find your pokeballs, they'll notify the police. The PC Admin will put a flag out in case someone tries to upload them onto the system. If we have to, we can take a train or bus back to Ecruteak once we reach Blackthorn."

I nodded, comprehending, but not feeling better. I could only think of what could go wrong with each solution; and I kept coming back to the worst case scenario- my Pokémon, gone, forever.

"Jasmine," Erika said, trying to catch my attention.

I turned, staring her eye to eye.
"Don't ever do that again."

I gave her no answer.

"Like it or not, there are humans who care for you. If you do something that endangers yourself, you're hurting them too. And I consider myself one of those people. Promise me that."

She's right. I'm bitter and my pride is shot to pieces because of what I just did, and what I just told her, but I knew that I was wrong and she was right. It was only a question of whether I could bear to acknowledge it, out loud.

…

I couldn't. It was too much for me to do that.

"It's like that time," I said aloud, a dim memory reaching out to me. A painful one. A night spent sobbing over the heaving, deathly pale form of Amphy. The worst night of my entire life. Infinitely worst than anything Morty or any other male had put me through. This was like that. The same fear, the same inestimable mental torture. Perhaps the fact that I don't know what happened to my Pokémon now makes it less painful than back then.

I really, truly thought I was going to lose him…

Just thinking about that night, about how close it was, seized my heart. Six years on and the fear still grips me, even long after it's over and past, it still scares me. A tear came to my eye, and as it leaked out, it seemed like it took the flurry of anger and fear and negativity with it.

I don't know that I've really lost my Pokémon this time. They're simply not here with me. There's a chance I'll see them again. A good chance, actually. And there's something I can do about it. And this is my fault, not some unaccountable act of nature. This is not as bad as that one night, not at all.

A deep breath, try to clear the mind. Fail to do so, but at least, quiet the raging emotions down a bit. Let logic gain a foothold.

"You're right," I said to Erika. "I'll be okay now. Let's do what you say. How much longer till Blackthorn?"

Violet answered.

"Four hours. The conductor said there was a landslide that's causing delays throughout the mountain rail lines. We'll get there about 10:40 now. You'll be okay?"

I nodded.

"I know it's tough to bear, I've been through it myself. It'll be alright," she offered. I waved her off.

The mountains rushed by, nothing more than dark black lumps against a slightly less dark sky. Eventually it was just a solid wall of blackness, as the train weaved through cliffcut routes, with no sky visible. Sometimes a small lamplight passed by, illuminating towering pine trees and not much else.

I got it into my head that my Pokémon were probably snatched by the busser. He would be rolling through his duties, picking up plates and refuse, and wiping down the tables and seats. He'd lean down to clean the seat off, and find ten pokeballs stacked into the corner. He'd be surprised, look around, maybe ask a nearby customer if they knew anything. No answer, so he'd put them in his
bussing tray. He'd hand them off to the cashier lady, and she'd put them under the counter, with the other lost items. They'd wait and see if anyone claimed them.

That would be the best case scenario I could conceive of. I'd have to turn around and high-tail it back to Ecruteak as soon as we reached Blackthorn. I'd march back to Treyarch’s, ask for my Pokémon, and the cashier would smile and hand them over, happy to see them returned to their owner. The weekend itinerary would be shot, but this self-inflicted disaster would be over.

This was my hope.

The worst case scenario, the busser would pick the pokeballs up, and keep them for himself. Or pawn them off to a thug, or Team Rocket, for quick cash. Beyond that- I didn't want to think about it.

Lights began appearing through the tree line. We were approaching Blackthorn. It was time to get up and try to get some action into motion. My muscles felt drawn, wasted. I wiped my face, feeling the salted residue of tears. Had I cried?

"We're here," Erika said. "Come, let's go to the lobby. We can ask for help from there."

Reluctantly, I picked myself up. The car was packed with bustling people. The delay and late arrival meant no one else was especially chipper. Aching joints and sleeping limbs abounded. My miserable self felt right at home. No one paid me any heed for the scene I had created earlier, thankfully. We filed off the train, one by one, out into the night. In darkness, pretty much every city looks the same.

"Are you going to be okay?" Erika asked yet again.


The lobby was busy, but only in that all the ex-passengers flowed towards the exit; there was barely anyone standing around. We didn't so much walk as get pushed forward by the human current. A hand tapped my shoulder. I looked up, to my left, finding Erika smiling. She pointed towards the end of the lobby. I turned to see a singular human standing still amongst the moving background. A man.

That's right, he was expecting us. We didn't get to ditch him after all…

He looked tired, more-so than the other travel-lagged people flowing around him. His shoulders hung limp, and he was resting his back against the wall. He had the posture of someone who had just put in eight hours of hard manual labor. Erika waved to him. He spotted us, and with great effort, mustered a smile and a wave back. Then he held up a cloth bag. Inside, I caught the glimmer of red over white. Pokeballs.

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...  

"Oof!" Morty let out, stunned by the impact of my whole body leaping onto him.

"I guess I got my hug after all,” he said faintly. I squeezed him tighter. He felt warm.

At last, I let go. He handed me the bag. I counted, all ten were there.
I looked up to Morty.

"You did this?" I asked.

"It was nothing, really," he said.

"How?" I asked.

"I had a friend send them through the PC."

Does it even matter how? I had my Pokémon back! I hugged him again. "Thank you," I whispered, burying my head into his shoulder.
The Skarmory Expedition

That night I must have looked like a Delibird, the pokeball-filled sack clutched firmly in my grasp like a pillow. The motel bed was surprisingly soft, but cold. Erika found me the next morning curled into a ball, wrapped in as many covers as I could lay hands on.

"Wake up sleepy," she intoned.

I did so, extremely slowly and reluctantly, while attempting to keep as many blankets on top of me as I could.

"Why is it sooo cold?" I tip-toed towards the restroom, wriggling in the cloak of blankets and feeling for the last vestiges of residual warmth in them.

"It's almost October, and we're in the mountains. You're not a morning person, are you?"

"Nooo." I then yawned for effect.

In the bathroom, I stripped naked and turned the shower on. It took a minute or so for the water to heat up, leaving me to shiver and dance foot-to-foot in the freezing air. Once the steam began billowing out, I jumped in. The shower was searing hot, just the way I liked it.

"Feels like heaven," I said aloud.

Erika knocked at the door. "Can I get ready while you shower?"

"Sure. Just close the door." I like it when bathrooms steam up, so when you get out of the shower, it's still warm and humid and comfy. I don't get that pleasure in my apartment, the hot water doesn't last long enough.

"So what's the plan for today?" Erika asked, busying herself at the sink.

"Morty's insane if he thinks we're going swimming. It's so cold! Why is Blackthorn freezing and Olivine still thinks it's mid-summer? Altitude cannot possibly explain the dif- oh, the plan? I got a map from the Pokémon ranger website; it has the population density for Skarmory. We'll just set out for the most convenient nesting ground."

"I see."

"Did you talk to Morty?"

"Yes, he's still in bed." 

"Pfft. Typical of him. You know, with all that occult crap he does at night, it's a wonder he gets any sleep at all."

"I assume he gets just as little sleep as you do, miss-greet-the-dawn Noctowl."

"Shut up," I said, a little testily.

"I'm sorry," she replied.

I turned face-first into the stream, simply taking in the feeling of hot liquid cascading down my cheeks, hair, shoulders, back, and breasts. I stood there, eyes closed, doing nothing; just listening and
feeling and contemplating existence as a creature of pure sensory and zero intellectual capacity.

At length, I opened my eyes and looked down at myself.

"I'm naked," I said aloud.

I looked at my nude self and wondered, *is this actually enticing to men?*

I see this sight every single day and think nothing of it. It's weird, actually. I, and every other sensible human being, would be mortally ashamed to be caught naked anywhere else. It's embarrassing enough to simply be in the presence of another naked human. But here, in the bathroom, it's so normal and so ingrained in our daily routine we aren't even conscious of it, let alone think of it in a sexual context.

Yet, what is normal and unremarkable for one person is blasphemy for another. What is it about men that drives them crazy at the sight of a boob or vagina, or hell, a bare belly or thigh or shoulder, for that matter? I don't get it at all. Is it really because of the discrepancy in gender? We humans seek and lust after that which is apart from us? Why? Because of instinct? Is it that simple? That's stupid. There ought to be parity between the sexes. If an image is sexy, a girl and a boy should be able to see that equally as well. But boys think of me in a sexual fashion, whereas I can't imagine the same about myself. Do boys think of themselves sexually? Or is it just girls' bodies they drool over? Does it work the other way around as well? Can even a hardened shrew like myself get turned on by a boy?

As example, Morty seems to think I'm pretty. I'm certain that, if it were him on the other side of the curtain and not Erika, the mere proximity to my nude self would give him a hard-on. I think, objectively, he's not bad looking either. Therefore, would I be horny if I witnessed him in his birthday outfit?

I tried imagining it, starting with his penis. A round, robust rod, probably erect, because in this imaginary scenario he'd be turned on by me looking at him nude. So, erect. The head is soft and smooth, while the shaft is sort of veiny. Some pubic bush, kind of gross, and balls, the whole ensemble laying there between his thighs.

I imagined cupping it in my hands, probing and kneading and massaging. A man's sacred treasure, there for my taking, for my pleasure…

…Nope. This isn't doing anything for me.

The image shattered, my hands fell down to my side.

Is it really only men who can take pleasure in visual stimulation? If so, it isn't fair. There shouldn't be a discrepancy between the two genders. Either men should be less horned or women should be more horned at the sight of the opposite gender's private parts. Either way would make my life a lot simpler.

Now, to be fair, it could just be me. At the gala table, I was the only one who hadn't "partaken", so that might mean I may be a genuine asexual anomaly. Strangely, that possibility alarms me. I don't want to be different; but I don't want to be the same as those apes, either. I wish everyone were like me, discerning and innocent. That's asking too much of the universe, isn't it? How would anyone exist if no one made babies?

Then… what?

Am I really different? I tried imagining Morty again, still starting with his member. I felt the same non-reaction, so I moved on to his torso. I didn't have to imagine that, though, I'd seen his finely crafted Oshawott abs, his sleek-yet-firm chest and shoulders. Mmmm… Aroused yet?... No?... Eh…
Still nothing. On to his legs, then: strong, beefy, always taking him to whatever faraway place in the woods for his next adventure. His back, broad, like a swimmer’s, big enough and strong enough for me to ride on. Long arms, things he could carry me in, or wrap around me and hug me with. Hands-large, but surprisingly delicate, gentle and precise enough for caressing. And that face—maybe it was just his farcical attitude towards everything, but that meant he was always smiling, and he has a great smile. It was pleasant, to think of his smile and pretend he was smiling at me because, underneath his jokes and devil-be-damned demeanor, he cared. The hair, blonde, rich—oh my gosh it's so soft and dense and rich. Even during middle school, I would pretend to get angry over some little joke of his, so I could grab him by the hair, just to feel it, to play with it. And, my little fantasy rapidly evolving, I don’t need that pretext anymore, and he's sitting watching something, and I'm leaning over him and just petting his hair all day while we make idle chit-chat, and we're having an adorable time together. He's not teasing or provoking, like usual, but we're whispering deep and personal things to each other. He sinks into the couch and I crawl on top of him, and our lips are mere inches from each other and he's caressing my bangs…

In the midst of imagining this was when I felt something on my calf tingle, and realized my hand had drifted to my crotch and was starting to play. As usual, once the sensations started, I couldn't help myself. Shame was temporarily set aside; my body demanded satisfaction, and my mind was too preoccupied by a gentle fantasy to object.

"Are you awake in there?"

"Ah!" Erika's voice yanked me back into reality. My body stood frozen in place, quivering, my genitals sensually whining, but the moment had been lost.

"Yeah, I'll be right out."

"Alright."

My innards faded back to normalcy. It took a minute to collect myself and then finish washing.

"Can you hand me a towel?" I turned the water off and took the proffered towel, wrapping it around myself.

Erika nodded as I stepped out. "That was a long shower, you look like a peach."

"Sorry."

She lay her hand flat on my head, as if measuring my height. "You know long showers make you shrink," she teased.

"Hmph!"

She can be so cordial and easy-going, even after our fight yesterday. I expected our friendship to be strained for the rest of the weekend, but not a trace of negativity could be found in Erika. She's the kind of person who can forgive and forget any transgression in less than a night's worth of slumber. That is what I love about her.

"It's not going to warm up that much today, so wear something long-sleeved."

"No problem." Skarmory like to hang out in thorny thickets and mountain crags, so I had brought jeans and a work-shirt anyways. My worry had been about overheating, but that looks less likely now.

"Have you talked to Violet?" I asked.
"She left a message last night; she said she'll meet up with us later in the weekend. I got the feeling she wanted to give us some space."

"Understandable."

I still owed her a match. Would she be willing though? No way to find out until I see her again.

"Here," Erika tossed me a pair of cereal bars. "Breakfast."

Washed, fed, brushed, groomed, and dressed, we set out. We knocked at Morty's door. A minute later, he greeted us, bleary-eyed and still in his pajamas. He took a massive yawn, obviously having just woken up.

"I'll be out in a min, just give me a few."

"I had a dream about you," I said.

"Really? Were we kissing?"

"No, you were sleeping in so I pounded on you like a drum until you got your butt out of bed. Now hurry up."

"Getting a boy's hopes up, little witch," he muttered as he dodged back inside. He reappeared five minutes later, looking much worse for the wear. He reeked too. I wonder when the last time he took a shower was?

"I had the good grace to let you come and this is how you repay me? What a slob."

"Well, firstly, I invited myself, you never gave me permission. Secondly, this is what I get for getting your pokeballs back?" Morty retorted.

"I consider that paying down your karmic debt to me. You've still got a long way to go. Hurry up!"

"Don't mind her, she's grumpy in the morning," Erika told Morty.

"I know, I know. Ugh, it's only seven. Another hour woulda been amazing."

"Too bad. We need all the time we can snatch."

I looked towards the southern mountain range, where Route 45 winded through on its way towards New Bark Town. Come shame or accident or disaster or the very end of time, I will have a Skarmory before the sun sets tonight.

"Let's go!"

Route 45 is known by trainers as the "Forever Hike"; it's the longest route of travel in the Johto region by a fair margin. A solitary highway travels the length of it, but most trainers avoid the road and use the Black River Trail system instead. Going from north to south, one can expect to spend a month hiking it on foot. South to north is notoriously difficult, because of the ledges and constant
upwards incline. In fact, the route is regarded as the roughest terrain in the region, marred by heavy
forest-growth, mountain crags, and whitewater rivers. Fortunately for us, we didn't have to go the
whole way down it, only a fraction. Unfortunately, that fraction still left us with a six mile hike into
the wilds.

"I'm so hot," I groaned. It didn't take long for the sun and exertion to overcome the cooler air
temperature.

"Tough it out, dearest," Erika said.

I shielded my eyes to look around and pick out our position, then pointed to a distant peak in the east.
That's our destination- Hatchet Hill. Reported Skarmory population: ~42,000, practically an urban
metropolis for the birds.

"More of a mountain than a hill," Morty observed. "How tall is it?"

"6,700 feet above sea level, maybe 3,000 above the valley floor. We're still two and a half miles
out."

"Right, let's go."

"Morty, have you ever been out this way?" Erika asked.

"Not really. Just Blackthorn. You?"

"It's my first time too. Don't you think it's pretty?" Her head was pivoting every which way, taking in
the scenery. The upper peaks were pretty but also a little desolate. However, the river canyons were
practically temperate jungles. All manner of Pokémon and flora made their home within the shelter of
the canyon walls. Her gaze was focused downwards on all the curious vestiges of life below us.

"I guess, yeah." Morty's gaze was more preoccupied with the sky.

"Jasmine?" My eyes were glued to the path.

I nodded. "Dark Cave is over there somewhere," I pointed westward. "We had a class trip my final
year of elementary school. It was our sending off present. I caught Geodude and Onix on that trip.
Ah, here's a better view."

Hatchet Hill appeared in an opening between the peaks. After a pause, I continued leading us
towards it.

The way there was not easy, nor uneventful. A pack of Gligar shadowed us at one point, often
swooping in as if to attack. It turned from nuisance to legitimate danger when we approached a
gorge. The cliff created a narrow path, maybe two feet wide, which we had to traverse. The Gligar
began swarming directly overhead, landing on rocks and hissing at our group. I clutched onto
Steelix's pokeball tightly, knuckles going white. Wild Pokémon are weaker than trained ones, but
they have no concept of fair play- they often will fight to the death, often attack in numbers, and
almost always attack the trainer first. The fact that they could knock me over the edge served to pique
my fear.

"Gengar. Screech." Morty released his own Pokémon, which promptly shrilled into the morning air.
The sudden ear-splitting screech startled the pack, sending them high into the air as if struck by a
wave. They scattered soon after.

"Don't wait and let the buggers get cocky, you need to take care of them early. Wild pokes are more
impressionable, less disciplined than trained ones, use that against them or they'll be all over you," Morty advised.

"I see."

It was nearly noon before we reached the base of the hill. While munching on our packed lunches I explained the situation, with a print-out map set down for the other two to see.

"We're at the base of Hatchet Hill here. The main peak is here- and all around the peak are smaller peaks and ravines. The name comes from a folktale, which says the peak used to be in a tree-stump shape, until a giant chopped it up with a hatchet into bits and pieces, until the head broke off and became stuck in the center, creating the main peak. The Skarmory like the place because the cracks and ravines and such give excellent cover. Plus, Blackthorn Brambles have the area overgrown.

So what I was thinking was, we can scale this ridgeline and make our way up to this crevice, which would be…” and I traced a finger up the actual hill's profile, "…there. That looks like a good hollow. If the population is really that big, I'm betting it'll be packed with Skarmory." I turned back to the map and found the hollow on it. About 400 hundred feet up the mountain.

"Let me see that," Morty said. He scrutinized the map for a minute. "Let's go here instead," he said at last, pointing to a much more remote crevice. It would be harder to reach, more than 800 feet upwards and having a longer horizontal trek to get there.

"Why? That looks hard to reach."

"Exactly. Do you want a run-of-the-mill Pokémon who settled for a crowded city-slum?"

"What?"

"You've done your homework, but you really need to do the extra credit too. It's simple, though- the stronger, smarter Skarmory flocks fight for prime nesting site."

"Yeah, I know that, they're territorial birds."

"So you understand that they'd go for the more remote nesting sites. Higher, harder to reach, more obstacles and more brambles. It's safer."

"No, I thought the best nests were in the center of the population, to be at the center of things and bully the rest of the flocks."

"Hahaha- no. They're shy birds, and have a strong paternal instinct. Their paramount concern is the safety of their chicks. A Skarm chick is a very frail thing in one of the most dangerous environments in Johto. Also, they just can't lay as many eggs as other species. So when you only have a few vulnerable kids in a bad neighborhood, as a Skarmory, you do everything you can to ensure their survival." Morty handed me the map back, tapping on his recommended destination.

"Interesting," I responded.

"So?"

"I kind of like that," I said, mulling this knowledge over. "Okay, let's do what you say."

We began our ascent without comment. Morty led the way, testing the footing and pathfinding for the best trails. I was immediately behind him. Erika took the rear. The way was every bit as hard as I expected, often requiring amateur rock-climbing feats. At one point we were confronted with an
enormous gap and couldn’t find a way around. I ended up calling Steelix out to be a bridge for us. It only got more difficult the higher we went, but we never seemed to get stuck completely. The mountain-climbing acumen of our guide could be thanked for that.

Morty caught me staring at him and returned a grin, seemingly reading my mind.

Isn't it convenient, though? Morty just happens to spring along on this trip, and then starts proving himself incredibly useful? It's almost as if he planned for this - to what end? To impress me some more? To act on his feelings for me? Knowing him, and knowing full-well his seemingly super-human intuition, I can easily believe he concocted the entire scheme in order to win my affection. Even now, as he holds a branch down to help me climb up, he's playing on my emotions. Well my dear Morty, it's working. My respect for you is inching upwards, a feat I didn't think possible. Notice I say respect, not affection. That's still light-years away. Seriously, though, you're trying too hard. It feels so uncharacteristic of you, where's the lowbrow humor?

I know it's coming. Any moment, some wisecrack about my bust-size, any moment now…

"There's one," Morty said, looking to the sky. A Skarmory drifted on the wind high overhead.

Sigh. I guess one can't invoke these things.

"Aha. Look at the color, too, it has the shiny gene."

"Mmhmm. That's pretty neat."

"Would you want to catch it?"

"No, I'm not really interested in having a rare Pokémon, just a strong one. Of course, it'd be nice if it had a good attitude too. Remember, I specifically need a Pokémon who will win for me, not just compete well. Victories mean more than a little ego boost now."

"They mean food, and clothes, and rent," Erika added.

"Are you hurting for cash?" Morty asked.


"Kay. Because, if you-"

"And I don't want handouts. Yesterday's lunch excepted. Because I was hungry. Hunger does funny things to one's principles."

"Well, I apologize Ms. Governor. This way." Morty leapt around a massive boulder. "I need a map, and Erika, a Pokémon with Cut would be nice." We rounded the boulder, to see what Morty was dealing with.

No problem, it's only a ten-foot high maze of briars and brambles!

"And a compass."

"Don't have any."

"Then I'll… hmm."

"Why can't I use Magcargo for the vines? Will it hurt the Skarmory?"
"It could. It'd also alert the whole mountain that we're coming." Morty took the map. "And you don't want a thousand angry Skarmory on top of us."

"That's a lot of Pokémon. How do they manage?" Erika asked.

"They probably only use Hatchet as a nesting ground. They're not like Pidgey, more like Empoleon-they gather in flocks to nest but fly far out to hunt solo or in mating pairs. At least Johto varieties."

"Mm. Hey, look, another!" A silvery flash ripped by close overhead. I mentally went over the plan for actually catching one, and hoped that we'd find one grounded. I would have to think something up if they were all airborne.

Victreebel was called out and proceeded to scythe a path through the brambles for us. It was a tight fit and I could feel the thorns clawing at the fabric of my clothing. From either side of us came the occasional rustling and clack-clack of sharpened beaks. That would be the parents, hunched over their nests and the precious offspring within. I wasn't interested in orphaning newborns, so we steered clear of them as best we could. Victreebel's Cut snapped a stalk into pieces, breaking out into a relative clear passage.

I stumbled through the gap first. My face landed into a pile of straw and brambles, getting scratched.

"Kraw! Kraw!" A miniature Skarmory with big beady eyes squawked at me.

"Hi there," I said.

"Kraw! KRAAWWW! KRAAAWWW!"

"I'm not gonna hurt you. Not gonna hurt you," I said as softly as I could, holding my hands and slowly backing away. "Don't call mommy or daddy."

Another Skarmory, perched overhead, spotted me. It cocked its head and brimmed its feathers. Luckily, backing off slowly like I did seemed to calm it down. From the looks of it, it wasn't much older than the nestling.

"So that's big brother, huh? Looking after you while mommy's away? What a good brother." The sibling leapt on top of the nest as I made my escape.

We extricated ourselves out of the ravine. A slight flush came to my face. That was a little exciting!

"These are wild creatures, Jazz, don't underestimate them," Morty warned.

"Nothing came of it."

"I know, but if that was the papa and not the brother you wouldn't have a face right now."

"Oh well." I shrugged. There was a ledge ahead and I had to struggle to get up onto it.

"Don't just shrug it off. Be more careful!" Morty made a point to give my foot a lift.

"He's right, Jasmine," Erika said, helping boost Morty up in turn.

"Since when are you so concerned about my safety?" I asked, pulling Morty up. The assist ended up bringing us chest-to-chest.

"Since the day I met you," Morty said.
I rolled my eyes.
"I'm serious!"

I brushed past him and continued the climb.
"That's what scares me," I said over my back. "I don't need you of all people mommyming me."
"Can't help it."

"Since when?"

"There it is." Morty pushed past me. He was waving excitedly at a nook in the balded hilltop.

"Since when?!" I repeated. Morty didn't bother to answer, instead skipping over boulders towards the nook. A care-free peel of laughter came from his general direction. "You want to set me up with that?" I asked Erika in a huff.

The nook appeared like a slightly parted mouth in the side of the hill. An overhang provided shade and shelter, while the lower ledge was created by a fault in the cliff-face that resembled a jaw. Bits of brambles and nesting material could be seen littering the cracks and crevices within. As far as security goes, I couldn't think of a better natural habitat. The opening was only two yards high, and a good twenty yards above the nearest navigable ledge. It reminded me of a fortress.

Morty had come to a rest at the base. Erika and I joined him.

"Any idea how we're gonna get up?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe Dakrai can blow a hole in the wall," I suggested.

"I don't have Darkrai anymore, gave it back."

"Oh?"

"Need another solution. Only brought Gengar with me, and he's not strong enough to lift us up."

"Can he teleport us?"

"He doesn't know Teleport."

"Erika?"

"I have Tangrowth. She may be able to create vines for us to climb."

I looked up at the twenty yards of sheer rock and imagined trying to scale it. The thought sounded terrifying.

"Hmm. Maybe not." Erika gauged the cliff face. "It looks too high, the top is out of Tangrowth's Vine Whip's range."

"I know how." I thought of a simple way to do it, but the thought made me nervous. Not just because it might be dangerous. "Graveler knows Rock Climb. She can carry us up there one by one."

"Oh, pleasant."
"Huh. Cool."

Erika and Morty stared at me expectantly while I did absolutely nothing.

"So, where's Graveler?"

"Um… How do I say this…" How does one confess to being a careless, unloving trainer to one's Pokémon, and then expect to put one's life in said Pokémon's (literal) hands?

"Well, let's… see what she thinks," I said nervously. "Graveler?" The pokeball went flying.

"Gav!"

"Graveler!" I knelt down on my haunches to face Graveler eye to eye. She turned away. I scooted over, to no avail. Our little game of Pika-boo ended when Graveler curled into a ball and refused to come out. "Graveler! Please! We need you! I promise I'll be a better trainer, I'll take you out to park more, and I'll even evolve you! Just do me this one favor!"

"Graveler!" Angry, uncooperative reply. I looked at Erika and Morty helplessly.

Erika stepped forward, touching Graveler gently.

"Graveler, Jasmine loves you, and she needs you. If you help us, she'll be forced to appreciate you. You are a wonderful Pokémon, without a doubt, and this is your chance to show us how strong and reliable you are." Graveler's only indication of hearing Erika was to roll upside down.

"Sorry guys," I said, slumping backwards into the cliff.

"Let me try," Morty said.

"Hey!" I cried out because he launched himself on top of Graveler, coming to a seat, as if Graveler was a stool.

"Hey there, Gravy. Things not going well? You and Jasmine in a bit of a row?"

"Grrrr. Gavavavar, Aragagga Grava," came the muttered and (to me) unintelligible reply.

"Oh, it's more long term. I see. You know, I can sympathize. It's not just you, though. You think Jasmine treats you poorly? Gee, she treats other humans like dirt. Always moping, always buggering out of social engagements, always back-talking and spouting pessimisms, always refusing offers of friendship, always being a killjoy. All her kindness is reserved for you guys, her Pokémon. So I'm really surprised to hear you and her don't get along."

"Graveler."

"Fine, no need for me to barge in. But, between you and me and Erika, you're awesome. I can see it. I can sniff it. I've got a gift for these kinds of things. So, you wanna get back at her? Do this. Help me and Erika up this cliff, and we'll ditch Jasmine right here. See how she likes that!"

"Morty! How dare you!"

It wasn't Morty's suggestion that drew Graveler out of her curl, but my yelling.

"I'm just saying. Always had the impression you treated your Pokémon better than us people; was I wrong? Maybe I'm right, maybe you need a little alone time till you appreciate who you've got." He gave me a wink.
"You Grimer! Don't you dare leave me here alone! I-" and without even a command, Graveler popped out, grabbed Morty with one set of hands, and whisked up the cliff face easy-peasy using Rock Climb.

**THUD!**

A half-minute later Graveler landed like a meteor, and immediately lent a hand to Erika. She took it, and up they went.

Just like that, I was stranded and alone.

"Hey! Are you guys there! Hey! HEY!"

Were they seriously going to abandon me here?!

"You cads! Don't you dare leave me!"

Five minutes of shouting and anxiety-mongering later, a vine rope dropped down. The rope was made out of three sections tied together. I tugged at it, dubiously.

"Tie it around your waist! We'll lift you up!" Erika called down.

"You sure it's safe?"

"The knots were tied by Tangrowth herself, I've played tug-of-war between a team of Rhydons and a Nidokings using a similar rope. That one didn't break."

I guess it's pretty safe.

"Come on up!" Erika shouted.

I tied the thing around my waist and thighs. As we lifted, the center piece dug into my crotch, causing some pain. I wish I knew how to tie a harness right now.

"Faster!" I yelled upwards.

"No, we're playing safe," she shouted right back.

"Faster! It hurts!"

"No!"

Strangely, the discomfort banished all fear. That, and the spectacular view of the afternoon mountains which was now fully coming into view. The peaks were like islands rising out of the purple-hued forest. Viewing such a vast swath of land, there was a level of detail that no painting or photograph could resolve to. Individual trees and boulders merged together to form enormous forests, hills, all untamed, all unmarred by civilization. It was surreal, breathtaking.

"Almost there!" Morty shouted. Then I was over the lip, and Tangrowth nestled me in its arms and stood me upright. The vine rope could not be removed fast enough for me; I needed to rub life back into my pelvic area.

"That really hurt!" I shouted.

"Why are you still shouting?! We're right here!" Erika shouted right back at me.
"Because I'm sore! And it's funny! And you're not funny!" I pointed at Morty. "And you're on chore
duty all next week!" I pointed at a sulking Graveler, none too eager to see me. "And that's a
Skarmory!" I pointed at an angry bird roiling its serrated wingspan.

"Oh!" Morty and Erika both backed away. Thinking back to Morty's advice, I chucked Magneton's
pokeball out.

"Magneton, if that bird attacks, Thunder Wave, pronto."

Magneton let out a low, barely audible rumble. Sparks of electricity sizzled across its poles. Despite
this, the Skarmory kept advancing.

"Brave, huh? How about I catch you?"

"No, don't," Morty warned.

"Why not."

ZZZT! Magneton let off a Thunder Wave without warning, determining by itself that the aggressive
bird was too close. The Skarmory flopped to the floor, partially paralyzed. I readied an empty
pokeball.

"Wait!" Morty caught me by the forearm.

"Why not? He's got some spunk."

"I have a better idea. Listen."

"I'm listening."

"Shhh! Listen!"

It became obvious once the Skarmory settled down. A sound came through the brush of the nook, a
frenzied raucous, the cries of many, many Pokémon fighting and screaming, the audible 'clings' of
sword-like wings slashing against each other. The noise was very faint, coming from much deeper in
the nook.

Morty motioned for us to stay quiet. He crept over to the paralyzed Skarmory, bringing my attention
to the nearby bird. I noticed now that it wasn't struggling to attack through the paralysis but to open
its beak. Its neck vibrated, but in spurts, and the only noise from it were gagged, guttural squawks.

"He's an old one," Morty said. "He's on guard duty."

"Against intruders?" Erika asked.

"No, against Skarmory." Morty motioned towards an innocuous pile of brambles. On closer
inspection, deep inside was a nest of softer material. Inside lay the quivering form of a wholly
unrecognizable creature. It looked like a deformed, featherless Spearow. Babies. Not even kids, like
the nest I had stumbled into earlier, but newborns. They looked incredibly pathetic, weak,
vulnerable. Just the appearance of their soft, pink skin made me want to scoop them up and pet them.
Morty waved me off.

"Don't touch," he whispered. He pointed, again, and again, and many more times. Once I got the
knack of it, I managed to spot them easily. We were standing amongst dozens of identical nests. The
next one held two more equally paltry hatchlings.
Morty explained.

"I read about this. That racket is the adolescents fighting amongst themselves. The females and the males get into big melees to determine pecking order- for mating purposes."

"Eww." I don't want to think about Skarmory screwing.

"They call them scraws, name comes from the sod they usually tear up where they have them. Anyways, these scraws get very violent, so the older, "married" adults stand on the edge and corral the contenders. This guy here is to guard the hatchlings, in case some flustered young male comes by and takes his temper on them."

"Okay, I follow." The birds fight each other to determine partners. That's much, much, much simpler than humans. In some ways, I would almost prefer it that way. No backstabbing, no manipulation, no double-intentions or emotional breakdowns or unsolicited flirtations. On the other hand, it was violent, and just how voluntary were these 'scraws'?

"Let's go watch."

"We'll find my team candidate there?"

"Yeah. This is the nesting site of the strongest flock on the hill, and the scraw should show you the best Skarmory in the flock."

Morty waved for us to follow. The path required us to crawl on our bellies, and we still ended up taking thorns to the forehead. Work clothes were not enough for this adventure; body armor and a combat helmet would be more suitable. I brushed my forehead, and it came back with blood smears. At least it wasn't painful.

"Ow. How much further?"

"Long ways."

"OUCH! Why is this such a hassle?" A rock had found my elbow and this injury actually hurt.

"Skarmory have steel skin, this might as well be a silk-draped road for them. Didn't you study the Pokémon at all?"

"I studied all about their battle capabilities and how to catch them."

"Pay more attention to the behavior part next time."

"Roger, will do, now get your foot out of my face."

"Oh, sorry." The offending boot ceased blocking my view. "There's a fork in the path and I'm having trouble fitting."

"We could have used Tangrowth to Cut through," Erika said.

"Nah, don't want to chop up a nest. The density is too high. This is like Skarm-City downtown."

"Penthouses," I added, "if they really are the elite of Skarm society."

"Nice analogy."

We inched closer to the din, which increased disproportionately in noise level. The cliff walls caused
the sounds to echo and re-echo, making it even louder than it really was. The nook, viewed from above, was really more of a shallow cave in the shape of a crescent moon. It was as if the legend's giant decided to circumcise the hilltop, but stopped 1/3 of the way through. Using that analogy we were approaching the fat center of the crescent. Using my old 'mouth' analogy, we were approaching the 'tongue' area. Either way, the nook grew larger and more spacious, and at last the bramble road eased up so that we could afford to stand again. By now, the noise of fighting was as bad as a rowdy school cafeteria.

"Let's sneak up," Morty said. He needn't even bother whispering, we could barely hear his normal voice.

The brambles here were well worn and less dense, and it was not nearly so difficult to navigate them. Morty glanced above a hedge, then ducked back down. "Gengar." The gutter-minded shadow appeared. "Play scout for us," Morty ordered. The Pokémon slipped into the ground. It made off like a submarine, with only the tip of the head and eyes showing. A thin trail of mist marked its path. The owner waved for us to follow this trail.

"I love ghosts," he remarked. "So useful."

Apparently Gengar wasn't interested in getting us closer to the fighting, but circumnavigated the perimeter. Once or twice it backtracked, after coming upon a Skarmory keeping guard. A pair of adults blocked our path at one point and refused to move; Gengar used Hypnosis to put them out. We arrived at an alcove deep within the crevice. A pile of boulders were stacked against the wall, and Gengar was signaling for us to climb. The top presented a complete view of the nook's central area.


Too many Skarmory to count littered the clearing. Dozens were actively tussling in a great pile in the center. Razor-sharp wings were slashed around like untrained swords, clanging and screeching against each other. Hooked beaks grappled against hooked beak, seeking the necks of foes. No one bird could gain advantage before some opportunistic spectator jumped in for an advantage. Sometimes a group of brawlers would roll out of the pile, like a tumbleweed. Then a group of bigger, stronger adults would descend on them and knock them apart. Those who had had enough limped to the sidelines.

Morty pointed to different groups in turn.

"Those guys in the center."

"Where?"

"There." He was referring to a group of adolescents almost in the center, holding ground on a small rise.

"I see."

"Those are the alphas. The fact that they're there means they've already proven themselves. See how the rest are sort of struggling to get on the rise? And the alphas are keeping them off?"

"Yeah? I don't get it."

"The alphas are making a temporary alliance, testing the others to see if they're strong enough. When the rest give up the alphas will have more formal fights among themselves. See over there?" He pointed to another group.
"The females, I presume." These were sitting around, not on watch like the adults, but following the action closely.

"Yep. Those in front are the alpha females. They'll be watching the formal fights. Then they'll pick mates, one by one, with the strongest females getting first dibs, and then on down the hierarchy."

"I never thought of Skarmory having such a complex society."

"Pokémon are amazing creatures, even on their own, without human guidance." Morty nodded to himself.

"So I should wait and snatch the best male for myself?" I opined. Too bad, gals, I'm a trainer and we do what we do.

"Nope, you're not going to do that," Morty said. I eyed him with furled eyebrows. Why must he always contradict me? It's starting to make me feel like a pre-schooler.

*Maybe you should look this stuff up yourself if you don't want to be exposed for ignorant!* my inner devil scolded me.

Well shoot me, I had probation paperwork to get through.

"Just trust me, and wait."

The scraw climaxed, with scores of birds clashing. Losers and worn victors bowed out, crawling to the sidelines and safety of the elders. Only those strong enough to beat their comrades, fend off the alphas, and still have some stamina left were admitted to the alphas' ranks.

The young males took turns now, challenging each other. Each battle began with an excessive show of screeching, advances, feints, and displays of bristling plumage. Sometimes it was obvious who the more aggressive one was and the other would bow out. More often the birds advanced and feinted until a mad clash of wing and hook and tail ensued. The battles lasted only a few seconds each.

"Watch closely."

A few in particular stood out, besting every opponent. Gradually the losers departed the rise, thinning the group.

"Huh." Two in particular caught my eye. The first, not because he was any good, but because he lost every bout he had, but still kept in the ring. The second, a great, silvery big boy with a sharply hooked (and dangerous) tail, stood out for being the obvious leader. He began challenging the other frontrunners and taking them down or scaring them off.

"That's the new leader. Probably will be the next leader of the flock."

"I don't like him," I said. He screeched more than the others, often in his defeated foe's face, and would nip them as they attempted to retreat.

"He's strong, though," Erika said.

"No, he's a jerk. I want that one, the loser."

I was referring to the first bird to catch my eye. He was continually challenged and making challenges, but overall the other birds got the better of him. It looked like he simply wasn't aggressive enough to keep up the pace of combat. Still, no matter how much the other birds attacked, he did not
give up. Even when birds took shots on him outside of the duels, he still refused to exit the rise.

I looked to Morty, who flashed a smile back at me.

"You catch on, don't you," he said.

"I don't know what you mean. I just like him. He's got tenacity."

The scraw finished with little fanfare. The silvered head-alpha lorded over the nearly empty central rise, leaping and hollering. The general tense vibe permeating the nook gradually dissipated, as did the spectators, adults, and wounded. Life in the colony returned to normal.

"That guy, huh?" While the other alphas were busy courting and being courted by the females, this Skarmory remained on the rise. Even when the victor left (to a considerable chorus from the females), this one remained. No other bird bothered him. The females completely ignored him.

"Aww," I let out inadvertently. I couldn't help myself, he looked so unloved out there.

"So have you figured it out?" Morty asked. I shook my head. "That guy may not be the strongest in the flock. Actually, he might be one of the weakest. Only got to the rise by taking more of a beating than the others. Kid's got issues."

"Pokémon have issues? Please!"

"They do! Even wild ones. This guy obviously wants to be accepted, but he's not strong enough to get any recognition. That's why you want to catch him."

"Oh I see." I nodded, finally getting it. "Give him some love and he'll work harder than any of these other birds to earn it."

"You got it."


"Oh, with some training, I'm sure-"

"No, he's tough already, very tough. I'd say he took three times more of a beating than any bird out there, and he still looks healthy to me. That Skarmory has some defense."

"Hmm." Morty took a long, hard look at the bird. "You could be right."

"I am right."

"So- hey!"

I slid down the boulder from our hiding place, right into plain view.

"It's dangerous!" Erika shouted.

"Hey!" Morty also yelled.

"You two stay put, this is my job. I can't rely on others so much if I want to be a Gym Leader," I said over my shoulder.

My target became aware of me when I was ten yards out. He leapt into the air, hovering and squawking at me, making a massive fuss. No point in sneaking anymore.
"You're coming with me," I proclaimed, holding out a Pokeball.

Time to initiate the Four Part Plan.

"Remember me?" I asked the Pokémon. "Maybe not, you're too young. I came this way ten years ago and tried to catch a Skarmory. It didn't work out so well. I've spent the last week studying it over and over, and I'm not going to make the same mistakes. So, the four part plan is this-"

The Skarmory advanced directly at me.

"One, no attacking me."

I chucked my pokeball, and the low cave was suddenly very cramped. Steelix completely blocked the Skarmory's charge. Steelix had already been drilled on what to do; the fact that the Skarmory could not escape into the air only made his job easier. My Pokémon curled into a protective wall around me. The Skarmory bounced off Steelix's armor, not expecting a 30-foot behemoth to materialize out of thin air. It tried strafing to find an opening, but only found a rapidly rotating spiked-ball joint. Realizing it wasn't going to get at me, it backed off and settled into a Roost.

"Two, start attacking, immediately."

Steelix began circling me like a cyclone. Its spikes dug into the ground, digging out rock and earth and sending them flying towards the Skarmory. The creature jumped in shock, not expecting a ranged attack. As soon as it was in the air, Steelix sprang forward.

"Catch it in your mouth and drag him underground!" I ordered. Easier said than done. Steelix caught the Skarmory in a Crunch easily enough, but the bird shrugged off Steelix's lockjaw as if it were a loose shawl.

"Tail Whip!" Steelix whirled its tail around, more of a Slam attack, but it got the job done. The Skarmory was grounded into turf. By now it was screeching and wracking its voicebox. Several other Skarmory gathered round. I watched them nervously, hoping my research held true.

The elder Skarmory watched us with great interest, but remained still. Good. Apparently Skarmory have a good deal of pride and sense of self-reliance. The others won't threaten me while I'm battling one-on-one; only if they feel they or their nests were threatened would they react. To them, this young male was having to "prove" himself by protecting the nook from me.

Turning back to the Skarmory, it seemed to get the idea. It ceased trying to call for help and instead used Roost and Iron Defense. Steelix's attacks weren't even ruffling his feathers now.

That's okay. Steelix's offensive was just to keep it pinned down and away from me. I could start the next phase of the plan. That is, assuming it didn't know-

"KRRKRAWWWWWW!"

"Ooof!"

You wouldn't think such a creature, with its sword-like wings and slow movements, could whip up a windstorm, but suddenly the air in the nook was blowing with extreme force. I was knocked off my feet, fluttering in the wind as if trying to swim up a waterfall- and failing. Even Steelix, block of metal that he was, was sent rolling. Miniature tornados tore through the nook, tossing and churning the sparse underbrush. The adult Skarmory watching over us were scattered out of sight.

*He knows Whirlwind- interesting, but not unexpected,* I thought to myself.
"Steelix, dig into the ground."

Steelix burrowed into the earth, slowly. The soil barely existed here, most of the terrain was pure rock. Bits of rubble flung up in the air where Steelix had excavated a tunnel. The Skarmory took this as its cue to counterattack.

"Part three, thunderbolt-proof Magneton, for me." Magneton appeared.

Magneton took the Skarmory's Brave Bird charge almost as easily as Steelix, and then began shrouding itself and me in an electrified barrier. The Skarmory beat a hasty retreat.

"Leading directly to part four: Thunderbolt, to shoot at you."

Magneton let loose a barrage of bolts, glancing the Skarmory's limbs but conducting straight to the core of his body. As planned, they were low powered bolts, not enough to knock it out.

The ground churned, Steelix was on his way back. The Skarmory spotted the disturbance. He maneuvered to avoid the incoming giant.

"Thunderclip." The Skarmory saw Magneton charging for another attack and grounded itself, letting it take the Thunderbolts without fainting. In the meantime Steelix was nearly beneath him. The Skarmory was forced into the air. More Thunderbolts were unleashed left and right, barely missing-on purpose. Trapped between the ground and air by quake and electricity, respectively, it behaved exactly as predicted- it began flapping away.

"Magnet Bomb," I commanded. Normally, Magnet Bomb utilizes electromagnetically charged rocks to barrage a target. Magnemite had learned a different use for it, as seen last week. It took some doing, but I had Magneton learn the same technique from its junior partner. Its poles sparked, sending an invisible ball of energy straight at the Skarmory.

"Good job. Magnemite, you're up."

The Skarmory turned around and slashed. The air rippled with an Air Slash, aimed at me. I winced, expecting to get hit.

There was a cracking sound, but I didn't feel anything.

I opened my eyes. The Air Slash had bounced harmlessly off a mirror-like barrier. All I felt was a gentle breeze. Magneton had set up a Light Screen on its own, to protect me. "Thanks, Mag. Now-"

**SHISH! SHISH SHISH!**

The Skarmory wasn't finished. He circled my position, loosing off Air Slash after Air Slash. None of the attacks were effective, but they weren't meant to be: Skarmory was using them to pin me down and gain a route of escape.

"Jasmine!" Morty cried in alarm.

From his point of view, he wouldn't be able to see the Light Screen. He must be seeing the bursts of vacuum and think I'm getting hit-

"I'm fine!" I cried back towards him. Even as I shouted this out, another barrage of Air Slashes pelted the screen.

"I'm coming down to help!" Morty's head appeared over the lip of the hiding spot. I angrily waved
him down.

"Don't you dare!"

"You need help!"

"Sit down! I've got it under control!" I screamed. How bloody patronizing can he get?!

Skarmory was nearly in the clear, with a straight path between the brambles and rises, leading towards open sky. Steelix was out of place, and Magneton and I were out of range.

"Magnemite, do your thing." The little Pokémon had zoomed to intercept the target, placing itself between the Skarmory and its freedom. "Now!" My pokemon hummed and vibrated. The Skarmory, sensing that its sliver of escape was about to be shut, resorted to the one attack that had seemed to work: Whirlwind. Myself and Magneton were caught off guard, being swept up in the winding winds. When I managed to regain my footing, we were both deep in the nook, and the Skarmory was racing for the exit and freedom. Magnemite was nowhere to be seen; Steelix was unearthing itself, but much too slowly.

"Jazz I'll-"

"Shut it Morty! Just shut up!"

Morty finally acceded and retreated back into the cubby hole.

The Skarmory reached the rim of the nook. Nothing stood between it and open air. The adults could deal with the intruder, for all he cared. His wings spread, preparing for take off- but then it stopped. From its beak came an alarmed squawk, the pokemon suddenly becoming aware of an awkward passenger.

Magnemite had attached itself to the Skarmory's rear end via Magnet Pull + Magnet Bomb. The Skarmory was enraged, he roared and tossed and banged Magnemite against the rocks, repeatedly. Magnemite took the beating, hurt, but refused to detach.

"Time for the coup. Magneton, remember to reverse."

"MAG." A second Magnet Bomb was unleashed. The Skarmory looked up, expecting more misery. But Magneton wasn't aiming at the bird.

The Magnet Bomb shimmered, hitting the half-submerged form of Steelix.

No further effort from me or my Pokémon was required. There were two metal beings polarized by extremely strong but opposite charges, connected by a Magnet Pull ability- That's a lot of attractive energies in a small, confined space. It was only a matter of letting science have its way.

"KRAW! KRAW! KRAW! KRAWKKWKWKWK!!" The Skarmory was dragged along the ground relentlessly, irresistibly towards Steelix. It unleashed Screech, and Air Slash, and many, many Whirlwinds, but to no avail. Even the cyclones couldn't do anything against the invisible forces at play, nor could they dislodge the firmly anchored Steelix. The trio of Pokémon struck together with a resounding CLANG! As soon as its motion halted, Skarmory tried to struggle free, but at that range, it stood no chance against the magnetic forces in place on him. He couldn't move an inch.

"Hurray!"

"Awesome!" Erika and Morty cried in joy as they both leapt down from their perch. We all gathered
before the Skarmory, which was obviously enraged but completely unable to do anything about it. Morty held out a hand to me in congratulations, looking rather sheepish for his worry. I ignored the offer, instead flashing him a fierce grin.

"See? What did I tell you?"

"Well, I got a bit worried."

"Ha! No way. This plan is so good, I think I'll give it a sporting chance." I turned to address Magnemite and Skarmory. "Magnemite, please let go."

"Mag?"

"I'm joking, of course. Skarmory, you're mine." My grin grew wide enough to hurt my cheeks. Morty let out a little laugh. Erika took my side.

"But, you haven't caught it yet. Were you just going to haul it all the way down the mountain like this??" she asked.

"Of course not," I replied.

"Then how? You haven't actually weakened its health yet." I held up the grocery bag carrying my pokeballs and misc items and grinned even wider. "I think I'll just chuck pokeballs until it gives up."

"That simple?"

"That simple." Simple, but not without a certain amount of tedium. I chucked pokeball after pokeball after pokeball after pokeball. Skarmory would shrink and disappear for a second, the ball would wriggle, then Skarmory would bust out in a flash of light, resuming its magnetically-locked position. Occasionally the Pokeballs would bounce off with no effect at all. The cheap ones broke quickly, and I ended up tossing the sturdier Great Balls multiple times each.

"Ah- ah-ah!" 33 was the magic number; on the 33rd toss the ball wiggled several times, then sat still.

"YES!"

I hugged Erika, Erika hugged me, Morty hugged us both, then we all hugged Magneton/Magnemite/Steelix. It was one great big ball of hugs all around. I think, for the first time in weeks, I have something to be happy about.

"Cheers!"

"To Skarmory!"

"To Gym Leaders!"

"Ahahahaaa….." Morty's laugh trailed off ominously. He was staring at something over my shoulder.

"Hey Jazz," he said nervously.

"Don't call me that. What?"
"The adults aren't too happy you caught their kid."

"Oh… Of course. Since I defeated and captured the adolescent Skarmory, the adults would no longer have any reservation about driving us, the intruders, off themselves. Right, so the plan is to Thunderbolt the-" and I turned, expecting to find a few irked adults.

Well, by my estimate, thirty adult Skarmory would be a challenge. I don't even know if Magneton and Magnemite combined could ward that many off with electric attacks.

Unfortunately, there were more like three hundred adult Skarmory surrounding us.

And they were angry.

Very, very angry.

"I think we disturbed them."

"It was the Thunderbolts, I bet."

"Their tempers are probably still high after dealing with the scraw."

"Well, this is a prickly mess we're in."

Sarcasm aside, we nervously backed farther and farther into the nook. I thought the scraw was noisy— the rising roar of the entire Skarmory flock put the previous din to shame. The eldest began making biting motions and hopping towards us. Amongst the forerunners I spotted the scraw-victor, aggressive as ever. The distance between us and them shrank from twenty yards to ten.

"Woa-" I tripped over a rock, falling backwards. Morty leapt up to catch me, preventing me from falling, but losing his own balance in the process. He fell forward onto his hands and knees. The Skarmory let out a vicious cry and leapt towards him.

"Thun- grr! Hiyaah!" I didn't even have time to order Magneton to intercede. Instead, I grabbed the grocery bag containing my spare pokeballs and flung it at the leader. The bird was blinded; it took crucial seconds to shake and then rip the bag off its head. By that time me, Morty, and Erika were making a mad dash to the very back of the cave. The Magne's provided rear guard using Spark and Reflect as best they could. It was a losing battle. We were surrounded on all sides by a veritable thicket of sword-edges.

Morty leapt up a small ledge, turning round to grab me and pull me up after him. Erika hopped up after. The two instinctively pushed me behind them.

"Shit," Morty cussed under his breath. The three of us surveyed the scene. It felt reminiscent of a medieval siege, countless enemies amassing before us, readying for a fatal charge. I could see still more huddled around Steelix, pecking at his exposed sides. He had become stuck on something in the ground, and couldn't defend himself properly. Magneton and Magnemite held the base of the wall, but were hopelessly outnumbered and surrounded. They fired Thunderbolt after Thunderbolt, but their stamina was running low. I didn't want them overwhelmed, so I withdrew them back to their pokeballs. Which left us isolated.

"This is bad," Morty said.

"What were you thinking? Did no one plan for this?" Erika asked.

"I don't - I didn't think there'd be this many. It's like the whole flock is on top of us!"
"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know!"

"Think of something, please!"

Erika and Morty stood unmoving. They both were far too mature and experienced to break down into panic, but I could see, in the shaking of their limbs, real, tangible fear setting in. If someone didn't think of a way out soon, we were doomed.

"Hehe." I forced my way in between the pair.

"PART FIVE, BOOBY TRAP THE POKEBALLS!"

**BOOM! BANGBANGBAGNBBANGBANGBANGBANG!!!!!!**

My friends didn't even have time to turn to me and wonder at my bold proclamation, before the cave was filled with intense flashes and choking smoke.

You see, that grocery bag did not just hold my empty pokeballs. It also held all my items. This included approximately 30 (combined) Smoke Balls and Stun Grenades.

Oh, and it also happened to hold a triggering explosive, in the form of Voltorb. Thirty-one explosions ripped through the place, battering, stunning, and dazing the hundreds of wild Pokémon.

"Great timing Voltorb!"

"VOLTOOOORB!"

I dashed into the smoke and confusion, fairly skipping across the bodies of confused and fainted Skarmory. Erika and Morty chased after me.

"Recall!" Voltorb and Steelix retreated back to their pokeballs, which I then slung into my backpack.

After a mad dash and narrowly avoiding several blind lunges, we were back on the rim. Beneath me was a thirty-yard drop, behind was a flock of infuriated Skarmory.

"We're trapped," Morty observed, deadpan.

"Morty, why oh why did you have to bring us up here?!!" It sounded like a great idea; let's go find the most remote nesting site to grab the strongest Skarmory. No one considered the fact that we might have to escape said remote nesting site in a hurry.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"Implying you're capable of ever thinking."

Those birds that were recovering stumbled towards us.

"Welp, guess now's as good a time as ever to try him out. Skarmory, go!" My new, not three-minutes-caught Skarmory reappeared, every bit as confused and incensed as his extended family. Too bad for him, I was his trainer now, and his trainer wants him to Fly.

"KAAAAAWW!" I grabbed him by the legs and launched off the cliff edge. There was no time, I prayed Erika and Morty could find their own way off. Skarmory fluttered and sputtered, vainly attempting to keep airborne with my weight anchored to it. Twisting backwards, I was relieved to
We were safe. I had a new Pokémon. And I was flying (sort of)!

"AHAHAHA! That was fun!" I said, throwing back my hair, still attached to a slowly descending Skarmory. At this point the pokemon was too exhausted to struggle or even verbally harass me; it was all it could do just to keep us from plummeting.

Morty stepped out of a shadow at the base of the mountain, looking like his balance was 90 degrees out of whack.

"That was insane! We could have been killed!" he shouted up to me.

"Your fault! All your fault! You should praise me, damn it, I saved us from your stupid mistake and I did it with style!"

"Don't try to play it off, Jasmine," Erika chided. She and Jumpluff floated above me and Skarmory. Their flight path was serene and smooth, as opposed to the jittery, semi-controlled crash I was undertaking.

"OOF!" I landed. "Haaa… Ha… ha… haha… HAHAHAHA!" I couldn't stop laughing. I lay on the ground where Skarmory deposited me and began heaving my chest.

"It's not a laughing matter!" Erika said, alighting on the ground. She's right, but I couldn't help myself. The merry-making only ceased when I ran out of breath.

"Ugh." Morty was still recovering from the after-effects of the Shadow-Sneak getaway.

"Haaa. Hey Morty, what's it like going all two dimensional?"

"I'll tell you when… when… uhh… burp," and he passed out. Erika kept watch for any Skarmory who might follow us. Fortunately, the explosions seemed to have cowed them.

I rolled over, to come face to face with my newest Pokémon. It's been a long, long time since I added a team member. Skarmory lay, panting and completely out of strength.

"So, were you worth all this effort?" I wondered. "Are you and I going to get along?! Because I'm going to depend on you."

Skarmory looked me in the eye, showing no recognizable emotion.

"Well, I promise you this. I will love you without question, without reservation, no matter what may come. So let's get along. 'Kay?"
Friends in Low Places

It was dark well before we reached Blackthorn. Morty lent me an Ether for Magneton, so that the Pokémon could use Flash to guide us through the dark. The man couldn't let it pass without bringing up the similarities to the gymnasium basement adventure.

"Well at least I know where the perverts are this time," I snapped back at him. Thankfully, the shadows concealed the fond smile I sported while saying this. He replied with a great big yawn.

At the motel, I looked through the brochures in the lobby. Hopefully there was a late-night fastfood joint where we could pick up dinner.

"Here." Erika pointed to an expensive looking place. I shook my head, patting my purse for emphasis. She lay her hand over mine in response. "Don't worry, I'll cover this one, and you can pick up tomorrow's lunch, at a cheap place. How does that sound? I want to celebrate your capture."

"Okay. Hey! Where are you going!" Morty sulked past me, heading towards his room.

"I'm going to bed."

"Wah?! It's not that late! Come have dinner with us!"

"Nah, I'm floored. You gals go on, I'm out."

"You're not just going to your room so you can wank off, are you?" I asked, a little perturbed. He deserved every bit as much credit for our success (and discredit for the problems!) as myself. I wanted him to share the moment with us.

"Wank off?! Hell no. Hey, if you want, you can personally see me," *insert massive YAWN* "drop dead onto the mattress. I'm not gonna move."

I frowned.

"Whatever. Go be a deadbeat. Jerk. Don't let Gengar eat your dreams."

"Woman, your insults are becoming ever more creative. And with that, I'm goooooooone." He stumbled the last few yards to his door, opened it, and vanished.


"Um… um… no… I think mine's dead too. We can use a payphone, maybe?"

"Do those things still exist?"

"Right… Oh, I know, you can use VOIP on the PC's."

"Ah! Okay. So, can you make the reservation for the restaurant? I'll go fetch us some company."

"You're being quite the social Butterfree tonight. Yes, I can arrange for a table. How many?"

"At least four, maybe more."

Erika went off to find a cab.
The Pokémon Center was close enough to walk (proximity to it was the main reason for picking this motel). Once there the night nurse nodded. Seeing I wasn't in a hurry, she figured there was no emergency and went back to reading a magazine. The PC, as usual, hung against the wall.

I tapped the screen to wake it up.

**Please enter your password.**

It needs my password, even for a call? I shrugged. Can't do anything these days without leaving a digital trail. I typed it in (**Lighthouse69**, no more kiddy relic passwords) and was greeted with the usual menu.

Who to call first?

"Eh. Guess I have to do the hard one first."

Calling… Calling…

"Hello?"

"Violet?"

"Huh? Oh…"

"Hi."

"Jasmine." The way she said my name- it was a little bitter, and wary. I couldn't blame her after yesterday, but that didn't mean it doesn't hurt.

"About last night… I wanted to invite you out to dinner, to make up for getting carried away. That wasn't usual for me." Me making excuses sounds so hollow. Still…

"Are you sure? I think it might be better-"

"I'm positive," I said, cutting her off. "I'm fine now; I'm actually feeling really upbeat. I still want to give you a gym battle as soon as possible. Would you be willing to come eat out?"

"Okay." She sounded reluctant. Do I need to convince her more? "Just say where, I'll be over as soon as I can."

"Oh. Well, it's Skyrim Tavern, just south of the Pokémon gym."

"Okay."

That was easier than expected. How much did that call cost me? I checked through the instructions- Nothing? Free PC VOIP calling comes with my Gym Leader's license? That's cool. Time for call number two.

"Hello?" came a low, annoyed voice.

"Hello, Clair. It's Jasmine, from Olivine. How are you doing?"

"…" Silence.

"Anyways, I was wondering if you would like to eat with me and some friends at the Skyrim Tavern tonight?" My voice fell flat. Even if we were part of the same league, Clair and I never really got
along. It was too awkward for me trying to suddenly call her up, act cordial, and invite her out.

"So that's a n-

"You paying for drinks?"

"Um… sure." Drinks? As long as it's not too much… Maybe if Erika chips in…

"I'm coming."

She sounded awful, but I didn't want to say anything, for fear she'd change her mind. Even if my party-arranging skills would mortify my mother, at least my plan was working. If only I knew more people to invite! Oh well, the important players have been gathered. Now to find my way over there. But first, let's check out my new Pokémon. Oh, and why not sneak a peak on Morty too?

"Magneton. Skarmory." I let out my old standby first, then my new capture. The odds that the latter would turn and attack me were 40%, I'd say, thus the former's presence. Would he actually attack me? Run away? How much training would it take to discipline him? Breaking in wild Pokémon has never been my strong point, another reason it's been so long since my last addition.

"Oh! How cute."

As soon as Skarmory's form materialized, it immediately hunkered into a ball and fell asleep. He's still exhausted from the day's activity, apparently. Can't blame him.

"You'll fit right in with Amphy. He's a snooze-addict too." I tried petting Skarmory along the back. His skin was devoid of down feathers. By his age they had all been worn to nothing, and his skin scarred into a tough metallic hide. It was a little rough to the touch, though. As he gets older, the hide will become even more worn, smoother, sleeker, and more aerodynamic. It's semi-well-known that elderly Skarmory are also the fastest, contrary to intuition.

At my touch, his head turned up to eye me warily. His beak opened, and he looked like he wanted to snap my fingers off. I jerked, and the gesture made the Skarmory flinch. His head and wings tucked themselves into a tighter, stouter ball.

"Impish? Or Bold natured?" I was referring to the genetic traits all Pokémon carry, genes that predispose them to a certain personality and physical weaknesses or strengths. Roughly 25 traits had been mapped out and arbitrarily named. This factoid comes courtesy of my probation homework.

I puzzled which nature fit him better. Either way, it certainly benefited the Skarmory's already noteworthy defense. For that, I was quite happy.

"Come on, we're going to the motel. You'll get to see your new home tomorrow. Come on! Come come!"

No amount of coaxing could get the bird to move, though. I resorted to picking him up around the torso. For his size and Steel typing, he was surprisingly light, although still not quite a featherweight. Regardless, he seemed content to let me carry him.

"My name's Jasmine. Jasmine. JASMINE. You're Skarmory. SKARMORY. SKARM-SKARM." I repeated the phrases over and and over.

"Kraw! Kraw! Skraw! Skrar! Skar! Kraw!" Skarmory let out soft cries every so often, while burrowing his head into his wing. Looks like he just wants to be left alone. Unfortunately for him, I've learned its best to start integrating a Pokémon into human society right away.
"My name is Jasmine. Jasmine!" I perked up after saying my own name. "Magneton!"

"Magneton!" Magneton pitched in.

"Jasmine! Skarmory! Magneton!"

We each took turns with name recognition. The Skarmory learned quickly enough— or rather, he learned at a lightning pace, but was reluctant to show it.

"I'm your master, you'll have to do what I say. You'll have to battle for me, and yourself, and your teammates. We're all in it together, to be the best we can be. It's like the scraw, only you're not just competing for girls. You're competing for everyone's attention, and praise."

The motel came into sight.

"You like attention, don't you? You like to show them you're not going to be taken lightly. That's what made you stand out to me. I'm the same way. I don't like to be put down, so I work extra hard to earn their respect. There's this one person I've been working on impressing. He takes me lightly and doesn't treat me with any respect. But we're going to show him, aren't we? One day we'll be better than him. Then he won't dismiss me when I say "NO!" to his dirty advances." Or if he really likes me, he'll finally listen and court me the right way, I found myself thinking.

"Here he is. This is him. Take a look at our arch-rival."

His window blinds were drawn shut, but a tiny gap at the bottom let me glimpse in. I kneeled down to gain a view, bringing Skarmory up to eye level as well. Morty lay in bed, splayed out like a gutted animal. There was no motion for a while, until he rolled over, limply, and pulled out his cell phone. From this angle I couldn't tell what he was doing, but it looked like texting or playing games. This continued for four or five minutes, at which point his head slumped forward and remained still. His chest rose and fell, slowly, gently, and I could imagine soft snoring sounds drifting into the air.

"Skraw." Skarmory cooed. He looked through the glass at Morty's form, then at me, then back, and then back at me. His beak lightly pecked my shoulder several times.

"You understand the issue, don't you? You looked lonely out there in the den yourself. No one respects you. No one accepts you on your own terms, everyone expects you to come out on their terms. Like, none of those lady Skarms even bothered with you, even though you fought so hard at the scraw. I bet you hated having to fight in there, but you did, and yet you still got nothing for your effort. It's frustrating, isn't it?"

Skarmory lay his head upon my forearm.

"Yeah. I kind of have that problem too. Not the exact same, but… you get my point."

I took one last peep at the party pooper asleep in his bed.

You sleep tight. We're going to have fun without you, pretty-head.

---

Cab drive: cry poor; fail, pay up, stare forlornly at little wad of cash left to me, cry, night-time drive through nondescript city, headplant on window, stare, stare, oh! giant dragon-shaped hedge
"Here."

"Huh? Ah. Thank you."

"Just part of the job."

Tipped the driver, and my bundle of cash shrank further. I hope I have enough for lunch tomorrow.

Skyrim Tavern appeared out of the gloom like a relic of another age. The wood-planked roof curved at the corners, from which hung strings of paper lanterns. The ornate veranda was guarded by a pair of stone statues, a pair of Dragonair that joined together and intertwined to form an archway. The outdoor area was dimly lit, littered with mainly empty tables. No one really wanted to eat outside with this chill wind blowing through. The entrance door, thankfully, was modern. One step inside and I was greeted by a toasty billow of air.

"Oyyyy!"

"Jazz! Jazzery!"

"Jazzery!"

"Jazzery!"

"It's Jazzery!"

I was greeted by a crowd about ten times larger than I expected. Trainers of every stripe and color packed the main dining area, and about half of them recognized me. I couldn't say the reverse was true for any of them, or so I thought. Erika pushed her way through the throng.

"Jasmine! Finally!"

"Erika?! Who are all these people?"

"I don't rightly know myself. They simply showed up and started drinking, heavily. I'm very concerned, they all say they're drinking on your tab."

What the hell?! I can't pay for all these people!

"Did Violet come?" I asked.

"Yes- but she's being a bit shy. What are you going to do about this?!"

"What am I going to do?! No clue, whatsoever. I only invited two people!"

We made our way through the restaurant. From their odd appearance, the profusion of pokeballs, and a few vaguely familiar faces, it eventually dawned on me who these people were.

"Now," Erika began, "I think there are a few people you will recognize here." We found our table, a long booth. Everyone turned to witness my arrival.

"Hello!" I said in surprise.

Violet was seated at the far end, where Erika took a seat beside her. Nearer to me were two complete but joyful shocks: Lyra and Ethan! Beside them was a stiff, serious looking young man in a black
coat. The final member of our group sat herself in the center, half-hidden behind the most massive mug of beer I’ve ever laid eyes on. Clair, of course.

"Hello Clair. It's been a little while, hasn't it?"

"GLURGLGLURGL." The enormous mug was half-finished when she picked it up; when she set it down it was completely empty. Her fist rapped the table, signaling for a refill.

"I assume these people are your subordinates?" I asked, indicating the currently chanting crowd.

She didn't reply right away. Or, well, at all. Her focus was fully consumed by the empty glass mug. It remained there, unwavering.

"She doesn't talk until she's drunk," Lyra said. "How are you doing Jasmine?"

"She's not drunk already?" I took a moment to puzzle over this impressive show of inebriated fortitude. The tender passed by to lay another mug down, brimming and frothing, ready for consumption. It did not touch the table surface before being snatched by Clair and chugged.

"Anyways!" I shrugged, turning to Lyra. "This is a pleasant surprise. What are you doing here?"

Lyra pointed to Clair. "It's better you ask her. By the way, this is Silver." The serious-looking redhead nodded politely, saying nothing. "If you're going to eat, I recommend the filet scash."

I spent the next five minutes chatting with Lyra, ordering, and chowing on the complimentary rolls. Lyra related various things she’d been up to, but was coy about her presence here and wanted to listen to me more. That was difficult with my attention drawn to the apparently-not-drunk-enough drunkard; with sidelong glances given to the stranger and Violet. The latter was secluding herself and engaging Erika in whispered conversation.

"So is probation really that bad?" Lyra bugged me for the third time on the subject. I held up a hand.

"Now wait a minute, why won't you tell me why you're here?"

"I can't." Lyra answered.

"Why?!" I'm so confused!

"Because it's much funnier to hear from her." She nodded towards Clair.

"But she's not drunk-"

"Fifty-five zero!" Clair suddenly shouted. "It's a fucking joke! A Rattata's crackhole of a joke! We're not some chump collection of bowling pins, are we?!"

"Hell no!"

"We're the goddamn Dragon Tamers of Johto! The strongest type has no business going fifty-five and zero against any opponent, let alone an emo prick and his pissy yellow rat!"

"Here here!"

"Dragons are invincible!"

"Aye!"
"Dragons are all-powerful!"

"Aye!"

"Dragons always win!"

"Ay-aye!"

"SO WHAT THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED TODAY?! DID WE COLLECTIVELY FUCKING DOPE ON PARAS SHROOMS?! WAS THAT A HALLUCINATION?! DEAR GOD AND ARCEUS TELL ME THAT WAS THE CASE!"

"We might not have doped on shrooms, but we're bowling on lager tonight!"

"What the hell?" I said aloud. Clair's speech was not really directed at any person, but at the ceiling. None-the-less, her subordinates eagerly threw in their two cents, in timed bursts. It was like a pep rally.

"Are you celebrating something?" I asked the nearest one.

"Hell yes! We are celebrating the most astounding, humiliating, lop-sided steamroll of the Dragon's Den in its five-hundred year history! Go us! The biggest losers in Blackthorn annals!"

"I have no clue what's going on." Erika shrugged, not knowing the answer. Lyra took joy in my confusion, but also offered no explanation. Silver contemplated our faces, while Ethan stabbed aimlessly at his sushi.

"Clair, what's going on? Tell me!" I shouted directly at the Dragon Tamer.

"Whah? Fran, is that you?"

"It's me, Jasmine. From Olivine. Remember?"

"Jasmine? That little naked squeak from Indigo?"

"Yes, that one," I said, sighing in exasperation. If that's the clearest memory she has of me, so be it.

"What happened? And please make sense."

"What happened is that I, THE Dragon Tamer, lost fifty-five to zero in a straight up Pokémon match."

"Wah?" That's not even possible. Matches never involve more than six Pokémon a side. "What do you mean?" I demanded. Unfortunately, Clair got her hands on another mug and was too busy downing it to elaborate.

"Hi, name's Paulo." A guy in a snazzy jacket (embellished ridgelines going down the sleeves, even) pulled a chair up to me."You must be Jasmine. Sorry if we're jacking your tab, I promise you won't have to cover this mess."

"Good to meet you Paulo. Now, care to explain this?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm about to tell you. Just wanted you to know about the tab first, since we all barreled here assuming you were offering free drinks."

"Free drinks? For everyone? Who said that?"
Paulo pointed an accusatory finger at the Dragon Gym Leader.

"I'll get the Dragon Den to cover this. Heck, we deserve it."

"So what the hell happened?" I'm tired of not getting answers when I ask for them! I'm tired of surprises!

Paulo leaned back. "So I assume you've heard of Red's challenge?"

"Red? What? Oh wait, the Champion? No, I haven't."

"Oh, need to get you caught up then. Apparently, Red's been coaxed into joining the Johto League Tournament this year. Thing is, for all the times he's toured the region, he's never completed the gym badge set."

"Wait? What?! Doesn't he come from Kanto? And he never finished the gym challenge here in Johto?"

Paulo nodded.

Come to think of it, I don't remember battling someone of Red's caliber, ever. Then again, he wasn't well known until he crushed the Kanto, Sinnoh, and Hoenn Elite Four in quick succession. That was four years ago. Before that? Was it possible he came through Olivine and beat me? Or did he come before I took the Gym Leadership? I can't recall. It was a difficult time in my life and I've tried very hard to forget as much of it as possible.

Or Paulo might be right and he never stopped by the Olivine City Gym.

"He's making up for lost time. With a vengeance."

"Guess where stop number one was?" Lyra chipped in.

I pointed to the ground, meaning Blackthorn. Lyra and Paulo both nodded their head in the affirmative.

"Blackthorn Gym got slaughtered," said Lyra.

"Don't be so modest. Us subordinates just kind of cowered in the corner after the first ten Pokémon got sent to the emergency ward." Paul grimaced. "Don't know if he had something against our gym, or just wanted to prove a point."

"So I take it he beat Clair?"

"Beat?! HA!!!"

I'm being serious, why do people have to insert exaggerations, hyperbole, and sarcasms into normal conversation all the time?!

"Okay, follow me here," Paul warned. He started counting off his fingers.

"Clair challenged him to a standard 3v3. Then a 4v4. Then a 6v6. Then a 6v6 double battle. Then a 6v6 triple battle. Then a 6v4 double. Then 6v1. Then a 6v1 triple. Then a 6v6 random. Then a 6-on-1. Red won every single match."

"Okay, so Red came through and won a lot. What's the big deal, he's the world champ, you expect him to be tough." Never mind that this sounds excessive and Clair should have just given him the
badge after the first battle.

"Tough?! You're joking. Fucking joking. He didn't just win. He won every single battle without his Pokémon taking a single scratch of damage. Yes, even the six-versus-one Pokémon battle. Well, granted, by then, Clair was in such a rage she didn't plan very well, but still. Six Pokémon. Attacking at the same time. Couldn't even hit a freaking Pikachu."

"I get it, he's good," I said. While those feats certainly sound impressive, there's no way to tell the reality of the situation without seeing it for myself. If what he said was true, and Red was on a tour of the region, he would certainly head my way at some point.

Wonderful! A guaranteed loss to add to my record.

"Lyra, can you make sense of this?" I asked.

"I didn't see it myself, though I wish I had."

"I did." The strange red head known as Silver finally spoke up. "It was the Pikachu. I don't understand how, but its Thunderbolt one-shot everything it touched. That, and during the later matches, Clair wasn't thinking straight and made suicidal judgment calls. It was really disappointing."

"Okay." I rubbed my face. "If I'm understanding this correctly, Red, the world champion, inexplicably wants to play in the little league, a.k.a. the Johto Regional Tournament, and to do that, needs the eight gym badges. He came here first because you're purported to be the strongest gym in the region, and he bloodied you all up and embarrassed your Gym Leader. When rumor came about free alcohol, everyone decided to jump on the bandwagon and chug away the bad memory. Am I correct?"

"Yep, basically."

"So Lyra, why are you here?" I asked. Lyra beamed. She had her poofy hat in hand, which shortly found its way on top of Silver's head. He batted it off.

"I've been tracking Silver here, since I want him to train me. He doesn't want to-" Silver shot her an angry look. "-but I know my cute charms will convince him eventually. He's been tailing Red in order to battle him, to prove himself or something like that. I also kind of fancy battling Red myself, see if he lives up to the hype."

You say that so innocently, Lyra. It's endearing, it really is. Silver looks like he wants to gut you right now. And you, battling a living legend? I don't care how strong Typhlosion's protective instincts are, he's not going to stand up against a monster that 1-shot the entire Blackthorn Gym.

"I have told you, repeatedly, REPEATEDLY, I will not train you!" Silver said angrily.

"Awww, you say that and you say that..." Lyra stared at him with googly eyes.

"Are you strong?" I asked Silver.

"Not strong enough." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Not yet. That's why I merely watched Red battle. I need to train harder before I challenge him. Much harder. And that's not possible with overalls here bugging me every other day."

"Don't listen to him! I bet he could beat Red if he just tried! He's really, totally strong! Stronger than me, stronger than Ethan even! Isn't that right?"
Ethan raised his vacant eyes towards her, with a look saying *Why am I dating her?*

"Have you ever competed in the tournaments?" Another question from me to Silver. He shook his head.

"No. Never. I don't participate in such formal battles."

"Why not?"

"They are shams, organized for mass entertainment. I value only the challenge in meeting other trainers on the field of battle, with something more at stake than money and ego."

"Uuhh."

"Pah! You can get everything you want in a battle just the same, whether it’s a tourney or on some mountain top. The only difference is money, and you like money, don't you?" Lyra said. She leaned forward on her elbows.

"No."

"Oh? Then what possessed you to bend over backwards for that Golbat contract?"

"My interest is not money for its own sake, nor do I desire petty wealth or material possession. Money is only a means to an end."

"And that end is?" I asked.

"To take control of my father's organization."

"Huh. Who is your father? What organization is it?"

"That's enough questions." Silver took up a draught of lager and started sipping it, as a means of removing himself from the conversation.

"Rude."

What a strange guy. If you have nothing good to say, then don't say anything at all! Or so the saying goes. Men don't ever seem to take that lesson to heart. I bet the ones who are quiet actually have nicer things to say. Like Ethan here. Although, by his demeanor, I don't think Ethan is really enjoying himself in this rowdy environment.

We spent another hour on irrelevant conversation. For me this involved a typically timid one-on-one with Lyra, while my interaction with the gym trainers more resembled a one-sided interrogation (them interrogating me). Paulo, at one point, did try to hit on me. His hands went around my waist and he compared me to a snow angel or something. I was about to respond as usual (unkind word and/or slap to the face), but he immediately turned to Lyra and hit on her without waiting for my answer. He repeated this gesture until he ended up with a truly awful pick-up line given to Clair. Clair reflexively smacked him, then in her own drunken stupor clutchted him by the cheeks and lip-locked him. Most everyone hooted and hollered, rooting the pair on. Except me, of course, I was too busy burying my head in embarrassment.

"Is it safe?" I asked, head still planted into my arms.

"From what, the PDA? Yeah."

I lifted my gaze up, to witness Paulo and Clair on top of the table and frenching.
"Liar."

"Hehehe."

"Can you get them to stop? Seriously, I need to talk to Clair." And Violet.

"I'll see what I can do."

I got up and made my way down the side of the table, trying to avert my gaze from the lovers' spectacle. Lyra tip-toed beside them and began poking.

Violet and Erika had spent the entire meal talking with each other. The conversation halted when I approached.

"Violet?"

"Yes?"

"How are you doing today?"

"I'm doing fine."

"Ah! Good!"

We stared at each other, blankly.

"So…"

This is awkward. Perhaps I should forego the chitchat and get straight to the point? Or should I apologize for yesterday, or try to explain myself to her? I get the sick feeling that I somehow hurt her feelings, even though she wasn't involved in any way with my misfortune and subsequent outburst. Is it that I'm afraid that she thinks I'm a lunatic, a clingy, overzealous pokemon fanatic?

In a way, I am like that. I treat my pokemon like a jealous lover. How should I deal with that?

Blah! It's irrelevant to the situation at hand. What's important is that I acknowledge Violet's troubles and try to do something for her, and not think about myself.

"Well, I wanted you to know that I was really touched by your situation, so I wanted to try to do something special. With Clair's permission, I believe we can have an official Pokémon match at the gym here. Would you be willing to accept that?"

Violet took in my offer patiently, and then smiled. A wave of relief passed over me.

"Yes, yes, that would be kind of you. I accept."

"Oh good! Tomorrow morning, at, say 9:00?" Our train leaves at noon, that'll leave plenty of time for a battle.

"Yes, perfect. Well then, I look forward to beating you." She nodded contentedly.

"Haha! Alright. However," I said, my spirits picking up, "this doesn't mean I'm going to go easy on you. You're going to have to earn this badge." I fiddled in my purse for a moment, looking for the spare badge I always kept on hand. It was usually reserved for show, but I can always get a new one. Assuming Violet actually wins. I truly had no intention of losing to her. Sorry, but an extracurricular gym battle is the most my sympathy gets you.
I found Clair straddling atop a wasted Paulo. Lyra was busy handing her glasses of soda, tricking her into thinking it was whiskey she was now glugging. I approached, clearing my throat to draw attention. It didn't work, and Clair went down on Paulo's face again. Lyra interceded with a plate.

"Mmmph?!" Clair and Paulo's expectant lips found only porcelain. Clair bolted upright, grimaced at Lyra before being directed towards me. Persuading her to let me borrow her gym came down to two sentences per side:

"I want to use your gym tomorrow morning."

"We're closed for the rest of the week."

"Let me use it for one match."

"Fine, just leave me alone."

Awesome. With permission in hand, I allowed the couple to continue their lewd display of sexuality.

Twenty minutes later we departed, everyone on good terms. Violet's expression towards me still felt… odd, somehow. Like she was mad or wary towards me. Her words were anything but, however, and we exchanged the usual promises of soon-to-be competitors. Erika promised to meet me at the room, but first she and Violet wanted to check the garden behind the restaurant before leaving. Lyra promised to show up to root for me tomorrow, and drag Ethan and Silver along to do the same. Clair promised to do some unmentionable things to Paulo once they found a bed. My final words of the night were addressed to her.

"Clair! I would love to thank you for for letting me use your gym, but quite frankly- your nipples are about two millimeters from falling out of your dress. Please find a room."

The unhappy, drunken hook-up couple glanced at each other and began a round of non-stop laughter.
Blackthorn Gym

Morty got the note I tacked onto his motel door. He was waiting for me at the lobby of the gym, twenty minutes before the match was scheduled.

"You look awake, for once," I commented.

"Yeah…" he shrugged. "Got a good night's sleep, for once. What did you want me here for?"

"First, to tell you that you missed a great time last night. It was your kind of party."

"Oh really?"

"Yes. Lots of beer, lots of noise, lots of sexual proclivity."

"Yeah? Well, for your information, alcohol alone does not a good party make," he informed me in the most formal of tones.

"Then what does make for a good party?" I asked.

"The right company."

"So says sleeping beauty. Your presence was sorely missed."

"Uh… Eh… I got no defense."

I stared, droll-eyed, then shook my head in reproach.

"Anyways, the real reason I summoned you."

"You want to make out," he ventured.

"Shut up. I wanted advice."

"On kissing."

"Shut up! Advice on battles."

"Between sexes."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up before I die!" I added, because my sides were cracking up, my brain not knowing the difference between frustration and hilarity. "Advice on a woman, named Violet."

"So you're gay now."

"Oh my god Morty!"

"You like it, you think it's funny!" He poked my laughter-riddled belly repeatedly.

"Stop! That h-hur-ha-hahahaha! S-s-stop!"

"Stopping," Morty said. The poking ceased, as did the jokes and involuntary convulsions. I took a serious stance, or at least, as serious as I could manage after that farce.

"There was a woman who beat you in a gym match shortly before we left Ecruteak. She probably
used grass types. Her name was Violet. Do you recall?"

"Oh, yeah, I remember that cutie."

"You think she's cute?"

"I think many women are cute. Don't be jealous."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm not jealous. I'm not desperate for your affection, contrary to your own delusional head canon."

He raised his hands in defense. I continued.

"I'm about to battle this woman in a sanctioned gym battle and I want advice on how to beat her. What Pokémon does she use? What tactics? Do her Pokémon have any weaknesses? So on and so forth. Tell me everything you know."

"Woah! Woah! No can do." He shook his head in a fierce horizontal motion.

"I'm not kidding here."

"Yeah, that's the problem," he replied.

"Stop joking," I warned him.

"Right, you did it again. You just had to be serious and you ruined our little moment. I can't."

"Don't mess with me. You are so far down my totem pole that-"

"Listen to me!" He put a hand over my mouth, shutting my speech off. "I didn't say I wouldn't, I didn't want to, or that I won't. I said I can't. Foreknowledge on a challenger? That is considered a serious breach of ethics for a Gym Leader, Jazz."

"It's not that serious! They only say don't-"

He physically shushed me again. His expression, I realized, was as serious and stubborn as he's ever shown.

"It is serious. I can't tell you a thing," he said deliberately, each word drilled for emphasis. "Gym Leaders are not supposed to seek reactionary competitive advantage. That includes prescient knowledge and pre-adaptation to challengers. Part of our job is to test a trainer's ability to adapt to proscribed difficulties. We can do anything we want by our lonesome, but we can't change tactics based on our opponent."

"But…"

"It's all there in the rulebook. And, furthermore, it's beneath you." He put a hand on my shoulder. "Why do you think you need to cheat?"

"Because my job is on the line. Because my dignity is on the line!"

I wasn't seething mad at him, only frustrated, but it was beginning to show. He moved closer, within the range of intimacy.
"You don't give yourself enough credit sometimes. Your Pokémon battle well beyond their level because of your intelligence in coordinating them. You think you need to cheat to protect your career? Your job and your dignity will go poof if you rely on others instead of improving yourself."

"That… But… I see." I bowed. He had struck a chord. He knows I hate relying on others, and was using that against me. Until that moment I hadn't thought about what I was doing in that way. "I assumed it was okay. I guess not. Sorry."

I say I'm sorry, but only because I look like a fool now.

"It's okay. That's the natural right of any other trainer. Unfortunately, we're slaves to the League." He lifted my chin up with one hand and hugged my shoulder with the other. We proceeded to walk off like that, me tucked under his embrace. To an outsider, we must look like a young couple, and I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

As long as we don't hold hands, I'll be okay.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

"No."

"Figured. C'mon, let's go find something for you to eat."

"The battle starts soon."

"You can be late."

"No I can't."

"Yes you can. You want advice? Never battle on an empty stomach. Your brain needs nutrients to think at its best."

"Fine, fine."

"How're your Pokémon?"

"They're good. I tended to them this morning. They know the basic strategy."

"Mind sharing?"

"Do I mind? A little."

"Right, fair's fair. At least tell me who're you're going to use."

I eyed him down.

"You're just going to laugh to yourself because you know what I'm in for but you won't tell me."

"No… I…"

"What?" I demanded. He seemed sheepish.

"Well, I was going to give you advice on what to do with your team, based on what I know about her, without telling you why it's good advice. You know, grey areas."

"You rotten scoundrel!" I unhooked myself from his arm. He was grinning. "You think you know
my Pokémon well enough that you could come up with a better strategy? If you're going to spout ethics at me and then subvert them, you might as well go the whole raw way! Why are you such a hypocrite?"

"You know why," he said. I took this answer seriously, and tried reasoning it out. The answer became obvious, and subsequently, I fell silent and demure.

Of course, it's because he likes me.

I settled down somewhat.

"I'm going to use Skarm-skarm," I admitted.

"Even though you just caught him?" Morty asked in surprise.

"Even if I lose because of it, I think it'll be a valuable learning experience. I want to test his capabilities."

"That's a gamble."

"I'm willing to take it. It's not like one or two battles is going to be the difference in reaching 50%. So, based on what you know about Violet, is Skarmory a good idea or bad idea?"

"Hmmm." His eyes focused on the belt of my pants. "Let me think. By the way, jeans today?"

"I was lazy, I just put on what I wore yesterday. Why are you commenting on my fashion?"

"Because I know you hate jeans. And I'm stalling for time… Kay. Yeah. I honestly have no clue how Skarmory's going to fare. She's tricky. Obviously, grass user, so Skarmory won't take damage from her primary attacks, but… I can't tell."

His head drooped, his eyes closed in thought.

"Remember how I almost lost to Volkner?" he said.

"Huh?"

"That's the best advice I can ethically give you. The way Volkner almost beat me, would be a good way to beat her."


"I can't say any more. I'm not allowed to tell you about her, but I can remind you that you know me, and you know my battle style, and that should give you some idea of what she's capable of. She used my tactics against me. Remember that."

I nodded. It wasn't helpful at all right now, but maybe it'll be worth something in the middle of the battle.

He idly took out a pokeball and began tossing it into the air, like a baseball. We arrived at a lunch stand, where he bought me a snack and himself some popcorn. "For the match, to throw at you when you're about to do something dumb," he said jokingly.

"Well, then I will just not do anything dumb enough to warrant that."

"That's the spirit. You'll be okay."
We made our way back towards the gym.

"Thank you," I told him.

"For?"

"The snack. For getting my Pokémon back. For helping find Skarmory. For believing in me."

"Coming from you? That's nice to hear." That smile, the one I so loved, the one I fantasized hiding a certain fondness for me? He had that smile now, and I was positive it was for me.

Dear heart, please stop fluttering. We have a battle. It's 8:56, I have to get to the arena.

"I'll be in the stands. See you after?"

"Sure."

"And I booked a ticket home. Train, this time, twelve o'clock. I double-checked with Erika, it should be the right one. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not enough to say no."

We parted ways, he to the spectators' stands, myself to the arena floor.

All gyms look pretty much the same on the outside. There is an official uniform architecture for all gyms throughout the nation. One reason was to give them a distinct style, to let every trainer indisputably know that these are Pokémon League facilities. Another reason was that the standardized floor plan was cheap to build. The interiors were a different matter. Gym Leaders were allowed to customize to their heart's content, as long as it followed the safety guidelines, and was paid for on their own dime. My gym had the auto-tilling system, so that Steelix could burrow and crack and crumble the earth all day long without worrying about undermining the building's foundation. Other than that, though, it was a very plain, straightforward gym. There was one arena floor, and no superfluous elements. Clair was not nearly so conservative.

The Blackthorn Gym was much larger, and its central plaza was, in fact, filled with a giant pool of artificial lava. Competitors battled on large, floating barges and walkways. To navigate across the lava, trainers had to use controllers to move the barges in a specific direction and orientation. The process resembled a life-sized game of tetris. The whole affair was timed, and challengers gained extra time by defeating gym trainers. Clair's rules allowed you as much time as you could earn; one story had a particularly puzzle-inept trainer require 100 extra battles in order to gain enough time to figure out the mobile platforms and reach Clair.

When I arrived, the gym was in the process of being shut down for the week. The platforms were arranged in a straight line, and the lava was very dim, the result of the thermal generators having been recessed. The background hum of energy shields could still be heard, however. They couldn't be taken offline unless the lava completely cooled down to room temperature. Even the weeklong hiatus would not be long enough for that to happen. Ergo, the shields remained online. The major platform was near the back; a separate pathway was prepared for me to reach it. I could trace where the path ended, but couldn't quite make out how to get to it. A few spare spectators and trainers hung around, obviously disappointed that regular operations were suspended. I was forced to make my way through them while searching for the pathway's entrance.

"Excuse me."

My gaze was focused on the path, and my mind was preoccupied by the imminent battle. I didn't
notice the man walking briskly in my direction until I was nearly on top of him. Luckily, he nimbly dodged aside and averted a collision.

I turned my head, catching a glimpse of his face, just as he passed.

"Oh!" He looks familiar. I recognize him. But from where?

Young face, dark hair, piercing eyes, slightly hollow cheeks, narrow shoulders, good posture...

Where is he from? Way back in time? Like, five years ago? No. Maybe. No; more recent? Yes! Much more recent. TV. Newspapers. Internet. Two weeks ago. The gala! Red!

"Red? That's not Red… Is it?" I double-checked my terrible facial memory, and indeed, my fears were confirmed. I had been within a hair's width of ramming into the world champion. Goosebumps broke out over my forearms.

"Red!" I called out. He was already well behind me, and either ignored me or didn't hear my cry. Oh well. I'm surprised he's still hanging around after beating the gym yesterday. Hell, I'm surprised he's still allowed inside this gym, after what happened. I figured a few folks in here might not even bother using Pokémon to settle the score if they ever confronted him again. Oh well.

I'll be seeing him eventually, I'm afraid.

Still, it's so weird. The media create these legendary figures, trainers with obscene win ratios and unheard of exploits. But when they pass you by on the street, in a hallway, at a café, they're just like normal people. Easily missed if they aren't being heaped with attention. Even here, no one else seems to notice him. I'm the only one that knows. He's not battling, his famous Pikachu isn't out, and he's not wearing his trademark red ball-cap, so I guess that could explain it.

I shrugged. Johto has a little more than six million inhabitants, and only eight are Gym Leaders. I could be considered mildly famous, but I hardly get any recognition unless I draw attention to myself.

This world is so odd.

I found the pathway to the Gym Leader's pavilion and marched along it. The stands were virtually empty, it was beyond easy to spot Erika and company. Lyra was present, as promised, as was Ethan. Silver was absent.

The officiating judge met me, we exchanged formalities and technicalities, and then he departed to his booth.

The Gym Leader's pavilion was like a pulpit, looming over the main arena. Clair was not one for humbling herself before her challengers; they were all forced to look up to her during battles. As a lone, frail-looking figure approached from the forward platforms, I felt strangely comfortable. Like my elevated position was giving me a sense of confidence, power.

False confidence, false power.

I shook my head. You saw Morty deliver an all-timer of a battle and prove himself capable of being a regional champion, and this woman somehow managed to beat him. It's going to take focus to make sure she doesn't add to my loss total.

Violet took her position opposite of the field to me. She wore a floral-print knee-length skirt and blouse, trademarks of the aroma lady society. It was too far to see her face clearly, but I imagined a
friendly but smug grin on it. Her posture was loose. A pokeball was ready in her hand.

I stood forward.

"Welcome to the Blackthorn Gym. Today we will engage in a 6v6 single battle. For the right to earn the Mineral Badge, I, Jasmine Mikan, accept your challenge!"
Jasmine versus Violet

"Go, Skarmory!"

"Go, Breloom!"

I took a moment to evaluate the matchup. A Skarmory against a Breloom is usually a no-brainer, but I just caught my Pokémon yesterday. On the other hand, a Breloom is not some simple boxer-brute when under the tutelage of an experienced Aroma Lady.

Quick history lesson: The Aroma Lady Society was a formal club that gathered some one hundred years ago in the Sinnoh region. They dedicated themselves to the cultivation of flowers with unique and flavorful scents. Naturally, they raised Grass-type Pokémon to further their hobby. When the society was attacked by greedy land developers, the ladies were forced to defend themselves by utilizing their Pokémon. Since the Pokémon weren't trained for battle, they had to adapt unorthodox techniques from their aroma-based abilities to match the thugs toe-to-toe.

The Society has long since disbanded, but their predilection for fusing Pokémon training and aromatic cultivation has gained an immense following across the nation. Along with their hobby, these so-called Aroma Ladies also shared a certain penchant for underhanded tactics—namely status effects. Lots, and lots, and lots of status effects.

Naturally, I had learned this the hard way, in friendly battles against one of the most well-known Aroma Ladies in the nation: Erika.

Since Morty wasn't willing to give me hints, I based my strategy off of my experiences battling my dear friend.

So, as Breloom hopped side-to-side, closing the gap between itself and Breloom, I hardly expected it to throw a punch.

"Skarm, stay away from it! Use Air Cutter!"

"Leech Seed!"

My foe acted just as I predicted.

Unfortunately, being an outright clairvoyant would not help in this situation.

"SKRAWWW!"

Skarmory doesn't even know his own name yet, let alone the human language. He bristled and charged the Breloom with a simple Peck attack. The Breloom dodged aside, its tail releasing a spray of seeds into Skarmory's path as it did so. Almost instantly tiny sprouts appeared all over Skarmory's body. Every few moments Skarmory flinched, and a light, fluorescent mist appeared, resembling neon-green pollen. This "pollen" was promptly sucked in by Breloom.

"Air Cutter!" I begged. I wasn't really expecting Skarmory to recognize my command, but I was hoping he'd be smart enough to use it on his own. Unfortunately, he had other (dumber) ideas.

"Skraw! Skraw!" He kicked up a Whirlwind that blew the Breloom end-over-end, all the way back to the far sideline. Breloom leapt back to its feet, undeterred.
"Giga Drain!"

Breloom pounced, knocking Skarmory flat and landing on his back. My Pokémon cried, not knowing why it was being attacked and why his efforts to counter were being thwarted so easily. He's not used to battling a trained fighter yet. Sadly, he probably doesn't even understand what's going on, why a strange Pokémon is beating on him and why I, his new master, am not doing anything to help.

Out of frustration, Skarmory whipped his body about, using Steel Wing to cut into Breloom. Breloom leapt and then came crashing back down. A green aura flared up where the two made contact. The aura unfurled and writhed, like smoke, then appeared to be sucked into Breloom's fist. Giga Drain. The Leech Seed took its toll on my Pokémon as well.

Skarmory fluttered, breaking himself free, and then shrugged off another Giga Drain. Breloom wasn't able to land another attack after that, as Skarmory began focusing entirely on running away. However, each time a puff of pollen burst into the air, Skarmory's speed took another dip, and his cries became a little softer.

I sighed.

"Skarm retreat!" I held up a pokeball, then thought better. "Skarmory, come back! Get over here!" I waved frantically, until I caught the bird's attention. After several silly body-motions on my part, he figured out to come to my side. Breloom, being well-trained, stopped pressing its assault when it saw Skarmory leaving the arena.

"Stay out. Watch. Waaaaatch." I put myself eye-to-eye with the bird. I'll leave him out. Maybe he'll understand if he sees his team mates battling. They were all introduced earlier this morning, and it went as well as could be expected. My senior Pokémon treated him nicely, at least, encouraging and gently coaxing. Skarmory, for his part, kind of tucked himself into a ball and stared at everyone.

"Magneton."

It let out a crackling vibration, ready for battle.

"That Skarmory doesn't appear very disciplined. I was expecting more from a Gym Leader," Violet commented.

"My apologies, he is new," I replied, trying to hold down the distaste in my voice. I couldn't tell if she meant to insult me, or was just trying to mess with my head.

"Ah! Let me apologize, I didn't mean to be rude. You said you would take me seriously, but so far…"

"I see." Oh now she's being humble. Why was it so easy for me to jump to conclusions about other people's character? "I promise I won't go easy on you. Thunderbolt!" I shouted suddenly.

Magneton let off a sizzling bolt towards the Breloom. It jumped up in the air, but couldn't dodge. I don't care if it's technically resistant to electricity, enough shots from Magneton will take down its frail little fanny.

"Mach Punch!"

"Magneton, don't Reflect! Magnet Rise!" Magneton hesitated, but just a moment. It was enough to allow Breloom the hit, its fist connecting with one of Magneton's faces. An instant later Magneton levitated itself higher into the air.
"It's just using Mach Punch to get close to you, in order to Leech Seed you," I told my Pokémon. "Ignore your training, don't use Reflect, just keep your distance!"

"Mach Punch!"

Breloom leapt high into the air to deliver this punch. Magneton countered with a Thunderbolt. Probably should have used Discharge, but at least the blast stopped it from using Leech Seed.

"Higher!"

Magneton lifted itself another ten feet into the air.

"Trying to escape? It won't do, not at all. Bullet Seed!"

"That won't hurt Magneton!"

"You really think so?" Violet is baiting me with her offensive tone. Can't let her get to me.

Breloom whipped off grass-type projectiles like a chain gun. They spattered across Magneton's three faces.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Substitute!"

"Thunderbolt!"

"Substitute!"

Each time I called for a Thunderbolt, it met nothing but a hollow shell. I figured Violet was stalling for time, but why? Did she think Breloom could outlast Magneton's power?

It was the eighth or ninth round of Thunderbolt-Sub-break-repeat that I noticed it. Breloom was as fast and nimble as ever. It appeared just as healthy as it was when Magneton began laying into it.

"That doesn't make any sense." The kind of Substitute Breloom was making weren't being made from natural materials, but the life force of the Pokémon itself. Therefore, each Sub should be causing damage to its user. Breloom should be fainted by now, for all the Subs it's put up. And yet, it was still going strong.

"Magneton, Thunderbolt, and then come closer!"

Lightning arced directly at Breloom. It was already preparing another doppelganger. The attack blew the decoy apart, even as Breloom loped towards Magneton's vicinity.

"AHA!"

I spotted it. Little green furls covering Magneton's underside.

"When did you use Leech Seed?" I demanded of Violet.

"I'll show you. Bullet Seed 3!"

Magneton blanched under the barrage attack.

"Mach Punch!" Breloom closed in for a melee attack. Magneton is already seeded somehow, might
as well put my strategy into effect.

"Discharge!" I commanded.

I kept my eyes on Breloom, and followed it all the way through its leap, expecting any microsecond now to hear a crackling zap. It never came. Breloom smashed into my Pokémon, sending it to the floor. The opponent landed gracefully a yard beyond.

"Magneton… are you… asleep? How? Spore? When?"

I looked towards my human foe. She nodded her head to the side.

"I don't want to give up an advantage, but you should be able to figure it out by now."

What has she commanded her Pokémon to do so far? Substitute? Had Magneton gotten seeded by breaking the Subs? What if the Subs were filled with infectants, and Thunderbolting released the contents into the air? That's too farfetched, I haven't seen anything being released. Wait.

"Bullet Seed Three? A specialized attack? Bullet Seed? You're using that attack to carry Leech Seed!"

Violet nodded.

"And Spore?!"

Violet reached out her hand.

"Breloom, start the operation."

"Magneton!" I silently begged for it to wake up. I'm lucky this Breloom is such an indirect fighter, or else the Mach Punches would have ended it long ago. Still, only two or three more… But Breloom seemed content with leaving Magneton alone. It was busy Bullet Seeding all over the arena.

"What are you doing?" I asked. No answer, of course. "What are you doing!" I demanded, this time directed at Magneton. "Wake up! Wake up!"

It took three more minutes, and right as Magneton appeared to shake off the spore-induced sleep, my attention was drawn away from Breloom.

"Now, Sunny Day!"

"Sunny Day?!?!" Did I hear that correctly? Why use that?! Except it wasn't the Sunny Day I'm used to. Most people use it to set up their fire types, filling the very air itself with a burning radiance. This was much softer, warmer, almost comforting.

"Magneton, Thunderbolt!"

"Mag?"

He looked confused. I had to double-take at the field to understand why.

There were dozens, dozens, of Breloom littering the field. Holy shish kabobs. That can't be right. This isn't a 100v1 battle, is it?

But, the army of Brelooms weren't moving. They stood patiently by; no, not even that, they were as still as statues.
"They're Substitutes!" The Bullet Seeds Breloom was releasing, and the Sunny Day… It was planting a field of Substitutes! Naturally grown ones, at that, meaning they didn't drain Breloom's health to create.

"They're not just regular Substitutes," Violet warned.

"What does that mean? Where's the real Breloom?" Violet smiled, but opted to keep the answer to both questions a secret.

Alright, puzzle me this. Breloom is hiding. Nothing is happening, so she must be waiting on Magneton to act first. Breloom is either hiding amongst the Subs, or has burrowed underground.

"Reflect! Light Screen!" I ordered. As long as she's giving me breathing room, I can have Magneton prepare for the counter attack.

Oh, crap. I saw another puff of green pollen fall off Magneton. Magneton itself was looking drained; its components were heavily drooping. The Leech Seed had been draining it this entire time. I couldn't afford to wait Breloom out.

"Okay… Magneton, do you see the Leech Seed energy?"

"Maaagne."

"Follow it closely, it'll drift towards the real Breloom! Hit it!"

A few moments later, an electric crack filled the air. The Thunderbolt blasted apart one of the Brelooms. The area erupted into a sickly looking smoke cloud which engulfed everything, including Magneton.

"Toxic spores," I said to myself.

"Bullet Seed Two!" Violet commanded at last. Magneton attempted to lift itself outside of the gas. Large, pod-shaped bullets shot out of the cloud, pelting the retreating Magneton. Small puffs of yellow engulfed it. My Pokémon shivered, then fell out of the air, straight back into the toxin cloud.

"You filled the Subs with poison," I remarked.

"Yes, I did."

"That won't effect Magneton."

"I know. I forgot to tell Breloom to adjust that. These are all filled with spore clouds containing different toxins- some poisonous, others leeching, others paralyzing, others that can put to sleep." Violet finished explaining, sounding very confident.

"I get it." Judging by the fact that Magneton hit one of the Subs and released the cloud, even though he was aiming for the Leech Seed tell-tail, I'm guessing Breloom had hid underground, directly beneath a Sub. It used the cover of the toxin cloud to drill another clip of Bullet Seeds into Magneton, this time adding Stun Spore to the projectiles. So, my Pokémon is nearly fainted, paralyzed, giving the enemy health, and I have to deal with a Status-inducing minefield for the rest of the match. Unfair.

"Magneton, Thunder Wave."

"Oh! Underground!"
Through the haze of the toxin cloud, I couldn’t tell if the omni-wave successfully paralyzed the foe. Magneton lurched one final time, and then collapsed. The Leech Seed had actually sapped it down completely, doing almost all of the damage to my pokemon.

"Magneton is unable to battle! Gym Leader, please send out your next Pokémon!"

"Breloom! I'm so proud of you!" Her praise sounds forced.

"That is one dastardly Pokémon you have there," I said across the field, trying to come off as complimentary. Inwardly, I was cracking ten kinds of furiousness.

"I know, right? She is quite the defensive Pokémon. Leech Seed, Giga Drain- oh, did I mention her Toxic Heal ability? Even the poison clouds heal her."

I watched the Breloom hop-scotch atop the heads of the fakes. She seemed blithe to her trainer’s praises, but quite jubilant to score a victory. So, she’s a stalling status-inflictor, and a good one at that. But, why would Violet reveal her tactics? She's been coy up until now about her Pokémon’s capabilities.

"That’s very gracious of you to inform me," I said in a carefully measured tone.

"I don't think I have to hide anything now. I'm going to win."

"Because of the booby-traps?"

"Partly."

"What if I got rid of them?"

"Without triggering them? All of them? That would take a long time, but it would certainly hurt my plans."

"Good. Magcargo."

Oh look, she’s not smiling anymore. What, did you think I was a pure Steel-type specialist? Let's see how much fun you have with my little ball of magma, miss flower girl!

"Lava Plume!" I ordered my freshly materialized Pokémon. Magcargo complied. A wave of searing ash billowed across the floor. Everywhere that it touched a Substitute, the latter caught flame and exploded. The spore clouds puffed like little mushroom clouds, but then the spores themselves caught on fire and were swallowed up by ashes. Magcargo's attack cleared the field completely free of obstacles.

"Breloom, Bullet Seed Two!"

Where is it coming from? Crap! Breloom had found refuge from the Lava Plume by leaping behind Magcargo.

"Return! Steelix!"

Steelix took the Bullet Seed all across his body. The stun spores reached his head, causing the big metal snake to seize up.

"Steelix doesn't have the special defenses or the resistance like the others. Giga Drain, hurry!"

"Steelix, Iron Tail!" Breloom leapt into close range. Her fist connected, drawing out life energy from
Steelix's torso. The latter attempted to retaliate, but the paralysis kept interfering, slowing down his movements just enough. Breloom side-stepped and rolled desperately, barely dodging multiple crashing blows. Steelix locked up entirely, creating an opening. Breloom attempted another Giga Drain, only for Steelix to suddenly roll over. The Grass-Fighter was squished underneath the massive weight.

"Leech Seed!" Violet commanded.

"Get off! Ugh!" More sproutlings, and Breloom managed to struggle free.

"Break through it! Iron Tail!"

"Giga Drain!"

Steelix launched himself forward, attempting to re-pin the minute mushroom. Breloom backflipped, and then immediately reversed herself and charged in. However, her attack was too well timed: she assumed Steelix's charge had carried him much farther forward due to momentum. At that instant, however, paralysis struck, arresting Steelix's charge. He shrugged, and then instantly turned to face the incoming foe. An unintended feint, but it worked. Breloom's counter-attack was met mid-air by a massive, multi-ton, ferrite-encased *baseball-bat*. Breloom was sent flying through the air like a homerun, splattering against the sideline shield-wall.

"Ouch!"

Everyone in attendance- the spectators, Violet, me, even the judge- all winced at the impact.

"Hm." The judge mulled Breloom's disposition. A small wift of green pollen made its way over, imbuing the Pokémon with a tiny amount of health. Breloom struggled to her feet, shaking.

"Breloom is still able to battle, although barely. Your call whether to keep her in the fight," the judge informed Violet.

"I… I'm not calling her out, only retreating her," she decided. I noticed a glance from her towards me as she said this.

"Understood."

What's the point in keeping the Pokémon in the match? She's been an absolute pain in the rear, and now she's near-fainted, just get rid of her already! I don't want to have to pity-KO her later; I might very well go overboard and actually kill the thing (kidding… or not, if she took another serious hit from Steelix like she just did). Does she think her sapping abilities are that valuable? Or does the Poke have more tricks up her sleeve?

"Breloom, catch your breath," she ordered, returning her to the pokeball.

"Who's next?"

"Venusaur."

Oh great. Special-attacking tank; not a good matchup for Steelix. I'd rather save my brawns if and when that Breloom returns. Violet held out her hand, preparing to call an attack. Look at her! She's staring right at me, she's already guessing I'm about to switch. She'll use Solarbeam, taking advantage of the opening to charge the uber-powerful Grass attack.

"Steelix, return-"
"Earthquake!"

"Magnemite-" damn it! But my Pokéball was already flying. My Pokémon switched out nigh-instantly, and my little Electric-Steel took the Earthquake's full force.

"Magnemite!" I cried. My Pokémon shook.

"Mag. Mite."

Oh wow. It's unhurt. The Earthquake did nothing.

"I think you overpredicted," I said to Violet.

"Yeah," she said, her disappointment clear. Magnemite is the frailest Pokémon on my current team, but the Earthquake didn't even hurt it. Venusaur is hardly a physical brawler. Even with the double weakness versus the resistance, she probably would have been better off with a special Grass attack. Too late now.

She ordered a Razor Leaf, I called for a Thunder Wave. Dozens of tiny, shuriken-like leaves ripped through the air- but were stopped dead in space by the Thunder Wave. Unfortunately, Venusaur remained out of range and unaffected.

"Magnemite, you need to get closer!"

"Don't let it! Weather Ball!"

"Crap!" Sunny Day was still in effect. A septet of fiery globules launched out of Venusaur's back. Magnemite tried to protect itself with a Thunder Wave- to no effect. The Weather Ball impacted upon the ground surrounding Magnemite; miniature suns, complete with sunrays, exploded. Magnemite flew skyward dazed and unprepared for the next attack.

"Weather Ball!"

"Switch! Graveler!"

The second Weather Ball bounced harmlessly off of Graveler's rock hide.

"Oh? But what happens when Venusaur uses Energy Ball?" Violet said, half-mockingly.

"Dig!" So far this Venusaur hasn't used a single short-range attack, and its Earthquake is weak. If Graveler could make it underground, she'd have a good shot at taking this monster down.

"Gravel!"

No! Hell no! She's ignoring me!

"Grrrrvvv!!!" My rogue Pokémon thought it infinitely better to try to Rollout. Granted, the barrage of Energy Balls failed to score direct blows; merely glancing off the rotating body. Still, they were quad-effective and even a few more tiny hits like that would KO her.

"GRRRVVV!" Venusaur was surprised by Graveler's advance. Even I was a little shocked by how fast the Rock-type could move once she rolled up to speed. The foe took a few steps back.

"Hold steady! Intercept with Vine Whip!" The living bowling ball bore down on Venusaur. The latter steadied itself, reassured by its owner's voice. It held its vines ready.

"Saur!"

Graveler went airborne. Venusaur's vines had redirected it skyward using its vines like a trampoline, momentum did the rest. No matter, Graveler was in range.

"Graveler, Self-Destruct!"

"Grav?!

My heart dropped to my stomach.

Graveler stared at me like I was the stupidest, most contemptible being in the universe. She's not going to obey me.

"Wrap! Leaf Storm!"

Graveler flipped about and came rocketing down, attempting what looked like a Giga Impact. Alas, she was easily intercepted and cradled mid-air. A cyclone of verdant, energy-encased leaves, swirling and whirling and looking voraciously alive, engulfed Venusaur. As if sensing Graveler, the storm gathered together, and then flung itself full-forced against the hapless victim.

An evolved, much stronger Golem would have been one-shot in the same situation. Graveler stood no chance.

The judge held out a hand, and the outer part of my conscience perceived that he wanted me to switch Pokémon.

Graveler shouldn't have been in my lineup. I realized that now. This morning, she seemed like my best option. Even with the quadruple weakness to Grass, I had thought she could at least take down one Pokémon using Self-Destruct. Apparently, she didn't appreciate being used as kamikaze fodder, and didn't trust me or respect me enough to obey orders at the most critical of junctures. I knew we were on bad terms, but I didn't think her resentment ran this deep.

What was I supposed to do? Even if I had known not to put her in, who else was going to fill my sixth slot? Probably Oddish, and Oddish is, quite frankly, pathetically weak.

"Gym Leader, send out a Pokémon, now."

"Fine."

I'm in a 4-6 hole, and all of my Pokémon have seen action already. Meanwhile I've only seen two of hers.

"Magcargo!" I decided. Venusaur wasn't going to win an artillery war now. She should switch.

"Lave Plume."

"Venusaur, recall!"

I hope you have a non-Grass-type, otherwise I'm taking someone down.

And yes, that tone indicates I'm frustrated to the brink of anger.

"Vileplume!"
"Nature Power!"

To my utter surprise, Magcargo's incendiary ash cloud was met by an even more incendiary wall of lava. Like opposing waves, the two crashed into each other and cancelled each other out. Vileplume stood happily unscathed.

"Where'd that come… oh, right." Natural Power, a geo-based attack. We're surrounded by artificial lava; it's easy to forget when we the trainers are safely shielded from the heat.

"Kkk. Magcargo, Flamethrower!"

"Poison Powder!"

"Argh! Lava Plume!" Magcargo reacted in time. Flamethrower was fast enough not to be blocked by another Natural Power. However, it couldn't neutralize the poison clouds like Lava Plume could, the pure flames didn't have the same viscosity. Vileplume spewed out toxic clouds like a sprinkler with the valve broken off. The toxin had no effect, at least while Magcargo wreathed itself in superheated ash clouds. The poisonous spores would be burnt and amalgamated with the cinders before they could touch Magcargo's body. It wasn't pointless though- while Magcargo was busy defending himself, he couldn't launch Flamethrowers.

"Magcargo…" I started to recall him, but stopped myself.

ARGH! This is tricky! I don't want Magcargo poisoned, he's the lynchpin to my strategy! But I can't switch him with Steelix. The way Pokeball mechanics work, when Steelix switches in he would appear at the same point as where Magcargo left the field- right in the middle of Magcargo's Lava Plume! That's no good for the Steel type!

"Mag, move left on Mark."

"Vileplume, Stun Spore!"

"Lava Plume forward!"

Stun Spore worked no better than Poison Powder within the ash cloud. And now, the ash cloud was advancing on Vileplume's position.

"Nature Power!" Violet ordered the counter.

"Mark!"

"Stun Spore!"

"Recall!"

"SCHTEEEL!"

Perfect timing!

The pause Vileplume took to defend itself with Natural Power gave Magcargo enough time to maneuver out of his own Lava Plume, allowing me to switch for Steelix just before the next puff of Stun Spore arrived. Oh well, Steelix is slow and already paralyzed. I got the matchup I needed to start my strategy.

"Steelix, Body Slam!"
"Petal Dance!"

Steelix raised itself high over Vileplume, as the latter began dancing frenetically and letting off obscene numbers of flower petals. The two attacks collided.

"Plu-" Plume tried to continue its dance, but stopped midstep.

"That's what paralysis feels like," I said. "Steelix?"

Steelix let out a low rumble from his gullet. The Petal Dance didn't hurt him too much. Nor was the Stun Spore slowing his movements all that much - he had too much brute muscle inside of him to be shut down by such a small amount of spores. The only thing that was noticeably slower was his reaction time. Fortunately, that doesn't really matter to my plan.

"Awww! Giga Drain!"

"Dragon Tail!"

I couldn't see nor really care what the Giga Drain did. Dragon Tail worked perfectly, beating the Vileplume like a deflated beach ball and smacking the Pokémon straight back to its owner.

"Oh?!"

Venusaur appeared involuntarily.

"Um, that's unique. Venusaur? Earthquake, I suppose?"

"Saur!"

"Oh, right. Energy Ball." Violet shook her head, as if clearing out a mistake.

"Rinse and repeat," I told my own Pokémon. Rinse and repeat it did, paralyzing Venusaur and sending it back to its trainer. Breloom appeared.

"Aww. Again!"

This time was harder. Breloom, weakened as she was, managed to avoid getting hit.

"Breloom, Leech Seed! Then Giga Drain!" Breloom had no need of using the Bullet Seeds, she had ample opportunity with Steelix repeatedly crashing down on her.

"RAWWW!" My Pokémon roared, gathering two-thirds of his body-length off the ground. Breloom jumped to the side- only for Steelix to execute a sweep instead of a ground-pound. Breloom was sent end-over end across the arena floor.

"Steelix, turn to me."

He did, and confirmed my fears. The Body Slam should have knocked Breloom out- but no, she got a crucial amount of vitality back from the little green saplings growing in a patch on Steelix's side.

"Dragon Tail!"

"Giga-watch out!" Violet cried.

"Woah!"
Steelix crunched into the ground with his massive jaws, using it as a fulcrum. He lifted his entire body end-over, crashing his tail down in a whip-like arc. The speed and range came as a complete shock to my opponents (and even me), cracking the earth just inches away from Breloom. The force of the impact alone was strong enough to send the mushroom Pokémon flying. Before she could touch the ground the red laser of the pokeball picked her up.

"Impressive," Violet said.

"I didn't teach him that," I said. Had Steelix been self-training?

Venusaur appeared.

"Earthquake!"

No good: too weak, even with Steelix's vulnerability.

"Steelix, Dragon Tail again!"

The battle devolved into a merry-go-round ride the next minute or so. I'd seen three of her Pokémon and managed to Body-Slam-paralyze each of them, but couldn't seem to fish out her other three. I was growing wary of the Leech Seed. Not only was it sapping my Pokémon, it was cancelling out the relatively low amount of damage Steelix was doing.

"Vileplume!"

"Steelix, Iron Tail!" Hopefully this will finish that Pokémon in a single blow.

"Synthesis!"

Vileplume couldn't dodge, but it didn't really have to. It was flattened like a pancake, but survived. By the time Steelix was ready for another, it had already healed itself.

"Steelix, enough!"

"SCTEEL!"

I don't really like battles where opponents constantly switch in and out. I want just two Pokémon duking it out till one bludgeons the other into unconsciousness. Alas, that's not how the game is played today. My big snake retreated to the safety of his pokeball before the Leech Seed could weaken it too much.

Skarmory tapped at Steelix's pokeball.

"Do you understand how this works now?" I asked him.

"Skar-" The bird stared at me, somewhat curious and somewhat bored at the same time.

"Magnemite, Magnet Bomb."

"Stun Spore."

The pair exchanged attacks. Predictably, Magnet Bomb did not do much.

"I think like, half the Pokémon on both sides have been paralyzed by now," Violet commented.

"Yeah, really." Half wasn't enough, though. I needed all of her Pokémon disabled. Then,
Magcargo...

But that wasn't going to work if I couldn't get her pokemon to come out!

My strategy was being derailed because I'm shorthanded, and Violet is being very conservative. How can I get my plan back on track?

By abandoning it. I suddenly realized that, maybe, it's not worth it to push one angle of attack if it keeps meeting resistance. Go with what works. What is working? Magcargo. But I don't want him getting stunned or poisoned. Gotta think, gotta think…

"Magnemite…"

"Please lose now," Violet said.

"PLUME!"

I had completely forgotten about Nature Power, and now, a wave of lava bore down upon Magnemite. Magnemite wasn't close enough to recall, either.

"Light Screen stat!"

The lava crashed over Magnemite. The humans all held their breath, waiting to see what had become of the little Pokémon.

"Magnemite… is… able to battle!" The judge had a better vantage point and could make out my Pokémon's status before me. I breathed a big sigh of relief.

However, "able to battle" and "useful in battle" are two different things. Magnemite wasn't going to survive the next attack.

"Magnemite, come back." I might need it later. More likely, I'll probably just call it TKO'd when the time comes. I don't want to see him take another attack like that for no good reason.

"Magcargo."

I'm getting nowhere. My Pokémon are down or beaten up. I can't figure out a good way of dragging her other three Pokémon out. Now's as good a time as ever to exploit my plan.

"Shell Smash!"

"Venusaur!"

Violet switched out.

"Venu!"

Magcargo's shell cracked, and then splintered apart. Screw defense, we were going full offense. While the move obviously butchered his ability to withstand blows, it also, imperceptibly, cranked up his speed and offenses by a factor of 2. Even still, one Shell Smash wasn't enough.

"Earthquake!" Violet ordered.

Think. Quad-effective, with Shell Smash. But at long range, from this Venusaur, who couldn't even budge Magnemite with the same attack- I should be okay-
Magcargo was tossed and punted and devastated by the seismic waves. Before, Venusaur's Earthquake had merely thrown up puffs of dirt; now, there were yards-long cracks radiating outward. I hadn't felt the earlier ones, now I was gripping the podium to keep my footing.

What the hell?! That thing just got twenty times stronger!

"Magcargo?!! Are you alright?"

"Mrgl." He looks terribly hurt. Opposite of him, Venusaur grumbled happily. The floral behemoth lumbered slowly forward. It was eager to finish Magcargo off with one more Earthquake.

"Acid Armor!"

I watched, with horror, the ripple of dust cross the arena. Could Magcargo make it in time?

Magcargo's skin melted, stiffening in the process. The seismic shock reached him, wracking his body and kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Oh, I suppose he's not really quad-weak anymore," Violet stated. The dust cloud was drifting towards me; she could see my Pokémon better from her position. "But one more should do."

The Earthquake hadn't been fatal- but it was close. If I had to put it into numbers, the first had dealt 60%, and the second had been 37% of Magcargo's health, leaving 3%, roughly. Venusaur had stopped advancing. It was readying a third Earthquake. That was a mistake.

"Recover!"

"Mag!"

Before the next ground buster could reach him, Magcargo concentrated his vital energy, rejuvenating the organs bruised by previous attacks.

"Ugh!" Violet stepped back, partly from the ground shaking, partly from surprise. Venusaur, undeterred, let loose several more Earthquakes towards its opponent. Magcargo just barely managed to Recover the damage off the first one. Thereafter, however, it slowly gained the stamina edge.

Violet was busy thinking of a better counter. Earthquake would work, if the two creatures were much closer. But then it risks Magcargo's Lava Plume. If she stays at range, I can Flamethrower. Vileplume is the only Pokémon capable of blocking either- and that was only before the paralysis and Shell Smash. Venusaur's long ranged attacks- Weather Ball (the Sunny Day had faded), Energy Ball, Razor Leaf- none were really effective against Magcargo.

What would I do? Status, if I could.

"Sleep Powder!" she ordered, tentatively.

"Magcargo, dodge it!" He should have the speed now… oh wait.

The purple plume of powder fell well short; it didn't have the range to reach Magcargo. I didn't even have to worry about the Sleep Powder, if its delivery was going to be this weak. Strange. I thought this Venusaur was a ranged specialist?

"Ha! Flamethrower, max."
Shell Smash-boosted Fire-type-boosted super-effective Flamethrower. Let's see her counter THIS.

"MAAAAAAG-CARG!"

Imagine a tornado, made of gasoline. Imagine it being lit up with a lightning bolt, so that it was now a great infernal vortex. Now turn this vortex sideways and point it towards a pile of soppy leaves. What would you wager the leaf pile's chances were?

"Frenzy Plant!"

The overpowered Flamethrower blasted the sudden protrusion of vines and flora. Flowers and roots, living when they burst from the ground, wilted under the intense heat. Green gave way to brown, to black, to grey, lifeless ash. Spurts of flame leapt off the edges of the conflagration. The center of the arena became a bonfire, too bright to look at, too hot to approach.

"Venusaur!"

"Venu!" came the Pokémon's cry. It was weak. I don't think it's hurt though, it just needs to recover from the Frenzy Plant. It had taken such an extreme and desperate attack as that to block the overpowered Flamethrower. Cool. Magcargo can launch these all day, while Venusaur has to rest after its Frenzy Plants. It'd be a potted twig of a target right now, if only Magcargo had a clear shot. Sadly, the burning remains of the Frenzy Plant obscured the target. Actually, the smoke was blocking my view of Venusaur too, and Violet. If I couldn't see them, then they couldn't see me either…

"Mag!" I cried.

"Mag!" he responded.

"Rush left! Left around the pile and Flamethrower again!" As I ordered this, I frantically signaled for him to rush right. He nodded. With only bits of his shell remaining, I thought he looked like a Slugma.

"Come on!" My hands wrapped themselves into white-knuckled fists. Magcargo skated across the arena, to the right of conflagration. Please work, please work!

"Earthquake!"

Crap! Omni-directional attack, didn't think of that!

As fast as Magcargo was Shell Smashed, he really needed to do it twice before he was truly "fast". He wasn't going to make it in time.

Magcargo rounded the corner, and immediately took damage from the Earthquake.

"Recover!"

"Vine Whip!"

"Heat Wave!"

"Headbutt!"

Heat Wave was supposed to ward off the Vine Whip, but Venusaur was using it to dig into the earth, not Magcargo, and sling itself forward into a Headbutt.
"Flamethrower!" An emergency attack- no good, no time. Venusaur rammed into Magcargo, sending him end over end. The victim flinched.

Venusaur reared onto its hind legs. Earthquake again?

Magcargo was within range, both for a full-force Earthquake, and its own deadly arsenal. It was a gamble, but if I could only take this ground-pounder out, I'd be free to Shell Smash again…

"Overheat!"

Venusaur crashed down. Magcargo billowed, his body glowing.

The earth cracked open, but no shockwaves emanated outwards. What emerged were dark, spore-laden plumes. The gas cloud surrounded and suffocated Magcargo. All I could see was the bright glow within the haze- a glow that faded, like a dying ember.

I reacted, visibly. Violet caught on.

"Vine Whip wasn't just a sling. It also planted Sleep Powder pods, activated by tremors."

So that's it.

"You've really developed your techniques," I said, complimenting her. "It's very interesting how you're pushing the box in terms of how your Pokémon are deploying status ailments."

"Why thank you." Violet gave me the barest curtsy. She was winning, she could afford to be gracious. As could I, inwardly grinning…

"Magcargo, Sleep Talk," I ordered casually.

"Oh that's not fair- Venusaur, Whips out!"

Magcargo let out a sputtered yawn.

Then he coughed up a coagulated chunk of slag and spat it towards Venusaur. The latter's vines easily intercepted the missile. With the viciousness of a pro-pitcher, it hurled the rock back into Magcargo's face.

Damn. It. All.

Of all the Fire attacks in his arsenal, he just had to go with Rock Throw.

"Power Whip!"

"Sleep Talk!" I shouted.

It was futile. My role in this round was over. Venusaur's vines became noticeably thicker, more muscular. They pummeled Magcargo, each hit knocking off bits of magma and remnant shell-casing in each direction. The leading tendrils grappled Magcargo, lifting him up into the air and squeezing the life out of him. The plant matter began showing signs of scorching, forcing Venusaur to slam its prey into ground. Venusaur lurched over the still-incapacitated Pokémon.

"Earthquake." Violet said this with a note of finality in her voice.

I said nothing, merely watching, my mouth hung open a little.
Venusaur landed, planting the Earthquake's epicenter directly on top of my sleeping Magcargo. He disappeared into a cracked and jagged crater.

It began to sink in that I was losing. Badly. Until this moment I had felt the pressure of being outmatched and outsmarted, which were never good signs. Returning Magcargo to his pokeball, I reached around to my belt-holder and realized I had lost half my team already. I'd not only failed to KO a single one of her Pokémon, I hadn't even seen half of her team yet. And then, further realizing that my remaining team members were, respectively, damaged and paralyzed (Steelix), damaged and weak, (Magnemite), and completely inexperienced (Skarmory), the river of despair let loose its flood gates.

The desire for victory welled up in me, meeting the overwhelming sense of defeat I already bore. Their collision, the fantasy of the former and the reality of the latter, and the sheer discrepancy between the two, put my into a foul, unfriendly mood. On a different mental level, I might have been paranoid that I'd let this ugly apprehension show on my face. On a more basic level…

*To hell with it. I'm mad. I hate losing. This sucks.*

That's the current me, the me of the moment, the me who is desperately clutching at straw-like chances for victory, and cursing my opponent for the difficulty she was putting me under.

Not very sportsmanlike of me, is it? I had thought I could take a loss more graciously than this, especially given the circumstances of my opponent. This was, after all, a means of assuaging her fragile ego, a plight I sympathized with because of its root cause. In the grand scheme of things, one battle was not going to hurt my chances at beating probation. I should be glad about this outcome. My only concern should be if I gave her my genuine best effort, and I think I have already fulfilled that requirement.

Then why am I so mad? Why am I kicking myself over my failure, and why am I still contemplating a way to draw this match out, painfully so?

No, it's not so simple as to be summed up in a single word.

"Gym Leader! That's the second time I've have to reprimand you. Send out a Pokémon!"

"Yes Mr. Official," I replied sarcastically. "Magnemite, you're up."

Now is not the time to sort these feelings out. Look at Violet. She doesn't feel sorry for me. She seems more than a little happy to be causing me all this suffering. My feelings are justified. Just go with them, run wild, feed off the energy. We'll have time later to go all psycho-analysis on them.

Back to the battle. It was Magnemite versus Venusaur now.

Magnemite's main job was to help handicap her team in order to allow Magcargo to sweep. Venusaur should be paralyzed still, from Body Slam, making Magnemite's job moot. Well then, we can always Flash…

"Retreat! Breloom!"

"*Bwe Bwe!*

Oh great, Mrs. Leech Seeder. If Magnemite stays in, it'll just become an hp battery for that mushroom.

"Come back, Magnemite! Steelix!" I switched out again.
"Low Kick."

Breloom's boxing-dance had brought it right beneath Steelix's position, before he could even materialize.

"Bre!" It let out a low-pitched cry as it launched a diving kick into Steelix's lower torso. To my amazement, Steelix was lifted completely into the air, and came crashing down on his head. The arena shook, and even the lava around us became choppy. What a hit!

"That's going to hurt. Steelix! Hurry, Iron Tail before they Leech you!"

"Steelix is unable to battle!" the judge called out.

...

"What?"

Steelix groaned, his head shaking, but a moment later it dropped to ground.

"Are you… serious?" I wanted to address the judge, but his patience with me had already run out (bastard). Besides, it was evident that Steelix had been knocked clean out.

"I don't understand," I said, recalling my Pokémon back. There's no way that Steelix was that low on health. To be dropped by a single attack, from that Breloom? That same Breloom was landing hits all over Magneton and Steelix earlier, and wasn't doing anything! Low Kick uses the opponent's weight against it, but with Steelix's defenses, there's no way it should be THAT powerful!

The sense of defeat, earlier? Gone. Completely eclipsed by confusion and dumbness. It felt like Violet had been toying with me, teasing me, lulling me into a false sense of security. Tricking me into thinking we were playing a game of wits, when in fact, her Pokémon were monstrously more powerful than mine.

"How?"

Violet grinned, and shrugged. "What can I say. He works very hard."

"Huh." I readied my pokeball. "Magnemite."

"Hmm?"

"Thunder Wave."

"Eh?! Return! Return!" Breloom, almost in a panic, back-hopped until it was within range of Violet's pokeball. The sheen of the Thunder Wave raced across the field, hitting her replacement with paralysis-

"Broom!" Or not. The new Pokémon was unaffected by the Thunder Wave- simply because it was already paralyzed.

"Broombroom!" Breloom stood before Violet, not looking too good for the wear. It was noticeably limping and holding one side.

"You have two Breloom," I said, matter-of-factly. "In fact, you have two Venusaur as well."

"I do? That's an interesting theory."
"Don't be smug," I called her out. "It's obvious this is a different Breloom than the one that dropped Steelix. This is the one with the specialized Bullet Seeds and Substitutes. I can tell, because this Breloom is a girl."

Violet held still, for a moment. How would she react?

"Hahahaha!" Violet twirled around, her skirt splaying out, her head held back in amusement. "Wonderful! You're as smart as I thought, to have figured that out! Your friend up there only caught on after I beat him!" She nodded towards Morty. "I think this match might very well go the other way if we ever battle again."

I crossed my arms, not amused.

"So you use two of each Pokémon, each with very different specializations, to lure opponents out and create mismatches. This Breloom is good at spreading Status effects, your other is a more traditional power brawler. Of the Venusaurs, one is more ranged and special-based, while the other is more physical and bulky, and a close-quarters specialist."

Violet pantomimed a monocle across one eye. "Caption Sherlock strikes again!" she said playfully. Then she straightened up. "You are correct. I'm terribly sorry, however, but this bluff was only part of my strategy. You were attempting to disable my team with paralysis. I was actually trying to do the same to yours, but it proved more efficient to simply match you one on one. No, that's not giving you enough credit. I was forced to take yours on one at a-"

"Magnemite, Self-Destruct."

Boom.


Female Breloom had not even been paying attention to Magnemite. The little contraption of a Pokémon had stealthily inched itself within range the whole time we were talking. The result was a mutual KO that put an indescribable look on Violet's face. She even took a step back, as if repelled in horror.

"Good one," she said, not a little upset.

"I figured I'd save you the trouble of taking out Magnemite."

"Well, how kind of you! I believe Vileplume will suffice now." Sarcasm ahoy!

"Well," I turned at last to the companion who had waited out the entire battle beside me. "Skarmory, let's see if you can do anything."

Yes, I'm still mad. Yes, that was the reason I audaciously called for Magnemite's kamikaze attack. But, you know what? After the certainty of defeat had already been established, I feel very loose and unconcerned. The old, time-worn phrase, "Nothing to lose" applies all too well in this situation.

The two women, her and I, glared each other down.

"Vileplume, Stun Spore."

"Skarmory- um, do something. KRAW KRAW! KRAW KRAW!" I screeched the latter two lines while holding my hands out like claws.
Violet, the judge, and the audience glared at me like I had lost my marbles. The only sentient beings who ignored me were the two Pokémon on the field. The one, because it was preparing a cloud of paralytic spores. The other, because it was just plain ignoring me.

Skarmory did nothing until the mustard-colored cloud had already descended upon it. Then he jumped and fluttered and rolled through the dirt, in a vain attempt to cleanse the painful spores.

"Now, to let you know, some people figure out my strategy much earlier. They then assume Vileplume is also part of a couplet, and they adjust accordingly. That isn't the case. Recall!"

Vileplume disappeared.

"If you were attempting to set up Magcargo, then I was trying to clear the way for this fine fellow," Violet said.

"HERA-CROSS!" A larger-than-usual Heracross stood proudly on the field of battle. Skarmory regarded it warily.

"He's my team leader, and the strongest. This was a good match." She curtsied once more, then held out her hand. "Heracross! Close Combat!"

I didn't bother to shout. What good would it do? Skarmory doesn't understand me. Just please survive the first hit…

"CROSSHHHH-UFFF!" Skarmory was sent flying into the air- about a yard, after which it fluttered crazily until he regained his posture.

Heracross was sent five yards backwards.

"Huh- toughie. Heracross! Again! It's a Skarmory, you'll have to wear it down!"

This time Skarmory was hit mid-air. He went four yards straight into the ground. Heracross- it was knocked flat on its back. It got up, slowly.

"Hmm..." She grimaced. "Try Stone Edge!"

Heracross smashed the ground, splitting the dirt and driving spikes of hardened earth into Skarmory. The latter's head was battered side to side, as if on the wrong side of a MMA beat down.

Still…

"Megahorn!" A barely-audible, high-pitched humming sounded out. It was Heracross's horn, vibrating at high frequency. It lowered its appendage and charged, rampaging into Skarmory's right wing. My Pokémon crumpled for a moment…

Skarmory merely cawed, shook off the attack, and pecked a retreating Heracross.

"I… don't under-under-under-" Violet stammered and failed to finish her statement of disbelief.

"Is this really your strongest Pokémon?" I asked, half-tauntingly. Meanwhile, my actual question was the same as Violet's: how damn tough was this bird??!

"Close Combat!"

New result: Skarmory tucked himself into a brand-new impact crater, while Heracross fell forward on all fours. The latter appeared exhausted, the former was irritated.
"Stone Edge, Close Combat combo!" Violet ordered.

"CROSSH!"

It was well executed- Skarmory was kicked into the air, and then met both clawed fists head-on, suffering multiple body and head blows.

Which seemed to be the last straw for Skarmory. He disappeared, for an instant. There was a glint of light. My Pokémon reappeared a yard behind Heracross, holding himself elegantly poised.

Heracross slumped forward and did not get up.

"Heracross is… unable to battle!"

"WHAT??!!" came the cry of disbelief from across the field.

A perfectly executed Aerial Ace- "Beautiful." I whispered to myself.

I wish the rest of the battle were as exciting, but it wasn't. Not nearly. Not for me, because my moment of sheer triumph had induced a blissful, catatonic coma. Luckily, my Pokémon was on auto-pilot and needed no input from me. For Violet, it was a steep descent into a horrifying nightmare.

Breloom attempted to Low Kick Skarmory, but the bird was too light and too… airborne… for the move to work properly. The first Venusaur attempted to Weather Ball, but without Sunny Day active the attack did nothing but earn it a Brave Bird to the face. An exhausted and confused Vileplume outright ignored its trainer (who was vainly calling for a Nature Power) and tried to Poison Powder the Steel-type. That worked about as well as one would expect. Skarmory chased Vileplume around the platform for five minutes, exclusively using Peck to torture the oversized flower to its end. The second, physical-oriented Venusaur managed to put Skarmory to sleep, and then Earthquaked and Frenzy Planted. After a battering, Skarmory woke up and Roosted off whatever traces of damage it had suffered. The battle ended when Venusaur was blown off the edge and into the lava by a Whirlwind. Here came my one fleeting moment of awareness and emotion- fear that Venusaur would die in the lava. My fears were allayed when the automatic safety features of the gym digitized and whisked the Venusaur away before permanent injury could be done.

"The battle has been decided 1-0 in favor of the Gym Leader. Good day." The judge sulked off. He seemed disappointed. Wonder what he had against me…

WHATEVER! I WON!

I leapt down from my platform, streaking towards Skarmory. The bird got my arm around its neck and then I was off again.

Violet met me in the center of the arena. She seemed a bit dazed.

How would she react? A tense, gripping moment of silence passed between us.

"You were… every bit as good as I thought. That Skarmory… I wasn't prepared for it at all." Her voice and body language had the grace of humility in it. Perhaps, when Heracross had gone down, she had been as mad as I was when I was losing. That changed over the course of the fifteen minutes it took for Skarmory to complete his sweep.

I'm glad. I had won, of course, but I was more glad that we weren't at each other's throats. I have
Violet to thank for that, of course, she's obviously handling the loss much better than I would have.

Maybe this is someone I could learn from?

She started to blubber something out.

"Please," I hushed her. I didn't need credit for what was a fluke mismatch. It was bad luck to face me the day after I caught the worst possible Pokémon for her team to face. The way she had commanded the battle completely outclassed me; my victory needs an asterisk beside it.

"You fought very well. I hope this won't dissuade you in your Gym Badge challenge."

And, hearing my tone and my compliment, things seemed to normalize between us.

"Not at all! I've been broken once, it won't happen again, especially over such a good match," she said.

Her spirit has picked up.

"And about the bad feelings-"

"Now you shouldn't worry about that!" she said.

"I do!" I replied. "I feel like there's been a bad air between us since the... the train ride."

"Stop!" And, unexpectedly, she hugged me. "That had nothing to do with it. I'm sorry, I have been little stand-offish with you. But, it's not how you acted. Okay, maybe your behavior was extreme, but it only showed how much you care for your Pokémon. I can forgive that. I forgave it the moment it happened."

"You did?" She held me at arms length and looked me in the eye.

"Of course! What bothered me was..." and she blushed, "I'm jealous."

"Jealous?!"

"Y-yes. Jealous. You have Erika, and friends, and your Pokémon, and your gym position. I have no one. My Pokémon obey me, but they don't love me. I ignored them too much during my marriage. I ignored everyone else too, and poured all my affection into the one person who, it turned out, thought nothing of me." Her eyes softened, and shied away. "I was uncomfortable, seeing someone who had everything I didn't."

"Oh..."

How awkward. First I incite lust even though I don't think I'm attractive. Now I'm inspiring envy even though I don't think I'm all that blessed. Is she thinking at all about the uncomfortable position she's putting me in?

&Dinker dare hold me in such high regard. My life is shit too.

Evil words, kept to myself. Instead:

"No worries, then. I forgive you. I feel so sorry for what he did to you- but I guess it hurts in ways beyond just losing him."

"Right," she gently nodded.
"I feel terrible now."

"Don't!"

"Okay. I won't." I conjured up a smile for her. "So, you'll continue your Gym Challenge?"

"Yes!" Violet nodded.

"Great! You're welcome to come to Olivine for a rematch- oh, but, I'm in kind of a situation where I can't afford to lose, so would you mind waiting till after December 10th?"

"Haha, you really think I'll be good enough to win by then? I'm going to have to train much harder."

"Oh, if we had a rematch tomorrow I think you could beat me."

"Mmm, doubtful. Not with Mr. Ironsides here," she said, petting Skarmory's head. "And I think that my doppelganger strategy won't work again, so I might need to train new teammates."

"Well, good luck."

"Thank you. Good game. I look forward to seeing you again."

We shook hands.

I actually made a friend.

Two friends.

"Skarm-Skarm." Skarmory looked up to me, cooing. He nudged my arm, eager for more head-petting.

"Well aren't you needy. I said I would love you, but now, if you keep battling like that, I'm going to adore you."
I had to tell my friends to tone down the celebration, out of respect for Violet. Lyra was the most difficult to reign in.

"I'M SO EXCITED FOR-"

"SHH! Not so loud!"

"-YOU! YOU WERE AWESOME AND SKARMORY WAS-"

At which point the clearest course of action towards silencing her seemed to be throwing Skarmory in her face. She nearly fell over catching the steel bird.

"Lyra! Hold him."

"Holding him," came a mumbled reply from behind the cluster of wings and feathers.

"Thank you all for coming- but like I said, we shouldn't be gloating. Violet might be graceful, but she's probably not all that happy about losing. She's had a hard life, Pokémon battles may be all that's left for her. Don't rub my victory in her face." 

"Well said." Erika patted me on the shoulder, then guided me aside. She began a conversation in a hushed tone, so the others couldn't hear.

"I take it she told you about her troubles?" she asked.

"Nothing really specific. I just sort of sensed it from our conversation. Was… was her ex abusive?" I asked timidly.

"Not physically." Erika answered. "But, she's a little- I don't know how to say it- clingy? Trusting? Neither are really the right word. In any case, he took advantage of her personality and made her very dependant on him for her self-esteem. I dare say he repressed her, mentally and socially. Since the breakup, it's like she's relearning how to be an independent woman."

"Uuhh." It made sense, with the way she was far too eager when we first met, and how she distanced herself when conflict stirred. The more depraved examples of the male gender torture me on a daily basis; I can't imagine the toll it would take on one's spirit to be married to one of those jerks.

"Don't you ever, EVER repeat this to anyone."

"I understand."

With my assurance, she returned to a normal speaking voice and we made our way back to the trio.

"Since the gym is closed, she'll be stuck here until it reopens. Meanwhile, there is a harvest festival. I'd like to attend that with her, and then maybe help her in training. You'll have to go home alone."

"Oh, okay." I said blankly. I didn't really like that idea, but was there anything I could do about it? Not really.

Oh wait-
"That's okay, I won't be alone." I said, perking up. "Morty picked up train tickets." And as soon as that came out of my mouth, my spirits fell.

"Will you be okay with him?"

"Yes," I said, taking a deep breath and not sounding too sure of myself.

"Very well then. We have a little time, let's go grab lunch."

"My dime, right?" I said.

"Yes, somewhere inexpensive."

We informed the crowd, and then set off for the nearest fast-food joint on foot.

"Hey Lyra, you said you'd drag that other guy along. Silver, was it? Where is he?"

"I did drag him along!" She seems indignant and excitable. Not unusual. "I got him seated right beside me before the match. We were gonna root for you all together! But then he saw someone and vanished. Didn't even bother to say why or goodbye or anything! I feel stood up!"

"Because you annoy him," Ethan said.

"No I don't!"

Ethan rolled his eyes.

"Huh." Little star-like dots appeared in my mind, and began tracing between each other like constellations.

"Silver said he was trailing Red, didn't he? Guess who I saw on the gym floor?"

"Red?!" she exclaimed.

"Yep."

"What is he still doing in town?!"

"Don't know, but I bet Silver spotted him too and that's why he ran off."

"Interesting," Morty interjected himself. "I've heard rumors that Red was on the move in Johto. Something about him and his boss having a public falling out."

"You missed last night," I reminded him. "Red's on a tour of Johto so that he can play into the Johto League Tournament."

"Oh is that what he's doing? I'm surprised. Shouldn't he already have the Johto badges?"

"That's what I thought." I need to remember to ask Whitney about that. She's been an official Gym Leader longer than me, and Goldenrod is a more popular destination for trainers; maybe she remembers if Red came through Johto way back in the day. "I don't know. Did you ever face him?"

"Can't recall."

"Huh. So, what's this about his boss?" I asked.

"Oh that. It was about a week ago. Apparently Mr. Stone and him got into a shouting match in front
of the media at Pokémon HQ, over in Castor. Pokeballs came out, death threats issued, etc. etc. Although, this is according to tabloids; they're probably exaggerating. The buzz was that the CEO kicked the champ out of the region and he's been sulking in Johto since."

"Sulking? Kind of sounds like he's been banished here," Lyra said.

"Perhaps, in a sense. Stone could have barred him from the mainstream competitions."

"Which would mean he's trying to enter the Johto circuit because he doesn't have any other choice," I mused. "Speaking of Mr. Stone, who won the exhibition match? I never followed up on it."

Between probation and angsting over this mongrel walking beside me, it hadn't been a high priority.

A massive grin broke out on Morty's face, stretching deep into each cheek.

"Stone, of course."

"Oh god, oh god," Lyra said. "I'm getting tingly just remembering it."

"Really?"

"Ohhhh yeah." Lyra shook her head in the affirmative. Even Ethan nodded.

"I only caught the last half, but most of what I saw- it put me and Volkner's match to shame," Morty said, his eyes glazing over. "Well, except for that last exchange."

"Yeah, the first nine-tenths were pure gold," Lyra said.

"It was very misfortunate, the way it ended," Erika added.

I turned my head from face to face to face, feeling completely left out.

"Can you guys just tell me what happened?"

They all began chattering excitedly, until Morty stepped in and took control.

"Okay, so it's former and current world champion, so you can imagine how good the battle is. Tactics, power shots, tough last stands, trick plays, the works. Towards the end, it was close, but Red had done a better job of controlling the flow of battle. He managed to isolate it down to his Charizard versus Stone's damaged Metagross. Fire v. Steel. So, the two pokes are one-on-one, grand finale, Charizard goes for Fire Blast, a sure-fire KO, Stone's about to get his first official defeat ever- and Fire Blast misses. By, like, twenty feet. Metagross then scores a critical hit Psychic on Charizard, brings it to the ground. Charizard recovers, uses Flamethrower at nearly point blank range- and it misses. Whish! Metagross goes to finish the battle with a Thunder Punch."

"Misses? Flamethrower? Point-blank?!"

"I know, right? It's not like Metagross or anyone else did anything to affect Charizard's accuracy- you know what the paparazzi later said happened?"

"What?"

"Allergies. You know the seafoam weed that grows all over Olivine's shoreline?" I nodded. "Gave the poor Pokémon allergies. That same battle happens anywhere else, or any other time of year, Red wins and Stone's perfect record goes down in flames."

"Aha, aha, you're so punny."
"Heh. That's not the worst. So, Meta's got a fist full of lightning and is going in for the kill. Red orders Charizard to Fire Blast the ground beneath it- And it works. Metagross goes down, KO'd, Charizard follows a few seconds later. No one is sure of what happened; they call the judges in. And here is why so many people are upset- the judges rule that Charizard KO'd himself with the Fire Blast. If Charizard was ruled down by Metagross's Thunder Punch, he gets the benefit of dropping second and Red wins. But rules state you can't win a mutual KO by self-KO, so the victory is awarded to Stone."

"Oh wow. I can understand if fans are upset by that." It's never pretty when they call in the officials to determine a winner based on technicalities.

"Upset? You're kidding. You must've been living under a rock, Jazz. The fansites EXPLODED that night. Hundreds and thousands of pages of furious, volcanic fans, even a small riot at the Battle Tower. Enormous outrage throughout the pro circuits. Pundits labeling it the biggest officiating blunder of the century. Most are calling it a conspiracy, to keep Stone's perfect record intact. Some are saying the argument between the two last week started because Red accused Stone of sheltering the officials from investigation."

"Oh joy, looks like I missed out on something big." Actually, I'm a little happy. I was a big fan of Steven Stone while he was still a trainer. Red, as a trainer, is okay by me, but I'm glad to have an undefeated living legend to root for. Still, to keep said perfect record by a technicality... kind of lame.

One way or the other, though, it really doesn't affect me. As far as their personalities go, from what I remember of the gala, Stone is a sly bastard who's more than willing to use employees to cover his own butt; and Red is a rude, anti-social prick. Either one winning, officiating fiat or no, has no real bearing on my personal life.

"Well, maybe a little," I accidentally said aloud.

"What's that?"

"I guess, if Red can beat Stone, that just makes my loss to him that much more inevitable when he comes to Olivine."


"Right, a lowly Gym Leader on probation is going to upset the world champion."

"With that mindset, of course it will never happen," Erika said.

"That's right!" Back to Lyra. "He's lost a few times. Mr. Textbook, how many losses does Red have?" She turned to her boyfriend.

"18," he answered.

"See? 18! Double digits!"

"Yeah, out of two thousand!" I retorted. I hung my head in despair.

"I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I'll probably have to see him first." Morty lined up behind me and began rubbing my shoulders. Just the thought of losing was putting me in knots. It didn't matter if it was one battle. It didn't matter how forgiving it would look to be steamrolled by the world champion. It was still dejecting, still hurtful, still humiliating. The bigger the power differential between Pokémon, the greater risk there is for long-term injury. AND, I honestly don't know how many losses I can afford before December 10th. One? Five? Ten? I'm in a deep hole on my ratio; I've
already resigned myself to bully-beating schoolkids and newbies. On top of that, I have to win against all the serious challengers too! My mind broiled on, only dimly aware of the soothing massage on my backside. At least, until I caught sight of Erika's staring.

"Did I give you permission to touch me?" I shrugged away from the backrub. Morty's caresses were calming, but too embarrassing to tolerate. He side-stepped my protests by walking past me, his attention drawn away and ahead.

"That place looks okay," he said, pointing out a patty-joint.

Ordering lunch was quick, and relatively financially painless. Erika ate lightly, affording me a nicer sandwich than I otherwise would have stomached.

"Ooh! Raspberry chocolate shakes!" Lyra upended her wallet. "Bah, out of cash." She peeled out a worn, much-used credit card, and was about to hand it to the clerk. A hand interceded.

"You don't have any credit on that." Ethan shook his head.

"But I want a shake. The overdraft fees aren't that much…"

"You have no concept of fiscal responsibility, do you?" He snatched the card from her hand, and then spent a minute playing keep-away with his girlfriend.

"Give it! I want a shake! I want a shake! I'm craving." The farce continued on, to the clerk's amusement and stifled laughter.

"You can't spend money you don't have!"

Lyra froze up.

"What if I told you I need it? What if I said I'm pregnant?"

"You're what?!"

Ethan's moment of shock gave Lyra the opening she needed to snatch her card back.

"One Raspberry-"

"Hold on-" Ethan pushed himself between her and the cashier. Lyra protested, to no avail.

"Are you serious?!" he asked, nearly sputtering.

"Of course not! You're so gullible." Ethan's cheeks lit up, rosy as the raspberry cream Lyra was trying to order. Mine too. Morty and Erika passed a knowing look between them.

If Ethan were able to fall for a preggers claim like that so easily, then… they really… were… oh gosh I don't want to think about that!

"But if I were-"

"Alright! Drop it! I'll buy the shake, just don't say things like that!" Ethan fessed up his wallet, and one raspberry chocolate shake appeared over the counter. Lyra began sipping, delighted. Ethan had his hands full with their regular order.

Poor guy.
It was getting close to departure time, so we elected to eat on the run. Lyra and Ethan strolled ahead, chatting about something in hushed tones and acting very much like a goofy, entrenched couple.

"Does that bother you?" Morty asked me in between mouthfuls.

"What?" I responded.

"That your friends are 'doing it'?"

"Not this again," I sighed.

"Oh be honest. Why aren't you honest? You seem to demand that from your peers, but it's not a one-way road you know."

"Fine!" I huffed, annoyed. "Yes, I'm embarrassed! I don't think what they do when they 'visit the daycare' needs to be public information. It bothers me very much!"

"Is your reason really that shallow?" he insisted.

"Yes!"

"It's not deeper? You're not embarrassed because you're secretly-"

I had my hands full with my lunch, so I resorted to stomping his toe.

"Ouch!"

"We've gone over this! I'm bothered because it's a perverted topic, not because I harbor conflicting emotions about it!"

"Do you believe her?" Morty asked, addressing Erika. The recipient of the question gazed off into the sky, aloof.

"I'm not a mind reader. With a question like that, isn't it most important if she believes herself?" Morty and Erika both turned to me.

"Well?" they said in unison.

"When you put it that way, the answer is only important to me, therefore I am not obligated to tell you." I shoved the macy-mac sandwich into my mouth and began devouring it at Carvanha speed. My chin was becoming soaked in sauces with each frenzied bite, but at least my friends couldn't see my blushing grimace. I could not, would not, will not let them know my inner feelings on this! However, they continued to stare and wait for a hypothetical answer, even as the sandwich disappeared. Luckily, a round of what appeared to be "Zangoose and Seviper play Time-Attack Twister" broke out between the couple up front, distracting my interrogators and giving me a reprieve.

Ten minutes later, we arrived at our motel. Morty went in to pack his luggage, Erika to clean up hers and pack mine for me. I pardoned myself for a trip to the pokecenter.

"Oh, hello again. Hey!" It was the same nurse as last night. I kind of feel sorry for her, to draw consecutive night and morning shifts. She perked up when she saw me. "I thought you looked familiar. You're a Gym Leader, right? Mineral Badge, right?" She lifted a magazine with a labeled group shot of the Johto squad.

"That's right."
"Trainers coming in say you had a battle at the gym? Right? It was a big win for you! They're really excited."

"I suppose…"

The nurse stood at attention. "Well, if you're here to heal your Pokémon, we're a first-class facility! I'll be sure to take extra special care of your Pokémon's recovery."

"I'm sure you are the best- but if it's alright with you, I'd like to use the PC."

"Oh, okay. But if you need anything-"

"I'll call," I reassured her. I made my way over to the computer station.

The PC slowly came to life.

Please enter your password.

Fine, fine, what a hassle.

I typed it in, and the account menu appeared.

Deposit Pokémon.

There was no need to risk my Pokémon becoming lost a second time. They would be sent to my home PC via the network, safe and sound. I also decided to dump my spare pokeballs and items. Admittedly, not much remained from when I used the flash-bangs to escape the Skarmory nest. When all was done, my purse was considerably lighter. Only one pokeball remained on my person: Skarmory. It's best not to send him home through the network, too much of a culture shock for now. I figured I'd let him out so he can see his new hometown as we rode in on the train. Good idea.

Back at the motel, Erika had a dress laid out. It was a winter-shaded knee length affair, with wrist-length sleeves and a turtleneck.

"Don't tell me…"

"Yes, it's for you."

"I don't want to steal any more of your wardrobe," I protested. Erika took my wrist, flipped me onto the bed, and began disrobing me. The dirty jeans were the first off, then my T-shirt, and very suddenly I was down to my under-garments.

"If you were a boy, I'd be screaming rape right now-" I warned her.

"Don't rush to judge people based on their sex, young miss." She jumped me, and soon enough I was tucked into her dress. It was a little loose, but soft and warm.

"And don't worry about my wardrobe. I have a shopping addiction, and need more room in there anyways."

"Hand-me-downs," I muttered.

"Alas, poverty, hang thy ugly head and shame us no longer," Erika responded poetically. I twirled around in the dress, noticing how the belt sash dangled out too long, and how the knee-length hem had become shin-length when put on me.
"It's too big," I said. She eyed me up and down.

"No, not too much. Wait, are you insinuating something?"

I flashed her an evil grin.

"Hmph. Clever." She took me by the shoulders and spun me around. "It still fits well enough. You'll be all ready and cute for your date."

"What date? I don't have a date."

"So innocent," she sighed.

Morty met us outside, his bag slung over his shoulder. Erika guided me out, as if a parent offering their child as a bride. The boy sharply inhaled upon witnessing my new outfit.

"What?"

"You look- queenly," he stated. I looked at myself in the window. Queenly? That's a bit over the top. Maybe more- teacherly, like I belonged in a preschool, chasing down five-year-olds.

"This is goodbye," Erika said quietly. Was that a tear in her right eye? Left eye, I mean.

"For three days?" I inquired.

"Thereabouts." She embraced me tightly, and then dropped my bag into my arms.

"You take care of yourself. No jumping off the train," she warned in a fake-stern tone.

"Okay, haha, I promise not to do that."

"And you," she said, turning to Morty. "Take care of her."

"By my great-grandmother's ghost," he said, holding a hand to his heart.

"Take care of Violet," I said.

"Of course. And…"

She pulled me in close, to whisper in my ear.

"Give him a chance, will you?"

I gave her an old-fashioned eye-roll. UGH!

"Rhythmic thumping," Morty said.

"Gross."

Of course I knew he was referring to the motion of the train bumbling its way over the tracks. His hand idly rested on the window sill, jumping with each small jolt of the vehicle.
"It's not like the Magnet Train to Kanto. The tracks are probably, what, thirty years old?"

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"What's on your mind?" I repeated.

"Nothing. Just musing about the train."

I slumped into my seat. As if I'd take that statement at face value. 'Rhythmic thumping' is not a phrase you use idly. He was concerned about something.

"Well, now that you mention it, I was thinking about your battle," he ventured, still staring out the window.

Liar. You're only deflecting your real intentions.

"I liked the way you played it. You were pretty good out there," he said.

"Don't patronize me. Everyone knows I won by accident."

"Accident? That's what you call it? Not every battle is won by strategy. I didn't plan to have Mismagius on backup so Gengar could explode. But it turned out, recalling Mismagius was a good move that allowed me to win. In turn, I think you made some intelligent choices there that won you the battle."

"Intelligent choices?" I made the "quotes" sign with my hands. "Like what? -Besides catching Skarmory."

"Well, first off…" he launched into a steady drone, detailing and breaking down the battle for me. I still don't believe it's Pokémon battles that are on his mind, though. The way he's still gazing into thin air, and fidgeting about, he's hiding his real thoughts. This topic is only a smokescreen. But, to be honest, chatting about Pokémon battles was preferable to the topic of the 'rhythmic thumping' of the train's motion. "Do you know how I lost to her?" He paused to wait for a reply.

"No. In fact, that advice you gave me was pretty useless. *Remember how Volkner almost beat me? That's what you should do!*" I paraphrased. "What was that supposed to mean?"

He glanced at me, condescendingly.

"I was talking about the Lum Berry. Her team doesn't have that much offensive firepower besides the Heracross, and they're slow across the board."

"Lacking firepower? Bah! and Humbug! Both Venusaur and the other Breloom were plenty offensive."

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't get that impression during my battle. I think you were just put into some very situational disadvantages there. But otherwise, if you surprise that Heracross, trick it into thinking you're disabled and then strike when it has its guard down, you can faint it, easily. After losing her powerhouse, she would be hard-pressed to KO anything bulky. That was my thinking."

"Well, what may be true for you wasn't for me."

"Right." He started rapping against the window. It was annoying. "I lost because I kept mispredicting the Breloom, and my whole team was put to sleep. After that, it was just one fucking
Stone Edge after another from Heracross."

"Hehehe." I giggled. "Bad memories?" He nodded, and continued rapping the window pane. "Stop rapping the window please." He complied.

"So," he continued, "I was hoping you'd realize her doppelganger trick before the battle got out of hand. It kind of turned out, it didn't matter. Your tactic, using Steelix to para-shuffle her team, kind of broke her rhythm and made it a little pointless to trick you."

"No, it worked. Steelix and Magcargo went down because of it." 

"Yeah, but it could have been worse. She only managed to use it to deploy her offensive pokemon. Against me, it was used to deploy her disablers, which is what she was aiming for in the first place. You hate switching wars. I think that messed her up, a little, when you refused to switch out even when it looked like you could gain a better advantage. Specifically when you didn't retreat Magneton when it was Spored to sleep. She was forced into the Substitute minefield instead of drawing out and Sporing more of your Pokémon, specifically Magcargo."

"So what? It's not like any of that had a material impact. Skarmory did virtually all of the work. And he didn't even take orders. I had no input into the things that actually won me the battle. Therefore, I say again, so what?"

"So! So there was something you did that assured you the win. The six million dongle question is this: do you know what it was you did?"

Should I answer? I have an idea of what he's getting after, but I wonder if I should go off on a tangent and confront him over what's really bothering him.

"Yes, explode Magnemite." I answered. Despite myself, Morty was still managing to draw my attention away from his moodiness and back into the mindset of a trainer. It was easier, and more fun, for me to analyze Pokémon battles than to worry about his private thoughts. He knew this about me, and was using it against me. Clever bastard.

"Explain," he commanded.

Fine, let's humor him.

"I actually had the feeling that Skarmory would do well in that battle. I wasn't completely right- I thought he'd pick up on obeying commands faster, and on that I was wrong. However, he is way tougher than I ever imagined. That allowed him to take the beating he did while he figured out he needed to simply attack the Grass-types. So," I paused for dramatic effect. "Taking out the Leech Seeding Breloom was an accidental stroke of genius. It was the only Pokémon that stood a chance of taking down Skarmory, via stall tactics."

"See? You figured that out, you're smart. It's the little instinctual things you do that set you up for success, as much as the big things you do deliberately."

"But you know what?" I countered.

"What?"

"I only did that because I was angry. In the end, even my best decision was a fluke."

"Hm." He was still staring off into the distance, and began rapping his knuckles again. "Can't argue with that. I guess you're right."
"I know I'm right."

"Skarmory has promise. Good pick."

"Mmmmm." I palmed my lone pokeball, thinking fondly on my new team member. Skarmory, or as I'm starting to think of him, Skarm-Skarm. Once this bird learns to take orders, we can teach him some TM's and start training him in my game plan. Then… Then he'll become a powerhouse. I don't think I've ever caught a Pokémon with this much natural talent. This is a good feeling. Confidence. Real confidence, the kind that makes me feel like my future is in my own hands.

My mind drifted off from there. There was so much to do, so much training to get done, so much paperwork to finish. I got caught up planning it all out, going through each step and what I had to do to complete those steps. Even if the mountain of work and the sheer cliff of the win ratio seem daunting, being able to mentally think it through eased the stress off. It was therapeutic.

And from there, I started imagining how happy I'd be to get past probation, and all the things I wanted to do after.

Haaaaa…..

…

"This is the conductor speaking," came a voice over the speaker. "I'm glad to say the traffic snarls of the past week have been cleared up, and we are actually ahead of schedule. We'll be reaching Mahogany in an hour, and Ecruteak four hours after that. I hope you're having a pleasant ride; sorry for the bumps, once we get out of the mountains in a few minutes the going should be much smoother."

Huh? How long had I drifted off? Ecruteak in five hours? The sun's still over the horizon, so I can't have drifted off for long, I think. Damn it. How tired am I, for me to daydream like that?

I glanced over to my traveling companion. Geeze. I thought I was tuckered. He's cold out.

Should I take advantage of his slumber?

Of course! I pawed through his bag, finding absolutely nothing of interest (I was almost disappointed not finding a porn mag). His lone pokeball was attached to his belt; and I had no interest in playing with Gengar anyways. There was a dry-erase marker, which I contemplated using on his face. I nestled the marker in my hand, thinking of the possibilities.

"Huh?"

His eyes popped open, to find a wet, colored instrument poised directly over his brow. He froze up, as did I.

"Did you doodle on my face?"

"Maybe."

He proceeded to bat the marker away and frantically wipe his sleeves across his face, while I giggled helplessly.

"What did you do?" I pointed to the window's reflection, where Morty discovered his face was clear of defamations.
"I didn't have time," I explained.

"Thank goodness."

"I was only trying to fix that ugly mug of yours."

He laughed out loud.

"Of course you think it's funny," I said. "You take everything as a compliment."

"That's not it." he settled down.

"What is it then?"

"You. The idea of you pulling a prank."

"Is it so hard to believe?"

"Yeah. I mean, you had your moments, but most of middle school, you were always Little Miss Proper, best student in the class, best behaved, most likely to become a gnarled old school mistress. To think of you scrawling over someone's sleeping face…"

"I'm not perfect. You should know that."

"It's cute," he said suddenly. I stared at him, not a little perplexed. "I'd let you doodle and 'fix this ugly mug' while I'm wide awake if it made you happy."

My stare turned icy. I said nothing, so he went on.

"Calling my mug 'ugly', huh? Okay. That's okay. But, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Maybe."

"What would you consider handsome, in a guy? Physically, I mean."

I mulled the question, and whether or not to even answer it. Does it matter? Do I even have preferences?

Maybe…

"I like when a guy has nice hair," I admitted.


"Any color, it doesn't matter. Except gingers."

"What's wrong with gingers?" he asked.

"It just looks funny, and odd, and wrong. It's not natural."

"But redheads make for beautiful women."

"Oh, no, you're right. I just think it's a bad shade for a guy's hair to be. It's like the female's bleach-blonde equivalent for guys."

"And blonde guys?" he inquired.
"They're okay." He seemed to wince upon hearing this answer. "Besides that, I don't care about the color. It's the texture, how rich and soft it is." Just like yours, Morty. I suddenly had an impulse to reach up and feel his hair. He even nodded forward, as if inviting me to do so. But I won't.

"And long," I went on. "Not too long. Not girly-long, like mine. Just long enough, maybe ear-length. And don't gel it. I hate when men gel it up." Because then I can't play with it, I silently added.

"So besides hair, what else?"

"I don't like fat people. Or body-builders, either. Skinny-eh, I can tolerate that, but if he's too much on the heavy end of the scale, he'll lose my interest."

"That's not nice."

"You asked what I find attractive! I'm being honest."

"Honesty can hurt others."

"Am I hurting you, personally?"

"Not really," he admitted.

"Then shut up and let me go on. I mean, I know you're not supposed to treat other people differently based on their looks, but does that apply to the kind of people we find attractive, too? It's not something we choose or have control over. Attractiveness is all about looks, and looks come from genes, mostly. You're a guy, you should know better."

"Well, personalities can be attractive too," he replied.

"Agh!" He turns everything against me! "You know I meant physical attractiveness. There's a big difference! You're a prime example! Oops." I didn't mean to say that last part out loud. Morty leaned back.

What was worse: to insinuate that I think he's attractive, or that he has a bad personality?

"Go on," was all he said.

"Heh." I took a moment to compose myself, and then think of other characteristics. "I like a great smile. Not too tan. Not too muscle-bound, like Chuck. Think, um, sleek. And tall. And... I don't know. I guess the most important thing is the face, but I don't know how to describe faces."

"I see."

"I think, subjectively, that you're physically handsome," I ventured, to see how he would react.

He closed his eyes and his face contorted. Did that affect him?

"I could say the same," came his deliberate, measured response.

"Is that what you wanted to hear?" I asked. He turned and looked me in the eyes. He did have mesmerizing eyes. Like wells. Deep. You could fit galaxies in there, and I wouldn't put it past him to be hiding galaxies' worth of thoughts behind them. Why wouldn't he let me in, then? That was the point of me even bothering to share my silly opinions on personal tastes. To see if it would get him to open up.

"I was curious."
"Morty," I said, exasperation and frustration evident.

After a pause, I continued.

"Now that I've shared, it's your turn."

"Hmm? You want to know what I find attractive?"

"No, I know enough about your tastes, perv."

"Then what would you like to know?"

"There's been something that's been bugging me for the past few days."

"That is?" He's off guard. He doesn't know what I'm talking about.

"You can't send Pokémon through the PC System without a password. You don't have my password, so how did you fetch my Pokémon from Treyarch's?"

"What? Huh?!"

He was blind-sided by the question. Yes, it was completely out of left field. My purpose in asking it was as much to see his surprised and confounded face as it was to get an answer. Besides, I already suspected the answer, I only needed confirmation.

"My friend is a good hacker, he got your password," Morty answered without looking at me.

"Liar. Tell me the truth."

He fidgeted and grimaced. He doesn't want to tell me.

"There's-"

"THE TRUTH, MORTY."

"I... I..." My hard stare wasn't going to back down. "The hard way," he finally managed to utter. "I went back and got them, myself."

"Using the plane?"

"Yes."

It took us 10 hours to reach Blackthorn by train. It was a 2.5 hour flight. Given an hour of layovers, he could reach Blackthorn, turn around for Ecruteak, grab my Pokedex, and return to Blackthorn, in about 9.5 hours.

"You knew about it?" he asked. I nodded. "How?"

"You've spent this whole weekend tired, like you were jet-lagged. You have luggage on you, even though you left Treyarch's for the airport with nothing on you. And yes, the password deal. You're a klutz with computers, anyways, you'd never figure out my password."

He sighed, and leaned back in his chair. He looks relieved, like he had some big secret that is now out in the open, but no one cares.

"Yes, that's all true."
"I'm not done."

He eyed me.

"Three plane tickets in one day? With no advance notice? You're not getting economy class like that. You must've paid for first-class seats."

Morty reluctantly nodded in affirmation.

"That's not cheap. That's more than an entire paycheck for me. How'd you afford it?"

Morty doesn't have a secondary business, like Erika. His family isn't rich. Where'd the funds come from?

"The cash prize from winning the Gym Leader's Tournament. Just about all of it."

My turn to nod. That makes sense.

"Jasmine, I really don't want to talk-"

"Shush. I have one last question."

"I won't answer it."

"Yes, you will," I insisted.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I won't."

"Why is the question dumbass. Why'd you go through all of that effort and spend all of that money?"

"Because I know how much your Pokémon mean to you."

"That's extrapolation, I want to know why *you*, yourself, did it." I must be pink for all the emotions stirring inside me. I had been staring directly at him, and hadn't dropped that stare since the conversation started. He had wilted under my gaze, his eyes roving the seats and the passing scenery, anything but look me eye to eye.

"You know why I did it."

"Yes, but I need to hear it from you."

"I don't want to say it."

"Why not?"

"Because you-" and he stopped mid-sentence.

"I what?"

"It's not something I can say."

"Why not?" We're repeating ourselves. "Say it!" I hissed.
"Because you won't be honest with me."

An insult. A criticism. Instantly analyzed, internalized, revolted against, forgiven, and pushed aside.

"I will be honest. I am always honest. You know that. What is the real reason you can't spit it out?"

"Because…" and he held himself, poised, as if about to answer. But the rhythmic thumping of the train wheels upon the tracks was the only sound. If he didn't answer, if he wasn't going to answer, I'll-

"Because you won't reciprocate."

"Please say it," I implored. It was, as best as I'm able, a tender, gentle request.

He tensed, and then sputtered it out.

"I like you… Do you like me?"

"I want to like you."

His look of shock was profound. To hear that, from me? To him, it must be an emotional super-nova. Now, finally, (and I glanced around to make sure we had privacy) I felt like I could let loose.

"I've wanted to like you for a long time. It's like a feeling, in my chest, in my head. Like you always had this potential to be my perfect someone. It's faded in and out over the years. Grown, diminished, blossomed, died. Since the lighthouse- that time- at the lighthouse- it's become so incredibly strong, and that night I started recognizing it for what it is. A yearning for something that's not quite there. A wish, a hope. So let me say it again-

I WANT TO LIKE YOU. But every time I tried, you messed it up. You went out with other girls, you teased me, you've been lewd to me, you've betrayed me. Indigo… hell and heavens, Indigo, I was furious then! I was ready to murder you!

But now- NOW?! I still, even after all of that, deep down, want to like you; but can't, not yet. You have to earn my feelings, and guess what-

You are.

You are winning me over every day, every good deed, every little word of kindness. You went and spent a bloody fortune for- what? To assuage the irrational zealotry I have for my Pokémon? You can't comprehend how much that means to me!"

I took his left hand in my own.

"I won't promise anything yet. Not yet. But if you like me, if you want my affections, if you l-l-nnph, if you-" I'm stuttering. "If y-y-you" Argh! Why is it so hard to say! Force it out! "If you LOVE me," HAA! ",-keep doing what you're doing. You'll be rewarded."

His eyes, drawn in by mine, now turned away. His hand forcefully withdrew from my grip.

"Don't say that," he said softly. "I don't deserve it."

"I said it. Deal with it."

He retreated back into the recess of his seat. He held his head in his hand, his brow furrowed, his eyes and mouth clenched shut. He wouldn't respond to anything, not even my touch.
He looks… hurt.

Not even in the lighthouse did he look so… vulnerable. I mean, now that I can compare. Now that I see him, clutching himself, looking truly pitiable…

At the lighthouse, he was still acting. Maybe not intentionally. Maybe it was only half the door open. Here, right now, without saying a word, I could see his true feelings. And those feelings?

They're tender. They're sad. I don't understand. I couldn't.

Was this what I expected, when I decided to tell him my feelings?

Is he hurt? Is the fact that he still hasn't completely won me painful to him? Is he overjoyed that I finally, out loud, expressed even the hope of affection towards him? Are the emotions too much, too fast, for him to deal with? Did he expect, when he started inquiring into my likes and dislikes in the male figure, to receive such a round-about, conditional confession? Is this like a dream to him, a murky illusion, too good to be true? It certainly feels like a dream to me. And now I'm getting upset, because even when I tug his arm, he won't say anything.

"Morty, please."

Without looking at me, without opening his eyes or saying anything, he responded. His near arm settled down, his hand took mine, and held it, fingers interlocking.

We remained there, still and silent, hands intertwined, for hours. Mahogany whistled by without a stir.

The picture of emotions, such as it were, only changed when I felt the need to use the restroom. I quietly left, came back, and found my companion asleep, gently snoring. His headband had slid down, covering one eye. Beyond him, the scenery was washed out by twilight. The now-familiar sight of an endless procession of trees skimmed by, too fast to count.

I lay down beside him, also tempted by the fading light and the rigors of the weekend into napping. Unlike our first train, this one was headed directly to Olivine. It would only stop at Ecruteak long enough to exchange passengers.

"Please don't leave without saying goodbye, kay?" I mumbled to his sleeping form, before drifting off to darkness.

…

"Goodbye."

"Hmm?"

And, before I struggled back to waking, he embraced me, and left, and the train was pulling out of Ecruteak station.

I saw him through the window, walking slowly along the platform with his duffel over his shoulder. A group of friends rushed up to greet him. There were two guys, one who seemed to be Jeff, from the gala, and another I didn't know, and they both high-fived him. Then he turned and embraced two women- one older, elderly, with crystalline blonde hair and an elegant blue dress who seemed familiar; and another, a tanned girl with a flower perched upon her head, to which he gave his final embrace.
As the five of them set off into the night, Morty turned his head, watching the train slide away. I waved, hoping he could see me in the window.

Hoping that I could see him again, soon.
"Earthquake!" I commanded. To my utter lack of surprise, she opted to draw patterns-8s across the floor of the arena. The enemy Sudowoodo purposely took the first few hits, biding its time. At the turn of the fourth pass, it used Counter, stopping Graveler in her tracks. The foe followed through with a Wood Hammer, fainting her.

I sighed. Time for Skarmory to bail me out, again.

"Skarmory, attack!"

Skarmory flapped onto the field. My human opponent, an elderly lady in a plaid coat, looked at my Pokémon apprehensively.

"Skar!"

"Sudowoodo, Counter!" This was an interesting Sudowoodo. It seemed it was trained in the ways of judo. It kept feinting inwards, attempting to draw an attack out of Skarmory in order to counter-attack. The tactic had helped it Brick Break Steelix into submission. However, it was rather useless against my unorthodox Skarmory.

"SKAR!" My bird looked back towards me.

"Just attack!" I implored. He kept staring at me, which induced Sudowoodo to jump in to close range. It let loose a Hammer Arm, catching Skarmory upside the beak. It immediately fell into a defensive pose, ready to counter-counter-attack.

"You can't really provoke him," I said aloud, but maybe not loud enough for my opponent to hear. "He just runs away- like that," I finished as Skarmory leapt into the air, squawking angrily. He landed on top of a massive boulder, unearthed earlier in the battle.

"Don't lose patience! Wait for it to attack first!" the lady advised her Pokémon. I admit, she herself was patient and possessed nerves of steel. She never commanded for a first-strike, always having faith in her Pokémon's defense. Sadly, her Pokémon weren't quite as disciplined, earlier costing her Hitmontop and Ursaring a trip to the knockout line.

"Wait for it, wait for it."

"Skarmory! Skarm-Skarm! Metal Claw? Please?"

"Skar!" He's barely learned his own name, let alone the 'attack' command. It's been useless trying to get him to use individual moves. Thankfully, he's improving each day. It shouldn't take too much longer now. Unfortunately, he's also got a stubborn streak to match my own, and doesn't care for combat, especially the close-quarters kind.

Skarmory remained on his roost, occasionally letting off an Air Cutter. Sudowoodo tried to dodge, couldn't, but didn't matter because the attack didn't do much damage. At the same time, he couldn't jump worth beans and didn't want to try to climb the boulder to reach Skarmory. This stalemate lasted five minutes, before the ranged attacks began wearing the Sudowoodo's health and patience down.

"Rock Smash and then retreat!" its trainer finally ordered.
"Woo-ha-do!"

Skarmory's perch blew apart under the judo blows, dropping the bird into the pile of rubble. Sudowoodo failed to take heed of its trainer's full command, however, and clawed forward for the kill. Skarmory screeched. Flashes of a Steel Wing sliced through the falling rubble, catching Sudowoodo in its own charge. The Rock-type clutched its midriff, and then, five seconds later, fell over.

"That's the match, thank you for the battle," I said, recalling my Pokémon. I waved the lady goodbye as politely as I could (she was about to cry), and then made my way to the back office.

... 

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Grava."

Graveler sulked in a corner.

"I mean, really now. I thought you wanted to be more active? I've let you battle, even let you fight your own way!" Which typically meant nonstop Rollouts, if she did anything at all. I've put her into 16 battles over the past three days. The results: 6 KO's due to blissful Rollout derbies, 7 KO's due to complete inaction, 3 forfeits because Graveler refused to even release from her pokeball, 0 enemy KO's. Overall, I lost 8 of those matches, mainly due to her insubordination. The wins were largely thanks to Skarmory's more productive form of stubbornness.

"Graveler, it really hurts. I don't know what to do; I don't know what you want from me."

"Grrv."

She rolled herself into a tight ball.

"What have I done that's been so horrible?" I asked her. She let out a low, grainy growl, as if to say 'you know what you've done'. I tried to approach her, touch her. She had no where to go, but still she tucked herself tighter, hugged the corner tighter.

She's acting like an abuse victim, I realized. That makes me feel like crap. Seriously, crap. Like a criminal. Guilt. This isn't a feeling I'm used to at all, and it hurts all the more for that.

"I know we've had rough times together," I said, softly. "I know... I know now you didn't want to be caught. More so than the others. You didn't want to be a trainer's Pokémon. You especially didn't want to be my Pokémon. I can't erase the things we went through, or didn't go through, but I can make it back up to you. Just please... don't shut me out."

There was no response from the Pokémon.

I began stroking her side. It was, as usual, caked in mud. Her rough, stony skin, cloven and ridged like the sole of a hiking boot, always had dirt and debris ingrained into it. There was a time when I would force her to sit still while I hosed her down after a battle. She hated that, and fought the whole way through. Eventually, I gave up, and just stopped letting her out into my apartment. She became an "outside" Pokémon. Even now, the floor where she had stood bore muddy footprints.

"I could... let you inside more? I'll clean up after, I guess. Maybe we can try sand-blasting instead of water?"
"Grrv." She shrugged away from my petting.

"Is it because I haven't evolved you? I'm sorry, I don't know how to do that. You know we've tried…"

Half a summer was wasted on that endeavor. I tried everything, searched the internet and queried every Pokémon researcher, and none of their methods worked.

"Is it food?" No answer. "Is it? Do you want better meals? I can do that, get you whatever you want." No answer or response of any kind.

"Do you want friends? I could get another Geodude, or Graveler. I can upgrade your pokeball. I heard they have dream-inducers; it makes the pokeball feel less like a coma. How about treats? Toys? A yard, or a mountain, or a cave of your own? Anything? Anything at all? Tell me what to do with you because I just don't know and you're not helping, and I only want to make up for every time I ignored you because Amphy is such a needy time-leech but I had to because he has such an important job and it's not my decision but it's okay now and he's more self-sufficient now and I want to be closer with you but if you won't open up to me I can't help you so help me but you won't so I just can't take it!"

OUCH! An exclamation of pain, because I had unwittingly brought my two fists down upon Graveler's back in frustration. It hurt my hands, and her feelings, I knew.

"Graveler?"

…

"Do you hate me?"

"V'ller." She shook, slightly.

A faint, wet sensation touched my cheek. It slipped earthward, past my lips, and then my chin, and then coalesced into a visual reality: a teardrop, falling onto Graveler's backside.

I, whose only real affection in the world is towards my Pokémon, struck my own Pokémon out of anger- anger caused by my own inability to understand my own Pokémon.

You're pitiful, Jasmine.

"Jasmine," a knock came on the door.

"Oh, yeah?" I wiped the tears off. Connie was leaning inside the office doorway.

"There's a challenger here for you."

"Oh. Okay. Has he won twice?"

"No," she said, sheepishly. "It's late, almost closing. Me and the subords want to go home."

"Agh. Really?"

"It's not like we're paid overtime. Or at all."

"Noted," I said, picking myself up. My subordinates were technically paid volunteers, not even making minimum wage. Their allowance came out of my own salary, after all, and I couldn't afford much. A pity the League doesn't pay for them anymore. The threat Connie was insinuating was that
she and the others could walk off at any time.

"Could you just 1v1 whiff it for me, for formality's sake? Then you can go."

"Alright."

She left, and I made to follow her. As I went out, my hand scraped through Graveler's hide, picking small clods of dirt out.

"Stay here, and... do whatever you like. Just don't make me feel guilty anymore." I don't expect Graveler to understand that, but I let it out anyways.

The challenger was a big boy, a little older than me, standing in front of the entrance hallway. I say 'big' in a very callous manner. To be fairer, let's say he occupied space. Ted, skinny as he is, struggled to slip by the human behemoth. The trainer wore hiking gear from head to toe; boots, khaki pants, sweater-vest, and woolen trunk shirt. A backpack big enough to fit me inside of it lay over one shoulder.

"Hello sir. Are you here for a gym challenge?"

"Oye? Oh, yeah, s'pose so. Are ye the Gym Leader?" He's got a very distinctive accent, definitely from the mountain counties. His cheeks and chin were hidden behind a massive, unkempt beard.

Eww. Another personal preference I forgot to mention to Morty. No facial hair, please.

"I am. My name is Jasmine Mikan."

"So ye are! Hahahaha! Righty, this is a fine place ye got here. I s'pose I just walked in ta take a look, but I wouldna mind a battle. Name's Bailey, by the by."

Bailey barreled his way to the front of the podium. "So, this how this works? I'm here, we go at it with the pokeballs n'such?"

Does he... know how to battle?

"I'm terribly sorry. My gym rules state you must fight two of my subordinates before you may challenge me."

"Oh is that so?" He nodded and winked towards Ted and Connie. "I didna think it was such a hassle awaitin me. Alright, rules be rules. Whose first?"

Connie sighed. I sat myself on the railing. Ted was up first.

"The first two matches will be 1v1, if you don't mind," I explained. His waving hand signaled that was not a problem. "Good. Ted?"

"Mag-Magne-" Ted mumbled something as he daintily chucked his pokeball out. The kid has social anxiety issues, I understand, but he really ought to save the stuttering routine for parties and such. Be more assertive, at least while you're battling, Ted!

"Magnemite? That's a Steel-Electric-type! And here I thought you were a Rock-type gym!" Ted gazed, a little dumbfounded.

"I apologize, you are misinformed on several counts," I pitched in. "No trainer is obligated to follow the type specialization in my gym; and in any case, our specialization happens to be the Steel-type. We switched from Rock-types many years ago."
"Oh wow, that's something. Not what I was expectin. Ah well. Gooooo, Golem!"

A Golem. That really would have been my second guess for his Pokémon, after Snorlax.

"Magnemite, um… Metal Sound."

"EXPLOSIOOOOONNNNN!" Bailey yelled.

…

…

Golem curled itself into a round, rocky beach ball, and then proceeded to erupt into small explosions. Chunks of rock and rubble burst out in every direction, pelting the shields, the ground, and Magnemite alike. Blasts like cannon fire bounded and rebounded off the walls.

"Aw that's not it! I told ye to EXPLOSION Golem, EXPLOSION!Alrighty, why not just try using Dig?" The challenger looked to Ted. "He's not the brightest chap, is he?"

Golem remained curled, but now began spinning. Wait, he wasn't fully curled, his arms hung out like spindles. They were still rotating, and now began clawing into the surface. The Pokémon dug itself a furrow, like a roto-tiller.

"Magnemite, he's digging himself underground. We have to get him, before he does… um… Thundershock? No, it's immune. Um… ah- Supersonic!" Ted's indecisiveness proved fatal. Golem did not burrow underground. Instead, he rocketed forward as if he were swimming through the clay, a one-ton earthen torpedo. Magnemite was hit once, from beneath, and that was all it took.

Okay, I have never seen an Explosion or a Dig do that. This guy is weird. Magnemite lay in pieces on the ground, obviously out of the fight.

"Magnemite is fainted, Challenger Bailey is the winner," I said lazily.

Connie shot me an even lazier look, silently telling me 'I'm not even gonna try'.

"Are you going to heal?" I asked Bailey.

"Nah, I'll just use one of me others."

Golem retreated in a flash.

"Okay, dude, let's send em out together," Connie said to Bailey.

"Go, Ladyba!"

"Go, Golem!"

Another Golem? You're kidding.

"Ladyba, Tackle."

"Mountain Slide!" Bailey yelled, eyes wide, face beaming.

Golem dug into the ground, picked up a chunk of earth five or six times its size, and then exploded. The Pokémon and boulder, together, blasted off into the air. They hit the ceiling, whereupon the boulder shattered and created what seemed to be a Rock Slide attack. I say seemed, because to me, it
looked more like a Rock *Torrential Downpour*. Ladyba was no where to be seen in the aftermath.

"Ladyba! Where are you? Here, recall!" The auto-sensor in the pokeball located and extracted Connie's Pokémon. She turned towards me.

"Yes, yes, go enjoy your boyfriend or painting your nails or whatever else you like to do with your free time."

"College homework," she threw back at me. She and Ted departed at vastly different paces: the former at warp speed, the latter at super-speed Slowbro velocities. I was alone with the strange man.

"Excuse me, I need to fetch my Pokémon," I told him.

"Righty-o."

An ominous crunching sound could be heard out of the office. It caused me to pause, and a sick feeling welled in my stomach. I took a breath and stepped in.

"Graveler!"

When I said she could do whatever, I didn't mean she could tear up the place! Even with me shouting and trying to grab at her, she continued on her Rollout frenzy, like a pinball. As she picked up speed it became too dangerous for me and I ducked outside. Her pokeball was lost somewhere inside the debris-strewn room; I couldn't recall her.

"Graveler!" I pleaded. Really?! Really?! Why, what's gotten into her? I've not done anything, past and especially not present, to earn this egregious behavior. She's getting out of control!

CRASH!

Graveler came to a halt after putting a large dent into the drywall. My desk was completely trashed, but I spotted her ball beneath its corpse. With a little courage, I hopped across the debris, snatched the pokeball, and spun around, prepared to imprison the rogue Pokémon.

I paused.

"Grrrv." Graveler lay there, on her side, too tired to continue her rampage.

"I'm not going to lock you up," I said, putting the pokeball away in my purse. Slowly, so she could see and understand. "Just please, listen. I'll give you one more chance. Help me in this battle. We don't even need to win. Just, show me what you can do; show me something, anything, just give me a reason to believe in you again."

"Graveler."

"Have this." I took a Super Potion and placed it in her hands, not even administering it. It took a minute of apprehension and distrust, but at length, she mashed the trigger. A healing mist sprayed across her body.

"Good. Will you come battle? See?" I held out my empty hands. "No pokeball. Just yourself, following me." Graveler, infinitely reluctantly, plodded her way past me.

"OOOOOH! A Graveler!" the trainer exclaimed upon seeing my Pokémon. "They're my favorite, no wait- second favorite Pokémon!" I wonder what his first is (note the sarcasm). "Nah, now, I had an idea. Ye mind we had a six versus six battle?"
"Um, not at all." It would be long, but at least, if Graveler didn't bear out, it would have less overall impact on the match.

"I wen an healed mine up."

"Very well. Then, for the right to earn the Mineral Badge, I, Jasmine Mikan of the Olivine City Gym, accept your challenge."

"Graveler!" I reached out my hand, signaling for the match to start and for my Pokémon to enter the arena. She did so, at a lumbering pace.

"Golem!" Bailey called.

Figures. I'm interested in seeing what else these Golems are capable of. Aerial Earthquakes? Farting Fire Blasts? As for Graveler, I'm praying she's good enough to even hurt the thing. Please? Please oh god and Arceus, just let this work out between us!

Bailey was gleaming. "Golem, Destro-ball!"

I have no idea what attack that's supposed to be; it kind of resembles a Bulldoze. However, given the foe's Rock typing, a pre-emptive Earthquake will stop this short. Even with the evolution advantage, this idiot isn't using the most effective attack. Graveler can win, if only she…

"Earthquake!" I pleaded.

Graveler turned towards me, doing nothing. Her eyes were filled with a volatile concoction of hatred and bitterness.

"Graveler! Earthquake! Please! Watch out!" She must have sensed the incoming Bulldoze, but she did nothing. The enemy Golem bowled her over.

"Graveler, I'm begging! Just Earthquake! You'll win if you do!"

My Pokémon lifted herself up, but no more. The second Bulldoze/"Destro-ball" smashed into her side, sending her rolling across the arena.

"Graveler! Please! Rollout, Rock Throw, anything! Just, at least, fight for yourself!"

"Grrrv." The Golem raced its way around the far perimeter. It banked, coming in for another pass. Graveler began moving, her limbs slowly inching towards the ground. Her claw dug into the earth, ripping out a basketball-sized piece. Rock Throw. It won't do much, but, it's something.

Unless, she throws it with perfect aim, so that it acts as wedge between the rapidly approaching Golem and the ground. But Graveler was not a very good pitcher. Could she do it?

"Please," I whispered. My hands clenched into fists, so tightly my fingers broke skin.

Graveler hefted the rock, whipped around, and let it fly like a cannon shot.

CRACK!

An explosion of rubble exploded three feet to my right, putting a hole into the wall. I flinched. My side was hit with ricocheting pellets. Some hits hurt, sharply. The force field before me flickered erratically. A moment later, Golem leveled Graveler flat.

"RECALL!"
With my nerves strung tight as a suspension bridge, adrenaline pumping like a hydro-plant, I ripped out the pokeball and returned my Pokémon to its digital stasis.

What the fuck.

To hate me. To be bitter. Destroy my office. Disobey my orders. I can understand these actions. But I never believed my own Pokémon would try to kill me.

"My sincere apologies. I must forfeit the match," I said, giving Bailey a formal, waist-deep bow, to hide my tears.


"Sorry, but it's impossible. It seems my shields are malfunctioning. It would be a violation of League safety protocols to continue."

"Oye." He seems a little puzzled, but eventually shrugged.

I looked down at my Pokéball. Graveler's pokeball. A place she would rather be, than to be out and serving me in battle. A desire so strong she had intentionally fired a Rock Throw at me, to hurt me, and had come so close to maiming or killing me.

My knees gave out.

Graveler, why? Am I truly this evil, in your eyes? Do you really want me dead? Eleven years you've stood by, and were these feelings building all this time? What exactly did I do? Or rather, failed to do? And is there anything possible I can do for you? Ever? At all?

"Oye."

Bailey approached me.

"Here's your badge," I said, daintily picking one from my satchel. He gently smacked the proffered badge away.

"I don't want that." His hillbilly accent disappeared. He kneeled down to greet me face to face.

"What do you want?" I muttered.

"Seems like you have some Pokémon there. Is that her?" he said, nodding to the pokeball.

"Graveler? Yes. How'd you know it's a girl?"

"Aha." A laugh, but muted. How considerate. He pulled out his six pokeballs and tossed them out, in one go, into the arena. His Pokémon appeared in rapid succession. I couldn't help but let out a chuckle of my own. Ridiculous.

"Golem!" "Golem!" "Golem!" "Golem!" "Golem!" "Golem!"

He's got six Golems. They stood in a row, obediently waiting for orders, curiously looking about.

"I'm a Breeder. I raise and sell Pokémon to trainers."

"I'm familiar with your line of work," I said.
"Good. Actually, I'm rather specialized, I only breed the Geodude family." He waved a hand towards his line-up. "You could say I'm the number one expert on the Pokémon. Know pretty much everything about them; their habits, moves, physiology, psychology, the works. It's my passion and my career to raise them for all sorts of purposes. I'm rather fond of the Pokeathlon, actually. May I?"

I didn't know what he planned, but he motioned for my pokeball. I mindlessly gave it to him. He released Graveler into the midst of the Golems. Graveler spotted the Golems and immediately curled into a defensive ball.

"Magnificent. Have you ever tried to evolve her?"

"What are you up to?" I asked. He's damn bold, thinking he can butt into my personal business! But… He's got such a smile as he's looking on Graveler, it felt disarming. It's the same face I glimpse in the mirror, sometimes, when I'm with Amphy.

"Nothing, nothing devious. Have you tried?" he asked again.

"Yes, many times. It never worked."

"Do you know how?"

"Not really. I thought leveling her would work."

"Ah, I see. No, no amount of training will work," he said.

"Then how?"

"Golem, they're special. Gravelers, they get accustomed to their environment. They get into a routine, and they lose sight of where they're going. They don't want to change, they're kind of stubborn. It's in the psychology. This "mental inertia", the profs like to call it, stops the signals that would trigger evolution."

"So how do you get them out of that?"

He smiled.

"Ye exposin them to a new environ," he said, his voice falling back into a mountain accent. I raised an eyebrow. He continued in a normal voice.

"You need to put them in a radically different environment. Physically, mentally, and socially. Get them out of their midlife rut. Expose them to new experiences, fight in new ways, fight new creatures. It really, really helps if they switch trainers, cause each trainer has totally different ways of training and loving and interacting with their Pokémon. This "character growth" removes the blocking signal and lets the Graveler evolve. That's why you get Graveler's rolling down mountain sides. Their clan is kicking them off the mountain so they can go find a new life, and that way they can evolve."

"Uhuh."

"You noticed my accent?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I figured out that if I adopt a different persona, treat em and train em differently, take them out of the city and into the mountains, I can get em to evolve by myself."
"Interesting."

"Ha! yeah. You might of noticed, I'm not very good as a trainer. I guess I spend all my time on raising these bubbly brutes, not much time gaining, you know, actual battle experience. Not really my thing. I let the customers do that after I let them off."

"You love your job?" I inquired.

"Absolutely! Since I was a little boy, loved the pebblers. Now, about your Graveler. She's magnificent."

"You think so?" I said, a little surprised.

"Aye. She's darn beautiful, for a Graveler. Tough, too. I'm thinking she might do super-well in contests, or in the Stamina courses over at the Pokeathlon Dome. I've got a proposition."

"What kind?" I said, suddenly a little suspicious.

"I see it in her eyes, here. She's not happy. She's been in that midlife rut for a long, long time. Lot longer than's good for a Graveler. Would you mind trading her?"

"What?!" I perked up, looking Bailey in the eye. He was serious.

"Trade her to me. You said you're a Steel type specialist, right? I came by a Piplup recently, don't know what to do with it. It evolves into Empoleon, a Steel-Water hybrid. Your Graveler for my Piplup."

"I don't know about that…" I said, my mind reeling from the suggestion. Give up Graveler? The thought had never crossed my mind! Even if she tried to hurt me, could I do that?

"You got that look, like you really love your Pokémon. But Graveler ain't happy, I can see that too. Maybe, I think I can help her get to where she belongs. I could say the same for my Piplup. I don't know a thing about the species; it's a big, wacky accident how I got it in my possession. So let's trade."

"Um…"

No!

Even if she hurts me, even if she hates me, I don't want to give up my Pokémon! It would be abandoning her! It's too cruel!

Eleven years I've had her! Since Dark Cave! To callously give away my companion that's been there for over half my life?

No way!...

No…

I looked upon Graveler, who was now being nudged and coddled between the six Golems. She was not curled anymore, but placidly taking the Golem's attention. They began happily rolling her between them. She seemed to enjoy it.

Is it her fault she's unhappy, or is it mine?

I turned to Bailey, who was patiently awaiting my answer.
"Can you give me time to think it over?"

"Sure, of course. I'll be in town till Friday. Here's my card."

Bailey left, taking his Pokémon with him. Graveler's mood noticeably deflated when they left. She and I both curled into a ball, holding ourselves tightly. I have no idea what's going through my Pokémon's head; but for me, mine was consumed by guilt for the past, and worry for the future. I'm doing everything in my power to improve my life, but my problems just keep coming and building up and building up and building up till they're out of control, like a Rollout. What am I supposed to do?

The next day was a Thursday, October 4th to be precise, and I was feeling miserable. Not just because of the Graveler dilemma, but also because of a pair of habitual nuisances intruding upon my life. Of course it always seemed like these two miseries landed on top of each other each and every month. Was it any wonder the other Gym Leaders thought I was a little bitchy?

I booted my computer and the attendant plug-in camera. After a few minutes and a few navigations, I was staring at a program highlighted by 10 windows set in two rows of five. Six windows were in "stand-by" mode, the rest were blank. The clock read 12:25 P.M. Five more minutes.

DING! DING!

Two windows lit up. Pryce and Falkner's faces appeared in them.

"Hello Ms. Mikan," the elderly gentleman greeted me. Falkner ignored both of us.

"Mr. Pryce! Nice to see you," I returned the greeting. For him, even in my thrice-cursed mood, I could muster a measure of politeness.

"Oh!"

"Hmm?" He gave me an inquisitive look.

"You reminded me of something…"

"And that would be?"

"Um… I can't say. It's between me and Morty."

"I see. I've heard the two of you are on speaking terms again?"

DING! Speak of the devil.

"You could say that."

"Hey Jazz."

"Hmph!" My nether region was giving me cramps. It's been sore and hurting since the morning. Boys lucked out so badly when it comes to physiology.

"Jazz-"
"Chat later."

**DING! DING!**

Chuck, and then Clair.

"Where's Miss Tardy?" Clair demanded. "Jasmine?" she directed her inquiry to me.

"I don't know," I said defensively. Does she expect me to keep a Whitney radar on me?

Two minutes past 12:30, a final **DING!** sounded.

"Sorry guys!" Whitney appeared. The seven of us had gathered.

Every first Thursday of the month, the Johto League Gym Leaders convene via teleconference, to discuss business matters and catch up on gossip. Unfortunately for me, the crimson tide always seemed to strike at this exact time of the month as well, causing me to be at my worst during the only day I was obligated to be social.

"Finally." Clair, as our association's chair, went through the minutes and agenda. She hinted at, but refused to say, the biggest items on the schedule, until she made sure she had our attention.

"I'm stepping down as chair. I need time off and I can't shoulder all the extra work."

"Anything to do with Red?" I asked.

"Shut your mouth, Jasmine."

"Rude," I responded. Perhaps I wasn't the only woman dealing with menstrual issues today.

**Ding!** A little message box appeared under the video windows. The teleconference program was also equipped with chat service, so you could talk to other participants in private.

"Cat fight!" the message read. Who else would send it but Morty? I looked back up to his window to find him grinning.

"Do you want me to block you for another two years? Don't test my patience!" I sent to the miscreant.

"So! I need someone to take over as chair. Nominations?" Clair called out.

"Myself," Falkner ventured.

Eww, no. Falkner's a prick. I don't want him in charge. But if I speak up, I might just antagonize Clair even further. Besides, I can't handle the chairperson's workload with probation going on.

"Morty, nominate Pryce." Morty's eyes glanced downwards, reading my text. He nodded, then grinned.

"And what do I get in return?"

"Two years of Falkner not going on a power trip. Just do it!"

Morty nearly chuckled out loud. "Excuse me. I'd like to nominate Pryce," he said.

"Hmm?"
"Pryce?" Clair addressed the senior-most member of our squad. It was a little awkward, because we were all staring into the cameras, meaning it always felt like they were looking directly at me. "Are you okay with that?"

"Hmm. I think… yes, I will accept." The old man's wrinkles creased, either in a grin, or deep thought. I couldn't tell.

"Fine, anyone else? No one? Good. Use the chat box to cast your votes. Send them to me."

"I think Clair is the best fit for this job, but if not her, then we still need a strong leader." Falkner was doing a little campaigning.

"Vote for whoever you feel is best," Pryce said. We all clicked in.

"Pryce." I typed in my choice and sent it away. Hopefully this woman doesn't rig the vote. Clair looked down at her screen, eyes counting. She grimaced.

"Vote of 4 to 3, Pryce wins."

Yes! Take that, mister haughty bird-boy! I wonder who the other two were that even voted for you. Clair's a given, given her attitude, but the other? Chuck, maybe? Or Morty, just to screw with me.

"Right, Pryce, you'll be taking over after we finish this meeting."

"Thank you all for your vote of confidence. I hope this old noggin of mine can be of some use." Pryce gave a curt bow.

"Second on the agenda, Azalea. Bugsy flunked the summit and he's decided to go traveling with his girlfriend. So he's gone, the town needs a new Gym Leader. The League's sent us a new candidate we're supposed to rubberstamp."

A new file popped up on the screen. "Check him out."

Blaiz, a hip young man with spiked black hair, jeans and open-chested shirt with a high, upturned collar. His bio ran on for paragraphs, but I was only interested in one line.

"He's a Fire-type specialist," I said aloud.

"Yeah. He's one of the best in the region," Clair said offhandedly.

"Azalea is right by Ilex Forest. That gym's been a Bug-type since its founding! I don't think the residents will appreciate it if some Fire-snotter walks in and breaks tradition."

"Yeah, and that gym has also been underperforming since its inception." Clair was now actively staring at her screen, presumably at me.

"You can't throw away their tradition! Send this Blaiz fellow somewhere he'll be appreciated!"

"No, we go with the League's recommendation," Clair insisted, but not whole-heartedly. She was just saying this to be contrary.

"We're not tools of the League! Come on! The last thing an old fashioned village like Azalea needs is a steel mill for a gym!"

"Jasmine! Is this the thanks I get for lending you my gym?" she let out angrily.
"Need I bring up Red again?" That silenced her. "I talked with Bugsy before he left. It was his expressed hope that a Bug-type user step in for him."

"Bugs are weak! Why would they want another decade with a weak-ass-"

"Falkner!" I yelled.

"We have to go with the League's choice. Blaiz is the guy. Let's not get caught up in sentimentality." Falkner wasn't about to back down.

"Or personal vendettas," I shot back.

"You implying something?"

"Only that you despised Bugsy and everything he did."

"I have a right to disagree with how a gym is run. Tradition is a crutch that-"

"I think she has a point," one person spoke up. We all jumped, surprised by the opinion. Chuck sat, knuckle in hand and chin resting atop them, musing to himself. "Hoenn's League's in turmoil cause they tried reforming too fast. Sootopolis' gym situation's been in non-stop turnover since Wallace left. Lilycove tried adding a ninth gym and caused a civil war, metaphorically speakin. I think we're all so caught up in tryin to improve and reform and modernize, maybe we take it too far. Someone's gotta stick by tradition, push back and slow them down before they try somethin foolhardy. Mmmph!"

The teleconference grew very quiet. Everyone listens to Chuck, because he tends to be the swing vote in close decisions.

"All in favor of Blaiz as the next Gym Leader, raise your hands," Clair said. Falkner, all by his lonesome, raised his hand. He glared angrily at the screen.

"I thought you wouldn't go against the League's wishes, Clair."

"Fuck the League. They've got that runt doing their dirty work for them. All those in favor?" Clair didn't raise her hand, but she hardly needed to. Five hands pressed against the screens.

"5 to 1, Blaiz rejected. Pryce, your first job after this is to notify the League we want a new candidate. Preferably a Bug-user, thanks to Ms. Mikan," Clair threw my way. Pryce nodded.

"Oh, I thought of another thing."

"What is it, Mikan?" She does not sound happy at all.

"I think we should balance out the gender ratio. Have them pick a woman please."

"Ugh." Falkner showed his disgust. Typical male. Morty beamed, as if to say 'Alright, more women!'. Also typical male perversity. Clair, though, didn't seem opposed to this idea.

"Right, Pryce, tell them to make it a female too."

"Feminista."

I looked at the message from Falkner and briefly contemplated how best to fight this slur. On second pass, however, my morals got the best of me and I simply blocked him.
"Now, if no one else, *Mikan*, decides to interrupt, let's get to the boring stuff."

The meeting promised to drag on for another hour without anything terribly important being discussed.

"Pretty brave of you, what with probation. Are you not afraid you'll get kicked out?"

"You're awesome!"

The first text came from Morty, the second from Whitney. I thanked the latter and thought of a good reply to the former. Clair didn't notice, and was talking with Pryce about direct-deposit rules.

"I don't care if it costs me my job. I refuse to work in a league that has no moral integrity."

"Huh. Still, do you think you can keep your job? How's probation going?"

"I've got a problem."

"When do you not? Is this about the train ride?"

"No, it's a new problem." There was a momentary pause before his reply came.

"Fire away."

I collected myself, thinking about how to say what I wanted to say, and whether I even trusted Morty enough to share it. Do I?

I do. He won't make fun of me for this. He can't.

"Graveler tried to hurt me. She threw a rock at me during a match. The shields failed and I'm lucky to be calling from the office and not a hospital."

"That's bad. Have you punished her or anything?"

"No, that's not even the whole problem. I met a Geodude Breeder. He wants to take Graveler from me, trade her for another Pokémon."

"What is he offering?"

"It's irrelevant. What should I do? Should I give up and trade Graveler? I don't want to, but at this rate" My text drifted off into blankness, mirroring my thoughts. I began shifting around in my seat out of nervousness, causing a new round of aches in my vagina.

"Well, I think you're a good person and a great trainer. I think you got to just work harder to get Graveler to trust you. She'll come back. It's taken ten years(?) to get to this point, she's not going to trust you again overnight."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yeah."

I stared at Morty across the computer screen. He also looked up, giving me a reassuring smile.

"It'll be fine. You can do it!"
"I don't know."

"Talk to Whitney, she'll say the same thing."

"Of course she will." The way she's still fawning over Brawley, I wouldn't put any question of unrequited affection past her.

"I'm not sure what to do. I'm not sure anything I do will be enough."

How had it come to this? In eleven years, I think there would have been something to clue me in on Graveler's feelings. Something that would have told me, "You have to deal with this!" Nothing. Nothing I can remember, anyways. Am I that ignorant? Was it my fault? Had I purposefully blocked out Graveler's plight so that I wasn't burdened by the difficulty of dealing with her?

Can I spot what went wrong now, from memory?

I caught Geodude in June of 2001, inside Dark Cave during a class trip. That same day I also caught Onix. I don't remember who was caught first, but I know they were my 2nd and 3rd Pokémon. We came home, and I started playing with my Pokémon. It didn't take long for me to decide I wanted to be a professional trainer. Steven Stone was an international celebrity and my number one role model. He was a geologist and used fossil Pokémon, which were all part Rock-type. I thought I would become a Rock-type user as well; explore the world's ancient ruins, uncover the mysteries of the past and the secrets of the earth, and battle crime lords and evil corporations to save the treasures of old- a typical dream of a ten year old child.

Geodude was an integral part of that dream. She was my lead, the first out on the battlefield. It was up to her to force the opponent's hand early, uncover their battling style and lineup. Her role as scout helped me decide a strategy and find the foe's weakness.

She was never very good at this, though. I thought it was because the opponent always had a special tactic just for dealing with Geodude, something unrelated to their main strategy, and usually didn't require switching Pokémon too much.

Looking back at it now, though, it felt like Geodude just wasn't very good, period. She had potential, but was always being outplayed, always outsmarted, always outspeed. It felt like she was slacking during practice, and didn't like working with the others, or didn't like learning her position. I argued, constantly, trying to get her to do what I wanted her to do.

Instead, she copied Onix. She tried to learn the same moves as Onix. She tried budging in and filling in for him when he wasn't performing at his best. She wanted to use offensive attacks, not defensive. She wanted to work on her power, not her technique. Why?

Onix was my sweeper. He blows up the enemy team after I neutralize their threats and devolve the battle down to a simple game of brute strength. Graveler… I think she might have been jealous. She wanted Onix's spot on my team. She wanted to be the sweeper. Was it because of the perceived prestige that position held? Or was it because she just enjoyed that role more?

Either way, she didn't cut it. She didn't have the qualities that made for a good sweeper; she simply wasn't stronger than Onix, nor faster, nor tougher, nor have as diverse a move pool. As for the prestige of being my team leader, Onix didn't earn that by being my sweeper. He earned it through his discipline, patience, and intelligence. He's been invaluable in keeping the others focused and striving to improve themselves. Geodude was rash, loud, bossy, and indecisive. Those qualities only got worse when she evolved into Graveler. Soon enough, it was taking more time to force her to train than she actually spent training. She was becoming more and more difficult, while Onix was
only getting stronger and more mature. I struggled, and failed, to evolve Graveler, but Dad helped me easily evolve Onix into Steelix.

Then *that incident* happened. I decided to switch from Rock to Steel-type. I threw away everything that was formerly me and became a new person. I took full possession of the Gym Leader title and vowed to never look back, never again be so weak. And Graveler? She was weak. Weak on the battlefield, and weak in spirit. She didn't fit in. Not with my new Steel-centric strategy, and certainly not with my new attitude. Now, it seems kind of obvious, but I was oblivious then: that was when Graveler started disobeying me in battle.

It's my fault.

It's because I treated her like the weak Pokémon she was, and not the strong Pokémon I knew she could become.

Back then, I knew it was still possible to reconcile, but didn't want to. There were so many little issues, like her mess-making, like my inability to fit her into my stratagems, like the way the rest of the team picked on her slow-wittedness. It was easier for me to ignore her than try to work with her. There was a period of years when I never talked with her, when I barely even saw her. I loaned her to friends, or kept her in the PC. Father would take care of feeding her because she wouldn't eat anything I gave her.

"**You seem upset. Is anything the matter?**" Another message, this one was from the pale-haired grandpa. In the window, Pryce continued debating with Chuck and Morty over battle philosophy, specifically whether challengers could force a double battle match. The fact he was texting me was well disguised. Why would he do that? Probably to keep attention away from me.

"**I'm having trouble.**" I went on to explain the situation to him in much more detail than what I gave to Morty. Despite his attempts to conceal it, I could spot the glances and slight nods each time I sent him a paragraph.

"**What do you think I should I do?**" I ended.

Pryce leaned back, closing his eyes. He began ambling on in support of Chuck's position, at which point Falkner and Whitney barged in and Morty lost interest.

"**Has anyone else given you advice?**" he asked.

"**Yes, Morty.**" Pryce's ability to multi-task was seriously impressive. He's still moderating the debate while engaging me.

"**What did he tell you?**"

"**He thinks I should tough it out. He believes in me.**"

"**Typical boy.**"

"**Who are you talking to?**" Morty messaged. I guess I'm not as good as Pryce at hiding my distractions.

"**You'll find young men say whatever they think will appease girls most.**" - Pryce.

"**Erika.**" - Me to Morty.
"Are you saying I should do the opposite and give Graveler up?" - Me to Pryce.

"Hey worm, got a sec?" - Clair.


"One sec." - Me to Clair.

"Not bummed (blatant lies), just uncomfortable. Pelvis hurts." - Me to Morty.

"I need to talk to you." - Clair.

"That time of month?" - Morty.

"Yes. TMI for you, don't worry about it." - Me to Morty.

"In a minute." - Me to Clair.

Argh! Too many conversations going on at once!

"I'm saying no such thing. I think you need to look inside yourself and figure out what you should do. Figure out what's best for you AND your Pokémon. It comes down to this, do you feel that you can make amends, and will Graveler be able to accept you? The answer to those two questions is key, and they can only be found within you."

Morty and Clair sent several more chats my way, but they weren't going to be getting replies. I stared, a little shocked, at Pryce's message. On screen, the corner of his mouth perked, a smile, unnoticed by everyone else.

"I believe in you."

Look inside myself to figure out if I believed I could reconnect with Graveler, and if she could accept me again. It was basically up to me, and my decision alone that would determine the outcome. Searching for someone to offload the weight of decision-making was the coward's way out. That was Pryce's message. He's right. He's absolutely right.

Both Morty and Pryce sent the exact same message- "I believe in you." The difference is that Morty was just saying what he thought would comfort me. Pryce actually meant it; he had faith in my decision-making ability.

"Thank you." I typed back to my mentor.

I took a moment to contemplate and internalize his advice. I didn't have the answer just yet, but I felt like I would soon. In the meantime-

"What's Erika doing?" Morty asked.

"I need to see you, soon. Saturday?" I replied.

"Um, I'm kind of busy. How about Sunday?"

"Good enough. The Mana Range Park, by the Miltank ranches on Route 39?"

"Sure. What time?"
"12. Bring a bag lunch."

"12? Hmm. Okay. Gotta wake up early."

"Too bad." I closed his chat window.

"Jasmine!" It wasn't a text. Clair had gotten fed up and called for me out loud. "I need to speak with you. Get into a private window."

"How?" I had never bothered to master the teleconference program.

"Right click my screen and select 'private room'."

"Um- okay, found it." The other six windows minimized and Clair filled the screen. "What's this about? Are you still mad at me?"

"Irritated at your impudent tone, yes, but that has nothing to do with this."

Okay. From what I could tell, Clair was still in her home, not the gym like the others. Her hair was disheveled, neither showered nor brushed. What's more, it's hard to tell because her head filled up most of the window, but she didn't seem to be in her Dragon Tamer outfit. She had really made good on her declaration to close the gym. For how long?

"Playing hooky I see. What do you want with me?"

"Hmph! Know your place!" She burst into an exasperated sigh. "As the chair (for all of ten more minutes), I am obligated to check up on your progress towards completing probation."

"Oh."

"Send me a copy of your status sheet via e-mail, and I'll take care of the League end."

"Okay."

"So, how is that going?"

"Terrible." I remember now, Clair was the one who sent me to K-Block in the first place. Grr. "The coursework is easy, but there's a lot of it. I should be passing that. My win ratio is, like, 38% right now. I know that's really bad, but it's been climbing the past two weeks."

"Good, good. Don't slack. League's a bitch on rules."

"Are you okay?" I ventured. Her appearance lent itself to the theory that she was being lazy, but her hazy demeanor and drifting eyes spoke of a more biological woe.

"Hangover," she replied. "You don't look too good yourself."

"PMS," I explained. "Give yourself a pat for me." We both symbolically gave each other a pat on the back.

"AGH! Brain cramps!" She clutched her head suddenly.

"You got pretty drunk at the Skyrim."

"Nonstop since. Ugh."
"Was it that hard a loss? It was Red, the world champion, after all. Not like it was an upset."

"Worms like you wouldn't understand. I was 3 victories away. THREE!" She shouted this final word at the top of her lungs.

"Three? From what?"

"From the all-time Gym Leader consecutive-win-streak world record! So damn close! If that brat had waited just one hour, I could've made it! Now, shambles. I've been guarding that streak for over two years. YEARS!"

"You haven't lost a match in two years?"

"Gym matches, no, not a single one; But then Mr. Virginballs had to come in and ruin everything! Gah, I'm still so pissed. I'm thinking of retiring."

"Well, my advice is to get sober before making a decision on that."

"Heh. Well, just get those files in for me."

Clair exited from the room, bringing me back to the main window.

"I'm counting on all of your support. If I recall, there is a push to unite the regional Gym Leader associations into a single workers union; I would like all of you to reflect upon your positions concerning that so that we can reach a consensus next meeting." Pryce finished his speech. "Clair, would you care to offer any words as the outgoing chair?"

"Nope. I'll get you the files and paperwork after this."

"Well then, everyone, have a good day."

"See you Sunday," Morty messaged, and then logged off.

I reflected a minute on what Clair was going through, and why she was in the position she was in. It was a completely different situation, but I felt like there was a lesson in there for me. All considering, to get this pissed off over something so minor as a meaningless world record, spoke to how good her life was besides. To care so much, to threaten to retire over this little blip of a loss, she'd have to be harboring the biggest, most prideful ego I'd ever…

!!!

A spark of imagination came upon me, like a minor epiphany.

"I understand now. Thank you for everything." I sent my final message to Pryce. He did not message me back, but leaned forward towards his computer, and placed his index finger on the screen. His stare told me everything.

'It's up to you now, kiddo.'

That's it. I know what I have to do now. More importantly, I know why I have to do it.

Everyone said goodbye, and the teleconference ended. I was left staring at the office's ancient PC, nothing running on the screen. No one else was in the office, not even a Pokémon. Now I know what they mean by saying 'The silence hung heavy'. I slowly got out the breeder's business card from my purse and reached for the phone.
"Mr. Bailey? I've made a decision."

"Graveler, come. We're going on a walk."

She had been left at the gym's outdoor practice field all day. Long, meandering furrows, like doodles, indicated what she had been up to. I gripped her pokeball in one hand, knuckles white, ready in case she decided to disobey me. After some moments, it became apparent she was disobedient, but passively so. She had dug herself into a hole and remained still, with only her backside showing.

I marched up to her. Tapped on her. Kicked her. No response.

"Come out. You're leaving."

I want to cry. I mustn't. Not yet. Instead, I choke my tears down, and give orders in a voice I hate using. Because I have to.

"Now!"

Graveler stirred, rolled around in place, and stared at me.

"It's time," I said, voice softening.

I turned and began walking, step-by-step. Soon enough, the heavy beat of foot steps trailed behind me. At a time like this, I imagine the soundtrack of my life, heretofore a sad, lonely tune, die out. All that was left was the wind, and the crunching of sand and grass to mark the passage of a trainer and her Pokémon.

The evening wore on. The sun disappeared behind a bank of clouds, and the first chill touches of autumn reached me. I clutched the shawl of my dress tighter, wishing the sleeves were longer. It was two miles to our destination; at our pace, it would be almost an hour to cover that. I was not tempted to hurry, though. We had time, if not much.

At a crosswalk, waiting for the traffic signal, I stopped. Graveler caught up, coming to a halt beside me. A sidelong glance told me nothing about my Pokémon's mood. Then again, I never was any good at judging her mood or picking out what was on her mind in the first place. Not even eleven years ago…

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Dark Cave

Friday, June 8th, 2001

"It's so dark! Dark dark dark!"

"I don't like it!"

"I can't see!"
"Waaaaaahhhh!"

The pitiful wails of soon-to-be middle-schoolers echoed through the cavern. Our lantern had inopportunely given out. Mrs. Lylat bumbled about, searching for Wailey. The little boy had been entrusted with the supply bag, because he could usually be counted on to keep a Trapinch-grip on anything he got his hands on. That, however, did not mean the boy himself would not get lost. Ergo, we had lost a student and our one remaining source of light.

"Wailey? Wailey, are you here?" The teacher nearly ran me over in her search for the child. "My gosh, child, where are you?"

"I think he got scared and stayed at the entrance," I said. Not that I knew for certain the poor kid had chickened out; only that I had last seen him by the entrance sign crouching over. Maybe I could have been more generous and said the boy was sidetracked by something curious. That would have preserved his ego but also gotten him in trouble. However, I was ten years old, and those kinds of dilemmas did not cross my mind back then.

"Jasmine? Are you sure? Okay, everyone, please sit and stay right here! I don't want anyone to run off! Jasmine, you're in charge." The awkward, stumbling entity of our teacher could be heard slowly retreating from us. As soon as I ascertained she was around the corner, I reached into my knapsack and pulled out a pokeball.

"Voltorb!"

A flash of light briefly illuminated the creature.

"Woah!"

"What was that?!"

"Flash!"

Voltorb's weak Flash lit up the group. Empty darkness stretched out in three directions. Behind us rose the only visible wall and passage back to the outside. It was our only anchor to the real world, seemingly.

"Wow! A Pokémon!"

"Jasmine has a Pokémon!"

"Light! Light! Light!"

"I can see!"

"A Voltorb!"

The class was simultaneously excited to be able to see again, and at the fact that I had a Pokémon. As far as I knew, the only other classmate to have their own Pokémon was hunkered down at the entrance. I began setting off into depths.

"Wait, Jasmine! Jasmine! Jasmine!"

"Where are you going?!"

"Stay here! Mrs. Lylat told us to stay here!"
I turned around to face them. They were all staring at me with forlorn looks, as if I was abandoning them. Cowards, the lot of them.

"There are Pokémon in this cave. I want to see them."

"But you have to stay here!"

"Mrs. Lylat said so!"

"You just want Voltorb's light," I countered. There was a round of sheepish nodding.

"Well I don't care, I'm going deeper. Anyone want to join me?" Nervous fidgeting. Several got up, then sat back down. At last a girl and a boy, Juliet and Billy, got up and followed me.

We wove our way between stalagmites and rock shelves, always traveling lower and lower. Shadows and flickers at the far edge of our field of vision confirmed my prediction. We were surrounded by Pokémon. Billy clung tightly to Juliet, who hung onto the edge of my skirt.

"There!"

"There!"

The pair of them pointed in different directions. I caught the glowing glint of eyes staring at us.

"They're gonna get us!" My two cohorts hugged each other tight.

"Grow up. I've got Voltorb, we'll be safe."

More than safe, actually. I hefted my knapsack, plastic objects jingling within. This excursion had been deliberately planned by myself for this very purpose. I reached in and got ahold of one empty pokeball. All around us, flittering and rolling and creeping, Pokémon hid just beyond the edge of Voltorb's Flash.

"See? There! There! It's a Pokémon! AHHHH!" Juliet screamed.

I reflexively whipped around and chucked my pokeball. One adventurous Geodude had strayed into the light. The ball thunked against its head, consuming it in energy.

"There!"

"There!"

"There!"

I couldn't keep track of it all. I continually tossed the devices till I was down to one. However, after Juliet's first scream, the monsters became startled and dashed away. All my subsequent pitches missed. We were left alone, the nearest pair of glowing eyes being many yards away.

"I think you caught this one," Billy said. He bent over to pick it up. With a dashing leap I snatched it from his hands to ensure he wouldn't mess it up. Time to take a look at my new Pokémon!

"Go!" I shouted, dramatically tossing the ball in a high arc.

"Grbrbrbrbr."

"It's a Geodude."
It was that simple. You snuck up on us with all of your buddies and were the unlucky one who got noticed first. The first thing you did when I released you was to try to run away again. I stopped that, though, by recalling you back to the pokeball. You tried again, and again, and all weekend. It wasn't until we got back home to Olivine that you understood your life had changed.

It was such a trivial, accidental thing, me catching you. That's why I couldn't remember who came first that day. Compared to Onix, your capture was... not noteworthy. It's difficult now, to recall the details. The sensory information, what it felt like, the emotions, are completely lost to me. What came a few minutes later was- well, more memorable.

"Grrrrrrb!"

"GRAAAARGHHHH!!!!!"

"Geodude, use tackle!"

My brand new Pokémon hid behind a stalagmite, scared before the towering behemoth. Voltorb went in her stead, pitting its pathetic weight against the rock snake's bulk. I was confident in my Pokémon, though. Its little form might not be heavy, but force is mass times velocity (a newly learned fact in science class) and Voltorb is a very speedy creature.

Billy and Juliet flailed about like the comic-relief from anime, before crashing into each other. I stood calmly by, waiting my chance. Voltorb was bullets the Onix over and over, but it wasn't doing enough damage. A foolhardy plan was taking shape in my head.

"Geodude? Where are you? Aha!" I picked up the creature by the arms and began ascending the stalagmite. The cavernous space opened before me. The Onix was thrashing about, unable to intercept Voltorb, who was darting all around it. I waited until the snake was right beneath me.

"Geodude, Tackle!"

I jumped. I vaulted into the air, Pokémon in arm, and gravity took over. Onix's forehead was directly beneath me. I brought Geodude round, with all my ten-year-old girly strength, and smacked the rock ball into the Onix like a mace. The Onix's forefront dropped to the floor, dazed. I ended up in front of the behemoth, staring it eye-to-eye.

"What's it gonna be, punk? You wanna be my Pokémon?" I asked it straight to its face. It never occurred to my ten-year-old self this Pokémon could crack my spine in half with an accidental flip of its tail. Yet, it must have seen something in my eyes, or in the way I dared to stare it down, but it didn't budge. There was a long, silent pause between us. After what seemed like an hour, it broke its gaze, looking away.

"Right, you flinched. I'm your master now."

I reached out and tapped its nose with my last pokeball. The device didn't even wiggle. A light blipped, and my third Pokémon was caught. I jumped in joy, then noticed the delirious couple cowering in the corner. It seemed like a good idea to reintroduce them to my 28-foot cave leviathan.

"ROOOOOOOAAAARRRR!"

"WAAAAAAHHHHHHH!" They went screaming off in the general direction of the class. By the time I caught up, riding atop Onix, Mrs. Lylat and Wailey had returned. The stuttering teacher was too overcome with astonishment to scold me for running off. Lost in the excitement and wonder of the
situation was Geodude. I remembered her only long enough to recall her to her pokeball.

You helped me catch Onix. I never thanked you for that. I'm not sure you would even want to be thanked for that. That day, I was so proud of myself. I had caught two Pokémon, on my own! I didn't even get in trouble for going off the path and leaving the class. Everyone loved me. I was... arrogant. Prideful. Even though I was so ecstatic over catching two Pokémon, I only paid attention to one. You were left out.

As we made our way through the evening streets, memories overcame me. What had formerly been murky and dim suddenly came alive. Sounds, smells, sights, feelings flickered across my sensory inputs, as real as the day they happened-

... "Graveler, stop! No! No! NO! Ahhh!" She had been Rollout-ing right next to the house, through a track of mud. Said mud was now splattered across the side of the house.

"Wait here!" I fetched the hose, and then had Graveler spin in place while I pelted her with water. The make-shift water sprinkler quickly cleaned up the mess, but left my Pokémon an unhappy sogging mess.

... Geodude stared down the Raticate. "Rock Slide!"

"Geo!" She took the Quick Attack with ease and climbed up the nearby slope. A rain of earth crashed down, burying Raticate under. The match was finished.

"Hurray! You wo- w- wah?!?!” Geodude was surrounded by a soft glow. It grew brighter, intense, then unbearable. Her body began undulating and morphing. Inside her, potentiating cells, reservoirs of mass and energy, received a once-in-a-lifetime signal and broke loose. The scintillating forces burst across Geodude's body, expanding, strengthening, taking shape until a new being stood in its place.

"GRAV! GRAVELER!

"Well that's terrific." The gentleman owner of the Raticate applauded. "Your Pokémon evolved!"

It was my first time witnessing an evolution in person. My arms and legs tingled with goose bumps. I ran over to greet my "new" Pokémon.

... She was going to kill herself at this rate. I contemplated her pokeball in the palm of my hand. Ever since last month, when I taught her that move, it was the same routine every time I released her in the vicinity of Onix. Rollout, followed by Self-Destruct, aimed at my team leader. It wasn't seriously hurting Onix, but it was fainting Graveler. The long term effects of repeated Self-Destructs were worrisome. It weakened her shelling, little by little, without giving the membrane time to heal. That would destroy her hide and open it up to serious infection. I bit my lip.
"Come here! We'll try you too!"

Graveler refused. I held the aluminum foil in hand, face stern and serious. Steelix waited behind me.

"If we can make Onix a Steel-type using a Metal Coat, we can do the same for you!"

I inched forward, and then pounced. My reward for effort spent wrestling the Rock-Ground-type for ten minutes, aluminum foil spewing out everywhere but the Pokémon's hide and exhausting myself in the process: one Rock-Ground-type Pokémon.

"I hate your filth! I get it, you lost, you blew our lead! That's okay, we all have bad days; BUT, do you seriously have to drag your loss in with you?! Damn it, there's soil, EVERYWHERE!"

"Dad, could you take care of Graveler next week? I'm busy and, well…"

"Sorry. There's a project review coming up. I don't think I can even take care of Magcargo."

"Um, shoot. I don't know what to do, then. Um…"

"Stick her in the PC. You can use the nutrient force-feed program if you really have to."

"I guess."

"Graveler, can I count on you?" The summit was in two weeks. I was anxious. Last year had been tough to get through; Steelix had to carry me the whole way through qualification tests. The exams had only gotten tougher. Magcargo was on loan to Dad, Choir to Mother, and the rest of my Pokémon weren't cut out for fighting. That left my prime three, but that didn't feel like it was going to cut it. I needed a backup.

"Grav." She's being stubborn. Oafish. I had anticipated this a week ago, and tried to incorporate her into the training regime. When she couldn't even make headway against Magneton, however, she stopped trying and slacked off. Efforts to get her to use Ground attacks were futile. We tried having a fun, relaxed game of kickball to loosen us up. When it came to her turn, she curled up and tried using herself as the ball (in which case, she won, because the others didn't want to be road kill).

"I don't understand you. Are you going to behave, or not?"

No answer.

"I'll interpret that as a 'yes', and hope for the best, then. Come on, let's clean you up."

It's impossible, being right beside someone, a Pokémon, for over a decade- it's impossible to not create memories with them. True, they've not all been good memories. It wasn't always like this, however. There have been good times as well. That time when we faced Cool Trainer Vito, you were clutch, delivering the final, improbable blow. People still bring that victory up on TV every so often.
The Pokecenter came into sight. It stood in a crowded corner of town, wedged between two office buildings. The parking lot lamps lit up as we crossed. Not many people were about at this hour. The few who did took notice, and stared, but no one bothered me. I could make out the large form of Bailey inside the glass walls. He was addressing someone, with two Golems in tow, and laughing. How lucky of him, to be able to laugh at a time like this.

The doors slid open. Graveler entered first, at the same pace, with the same demeanor, as she had carried the whole walk.

"Mr. Bailey. I'm here."

"Ah! So you have come!"

He waved goodbye to his associate and we proceeded to the second floor. There was a small space prepared.

"Here she is." He held out a net ball.

Not out of curiosity, but simply to fill time, I asked, "How'd you come to own her?"

"It's the weirdest thing. Geodude and family are my specialty, but I sometimes branch out to other rock types. Well, there was this one Sudowoodo who had been abandoned by its trainer, keeping lodge in a ravine north of Veilstone. I got a friend and hiked on out there. Turns out, the thing had adopted a Piplup from the wild! Guess it got lonely. Anyways, friend took the Piplup, me the Sudowoodo. Hey, but after awhile, my friend comes and says "I want the Sudowoodo, if you please." And I go, "Why?" And he responds, "I live in a desert. No water." I respond, "Yeah, maybe you shoulda thought of that when you took the bugger in." "Guess the heat's getting to me," he finishes. So I agree and we swap Pokemon. Figures though. I don't know anything about Water-types, the poor tyke has been in a fuzz since then."

"Meh."

I heard less than half of what he was relating.

"You seem droopy."

"I am."

"What for?" he asked, suddenly concerned.

"I don't like this."

"Why not? Everyone wins, right? You'll be getting a nice Steel-type. Steel-Water, eventually, in point-o-fact. Don't a team like yours have use for a Water-type? It'd be super helpful against your weaknesses."

"Tell me," I said, snapping. "Are Pokémon just tools to you?"

"N-n-no..." He physically took a step back under the force of my glare. "I just thought you might be... recalcitrant. Maybe need a little nudgin."

"I need no such thing. This decision has nothing to do with personal gain or my career advancement. Don't try to rationalize it."

"Okay. Sorry, my apologies. I was wrong." He backed off.
"Can you give me a little space?" I asked. He nodded, and plodded over to the trading machine. I turned to Graveler.

She stood in place, watching the Golems interacting with each other.

"Do you want to join them?"

She turned to me, to the Golems, to me again, and then started to set off in their direction.

"Hold up."

I grabbed Graveler by the ridges.

"Gravel." She growled.

I turned her around, nudged her to sit down. I knelt to my knees, coming face to face with her.

Here we are.

Second thoughts?

Eleven years. My second Pokémon. My faithful, and not-so-faithful, companion. Yet, a companion nonetheless. It could be a long, long time before I see her. It could be the last time. We each could die without ever crossing paths or hearing from each other again.

It hurts. So, so, so badly. It feels like throwing away a toy from one's childhood. Not the brightest, shiniest toy. But, one that has gained a special place in one's heart by its very familiarity and age.

"I- I-" I tried to start, several times, but my heaving chest cut me short. It was a minute before I could calm down enough to speak. Graveler regarded me with the same blank look of wariness I had grown accustomed to. 'Accustomed to'- that very phrase could sum up why it had come to this.

"You're going away. You're going to join Bailey and his Golems. I don't know what you'll do. Train for Contests or something. He's an expert in your species. He knows what to do to make you happy. You seemed to get along with them. I hope- hope-"

My chest is heaving, making it difficult to organize my thoughts. Spit it out, swallow those tears.

"I hope- you'll be happy. I'm betting on him. I'm counting on you to find to happiness with him. Do you understand? Do you want this?"

A part of me wanted her, this one time, to be stubborn, to shake her head 'no!', to cling to me, to choose me. She didn't. She nodded, readily. Her face, her expression, her aura, her soft, rumbling cries, told me this was what she wanted.

I gave her a weak smile. Then I hugged her.

"This is it, then. You'll be good. And, I just… please… please… When you think of me, please don't hate me. I'm… I'm…"

Oh Arceus, the waterworks are starting. It was because I was losing her, but it was also because I was reaffirming my belief in what had transpired this last decade and what I was doing here; and the weight of a planet's worth of guilt bearing down on my heart was crushing me.

"I'm- sorry. Sorry it came to this. Sorry for how I treated you. Sorry that you and I never got along. Sorry… for catching you. I hope, that, when you look back, that you're happy, and successful, and
strong, and that this guy and his family are the world for you. I hope that, when you think of me and all the terrible times I've caused you, you also remember that I brought you here too. It's not enough to make up for everything. I know. But it's the best I can do."

A single clawed, grainy hand reached up and touched my cheek.

"Graveler."

I held her hand in my own, for a lingering moment.

"Okay. This is goodbye."

The trading ceremony was quick and straightforward. Bailey placed his net ball in one slot. Graveler went into her pokeball, and that was placed in the other slot. The machine chimed. Trainer data was exchanged, the balls swapping code and the registration confirmation being sent off to the central servers in Goldenrod. A final chime, and the process finished. Graveler was no longer mine. Instead, I had a stranger, a Piplup I've not even laid eyes on before. God, please let me be a better trainer to her than I was to Graveler. Please. No more heartbreaks. I've had enough of them for a lifetime.

"Aye! Would ye like me to call ye, from time to time? Updates and what not?"

"Sure." I nodded.

"Well, you take care of the tyke."

"You," I said to him, "PROMISE to make her happy."

Bailey put a hand over his heart. "I promise. With me 'ole soul."

"Thank you. Your accent is back, by the way."

"I aim fer it. I'll have Graveler evolved no time. She'll be stronger'n ever."

"Good. Farewell, Mr. Bailey."

I took the net ball and began my slow march out of the pokecenter.

The truth is, I was still torn. Every inch was a battle, a struggle to not turn around and say, 'HALT! I WANT HER BACK!'. It wasn't too late. Yet, deep, deep down, I knew I shouldn't. That little part of me that said 'let her go!' was so weak. A pathetic little feeling. But it was on a fulcrum, and had leverage over my soul and spirit right now, and was not giving in.

Because...

What I realized, talking to Clair, is that I am a proud woman.

Pride, as in the sin, as in the arrogance and the self-serving ego that proceeds the downfall. I wasn't keeping Graveler because I liked her. I kept her, to this very point, because I was too proud to admit I had wronged her. I was too proud to admit I couldn't help her. I was too ashamed of myself for giving up on her. As a trainer, as a person dedicated to developing a Pokémon's strength and guiding them in battle, this was a monumental failure.

But...

As a trainer- as an owner, and a mentor, and a parent, I would be as evil, cruel, and heartless as the terrorist teams if I did not do what was best for her. Even if that meant separating myself from her,
forever.

That burden was shaking me apart.

Real pain.

The anguish of being wrong. The bitter loss resulting from it. I had not experienced it like this before. The effect was nearly as bad… very nearly as bad… as that one lone night in the thunderstorm.

"There." I was halfway across the parking lot, and I shouldn't have, but I looked back over my shoulder. Graveler was out of her pokeball, thudding against the Golems, getting to know them, while Bailey hunched over them, smiling and occasionally laughing.

"Graveler… I…" I whispered into the open night air. A chill wind blew over me, causing me to shiver.

'Stop it. It's over. Go home,' I silently told myself. The night was very dark, and very cold. Nonetheless, I took my time, slowly making my way back to my apartment.

…

Sometimes, the only way to say "I love you"-

-is to say "Goodbye".
"That's fucking adorable," he said, striding up the hill.

The Piplup had taken to following Skarmory everywhere, pestering him nonstop with tweets and peckings and Bubble attacks. Skarmory's temper had been boiling continuously since yesterday and into this morning. At last he became fed up, snatched the baby Water-type in his beak, and forced it under his belly, roosting on it like a father Empoleon would. This kept the little bird happy and gave the big bird peace. Now, the pair were resting easy and watching me peruse a textbook.

Morty alighted at our picnic space. He chuckled, bent over and gave the little tyke a knuckle on the head. Skarmory angrily snapped at his digits, forcing Morty to withdraw.

"What, is he playing the daddy now?"

"Seems that way."

"Fascinating. How is he?"

"She. Playful. Adventurous. Curious. Likes to get into places, especially ones she shouldn't be getting into."

"Sounds like a handful."

"A little. Honestly, Skarmory has taken the brunt of it. That's the result," I nodded over to the roosting pair.

"Try training her yet?"

"No, no time, really," I said.

"So..." he began, not a little put off by my succinct answers. He had caught me in the middle of reading and I didn't want to lose my place, so I ignored him a bit longer. There was one more paragraph detailing League regulations concerning gym power generators. While I read, he cycled his focus from me, to my two Pokémon, to the wonderful view.

Mana Range Park was situated directly on the slopes of Route 39. The route was nestled within a broad, rolling valley of mostly grassland. The northern reaches were occupied by large Miltank ranches; this was the prime beef and milk production center for our nation. Overlooking the ranches was Mana Range Park, mainly a collection of grassy hills marked by trails and the occasional gazebo. The sky was cloudless, but windy, cause for long-sleeved attire.

I had ridden Steelix in, bringing along lunches, a blanket, and reading material. This was all set out and well used by the time Morty (predictably) arrived late.

"Done." I slammed the textbook shut. "How've you been?" I asked Morty.

"Tired, but pretty good. Yourself?"

"Tired, and awful."

"Unload on me," he offered. I rolled over, looking at him in the eyes from beneath.

"I'm too tired to get up. You sit down." He obeyed. "It's been awful. I took challengers yesterday."
Shut out 7 out of 15, but it took some work. Skarmory is starting to recognize basic orders. The bird is definitely Impish; he hates being bothered. The Piplup spent all day tormenting him whenever it got a chance. I've taken to calling her Tyko. Had to stop a couple matches to go chase her. She's already turning into a nuisance. Dratted thing—"

"Hey, stop that." Morty butted in. I know he's referring to my sour attitude.

"I can't help it."

"I know. I know you're upset about losing Graveler. I still think you should have tried to make it work, but it was your decision. I'm okay with that. But don't let it poison your relationship with Piplup. Tyko, I mean."

"Haaa."

He's right, as usual, but still, it's not easy. I don't want to face reality right now. I've had enough of hard emotions this past month.

"It's just emotions, it'll pass. I'm sure Tyko and I will get along fine," I said, vacillating between mere hope and inevitable expectation.

"You hope. Don't be passive about it. Make her your friend. Put in the effort."

"Watch," I told him. I rolled onto my belly, and then whistled and clapped for Tyko to waddle over. She burrowed herself deeper underneath Skarmory's breast and peppered me with tweets.

"Great, so she hates you already." Morty sighed.

"Not really. She's just attached to Skarm-Skarm. See." I elbowed my way over and held out a hand. Skarmory allowed me to close the gap, unlike Morty. The Piplup darted a beak out, nipping at my empty palm. "Sorry, no snacks here."

Morty reached into his backpack and came out with a piece of candy. He unwrapped it and began to reach out to Tyko. Skarmory intervened, pecking him sharply in the forearm and snatching the candy away. The "daddy" Pokémon then gingerly crunched the candy down and fed it to an ecstatic Tyko.

"Tyko, where'd that come from?"

I explained how Bailey had kept referring to the baby as a tyke, and that the Pokémon responded as much to that as it did to its species name.

"So, you were 7 on 15 yesterday. How're you overall?"

"Still hovering around 39%," I answered.

"That's better than before, right?"

"Yeah. But I still have a ways to go. What is your rating?" I asked.

"I don't keep close track," he replied. "Maybe 30%? There's no real incentive to go all out every day. To be fair, I'm not on probation. 50% on a per trainer basis is damn high." I agreed with a rolling of eyes.

He busied himself emptying his backpack, which contained bagged lunches, a computer with a satellite uplink, one grey-colored and one black-colored pieces of fabric, and a large number of pokeballs.
"What's this?" I asked.

"You made a comment about me keeping my Pokémon in the PC all the time. It's been bugging me, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to bring them out today." He let the first Pokéball out, Gengar.

"Gagar-ga! Haunthaunt!" Seeing me in close proximity, Gengar immediately morphed into the ground. With years of experience, I grabbed my textbook and readied it. Gengar reappeared where my tush had sat a moment ago, gunning for a panty-shot. Instead he was met with the thwack of a book.

"I'm good," I whispered, congratulating myself for being able to time my attack with Gengar's phasing back into the material plane, allowing me to hit it with a solid object. That kind of timing can only come from hundreds of attempted panty-peeps too. Gengar nursed his bruised brow; Morty raised an eyebrow.

"Gengar, don't bother her. Help me release the others."

Dusknoir, Rotom, Spiritomb, Mismagius, Misdreavus, two Ghastly, a Sableye, a Shedinja, Tentacruel, Noctowl… More than forty Pokémon eventually materialized.

"Alright, now go play capture the flag. Black and Grey teams today," Morty ordered. The crowd of Pokémon let out a raucous cry and scrambled over each other. Two rough groups formed and then scattered across the hills.

"Capture the flag?"

"Yeah," he said, chuckling. "They treat it like a fun camping game, but I actually use it to train them. It's been over a year since I brought out the whole squad for a game, though. Oh, look at this." He booted up the computer.

"See? Ah, yeah. There goes Black Team leader, Gengar. I can track them with this and record the game, to evaluate later."

"Mmm. Cool."

We watched the game unfold while munching down lunch. At some point we were joined by Tyko. She chirped at me.

"What do you want?" She nudged my coat. "Oh, you're cold." I tucked her into the folds of my clothing, from which she watched the symbols flittering about the map. Soon enough, Skarmory waddled over, looking concerned. "You too?" I said. Skarmory cawed, so I let him snuggle closer. Morty glanced over, grinning. "Two's my limit, chump, no snuggles for you," I warned, to which he shrugged.

An hour or so passed as we tracked the game. Grey team, led by Dusknoir, was getting the better of Black Team. A third of the latter's members were captured and secured in a well-guarded hollow. Gengar was committing too many Pokémon to trying to free them, and ended up snowballing the situation out of control. He resorted to using a Crobat to carry the Black flag, desperately relocating the all-important cloth to one hiding spot after another.

"Dusknoir's smarter than I thought."

"Mmm, yeah. Probably my most strategic Pokémon. Gengar's clever and creative, but not so adept at the big-picture. Haha!"
"What's so funny?"

"It's getting messy out there." He pointed to above the next ridgeline, where sparks and whorls of energy erupted into the sky, evidence of a Pokémon battle. "Neither are really good leaders. No one respects the authority of the others; it's a big pain in the neck since I have to corral them all on my own."

"Sorry to hear that."

"I guess you wouldn't have that problem, with so few Pokémon."

"Actually, I don't have that problem because Steelix is my second-in-command and he's good at his job."

"Oh is that so?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

"So tell me," he began, "You arranged for this trip. I take it we're not a couple yet, so this can't be a date. So, is this about Graveler, or did you want to continue the conversation from the train ride?"

"I'll be fine," I responded, my mind focusing on the Graveler comment first. Even if it hurt, the weight and warmth of Tyko and Skarm-Skarm on my sides were helping to dull the pain. "Um, the train ride, actually."

"Ha, yeah. Deep stuff went down."

"Don't hide your feelings. Do you like me or not?" I demanded, almost rhetorically.

He gulped.

"Yeah I do."

"Then stop being so flippant about your feelings."

"That's just the way I am," he said, shrugging. His finger extended to the screen, pointing to a large brawl coagulating near the center of the war zone.

"Anyways, I wanted to talk to you about something. That lady you met when you got off the train, how do you know her?" I asked.

"Wah?" he jumped, startled. "What lady are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. The woman you hugged on the platform and ran off with."

"Ah… ohhhh… my friends came to greet me. Nothing serious."

"It is serious. How do you know her?"

"Well, she is…"

He drifted off into silence for a moment. "An acquaintance."

"Yeah right." I don't believe him.

"Well, you being you, I don't think you want to know how I know her," he said.
"Spill it," I ordered. If he says what I think he's going to say…

"Well, we, you know… she was a one-nighter, from a long time ago. And since then we've been friends- platonic friends."

"You banjo'd with that old hag?!"

Morty couldn't contain himself. There was some unholy mixture of shock and laughter in his outburst. I couldn't contain my repugnancy either. That woman was at least fifty years old; I would never have guessed Morty was into MILFs. Yet, he's here, cracking his ribcage in laughter.

"Oh, jeeze, fuck, you were talking about Glacia."

"Yes, Glacia! Who did you think I was talking about? Flower girl?"

"Yeah."

"I don't care about your exes. You probably have, like, a hundred of them. As long as you stay away from them from now on. At least, if you want my affection."

"Isn't that a given in a relationship? Still, there's give and take- if you won't commit, I can't be tied down- " he started.

"No arguing!" I shouted at him. "You don't have that luxury with me, considering how far you still have to go to earn my good graces. BESIDES! Like I said, this isn't about your old flames or your love life. This is about Glacia. Who is she to you? Not one of said exes, I hope!"

"No, that'd be weird," he admitted. He seems amused at the offense I'm taking towards him. He'll understand why in a minute.

"She's Glacia. She's in the Hoenn Elite Four right now. I met her during my tour there, and she became my mentor. She's the reason I became good enough to win the Gym Leader tourney."

"Your mentor?!" I asked, incredulously. "You're kidding."

He shook his head.

"Not kidding."

"I don't want you seeing her ever again."

I stared at him with steely eyes (or I hoped they looked steely). He leaned back on one elbow, to put a little more space between us, and so that he could look directly at me. There was an air of bemusement around him.

"Ever again? Jasmine's that's pretty petty of you. Is this some sort of joke?"

"Never again!" I repeated, forcefully.

"You can't possibly be jealous. I said she and I have never even considered sleeping-"

"It's not about your bed-time cha-cha, doofus. That woman is evil and I forbid you from associating with her. Do that, or you lose me. Understand?"

"Evil?! Yeah, she's hard-nosed and cold, but that doesn't mean…"
"Fine, let me explain," I reached over and tapped him on the head with my knuckle. This gesture got him to shut up and listen for a moment.

"I saw Glacia and company meet you."

"So you did wake up then," he whispered, thinking to himself.

"I thought I recognized her, but couldn't be sure of myself. You know I have a hard time with facial recognition. It wasn't until our teleconference that I remembered. She used to live in Johto."

"Johto? Really? All this time, she never told me that," he said, somewhat not believing me.

"It was before we were even born. She had a relationship with Pryce. Ever been to Mahogany Town's gym?" He nodded. "And did you see the plaque out front? It says 'In loving memory of Piloswine, 1967-1987'. See that?" Again he nodded. "That woman is the reason for the '1987'."

"What? Are you telling me she murdered Pryce's Pokémon?" Now he looks shocked and in disbelief, in as much as Morty can ever look shocked.

"Close enough. She was in a relationship with Pryce, they had a falling out and broke up. She took Piloswine from him, moved out of the region, and then one day her bone-headed arrogance and recklessness became responsible for Piloswine's death. That was Pryce's precious childhood friend! Ever wonder why the old man deflects all attention away from himself? It's because he's been hurting for decades upon decades! He's kind to everyone else because he's been on the wrong end of the worst humanity has to offer and doesn't want anyone to experience that pain! That woman destroyed Pryce's life! I don't want you to talk, nor communicate, or even keep company with her, ever again. Got it?" I finished my rant, huffing.

"How do you know all of this?" Morty asked.

"Because Pryce is my mentor. I found him one night during our training. He had gotten extremely drunk and let the whole ugly tale slip out."

"I need time to process this," Morty said. He returned to facing the laptop screen, silently gazing at the Pokémon symbols. I bit my lip, hoping he would believe me, wishing he'd agree with and accept my wishes.

That woman. If ever there was a woman who wronged a man, she was it. Everything that Pryce had done for me, showing me kindness, understanding, patience, helping me through my underage Gym Leadership, and all with a total lack of lustful interest, had earned my respect when no other male had succeeded. The fact that this man, who I loved like my own grandfather, had dealt with such sorrow because of this woman, made my blood boil.

Pryce lost his closest companion, his best friend from the earliest years of his childhood, because of the selfish pride of a woman who took, but did not earn, his love. She pilfered his Pokémon during a messy divorce. Then she deliberately put herself into a dangerous situation for her own self-gain. When it spiraled out of control, she survived by condemning Piloswine to near-certain death. Months later, when they found Piloswine at the bottom of Shoal Cave, the "near-certain" part was removed.

I will never forgive this woman. And I will never love a man who tolerates her, either.

"Jasmine, I thought it over."

"And?"
"I want to talk to Glacia first, and maybe find out the truth from an unbiased source."

"I already did that. Talk to a … Walter Raylor, in Mossdeep. He was the chief Pokémon Ranger on the operation, he knows what happened."

"Okay. If it's as bad as you say, I'll ditch her from my social circle. It'll be hard; she's good friends with some of my friends."

"Tell them about what she did, convince them to do the same."

"Eh," he uttered. "I'm not sure I'm up to that."

"Pippip."

"Oh! Sorry, human matters. Too deep for you." I pet Tyko, who was looking at me with worried eyes. She had been able to sense the hostility coming out of me.

"So, you'll let me check this first?" Morty asked.

"Yes. Do it. In fact, I encourage it. See for yourself what a monster she is."

I had spent an inestimable time myself, tracking down the facts. It didn't seem possible to me, for a woman to be so stupid as to get into that situation, and so cruel as to save herself in that way. When I spoke with Mr. Raylor and saw the reports, I ran away and threw a private fit.

That anger subsided, eventually, replaced with pity and love for the surviving victim. Up until then, I had considered Pryce a kind, precious gentleman, a stark contrast to all the immature boys my own age. After that, he ascended to sainthood in my eyes; a martyr, to have actually suffered my own worst nightmare and still remained so benevolent to the human race and the universe at large.

I would sometimes fantasize, if I had been born earlier, that this was a man I could fall in love with. This is something I could never tell him, though.

"I never thought of you as being a controlling person, Jazz. Do you do this for everyone you hate?"

"In general? No, not at all. I make an exception for that one woman, though. I can't stand the thought of her and what she did to the only human I completely respect."

"I see. Well, if it's as bad as you make it out to be, I'll be sure to do something about it." His thoughts drifted on silently, while his attention turned back to the capture-the-flag game.

Gengar had taken a big risk and personally devoted himself to freeing the prisoners held by Grey team. His gambit had paid off. Two-thirds of the former prisoners were now following Gengar in a desperate jailbreak, dodging in and out and around the hills, trying to ditch their pursuers. The rules seemed to be that encounters were determined by light-battles, and that a Pokémon could sustain maybe 1/4th of its max stamina before having to surrender.

Meanwhile, Crobat, carrying the Black flag, and his Honchkrow guard were being chased by Grey team member Rotom, and the lot were unwittingly heading straight towards Grey team's hide out.

"Do you ever play games with your Pokémon?" Morty asked.

"Not like this. I mean, can you imagine any game where Steelix, Magnemite, and Graveler can play fairly?" Oops. One of those Pokémon don't belong to me anymore. Losing her is starting to needle me in more ways than I expected.
"Huh. True. Video games? Wait, never mind, most of your Pokémon are lacking, um, hands." I giggled at his observation.

"Magneton loves watching me play. Amphy loves card games, I even started to teach him a trading card game. He seems to get the idea, even though he can't read."

"How does he play, then?" Morty asked.

"He recognizes the images and remembers the rules associated with them."

"Fascinating. What about poker?"

"Tried, he doesn't really like that one. Bluffing is not his forte."

"Eh," Morty shook his head disapprovingly. "I'm not really into the geeky kinds of games, poker and blackjack are more my style."

"Yeah, I seemed to recall that."

His uncanny ability to predict the cards bordered on precognition. He didn't go easy, either, which made playing against him as an amateur an unfun experience.

"Hmm."

We wasted another hour chatting idly. Three years had gone by since we spoke more than a few brief words. I had avoided him assiduously at every summit and conference we'd attended together. I'd even gone as far as to block and ignore him on the teleconference meetings up until this month's. Now that we were on speaking terms again, there was plenty to catch up on, and we finally didn't have such heavy topics like "feelings" getting in the way. It drifted between Pokémon, family difficulties, funny occurrences, gym battles, favorite diners, middle school memories, and all the like. Passing the hour mark, our conversation died off, in favor of watching the game. It looked like the conclusion was drawing near. Ghastly had succeeded in stealing Grey-team's flag, but was at a loss where his own flag was located. Meanwhile, Dusknoir had a covert group trailing him, letting the Ghastly lead them to Crobat's location. At least, that seemed to be the idea; Ghastly's cluelessness was frustrating the tails to no end. Meanwhile, some thirty Pokémon battled pointlessly in the center.

"You know, I've been thinking about the train ride too."

"You have?" I asked.

"Still wondering what you meant by 'I find you subjectively attractive'.""

"Um, what else is there to say? I think that's pretty straight forward."

"You don't act like it," he said, accusingly.

"Oh that's what you mean," I said, now understanding his logic. "Girls aren't like boys, they don't fall in love based on looks. Even the most handsome guy in the universe and knowing nothing else besides, a girl won't develop a crush based on that. Only boys do that."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Well, I've got a theory. Boys are able to do that, because girls are the way they are."
"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Girls put more of their personality into their looks. Like you, you always dress in very modest dresses; and you don't wear make-up, and you're so skinny. It says a lot about your personality and lifestyle. Boys notice those things. Maybe a guy's appearance isn't as reliable an indicator -"

"That's a really shallow thing to say," I countered. "Even if I dress how I like, it doesn't mean that's a cheat sheet to my personality. I get a lot of people who think I'm softer than I am because of that."

He shrugged.

"It's only a theory. I guess, I thought, with your personality, you'd have a little guy-logic in you."

"I do not!" What an offensive thing to say! How could he come to that conclusion?!

"Do to. I don't know many girls who are as stubborn and competitive as you."

"Ugh. Skarm, attack!" Skarm lashed out, an underpowered Drill Peck nailing Morty's ribcage. He clutched his side in mock agony.

"P-p-point made," he sputtered.

"Morty! You're handsome enough for me. Seriously, why worry about it? Girls have to worry about it so much more. Did I ever tell you how much time I have to spend to patch Whitney's ego up because she got rejected? Hours per session. Three times now I had to stop her from dyeing her hair black because her date made fun of her red-headedness. And Erika! Good grief, the way she moans about her weight issues! Do not ever mention the words "pounds", "kilograms", or "calories" around that lady."

"Hahahaha!"

"It's not funny!"

"Sorry." He's not sorry, he's still making merry at my increasingly exasperated expense.

"Stop! Listen to my point! My point is that you're fine, just worry about the important things, like how you treat others. Do this, and then I'll elevate your chances of us holding hands."

Apparently this Ludicolo has no intention of ever dating me, because he's face-down, choking-on-blanket laughing.

"What is so funny?!" I demanded.

"You-you- HAHAHAHA! Oh my gosh. Y-you- hahahaha! You can't- you can't possibly think like a guy. No guy has ever been so logical about a relationship. 'Elevate your chances of us holding hands'," he mimicked me in a supremely mocking manner.

"Are you only doing this whole romance thing in order to make fun of me?" I asked.

"Heavens, no! I'm here to introduce you to the sweet and tender world of sex, preferably by New Year's." He says this in the lightest tone, as if my virginity is just a joke to him. I considered what manner of tsundere violence was best suited to punish him, but thought better of it. He's probably expecting a childish outlash.

"Do you only want to sleep with me?" I asked bluntly.
"No…" he answered, but not definitively. I should reiterate.

"Do you want to sleep with me?"

… And now he's suddenly very awkwardly quiet. I suppose that's as good as a "Yes".

"Call me logical or call me strangely illogical in this messed up, hormone driven world, but there is a long list of specific steps you need to take if you want that pleasure. Here's step one- be serious with me when I'm being serious with you."

"But you're always serious," he whimpered, mockingly. He then threw up his arms, suddenly pelted by a number of pecks.

"Gyaah! What the hell!"

"Tyko!" The Piplup had made her way to the top of Morty's head and was now taking shots at his headband. Seems like she's curious about the headband and wants it for herself. The barrage of exploratory pecks sent Morty into a duck-and-cover position. I crawled forward on hands and knees to remove the interloper. Grabbing Tyko caused me to lose balance, till I landed on my stomach, my face a few inches from a cowering Morty. The pecking ceased, and he looked up, eye-to-eye, with me.

"In all seriousness," he said, "how many steps before I get to kiss you?"

His breath lay gently on my nose and cheeks. It felt cool and minty, like he had pointedly used mouthwash this morning.

"Three," I answered. A completely made up number. I hoped it would be enough.

Enough for what? To prepare myself? For a kiss?

"And what is the next step?" he asked in a level tone. With him, though, I can't tell if he's serious or just preparing for the next punch line.

"Um…"

Shoot. He caught me off guard.

"Grr! Next step, um… aha! Glad you asked! I have a problem." I sat up, not feeling comfortable with us being in each other's faces like that. Tyko was cradled in my lap. Skarmory walked around, also wanting to be held.

"Stop it! You're too big!" He insisted, which is why I found myself with 74 lbs worth of raptor in my lap. The extra weight hurt. If Skarm thinks he can do this when he's full grown and 50 lbs heavier, he's, as they so aptly say, bird-brained! ('By that time, he'll be heavier than me!' I thought. Wow!)

"What kind of problem," Morty asked, concerning my previous statement.

"I'm looking at closing the gym down for I don't know how long. The shield generator is malfunctioning. The shields are breaking at the worst times. It's only a matter of time before some challenger gets hurt, and I get double-slapped with a lawsuit and League safety fines. I had my techie look at it, and he says it's working. I think he's full of crock. Furthermore, I can't afford to replace the thing."

"The League was the one who mandated the shields. Won't they pay for it?"
"Not in a five-year window. They'll pay for repairs, but, as I said, the repair guy doesn't believe me that it's broke. I bet I can get them to give me a discount, but with the loan for the auto-tiller, I don't have enough money even for that. I'm stuck."

Morty leaned back on his two hands, looking up to the cloudless blue sky for inspiration. "Hmmmm."

He knows his way around the League bureaucracy better than I do. There's got to be something he can think of; hopefully a loophole that will get the League to pay for a new generator.

"Um… Well, I can't help you," he said. He cut me short with an upheld palm before I could interrupt. "I know someone who can. It's just…"

"Just what?" I asked.

"I'm not sure you'll want his help."

"Huh." I sighed. That could mean any number of people, even ones I've never met.

"Is it a male? Because if it is, as long he behaves-"

"It's Volkner."

"Oh."

I really should have expected that.

"I could call in a favor from him; he could be down here by tomorrow evening and take a look at it. But, I don't know if that's okay with you. And, even if it is, I might have to run it by him. Morty's look told me the rest. I'm not sure he'd be willing to help you, Jasmine."

The last I saw him, Volkner was looking pretty defeated, courtesy of Morty here. I wonder what kind of friendship they had, to make Morty even think he could ask him to do this kind of favor. Or maybe the debt he mentioned goes deeper than I could imagine.

How do I feel about it? Right before the battle, when I met him along with the rest of the group, Volkner had been completely focused on the battle. I can understand he was concentrating on the upcoming match, so he could be forgiven for ignoring me then. Still, that kind of deprived me of the chance of seeing how well he was taking his rejection. It's a trivial thing that I normally wouldn't bother myself with, but now it seems manifestly important.

Maybe allowing Volkner to come fix my shields is worth the opportunity to find out?

"He's a swell guy. I mean, you're a girl, and he never mistreats or rough talks with women. I'm pretty sure there's no hard feelings there from his side, or even if there were, he wouldn't let them out." Morty gyro'd into a sitting position.

"Honestly, I can't think of any other way I could help. Closing your gym would be pretty bad for your probation, wouldn't it?"

I thought it over, and nodded. Outside reasonable guidelines, challengers who've been turned away or deprived of the chance to face me could be counted against my win ratio. Not to mention the cascading effects upon my gym even if I had not been under probation, such as the loss of sponsorships and reputation.
"Why'd you turn Volkner down, anyways?" Morty asked.

"Why do you want to know?" I asked, suspicious.

"Well, so I could avoid the same mistakes."

"He didn't make a mistake, so much as he was born a man. And he's... just not quite my type. I think." That's the two reasons I had given myself when I arranged our final tortuous meeting before the summit. To be truthful, I really hadn't spent any time reflecting upon it since then. "Do you worry about it?"

Morty went sheepish on me, like a shy Mareep.

"Heh, a little. He and I are a lot alike, personality wise. It makes me feel like if I'm the same way, I'm going to have some personality flaw you secretly hate," he divulged.

"It's no secret, I hate your frat boy attitude. But, let's say I've had since middle school to become inoculated to it. Volkner's a stranger to me, and he came on too fast for that strangeness to rub off." I crossed my arms across Skarmory's chest. Me, Skarm, and Tyko all stared seriously and determinedly at Morty. He wilted under the combined ocular focus fire.

"Is that all? Huh."

"How has he been?" I asked. My mind had flittered back to worrying about probation. It occurred to me that, despite the complicated feelings involved, I might have to bury those feelings for the chance of getting the generator working. In other words, there were times you had to fake concern and play nice.

Morty 'hmmmed'.

"Well, to let you in on privileged information, he took that rejection damn hard the first night. I mean, really damn hard. Since then, though, he seems like he's mellowed out. Haven't gotten him to speak up about it, but I know he's on a new dating site. So that might say something about his attitude. All that taken into account, are you willing to entertain him?"

"Yes," I answered. "As long as he's willing to come."

Even if he respawns an unrequited crush, that's something I could tolerate, or even take advantage of. Anything to keep my Gym Leadership.

"Alright. I think I can convince him to come out. It was a pretty clutch favor I did him, this ought to be nothing."

"Okay."

Well, that was set.

We turned back to the nearly-dead laptop. The capture-the-flag game was about to end. Ghastly had been successfully tracked, giving away Crobat's location. The bat pokemon had been surrounded by Dusknoir's forces and the cordon was tightening. Ghastly had been neutralized, the Grey flag was standing by in Rotom's clutches, and Gengar's forces were captured, fainted, disorganized, or successfully held off outside of the cordon.

"Guess it's Grey's win today," Morty stated.
"Yep."

It took seven more minutes, but a few seconds before the battery died, the tracking program rang and flashed, indicating a Grey team victory.

"What are you up to this week?" I asked.

"Gym battles. Been pretty slow, though. Guess I scared some of the competition off with that summit performance. People still think I have Darkrai. Besides that, me and Eusine are tracking down an old manor in the boonies. We think there's a real chance for some paranormal shiggy going down there."

"Huh. Have fun with that." As if real ghosts actually exist.

"And you?"

"Gym battles, gym battles, and more gym battles, if I can get the shields working. Oh, and paperwork. Thirty pages of it due by Friday," I answered.

I sighed. Morty reached out and rubbed a hand through my hair.

"It'll be alright."

We got up, fighting off sleeping limbs to do so. The picnic was cleaned up and Morty's group appeared over the ridgeline, returning from their game.

"So, remember what to do?" I asked.

"Contact Volk-"

"No, before that."

He sighed and hung his head.

"Find out the truth about Glacia, and THEN distance myself from her IF it's as bad as you say."

"Correct answer."

"And then I contact Volkner and see if he's willing to help you."

"Thank you."

"You can thank me with a kiss," he inquired, hopeful.

"That was only step one, of three," I reminded him. I patted him on the shoulder.

"Fine fine, fine! The things I do! The troubles I must endure!" he exclaimed to the sky. He turned back down to me. "Okay, then you have to do something for me."

"No, I don't have to do anything for you, but I'll take suggestions," I said.

"Take care of Piplup- I mean Tyko- properly. Love her. And especially don't confuse your feelings for her with the Pokémon YOU chose to give away. Got it?"

I looked down upon my little penguin. She was blowing bubbles into Skarm's face, and looked about to get herself stuffed under his belly again.

"For once, Morty, you are imperatively correct. I have no choice." I saluted him and smiled, faintly.
"So, if I don't get a kiss," he said, leading me on. He then opened his arms wide. How amusing, but he's been much more tolerable today than usual. I'll humor him.

*Thump.*

We hugged.
"Tyko, I have no heavenly clue how you got up there but you need to come down this instant!"

The infant was growing exponentially in every aspect. Not two days had passed and she was already taking commands and fighting in mock battles. Her trouble-causing streak had also blossomed. Namely, her "gets-into-inexplicable-and-dangerous-places-she-has-no-business-being-in-and-causing-mayhem" habit. Currently, that entailed roosting in the metal rafters that criss-crossed the ceiling, four stories above my head.

"Pippippip!"

"You are kidding me! You can't even fly! How'd you get up there?" To my horror, I realized she might have no way of getting down, and that I would probably have to fetch her personally. I gulped. Steelix himself wasn't tall enough to reach. Could Magneton levitate that high?

"Excuse me, anyone here?" A voice came drifting in from the entrance hall.

"Sorry, we're closed for maintenance. You'll have to come another day for your challenge."

"Right, that's actually why I'm here."

"Oh!" I turned, my attention instantly wrenched from the Piplup's predicament. There, in the doorway, stood the lean, tall figure of Volkner.

"Hello."

He was wearing his usual turkish military jacket, but underneath he was unusually well dressed: business slacks and what appeared to be a collared dress shirt. It was a noticeable difference from his usual grungy workers outfit- a pleasant upgrade, in fact. He looked… adult-like, for once, and not like an overgrown boy.

"Having a problem? Oh, I see." He followed my gaze and found Tyko waddling back and forth across a beam. "It's stuck?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes. That would be the case."

"One minute. I can get him down."

"It's a she."

"Mmm." A Premium Ball rolled into his hand. He set it to release midair, and a large flapping creature appeared. Zapdos, one of the legendary bird trio.

"That's impressive. How did you come by such a rare Pokémon?" I asked.

"One minute." He mounted atop Zapdos' back and the pair flew aloft. Slight, expert tuggings with his thighs guided the bird, like a trained equestrian. It was mere moments before they were hovering before Tyko.

"Come here."

"Pippitypipup!" Tyko readily flung herself from her perch, into Volkner's outstretched arms. The ensemble lighted upon the ground, safe and sound. Tyko happily waddled over to me, tripping up
and bonking her head on the floor. She recovered easily, like a rubber toy, and proceeded to run circles around me. I took a moment to scold her, to no avail. Seeing all the harsh words proving to be futile, I returned to facing Tyko's savior.

"Thanks."

"Just returning a favor," Volkner shrugged.

"To m-?" I almost blurted out, before realizing my mistake. There was no possible way I had ever done something to indebt Volkner to myself. He was referring to Morty and whatever leverage the goofball had over him.

"So, um… the shields aren't working."

"Right. Let's take a look."

I guided him to a small grate in the floor, an access hatch to the cramped chambers underneath the gym floor. I pulled the latch up; Tyko hopped down before I could stop her. I sighed.

"Magnemite, Flash." Magnemite emerged and began glowing. It saw the open hole and instinctively floated inside. Myself and then Volkner jumped down to complete the spelunking party.

We crawled/hunkered between various contraptions, pipes, and dangling wires. The going was not easy. It reminded me of the gymnasium basement excursion my first day at Ecruteak Middle School.

"What's this?" Volkner asked, pointing to the red-and-black patterned machinery splayed out in every direction.

"That's the auto-tiller system. It's for fixing the gym floor after Steelix has torn it up." He seemed interested, so I explained the mechanism in as much depth as my technically challenged mind was capable of.

"Blue-on-white are the battle sensors. They run to the server in the back office. Plain blue is the air conditioning or plumbing. Blue-on-green are the shield systems. There's the generator."

"I see." We ducked our way over to a mini-cooper-sized piece of equipment. The shape reminded me of a rose flower that had yet to bloom, surrounded by yellow containers marked with warning labels. Tyko was about to peck at the access panels before I grabbed her by the scruff of the neck.

"NO! Don't touch anything here!" She squirmed and resisted. I smacked her beak. "I said NO!" I smacked her again. "Does that hurt?! Good! It'll hurt a hundred times more if you keep pecking at these wires!" She got the message and settled down. I tentatively lowered her to the ground, making sure she didn't dive off into the darkness. "Magnemite, keep an eye on her."

"She's not that well behaved," Volkner observed.

"She's just young and curious. It'll work itself out."

"Mmm. Probably." He hunkered over to the generator and began looking over it. His hands groped the machinery, delicately, touching it with the gentleness of a lover.

"Capacitors," he said aloud, tapping the six yellow containers. "Power feed." He ran his hand along the thick black wires attached to the bottom of the containers. "Sensory input, command output, diameetrics, processor, central projector, refractor control." One by one he checked down the individual components of the machine.
"There's no signs of burning or wear. The wiring's a little loose, but that shouldn't be a problem. I'll need to check the sensors and refractors out on the floor too. Can you tell me exactly what's going wrong?"

"Um… right. The shields usually work, but in the middle of matches, some attacks are getting through."

"For instance?"

"Well, there was a Self-Destruct where a bit of rubble shot out. And a Rock Throw that went clean through," I said, biting my lip and remembering the incident that caused Graveler and I's mutual loss of faith.

"Huh. What about spread attacks? Or Pokémon themselves?"

"Spread attacks?" I repeated.

"Like Flamethrower, or Water Gun."

"No, those have been stopped."

"Hmm." He scratched his chin. "I'm definitively going to have to take a look at the floor systems, then."

"Can you fix it?" I asked.

"I don't know yet. This is going to take awhile, at least. You might not want to stick around."

"Okay." I actually did want to stay, but the way he made his suggestion, it sounded like doing so would be a hindrance.

"But can you keep Magnemite down here." He rubbed the living light bulb as if it was a familiar pet.

"Sure."

"Thanks. Appreciate the light."

"Tyko?" Except Magnemite had failed his orders and the little penguin had run off. Dear lord. Hopefully she took the smacking to heart and is staying out of the electrical wires.

"Well, um, I'll leave you be."

All considering, he's being civil and businesslike. I can't get anything out of him relative to his feelings towards me.

"Tyko? Where are you? Tyko!" I called after the Pokémon.

"Pipipip!"

"Huh?"

Tyko was chirping, but it sounded muffled and distant.

"Where are you?"

"Piploop!"
Ah? Tyko continually chirped in that muffled, echoed tone. It was close now, but still not clear. I drifted amongst machinery, honing in on her voice. She was close, closer… she was right beside me now, but I still couldn’t see her.

"Pip!"

I slowly, hesitatingly put my ear to an air duct.

"Pippipipipi!"

Oh dear. She’s inside the air duct.

"Just… how?!!"

Anger rising. Let's combat it by focusing on the silver lining. I had ordered her to stay away from the electrical wiring, and she had obeyed that. At least she was safe, if still, you know, trapped in an underground air conditioning system.

The next fifty minutes were spent playing handyman as I searched for a way to get at my Pokémon. Every so often the sounds of metal-on-metal and electrical revving came from the direction of the generator. We two humans worked our little corners of the basement, undoubtedly trying to focus on the problems at hand and not on the strange emotional dynamic between us. At least, that's how I felt about it.

"Come here." I looked and beckoned at Tyko, who looked back at me with a puzzled expression. It probably had something to do with my upside-down face. I was hanging from a ledge like an Aipom, and shaped like some undiscovered form of Unown. The blood was beginning to congregate in my head.

"Tytky piploop!" A draft of freezing air blew down the duct, startling the Pokémon. She burst into an accidental Bubblebeam, which popped across my face.

"Ouch!" Argh! That hurt! Tyko, hurry over!"

She did so, silently, waddling up to my upside-down face. Her fin trailed the red, raw surface of my skin, which, suddenly, she began licking. It tickled, causing a cry from me.

"Ahaha! Stop that! I'm not mad, just get out of there."

I clung her to my chest and then lifted the both of us out.

"Hey." Volkner walked up to find me suspended by one leg, dress falling down my face and the Piplup in my arms.

"Hello."

He was averting his eyes, like he was repulsed by the sight of me making a clown of myself.

"Your panties are showing."

"Hmm." I cranked my head skyward to see my exposed undergarments. Well, it's not so bad, I'm wearing boyshorts-style today. "Well this is embarrassing. Please don't look?"

"I'm not."

With much huffing and a little pain, I managed to extricate myself out of the lewd position.
"So I figured out what was going on."

He led us back topside. Once we were clear, he began pointing out instruments one by one and explaining.

"Your sensors are fine. The refractors are a bit worn but okay. I was convinced it was something messing with them at first. The way you mentioned projectiles breaching the field sounded like an arena-side failure, not a generator problem."

"Oh great." His tone means the problem is down below and not easy to fix. Which means it'll be more expensive.

"Okay, back down we go."

We made the journey back to the generator. He waved a hand over the rose-shaped machine. "The projector core is okay, as is the projector. You mentioned your techie didn't find anything wrong; that's because he probably only checked the core and the obvious silly crap like wiring. Power supply is also fine. Which leaves the processing unit."

He hunched over an exposed panel, and, delicately, pulled out a palm-sized piece of machinery. It looked like the inside of a keyhole, with numerous teeth and slots. One end was encased in computer circuitry, the other, flayed end resembled an extremely complicated gimbal.

"So, basically, a shield generator projects a variably-powered force field across the arena. You can't have a full strength shield covering the entire arena all the time, though. One, nothing could get through the shield: pokeballs, humans, light, air… Two, it would take a nuclear power plant's full capacity just to keep it running. So what it does is sensors detect where, when and how strong a shield needs to be. Say, at this point in time and at this square-foot of air space, a random Thunderbolt is headed towards the audience. The sensors tell the generator to instantly create a shield there."

He held up the keyhole-like device he had extracted from the generator.

"This is a tumble calibrator," he began explaining. "In simple terms, it translates the digital signal from the computer into mechanical signals that the generator uses to shape the force field. It's the interface between the computer sensors and processor, and the actual core of the shield generator."

"So, it's a messenger boy device," I ventured. Volkner stared at me, surely thinking what a plebe I am.

"More like an engineer guy reading a blueprint and telling the construction workers what to do, and the blueprint is changing every few thousandths of a second."

"It sounds really complicated," I said, reinforcing my position as captain obvious.

"It is, and it gets worse."

He held the device up to our noses, so that I could see every minute detail.

"See these teeth? The way the digital signal is converted into a mechanical output is that these micromotor "teeth" tap against these tiny magnetic plates. Take a look at these plates."

I did.

"They look stained, or tarnished," I guessed.
"Not tarnished, scratched. Microscopic scratching. Strong, constant vibrations can cause the teeth to scratch the surface of the magnetic plates. Over time, if the scratches build up, it can cause the signal to become unreliable. This means that, sometimes, when a sharp, localized pressure hits the shields-like a Rock Throw- the signal telling the generator to spike its output is garbled and the system reacts too slowly, if at all. That's when you get the rock breaking through the barrier; however, if it was a whole Pokémon or a Surf attack, the system doesn't need to react as fast and it can still handle the load, masking the problem."

"I think I follow."

"Strange, though." He stood upright (as well as one could "stand" in this four-foot high crawl space). "It should take decades for this kind of wear, the rest of the generator should break down way before this happens. Hmm."

"Hmm," I mimicked.

"Do you get a lot of heavy vibrations? Like seismic activity?"

"No, not at all."

"You sure?"

"Well, Earthquake attacks from Steelix, but the shields should protect from that, right?"

"Yeah- if they're always on and on max settings."

"Oh…" Crap.

It was a habit of mine to turn down the shield's strength unless I was facing serious competition- or turning it off altogether during training. So this is… all my fault? Gah! How stupid can I be?! A quick glance at Volkner's expression reaffirmed my conclusion. It just brimmed with 'What a dumbass she is,' exasperation.

"You know, if you've been ordering Earthquakes and the like when the shield's not on, you might want to check your building's foundations too."

I'm an idiot. I'm an idiot. I'm an idiot.

I only wanted to save on power bills! Damn it!

"Can you- can you fix it?" I asked.

"Depends."

A sly twinge passed across his lips and eyes. Like he was thinking of something- something not nice.

"Depends on what?" I subconsciously backed a few inches away from Volkner.

"A new calibrator isn't cheap. On the other hand, I could outfit it with new plates, but that could take more than just a few hours."

"Um… I'm not sure I'd impose on you like that," I said.

"You wouldn't be," he said, trying, in vain, to assure me.

"I don't think I-"
"Don't underestimate my debt towards Morty. He's not going to forgive me if I half-ass this job. A day wasted? That's nothing."

"Still… I can take care of Morty. If you don't want to do this, I'll understand." I told him this, worrying all the while about my tone and deliverance. It felt like one wrong word, one negative pitch and the volcano would come uncorked. He was still, pondering my stated position.

"Well, if not, I know a site where you could buy a replacement…” He turned his back, as if to leave. It's subtle. He's daring me to take his offer. I can't tell but I'm afraid that his plan is to have me use him, to indebt myself to him, to make me feel guilty and make me want to owe him- owe him what? Not money, I'm sure of that! Morty, is your friend really so honorable as you claimed? Would he guilt trip a female into a kiss? Into a blowjob?

Am I making this up, pulling wild assumptions out of the blue? Not quite, they're not groundless, there's evidence of emotional underpinnings in every little word that's passed between us, but the unanswerable question is whether those emotions imply perverted intentions. Or is he merely pained by having to work for someone who rejected him?

"Wait!"

He stopped short. Could we possibly get through this without bringing up his previous feelings for me? I know I had been curious about the issue, and had even accepted Volkner's assistance as a pretense to find out; but now I'm regretting that curiosity.

"Um… do you want to do it?" I asked.

"Yes," Volkner answered, without hesitation.

"Oh."

Did he understand what I had asked him? Not whether he would do it, not whether he needed to do it to settle his debt to Morty. I wanted to know if he wanted to do this personally. Which really means, did he want to do this because he had feelings for me…?

"What is it?" he asked.

Grasp for an answer, something vague and oblique.

"I just feel bad for having you do this for me." Too oblique. Stop avoiding the issue, Jasmine. "Considering…" I trailed off. That should be enough to give him the hint.

"That… doesn't matter. I'd be glad to help anyone with a tech problem. Anyone at all," he insisted.

"Really? I mean, I mean, I mean… I mean to say, I don't want to be playing with your feelings."

"And what about yours?" he asked.

"It's still not…" I gulped, and fell silent. Life would be incredibly simple if I could just discuss feelings as easily as we just discussed the shield generator's technical issue. I can't though. I'm hung up and afraid. Afraid of what? Volkner? No, not of Volkner reacting poorly. He doesn't feel like the kind of guy to hurt a girl, physically or even verbally. Rather, I'm afraid of being judged by him, having him think poorly of me.
"If they haven't changed, there's nothing to worry about. I'm over that. I'll do this job just for fun."
He stepped back, and put his hands on his hips.

"I'm sorry for bringing it up."

My voice is soft, demure, recalcitrant. There's all sorts of signs, the tone of voice, the focus of the eyes, the posture of the body, things that tell you what a person is really saying beyond their words; and most of the time it's difficult to translate this into writing.

It was his body language, as he so-readily agreed to work for me and batted down my objections, that told me everything. I understand now.

He likes me. He still likes me. Even if I'll never return his feelings, even if his conscious mind tells his heart it's fruitless, these pangs of attraction won't go away for him. I understand that feeling all too well.

So he's willing to do this job for me, not just because of his debt to Morty, but also because he wants to. Not to seduce me; he's past that. He wants to be kind to me.

I feel like I've been humbled. I suspected Volkner of foul intentions when he's done nothing offensive. His actions are driven by pure and empathetic emotions. Emotions? Call it what it is: Love, if only the kind of puppy-love associated with crushes.

But he's a stranger. I'm not comfortable with him. I don't how to deal with him. I can't will myself into allowing new people, especially men, especially love interests, into my personal life. Morty has that advantage, that he's been there since long before I formed my identity.

If only Morty showed that genuine love and affection that Volkner is showing me. It may be the man is simply not capable of feeling that particular kind of love, or maybe he still needs to learn it, or he has those kinds of feelings and it's too difficult translating them into actions. If Morty were as open and affectionate as Volkner, wouldn't that solve all of the issues I have with the boy? Wouldn't that make him the man of my dreams?

I'm sorry, Volkner. So sorry. In a fair world you would have met the girl of your dreams and she would love you back. As is, I don't feel that love for you.

Now, I have the choice of which of two evils I should throw upon him. I can take advantage of his crush, and use him, and lead him on for my personal gain, only to drive him deeper into despair.

Or I can refuse him and destroy his feelings right here and now.

He's not able to look at me. He's staring at the floor, awaiting my response but unable to look me in the eye. It's pitiful. It's heart-wrenching. I can't bring myself to hurt him anymore. I may pay for this later, but I'll try to compromise- on the side of self-gain.

"I don't want to waste your whole day. Is there some less expensive way to fix it without replacing the whole thing?"

"Um," he drifted off, checking his workshop-like memory. "I don't know what the machinery market is like here, but you might be able to find shops with junk calibrators. You might find ones with burnt circuitry. I can salvage the gimbal mechanism and gerrymander it to this one. It'd take 30 or 40 minutes."

"How much would that cost?"
"Depends, it can vary a lot. 12,000, at most, probably less."

"I see." That's expensive, but only in the sense of incurring a credit-card debt (as opposed to a bank loan, like what a new generator would cost).

Volkner was able look me eye to eye now. The atmosphere of our conversation had the edge taken off. Talking shop seems to relax him and keep his focus off his feelings.

"So if I bought one, would you install it for me? Would it be easy?"

"Easy? Relatively so, with my skill level," he said.

"Then just do that. Where can I find one of these shops?" I asked.

He put a hand through his hair.

"You wouldn't know what to look for. Better to let me scout the area, and then you can reimburse me when I find one."

"Oh I see." I need to act like I don't want to bother him, so - "Please don't tell me you came all the way from Sinnoh just because Morty told you to."

"I did, but don't worry about it. I wouldn't mind taking a look at the lighthouse here while I'm visiting. It's kind of famous, there's a lot of back-and-forth between fans of Glitter and Vista, which one is better. So - " he cut me off as I was about to interrupt, "- I'll be back tomorrow, in the afternoon. Hopefully with the part. You'll be here?"

I nodded in affirmation.

He led the way out of the crawlspace, till we re-emerged onto the gym floor. He looked around, taking in the gym's setup in a casual, relaxed manner. It was as if he was looking for the character of the place. That saying "The Leader is the Soul of the Gym and the Gym is a reflection of its Leader" came to mind. It felt like Volkner was trying to trace my soul from the walls of the gym.

All he would find, though, is a solid metal casing. I've hidden myself behind a wall of steel.

"This is good," he nodded, as if had actually gleaned some secret insight into my soul. "You take care. You too." He patted Tyko and Magnemite as he departed. The latter's Flash finally flickered off, the former chirped contentedly. Tyko brushed against my leg.

"Oh, now you're acting like a Glameow." I picked her up to coddle her.

"It's harder then I imagined, Tyko. Being on the receiving end of a crush from someone I just don't feel anything for. It sucks. Especially when he's so darn nice."

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"Amphy!"

No response, even though I knew he was here. As winter solstice crept up on us, the Light Pokémon was required to start work earlier and earlier. It was 7:05 in the evening and the lighthouse beacon had already been shining for some time now. I made my way through the lighthouse suite to reach the focal chamber.
"Amphy, are you in there? I know you're in there! Answer me! I brought some new friends for you to meet!"

The intense light radiating from the chamber made it uncomfortably hot to step inside, never mind the problem of being blinded. So I stood at the threshold, calling in and waiting for a reply. The only answer I got from behind the wall of light was a barely audible mumble.

I let Skarmory out of his pokeball. Tyko wasn't fond of her pokeball, mainly because she wanted to explore and sightsee. She was small enough, though, so I had carried her under one arm on the way here.

"They're our new team members: Tyko, a Piplup, and Skarmory."

"Piplup!"

"Skaaaw!"

"Nnnmn?" A soft utterance floated out of the room. It was an indifferent inquiry, not particularly interested in its own answer; as if I had said enough just by naming the new arrivals.

"You seem tired. I wonder… Amphy, are you having trouble sleeping? It seems like you're always sleeping late, but maybe it's because you're up late. Is it because the longer nights are making you work longer? You know the ships have standing orders to weigh anchor at 4:00 AM, you don't have to wait till dawn…"

My barrage of questions might as well have been rhetorical. Amphy wasn't interested in conversation tonight.

"What's wrong? You've been acting strange all month!" I said loudly, with more force than I'm usually comfortable with. When even that exclamation went unanswered, I grew perturbed. There was a shelf by the side, where several supplies were kept. I grabbed one particular item, a pair of goggles.

On second glance, I spotted four more of the things. They were heavily tinted, to allow for vision even under the intense glare of an Ampharos' Flash. I donned a pair myself, and then helped one each onto Skarmory (difficult to fit) and Tyko (same as Skarm, except magnified by the her squirmy demeanor). The Piplup immediately bolted for the door.

"AMPHA AMPHA!"

"Tyko!"

Looks like the runt startled our beloved beacon Pokémon. I stepped inside. Even with the shaded lenses I was forced to squint a little- but not for long, as Amphy's tail-incandescence was disrupted and weakened momentarily.

"Tyko, what are you doing?"


"Tyko! Stop that!"

"AMPHA!!!" Amphy was even more upset than me, showing an anger bordering on panic. He tried, in vain, to hold his tail-bulb out of Tyko's reach. The irregular movement taxed the automated mirror systems as they attempted to keep up with the shifting light source. Outside, the steady ray of
Illumination quivered in and out of existence. I couldn't allow this to continue. I darted in, grabbed the Piplup by her foot, and lifted her upside down. Without hesitation I smacked her beak.

"PIP!" she cried out in pain. I smothered her in a hug.

"Seriously! You're such a troublemaker! You should have been a trainer's Pokémon, so you could go on an adventure." Her chirps of consternation came out from underneath my coat sleeves, muffled and downcast. I held her out at arm's length, still upside down. "Are you going to behave?" The bulbous head with tinted goggles donned chirped and nodded. A moment later I let her down onto the floor. Amphy stared at the miscreant cautiously. "Great, you made a terrible first impression."

Skarmory hung back, content to watch the spectacle.

"Tyko, meet Amphy. Amphy, meet Tyko. I hope you two get along better than this from now on." I made sure to direct this warning towards Tyko, but it was Amphy that seemed hurt by the accusation.

"And this is Skarmory." Skarmory waddled around the dais Amphy sat upon.

Amphy observed his trio of visitors, looking disturbed. It was not long before he jerked up in realization, apparently remembering his duties. The tail-bulb was raised up and resumed radiating at full power.

"So, Amphy, are you going to be stubborn and still not tell me the problem?"

"Phoo."

"Well, I'm sorry then, if I can't help you." I stepped back, intending to exit the premise. However, my back met a solid object that hadn't been there before. I barely managed to hold a yelp inside.

"An Ampharos lights your place, huh? Interesting."

A pair of large hands held me by the shoulders, arresting my collision.

"Volkner, what are you doing here?" I asked, surprised and dazed.

The boy looked down on me. He had taken a pair of goggles for himself. They made him look like a giant insect, but glancing at the mirrors, of the four of us, they looked most appropriate on his head.

"I told you I wanted to check out the Glitter Lighthouse. What are you doing here?" he asked in turn.

"I take care of Amphy." I beckoned towards the Ampharos, who had taken a napping position, ignoring us.

"I see. He's your Pokémon. It is a he, right?"

"Yes." He looked over my other two Pokémon. "Piplup. Didn't expect to see you again so soon."

Tyko responded by jumping and hugging his knee. Skarmory clickity-clacked over, nudging Tyko and attempting to coax her away from the stranger.

"And a Skarmory. Haven't seen one of those in a while."

I nodded and knelt down to remove Tyko from Volkner's leg. She must have construed my grip as a hug, since she snuggled backwards into my chest and bubbled happily.
"They're both new to my team. The one has a daddy-complex for the other. I was introducing them to Amphy."

"How did that turn out?"

"There was a fuss. This interloper was causing trouble." I patted Tyko on the head.

"I'm getting a good feeling for her personality already," Volkner said. He gestured back towards Amphy. "It's been a long time since Vista used Pokémon for lighting. Fifty years, at least. Why does Glitter have Ampharos? Why not a spotlight?"

Volkner's appearance surprised me, but talking about things like Pokémon and technology put me at ease. Even if I'm no techie, lighthouses are my one area of expertise, so even on that account I don't have to fear sounding stupid.

"There's no cheap way to match Ampharos' luminosity output. It would cost too much in gas or electricity to do so."

"Have you thought of using Solarflare Generators? They use solar power, so they shouldn't be as expensive over the long-term."

"I know. Still, we don't get enough sunlight to run one of those at max power."

"Do you really need the power?" he asked.

"We do. The harbor can't settle for a less powerful system because the Whirl Islands create abnormally heavy fog, especially during the winter. So, cost-for-power requirements considered, there's only been one solution. They've had an Ampharos lighting Olivine Harbor now for six generations."

"Huh. Doesn't he get bored, doing this every night?" Volkner asked, indicating Amphy. I reflected for a moment.

"Maybe. He has been acting up recently. Doesn't like to talk or play games like usual. Always in a sour mood. It's like he's depressed. You're an Electric-specialist, any special insight?"

He rubbed a hand through his hair. Thick, luscious hair, I noticed.

"You probably know more about Ampharos psychology than I do, but…"

"Hmm?"

He paused for a moment before continuing.

"Does he have to light up every night?"

"Yes, basically." I thought over the workload Amphy was forced to bear. "The Whirl Islands, like I said, are basically giant fogbank factories. We can go months without a single clear night. Amphy probably has to work 330 nights a year, including straight through winter, and nearly uninterrupted through late autumn and early spring."

Volkner nodded.

"Don't you think that's a little too taxing on the Pokémon?"

"Hmm." I had thought about this, but failing to see a solution, I had swept it to the back of my mind.
"I'm just a stranger, haven't been here for more than a few minutes, only have the barest info, but..." 
He stepped forward until he was standing beside Amphy. His hand gently ran down the Pokémon's flank, massaging the pale skin and feeling the fine, thin fuzz of his fur. "I'd say Ampharos feels trapped here. He probably needs to get out more."

Trapped?

I hadn't thought of it in that way before.

"I suppose you're right," I told him.

Amphy rarely, like twice-a-year rarely, left the immediate vicinity of the lighthouse. Weeks could go by where he never even ventured to the bottom floor. He slept through most of the day, and even though his work was not that taxing, it kept him rooted in one spot for up to 10 hours every single night.

Yes, I had thought about how this kind of sedentary life might effect his mental health- but perhaps I had underestimated how badly the effect was. If that was true, Amphy might be experiencing the Pokémon equivalent of a nervous breakdown. In that case...

Oh no.

"Amphy?" I called out. No reply.

I had lost Graveler because I was too prideful to admit that I had wronged her. Yet, even with her, I had known I was wrongdoing all the way through. I had been aware of my abuse, pride had simply tricked me into justifying that abuse. But now? Now my fears came back to hack into my heart in a whole new way.

Had my pride clouded my judgment AGAIN? Had I assumed, just because I spent more time and more energy and more love and more worry upon Amphy than all my other Pokémon combined, that what I was doing was for his own good? Had I falsely assumed that Amphy loved me just because I divulged so much love and spent so much effort on him?

I grabbed Volkner's hand out of reflex, the fear gripping me.

"Is something the matter?" He gave me a concerned look, doubtless wondering what this grip of mine meant, perhaps hoping for it to mean more than what it was: a sudden yearning for human contact induced by panic and fear.

"I'm worried," I mumbled.

Graveler had been difficult to let go, and it was better for the both of us that I did so- but it had only been possible because she had meant so little to me. Amphy? Ampharos? It would be impossible. I would rather die than let him go. My whole life, my whole heart, was devoted to this one adorable, needy, affectionate, gentle, modest jerk.

Which made the thought of losing his affection terrifying.

"Amphy? Is it true? Do you feel trapped here?"

"Nnn."

"Ampharos... Amphy, is it?" Volkner realized the moniker as he addressed the Pokémon directly. "I can relate. Doing the same thing, over, and over, with no end in sight; it's nauseating. You feel like
the world could end and you wouldn't care because you've got no satisfaction in what you're doing and no hope the future will be any different."

Amphy didn't answer verbally, but he did pick his head up to stare at Volkner eye-to-eye. I myself was staring at Volkner from the side. It definitely feels like he's revealing a little about himself here.

"You've been giving Jasmine a little trouble, lately. Do you hate her?"

Amphy shook his head, in the negative. I breathed a deep sigh of relief. Our bond wasn't severed; I wasn't the problem. However, I wasn't the solution, either, apparently.

"What do you need to be happy again?" I asked.

"Amph." The Pokémon huffed, and went back to napping.

Volkner turned towards me. He caught my eye, and I felt a certain sadness, like self-pity, but only the faintest hint of it, before it passed away.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He turned and went out of the room. I followed, to find himself seated on one of the benches. He took the goggles off and tossed them beside him. I mimicked his gesture, but slower, more daintily, in the manner of the woman I was expected to be. We sat, side-by-side, for several minutes while he collected his nerves.

"I know you wanted this to be professional," he stated. I bit my lip. "But, that's impossible, isn't it?"

My bite got harder, drawing pain. "I hope you're aware of what's going on here," he said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I responded.

"Morty set this up. It's one of his games. He's using me to get to you."

"Not a surprise." Truly, it wasn't. I had not thought of this scenario, but it seemed very much in the realm of possibility. I accepted the truth of it immediately. "The only thing I care about is, why? What is he after?" I asked.

"I don't quite know… Only that, he's been trying to get at your emotions. Besides his hobbies, it's almost all he talks about now… he wonders what other people around him are thinking, how they feel, what their lives are like, what's troubling them. Like he wants to fix their problems, and he can only do that if he manages to understand them- get to know them on a deep, personal level. And mostly, he's talking about you. More than anyone else, he focuses on you when he gets into these weird philosophical, psychological musings."

I nodded.

"You realize he has feelings for me."

Volkner turned to look at me, head taken aback.

"That surprises you?" I said, a little surprised myself.

"No, and yes. It was obvious he liked you."

"Oh?"

"I just didn't think it in him to confess. Or did you figure that out on your own?"
"I had to browbeat it out of him," I said truthfully.

"Ah. Well, that's realistic. He has trouble being straight with his feelings, doesn't he?"

"Hehehe, yeah," I said, and giggled.

"Can I ask you something?" he said suddenly.

"Whenever someone asks that, aren't they really just preparing their listener for an uncomfortable question? What if I said no?"


I looked away. Compliments are embarrassing.

"What was your question?"

"Would it be too awkward if I could just talk to you, about us?"

"Huh?" Uh oh.

"I mean," he backpedaled rapidly, "I don't mean to put you in an awkward position again. I'm not asking you out or anything, like last time."

"So you just want to… talk… about… me rejecting you."

He indicated yes.

This could either be incredibly soulful, or incredibly disastrous. Volkner being the kind of man to bottle his emotions up, however, it might cause more emotional damage to not let him talk it out. So I nodded and let him continue.

"First, I just want to say I'm sorry for putting that over you. I should've picked up on it sooner."

"Don't apologize," I warned.

"You say that, but you don't have any idea. It wasn't really about you. It was me."

He settled down, and began speaking, slowly, deliberately, in length.

"I felt stuck in my gym for the longest time. There was no one who could really give me a challenge. Pokémon battles became tedious, wretched, uninteresting. I got sick of them. I basically had to let subpar trainers win just to ensure the Sinnoh League had anyone at all to participate in their tournaments. There were days I just left a barrel of Beacon Badges out front for anyone who wanted them. Sunnyshore is peaceful, too damn peaceful, forgive my language. There was nothing in the whole town that was interesting. People were calling me emo, a loser, a creep, I was in such a funk. Even teching up the town was growing boring. I had just about had it."

"What happened?"

"I got a visit from my bro. Flint. He convinced me to get out of town. He took over the gym for a while, let me go out, see the world, find something new. That's when I met Morty. Morty… he's a character. Gets under you skin."

I nodded in agreement.
"He knows how to get out there and experience life, and he's willing to share. I guess that's how we became friends. He makes it easy to find new things to enjoy in life."

"Careful, you're starting to venture on boy-love territory," I cautioned.

"Only girls mistake bro-mances for erotica."

"Oh?" I inquired.

"Is your gender capable of understanding relationships not based on sex or romance?"

"No, we're not," I answered, thinking back to the excitable gossip my girl friends always engaged in. In relation to men's relationships, "Platonic" was a foreign word to them.

"Hanging with Morty was fun, seeing new regions was fun, but I wasn't clearing out my head like I wanted. There was always something nagging me. Always this little voice saying 'It's just a vacation'. In the end, I knew I would have to go back to Sunnyshore and I'd be right where I started.

Morty, that bastard, got it into my head what I was missing was someone special. Like, if I only had a significant other, all the world's problems would dissolve."

I tilted my head.

"You mean sex?"

"No! No. Not sex, or at least, not just sex. Someone to spend not just one night with, but a lifetime with."

"Morty said this?"

"Insinuated," Volkner corrected. "You know him."

"Yeah," I agreed, "he has a way with words."

"So, I got to feeling that this was it. My solution. It was only a matter of time before someone caught my eye, and I got trapped by infatuation. It just happened to be you."

"Me."

"Yeah. Like I said, I'm really sorry. I acted on my feelings and got burned. It was my fault. I should have listened to logic first, wiener second."

I snorted. It's true. No matter how pure their feelings, men will always hold some sentiment of lust in their affection. Which… wasn't always a bad thing. If it was controlled, if it didn't dominate their actions towards the object of their affection, it would be fine.

But thinking it over, Volkner's off-handed confession put that assumption into a new light. I had, heretofore, assumed that lust drove men only to blatant acts of depravity, like rape, or crude come-ons, or being pushy towards sex. Volkner revealed it can be more subtle; it can make men chase women they otherwise knew they had no hope of dating. The fact that Volkner had been able to court with me so innocently masked the motivation for his flirtations.

They say us women are incorrigible. We are. Men never receive the same credit for the complexity of their emotions. Just because the output was so simple, though, didn't mean the underlying motivations weren't. Men get caught in that tangle of lustful and emotional attraction, just the same as we women.
Volkner… you say so little, but your words have been enlightening. I'm shocked. I'm feeling humbled.

"I'm starting to feel like Morty was wrong. A relationship isn't what I need. I shouldn't be expecting a relationship to fix my problems. A relationship is more like the reward for fixing my problems. That's how I feel."

"I see. So…” I'm afraid to ask this to his face. What reaction would I get? Hopefully benign. "Do you still like me?"

"Hmm? A little. It's not easy letting go."

"No, it isn't. I'm just worried that you'd be jealous towards Morty. Since, you know, he's coming on to me."

"Jealous? Yeah, I am jealous of him. But not for winning you."

"For what, then?"

"His character. The way he seems like he could have anyone he wants. Anything he wants. He has the perfect personality to succeed in life. It's only natural that he would win you over me."

"Let me make this clear, he hasn't won me over," I interjected. "And I didn't choose him over you. I didn't expect him to re-enter my life when I rejected you. That was just me and my personality."

I grabbed his shoulder, and squeezed.

"I'm just worried. I feel guilty for dragging you out here. I didn't want you helping me just because you had feelings for me."

Volkner leaned back, eyes closed. I could sense now what Morty had said about the two of them being similar. They both were so timid with their true feelings, and yet beneath the timidity they were so gentle and so deep in their emotional capacity. The differences were superficial; Morty had developed a blasphemous attitude to hide his emotions; Volkner, on the other hand, had not. He bunkered down and coped with his emotional insecurity. No lying, no manipulation, no fake personalities. Even if it got him labeled as a touchy-feely, spineless man, he was going to be honest with his feelings. I sort of respected that.

Honesty and meekness. One trait I valued in the opposite sex, one I found very unattractive. What should I think when one reveals the other? Was it asking too much to have a man that was both honest and emotionally secure?

Was the reason I rejected relationships because I-

I suddenly scooted away from Volkner, eyes wide.

"I'm not going there," I declared.

Volkner started, looking at me and wondering what I had meant by freaking out out of the blue.

I calmed down a second.

"What?" he asked.

"…”
I could not tell him. His words had put me in a vulnerable state of mind, where I might pry too far into my self-conscious and discover things I had buried too long ago, too deep in the murk of guilt and shame, to allow out at this juncture. Better to unearth those feelings in private. Best to never unearth them at all. It's shameful to say, but even while I demand openness from others I could not open myself to anyone.

The world is absurd, and I am prideful and self-centered. These sins I will readily admit.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'll be okay."

"You sure?"

"It's just me being a girl. You know the deal."

"All too well."

"How about you? Generally speaking."

"I'll be okay too. Morty did well enough. Getting out into the world was a good idea. It helped break up the tedium. I wanted to say, if Amphy is in the same situation as me, it'd be good for him to get out. Meet people. Battle. Play. He's not meant to be a recluse."

Volkner pulled out a pokeball.

"Don't think of this as an attempt to win your affection," he said, and placed the pokeball in my lap.

"What is this, then?"

"This is me feeling sorry for Amphy. It's Lanturn. You take Amphy outside, give him a vacation. Lanturn can fill in for a night or two. Keep him while I scout the town for that replacement part. Which, by the way, I'm doing to repay my debt to Morty, not to win your affection, just to be clear."

I let out a lone laugh.

"I will not misinterpret your actions," I promised with an overly officious tone.

We re-donned the goggles and went inside the hot focal chamber. Tyko had never come out, and even though he was clearly suffering from the heat, Skarmory had not left the little runt's side.

"Lanturn."

Lanturn appeared, eyes squinting but not as overly taxed by the luminescence as us humans.

"Lanturn, could you substitute for Ampharos?" Volkner asked his Pokémon.

"Lan lan!" The angler fish nodded, used Magnet Rise to levitate itself into place, and shivered. A moment later, its bulb lit up, nearly rivaling Ampharos' in brilliance. Ampharos, still napping, yelped and leapt off the dais in shock. I caught him before he hit the floor.

"Amphy, you're taking a break. We're going to the park tomorrow."

"Amphoo?"

"Yes. No more being cooped up in here every single night. I'll talk to the mayor, see if we can find a
better solution than keeping you prisoner here."

"Amph," my Pokémon replied. It's not that he sounds overjoyed by that prospect, but his voice had a hint of hope in it. Even the smallest trace of optimism from him was an improvement, and the notion made me smile and filled me up with good vibes.

"Amphaphampha ampharoo. Arooo! Ampharrararoooo?" Aooou?" He began torrenting excitable questions and concerns at me. What couldn't be conveyed by Poke-speech alone he mimed, or skittered around the room to indicate objects. The first object he singled out was a surprise.

"Your pokeball?"

It was a Great Ball, actually, blue, red, and white, the top half covered in dust. Amphy so rarely left the lighthouse, I couldn't remember the last time he had actually been kept inside the device.

"Do you want to ride in the pokeball or walk?" I asked.

Amphy looked to me and then to the pokeball, thinking over the options. He tail-whipped the ball into the corner, indicating his desire to walk.

"Alright then." I gathered up supplies and his bedding. "Hold Piplup for me, will you?" Amphy looked, not without a little consternation, at the little blue bathtoy. Tyko squeaked with joy and flung herself into Amphy's belly. The larger Pokémon held her, unsure of how to treat the situation.

"Amph."

"Come on, you're sleeping over at my place tonight."

We made our way down the staircase, out into the gloomy night. Volkner dashed to catch up with us, after having said farewell to Lanturn. From here, the ray of light looked no less bright and far-reaching than Amphy's, making me feel confident Lanturn wouldn't cause a ship-wreck.

"Well," Volkner said.

"Thank you. For helping me with the generator. For Lanturn," I said, nodding towards the beacon. "And mostly, for being open about your feelings. That's something I have a hard time with, so I respect people who can."

Volkner turned away.

Yes, I know it's hard, Volksy. To have the woman you still have lingering feelings for praise you and thank you, yet with no intention of loving you, must be murderous. Too bad. I'm about to incite your misplaced affections even more.

I hugged him, innocently.

"This is not to show affection," I told him, mischievously. "This is to show gratitude."

"I know. To tell you the truth, I was never so in love that I put you up on a pedestal. In my mind, you were always 'that shrewish little runt'."

"Hehehe. Criticism accepted."

He began walking off around the side of the lighthouse. A car was parked over on the far side. As he climbed in, he waved goodbye and shouted over, "I'll call tomorrow afternoon."
"You have my cellphone?"

"Yeah, Morty gave it to me."

Bastard. That's not for him to share. Too late now.

"Alright! Goodbye!"

I gathered my flock of Pokémon around me and began trundling off into the streets of Olivine. Skarmory led the way. Amphy walked beside me, holding my hand. Tyko chased Amphy's tail-bulb and in that way was kept on an invisible leash. I felt happy, the relieved kind of happy. My family surrounded me. This night was confusing, but I had the sense it was not a constricting kind of confusion. More liberating. I had been given a lot to think about, and I looked forward to figuring it out.

Maybe I was in that same funk. Maybe I had been concentrating too much on my worries, and what I needed was a change of pace, an escape, the chance to do something different.

…Nah. I loved my city too much. I wasn't going to abandon it. I'll have to find a different solution. I'm the Ironclad Gym Leader of Olivine City, after all, 'perseverance' was my catchphrase.

Still, that man…

I'm at odds with myself, thinking of him. What he said about himself was illuminating, both for himself and for the whole male gender. What he said about Morty was even more question-raising. What was Morty getting at, trying to "understand" me? Trying to "fix" me? It sounded like Morty's feelings for me weren't some simple crush, but something deeper, more cerebral. What was it? What exactly was I to Morty?

And what about Volkner? What will I do with him? Could we be just friends? That's a novel idea. Would his feelings fade away and let us have a normal friendship, or would they always be there, coloring his behavior towards me? How exactly did I feel towards him? That answer seems muddled.

The streets passed by, one-by-one, marking our passage homeward. The cool air dug into my thin frame, chilling me. I'm trying to remember why I rejected Volkner in the first place, and yet, there was no concrete answer. Maybe there never was.
Erika returned overnight. Early the next morning I was summoned to her rental home for breakfast. Throughout our telephone conversation she kept dropping mysterious hints as to some surprise that would directly affect me. Not liking the sound of that, I collected six of my Pokémon together and headed out at 6:30 A.M.

An early morning mist clung to the streets, making it seem like Steelix was wading through the River Styx. Amphy rode beside me.

"How're you feeling?" I asked my Pokémon.

"Mmm." An unenthusiastic reply.

I reached around and hugged him to my side. "It'll be alright," I said, trying to comfort him. His gaze never left the flat, featureless section of Steelix's hide directly before him.

At Erika's, a single doorbell ring was all that was needed… as if she was waiting for me. I crept inside, peering left, right, and upwards for good measure. Nothing seemed amiss, even as Erika lead me down the hallway with a psychotic smile.

"GUESS WHO!"

"GAHHH! I'm blind! I'm blind!" My hands shot to my eyes, where they found another pair of hands covering my vision. I tried wrestling them off, but couldn't without exerting more energy than the morning hour allowed me to muster.

"Get off! Who are you?!

"Guess!"

"Lyra!"

The stranger's hands fell to my shoulders and spun me around, bringing me face-to-face with my friend.

"Lyra!"

"Jasmine!"

We jumped into each other's arms.

"How'd you… you snuck around the front lawn, didn't you?"

"Ahahaha! It was worth it!"

I soon found myself being pooch-piled by Erika and several other creatures, mostly grass Pokémon.

"Ethan's here too," Lyra explained gleefully, as her boyfriend trotted into view. Behind him rose the tall, fatherly figure of Typhlosion.

"So this is my surprise?" I asked of Erika. Her creepy smile finally broke into a soft, genuine grin.

"I caught a pair of stowaways on my way home."
"Ha ha! We'll explain later. Ethan, grab the picnic stuff." Ethan, seemingly reluctantly, trotted down the hall. Erika started laughing. She spun around, flaunting her autumn-print kimono and continued belting out HAHAHA!'s until she too disappeared down the hallway.

"What's so funny? What is this about?"

"We've been busy." Lyra hinted.

The vanished pair returned, bearing between them a… cake. In the frosting was written "Probation Picnic Party!".

"Vanilla cake for the vanilla girl!" Lyra exclaimed.

"Oh shut up."

"I got a phone call from our mutual acquaintance on the way home last night, informing us of your recent parting with Graveler. We thought you might need a pick-me-up, so we planned a party, cake included," explained Erika.

"How did you..." I began, wondering how they knew about my planned park outing for today. I shook my head, figuring it wasn't worth it to nitpick. I do way too much of that, I should just appreciate this kindness. "Let's have a picnic party!" I said with (somewhat forced) cheer.

"So, um, where to?" Erika asked. Apparently she still hasn't gotten the layout of Olivine City, and the Blackthorn excursion had not helped.

"Crescent Bay Park."

We set off, Pokémon in tow. Ethan, his Azumarill, and Lyra's Typhlosion carried most of our considerable party gear. The park was not too far from Erika's house if we took shortcuts, but unfortunately that meant a lot of back alleys and footpaths, so that Steelix couldn't be used as our personal shuttle bus. He went back into the pokeball obediently.

"So-" I wanted to ask a lot of things, but by the time I could formulate questions that wouldn't come off as critical or harsh, I was already on the receiving end of Erika and Lyra's verbal assault.

"Are you doing okay? Are you missing Graveler? I heard you traded her for another Pokémon, a Piplup."

"I call her Tyko." I let out Tyko, who was immediately taken into Erika's arms and coddled. Tyko, in turn, was thrilled to be the center of love and attention.

"You need to evolve already! You need you for battles! You can't be a little attention magnet your whole life!" I half-mockingly scolded the Piplup.

"No, dear no! We should surgically implant an everstone into you, little one." Erika nuzzled the Pokémon cheek-to-cheek. Then it was off to Lyra's embrace and then using her poofy hat as a pillow-chair.

"How is the gym? Are you improving your win ratio? I hope the workload isn't too much. Will you be fine?" Erika asked in rapid succession.

"Yes, yes, yes to everything," I said, flustered.

"How are you and-"
"Hey! Let me ask something already!"

"Hmm? I'm sorry. It's just the morning."

"I know, I know."

Erika, the very picture of formality and geniality, has one weakness. She is the opposite of me in regards to the morning period- for about an hour after waking, she can be quite hyper and explosively jubilant. The effect is most noticeable when she hasn't gotten any tea into her system. I presumed that was the case right now.

"Why were you in Blackthorn so long?" She had spent ten days there, longer than she first promised.

"Ah! Oh, well about that, Violet was such wonderful company, and the festival was much more engaging than we expected. We had a wonderful time of it! And Clair only reopened her gym yesterday. Violet wanted my advice to help defeat her. I'll have to fill you in on the details later."

"Did Violet beat her?" I inquired.

"Oh, yes, eventually. It took nine matches."

NINE!

"Did you know Clair hadn't been defeated in almost two years before Red came?" I asked.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, I did. Apparently her assistant Paulo had been running Pokémon Challenges as an alternate means of attaining the Rising Badge. Don't tell Clair this, but when trainers figured out the Challenge was easier than beating her, most didn't even bother to fight her. That may be how she kept her streak going so long." Erika whispered this last sentence while leaning forward, as if conveying some conspiratorial message.

"Interesting."

"Not to say she isn't a splendid Gym Leader. I don't believe Violet would have defeated her at all if she, Clair, had been at the top of her game. We were wise not to use the doppelganger strategy right off the bat, but saved it for the eighth try. It didn't work so well, though, Clair overpowered it. The next match, however, she over-predicted the doppelgangers and Violet managed to take advantage of it."

"I see. It was a good idea though- it might have worked even better than it did on me if I had accustomed myself to one each of the Brelooms' and Venusaur's individual strengths first."

"Jasmine, I don't think Violet could have won once out of a thousand battles against you that day, with Skarmory being who he is."

"A stubborn, impossibly-tankish damage-sponge?"

"Yes. He was quite the catch, for a Pokémon."

"Why thank you. Skarmory has improved too, now he understands basic attack commands. I think I have a handle on his movepool as well."

Discussing Pokémon tactics was perhaps my all-time favorite topic of conversation. In that way we easily occupied our minds during the ten-minute trek to Crescent Bay Park. Meanwhile, Lyra and Ethan soon had their hands full trying to keep Tyko from running off.
"So, Lyra," I called back to her, just as she and Ethan appeared behind us again. They each held one of Tyko's feet in their hands, carrying her upside down between them. "Why'd you decide to come here to Olivine?"

"Well, no real reason for coming here, specifically. We just thought we'd like to hang out with you guys some more," she answered.

"Oh? Okay, that's nice."

"Well..." she started.

I looked back at her, eyebrow raised inquisitively.

"The more pertinent question is why we are not in Mahogany Town, I think," she said.

"Hmm? Yeah, I thought you were tracking Silver and Red."

"That's just the thing. Actually, this is the other surprise we wanted to share."

We arrived at the first ledge overlooking Crescent Bay at that moment. The view was obscured by one last line of trees and a fence. I stopped and turned to Lyra, head tilted, wondering.

"What happened with Red?"

"We lost him."

"Huh?"

Lyra sighed, looking none too pleased about the ordeal.

"Like, he completely gave us the slip. We got word he was heading towards Mahogany and went after him on foot. Got a day in before we realized we had been duped and had to turn around. My legs still hurt from all the hiking, and all for nothing. I think we were fed false info by Silver so he could chase Red alone. Smart bastard," Lyra said, stifling a giggle.

"So if Red wasn't on his way to Mahogany, where was he going?"

"South, down Route 45. He's heading for Violet City, I think. Either going to detour through Cherrygrove, or take Dark Cave or Vishna Pass to go directly to Violet. Either way, that's where your good news comes in."

"He's going after Falkner," I muttered.

"Yep. And on foot. Which means, you might have a month, maybe two, before he reaches Olivine. Nice long cushion for you to train."

"Eh? You think I could beat him with a hundred years' worth of training? You're delusional."

"Don't be so pessimistic!" Lyra told me.

"She's right," Ethan added in.

"I'm not being pessimistic! I'm an optimist! I'm optimistic that Red's detour will postpone his inevitable victory over me until after my probation ends."

"That's being optimistic? Your world must be very bleak." Lyra took her hat and put it over her
heart, while shaking her head in disappointment. The gesture amused me. "Anyways, me and Ethan are just going to camp here until Red arrives. Silver shouldn't be too far behind."

"I don't get why you think you need training from Silver," Ethan interjected. "You already beat him outright."

"That was the Johto tournament. You heard what he thought about 'official' battles. I don't think he had his heart in it," Lyra answered. Ethan sighed and shook his head.

"Come come, don't dawdle you three."

Erika returned to circle to our backsides and physically nudge us towards the park. Down a short flight of steps and past the fence and tree line, and we arrived at the main cliff overlooking Crescent Bay.

"Pretty, isn't it?" I remarked. The other three nodded. You don't get sights like this anywhere else in Johto.

Crescent Bay cut into the land in a long, four-mile wide semi-circle. The far eastern end of the shore kept going, right on out into the ocean, forming a stubby peninsula. It rose into a short hill, upon which Glitter Lighthouse was perched. Westwards, an inlet cut into the shoreline where Bronze Sand River emptied into the bay. Crescent Bay Bridge spanned the gap, hanging a hundred feet over the inlet. Directly in front of us there was nothing but water; clear, aqua-tinted water, all the way out into the horizon. If one squinted, you could make out some dark blotches where the ocean meets the sky. That would be Whirl Islands. Today, the water was relatively calm. The morning mist had yet to lift completely, but from our elevation we managed to surmount the fog. The sun hovered near the lighthouse's peak to our left.

We descended the steps, myself two or three at a time, down into the park. The park itself was terraced into the hillside, creating multiple tiers of flat grass lawns, each overlooking the other. Near the bottom were gazebos and bathhouses, for couples and swimmers, respectively. A row of benches and recliners lined the edge of the beachfront. I could pick out the one I had wept on after the gala. Now, like then, the park was virtually empty. We were alone in the park except for a few exercise fanatics jogging up and down the steps and one brave soul venturing out into the cold salt water.

I alighted on the middle-most tier, stopped, and breathed in the air. It was damp, but refreshing. Far better than the stagnant rank that filled up my apartment. To be honest, it felt good, really good, to get out and visit some place that wasn't my gym, my apartment, the pokécenter, or the light house. In one way or another, every one of those places represented a stress in my life. For a day, at least, I won't allow myself to worry about probation or boys or bills…

"If only Morty were here," Erika lamented.

…unless one of my friends force the topic onto me. Bleh.

"He would spend the time teasing me," I insisted.

"Courting you," Erika corrected.

"Distracting me from relaxing," I counter-corrected.

I took in another deep breath.

The early morning passed into the later morning. Lyra and Ethan claimed our little piece of turf and set up the base. I showed Erika the flower garden Mrs. Leo was cultivating. Then we all played a
round of frisbee golf. Afterwards, my six Pokémon were released and allowed to play on their own. Erika and I snuggled into the picnic blanket to observe them.

"Shouldn't Ampharos be sleeping?" my friend remarked. The Pokémon was currently sitting on a ledge, watching the others play keep-away. His head bobbed back and forth, trying to keep tabs on Choir, who was being used as the ball. Otherwise, he showed no indication he wanted to join in.

"Volkner lent me his Lanturn so Amphy could have a day out."

"Volkner? What is he doing here?"

"Oh… About that…" I told her in detail about the broken generator and how Morty had arranged Volkner to come fix it, and then how we had attempted to diagnose the Light Pokémon's depression. I left out the more in-depth conversation we had concerning Morty, affections, moods, and the ilk. Erika waited patiently for me to finish, however, it was subtly noticeable that she wasn't concerned with neither my technical difficulties nor Amphy's mental state.

"But didn't you and Volkner have a thing before the summit? You never told me much about it," she finally blabbed, as if itching to steer the conversation towards her own ends.

"It wasn't a 'thing'. He developed a one-sided crush and I had to put it down. It hurt his feelings. Unfortunately, he's friends with Morty so I can't just forget he exists, like all the other boys."

"Why did you reject him? Is he too ugly?"

"Are you really going to bug me about this, again?"

"Answer the question, little girl."

"Little girl? Stop teasing me!"

"Hahaha! But please, answer that for me."

"Why do I need to answer it? What are you trying to learn by asking something like that?"

Erika rocked her head side-to-side for a moment, as if thinking up the right words to say.

"Let me share a small worry of mine. Your only friends are me, Whitney, and Lyra."

"And my Pokémon."

"Your only human friends. Now, what do us three have in common?"

"That's too open-ended. You have a lot in common-"

"None of us have a permanent residence in Olivine," she declared.

She ought to warn me when her questions are going to be rhetorical.

"What does that mean?"

"Meaning, I'm worried about you being alone. You aren't naturally a shut-in; circumstances have merely forced you into becoming one. So I wish you had someone close, someone you could trust, living nearby."

"I have my parents," I said.
"Would you feel comfortable telling them anything and everything? Your secrets, your worries, your feelings?"

I fell silent at the suggestion.

Everything? No! I couldn't tell mother a third of what goes through my head. I can't even stomach the shame of even hinting at my deeper secrets to you, Erika, let alone telling that judgmental, hard-nosed woman about my personal life. Father? While I do feel like I could be more open to him, I don't want to. He wouldn't judge me, but he's not exactly helpful either.

"No, I wouldn't trust them even with the material I tell you, let alone the stuff I don't tell you." As soon as I said this I knew it sounded like bait. Erika beamed, giving me a mutually understood glance.

_Oh, you have things you hide from me? Do tell!_

But in reality, she didn't bite.

"So, there's no one in the world you would trust those things with? And don't say Amphanos. Amphanos is good for unburdening on, but he can't fully understand what you're going through; he can't respond like a human does."

"But it works-"

"Is that truly all you need? A semi-sentient Pokémon to hear you out?"

"Nnn…"

Erika can read me like a book, and play me like a fiddle. How does she do it?

Of course I can't take solace in airing out my worries to Amphy! It feels numb, devoid of meaning; like confessing to a slab of wood. How can I take any comfort in confessing to a Pokémon who is entirely reliant upon me for his care? I can't trust that his nudges and coos and assuaging gestures aren't born out of that paternal bond we share. Unloading your feelings onto someone is therapeutic because they are capable of understanding what you are sharing, and are capable of criticizing you for it- but they don't. That all-important choice not to judge is critical, because it lets you know you'll be alright, that you don't need to feel guilty or ashamed.

Besides, Amphy having his own indecipherable funk precluded any thought of using him as an emotional consolation at the moment.

"You're suggesting I need a friend in Olivine to keep me company so I don't go insane."

"Correct."

"I disagree. Sure, Amphy's just a placebo, but so what? The alternatives aren't any less of a charade. I can't stomach this medicine you're selling me. Who am I supposed to trust like that?"

"A significant other," Erika answered.

So that's her game.

"Wait, so are you trying to help Morty's bet come true? You want me to fuck someone?"

"NO! No. Not sex, Jasmine. Merely, I think you need the intimacy that sex implies. Sexual relations are optional."
"Since when does sex imply intimacy? That doesn't seem to be the case from what I've seen of the world."

"Set that aside for now. In fact, come visit me tonight at my house. We can have "The Talk"."

"I don't know…"

"Just leave it aside and come tonight. The important thing for right now is the emotional bond that can only be found in a romantic relationship. I think you need that. I dare say you desire that. I believe Morty saw that need and that was what he was actually doing in making that ill-advised boast."

"Morty just wants to be my boyfriend."

"Don't try reducing Morty to such a simple stereotype. What he selfishly wants for himself does not exclude what he altruistically wants for others. In his view, having the two desires align is good for the soul."

I sighed.

"I just wanted to relax today."

"Little miss, you are thoroughly incapable of relaxing with all the burdens you are under."

"I can relax, if people would just stop irking me!" I angrily responded.

"Oh? What did you do last night?" She asks this like she already knows the answer.

"I relaxed," I said, trying to sound convincing.

"And what did that entail?" she asked.

"I… I played SimKingdom till two o'clock. Magneton and Amphy watched me. Relaxing, okay?"

"Hahaha!" Another peal of laughter told me she didn't believe me. "Jasmine, I know for a fact you play computer games when you are stressed."

"I…” I couldn't argue. The best I could do was throw a comeback at her. "At least my stress-relief doesn't make me fat." Erika, like most women, preferred ice-cream and chocolate for her stress-relief.

"Touché."

She grinned, and continued.

"But you see my point. You've been unhappy for a while now. Coming back to Volkner, I'm just incredibly curious as to why you rejected him."

"Why?! Why is that so important?" I whined.

"Because, it is."

"He's a guy! That's all the reason I need!"

Erika heard my answer and leaned back, sinking into contemplation. I was confused, because that wasn't an answer I expected her to take seriously. My mind raced through the possibilities, and my mouth, without much conscience thought, began running off the resulting thoughts.
"You think I need a relationship so badly. I don't know. I don't want one. It's really troublesome, and you're right. I am stressed. But don't you think adding a relationship on top of probation would be even more stressful? You seem to think a boyfriend would comfort me, and to that end, you're trying to figure out how to set me up. You ask about Volkner because you think there's a hint in there as to my romantic weakness, something you can exploit. Perhaps, you're even trying to hook me up with Morty. Hey…"

I turned towards her, scowling.

"Are you just trying to hook me up with Morty?"

"No," she answered simply.

"Yes you are! You've been shipping us, haven't you? Haven't you!"

"Teehehe! 'Shipping'? You're such a nerd, Jasmine."

"Don't make fun of me!"

"In all seriousness, I don't mean to try to push you onto one man or another. I just want to understand the root cause of your misery and help you address it."

"My misery is caused by the incessant demands of this society upon my feelings and my virginity! Why can't anyone understand that?!" I spat this out, rolled onto my knees and then flopped onto my back, arms held outward, hands balled into fists. Something of a whine/roar hybrid escaped my throat.

"I don't believe that," Erika said.

"Why not? What makes you, and Morty, and Mother, and Lyra, and Whitney, and everyone else think I'm love-sick?"

"Not love-sick. You certainly aren't aching for a relationship. But you are depressed and isolated and lonely, and we all believe a relationship would be the best way to cure you of that."

"Argh! I ask again, why do you all think that?!"

"Because…" Erika hesitated. I lifted myself up on one elbow to glare at her. Give me an answer, damn it!

"You weren't always this way."

I waited for her to explain, but she didn't. She stood up, and began drifting towards the ledge.

Does she not want to answer?

"What way did I change?" I called after her. She remained silent still. Is she afraid of hurting my feelings? That would be off, considering how she's been yanking them this way and that over the course of this conversation. If that wasn't it, was she hiding something of interest to herself? To someone else? No, that's extremely unlike her. It had to be because the subject was too touchy for her.

Yet, in the years I've known Erika, I couldn't think of anything that could possibly be construed as me "changing". Not in any way related to my romantic interests (or lack thereof), or my mental state, or my attitude towards life. Was she talking about a major event? Couldn't be. Could it?
Could she be talking about the Indigo debacle? She ought to know Indigo didn't "change" me. Quite the opposite, it affirmed every negative view I had of mankind, the universe, and most especially, of that boy Morty. It wasn't a turning point, merely a final straw on top of an already-overburdened pile of straws that set me against the opposite gender.

The only other major personality change I could think of was when I was fifteen—before I met Erika, so obviously not what she's talking about—and the Gym Leader Summit.

"Hey. Are you talking about the summit? Do you think I've changed who I am since then?" Erika shook her head but continued to say nothing. "I know I've been unhappy since the summit, but that's probation for you. Nothing a good 50% win ratio won't fix." I trotted up beside her.

"It's not that," she said. "Although, I'm sure you would be happier— we would ALL be happier—if you managed to graduate from probation."

"Sure."

I should drop it. Even if I got the true meaning of her words out of her, it would just spark another round of touchy-feely crap, and I was getting sick of it.

My Pokémon were joking around in a disorganized mob, intermingled with Lyra's, Ethan's, and Erika's Pokémon. Erika's gaze was fixated on the medley. My attention was caught by the little tower of yellow sitting apart from it.

Amphy hadn't joined them at any point. Even when the others beckoned, he refused or ignored them. Even now, Ambipom somersaulted into Amphy's personal space, trying to use surprise to draw the Pokémon into reacting. Amphy jumped in fright, pelting the monkey with a strong Flash (it put a sunspot in my vision, it was so bright!) and scampered away. Ambipom recovered, and, with his comrades, looked on dolefully at the loner.

Volkner had been wrong. Amphy didn't want to get out. He doesn't like company and he doesn't want to play with other Pokémon. What is his problem? Is he just ill? Do we need anti-depressant drugs for him?

Erika glanced towards me and saw the concern in my face. She probably mistook it for worry over our conversation:

"I'm sorry," she said. "I put a lot on you today."

"It's only because you care," I responded. "But, don't worry about my feelings right now. I just want to focus everything on getting out of probation. Until then... I don't want to think about it."

"Will you come to my house for the Talk, then?"

She emphasized the word 'Talk'. I know what she means by it. Our private, late-night discussion about what I really think about sex.

"I'm not ready to talk about that, yet. Another time."

"Mmkay."

We watched Tyko practice her BubbleBeam attack while pretending to be a tank-turret. Her "tank", of course, was Steelix, rumbling around the premises. Magneton and Magnemite also rode atop Steelix, further down his abdomen. They acted like anti-air missile batteries, sending light Flash Canons and Discharges into the air. The other Pokémon swarmed over the terrain, attacking the
mobile fortress and retreating as they came under fire.

"Say, I had an idea," Erika said suddenly.

"Hmm?"

She turned towards me.

"Would you like to battle?"

"Don't hold back just because I'm your friend!" Erika shouted.

My jaw slackled a little, staring at my friend in disbelief.

"Steelix!"

Steelix crashed down upon the sand, sending waves rippling across the battlefield. Victreebel, having barely dodged the blow itself, was caught up in the sand surge. It found itself half-buried and unable to move. Steelix towered over the hapless Pokémon.

"Reflect!" Erika ordered.

"Dragon Breath," I ordered. Erika's eyes popped wide open, hand held to mouth.

A multi-colored glow filled Steelix's maw, churning into a violent, raging nova. Steelix roared, sending the primal energy into Victreebel's position. The Reflect dissipated, useless. The Grass Pokémon appeared from beneath the smoke, surrounded by glassed sand and bits of smoldering plant matter. It struggled to break free and fight back, but could not break through the silicon prison. Steelix sent another Dragon Breath blasting down upon it, finishing the Pokémon off for good.

Erika recalled her Pokémon.

"You're down by three Pokémon and you think I've been holding back?" I cried out to her across the battlefield.

"Well... I knew Steelix was good, but I didn't think he was this good, Jasmine. Dear, you're embarrassing me."

"Stop being facetious. It's not like you," I told her.

"My apologies," she said, giving me a curt bow. "I must admit, I underestimated Steelix by a tad bit. But, well, I'll explain in a bit. Tangrowth!"

Victreebel had been Steelix's third victim in a row. My Pokémon was heaving due to the accumulated damage from numerous Grass-type attacks. Despite the beating, he had stood his ground and retaliated, giving better than he got each time. Victreebel's efforts to defend itself via Reflect had been thwarted by a surprise special-type Dragon Breath assault- in truth, the only special attack Steelix knew. Before that, Vileplume had underestimated its own Earthquake vulnerability, and Jumpluff its own Rock Throw weakness. All three had assumed they could pick on Steelix's neutrality towards Grass attacks and low special defenses. They were wrong. Now Steelix faced down his fourth opponent, and was probably not going to be able to take another attack.
Tangrowth waddled onto the field, rippling vines fully encasing its gregarious body.

Don't tell Erika, but I think these things are super-creepy. They look like piles of snakes, and I'm aware of their reputation in the more, um, "questionable" pornography projects. My mind reels at the mere thought of such works; thankfully I've never seen them for myself, or else I might force bleach into my eyes.

"Tantantan!"

Erika ordered a Power Whip. I wanted to try Fissure, a long-shot, but basically the only thing Steelix could do to the bulky seaweed-gorgon. Sadly, he never got the chance. Vines, thick as Erika's thighs, pounded Steelix into submission. True to my predictions, Steelix groaned his last gasp of vitality and fainted.

"Return, Steelix."

I contemplated my options.

"Oh dear, what ever will you do now that Steelix is gone?" Erika mocked.

"Oh shut up!"

We were battling on an abandoned beach-volleyball court, the netting torn down and tossed aside. The sand was not as conducive for Ground-type attacks as hard clay. Steelix had not been able to Earthquake or perform subterranean maneuvers as well as I had wanted. If not for that, I might have been able to milk another KO or two out of him. Nonetheless, he had given me a 5-3 advantage and I didn't intend to waste it. The question was who should succeed him.

"Against Tangrowth? Power Whip seems to indicate a physical brawler," I thought out loud.

"Perhaps this will work- Skarmory!" I called out. The steel-feathered raptor emerged, stubborn as usual.

"Tangrowth, recall!"

"Spikes!" I ordered, knowing Skarmory was too slow to attack the retreating Tangrowth, and didn't hit hard enough to make attacking the incoming Pokémon worthwhile. Skarmory let loose a flurry of sharpened spikes from between his feathers, smattering the ground where Tangrowth had left the battlefield. An Exeggutor appeared in its place, hopping painfully across the spikes before clearing them.

"Skarmory, try using Whirlwind to herd the foe back onto the spikes," I ordered my pokemon. He didn't understand the command, and only heard "Whirlwind". Subsequently, a gusting wind funnel blew directly towards Exeggutor. I expected the opponent to dodge…

"Psychic!"

Exeggutor lit up, an aura of incandescent violet surrounding it. Skarmory squawked, finding himself being dragged forward into his own Whirlwind. The vortex flung the bird straight back towards me. I reflexively raised my arms, triggering the pokeball's recapture function accidentally. Skarmory was drawn in and locked inside the device.

Materialization and dematerialization was not a perfectly efficient process. If repeated too many times, in too short a window, it could cause a loss of genetic information during the transition. Called "Margin Deficiency Errors", these could cause seriously ugly and bizarre wounds; for instance, a Pokémon could pop out with half its vertebrae missing. Every Pokeball was designed with a safety
timer built in, in order to prevent MDE. The timer disallowed a Pokémon from reappearing for a short period, the length of which was determined by various factors, such as the Pokémon's size, organic complexity, and metabolic energy reserves. Moves like Whirlwind and Dragon Tail were specifically tailored to exploit this safety delay.

In other words, I needed to bring someone else out to fight until the ball unlocked.

"Hmm."

With Steelix fainted and Skarmory in timeout, I needed to think hard about this one."Magnemite," I decided upon.

"With Skarmory gone… return, Exeggutor! Tangrowth!"

My little Steel-Electric appeared on the battlefield long enough to use Signal Beam, dealing moderate damage, and promptly getting one-shot by Super Power. I sighed, a little disappointed- in myself, not my Pokémon. I could have avoided that KO, but was too lazy. The light on Skarmory's ball clicked from dull red to a more vibrant crimson.

"Skarm Skarm, you're up again."

The battle progressed, with Erika doing much better than when she was facing Steelix. Skarmory scared her, forcing her to come up with increasingly complex stratagems for avoiding or hindering the bird. Against Magneton and Tyko, she had a much easier time of it.

"Seed Bomb!"

And there goes Tyko. I felt sorry for the Piplup, it was her first official battlefield fainting. It is a little touchy, having to throw such a cute, innocent Pokémon into battle like that. You always wonder if they'll adapt to the battling lifestyle or not. Among my old Pokémon, Choir and Oddish hadn't ever gotten used to the fighting, and so hadn't seen combat in at least three years.

"Well, it's even again," I murmured. Three versus three.

"Jasmine! Is this all you have?" Erika asked, a tiny bit incredulous.

"Pretty much."

My friend and opponent settled into a reserved posture, crossing her arms.

"Then this would be the time for me to explain what I hinted at earlier. My assessment is that you're much too reliant on Steelix for your staying power. Magneton has the firepower, but is too vulnerable, not just to Ground attacks, but also to status effects and special attacks. Skarmory has impressive defensive capabilities, but lacks a strong punch. Your others are just too weak to be competing."

"Thanks for the dissection. Any other complaints about my roster?" I said, crossly.

"Well, the point of battling you was for me to see, personally, where you were as a Pokémon trainer."

She smiled and tilted her head to the side, as if to say, 'sorry!'. That smile told me she's enjoying the hassle she's giving me, though.

"If this had been your usual three-versus-three match, Steelix would have given you an
insurmountable advantage. With him gone, though, you struggle. Your other Pokémon have their individual advantages, but cumulatively they work in support of Steelix. Steelix's contribution to the overall battle effort becomes less impactful when you're forced into four-participant-plus battles. Your other Pokémon need to create their fair share of knock-outs. Even if they remain support, you are probably better off saving Steelix for last, after your stallers have softened the opponent."

"I could have told you all that without a battle! My strategy takes all of that into consideration. I haven't forgotten how to fight my own style," I told her.

"I wondered if you had… or if you were just going easy on me because I'm your friend. Otherwise, why did you lead with Steelix?"

"Because… I'm feeling lazy. I don't care if I win or lose this match," I admitted.

"THERE! That's the issue!" Erika shouted excitedly, pointing at me.

"What?"

"It doesn't matter who you're facing or how bad your day has been or how lazy you're feeling. You need to take every battle seriously!"

"That's pretty generic advice," I told her. "But it's too feel-goody. I thought you were going to help me train with real tactics and strategies."

Erika shook her head.

"You are brilliant, my dear. I could not hope to teach you anything about battling itself, nor could my Pokémon challenge your Pokémon in any meaningful way; yours are much stronger. But what I can teach you is the reason for why we are even right now, despite you being the better trainer."

"Because…"

"Because you let your negative emotions interfere with your fighting spirit." She crossed her arms again.

"That's an obtuse way of saying it, but I think I understand," I said.

"The difference between merely winning the majority of your matches, and beating out the majority of your challengers, is the willpower to go all-out every single match. Only then will your victories be so complete that your challengers will become demoralized and not return for rematches."

"It's too hard to be psyched for every single battle," I complained.

"Nonsense! It's all about willpower! Mental stamina! And simple decisions. Do you want to keep being a Gym Leader, or do you want to move back in with your mother and beg her for a job?!"

"GAH!" I gagged and sputtered.

SHE KNOWS ME TOO DAMN WELL!!!

Put it that way, and there's no need to go looking for motivation! Like hell I'm moving back in with my mother!

"Alright, Erika, I'll take you seriously now." I gripped my pokeball in my fist, tight enough to make my knuckles go white.
"That's the spirit. But, know that I won't back down either. I fully intend on winning. You're too reliant on Steelix, and now that he's down, I feel like you have nothing left that can seriously hurt my Pokémon."

I waved her down.

"Keep talking to yourself. I'm going to beat you with Skarmory, eventually." It might take a long time, but Skarmory could eventually win just using Roost and Peck. It would be boring, but it was the sure path to victory.

"Don't underestimate your opponent either. What will you do when the easy-but-practical route is taken away?" Erika asked.

"How would you do that?"

And by way of demonstration, Erika called out her sixth Pokémon.

"Bellossom!"

It looks so little and weak compared to Vileplume. What does she expect it to do against Skarmory? Any number of things, I reckon. It wasn't a matter of if Skarmory had a counter for her attacks, but rather if I could predict which one she was going to use in time to relay the counter to Skarmory. This is where auto-reaction training would have been invaluable.

"Bellossom, Petal Burst S!"

"Skarm, Aerial Ace!" I called out, expecting Petal Dance. It was better to cut through the initial storm of petals than attempt to tank the directed floral vortex that was about to follow. Skarmory duly launched himself forward, wings brandished like sickles-

-only to stop three feet short of the target. He slumped forward, as if fainted.

"One-shot?" I inquired, not sure as to what had happened and disbelieving Bellossom had the capability to take Skarmory down in a single blow.

"Just sleeping."

"Uh? Oh! You borrowed Violet's tactic, didn't you?"

Erika let out a sly smile.

The Petal Dance had been laced with Sleep Powder; Whirlwind would have been the correct counter. Too late now. I recalled Skarmory before he became Bellossom's plaything.

"See what I mean? Part of being serious means accounting for the unexpected!"

"I get it, I get it!"

"Some more advice. This battle won't go on your record, so try experimenting! It won't count against you."

"I hate losing though," I whined.

"I know you do. If you want to succeed in life, though, you have to do things you don't like in order to harvest benefits later on. Use this as a learning opportunity. Don't be afraid to take risks just because there might be consequences! Being conservative makes especially no sense here, in a mock
What she's saying makes sense. Thinking it over, there was something I wanted to try, if only because if I didn't, this battle would become a 5v6 affair. In other words, I needed to use my sixth Pokémon… even if he might not like it.

"Amphy!" I called over to him.

The Pokémon had patiently watched me direct the battle from a perch atop a picnic table. I slapped my thigh, indicating for him to come to my side.

"Ampha!"

"You're going to battle!"

"Amph…" He didn't seem at all enthused by that idea. Nonetheless, he obediently plodded over to me. His gaze wavered between me, tepid, and at Erika and her Pokémon, fearful.

I had not used Amphy in a Pokémon battle since… ever? Not a single gym battle, to be sure. No, never even a semi-official battle. Only childish mock battles when I was very young, before I even knew type advantages. Back then, he wasn't even in my care yet. He wasn't even Amphy yet, just Ampharos. I was seven years old the last time this Pokémon let off a Spark in battle. It was truly taxing my memory to reach that far into my childhood.

He keeps eyeing me. Asking me 'Why am I here?'. Worried that he might be hurt. Worried that he might not live up to expectations.

"This is your time to shine!" I told him, trying to psyche him up. Maybe what Amphy needs is a little competition in his life? We'll find out.

"Amphy, forward!" I called.

"Oh? Ampharos? I did not think he could battle."

"You asked me to experiment. Well, here's my scientific thesis: Amphy is gonna zap your butt!" Erika muffled a laugh.

"Bel bel!" Bellossom was ready, even becoming eager upon seeing the shyness of its foe.

"Um, Amphy, Safeguard!"

"Solarbeam!"

Bellossom absorbed energy, while Amphy stumbled through the motions of creating a status-protection charm. Several times he failed because he seemingly could not remember how to keep the mental incantations straight. I frowned, already regretting this experiment. Safeguard was one of the few moves I expected Amphy to know - not for battles, but to allow him to protect himself from weather, hypothermia, illness, poisons, and other nasty, unexpected surprises.

"BEEEEELLLLLL!" Bellossom let loose a brilliant beam of concentrated solar energy, pulsing across Amphy's right flank. He yelped in shock and pain, letting off a reflexive Flash, his tail-bulb lighting up even brighter than Bellossom's burning ray of light. Clutching his side, he looked towards his
opponent. Erika had ordered a second Solar Beam.

"Amph!"

"Amphy, what are you doing? Amphy! Hey, no, I can't shield you!" Amphy, fearing a second Solar Beam, had taken cover behind me. Bellossom held the burning core of the Solarbeam in reserve, waiting for Amphy to come back out into the open.

"Amphy! Go back out there! After years being cooped up in the tower, don't you want a chance to battle like my other Pokémon?"

I pulled the Pokémon out in front of myself and shoved him forward. Bellossom took the cue and let fly the second Solarbeam. This one hit the sand directly between Amphy's haunches, blowing up the Pokémon and sending him flipping over backwards.

"Oh dear. For an Ampharos, he isn't even very specially bulky?" Erika commented.

"No, I guess not."

He was slow to recover, and did not move very fast when he did.

"Well, Bellossom, please finish him- gently please. A Mega Drain will do."

Bellossom was having too much fun, however. It danced its way over to the cowering Ampharos. In one stubby arm it formed a vermillion-colored orb.

"Amphy, get up. Don't let it touch you!" I implored. "Spark! Signal Beam! Light Screen! Thunderbolt?! Do something!"

"Bel- OSSOM!"

Erika's Pokémon moved in for the kill, planting the Mega Drain orb directly into Amphy's abdomen. Amphy jumped in shock.

There was a crack.

My vision blurred. Sunspots bloomed right at my point of focus, making it impossible to see anything. My ears rang painfully, like the tone given off by a television emergency test. I tried concentrating, wondering which, if any, of my senses would come back to normal first.

"Oh dear," Erika said. "Turns out audio returned first. "Bellossom, were you hit? I suppose Amphy has some fight in him after all. Was that a Flash? Well, no matter, just use a Giga Drain to end it."

"Amph."

"Hmm. Bellossom?"

"Amphy?"

We humans' vision returned at the same time. Amphy stood directly before me, head bowed. He was clearly upset.

"Bellossom, Giga Dr- Bellossom?!"

Bellossom stood rooted upright. Soft whorls of smoke lifted off its head. There was a smell, like sulfur, wafting through the air.
"She's… she's… fainted," Erika said in a daze.

"What's the matter?" I inquired. All throughout Steelix's blitzkrieg, Erika had kept her composure intact. Her reactions, her faces of shock and despair, had only been feigned then. Now, though? Genuine shock, genuine fear.

"What was that?"

"I don't know. Amphy, what did you do?"

"Ampharooo." He hesitated, but then began miming. A whirling motion with both paws, before one shot off in a zig-zag pattern, finally exploding at one end.

"He says Thunderbolt. What's surprising?"

"Bellossom…" Erika uttered. "She was my strongest Pokémon… and Special Defense was her strongest attribute. I've known her to take super-effective Overheat attacks without being troubled. Yet… a single, resisted Thunderbolt… in one hit. Ridiculous." She shook her head. "I'm terribly sorry. I shouldn't have goaded you like that. We shouldn't have fought here without a shield generator. If only you had told me how strong Ampharos was."

"I didn't know." I looked upon my mute Pokémon with wonder, shortly transforming into excited joy.

Amphy! You DO have something you're good at! You're not just a biological lighthouse beacon! Okay, you may be slow, and bad at performing complicated commands, but… that was your Thunderbolt! Wow!

"I'm so happy for you! You're a Thunderbolt-nuke-plant!" I embraced my Pokémon, who did not reciprocate with anywhere near the same amount of enthusiasm.

"Well, um… I suppose we should finish the battle," Erika stuttered.

It wasn't close. I urged Amphy to create a Safeguard for himself and the team, which he finally pulled off while Erika switched for Exeggutor. I then sent Amphy to the back and let out Magneton. Without having to worry about Sleep or Paralysis or any of those other nasty effects, Magneton was virtually immune to Exeggutor's attacks. Signal Beam decimated the Pokémon. Tangrowth attempted a Super Power, but a Thunder Wave killed its momentum. A Flash Cannon nailed the creeper in the face, blasting the Pokémon into fainting. Its vines stood straight out from it body.

"Gross," I muttered, witnessing what Tangrowth looked like underneath its cloak of vines. Pardon me if I don't describe the grotesque sight.

Anyways, I won 3-0, and was feeling immensely better about myself.

Clapping sounds came from behind. Lyra, Ethan, and some bystanders stood to applaud me. I turned to wave at them, only to hear more clapping coming from my front. Erika was tapping her hands together. We greeted each other with a hug at the midpoint of the field.

"I expected to lose, actually. I just wanted to show you a few things along the way," Erika said.

"Like coming to battle mentally prepared," I echoed.

"Most importantly that, yes, correct. Also, to not rely on Steelix so much. It isn't good to have one all-powerful Pokémon, but no backup. No Pokémon, even the legendaries, can handle every other
Pokémon in existence."

"I know that. It's why I've been focusing on acquiring new Pokémon recently. Even before the summit, I had challengers bringing nothing but Steelix-counters- and still winning. I couldn't get anything going with Magneton, Magnemite, not even Magcargo. It was very irksome."

"It's good to know you understand that. Still, I must say I underestimated just how strong Steelix is. Even with you being lazy, I did not expect him to handle half of my team."

"Ha!" I nodded to myself, eyes closed, a bit smug. "I didn't get to be a Gym Leader by relying on the likes of Sunkern and Magnemite! Steelix is not merely my strongest, he is virtually my entire team all by himself."

"If you raise the rest of your team up to his level, I'm sure you will be among the strongest Gym Leaders in the nation, if not the world," Erika predicted. I chuckled at the suggestion. "Oh, and even though he is required for lighthouse duty, would you see if Ampharos could battle for you occasionally? At the very least, you should measure his Special Attack rating with one of those statistics machines. I suspect everyone present will gasp when they see the number."

"Hahahahaha!" I began laughing to myself, a bit harder than the humor of the joke merited.

"You have visitors," Erika said, nodding to fresh arrivals.

Lyra and then Ethan congratulated me on my victory. The man was curt and stoic, the woman was mildly exuberant, as typical of their personalities.

"That was a great battle Jasmine! Hey, I want you to show me that thing Steelix did, that thing…"

"What thing?"

"The thing where he looked like a rotor tiller, to create a trap for Vileplume."

"Oh, that. It was a Bulldoze-enhanced Sand Tomb. I actually needed it to get down to the dirt bed to use Earthquake."

"Yeah, can you show me that?"

"Steelix is fainted…" I said, unsure of how we could remedy that.

"I have some Revives."

"Revives? But those are expensive! I wouldn't want you to waste your items-"

"No problem! I'm not hurting for inventory, hahaha!"

So we revived Steelix and put him through the motions. The Pokémon had finished creating another crater reaching to the dirt-bed when another figure hovered into view. It was just barely in my peripheral vision, so I gave him a quick glance, and then a double-take.

"Volkner…"

What is he doing here? My guard went up instantly.

"Hi." He had his hands tucked into his pockets, as if embarrassed to have come forward. "Watched your battle. It was impressive- Amphar- I mean Amphy was pretty spectacular."
I nodded. Compliments like that were nice and all, and especially to receive praise for an Electric Pokemon from the most famous of all Electric-type specialists in the nation was a little flattering. But I wondered exactly what Volkner was doing here. It couldn't be coincidence that this was the third time, in three different places, that we had met in under twenty-four hours. Was he stalking me?

"So, I, uh, found your part," he muttered. He indicated a cardboard box wrapped in tape and labels sitting on a park bench, being guarded by a Raichu.

"Good. You'll fix the generator tomorrow?"

"Yeah, probably. I'll catch a ride back home tomorrow afternoon. In the meantime…"

"What is it?" I tensed. He looked embarrassed, like he didn't want to say what he was about to say, especially with company surrounding us. He glanced at them, a signal I took as wishing they would disappear. Not going to happen, unfortunately.

"I wanted to, um, have a little alone time… with Amphy."

…

"Amphy?!"

That was either the lamest copout of all time, or you have some explaining to do, mister!

"How do I explain it?" He put a hand through his hair, slightly oily from the looks of it, bearing out the time and effort spent scouring Olivine on my behalf. His gaze wandered towards the ocean expanse.

"He's an Electric-type, so you could say, I care for the dude more than what's appropriate, considering I'm a stranger. Still, I'd like to see if I can figure out what's wrong with him, and maybe, help train him. He's got some promise as a nuker- that Thunderbolt was as strong as anything my Zapdos ever ripped off."

"I see…"

Now I understand it. He got caught in the trap.

"I understand. Sure. Go ahead."

"Thanks."

"What was that all about?" Erika said, as the three of us girls watched the Sunnyshore Gym Leader make his way towards Amphy. My Pokémon squatted atop a flight of steps, anxiously looking this way and that.

"I've been worried that Volkner still has feelings for me," I admitted. "But, this seems perfectly reasonable. I don't think it's a ploy to get on my good side."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I understand his feelings. Towards Amphy, I mean. Amphy just naturally makes you want to hug and comfort him. It seems like Volkner's feeling the same maternal instinct I got when I first met Amphy. Um… I guess paternal is the right word for Volkner. That Pokemon is just so pitiful, you can't help but love him."

"Everyone? That may be a stretch, but…" Erika kept glancing back and forth between me and
"I'm going to call someone."

"Who?"

"From my gym," Erika said quickly. "Be back."

"Alright." I watched her go. My tummy was suddenly craving sweets. I want some of that cake now.

Behind me, the sky turned dark for a moment. A crack and a flash ripped through the air, the echo of thunder rebounded off the cliff-walls. Looks like Volkner coaxed Amphy into using Thunderbolt again.

He approached me as I leaned upon a railing, plate full of half-eaten cake in hand.

"Hey there," he said casually. I cocked my head to one side. He looked vaguely familiar, so I didn't react with any obvious alarm. However, I couldn't place him immediately, which put me on guard.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Warren. Y'know... don't you remember me?" he asked, somewhat disbelievingly, as if it were impossible anyone should forget his mug. Between an earring dangling off one lobe, slicked, spiked hair-style, and distinctive neo-modern wardrobe, he did cut an "unforgettable" figure. At least that would be true for normal people with normal facial-recognition ability. For myself, it wasn't until he mentioned his name that my memory clicked into place.

"Warren... you were a challenger at my gym a few weeks ago."

"Yeah! Yeah that's me!" He lit up, happy as can be.

I turned away, suddenly much less interested in the visitor. "My apologies, but the gym is closed. You'll have to wait until tomorrow afternoon, at least, for a rematch."

"Hey, wait a minute, don't jump to conclusions! I just want to chat. I saw your battle down there, and I thought I'd pay my respects to such an ace victory."

"Thank you, but I don't need accolades."

He's irritating me. He's sidling up beside me and irritating me further! What does he want? Go away!

"You were awesome. Your Pokémon are awesome. I was pretty mad when I lost to you, but watching you battle some more, it's clear to me how much farther I still have to go to challenge the league."

"Apparently," I shot at him. He's staring straight at me as we're talking. It's unnerving, so I tried breaking eye contact and concentrating on the various beach-goers. Warren wouldn't take the hint and kept slathering words of chit-chat upon me.

"So, hey, why don't we go out for a bite to eat? I'd love chatting a bit, take some training from you. You're pretty cool in my book, there's no shame in saying I could use some lessons from a strong,
pretty gal such as yourself…"

Okay then! I was about to flare my temper, when-

"Excuse me," another male voice broke in.

"Oh hey… um…" Warren took a step away from me as the man approached the two of us. Well, I would say boy, because of his young looks, but his face practically radiated chilling, brooding seriousness; the kind of look that no one dares to mess with.

"Ethan!"

"Jasmine, who is this?"

"Just a Cooltrainer," I shot out testily, eying the crass interloper.

"Hello. What were you talking to Jasmine about?" Ethan asked Warren, in none too friendly a tone.

"Nothing much. I was… just leaving. You two have a nice day," Warren said, hands held up in a pacifying posture, before exiting the landing.

"He wasn't hassling you or anything, was he?" Ethan asked, his voice and face devoid of the scary intensity it had carried a moment earlier.

"Actually, I think he was trying to flirt with me. 'Trying', being the operative word. I also think he might've thought you were my boyfriend."

"Heh."

"Where is Lyra?" I asked. It's unusual to see Ethan wandering around freely; usually he's either being dragged along behind his girlfriend or else looking for her.

"Lyra and Erika decided to try swimming. I would have thought you'd join them."

"Oh, hahahaha! No."

Ethan looked at me bemusedly.

"Look at the unwanted attention I get just from standing here. Me in a swimsuit would just be like casting Mareep into a hungry pack of Houndooms. Also, I don't want to freeze to death. Also, I didn't bring my swimsuit." As I gave these perfectly valid excuses, I scanned the ocean front for a pair of brightly-colored bikinis. Sure, enough, Erika and Lyra could be seen darting in and out of the waves, shivering and squealing when so much as their knees went underwater.

"Eh. You don't need to excuse yourself to me. It's a cold day."

As if on cue, a wind gust blew over our thin bodies, causing both of us to shiver in tandem.

We stood apart, leaning on the railing and watching our friends combat the chill of the water. The silence felt awkward, making me want to say something, anything. However, it took a few minutes to think of something appropriate. Why am I so socially-challenged?

"So, I guess you saw my battle. That's been my day, basically, but how has yours been? For that matter, how's life with Lyra? I've barely gotten to speak with you two."

"It's fine." He sighed. "She has me doing chores, basically, and in my free time I've been trying to
"figure out our money situation," he said, indicating a folded up piece of paper stuffed in his pocket. "Other than that? Playing with the Pokes, I guess. Just an average day."

"And before today? How's life in general?"

He paused a moment.

"Full of worries," he admitted at last. I gave him a "mmhmm" in response.

"I know that feeling."

"Lyra's kind of a handful at times. Hard to keep up with her. Money. Lots of money problems. They told me I'd get to a certain age and reality would slap me across the face with a big stack of bills… I didn't believe them until this autumn."

"Teehee."

"What?"

"Do you usually say 'autumn' instead of 'fall'?"

He checked his memory, eyes scanning the roof of his eye sockets.

"Yeah, I guess I do."

"It's funny; so do I. Everyone else seems to shorthand it. I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"Haha. What was I saying? Oh, worries. Lyra, bills, Pokémon League stuff. It all kind of connects, actually. We can't keep adventuring without Lyra's prize income, which makes her think she's entitled to spend it however she wants. But she's terrible with budgets."

"Don't you earn money from your winnings?" I inquired.

"Not much. I'm not really good enough to make a salary off of battles," he said.

"But I was told you won the Kanto tournament?"

"And lost a championship bout two weeks later, so, eh." He shrugged.

"Well that's very mature of you to put finances first. I feel like I have a hundred different things to worry about, and even though money should be the first, it's more like, number fifty on that list." I popped a mouthful of cake into my maw.

"Mature? Huh…" He stared off in silence for a minute.

I get the faint feeling he's not in the brightest of moods. Not really sad, nor angry, nor stressed. What's the word I'm looking for? Melancholy, that's it. He's showing signs of melancholy.

"What about you? How's life? What's on your mind?" he piped in.

I pointed to a far corner of the beach.

"Overwrought by worry, currently courtesy of that naked, moping lambchop over there."

Volkner had continued trying to engage Amphy. Occasionally his pestering paid off and Amphy would do whatever little stunt he asked, but mostly the human just talked to the Pokémon and the
Pokémon sat around indifferently.

"Amphy?" Ethan asked, for clarification.

"Right, Amphy." I nodded along, grateful he remembered my Pokémon's pet nickname. Erika certainly had trouble remembering it.

"What's wrong with him?"

"That's just it, I wish I knew. He's been acting very depressed the past few months. I have trouble getting him out of bed, and I assume he's having trouble sleeping. His appetite has plummeted. It's taking more and more effort to get him to do his job. He shrugs off doing things he used to like. I don't get it at all. Volkner there thought the reason was him being cooped up all day, and that he just needed a vacation. But it doesn't look like he's enjoying himself at all."

Ethan began studying Amphy and Volkner's interaction alongside me. The pair played a half-hearted game of patty-cake, until Amphy scooted away.

"Amphy is how old?" Ethan asked.

"Um…" I had to think about this one. "17."

"That's getting on for an Ampharos, isn't it?"

"They live to be up to 140 years old," I replied.

"I meant," Ethan backpedaled, and then stuttered, trying to find words delicate enough to not offend me. "I mean, he's a full adult now, not even a young adult. Ampharos mature very quickly once they've evolved, don't they?"

"Yeah, I guess they do."

"My uncle and aunt run a Mareep ranch, so I know a little about the creatures."

"Oh really? That's neat. Do you visit often?"

"No, not really. My knowledge's a little off, since it's from my pre-teens." He shook his head, and then continued to monitor the subject of our conversation.

"I see. Well, he's 17 I think."

"I see. But that would make you a toddler when he was born. Was he domesticated or wild born?"

"Domesticated. He was born on one of the ranches up north. Why do you ask?"

"Domesticated Pokémon evolve at an earlier age than wild ones. Which means Amphy is relatively mature for his age. Hmm."

"What're you thinking?" I asked.

"Still figuring it out," he replied. "Tell me about him."

"About Amphy? Well, I began taking care of him… I don't know. Before I moved to Ecruteak. Before I even had my own first Pokémon. I was eight, I think, when we first met."

"You're not his original trainer?" Ethan asked, a bit surprised.
"No! Haha, no. I'm not even his actual trainer. His Pokémon e-certificate has me on the trainer's tab, but I still only have joint custody of him with the City of Olivine. So, technically, Mayor Adoch is his trainer. But I've been deputized to look after him."

"That's convoluted. How'd you end up in an arrangement like that?" he asked.

I smiled at the question.

Most memories fade away. They get lost. I'm finding that recent memories are more susceptible to this than old ones. The memories we weave as we're growing up and experiencing life for the first time are the ones that stick with us, even as the march of age warps and blurs them. My childhood spent with Amphy produced many of these warm, fuzzy moments.

"Amphy belonged to the former Gym Leader of Olivine City. He was a gruff old man, and a good battler- extremely good, I think. Could have been a regional champion if he had wanted to. Anyways, he knew my parents and my teachers, so I was always around him and his Pokémon. He let me play with this Ampharos he had at his house. Amphy was newly evolved, and didn't have any friends or get any attention from the others. I felt sorry for the Pokémon. We became friends, playing silly games and exploring and investigating and other childish adventures."

"Fast-forward to high-school. Mr. Beret, that was his name, got sick. He decided he wanted to retire, but the size of his estate and his Gym Leadership wouldn't let him do it right away… So he gradually unloaded some of his duties on me. Eventually I became the de facto Gym Leader of Olivine. I guess this was a year, maybe less, before you met me. So, another thing that was happening around that time was Glitter Lighthouse's Ampharos was growing old too, and they needed a replacement. Mr. Beret offered Amphy for the job, on condition I took care of him, since, basically, the two of us were inseparable. We've been in each other's lives for nine years now."

"I see. That's pretty much how I found you the way I did. I had to track you down to the lighthouse in order to get a battle. You were making oatmeal for Amphy, I remember."

"Oh, right…" My mood soured. Some teenaged memories are better left locked and buried. Ethan had arrived to challenge my gym not too long before the whole crisis happened. The events of that one night somewhat overshadowed the previous week's, so that it all ran together in a mish-mash of illogical daydreams.

"December 23rd, 2005, the day they handed me Amphy's pokeball. That's a date I'll never forget. Since then, he's been the one constant in my life. He likes sleeping, and playing games, especially board games. Simples ones, like checkers, or Go-Fish, although that's a card game. He's very gentle, and kind, and considerate. Sometimes a little selfish, usually around food. Before this funk, he's always been a little love-machine. He's very affectionate, but he also wants a lot of affection in return… Heh, I guess I went on rambling. Maybe I should say sorry? But I don't want to. It's shameful, but I love talking about Amphy."

"Not shameful. Endearing," Ethan offered. "Lyra talks the same way about her Typhlosion, and I find that cute."

"Mmm." It's good to know my friends have the same affection towards their Pokémon as I do to mine. It's a quality I look for when making them my friends.

"What I was getting at, is that Amphy is… older, as far as Ampharos go. I think I know what's wrong with him," Ethan said.

"Oh?"
Does he? This should be interesting.

"He's lonely."

"I…"

I'm a little confused. Lonely? Is that all it is? Is that all Ethan has to offer? It makes sense, but then again, how does loneliness cause depression? How is Amphy lonely when he has a monopoly on my attention; and even now when he has all kinds of company, he refuses to engage anyone?

"I don't follow…." I said.

Ethan was still gazing at Amphy, now pattering his way up a multi-tiered seawall.

"How do you put this… well, there really isn't a good way, so forgive me." He paused. I stared at him, wondering what was worth so much reticence.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm not sure if you want to hear it, it's a bit… well…" Ethan stuttered off.

"Tell me!" I commanded.

"He wants to mate."

"Oh……"

There is the common expression of having one's mind blown. Mine has not exploded, so much as deflated like a gashed Drifblim.

"How can you tell?" I asked, trying desperately to control my own awkwardness. I can see why Ethan is being coy- I have a hard enough time dealing with my own sexuality, let alone human sexuality- bring up the question of Pokémon sexuality and it's all too easy to venture into taboo, squicky territory. I'm liable to freak out if handled improperly.

But, thankfully Ethan was handling the matter very maturely.

"It's the way he keeps looking around. Haven't you noticed it?"

"Huh? No."

"See. Right now." Ethan pointed out Amphy's current behavior. The Pokémon was sitting upright, his head on a swivel, moving from one point of interest to another. "He's not just staring around. He's looking at all the other humans and Pokémon, checking them out. It's a guy thing. He's probably hoping to find a lady Ampharos."

"You really think so?"

"Yes. That's my hypothesis. I'd be willing to stake money on it. Amphy has the look of being lonely and love-sick, and how you described him being affectionate-yearning, contrasted with how he's cooped up all day and night, only confirms it for me."

"Huh… That's quite something for me to take in."

Amphy… to think of my lifelong companion, that innocent, sexless partner, one I have spent countless hours snuggling, countless nights sleeping besides, countless touches, countless pettings,
countless caresses… that he desired someone himself- not merely anyone, but a female member of
his own species that he could copulate with- it was an utterly strange concept to me; and yet, it made
all too much sense.

"Does it really have to be a girl Ampharos?"

"I'd recommend it. Cross-breeding is…"

"Right."

Inter-species relationships are not exactly ideal, despite what the ultra-liberals and move-breeders
want to espouse.

"But I mean," I started, "Does it have to be sexual? Do you think the only answer to his loneliness is
for a mating partner?"

Ethan sighed.

"I assume so. I mean, I'm no expert, but I can guess trained Pokémon and humans think alike, so
Pokémon boys think like me too. And, as a boy, there's a void that can't be filled by a purely platonic
relationship. It's gut-wrenching, and I agree it causes us to do stupid things sometimes, but it's just a
part of our gender."

"I thought boys separated desires. They could… Jigglewiggly without feeling any emotional
attachment. Is that not true?"

"It is true," Ethan said, deliberating every word. "But it's also the exception."

"So you don't think he's just lonely for companionship?"

"No."

"And he's just not just 'action-starved', so to speak?" I asked.

"No," Ethan shook his head. "He'd be more manic, more aggressive if that were the case. If he's
depressed because of this, that means it's that unholly mixture of feelings, loneliness, and lust called
love-sickness."

"Heh. So there's nothing I could do for him."

"If I'm right, that would be correct. Unless you two were into- ah forget it, it's too disgusting to even
mention as a joke."

"Hehe." I managed a laugh. "You're right, it is. But I know what you're thinking of, and just for the
sake of clarity, I am absolutely against… um… pokephilia." Actually, the correct word is bestiality,
but to even say such a grotesque concept aloud would make me puke.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to imply that."

"It's okay." I took my mind off of the abhorrent topic by returning to observing Amphy.

The Ampharos hadn't moved from his spot atop the seawall. Volkner was busy tossing frisbees
across the field, and Amphy had been coaxed into knocking them down with precisely-aimed
Thunder Waves. His aim was only about 50%, though. He wasn't putting much effort into the game.

"So, he needs a girlfriend?" I said, summing up Ethan's speculation.
"That's my best guess." He sighed and then braced himself against another gust. I did the same, stealing a lingering glance towards my friend's boyfriend.

"Thank you," I told him.

"For what?"

"For being honest, and yet considerate. I know it's hard balancing the two."

"I try." He perked up. "They're coming back," he said, gesturing towards the two other females of our entourage. They were shivering, rather violently, but wore enormous, goofy grins across their face. I hurried out with bath towels to save them from the wind chill (and their own stupidity).

The rest of the day was spent in harmless fun. The cake was shortly devoured—whatever the humans couldn't stomach was thrown to the Pokémon. Ethan and Ambipom helped pack up the picnic, while Lyra and I picked up trash. Erika was in charge of collecting the Pokémon. She engaged Volkner for Amphy's return, which evolved into a longer conversation.

Lyra and I were at it for a good ten minutes, before we could keep true to the nature-lover motto "Leave a site better than you found it". Meanwhile we chatted about random things. At last picking up the last bit of aluminum foil out of the dirt, I rose up and dusted myself off. Lyra did likewise. We had been talking about how different it was to battle as a Gym Leader and a gym challenger, and had concluded the challengers had more fun of it because they had something more concrete to strive for.

"Hey Lyra, change of subject, but can I ask you something personal?"

"Yeah, sure!"

"How are you and Ethan getting along?" I asked.

"Fine, I suppose," she answered, shrugging at me as if I had implied a serious question and instead had asked something terribly silly instead. But… I wasn't being silly.

"Good. Don't let him go," I warned.

"Of course not! He's too good a housewife!" she joked.

"I don't ever say this about a guy, but I will here: Ethan's a nice man. Don't lose him."

The geography of Olivine, with the beach facing south, the sea expanding southeast, and the mountains jutting out just a tad due west, is such that we get spectacular ocean sunrises, but rather bland, landlocked sunsets. The sky doesn't light up in a fiery rainbow, but merely fades into darkening shades of grey. The orb of fusion that lights the world dips unceremoniously behind a western tree line, taking the day with it. Night comes in imperceptible degrees.

In short, Olivine dusks felt rather empty. Much like I felt at the moment.

I had told everyone to go home without me. I wanted to stay a little bit longer.

"Amphy."
"Amphy."

We sat side by side on the highest terrace. The vastness of the sea stretched out before us, with nothing to discern but darkness, nothing to hear but the rolling of the waves. My fingers dug into the dry grass.

"Amphy," I repeated.

This time he didn't reply.

"Amphy," I said yet again. The Pokémon sunk deeper into a slouch.

"Do you love me?"

"Phoo." - a reluctant 'yes'.

"I love you Amphy."

"Auoo," he let out dolefully.

"It's alright."

I scooted sideways and put an arm around him.

"It'll be alright. You're my Amphy, and I'd do anything to make you happy. Well, almost anything. Anything reasonable. Haa…” My thoughts meandered for a moment. "I don't want to lose you like I lost Graveler. I want you to love me. I want us to be happy together, like we've always been. Is that selfish of me? I don't want to think so. I don't want to be a selfish person. Am I?" I asked my Pokémon.

He slowly shook his head.

"I think I am. Or at least, have been. I've been wanting to keep you all to myself, thinking my love was enough to keep you happy. But that's not how the world works. Is it?"

No answer.

"Because if Ethan is right, I can't give you the kind of love you want right now. Is he right?"

His ears twitched. His head perked up, tilting at an angle, curiosity gleaming in his eyes. It was the first positive sign he'd shown all day- the first he's shown in months.

"So that is it," I muttered.

How incredibly selfish of me, to hate and condemn and forbid relationships, destroying all notions of love within my domain, without regard for anyone else's feelings. It was one thing to have my own issues and reject romance involving my own person, but that bitterness had extended to my treatment of my Pokémon.

No!

It has to end with me.

I can't allow my tragedy to continue to hold back and deny happiness to the one I most care for. Even if that meant allowing him to engage in something as primordially disgusting to me as sex. Even if that risked getting my place in his heart replaced by a lover. For his happiness, for Amphy's
happiness, I've got to try. He deserves it. He really does.

I only hope that, unlike Graveler, I can keep our bond intact after the fact.

I winced.

This must be what a mother feels like.

"Amphooo."

"It'll be alright. I'll figure something out," I said, hugging Amphy tightly.
Incoming.

My cellphone beeped, showing me the single-word text message like a harbinger of doom. Or mere nuisance, as I recognized the sender's number.

"Volkner." The blonde haired gallant emerged onto the gym floor. I curtsied as a way of greeting him, because I felt like doing something silly and old-fashioned. The second visitor, filing in right behind Volkner, saw my curtsy and grinned. I did not give this second man so much as a curt nod of the head.

"Oh come on, aren't you happy to see me?" Morty made directly for me. Volkner took his time, checking the machinery of the generators and auto-tillers first.

"I assume you're here to pick him up," I said to Morty while nodding to Volkner.

"Close. He's taking a ferry over and flying out of Goldenrod International. I'm here to pick up his rental car."

"And that isn't just a pretext to see me?" I asked.

"If it were?" He's still grinning. The grin hasn't left his face since he walked in. How long can someone keep their facial muscles strained like that?

"I'd send you packing along."

"Well pack me up, since that's what happened. Even the littlest chance to see your cute angry-face is worth any hardship."

"Grr." -Deadpan guttural issuance. I brushed past the miscreant and approached the Electric Gym Leader. A wad of cash was held in hand.

"Hey," Volkner said, noticing me. He keeps glancing behind me, at Morty, or at the machinery, like he's afraid of eye contact.

"Hello. First thing's first, thank you for this favor. I can't express how much it means to me."

"No problem."

"Secondly, reimbursement for the spare part." The bills dangled before me, ready to be counted.

"Sorry, Jazz, but I already paid for it."

Morty walked up behind me. I glared at him, my temper growing dangerously volcanic. "Did he really?" I asked, addressing Volkner.

"Yeah, he did. I mean, I didn't know it'd bother you," Volkner began.

"It does bother me. YOU!" I pointed a finger at the true culprit. "Stop preying upon my pride and good graces! I don't need this charity!"

"Well in my defense, you did ask me to help you fix the generator," Morty said.
"But-" Ugh. He has a point. Defeated, spiteful, and rash, I turned towards Volkner in a huff and crammed all the bills into his hands.

"For services rendered."

"I can't-"

"Take it!" I insisted. He pushed the entire stack back into my hands, which I refused, which caused the money to spill all over the floor.

"I'm not taking your money."

"Why? I can't stand handouts! Please!"

"You have such a hard time accepting the fact that you need help, Jasmine. Why not just accept the favor already?" Morty asked.

"It's how I was raised."

I did not want to add the underlying implications. If I accepted favors, I would be expected to help others as well. I'm not a charitable person, and I don't go out of my way to help anyone but my closest friends. In turn, I ask that no one asks anything of me. It's a philosophy of independence and self-reliance ingrained into all Mikan women from birth.

"I'll take your money then," Morty said, snapping up bills.

"No! Give it to Volkner!" I grabbed for the currency in Morty's hand, who swiveled it just out of reach. I tried lunging, but overshot and tiptoed beyond him, barely keeping from flopping over.

"I'll let you two figure it out. I'm going under," Volkner said. He hefted a box and toolkit and headed for the basement access hatch.

"How's he been treating you?" Morty asked as soon as his friend was out of earshot.

"Like a typical man still feeling the echoes of a crush. Haa!" I leapt, smacking a few bills out of Morty's hand but still missing the majority. Morty danced around like a ballerina, keeping them just out of my reach. "He's taken to Amphy, been trying to help the poor Poke. He had his Lanturn substitute in just to give Amphy a day off. Ha!" Another misaimed lunge. "I think it's because he's trying to make me happy out of some sentiment that even unrequited love is worth sacrificing for. Valid hypothesis?"

"Valid," Morty said, agreeing while dodging my latest attack.

"Stand still already!"

"Not 'Give me my money back!'? Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Why would I waste a breath to say that? You'd just flip it around on me and still not hand the money over."

"You never know until you try."

I rolled my eyes, settled down, and held out my hand.

"Give me my money back. Please."
The wad of cash flopped into my upturned palm.

"See, wasn't that easy?"

"You're a control freak, aren't you," I accused. "You don't ever cede to other people's wishes, always forcing them to act on your own terms."

"You could say the same about you, stubborn," Morty threw back at me.

"That is a lie!" I exclaimed. "I have countless times bowed to the will of others for the sake of their feelings!" I grabbed him by the collar, staring quite fiercely into his eyes. "Your joke logic only goes so far," I growled.

"Easy there. It's true, though, you hate losing control over the people around you, and you can justify it because you've gotten used to mixing up what you want with what othe-"

THWACK!

He blinked at me, many times, unable to process the pain of being slapped across the face with such force.

"Learn this mister- you know you've pushed a woman too hard when they slap you. That is the surest sign for you to cut it out, not an invitation to continue."

He rubbed his cheek and backed away. "She's hostile today," I heard him mutter under his breath. Thankfully, his verbal assault relented and he took a seat inside the office. My temper simmered for a minute before I felt cool enough to join him.

"Step two," I announced, perhaps a little officiously. "To win my heart, you must halt all joking, kidding, and teasing when I tell you to."

"Understood."

"And I'm telling you now!"

"Understood. May I ask, since we're getting technical, how many steps there are? And is that step two of the three I need to get a kiss? I ask this in all seriousness," he added. I stood over him, arms crossed, weighing his various inquiries.

"I reserve the right to add however many steps I want to the process. And no, these are guidelines for my love, not the three tasks I appointed for the right to my lips. And to be sure, the next two tasks will be much harder. I don't just mean more difficult to achieve, I mean they will test your character much more rigorously than what can be achieved by calling in an old debt, like you did with Volkner."

"Mmm." Morty acknowledged my answer with barely a nod.

"Speaking of, would you mind telling me what Volkner owes you? I'm curious," I said.

"Heh." Morty wouldn't make eye contact. "I know you value honesty, Jazz, but what does integrity mean to you?"

"It's important," I replied, unthinkingly.

"Then I can't tell you. It's a private matter between bros."
"Fine." I sighed, shoulders slumped, my willpower sapped. This one concession I will leave to him.

"My turn," he said. "If Volkner gets the shields working, will that be enough to satisfy the first task?"

"Yes," I confirmed.

"So, then, what will task number two be?"

I bit my lip. This had actually been something I had given a great deal of thought. I wasn't about to give Morty the satisfaction of becoming physically intimate with me without truly testing his moral integrity. Since yesterday evening, a plan had been forming in my mind, one that would also help my everyday worries.

"I want you to earn the respect and love of a Pokémon."

Morty stretched out his right arm, a pokeball held in hand.

"Gengar."

"No!" I stopped him with both hands before he could release the perverted ghost. "Not just any Pokémon. An Ampharos. A female Ampharos."

"Why so specific?" he asked.

"Because I want you to find a love interest for Amphy."

"A love interest?"

"Yes. I talked to you about Amphy's troubles, haven't I?"

"I vaguely recall."

"Recent conversations with certain other people have likely pinpointed his illness, namely a lack of companionship. So I want you to find a girl Ampharos- and what's more, I want her to trust you, and love Amphy. If the two don't get along, you fail the task."

I nodded twice, eyes shut, hands held on hips, congratulating myself for my stroke of genius.

"So you want me to play matchmaker," Morty confirmed.

"Correct."

Wild and newborn Pokémon are like putty: the base and substance are quite set, but their shape is still undetermined. In other words, to a certain extent their character and personality are flat and have yet to emerge to their fullest expression. Being caught by, and living with, and battling for a human trainer is what imbues Pokémon with sentience, and thence on to the more complex facets of individuality. This means that domesticated Pokémon absorb some of the personality of the person who trains them.

This can be seen in my own Pokémon: they are all tough, stubborn, and resolved. They will often ignore common sense in order to follow their own way, and changing their minds is difficult to do. These are all traits they acquired from me.

The same would be true of any Pokémon Morty caught and trained. That's why it's important that he not merely find a random Ampharos and foist her upon Amphy, but that this female Ampharos be his Pokémon and that, having adopted his demeanor, she must be able to capture the heart of dear
Amphy. If Morty's pokemon can succeed at satisfying Amphy's emotional needs, that would reflect on his ability to satisfy mine as well.

"Do you understand the conditions? Your own Ampharos must bond with Amphy. An Ampharos you haven't raised will be disqualified. A rejection by either party will be cause for disqualification."

"Hey, I can't control their feelings," Morty protested.

"Doesn't matter. If this doesn't work out, you and I will never work out."

"All this for a kiss… You weren't kidding when you said it would get tougher. I can't imagine task #3… Or hell, whatever you ask for when it comes time to have sex…"

"Pervert, you're a thousand light-years before you get to even think about that!" I shouted.

"Light years are a unit of space, not time-" he pointed out, to which I already had a comeback.

"And our fastest space rockets only go .00006% of the speed of light! So imagine how much time a thousand light-years really is!"

"Nevertheless, somehow that exaggerated figure shall be crossed within 14 weeks."

"Ugh."

He's delusional. In my mind, under perfect conditions, the minimum amount of time I'd be willing to part with my virginity-

Five years.

I clutched my stomach. My heart fluttered.

By the mere fact I have even put a finite number to that proposition shows that Morty is winning this war, slowly but surely. Against all reason I have now begun contemplating the filthy, revolting, disgusting act of copulation, and the notion of my weakness is making me feel nauseous.

"Under perfect conditions", I reminded myself.

'Perfect' would mean more than simply changing Morty into a more likable man. 'Perfect' meant he could completely overturn every biased, negative belief I've held towards him and his gender for the better part of my lifespan. 'Perfect' meant that, when I go to bed with him, I do so not acting on these primal feelings of lust, but out of love and genuine, reasoned desire to do so.

The lust is there, its an inseparable part of every human being. The sentient desire to bed him isn't. Unless he can find some way of changing that, changing who I am, he and I will never have sex. It's as simple as that.

"Hmm? You're blushing."

He's looking right at me, and I'm returning the stare.

"No I'm not," I said, despite the absurdity of trying to deny something he could see with his own two eyes.

"If you say so. What were you thinking about? The kiss?" he said, leading me on.

I shook my head.
"You sure? I mean, kissing is really not that big of a deal. Didn't you have cousins that kissed you? Parents?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"So, you've never experienced it? I'll be your first?"

"…"

Total silence.

My cheeks must resemble a Pikachu's right now.

That statement… triggered far more emotion than it had any right to. I'm in a daze.

"This is something. This is something," he repeated to himself.

I don't like this topic.

I don't want him to talk about it anymore.

How do I get him off of it?

"Don't- don't act like you've already passed my tests," I stuttered.

"I predict I will persevere. I foretell it. I've foreseen it. This is a genuine precognition."

"You're no psychic," I huffed.

"No? But my hunches just tend to be so accurate." He smiled. "I look forward to taking it," he said.

"Your first kiss."

I raised my hand, swiftly, violently. It stopped an inch from his face, so that he flinched in reflex.

"Ugh." I dropped my hand and walked off to my desk, flopping myself into the swivel chair.

"Jasmine, tell me something," he called across the room.

"What is it."

"If you're so against this whole romance thing, why do you even tolerate my presence?"

"I don't get what you mean."

"You know what I want. There'll come a time when I expect to get it, and you'll either say yes or no. If you're so set against it, you ought to spare us both the trouble and banish me from your life right now."

"I don't want to," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"I… I want to see if you'll change," I said.

"Change, sure, I'm trying. But I want to know… even if I can become that guy you want, would you even want me? Because, from my perspective, you're dead set against sex, period, no matter what I do."
"Maybe you'll change into the kind of guy who doesn't ask me for sex?" I ventured. My head started aching.

"Oh, I can assure you that won't happen."

"Maybe."

"Never. Ever. Face it, you know I can't change that about myself, and I don't want to. So accepting that, the fact that I'm still here tells me you have some finagling interest in the dirtier part of romance. And-"

"I'm not talking about this," I cut him off sharply.

Frustration. It's building like a 9.0 earthquake.

"But-"

"I said I'm not talking about this! Kissing, and sex, and all of this touchy stuff! I hate how everyone keeps pushing me into this conversation! God! Just, worry about finding an Ampharos for Arceus' sakes!"

"Is that what these tasks are?"

"They're a test of character!"

"Tauros-shit. They're a delaying tactic. You're using them so you can get stuff out of me without ever having to put out."

"Morty what the hell?! I thought you had learned by now! Shut the hell up!"

"I-"

"SHUT THE HELL UP!!!"

"Sorry."

He quieted down.

We remained silent for several more minutes, neither venturing any word or gesture. I reflected and regurgitated every word of nonsense he had spouted, and the more I went over it the more it felt like a betrayal. He has been extremely pushy today about this subject. Why?!

"I'm sorry. I went too far," he said, apologizing.

"Apology not accepted."

Another long silence followed. I was about to collapse or explode, one or the other, and needed an outlet to merely distract my out-of-control mind. A stack of probation-related study-sheets lay upon the desk. I began tackling them with a vengeance. As I reeled off short-answer responses to the topic of Pokémon Battling Legal Liability and Gym Maintenance, my thoughts settled enough to evaluate them objectively.

"Erika and I had a talk yesterday," I said aloud.

"I'm still being sorry," he cautioned.
"She brought up the same topic, similar questions. You're both prodding into my feelings, and it's getting extremely frustrating."

"Sorry," he said yet again.

I need to be very careful saying this next part. As I related it to him, my eyes never so much as glanced in his direction, instead remaining focused on the worksheet before me.

"I have... certain issues... with men. I don't want to go into specifics. But needless to say, it's a very dim and bleak view of your gender. I am giving you a chance to prove me wrong. Only a chance, and only because a world where men are good and pure logically seems to me like it would be a better world than the one I currently suffer."

"I see."

"And you are not helping your chances by antagonizing me and pushing me towards a subject and a lifestyle I am not yet convinced is not fundamentally corrupt and sinful."

"So you're saying..."

"I am the Iron Clad Gym Leader; it takes a lot to budge me. You've got to take it slowly or else I'm liable to crack and collapse and crush you under the rubble."

"Aaaahhhhhaaaaa." Morty let out a long, slow laugh, staring at the ceiling. "I have never, in my life, met someone so clinical and objective about their own emotions." He faced me. "I like that about you."

"Go check on Volkner," I commanded, not being able to tolerate compliments at the moment. Morty did as told, lugging himself off the seat, gently grabbing my shoulder as he passed me.

"It'll be alright," he said as he exited the office.

"Oh wait," I called after him. He looked at me sidelong, eyebrows raised.

"What is it?"

Is it true, that a boy in love will find absolutely anything you say interesting? Maybe I should test that theory by rambling about Skitty and women's fashion...

Maybe not. My inquiry couldn't wait.

"Did you ever check up on the ordeal with Glacia? Tell me you aren't procrastinating on that."

"No, no, I did the checking." He hung his head, seemingly unhappy to be treading this subject. Now he knows how I feel.

"And?"

"I checked with that ranger you asked me to. More or less, everything you said is true."

"What exactly did he tell you?" I asked. Morty sighed in exasperation.
"That Glacia sent a distress signal shortly after seismographs picked up activity deep within Shoal Cave. She was distressed and hysterical. When a recovery expedition spelunked deeper within, they discovered the remains of a Mamoswine, in a position that suggests it was forced to hold back a massive load of ice. So it looks like you were right; she saved her own skin at the cost of Mamoswine's life."

"I told you. So have you cut ties with her?"

"No, not yet… hear me out. I said I wanted the right to ask her directly and get her side of the story before I jumped to conclusions. It's only fair," he put a finger to my lips to preempt my protests. "Hey. No whining. She's my mentor and deserves the benefit of the doubt. I'm not saying I won't, it's just… I can't."

"Why not?!"

"I can't get in touch with her. She went back to Hoenn. I tried calling her, and the moment I even mentioned Mamoswine, as soon as the first two syllables came out, she hung up."

"Have you tried calling her again?"

"I only had a couple of days to do all of this, so no." Morty sighed. "Give me more time. Time to contact her, time to sort it all out. You said you had such a hard time cutting ties with Graveler. Well, I actually like Glacia, I thought she was an outstanding human being before you dumped this all over me."

"The fact she hung up at the mention of Mamoswine's name should be proof enough- but fine, take your time."

This was not pleasing to me. I tried, in vain, to figure out a way to coax Morty to take a more aggressive approach to confront Glacia. Alas, my scheming fizzled to naught before a solution came to mind.

We had arrived at the basement access and were perching over the edge of the darkness. Morty lent me a hand so I could climb down. He followed me after.

"Yo Volkner, you alive?"

"Yeah. Almost done. Though, why you worry about my well-being with the way you two were going at each other, I can't fathom. Don't bring that rough-housing near the equipment."

"We're fine." Morty turned to me. "Still insist on paying him?"

"I'd like to," I said.

"He and I both think you should save the money for yourself- use it to pay down your loans."

Oh bother, Morty even knows about my financial debts. More and more of me seems to be hanging out on display for any wandering stranger to see.

"So? Is the generator going to work again?"

"Yeah, probably. This replacement calibrator is a few years old. Assuming Jasmine doesn't wear it down like the last one, though, it should last another five years."

"Great."
"And about… you-know-what…” Volkner asked Morty mysteriously.

"I'll take care of it. I promise," Morty responded, equally cryptically.

Volkner carefully guided the device into the crevice of the machinery. His movements were remarkable, I thought: his arms never quivered, not even a millimeter, as he coaxed the part into place. His motions were smooth, deliberate, methodical- robotical, but in the sense of a futuristic cyborg, not a 1970s junkbot. A final click indicated the task was complete. Volkner closed the access panel and wiped a hand across his brow.

"It's done," he said. "She's ready."

"Always treating your devices like ladies," Morty commented. "Like you're in bed with them."

"Damn it, Morty, not this again."

"It's like Jasmine here; trade 'Pokémon' for 'machines' and it's the same sentiment. Feels like I'm the only person whose prime interest is my own species."

"You're a maniac."

"Cut it out chump."

Me and Volkner, both reprimanding Morty at the same time.

"Seriously, I should tell you about the time we went strolling for chicks in Saffron."

"No. Don't you dare, Morty," Volkner warned with a growl.

Despite Volkner's relentless protests, however, Morty began narrating.

July 10th, 2010

Saffron City

"So why do you think we're missing out on all the good women?"

"Maybe you need a better pickup line than 'Should I call the Ghosteraser? Cause' you're sending chills up my spine'."

"Pickup lines are meant to be cheesy. They're all about being earnest and making an ass of yourself in order to show your sincerity."

"It just makes you sound like an ass, period."

"Well ask yourself, what's the alternative? Come off like a pretentious dick? You gotta show you're capable of not making it all about yourself. Demeaning yourself is part of the game- but remember to do it in a goofy way, not in a serious, emo manner like you're prone to."

"Oh flip off. And there's a flaw in your theory: humbling ourselves just gets rid of a possible downside. What's our upside? How do we, as boys, convey our desirability? Ditch the pickup line
and what's left to grab the chick's attention?"

Morty grinned and donned a pair of sunglasses to go with his tropical shirt and jeans.

"Style."

The fiend put his arm around Volkner's neck and hauled him down the street, talking like the savvy smart-alec he believed himself to be.

"What we are missing is transportation. A vehicle. A mobile love-machine that'll give em the lady-boners. No girl wants to hoof off on public transportation with their date; they want to be treated like princesses, they want a side-seat in a sweet, souped-up, power-spewing hotrod."

"Or they could just ride our Pokémon. It's faster, in this traffic," Volkner suggested with annoyance.

"Girls don't ride Pokémon! Girls shop, fact of life, it's who they are. So girls need cargo capacity. Pokémon don't have cargo capacity- least not anywhere sanitary."

"You-"

"What, you think we're in the 1800s? Cars were invented for a reason- for guys to lure tail in! Let's go find a ride."

"How much is this going to set me back?" Volkner muttered under his breath, wondering and worrying. The pair set off into the urban landscape, one hopeful, the other dubious, for a chance at getting laid that night.

---

Saffron is a large city.

No, that's an understatement. Saffron is an ENORMOUS city. Fifth largest in the world. The political and economic capital of our nation. Home to millions of people, thousands of businesses, and hundreds of landmarks. The place is a mechanized hive of human activity, its enormous population drilled into exacting efficiency, all to ensure the sheer biological mass would not choke on itself. Subway schedules were timed down to the second. City-wide traffic flow was guided by no less than 33,000 traffic lights controlled by four supercomputers and one Metagross. There existed in Saffron University's Business School a course entirely dedicated to the analysis of Saffron's fast food market and its effects on the daily flow of people and goods throughout the central business district - and this course is always fully enrolled before even honors undergraduate students get a crack at it.

In other words, Saffron is a giant, delicate, biological computer. Humans and Pokémon are its bits and bytes, whirring around in exacting routines of work and play. The slightest little bump could wretch the entire system off-kilter.

Keep this in mind.

"Morty, do you truly, honestly believe we are going to find even a nonfunctional clunker of a motor vehicle in this city for less than 100,000P? City inflation is insane."

"How much do you have?" Morty asked.

"On me?"
"Usable. You have a credit card, don't you?"

"Debit. And hell no, I'm not using it. And I only have 4,000 cash."

"Damn."

The car dealers, despite being tucked in the basements of corporate high-rises, were still glitzy, high class establishments. The pair wasn't going to find anything under 1,000,000P, not even a used car. Volkner had no intention of hoofing it to the suburbs where they might find a more affordable junk car dealer, and Morty had no intention of giving up. Thus, impasse and grousing ensued. They lurched down one block after another, occasionally stopping random passerbyers for instructions, more often breaking into arguments with each other.

Three hours' worth of searching later, their transportation-needs had not changed, although their mood and appetites had raced off in opposite directions.

"I hate you."

"Really? Cause, you say that all the time, but you're still here."

"I'm stuck with you. Nonetheless, I hate you."

"Well, that was duly noted the first time you muttered it at 8:00 A.M."

"It's 4:00 P.M now. Just your hourly reminder that I hate you."

"Yeah, well, you know what? I love you- in a platonic, brotherly way. Now let's find a car. And food."

At last, at 4:35 they arrived at their last-gasp hope of a destination, courtesy of a dubious tip received from a homeless veteran after being bribed with a McKing Burger. A chain link fence separated the pair of boys from an unusually empty expanse in the midst of the skyscrapers.

"It's an old army decom lot," Volkner noted.

"Cool. Hey, look, a jeep!" Morty finished his own burger and ran up to the chain-link fence surrounding the lot.

"I don't see a way in," Volkner said.

"And I don't see a no-trespassing sign. Give me a boost."

The fence wasn't even barbed, so the pair had no trouble quickly scrambling over the top. Being boys, they quickly skipped from one row of jeeps, trucks, and humvees to the next, eyes gleaming like kids in a toy store.

Unfortunately, of all the old military hardware, what wasn't complete junk was missing something much more critical than working motors, according to Morty: pastiche.

"Girls won't go for any of this crap. Maybe a jeep, but hell if there's one here with a full set of tires. Damn it! I thought we had it."

Morty frowned, and was about to plop his butt onto a stack of tires.

Volkner climbed around a pile of trash bins.
"Hey look at this."

Morty dragged himself back up and joined Volkner. His eyes fell on the newfound discovery and lighted up in glee. Beside him, Volkner's excitement quickly melted into uncertainty.

"Dude, there is no way..." Volkner began protesting.

"We can do this," Morty assured him.

"You can't pick up girls in THAT-"

"Quit your belly-achin and help me get it running. Looks like most of it's there."

"We're not gonna attract chicks, we'll-"

"Quit yer bitchin and get over here!"

A cursory exploration of the vehicle showed there was no fuel. Volkner felt at last that he had some leverage to cut this foolish venture short, only to find Morty lighting up like a Christmas tree.

"What the hell are you planning? No... NO!"

Morty drew out a pokeball and popped it onto the ground.

"Let's do this."

Twenty-five minutes later:

Tempura Street was crowded, as usual. Shops along each side serviced the endless stream of retiring corporate drones with cheap take-out food and daily household goods. Cradled in the second floor were discount specialty restaurants and fashion shops, making the street popular with local young adults. The city's Pokémon Gyms were just one block over, making the venue a haven for Pokémon trainers as well. Cars drove along at a Slugma's pace, no more than 15 miles per hour, bumper sniffing bumper.

On this evening, business ran normally. A pair of young women made their way through the crowd, discussing the inane topic of office drama.

"Harriet, do you have any idea what Mitch thought about it?"

"He loved the idea, but said he wanted to double-check with Lisa, and I never heard back... uh?"

"Just like him. You know, if Mitch doesn't get his head out of his ass he's going to end up marrying that woman. She'll drive him Zubat-crazy. Watch it happen. And I won't say a thing, I'll just shake my head-"

"Haruka?"

"-and watch them castrate each other. He could have had so much better. He could be in HQ, he could be coddling a nine-digit salary, but no, he followed his dick to Accounting Sub-Division 14, home of the-"
"Haruka!"

"What?"

Haruka's rant had left her completely oblivious to the fact that every single car on the road was now struggling, as best they could, to get off the street. Pedestrians were forced into crevices and shops. General panic began spreading throughout the crowd. A chorus of car horns and sirens ran up the street like a tsunami of sound. Above all, a deep, quake-like rumble bore through the air and ground.

"What is happening?"

"I have n- wait, look at… oh god… what is that?" Harriet pointed out the lumbering behemoth now making its way down the suddenly vacant street.

The woman's face quivered, staring in utter disbelief.

Haruka, though slightly more composed, was equally stunned. Her gasping voice could barely be heard over the rumbling.

"Is that what I think it is?"

It came closer, closer, closer still, then it was abreast of them, inching along barely faster than a slow bicyclist, and then it disappeared around the curve of the street.

"Was that… a… a… a Rotom… tank?" Haruka stuttered.

Three minutes later:

Volkner shivered, adrenaline pumping through his veins.

"I could blow up the whole damn world in this thing," he muttered, audibly ecstatic. All worries had evaporated about thirty feet out of the parking lot.

"How you holding up up there? Grabbing any girl's attention yet?" Morty shouted.

"Morty, we have everyone's attention. EVERYONE."

Indeed, even fifty floors up corporate tycoons spared some of their 1,000P-a-second time to gawk at the spectacle. Crowds of open-eyed, slack-jawed pedestrians and drivers watched them roll by in shocked, silent disbelief. All activity within a block radius screeched to a halt. The effect rippled all the way through the road network, such that traffic began backing up at the normally serene 67B Interchange, twenty miles away. Volkner, had he been aware of this fact, would have found it glorious.

"Hey Rotom, how are you holding up?"

"ROOOTOOOM! ZZZT!" The Pokémon was enjoying itself, immensely.

After all, isn't it every little ball lightning's wet dream to possess a derelict, 60-ton military war machine and strut down Main Street, Saffron City?
"WAAAAHHOOOOAAAA!" Volkner couldn't help himself either. His whoop pierced the air, making bystanders flinch.

"I don't know how to steer this thing!" Morty cried from down below, half-scared and half-exhilarated (and all jokingly). He played with different levers at random, jerking them rapidly back and forth. Rotom groaned under the stress, its own control interfaces chaffing against Morty's ill-advised inputs.

"Zzzt Zztt! ROTROT!"

Rotom's ectoplasm enveloped Morty's hands and hardened, preventing any more unwanted reversals of the tank's motors. Morty was about to protest, violently, when the ectoplasm again morphed. A crude approximate to a gamecube controller formed, falling into Morty's hands.

"Awww thanks Rotom!"

After that maneuvering became trivial.

"Hey Morty, 10 o'clock!"

"What' that?" Morty peered through a periscope proffered by Rotom. "Oh that douche."

A billboard sign advertising Gabriel Brach's run for prime minister stood above the rest of the commercialized riff-raff. The gruff, aging fellow was attempting to smile in the mini-video ad, but it came off as a sneer instead. The man was particularly hated amongst the Gym Leader crowd for what he had done to the Gym Leader National Association during his tenure as the Director of the Board of Trustees of the Pokémon League.

Morty and Volkner simultaneously wrinkled their noses in disgust.

"Rotom, aim for Mr. Dinosaur's mug. Got it?"

The orange, ectoplasm-enclosed turret rotated, elevated, and came to a halt, its barrel aimed dead at the offending billboard.

"Okay, what does X button do?"

BBBSSSHHZZZZTTT!

"Ah, Zap Canon."

The ball of concentrated electricity fired across the urban canyon, smashing into the billboard. Brach's oversized nose burst into static, part of the video cells sizzling out, leaving the impression of a burnt snozz on "The Man".

"Dead on! Thousand pokedollars for a mugshot when Mr. Pudgymon sees that!"

"Morty, left, turn left here!"

"Oy? Ah, yeah!"

Rotom's massive form slowly veered leftward, taking three turn-lane's worth of intersection to wheel 90 degrees northward. They were now on Battle Avenue. Volkner ducked into the cockpit for a moment.

"Okay, changed my mind. We can so pick up chicks in this thing."
Volkner beamed. The rush of adrenaline was overriding his usual reticence and any semblance of what was reasonably attainable.

"Told you," Morty said with a grin. "What are you doing down here? Keep an eye out for girls up top."

"Nah, let's wait. We'll get to Battle Square soon, I bet a bunch trainers hang out there."

"What, you have a thing for trainer gals?"

"Yeah. I mean, we're trainers, right? And we're in a fucking Rotom Tank; if we're going to be reeling in chicks they're going to be a certain type."

"I get ya. Rotom, double our speed! We're movin for-"

At this exact moment Rotom shuddered. It lurched to and fro, suddenly swinging, dipping, and rushing upwards towards its passengers. The pull of gravity veered wildly from side to side, as if the pair of humans had been tossed into a washing machine. Volkner hit his head against the bulk, while Morty clung to the controller-console for dear life. They eventually stabilized, somewhat, but something felt awfully wrong with their sense of balance.

Volkner crawled out of the turret first to make sense of their situation.

Surrounding Rotom was a strong, violet glow that shimmered in rapidly pulsing waves. A quick peep over the edge caused him to quickly duck back inside.

"We're up in the air," he explained to Morty.

"What?"

"We're up high. Like ten stories."

"How the fuck is that possible?"

"I don't know, there was purple radiation or something, and we're floating."

"Hey Rotom!" Morty shouted at his Pokémon. "You didn't morph into a VTOL or something did you?"

"Rotrot."

"No?"

"Otom."

"Then what the… Volk, get out there again."

Again Volkner clambered up the command access and took stock of their situation. Rotom, passengers and all, were suspended in place by an ethereal force. A similar concentration of violet aura was radiating from a spot on the ground. Upon closer inspection, Volkner decided it was a young woman, with long raven hair and a tight polyester jacket, and a contemptuous stare on her face. Her two gloved hands were raised, from which the bulk of the violet radiation was emanating.

"Morty, get out here."

The other blonde head popped out of the driver's access hatch, looking around before also spotting
their accoster.

"Dude! DUDE! We got picked up by a chick! *We got picked up by a chick! We should be the photo for 'irony' in the dictionary now!'"

"What are you jackasses doing?" the woman shouted up at them.

"Hey, wanna ride with us? We're going to this awesome club tonight!" Morty shouted right back to her. "We even got a ride! Plenty of room in here!"

"You…! What are you thinking?! Is that a Rotom? Is that a tank?" The lady couldn't decide whether to be furious or dumbfounded, and ended up displaying the body-language of both.

Morty, undeterred, barreled on.

"You're pretty hot. Hop in! Hey, you could levitate us like you're doing and we can have a hover tank! Then traffic would be a cinch!"

"Are you an idiot? A creep?! Look at this mess you've created! You're backing up traffic for miles!"

"Sorry about that!"

"Like hell you are!"

"You didn't answer my question. Wanna join us, or are you just going to keep us hanging?"

"What in this plane of existence leads you to believe I would even consider accepting that offer? My answer is no! NO! Damn it, look at the people you're scaring!"

"Oh, well, if we're spooking up the place, maybe you and I should, you know, 'disappear'. Eh?" Morty's face contorted into a familiar perverted leer- only to be instantly replaced by sheer horror.

"I DO NOT SLEEP WITH -BOYS-! ONLY -MEN-!!!" the psychic screamed in fury, as she psychokinetically hurled Rotom, Morty, and a befuddled Volkner into the nearest tree.

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Saffron Police Station #13

3 hours later:

"So you were charged with-" the lawyer began raising fingers one by one- "Assault, threatening and intimidation, reckless driving, theft of government property, illegal operation of a military vehicle, illegal operation of a military weapon, trespassing upon closed property, use of a Pokémon in aid of a crime, and defacing public property."

Morty and Volkner both gulped.

"Lucky you, the judge ordered almost everything dropped on technicalities. That tank was supposed to be a derelict, not even fit for a scrap yard, and written off- so you couldn't have technically stolen it, and it technically wasn't a military vehicle or weapon at that point. Reckless driving involves either disobeying the rules of the road, or speeding, or running into the opposite lane- and as near as we could tell, you never made it past 15 miles per hour."
"Rotom's such a sluggard," Morty muttered.

"And people reacted on their own." The public lawyer leaned back, observing the two young men for a moment. "So that leaves us with the last two charges, use of a Pokémon in a crime, and defacement. Now I and the judge realize you are both Gym Leaders, and that the Pokémon usage charge would ruin your careers. Add in the fact that neither of us share much love for Mr. Brach- do not repeat this to anyone- so we are willing to drop that particular charge if you sign a promissory note stating you will never misuse Pokémon ever again."

"Easy!"

"Of course!"

Morty and Volkner responded eagerly in unison. Although that charge was the lightest of the ones mentioned, it would have also stripped them of their Pokémon ownership license, destroying their careers and taking from them their beloved Pokémon.

"Now, we can't look past the fact that you damaged a 200,000P billboard. So you're still going to jail, probably 24 hours, and still have fines and community service to pay. We'll go over that at your punishment hearing. Got it?"

"Yes sir," both of the boys grumbled.

"Alright, that wraps up my work here. See you guys tomorrow."

"Bye," both of the boys grumbled again, pathetically waving the public worker goodbye.

Later, as both of them sat upon a bunk in their temporary cell, gloom and doom set in, at least upon one of the boys. Volkner was holding his head in his hands.

"Cheer up," Morty advised.

"I'm so damn stupid. Why'd I listen to you?"

"Seriously, stop moping."

"We could have lost our Pokémon, you dimwit."

"But we didn't!"

"Because of some biased judge! What if we did? We'd be screwed, permanently!"

"Stop dwelling on the 'what ifs'. You give yourself a hard enough time on the opportunities you passed up, I won't allow you to beat yourself up over an averted disaster."

"I wouldn't not call this a disaster. We're in jail, and there goes my paycheck and free weekends for half a year."

"Hey, there's a saying."

"What."

"Always look on the bright side of life!" Morty hummed.

"Huh?"
"In two years, you'll forget all about this punishment crap, and you'll look back and have an awesome story to tell. It'll be like, 'Hey! Remember that time we drove a tank through Saffron and got hit on by the psychic Gym Leader?'"

"She didn't hit on you, you hit on her."

"Ah, true, but don't say it that way when you tell your children."

Volkner lifted his face to stare at Morty, incredulously.

"You seriously think I'm going to have children?"

"What, you don't want them?"

"No- I mean, you expect me to find a woman who'd want children with me?"

"Oh fuck, Volkner, you're not even a virgin. Don't worry about if you can pick up a girl."

"Ugh."

"You'll find her, one day. Crap, I wish I could attract them like you. You're damn chick bait. You know that's why I really keep you around?"

"Liar. I don't care about how many I can get in bed with, I just want something steady. How do you do it? I just keep getting dumped after a few dates, how do you manage to keep them around?"

"Don't know, don't care, would trade you if I could. All my stalker exes for your hassle-free one-night-stands."

"I'd take it. But we're stuck with who we are."

"True. Ironic, isn't it? I'm the one everyone calls a man-slut, and yet I can count my exes on two-hands. Meanwhile, innocent you…"

"Don't even mention it. It's not something I'm proud of."

"Must be your nice-guy exterior. Damn, maybe I should pretend to be nice? Being a bad boy only attracts the clingy, crazy types."

"You think they're so crazy?"

"Mmmm." Morty stared at the ceiling for a moment, thinking the question over. "Maybe not crazy crazy. Just in the way they keep coming after me, even when I tell them no. Meh. It's a conundrum. I want a lot of sex, but if I have too much sex with one girl, she gets feelings, and then I have to reciprocate or else she calls off the bedtime fun. But when I break up, they go psycho."

"Your life sounds so tough," Volkner told him mockingly.

"Hypocrite. 'Oh, I'm so good at battling I can't have fun anymore, I'm just gonna be a bum and mope around in my gym and hand out badges. Oh, I want to be loved so badly, why won't any one of these numerous, lovely, sensual, no-strings-attached hoes be my girlfriend? Wah! Wahwahwahwah! God, what supermajority percentile of mankind would love to be you."

"I don't even want to acknowledge you said all that."

"This is an objective world that continues despite your utmost denials. I said it, it happened, respond
properly. Stop being a pussy and deal with your problems straight on!"

"Whatever. Just remind me to never listen to you ever again."

"I'm forgetful. Remind me to remind you."

"Whatever."

The hours passed into nightfall, neither being able to fall asleep. Booking had wiped out their meal hour and thus they couldn't expect anything to eat until morning. Every once in a while a stomach let out a growl.

"Hey Morty."

"Hmm?"

"Were you being serious?"

"About what?"

"About just wanting sex all the time."

"Yeah. What, you got a problem with that?"

"No. I mean, it just doesn't seem like you."

"How so?"

"Well, you… you're not like Flint. You don't want variety, you just want quantity."

"I've said as much. What can I say? I enjoy physical pleasure, I wish I could have more of it."

"But it seems like you're purposefully avoiding the easiest solution to that."

"I know."

"And?"

"I'm not particularly inclined to discuss it with someone who doesn't hold a doctorate in psychology."

"No?"

"No."

"No?" Volkner rolled over and peered down into the lower bunk, confronting Morty face to face.

"Ugh… well… um…" Morty looked out of sorts with himself. He wasn't going to continue without some more prodding. Seeing as they were both guys, Volkner had no compunction about harassing his friend-

"Seriously, why don't you settle down with one? You'd have your pick, just grab the horniest out of your little cult and marry her. You'd get plenty of action then."

"I'm…"
Morty paused in his narrative, looking directly at me. Volkner and I stared at him, waiting for him to finish. Volkner, beside me, gave a knowing smile, remembering their jailhouse conversation for himself. When Morty took too long to get on with it, Volkner needled him in the ribs. Still he wavered, as if deciding whether this was something he could bring himself to divulge or not.

Morty looked me eye to eye.

"I'm waiting for someone special, I told him."

My breath stopped short, for a moment.

"So! That's how we got picked up by Sabrina. Met her at the summit a few weeks ago and reminded her about it, she and I had a good laugh. Time does wonders to all that stupid stuff you do as a teen, takes the humiliation out, makes it funny."

He passed the moment off and began spewing more nonsense, reminiscing about other trite moments shared between himself and Volkner.

As for me…

I was lost in thought.

It's not like he treats me that differently- but he let slip things I don't think he would normally talk about with me. Like the fact that he keeps rejecting long term relationships. Why does he do that? Is he waiting for someone special? Was he holding out for me? For another woman? How much sex does this pervert actually get? Who are his exes, and how does he treat them? Or deal with them, if they're crazy? I hate thinking about my gender being at fault in any way, especially when it comes to this man, but I am forced to acknowledge the less sane members of my sex exist. Still, they couldn't be worse than this jerk, right? Just how would the two interact? And the way he said that one line, "I'm waiting for someone special," he was talking about himself two years ago, but I got the overwhelming feeling that it was no less applicable today than it was back then. Is that really true? Are you still waiting, Morty?

And the one question that continually bombarded my mind, the one my aimless carousel of doubt and interminable worry came round to-

Morty-

Just who am I to you?
The Integrity of Secrets

"Hey Jasmine."

"Hmm?"

Volkner caught my attention with a gentle wave of the hand.

"I'd like to battle you. Nothing serious, just enough to calibrate the shields, make sure they're working."

"Oh. Okay." It sounded like a reasonable request, and I took it for one as I prepared my team for battle. My first suspicion that something was awry was Morty whispering into Volkner's ear. The latter nodded in agreement at the silent proposal. If either of them smirked or showed any sign of foolery, I decided I would call it off immediately.

However, Morty glided off with no hint of mischief about him, and Volkner nonchalantly assumed a serious and businesslike expression. I willed myself into believing it had been an unrelated inside joke shared between the two of them.

"How does three-versus-three, single battle, sound?" I asked.

"Alright. Add an extra condition, for time's sake: no switching," Volkner suggested. I assented, and with the shields already primed and humming, we assumed positions at opposite ends of the gym floor.

I wasn't about to go easy on him, no matter the favor he had done for me, nor out of pity for the unrequited feelings he must be bearing towards me. Tyko and Skarmory, as much as they could benefit from the experience of fighting a top-tier Gym Leader, held a common Electric weakness and would not be fighting this match.

Now, if I were Volkner, and having asked for a no-switching clause, what would I do? Probably lead with someone expendable: quick, fragile, and disruptive, to scout out the opponent's team leader. I vowed not to get caught in such an elementary trap, however.

"Magnemite, go!"

"Emolga, take the field!"

Exactly as predicted.

"Keep in mind, we need to hit the shields with everything we can think of, so try not to focus too much on winning quickly," Volkner advised. I gave him a pittance of a wave, ignoring him. I'm not too worried. Battles with my Steelix involved tend to get collaterally destructive whether I want them to or not.

"Match, set, begin!" Morty cried from the balcony. Does he think he's going to referee this? He's enjoying himself too much.

"Thunderbolt!" Volkner ordered right away.

Should have used Thunder Wave, Tailwind, and Electro Ball combo, otherwise neither of Emolga's natural attack types are going to hurt my Steel-Electric.
Thunderbolt ricocheted off of Magnemite's electromagnetic aura, causing negligible damage.

Still, I can't counter with Electric attacks of my own, due to Emolga's Motor Drive ability.

"Keep in mind, I still remember your fight with Morty. I know your tactics, you don't know mine. Don't hold back!" I warned my opponent.

"You think that's enough to to make up the power differential?"

"You think you can beat me with ineffective Thunderbolts? Magnemite! Code 4!"

Now it's time to see if the training I did while my gym was closed worked.

Magnemite began swaying from side to side, humming, with small sparks lighting off its nodes every ten seconds or so. The humming increased, until it had become practically a screech.

"What is it doing?" Volkner wondered aloud.

"You would like to know," I responded. In truth, it was using Supersonic on itself. The swaying motion was a specific movement pattern to shape its own electromagnetic field, in order to stabilize its electron-based brain. This had the result of dampening the Supersonic's confusion effect.

"Emolga, Air Slash!"

Emolga tried whipping razor-thin lines of vacuum in Magnemite's direction. Unfortunately, the first pair missed - I'm guessing on purpose. The attacks curled across the room, till they hit the shields on the opposite side. The shields glimmered for a brief moment, and then subsided. The Air Slashes dissipated without a trace. So far the shields were working perfectly.

"Air Slash again."

"Magnemite, follow through!" I ordered.

Extensive research and experimentation revealed a dirty little combo to me, one that only the Magnemite family could capitalize on: Firing a Sonic Boom through an electromagnetically-suspended-and-concentrated Supersonic field fragmented the Sonic Boom, creating 15 waves instead of 3, with a commensurate increase in damage. Sonic Boom being a weak attack that could pierce any defense, increasing its damage potential was tantamount to creating an overpowered, unfair uber-attack.

The resulting booms, like rapid-fire gunshot, rang across the room. The shields worked too well - they caught the sound waves and rebounded them slightly, creating an echo effect that added to the cacophony. Emolga tried dodging the shockwaves, but after the first three missed, the echoes shattered its concentration and the next dozen hit it square on.

"That's a KO!" Morty shouted from the balcony. He held out a straight-handed gesture in my direction. "Lead goes to the local Gym Leader with an unexpectedly strong Sonic Boom! How will the challenger respond?!"

Oh, so now he's the color commentator too?

Volkner was smirking. At me, at Morty, at the general situation, I couldn't tell.

"Lanturn."

Water Type + Electric Type = Electric Attack Neutral \(=/=\) Volt Absorb.
A near instantaneous analysis of the type matchup, a skill that by now had come to me naturally. 1.5 more seconds of analysis told me Magnemite was in trouble. A Sonic Boom Barrage was not going to take the bulkier Lanturn out in one go. The opponent could use Water attacks for neutral damage, which would be enough to overpower the bulkless Magnemite. Magnemite did not even possess Tri-attack yet, not until it evolved, which meant it had no quick way of attacking Lanturn.

I would have to think of a way to counter the incoming Hydro Pump, and make an opening for two or more Sonic Boom barrages. What's more, I would have to think of that solution within the next three seconds. Volkner was getting ready to give a command to his Pokémon.

"Magnemite, Magnet Rise!"

That would preclude a Surf attack from easily hitting.

"Magnet Rise! Aqua Ring!" Volkner ordered. His Pokémon lifted off into the air, giving it markedly more maneuverability than it could attain flopping around on the dirt. Its next move caused luminescent seafoam-green rings to curl around its body. Between its ability to swim in the air, its formidable defenses, and its constant self-healing, this Lanturn could be very difficult to take down.

"Surf!" Volkner said next.

I don't know why he chose that move, with Magnemite raising itself halfway to the ceiling. It would be impossible to bring the full brunt of the attack down upon Magnemite. His Pokémon shared my sentiment, looking back at its trainer dubiously, even as it carried out its orders.

A great blob of water spurted from Lanturn's mouth, enveloping it and the surrounding battlefield in an eight yard radius. The pool-sized bubble of water swirled and amassed, preparing to be propelled forward towards Magnemite's position.


Piercing sonar waves were directed into the pool of water Lanturn had created for itself. The liquid medium served to amplify the sound waves, making it impossible to dodge the confusion-inducing status. Lanturn's movement became, literally, scrambled, tilting to and fro. Before it could lose control of the water, it rushed headlong towards what it thought was Magnemite's position.

"Accurate… but too low," I said.

"Good enough," Volkner replied.

The large mass of water, with Lanturn at its center, swept beneath Magnemite and into the backfield. The shields flared, an area the size of a garage door lighting up to near-total opaqueness. The flood washed up and sideways, failing to put so much as a drizzle through the energy barrier.

"Great, they're working," Volkner said.

He must have ordered Surf solely to test the wide-range capabilities of the shield generator.

"I told you to take me seriously!" I complained to my opponent.

"And I told you to relax, right? It's more important to make sure the shields can hold up under normal battle conditions."

"You don't know her very well, Volk," Morty interjected.
"Normal battle conditions? I always fight with everything I've got, so the shields have to be able to take way more abuse than these piddly attacks you're throwing at me!"

"Told ya," added Morty.

"Hmm." Volkner contemplated this bit of information, before shouting out to Lanturn. "Thunder!"

Still ineffective; why he won't use Hydro Pump is beyond me. However, the field and air is soaked from the Surf attack, which will amplify Thunder's power and accuracy.

"Magnemite, Magnet Bomb!"

Completely ineffective at damaging Lanturn. But if the polarity-warping mortar being lobbed at Lanturn can get there at the exact right moment… No!

"Ghuah!"

The shimmering, metallic-colored blob of energy smacked Lanturn in the face too soon. It shook off the damage and prepared its own Thunder. Sparks sizzled off its bulb.

The crack of the Thunder went off, causing Morty and I to hold our hands to our ears.

Yet, when the mist cleared, it was Lanturn who was flopping awkwardly on its back.

"The Supersonic… Lanturn was confused and lost control. The Thunder blew up in its face," Morty conjectured. I nodded, coming to the same conclusion. Volkner looked out of sorts.

"Continue Code 6!" I ordered of Magnemite. It buzzed in acknowledgement.

Its sole eye lit up, blinking red. Within its mind, Magnemite was doing computations, increasing its focus and concentration and mentally blanking out all distractions. This was a Lock-On.

"The belly," I reminded it. Volkner looked confused, unable to guess what I had planned.

I love it.

I haven't been idling these past few weeks, getting completely caught up in the stresses of my chaotic social life, or letting myself get buried by the inane homework of probation. I've been studying, hard, and now I get to put all my newfound knowledge and stratagems to the test against an actual top-tier trainer. And best of all? They were working.

"Thunderbolt!" Both of us shouted the exact same word in unison. Lanturn's bolt was aimed low and had to be swept upwards to bisect Magnemite's position. Magnemite's bolt, however, was less of a Thunderbolt and more of an instantaneous, laser-like lightning bolt. It drilled itself into Lanturn's soft lower flank. The victim was stunned and hurt, badly.

"H-h-hey!" Volkner gasped, but caught his tongue. What was he expecting? For Volt Absorb to render Thunderbolt useless? Ha!

But he's not saying a word. Which means… and I'm only guessing, with my limited understanding of how the male psyche works… he can't bring himself to act uncool, or silly, before the girl he once confessed to.

"While you're figuring it out; Magnemite! Code 6 plus 3! Then Code 4!"

"Mag?"
"Huh? 6 plus 3!"

"Magmag!"

"Bubblebeam!"

"Dodge!"

Not happening. The stream of grenade-like bubbles popped across Magnemite's shell, sending the thing spinning and flying. It regained stability right at the edge of the shield, and then used its electromagnetic field to propel itself off the shield like a tennis ball.

"Lanturn, Reflect!"

Magnemite, without being told, was using itself as a Magnet Bomb. True, if Magnet bomb used something metallic for ammunition its power would increase drastically, but to use your own body?! Magnemite, that's reckless! I taught you better!

My Pokémon smashed itself into Lanturn's Reflect at an angle, bouncing off, up, and over Lanturn, screeching in pain. Yet, just before it landed into the dirt, it let off a Thunderbolt into Lanturn's backside. The latter lurched forward in pain. The glimmer of Aqua Ring whirled, quickly restoring some of the health lost. Lanturn turned about, readying its own BubbleBeam again.

"Magnemite, what didn't you understand?"

"Maga!"

"Hmm… oh!"

Magnemite has a… very peculiar quirk. It doesn't understand or acknowledge odd numbers. As in, non-even numbers. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, etc. do not exist, as far as it is concerned. I don't think it's a physiological inability to comprehend such integers, as I've seen other Magnemite who could handle odds, evens, and whatever else mathematicians threw at them. My Pokémon, however, just had some inexplicable hatred towards these integers.

So, making "3" a codeword for "Metal Sound" was a mistake on my part. Magnemite had probably ignored me when I assigned that move to that numeral. Which also meant my Thunderbird, Railgun, and Plastic Parity combos were also useless. Which left me with…

"Lanlan!"

BubbleBeam fired, splattering the ground under Magnemite as it lifted off to avoid being hit. Lanturn adjusted and aimed higher, to which Magnemite countered with a Spark, popping most of the bubbles on its own.

"Metal Sound!" I ordered. Even if Volkner knew what I was about to do, could he still counter it?

"Amnesia!"

Yes he could.

I should switch attacks. What about Sonic Boom barrage? It isn't affected by the opponent's heightened special resistance. Let's try it.

"Code 4!"
"Thunder!"

Sonic Boom Barrage took time to set up, but so did Lanturn's Thunder. Magnemite fired first.

"LAAAAAAAN!"

Lanturn was peppered by multiple shockwaves, sending its Thunder careening off into the ceiling. I winced, but the shields held. Volkner's Pokémon was momentarily stunned.

"Okay, forget code words! Super Sonic! Metal Sound, Lock-On, Mirror-Shot, Thunderbolt! You know what to do!"

"Oh cr-… Light Screen Lanturn!"

Super Sonic hit, Lanturn struggled through, raising a Light Screen - on its tail. The second sound-based attack, Metal Sound, rang in true, pounding its eardrums relentlessly, dropping its guard and making it more vulnerable to special damage. Lanturn created another Light Screen, this one bigger, and domed, but still not covering the direct line-of-sight between it and Magnemite. Still, its back and top side were now shielded.

"MAAAAAG! DUNDUN! ZZZZZZZZT TSEEEEEW!"

A number of things happened in quick succession, too fast for me to describe in real-time.

"And Magnemite lets loose a Thunderbolt, complete with sound effects!" Morty yelled excitedly. I squeezed my eyes shut, not daring to open them. Magnemite, this was asking the impossible, but I believe in you!

My third command, Mirror Shot, had missed- or so Volkner and Lanturn were supposed to think. It had burst upon the ground under and slightly before Lanturn's belly. Even as the energy exploded, it created a sphere of metallic-based light-energy. The sphere would expand to 20 centimeters diameter and only last .05 seconds before it dissipated. That's the window Magnemite had to aim for.

The afterglow of the Thunderbolt slowly faded from my eyesight.

"Lanturn is knocked out! This battle has become one-sided!" Morty said, voice deep and imitating the famous Kanto Cup announcer.

"What happened?" Volkner said, still struggling to mute his shock and keep up appearances. After all, he wouldn't want to look stupid in front of me.

"I told you, I watched your match between you and Morty. And I didn't just watch, I went back and researched the science behind it," I told him, smiling to myself.

"Yeah, so?"

"Lanturn uses the ability Volt Absorb, but specific to their species, the ability is tied to the bulb atop their head, not generally spread throughout their body. Meaning, if an Electric attack hits anywhere besides the bulb, it'll do damage normally. Now, since the bulb exerts an electromagnetic attraction to all electricity, it's difficult - no, usually impossible to take advantage of this flaw. The diameter of the bulb's absorption field is about two yards, enough to encompass all of Lanturn's body and protect it, even from powerful legendary-launched Thunder attacks."

"Cool insight. Go on!" Morty urged, while Volkner remained silent, attentive, and stewing.
"However, with the aide of Lock-On, a Thunderbolt can be concentrated enough to negate the attraction to Volt Absorb. In effect, it reduces the sphere of influence of Volt Absorb to about 20 inches. Still large, enough to cover Lanturn's head. That's where Lock-On comes in again! It helps target the Thunderbolt perfectly, so it can hit a part of the body not covered by the Volt Absorb!"

"And yet, on that final fight, practically every inch of Lanturn was covered by either Volt Absorb's field, or a Light Screen," Morty said, acting as my Watsonian counterpart. "How'd it still hit in that circumstance?"

"That's where Mirror Shot comes in! Magnemite is so precise using Lock-On, it can fire a laser-like Thunderbolt at the exact space and exact moment Mirror Shot impacts, bouncing the bolt off the Mirror Shot's explosion, ricocheting just underneath the Volt Absorb's field of protection, and straight into the exposed belly of Lanturn!"

I crossed my arms, closed my eyes, and nodded exaggeratedly to myself, a gesture of the extreme pride that was overflowing me at the moment.

I am a Pokémon battling genius!

"Hehehaha!"

"Heh-

Morty burst out laughing, while Volkner sighed, hanging his head.

"You're really enjoying yourself, aren't you Jazz!"

"Yes, yes I am!"

This is me. This my element. This is who I want to be. A great Pokémon battler who wins with stubborn pride and strategic genius.

I'm... happy.

A smile burst across my face, and then, slowly, faded. It wasn't sadness or anything that caused it to vanish, but thoughtfulness, and wonder.

I looked up to Morty, who was still laughing, and recalled him whispering into Volkner's ear before the match started.

Morty...

I still don't know, maybe I would never know, who exactly I am to you. But, I think I can believe this now, that you want to make me happy. And I can't help but feel this battle was your idea, in order to help brighten my mood. You do know nothing makes me feel better than a brilliant victory in Pokémon battle...

"Hey, Volkner," I said aloud.

"Hmm?"

"Why didn't you command Lanturn to use Hydro Pump? You could've ended the battle in an instant."

"Eh... no reason," he said, not looking me in the eye.
"Emolga, Lanturn… Why are you using the weakest members of your team?"

"No reason," he repeated.

"That's a lie, isn't it."

"Hmph." He's being grouchy now.

I pointed towards Morty.

"Did he tell you to throw the match?"

Volkner sighed, rolled his eyes, and then gutted Morty with an incredulous stare.

"She figured it out. She's smart."

Morty nodded happily in agreement. "She is very smart. I thought you liked that about her?"

"I did, once. What about you?"

"Only to an extent. The smart ones are more fun to pick on, they can properly appreciate the more cerebral insults. Oh look, she's pouting now."

Volkner glanced towards me.

"You're right, she is cuter when she's angry. Too bad she won't go out with me," he said.

"Come now, are you jealous?"

"Should I be honest or should I just act cool to protect my ego?"

"Be honest. Jasmine puts a lot of value into telling the truth."

"Then I'll say I am incredibly jealous."

"That's super unfortunate, because I'm still not giving her back to you."

"Hey guys," I tried interjecting. To my chagrin, they completely ignored me.

"I don't believe you can give away what you haven't even won yet," Volkner countered.

"Oh really? As far as I see it, she rejected you, and she'll go on dates with me. We even went to the park. It was very lovely. If that's not a solid indication of romantic interest, what is?"

"Except I have it from her very mouth that she's not been won over yet."

"And I have it from her very mouth that she'll sleep with me!"

"I DID NOT SAY THAT!" I shouted, and was again ignored.

"I'm positive you misheard a "won't" with a "will" in there somewhere," Volkner said.

"No," Morty answered. "She said I was one-thousand light years from sleeping with her. I just need a very fast space ship."

"DAMN IT MORTY!!!"
"In that case, I, being the tech genius and Electric-trainer, will outrace you."

"Are you suggesting you're still in the race? Dear boy, you've been disqualified already, lest you forget--"

"-that I'm actually four months older than you? Don't call me boy."

"And what about everything else? It seems to me fighting me for Jasmine's affection would be counter-productive to our other goals."

"I would do it for no other reason than to spite you. You need something you actually care about to not go your way every once in a while. Teach you humility."

"Could say the same for you, mister "I have an 85% gym challenger win-ratio"."

85%!!!!!!! Good God Volkner!

Compared to that, I'm….

"That's like, double Jasmine's record. You need to lose more often. Maybe Jazz is up to the task."

"Of course the little squirt is up to the task, when you have me handicapping myself from the start of the battle."

"Guys, I know you're mocking me," I said. It was the only explanation for their blatantly crude discussion of myself in the third person while I was present. Still, there was no stopping their feigned rivalry.

"Shush, Jasmine, most women enjoy when boys fight over them. As for mister Sir-Wins-A-Lot here, I am astonished he does not realize his place in the fight."

"My place would be number one, if you hadn't convinced me you were looking out for my best interests. Now, I'm not so sure that you aren't just using me for your own ends."

"I'm not some guy that manipulates people- at least not in ways that ultimately don't help them. That's part of my new vow."

"So you're saying me getting my Pokémon's butt curb-stomped by the pretty miss here is part of a grand plan to help me out? Could it possibly have to do with our deal, because I don't see the connection."

"It's all part of the plan," Morty assured him with a cackling, super-villainesque smile.

"The last time I trusted you, I got embarrassed, on national television."

"That's because you went off script. You were supposed to throw that match too."

"Like hell! You were the one who went off-script!"

"Guys, you are confusing me! What's going on?!"

"What's going on is that that douche up there likes to make a lot of promises to people and get them to trust him, and then he reneges the moment he sees an opening for his own self-gain," Volkner told me.

"Honestly, Jasmine," Morty cut in. "Volkner here has a crush on Flint that he's ashamed of. He's
trying to validate his masculinity by picking up a girlfriend. The deal is for me to hitch him up with Sabrina by showcasing his Pokémon prowess. To that end, I tried a lot of backdoor subversion and social maneuvering during the Gym Leader Summit. That didn't quite pan out like I wanted it to. Secretly, however, I'm just trying to get him to accept his homosexual tendencies and hitch up with Flint."

"NOW THAT IS A BALD-FACED LIE!!!"

"Hahaha! It's so true, you know it."

"It is not!"

"Oh come on! Just admit it!"

"Morty, how do you even come up with this crap? It's like some bizarre Channel Two soap opera drama!"

"I know the truth hurts, Volksy."

"The truth is that you're a real pain in the butt. Our deal had nothing to do with-"

"Hey! Well, if you're going to deny it so hard... But you should know Flint does have the hots for you."

"I will kill you, someday. It will be very sudden and unexpected and violent."

"Ahahahaha!" Morty broke down into another round of laughter.

I could not, for the life of me, tell how serious these men were. It boggles the mind they could talk like they do, in such a cavalier manner. I couldn't tell fact from fiction and I was certain that the confusion was by design, a conspiracy to put me off guard. This was the trick I had been expecting since Morty whispered into Volkner's ear before the fight- I just couldn't figure out what the end purpose of it was supposed to be.

"Sorry, but it's too easy to pick on you two, the way you guys practically hang off each other."

"Seriously, Morty, don't pick on it. Flint actually is bi."

"Really?!!"

"But that's not permission to joke around about it."

"Are you bi?"

"I just said to not joke around!"

"It was a serious question."

"Just asking about it is beyond rude! What gives you the right to be prying into these kinds of matters? Huh?! - And for the record, I'm straight."

"Sigh," Morty said, explicitly using the word "sigh" and not just the exhalation of a breath. He crossed his arms and rested them on the balcony rail. "And here I was, my secret desire to bed you, left unfulfilled."

"God, Arceus, Morty! If there ever were a national reward for nascent, pretentious bullying, you
would be in the running; a top, top, favored contestant."

"Ladies and gentleman, I graciously accept this acknowledgment of my supreme narcissism," Morty began pantomiming an Oscar acceptance speech.

"Whatever."

"Hey, sorry."

"GUYS!" I screamed.

"I hear something," Morty said, cupping his ear.

"It's Jasmine, doofus. You know, the reason we're fighting."

"Oh, I forgot. Right, do you want to battle for her after this?"

"Battle? For her? The girl I, for a brief period, stupidly pledged my heart to for no other reason than YOU told me to?"

"Wait, what?" I interjected. "Was Volkner's crush your idea Morty?!?!"

"No way!" Morty hastily replied, looking and replying to me directly for the first time in the conversation. "I never told him to go after you specifically Jazz. Sheesh, I would not wish that upon any pal of mine."

My eyebrows cocked, incredulous and furious feelings mixed in my pupils.

"I merely told him to get a girlfriend. And I thought I taught you better how to approach women," he said, returning his focus to his friend.

"You're a shitty teacher."

"You're a difficult student. I'll get you fixed up better for the next one. That is, if you swear off interfering in my pursuit of Jazz here."

"Morty!"

"By all means, have her! But I'm done taking advice from you."

"So you don't care about our deal?"

"Oh... shit... don't bring that up."

"Wait, what is the deal with you guys' deal? Does it not have to do with relationships?"

I had assumed, with the way they talk about it and how it kept coming up during the topic of romance, that it had something to do with relationships or love or sex. I felt like I was possibly involved.

"Not exactly," Morty said, before Volkner could answer.

"I-" Volkner began saying, but Morty interrupted.

"So Volk, if you're really not interested, just do as I say and toss the battle."

"I've pretty much done that already, it's 3 to 1."
"Cool, that'll make it easy. Just lose like the little Bidoof you are and then I'll take care of everything else."

"A Bidoof?! Why you!" Volkner was visibly ticked now. He stepped off the dais, heading for the stairs, conceivably to strangle Morty.

"Sorry, sorry! I kid, I jest. Calm down!"

Volkner did stop, staring up at his supposed "friend".

"You're the worst fellow I have ever known," he muttered.

"I'm the the worst fellow I've ever known too. You're, like third. Good thing you do such a good job hiding it. One of those secretive brooding types. The gals will never suspect you."

"The worst. You know, Morty, I normally tolerate all kinds of abuse from you, it's kind of a prerequisite of being your friend. But after what you've said last night, I'm starting to wonder if there's any redeeming features under that sham you call a personality."

I myself cupped my hands into a fist, thinking exactly the same thing as Volkner.

"Of course I do," Morty replied. "You're a guy, though, so I have no interest in laying out my soft, squishy interior to the likes of you. Now, Jasmine on the other hand…"

"Thinks you're still a perverted reject to the core!" I angrily shouted at him.

"She's just teasing," Morty assured all present.

"I don't know." Volkner shook his head. "Why are we friends again?"

"Because I'm your conduit to a social life, dumbass. My friends become your friends, and so on. And don't think I'd have all these friends unless I really did have such a soft side."

"Still not convinced," Volkner said, voice pitching. "You're a scoundrel, a bastard, and I would never even contemplate you having a single shred of goodness in you if it weren't for your-"

"HEY!"

Morty stood, bolt-straight, his face serious—deadly serious. His single-syllable shout continued to echo about the chamber, cutting Volkner's pronouncement silent. The latter paused, suddenly cowed.

"Don't go saying stuff you'll regret," Morty growled out in warning. "You know you shouldn't be sharing that with anyone."

"What?" I asked. "Volkner, what is it?" The man was silent, refusing to acknowledge me. I turned to Morty.

"What? Your what?"

"It's personal," Morty said.

"I'm the woman you want to copulate with, how personal could it be to keep a secret from me?!" I shouted out to him.

"Forget it."
"GRRARRGH!" I threw both fisted hands down by my side, arms stretched and tensed and shivering in rage. These boys are really pissing me off! I just wanted a functional shield generator!

"Listen! Volkner, if you're throwing this match because Morty told you to, stop it! You said yourself at the lighthouse he's using you to get to me. I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty underhanded and I wouldn't stand it if I were used in the same way. Whatever leverage he's got over you, whatever he's promised you, whatever "deal" and whatever "debt" you have between you, it doesn't matter! I'll take care of Morty! And keep your stupid secrets! Nothing's more important than what's right in front of you! And at the moment, that's me, your opponent! So just man up and face me like a real challenger! And Morty, just shut up! No more interruptions! I'll deal with you later!"

I huffed and puffed and had my say, and then settled down. Hopefully Volkner is more permeable to logic than Mr. Psyduck up there.

Volkner slowly pivoted towards me, staring me in the eye. His eyes were different from before. They were not the eyes of that meek, unassuming boy who had clung to me like a puppy, not even daring to properly confess his love to me until forced to. Now that I've seen him battle seriously, and interact with Morty the way he does, I can tell that that pussy-footing had nothing to do with his fundamental character and everything to do with his clumsy handling of his crush towards me.

The look he gave me now was far and away different than the look he gave me the first day of the Summit. These eyes were open, icy, and hard. They stared straight at me and did not flinch. They belonged to a competitor. A challenger. A man.

"I guess three versus one is a fair handicap. Fine. I'll be serious now." He held a pokeball up to eye-level, those eyes still transfixing me.

Oh god.

I might have pushed too hard.

"You know, Jasmine," he said. "I kind of hate you."

He threw his pokeball.

"Zapdos!"

Things began moving fast. In a matter of single-digit seconds Zapdos had unleashed several attacks and abilities, and Volkner had shouted out a list of future commands lasting at least until the next two minutes, and containing contingencies for different counters, and turnkey moments where Volkner could change the plan to accommodate battling realities and not waste any time in doing so. It simply blew me away. This was intense. This was a top-tier, world-ranked trainer at his best.

Zapdos wheeled around in the air, skimming the surface of the shield, its static electricity crackling off the translucent plane. It was gaining speed with Agility - and preparing a Spark attack. No, wait. It's a Discharge, and it's building capacity so that it can use it later on demand. Which might mean it's simultaneously using Charge to boost its power and increase it's resiliency against Magnemite's Thunderbolt. Volkner was telling the legendary bird to keep moving and not to fall into a set pattern, ostensibly to avoid being targeted by a Sonic boom barrage.

I can't sit here in awe of my opponent's multi-tasking. He's about to attack in the next five seconds, I need to think of something. Something, something…

"Magnemite, Lock-On, wait, no!" I cried, changing my mind and simultaneously realizing how
dangerous being indecisive would be at this point. "Magnet Bomb! Target is downrange, sac. strength for duration and max the negative charge!"

That was a lot of specific instructions and I hope Magnemite understood them. Worse, Volkner is a bigger techie than me and would understand everything I said. I just hope he doesn't figure out how I plan to use it in time. Luckily, even off Zapdos, Magnemite's resistances should let it tank one attack…

"Zapdos, she's trying to use polarity charges to restrict your movement. Convert all electrical power into resistance and fire away!" Volkner's already deciphered my attack. Still, I could- crap!

"ZAAAAP!"

"Magnemite, backpeddle fire! Ignore yourself!"

Please oh please get it off!

The energy crackling across Zapdos' wingtips had died down. Instead, the spiked remiges feathers began vibrating, producing an audible humming sound. The bird whipped around, diving directly at Magnemite at insane speed. It only took a third of a second for it to cut from the height of the ceiling to the ground, and it very much seemed like it had crashed. At the last moment, however, it broke its dive with a loud, crashing forward flap, at the same time unleashing a voracious gust- but it wasn't a gust, it was a Heat Wave, ignited by the built-up electricity Zapdos had charged up.

The hot air shimmered, like the heat coming off an engine block or mid-day desert sand, and it was moving towards Magnemite. I had seen this coming, a Fire-attack, as soon as I heard Volkner shout his orders, but the legendary can move so fast, there was simply no way to react fast enough. The wave of searing air crossed Magnemite at the same moment I uttered the "nore" syllable of "Ignore yourself". Magnemite was a goner, the Heat Wave encompassed it fully, transferring fatal (metaphorical) amounts of heat energy into the vulnerable Pokémon.

"ZZZZZRRRRGGLLLE," my Pokémon let out.

I held my breath and my fists, hoping for the impossible.

"ZZZZT! VRRRGgggg...."

Magnemite made an incredible effort, sparked, shimmered, and then fell to the floor and expired. Down and out.

The battle sequence had happened too fast. I couldn't do anything about it once Volkner had given the order. The entire description of the attack I just conveyed was not what I actually saw, it was merely stitching together what I anticipated would happen, and videos of the battle I watched after the fact. From the instant Volkner finished saying "fire away" to the time Heat Wave connected with Magnemite was a mere .429 seconds. Yes, I used stop-motion video to clock it.

"Magnemite is out. Who's next? No switching, remember!" Morty shouted out.

My shoulders slumped. An unexpected hardness took root in my gut.

Zapdos really might be able to take out Magneton and Steelix on its own. It's not because it's that much stronger than the both of them, although it is very strong. It's because the way Volkner battles is completely antithetical to my style of battling. In the strategy forums they call this the "hurry-up offense". The Pokémon is trained to attack the moment it's given the signal to do so. It doesn't even need to hear what the order is, since it already knows what to do. It's a step beyond being trained to
react to the opponent without needing guidance, it's a tactic of attacking so fast the other trainer has zero time to input any commands at all, taking them out of the equation. I hate that. I want time to measure, and react, and counter, and analyze. I want to fight battles of wits, not reflexes. But there's nothing I can do; it's a legal strategy and apparently Volkner's specialization.

Okay, calm down. You're getting emotional. Think.

One benefit of losing Magnemite is it gives me about twenty seconds to think before I'm obligated to switch out. Longer, depending on how far I'm willing to push battle etiquette.

Hurry-up doesn't give me a chance to react to the opponent. By the time I realized Zapdos was converting electrical energy into heat energy, the bird was already turning for its blink-and-it's-over dive-bomb. How do I stop something like that?

You need to slow the pace of the game down.

Thunder Wave. If I could hit it.

Not happening. Zapdos is too fast, too attuned to the electrical currents to get caught by that status attack. Even if I did hit it it might still be able outrun, outfire, and out-reflex my slow Pokémon.

The weakness of hurry-up is that it's predictable. A Pokémon can only memorize a handful of basic attack patterns. Anything more, either variety or complexity, and it'll get confused and the chances are high that it'll mess up and use the wrong sequence in its hasty judgment. Yet, even if I know Zapdos is going to Heat Wave twice more for the victory, I can't stop it.

Think!

My eyes squinted, my eyebrows perked, and I realized I should have spent less time thinking and more time paying attention to the field, or rather, my fainted Pokémon.

"Magnemite, return," I said, a moment before Morty could open his mouth to complain about my procrastination.

"Magneton, go."

THINK!

I have little time and even less margin for error. Hold it together for just a little longer!

"Hey Volkner, you should ask for a date if you win."

"What?"

"Maybe she'll be so impressed with your sweep she'll change her mind about you."

"Morty, shut-"

Ignore them. Morty just gave you a few seconds more to double-check your plan. Got it? Good!

"Magneton, Tri Attack!"

"Dodge and Fire!"

Zapdos was an aerial acrobat, neatly cutting left, right, and up, making the Tri Attack whorls miss by mere inches. It turned for its own attack run.
I smirked.

Of course the bird would dodge. Why tank an attack when you could dance around it? Especially when you're so good you can make it barely miss, and thus save time, space, and energy you'd otherwise expend making big swerves to get out of the projectile's path.

Which meant Zapdos was now diving straight towards Magneton - from a vector I had goaded it into. Magneton was already in position from when I threw the pokeball to release it.

"Heat Wave!"

"Thunder Wave!"

Zapdos plummeted towards Magneton, and at the last moment flapped its wings to let off the searing gust…

…And it did let loose the Heat Wave, which did envelope Magneton and bring it down to a sliver of health.

That didn't stop the bird from crashing head-first into the earth, though.

Zapdos screeched in pain. A moment later it screeched from a different kind of pain, that of Thunder Wave wracking its nervous system.

"Zapdos! are you alright? What happened?"

The bird shook its head, dazed and hurt.

"Light Screen!"

"Hey wait!" Volkner shouted at me.

"Keep up!" I shouted back.

A luminescent wall of light came into existence and anchored itself before Magneton. Useless for it, honestly. The only reason Magneton was still active was its Sturdy ability- even the faintest, half-absorbed attack was going to knock it out. But Light Screen would be useful soon. I closed my eyes to mentally calculate several important facts.

Magneton = Sturdy.

Magnemite = Magnet Pull.

Always necessary to keep that difference in mind.

"Zapdos, Roost."

He thinks Zapdos crashed because I hurt it with some invisible attack from Magneton. Good. He doesn't realize that Magnemite, even in the middle of fainting, had still managed to create its Magnet Bomb. It hadn't been able to fire it, though, so the invisible ball of electromagnetic energy just sat there where Magnemite had fallen.

When Zapdos let's loose a Heat Wave, it dumps all of its pent up negative charge and converts it into heat energy via resistance. Because of this, for a brief moment after launching Heat Wave, Zapdos has a net deficit of electrons and gains a strong positive charge. It was only a matter of letting the positively-charged Pokémon and the negatively charged Magnet Bomb interact, causing the latter to
pull the former forward. The bird couldn’t break its momentum from the dive-bomb and so it crashed, taking away a good chunk of its health.

Paralyzed, too.

Zapdos balled itself tightly, revitalizing its damaged organs and depleted stamina. No matter. It was far more valuable to slow down Volkner’s pace than to hurt his Pokémon right now.

"Magneton, Magnet- eh, no." Magneton wouldn’t be able to create a strong enough Magnet Bomb for that to work. We’ll have to work with Magnemite’s leftover Bomb. "Magneton, use Light Screen to collect the bomb and push it towards Zapdos! Don’t absorb it yourself!"

"What are you up to?" Volkner asked. "Don’t let it touch you, Zapdos."

Zapdos flapped awkwardly, the result of the paralysis impeding it. Still, it being an Electric-type legendary, it wasn’t going to have its muscles lock up on it. The Pokémon made it to the rafters, where it continued to Roost off its damage.

"Magneton, squash the bomb."

My Pokémon hummed at me, telling me it didn’t know what I meant.

"Disperse it throughout the earth. Don’t let the charge dissipate."

Magneton hummed again, telling me it was unhappy, probably because it was tough enough having to maneuver the Bomb around as is.

Magneton sparked, and the Magnet Bomb erupted in a scintillating wave.

"She’s planning something. Better watch out," Morty warned Volkner mockingly.

"Shut up. Zapdos, Thunderbolt, finish the Magneton."

"Pinpoint," I shouted out.

Zapdos was obliged to leave the rafters and fly out into the open in order to take proper aim at Magneton. This gave my Pokémon the time to set up another Light Screen - this one so small, it could barely cover the lid of a soda bottle. That’s fine, though, since the concentration makes it as thick as a soda bottle’s length too. The Thunderbolt was intercepted and stopped cold, not a single iota of damage leaking through.

Now, for the next Heat Wave…

"Thunder," Volkner stated.

Zapdos obliged, blowing apart my Pokémon, the arena, my eardrums, my eyesight, and my hope for victory to smithereens. The shields rippled, as if lashed by a cat-o-nine-tails, evidence of both Zapdos’ power and the shields’ durability.

"Hey, we know the shields are working! I guess that’s a 100% completion on task #1, right Jasmine?" Morty called out.

"Yeah yeah, talk about it after."

Magneton, as usual for him fainting, was littered across the field in a dozen pieces. Good thing the pokeball recall function automatically reassembles him, or else it’d be kind of tedious using him for
battles. I don't want to have play LEGOS every time Mag-Mag here faints.

"Well, now we're even." I sighed.

"Only in the number of Pokémon," Volkner remind me. "You wanted my best and you're getting it."

"Where did you find such a strong creature?" I asked.

"I raised it."

"REALLY?!"

"Yep, found a massive, abandoned nest in a derelict solar dish a few years ago. There was one unhatched egg there. I got some medical help, got it hatched, evolved it, and nursed Zapdos to health. Been a powerhouse ever since."

"You evolved it?! There's a baby-form for Zapdos?!"

Forget the battle, I want to see a baby Zapdos!

I want to see it I want to see it so badly!

I bet it's so cute! Cute cute cute!

Images of diminutive prickly chicks peeping and chirping seemed to float off into the air above my head, as I stared starry-eyed.

D'awwww!

"Yes, there is such a Pokémon. Would you mind sending out your third?"

Okay, back to being serious.

"Steelix."

Of course.

Erika had pointed it out to me, that my entire team revolved around giving Steelix a chance to grind the opposing team into dust. This battle had been no exception. The Magné's did their job, time to put my full faith into my metal leviathan.

Volkner didn't even bother saying it this time, he merely pointed, and Zapdos was off like a missile. I gained probably half a second while the bird banked to gain an attack angle that would steer it clear of the Magnet Bomb's former position. The Bomb was dispersed now, so it wouldn't matter, but Pokémon are simple minded and wouldn't know to not over-adjust. Volkner didn't tell his Pokémon not to either, due to his hurry-up offense tactic.

And yes, that half-second mattered.

It gave Steelix time to duck behind Magneton's Light Screen. The Heat Wave crashed into the barrier, obliterating it but also spending most of its fury before reaching Steelix.

"Now! Steel Edge Blast!"

"SCHTEEL!"
Steelix's tail rippled forth.

Steel would be incorrect, technically. The chunks of earth being pulled out of the ground and hurled, like spears, towards Zapdos were mainly composed of silicates, quartz, granite, and traces of unrefined iron. However, that iron was the important ingredient.

Zapdos shrieked. It tried dodging, like it did earlier with the Tri Attack. The first stalagmite-like projectile simply swerved mid-air and struck it in the dead center of its back. Zapdos tumbled, was hit again, and barely managed to keep aloft. The Pokémon tried dodging again, this time in a wide arc going as fast as it could manage. Still not enough, not when the Pokémon is paralyzed and the rocks are inexplicably changing course mid-air and homing in like guided missiles. Zapdos hit the ground.

"It's-" I nearly cried, before gulping down my premature excitement. Zapdos hopped up and backwards. Subsequent Rock Blasts (the actual attack Steelix was using) failed to home in.

"I have no idea what happened there. Zapdos, rafters, Roost."

"I bet it has something to do with her excellently laid out plan," Morty interjected. "Zapdos is in the rafters because she wants it to be there. Better stay grounded!"

"I'm not that devious," I said.

"Zap, Double Team."

Zapdos danced, as much as a giant avian can dance. The odd, random movement created a hypnotic effect, lulling the senses into seeing multiple images of Zapdos.

"Steel Edge Blast!" I shouted. One more good volley, and it wouldn't matter how much roosting or how tough this legendary was, it'd go down.

"Agility."

Zapdos sped up, and its image "clones" became even faster, blurrier. Steelix doesn't have as good eyesight as me, so it must be terrible trying to pick out the real Zapdos amongst the afterimages.

The Rock Blast projectiles peppered the room, mostly missing, sometimes ripping straight through the heart of Zapdos, only for it to be an illusion. The shields held, which I was grateful for. Where the iron-imbued rocks hit somewhere that wasn't shielded, an explosion, a plume of smoke, and a three foot crater appeared.

"Alright, Heat Wave but long-range! It's slow, you don't need to risk anything to try for a one-hit-KO. Just siege the thing down!" Volkner ordered his Pokémon.

"Schteel!"

Zapdos wheeled amongst the rafters, occasionally coming to a stop to unleash a wave of hot, burning air. It didn't have quite the same force as the dive-bomb propelled Heat Waves, but these were constant, and cumulative. The general atmosphere within the shields was starting to sizzle.

"Dig!"

I can hide and let the chicken roast itself, I thought.

"ThunderShock."
"It won't deal damage," Morty commented, confused.

Zapdos let out a small jolt that crossed through the arena.

"It's only ThunderShock so it can conserve its energy. Steelix, deeper!" I ordered.

The ThunderShock was acting like a homing beacon for Zapdos. I don't know if Heat Wave will be enough to reach him under the earth, but I don't want to find out.

"It won't matter how deep he goes as long as I know where he's at. Extrasensory!"

Zapdos' eyes lit up gold. From beneath the surface there was a deep rumble, followed shortly by a quake.

"Stay under!" I implored, but Steelix wouldn't listen. He barreled his way to the surface, trying, in vain, to end the psychic torment wracking his brain.

"Go."

Now or never.

"Smack Down!"

Zapdos' blinding speed would be hampered by the paralysis. Light Screen would protect Steelix from an instant knock-out by Heat Wave. The ferrous clay that made up my gym floor was still magnetized by the dispersed Magnet Bomb. The moment Zapdos let out Heat Wave, it would gain a net positive charge and be vulnerable to the homing projectiles again. Knock Down would floor it.

"ZAP!"

"SCHTEEL!"

The snake braced itself.

The bird crashed down, coming in at a steeper angle to allow gravity to help offset its paralysis.

"Grrr!"

Then Steelix did the unexpected. He Bulldozed.

The Heat Wave let loose across the air, dust kicking up where it met the floor. The Bulldoze had no hope of hitting the banking Zapdos, but it served its purpose- the berm of earth partially blocked Heat Wave. Only half the attack roiled across Steelix's Fire-vulnerable body, causing the big fellow to groan in agony.

Zapdos immediately arced for the rafters. The one Smack Down stone that Steelix managed to launch was accurate, but at the last second veered off course, clanged loudly off one of the steel beams, and fell to the ground. I kept my eyes on Zapdos, seeing what it was doing. It appeared to be Roosting on another steel beam. Seeing small sparks skitter across the steel told me otherwise.

The Pokémon settled down, catching their breath and awaiting orders for the next exchange.

I've made a mistake.

Light Screen was already blasted apart earlier. It wasn't going to protect Steelix from Heat Wave.
Steelix saved itself by acting on its own.

Now Zapdos is dissipating its positive charge by drawing in electrons from the rafters—presumably negatively charged by the Thunder earlier. Charging the rafters also had the bonus of being able to deflect other negatively charged projectiles, creating a safe-haven for Zapdos. Had Volkner planned that? Had he quietly predicted I would attempt to use polarity to catch him?

Yes… he did. I made the stupid mistake of telling him I had researched his battle with Morty, in which polarity had played a major role. Of course he was going to prepare countermeasures, especially knowing my first two Pokémon were from the Magnemite family.

I've been outplayed.

My opponent was better than me, smarter than me, had stronger Pokémon than me. The only reason it wasn't already over was my own Pokémon's initiative. I had not ordered or taught Steelix to Bulldoze in the face of Heat Wave. I played no role there.

I'm aghast.

I'm mortified.

I'm also out of ideas.

"Are you going to Dig again? I'm about to order a Heat Wave, and I'm betting Steelix can't take even a glancing blow from it anymore." Volkner looked at me, almost with pity, or malice, I couldn't tell. Does he enjoy this? Is it nice to be able to take revenge upon the girl who rejected him? Or is he just taking cold satisfaction in beating an opponent in such a lop-sided manner, disregarding the personal history between us?

"Jasmine."

"Go!"

"Hey, Volk stop!"

"Huh?"

Morty waved frantically, getting Volkner to halt Zapdos' advance. Volkner stared up at Morty, probably irritated at the interruption and hoping it was something genuinely important this time.

"Jasmine," Morty repeated, getting my attention. "You're panicking."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are, I can tell. Get it together. Take this seriously."

"I am battling seriously! I'm throwing everything I got at this powerhouse, it's not working!"

"You aren't taking this like an adult," Morty scolded.

"What could I possibly be doing better than what I've already done?!"

Morty shook his head.

"It's not about what moves you're ordering, it's about the mindset you have. Like this battle doesn't matter, so you think you can treat it like a game. It's not a game!"
"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Volkner, you're taking this seriously, aren't you?" Morty asked.

"Yeah."

"Treating Jasmine like you would a first-rate challenger at your gym, right?"

"That's right," Volkner nodded.

"Jasmine, you're treating Volkner like the guy you rejected and not a gym challenger. You're putting emotion into a fight it has no business in."

"Why does it matter? I'm still trying my best! It's not like we're playing for anything more than pride."

"It matters because Volkner IS a gym challenger!"

Morty pointed to the video camera mounted on the wall.

"You bastard," I cried. "You didn't actually…"

"I did."

"Are you freaking kidding me?!" That bastard! That absolute maniac! What in heaven and earth convinced him it was a good idea to pit me against someone the caliber of Volkner and then record it as an official gym battle."

"This loss will go on my record!" I cried.

"Yeah, so you better win it!"

"I can't!"

"Try harder! Don't make stupid mistakes like forgetting Light Screen isn't there to protect Steelix!"

I shook my head.

"It's a legendary! He's one of the best Gym Leaders in the nation, and I'm down to a half-melted Steelix! I can't!"

As much as it hurt to say, I know my limits, and when I've been beat. Any more resistance would be token only.

"Hey, Volks, you're gonna make her cry."

"I'm not crying!" I insisted.

Morty went on, directing a request to Volkner.

"Mind sticking with the plan and throwing the match for her? Please?"

"No." Volkner shook his head.

"Oh come on!"

"Listen, you two. I've been humiliated and yanked around enough by the pair of you. Now, Jasmine,
you sincerely asked for my best and you got it. One of the things I liked about you was how you didn't back down and you didn't give an inch under pressure. So if you're going to lose, you better be true to the woman I fell for and go down fighting!"

I tucked my hands into fists, clenched my jaw. So this it. His real feelings. He loves me and he hates me.

I hate being the object of men's wanton desires. It causes me so much turmoil.

I can't lose.

Because I don't want to suffer at the hands of another idiot male who thought I would go out with him, and is now taking his frustration out on me in turn. Even if I'm to blame for allowing him the opportunity to hurt me in this way, I don't want to bear it.

So, like Volkner said, I have to be true to myself and try to win. Even if it was impossible.

"Now, Zapdos, finish it with Heat Wave!"

Zapdos lifted off from its perch. It fluttered amongst the rafters, staying close to them, not allowing Steelix any opening till it was ready to make its attack.

It has every advantage.

Speed, power, health.

Volkner's smarts and preparation.

The negatively-charged rafters protect it from polarity-guided projectiles and allow it a grounding station to modify its polarity charge at will.

It can fly. It uses Heat Wave, a wide-ranged, nigh-undodgeable, super-effective Fire Attack.

What do I have?

A near-fainted Steelix who is slow and grounded.

And…

Oh derp.

I'm an idiot.

"Steelix, Dig! Deep!"

I need time.

Steelix got it for me, burrowing into the earth. Zapdos zipped by overhead, unleashing a fiery gale in its wake, turning the earth the color of glowing cinders.

"Steel Edge Blast!"

Rock Blast, shaped like spikes and magnetized, shot out of the earth and headed for Zapdos. The bird unleashed a Thunder to bat the first wave out of the air, but could not sustain it. The second wave zoomed in, barely missing the wheeling and rolling Pokémon. It came to rest in the rafters, where the similar polarities repelled each other, knocking the stone lances awry. A more
concentrated burst headed straight for Zapdos. The creature huddled behind the central beam, a large, two-foot-wide structure, which provided a physical barrier from the onslaught.

Meanwhile, I was busy texting frantically, foregoing proper spelling for the sake of speed.

"Trn shield down 1/2 power"

"But u just got new shields?"

"I battle it'll be fine do it HURRY!"

Morty looked down at me, nodded, and sprinted off. Good. He knows that while he still wants my lips and/or virginity, he's going to be my puppet. Also, the fact that I have to win this fight is his fault. He'd better help me bend the rules.

"Get the thing out of the ground. Extrasensory!"

"Stay!" I shouted.

I know it hurts, Steelix, but it's Psychic and you can resist it! It won't knock you out! If you come to the surface Heat Wave will annihilate you!

Steelix understood the situation after the experience of the last bout. Despite savage rumblings indicating the mental anguish he was going through, the steel leviathan did not surface.

There was a distinct hum, like a fan or computer powering down. Volkner didn't notice it.

"Volkner, please," I begged.

"Sorry," he replied. "I'm not gonna let my ego get broken the same way my heart was."

"I'm…"

I'm sorry too,' I was about to say.

But I couldn't will myself to tell him that.

"I wish we could have been friends," I said instead.

"Heh," Volkner let out a dry laugh. "Zapdos, Metal Sound, then Extrasensory again."

Zapdos complied, letting out the ear-splitting waves of Metal Sound into the earth. Steelix is sensitive to vibrations; this was going to be doubly effective upon him. Even Extrasensory could do real damage after this.

Please, bare the pain! I only need three more attacks from you!

"Steel Edge Blast!" I ordered.

Again, Zapdos retreated behind the largest beam in the rafters, the rocks safely bouncing off the near-side.

"I don't give up, and I have one advantage over you," I told Volkner. He raised his eyebrow.

He's pausing for me to finish my sentence. But if there's one more thing I learned from his and Morty's battle, it's that words are as effective a weapon as Stone Edges and Shadow Balls.
His pause meant Zapdos wasn’t moving, exactly what I wanted.

I knelt to the ground, placing my splayed-out fingers on the earthen floor, as if to be closer to my Pokémon.

"Magnitude."

"But Zapdos is flying," Volkner said, stupefied.

"No it's not."

There was tremble in the ground, a prelude.

Magnitude ripped through the building, the foundations screeching, the support beams groaning, the struts vibrating violently. Even all the way up in the rafters, Zapdos was rocked to its core. It tried flapping to get off the beam, but the paralysis held it back. It fell back onto the beam, and the Magnitude continued to wrack its fragile, Ground-weak body for damage.

When the commotion subsided, Volkner was shouting, rather hoarsely, attempting to ascertain Zapdos’ condition. The bird came tumbling out of the rafters, flapped frantically, hit the floor, before finally shooting airborne again.

Steelix punctured the ground, like a torpedo, snapping at Zapdos and sending bricks of rock flying in all direction. The bird dodged, and instinctively let off a Heat Wave that was too weak and too poorly aimed to hit Steelix properly. Besides, its priority was to dodge the constantly lunging jaws of Steelix and the general shrapnel filling up the air.

A few seconds later it had gained enough altitude to escape Steelix’s range.

One more.

That's all I need.

"Fissure!" I cried.

"But Zapdos is flying!" Volkner insisted.

"The one thing I have that you don't," I warned direly. "Home field advantage."

Steelix roared, a massive, booming thunder that penetrated every crevice of the building and every fiber of the body. Its body came crashing down into the earth, with the force of ten-thousand volcanoes (hyperbole), splintering the ground asunder.

And the ground rose.

It cracked, crumbled, shifted, faulted, broke, fell, and mainly, it rose. Like a living giant rising from the grave, it reached up, and up, and up, and into the sky, until the space between the ceiling and the ground was less than a yard. A miniature mountain had sprung up the middle of my gym floor.

Zapdos couldn't escape. It was surrounded by cliffs, barely able to dodge debris let alone glide to an open space.

The world collapsed around it. The legendary bird, so reliant on its altitude advantage throughout the fight, now found itself below ground level. A moment later it all came crashing down. Zapdos was buried under several dozen tons of rock and rubble.
Steelix plowed his way to the top of the now-caved-in pile of earth and roared.

Volkner, and Morty too, gawked.

"What was that?" the boys uttered in unison.

"That's me adding one more to my win ratio. No one's taking my badge today," I said to them.

After the dust had settled, we recalled our Pokémon and sat down in the lobby. The injured Pokémon were put into the PC to heal. Volkner, still stunned and confused, obliged me to explain what had happened. My mood very much buoyed by the victory, I was all too happy to teach him.

"So I guess you figured out I was going to use your electrical charges against you," I told him.

"Yeah. Figured as much. Didn't expect you to use it to create guided Stone Edge missiles, but it wasn't something I couldn't adjust to. But that... Fissure. Just, what was that?" Volkner asked.

"I'd like to know too," Morty chipped in.

"The short answer? Steelix is just that strong. The long answer? Magnemite's Magnet Bomb was modified. I had it sacrifice virtually all of its damage and convert all of the energy into a super-strong magnetic charge. Magneton squashed the Bomb, so that the charge was spread out throughout the clay of the gym floor."

"Wait, you can do that? Isn't dirt just inert?"

"I use a custom, iron-heavy blend of clay here. It's needed in order to accommodate the auto-tiller system," I explained. In the background, the system could be heard churning the dirt back into a fine dust in the process of re-smoothing the arena floor. "It has the added benefit of creating a particularly heavy, hard-hitting substance when I choose to use it for Stone Edge and the like. And, in rare cases like today, it's also capable of being electrically magnetized."

"Yeah, yeah. It's hard to believe, but not impossible," Volkner said. "I thought I had that countered pretty well by charging the rafters. What does it have to do with that Fissure?"

"It has everything to do with the Fissure," I said, gesturing. "You really think Steelix could lift hundreds of tons of earth up into the air on his own? The Magnitude was the second key."

"I get that," Morty said. "You had me turn the shields down so the Magnitude could reach into the rafters and hit Zapdos."

"That was gravy. What I was really aiming for was dissipating the negative charge Zapdos had built into the rafters. Heavy vibrations should free up the flow of electrons and allow any stored up charges to flow out and dissipate. I needed the ceiling to at least be electrically neutral."

"I think your grasp of electromagnetism is pretty sketchy," Volkner told me.

I waved him off. "I'm not a scientist, I don't know how it works, just that it does."

"Why'd you want the rafters neutralized?" Morty asked.

"So that the steel beams in the rafters would attract the magnetized soil in the ground. That cut the effective weight of the soil by a factor of eight, I think. With that light of a load, Steelix could easily use his power to send it skyward. Once in close proximity, the soil's charge dissipates into the rafters and gravity takes over. You guys saw the result."
"Oooooh!"

Morty was looking at me in wonder, impressed and nodding. It felt nice. Even Volkner, who must have been counting off about a dozen different flaws in my scientific reasoning, was smirking a little.

I like to pretend I know what I'm talking about, but in the end I'm just grateful the end results somewhat match my sketchy explanations.

Volkner leaned back into his seat and gazed at the ceiling.

"I should have used Electivire and Raichu. I could have won."

"Too late."

"I know. Thanks to this guy," he said, and leaned over to lightly punch Morty in the shoulder.

"Hahaha!"

"What was up with that, anyways?"

"I was trying to help Jasmine's win ratio by getting you to throw the match."

"Yeah, how is that supposed to help me?" Volkner demanded, laughingly annoyed and indignant.

"You?! What makes you think this battle was supposed to help you?"

"'Cause you said it would."

"Since when have I become a trustworthy person?"

"Since… never. I was just hoping this time might be a little different."

"Ha!" Morty laughed, a little syllable of off-putting denouncement. "Do as I do, not as I say."

"You got that backwards," Volkner objected.

"No, I got it right. Don't listen to me, pay attention to my actions," Morty corrected.

"I wouldn't do either."

"You might as well, we're corrupting ourselves by merely tolerating his presence," I added.

"See, what you get out of listening to me, specifically giving Miss Jasmine a freebie win, is that I will do my upmost to ensure our deal—" Morty gestured between the two of them, "—goes as planned."

"It'd better."

"Hey Volkner, what is this deal you keep talking about?" I asked, fishing for a hint. Volkner looked from me to Morty and back again. His shoulders slumped.

"Sorry, it's a secret."

"Why is it secret?"

"Hey, hey, I thought I told you to respect our privacy," Morty butted in.

"Fine, fine."
The topic of conversation roved about for another half-hour. There was an extensive discussion about the fact that Gym Leaders seemed to battle with much more complex and technical finesse than even the best tourney trainers. A Sonic Boom Barrage, for instance, was not something you'd see Red, Lyra, or Cynthia use. Morty attributed it to the fact that as type specialists, we have to be more creative to make up for our limited selection of Pokémon and common weaknesses. Professional trainers focus on controlling the flow of battle using switches, counters, and coverage attacks. Occam's Razor cuts them much sharper than us Gym Leaders. I commented that it seemed like the vast majority of Gym Leaders were type specialists, but that it wasn't against the rules to diversify. It seemed strange to me. If we wanted to compete, why didn't more leaders diversify their teams? Volkner, being the head of the Sinnoh Gym Leader Association, knew the reason behind that. He said the Pokémon League specifically biases hiring towards specialists, often ignoring more eclectic or type-diverse candidates. He wondered if the practice had something to do with our function as a filtering mechanism for the tourneys. I said it was unfair that the League hobble our competitiveness and then expects unreasonable win ratios. Morty agreed, Volkner shrugged (of course he would, the bastard with an 85% win ratio! Pfah!)

This was the longest subject we dwelled on, around ten minutes. Most others merited a couple of sentences or less each. Our chat dragged on and on until it drifted away into idle nothingness. We grew restless, fidgeting, our observations more abrupt, more disinterested. Volkner checked the time.

"It's time for me to go," he said.

Connie and Ted could be seen through the window coming down the lane. With the generator functioning again, I might be obliged to open the gym back up by this evening. It was time to wrap this little get-together up and say goodbye. Our trio got up, achingly, took care of errands, and moved to the doorway.

"So, to make sure it's official, is this step one completed for attaining a kiss?" Morty asked. Volkner rolled his eyes in disgust, or jealousy.

"Yes," I nodded.

"Cool. So Volk, consider this down payment on our deal."

"Right. I'm still not sure if I even want to go through with it."

"Why not? You know what, never mind. Actually, mind it, just not now. We'll talk later."

"Cool."

"And about your… you know."

"Keep your damn mouth shut for once," Volkner growled, unexpectedly hostile.

"I know, I know, that's my point. Don't go blowing your mouth off, especially to Jasmine here, or I might not be so kind."

"Understood."

I looked one to the other and back again. How many secrets are they hiding? It's so frustrating! It's insulting that they could stand there, right in front of me, acknowledge the fact that they have secrets, and then affirm to each other that I was to be kept out of the loop!

My anger simmered, visibly, until Morty reached up and began rubbing my back. The anger subsided into mere grumpiness.
"So…"

Volkner turned to me, becoming sheepish again. His hand went to the back of his hair, rubbing through it. He's at a loss for words and won't look me in the eye.

"I said some things that maybe… they were true, but not the sort of things a guy should air out in the open. I apologize."

"Forgiven," I replied, reluctantly. "After all, you tried to help Amphy. That means a lot to me, I can let a few hard feelings go."

He took me by the hand and led me outside, indicating for Morty to keep his distance.

"Hey listen," he said in a whisper.

The situation had suddenly become intimate.

"If you ever get tired of Morty, would you consider dating me?"

"Wah?"

My heart's a throbbing mess. It's like, one instant we're friends, and another he's asking me out all over again! Argh, so frustrating! My mood cannot sit still for even one minute before wildly being yanked again!

"If he gives you too much trouble, just call me and we can go out."

"Are you joking?!" I blurted out.

His serious, resolved face suddenly dissolved into a big grin.

"Yeah. I am," he said.

"Nyaaa!" I slapped him across the shoulder. "Don't play around like that! Morty is rubbing off on you!"

"Haha! Really, though, just be careful of him. He's got his dark side, and an agenda. Don't let him fool you into doing something you don't want to do."

"I'm well aware of Morty's inner devil."

"Good, good. Just call me if he gets out of hand, I'll deal with him."

He turned to leave, but paused and turned back.

"And I wouldn't mind spending more time with Amphy again."

"Well, you know where to find him," I said, nodding in the direction of the lighthouse.

"Fine, fine. Get Morty to call me if you have any trouble with the generator. See ya."

Volkner waved goodbye and set off.

"Chat later, okay?" Morty called after him. His only response was a curt wave of the hand.

"Unrequited love, tsk tsk tsk," Morty said, watching Volkner go.
"You two have been a handful today. A lot of unwelcome teasing, and confrontation, and generally too much emotion."

"Sorry. Stress. And we goof off. It's just boys being boys."

Morty led me to the rental car.

We stood by it, face to face, saying nothing, only thinking of what could be said that hadn't already been discussed.

Yet, now that Volkner was gone, I did have something I could bring up.

Apparently Morty had the same idea. His hand reached up, and a single finger touched my lips. I quickly batted it down.

"Don't try touching me without permission."

"Sorry," he said on down note.

"I don't like the fact you two are purposefully keeping me in the dark about so much. It makes me think you two are gay for each other."

"That's absurd," Morty said mutedly, looking over my head and acting as if he was tired and replying automatically.

"Of course it is, but if I can't get answers I tend to make them up, and chances are it'll be the least flattering scenario I decide will be canon. So unless you tell me what's going on, you two are dating in my mind."

"Don't be a child."

He's still not looking at me, he's staring off into the rooftops behind me. His hand did reach up again, this time to rest on my head. I simmered, torn between fighting it and allowing it, and eventually sided with spite and batted it down again.

"Remember our lighthouse conversation?" I asked.

"Hmm? Yeah."

"You made a promise then."

"To be honest? I can't be honest with everything. Not when it's of a certain nature."

"So how then am I supposed to trust you?"

"You just have to trust my intentions."

"I only trust your intentions so far as you think you're doing the right thing. But if I don't know what's going through your head, even a little, I can't be sure that your intentions are actually something I'd agree with."

"You're annoying."

I was taken aback.

Not from the criticism.
That's dismissible.

No, it was the fact that Morty said it.

The guy who supposedly had feelings for me, and wanted to kiss me, and fuck me, and should be head-over-heels gaga for me. At least, isn't that how men in love usually act? But he's not like normal men, and he's certainly not acting stereotypical now. He's got something on his mind and it isn't even remotely connected to me.

"Well, fine! Get lost!!" I shouted, and began stamping away.

"Jasmine."

He caught me by the hand and spun me around. We were inches from each other's face.

He's going to kiss… I put my hand up, but he caught it in his, so that he was holding both my hands in his. They were cold… His eyes stared into mine for a moment, and then drew away. The boy, no, the man stepped back, still clutching my hands but no longer threatening a premature unity atwixt our lips.

"Listen. A compromise?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"Make your demands easier, and I'll share a secret."

I fell silent in contemplation.

A long pause later, I answered.

"Okay."

"Two tasks, not three."

"No."

"Then…"

I had gone through this sequence too many times to give up on it. I shook my head.

"If you truly want me, the third task will be no problem at all." I thought a moment. "I'll ease the second requirement."

"How?"

"Just make Amphy happy. I don't care how you do it. Anything you want."

"That doesn't sound like any sort of compromise," Morty said. He paused. "Tell me why a kiss is such a big deal."

He's fishing for a way to tell me what's on his mind, but he doesn't want to give it up freely.

"It just is," I complained.

"You are stubborn."

"I am."
Morty paused another moment, thinking hard about his next words. At length, he gave into the mental pressure.

"The deal between me and Volkner."

"You'll tell me?"

He went silent.

Damn it!

Tell me or leave me, but be decisive!

"I'm using him to manipulate your emotions. I thought I could make you upset, which would make you vulnerable, which might make you more willing to do something you're uncomfortable with. Like kissing."

"You're an idiot. Throwing an ex-confessor on a woman is only going to make her more wary."

"I thought I could play it off in my favor. It worked, partly."

I had no clue what Morty thought he had gained from me by employing this stratagem. I didn't care. This was the same kind of predictably vague non-answer I had come to expect from him. It was not surprising in the least. What interested me more:

"What does Volkner get out of the deal?"

"Hmmm." Morty furled his eyebrows. "Well, it's simple. I help him attract a girl he's taken a liking to."

"A girl? Who?!"

This was news to me.

"Uhhh…. well… you wouldn't know her. It's just a young lady he's known for a very long time, and he had never given himself a chance with her until recently, and, um, well… I can't elaborate too much about it," he said with some trepidation.

"Why not?"

"I can't say."

"Why? Why are you so damn secretive? It's making me mad."

Men!

They're so unreliable!

"There's our deal and then there's the debt he owes me. The two are separate entities, but the former is connected to the latter. And I cannot, for my honor and my life, divulge what his debt is."

I cocked my head.

"You're just blowing smoke."

He shook his head and let my hands go.
"No, it's true. It might be the end of Volkner if I told anyone. Even if you had decided you liked him and started dating him, it's not something he'd tell you even then."

"That's inane. Relationships can't last with secrets of that magnitude being kept from each other," I said.

"You're right. That's why the matter of getting Volksy hitched with this girl is such a delicate issue."

He took a breath and leaned back against the car, gazing at the clouds above us.

"Let's just say, it's the kind of debt he'll probably never be able to repay me."

"Huh."

That's a bit heavy, isn't it?

I stared, a bit fazed and cowed. Morty's taking glances at me, looking down on me, as if saying, 'Are you sorry for asking?'

"You assumed we were just keeping something like an embarrassing fetish or some relationship drama from you," Morty mused. "That's your fault."

"You don't trust me," I said. "Not with anything serious."

"No."

"That hurts."

"It's not because you're you, although it doesn't help to be so judgmental. It's more to do with us."

"I don't get it. Why won't you just tell me?"

"Because it's not just my secret. It's Volkner's, and despite what you think of me, I still value things like integrity. I won't compromise his reputation."

"That's the case for Volkner, but I know you hinted at your own demons."

"What demons?"

"I was paying attention to that spat you two had in the middle of the fight. You had something Volkner knew about you that you didn't want me to find out."

"Eh..." His face is doing the cussing that his brain won't allow his mouth to vocalize. Apparently he'd hoped I had forgotten about that.

"I don't understand why you won't share everything with me. Just tell me!"

"Why are you so pushy?"

"Because!"

"No, why are you so pushy about needing to know this?"

I gulped.

I didn't want to tell him the reasons. Of course, that's massively hypocritical. I can't demand honesty and yet not be willing to open up my own inner thoughts. I wavered between the extremes of
openness and silence, debating whether to say or not, and hoping, praying that it would be enough to convince him to share.

I gulped.

"Remember the lighthouse?"

"Hmm? What about it?"

"You… you caught me in a compromising act."

"I don't recall this 'compromising act' that you speak of."

"It's alright, you don't have to pretend when I bring it up first. Just don't say it," I warned. I gulped again, my mouth running dry from nervousness.

"Even though I made you promise," I said.

"Which promise? There were many."

"The one where you were not allowed to think of me in 'that' way."

"Oh…" That got his attention, finally. He's looking me in the eye again.

"It hurts, you know. It's a little constant nagging, a shameful feeling knowing you saw me like that. That was me at my most vulnerable. I hate that you had that opportunity, and I have nothing."

I took a deep breath.

"To answer your question from earlier- why I tolerate you, even if I know you want something out of me I can't even imagine giving you? Maybe it's because of that incident, and this feeling of desperately needing revenge."

"That's a strong word, revenge. Do you hate me so much?"

"Equivalency," I said, softening the rhetoric. "I need to see you at your most vulnerable in order to make me feel better. I only keep you around for that opportunity- and to make sure you don't go spreading rumors about me."

"Is that all?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Is this whole testing and trials thing Tauros-shit to keep leading me on, making me believe you'll reciprocate my feelings so I don't go ruining your name?"

I nodded again.

Morty got up, right up to me, towering over me, grabbing me by the shoulders. His eyes stared down at me, furious, but dismayed too.

"The lengths I go, right here, right now, to protect Volkner's reputation, and you don't think I'd give you the same- no, you don't think I'd give you even more diligent care? You, the woman who I have come to respect and hold so dear over the course of my childhood? That's insulting, Jasmine, truly insulting."
I couldn't look him in the face. My reflection in the car window became the focal point of my gaze. It was a sad face. A scared face.

"I know," I mumbled out.

"Do you?"

"There's a difference…" I stuttered, "between what I know and what I feel. Maybe if I could just… stop feeling… feeling… I don't know… a word, a word. Distrusting? That's it. If I weren't so distrusting, I could learn to get past this. Learn to be able to relax around you. All of you. Men. I could learn to… love you."

"Hmph."

"So, it would help, being able to trust you, if you let me know what's the matter, what your secret is."

"No."

His word had the intonation of divine definitiveness, a cosmic declarative that no amount of argument would change. My eyes could not meet his, could not see with what emotion he was staring at me with. There were tears coming, I felt.

"Why?" I squeaked out.

"It's personal."

"You're a liar."

"Listen, Jazz." I tried stepping away, but he wouldn't let go. His grip on my shoulders tightened. "Jasmine Elaine Hayate-Mikan." Okay, he's using my full name, I can't ignore that. I faced him, looking up to him dolefully.

"When I say it's personal, it means it's something that makes me unhappy. It cuts into my soul. To bare it out like that would destroy my dignity, my masculinity, my essence. I could not live it down. That's the way men are. With women, you have your virginity and your body and sex as your sacred haven, where you only let someone in you absolutely trust. For men, it's not our body, but our insecurities. Our fears. Our feelings. That's our weakness. Forcing this out of me would be every bit as bad as me forcing you down and raping you."

His hands fell away from my shoulders, lingering upon my wrists, just a gentle grazing of fingertips upon my skin.

"When you're ready to have sex with me, I'll be ready to share this secret with you. I hope you understand."

"Huh?" Without a goodbye, he opened the car door and got inside. He wore an unhappy grimace like a mask as he drove away. The car disappeared around the corner, and that was the last I'd see of Morty for another week. My mind wandered off without my body, contemplating his departing words.

When I'm ready for sex?

Then we'll be close enough to share such dire secrets?

A bond of deep mutual trust…
Is that what sex means to you?

But…

Morty…

That's exactly how I think of sex.
I could see it coming a mile away:

Nervous glances directed towards me.

Shifting of the feet, awkward placement.

Constant busy-bodying and chore-seeking that just "happened" to cross my path.

Furtive gestures, furtive glances, half-utterances born from aborted fetuses of attempts at communication. Repeatedly failing courage.

When at last he steeled himself and began marching my way, one hand held behind his back in a vain attempt to conceal a custom-stamped letter, my heart fell like a rock.

'Not this. Not now. Not him,' I found myself thinking despondently.

"Um, Jasmine, could you… could.. could you," and he thrust the letter, complete with a heart-shaped seal, into my hands. I took the letter, confused as to the best way to handle this situation. If he were any other male, I would politely reject his feelings while repressing the urge to slap him silly.

"But Ted, is this…?" I uttered.

What is this little twerp thinking? He's barely reached high school! He's six years younger than me, what idiot idea got it into his head to ask me out?!?

"I can't accept this, Ted. You should-"

"Oh!" The look of shock in his face was not of rejection, but embarrassment.

"Sorry, sorry. I should of said first... It's not for you."

"It's a love letter, right? Why are you giving it to me then?" I asked.

"It's for-" and he seized up. I waited, until the blubbering of the mind and fluttering of the heart subsided and he pulled himself together. At his age, love is much more a thing of pheromones, a physical thing that impedes the body or propels it headlong, depending on the character. Ah, to be young- I don't miss it at all.

"It's for Janina!" he finally sputtered out.

"Janina? You like her?"

"A lot," he said, nodding and gulping.

"Then just tell her," I said.

"No, I… I can't. It's too…"

"Oh. It's like that." He's having enough trouble just discussing the very basics of the situation with me, a third party. To confess directly would massacre a shy twerp like him.

"Could you please give that to Janina? You don't have to tell her who it's from. I have it all written..."
out." He's looking at me with puppy eyes. I didn't want to do this, but I couldn't bring myself to say "no" either.

Ted and Janina were both freshmen in high school. Janina came here first, barging in some three years ago demanding a position. Despite the fact that I rejected her application (she was too young), she asserted herself and eventually won me over with her battling ability and general competence. Ted is more recent. He came stumbling in last spring, apparently at the urging of his parents. The boy wasn't terribly competent, and his lack of confidence hindered his ability to improve. I guess I only took him in out of pity. I had heard he was being bullied every afternoon after he left the safety of school.

That the lad would develop feelings for the lass was an utterly predictable outcome that, nonetheless, I failed to see coming.

"So… will you?" he asked tentatively.

I don't want to be thrown into the middle of relationship drama, I have enough of it on my own! Besides, these were my subordinates. There are any number of ways this could end up hurting our professional relationship with each other. I don't want hurt feelings getting in the way of their volunteer duties, or, heavens forbid, reciprocated feelings making the pair lazy!

Still, I can't just say no.

I have a reputation to uphold, and part of that reputation was the veneer of courtesy and kindness. Isn't it vapid of me, to worry about such things? If I were more honest and blunt, like I am with my closest friends (does that include Morty now?!), I could learn to be genuinely kind to people.

I clutched the letter tighter and assented to Ted's request, without saying a word.

Ted wandered off, lost in thought, probably dreaming about Janina's lips and nerve-wracked about her response. He was expecting me to deliver the letter, and not to do so would be a breach of trust on my part. How awkward would it be to go back now and say "Sorry, I can't do this!" Argh! But I don't want to!

A solution dawned on me; or rather, came walking out of the restroom doors.

"Connie," I said, hesitantly. I clutched the letter in both hands behind my back while approaching my chief subordinate.

"Jasmine….?"

"Um…"

I reached out and handed the letter to her.

"Woah woah! Jasmine, I like you too, but I'm not into girls!"

A smile came to my face, realizing I'd unintentionally caught Connie in the same trap Ted had just sprung on me.

"It's not for you, it's for Janina!"

"Janina?! She's… 15… Jasmine."

I blushed. Oh gosh. I really should think before opening my mouth. Then, as a way of trying to
deflect the awkwardness, I giggled.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry (I really wasn't), I didn't explain. This is from Ted, to Janina. I was supposed to deliver it but I'm a little busy and flustered right now, so could you do this for me instead?"

"Um... I'd rather not."

"Oh just do it. I'll take janitorial duties for tonight if you do."

She bit her lip, thinking it over.

"All right."

I watched her off, pitying her for the burden I had put her under, and yet not feeling guilty about it at all.

It was crowded in the gym today. A gaggle of trainers approached me, the leader a shy high schooler who had to be shoved forward to address me.

"So, um, Miss Jasmine? Are you taking challengers right now? We'd like a gym badge."

I shook my head.

"No, not now. Gym challenges aren't until 2:00 P.M. Right now I'm getting ready for strategy classes. You're welcome to join if you want."

The gaggle huddled and conferred amongst themselves, before the leader was pushed forward again.

"Um, okay, we'll do that."

They followed me around the gym like a pack of puppies. In fact, a few of them even had Snubbulls following them around, so it was like a puppy parade. At one point I marched/skipped like a military flutist straight down the center of the arena, just to see what they would do. Sure enough, they unconsciously started march-stepping in tune with me. Stifling an enormous giggle, I led them in pointless circles around the floor, as if to show off my troop to the adult trainers. It was near-impossible to contain my giggling at this point.

Eventually we ended up at one end of the main room, all of the trainers taking seats in the stands and me standing out in the open. Joining my puppy troop were about two dozen other trainers of mixed age, race, and gender. I didn't like the emptiness surrounding me, with so many faces staring down on me, so I let Steelix out. Feeling the presence of his massive bulk behind me was reassuring.

"Who was here during my last two lectures?" I asked. About half of the audience shot their hands up. "And who's willing to recap what we went over?" The number of hands quickly decreased down to two. I picked the woman first. "Tell the rest of us about the second-to-last lecture."

"We went over, um, picking the strategy that works best for you. Like, how to recognize when to be conservative, and when to take risks. Like sometimes you should switch in a Fighting type against a Ground type, even though you might have a Flying type, because the Ground type user might be betting you'll bring a Flying type so that she can't hit her Pokémon, so she actually has, like, Rock Slide or Ice Fang for coverage. So you've got to be really smart about who you pick and what moves you use."

"That's right." A little long winded for an answer, but it wasn't a simple concept to convey in just a few words. The lesson had basically been a crash-course in how to play to your strengths and
develop a personal strategy, something that was difficult to teach because each person was unique. It would only get more complex. I turned to the second volunteer, a young man, and asked him to recap my last lecture.

"It was a follow-up to your other one," he said. "You taught us that we should always assume the opponent will think strategically too, and we should put ourselves in their place and figure out what we would do against ourselves in order to have the best chance to win."

"Good, good. And what was the mental trap I most warned all of you against?"

"Don't make stupid mistakes assuming the opponent will do what you want them to do," the man answered.

"Correct. I've seen even the most elite trainers go down because they lose objectivity, and only imagine their opponent doing what they want them to do, because it will have a big payoff if it works- which it usually doesn't. Your opponent wants to win as badly as you do, and will make decisions that they believe will give them the best chance for victory, not the most obvious decisions and especially not the decisions you want them to."

"Could you give us an example of when you've done that yourself?" an older lady asked me. I felt like blushing, and shied away from answering at first because telling one's own failures is kind of embarrassing.

Oh well. Erika and company want me to open up more.

"Well, I remember this time. Someone was using your standard field-hazard Forretress. Now I knew that my Magnemite had Magnet Pull and if I could just trap the thing, it'd be at Magnemite's mercy. I felt like I could take the Pokémon down quickly, before it could set up any hazards. Well, the trainer read me, and three times in a row managed to switch out Forretress before I could switch in Magnemite. I was too greedy to capitalize on Magnet Pull and ended up letting a slow, Choice Banded Marowak Bonemerang my team to dust. So that's my example."

Then, thinking I didn't want to be the only person sharing an embarrassing loss, I asked others to share their own anecdotes. Several complied, and once someone divulged getting his entire team Toxic'd because he kept betting the opponent wouldn't predict his switches, I felt better about myself.

"So, you've already been taught a little about how to figure out your own team's strengths and weaknesses, and how to predict your opponent's actions based on what you would do in their place. Now, today's lesson centers around psychology- namely, what's stopping your opponent from dissecting your moves?"

A big blank silence followed. It was rhetorical, after all, but really, no takers? Ah, well.

"It's a pretty complex field, the psychology of prediction," Connie added, coming up beside me. "It's one elite trainers and deep-thinking strategists spend years theorizing on." She then whispered into my ear. "Heads up, we lost the television remote."

"Really?!" Without it, we had no way of controlling the display screen or video capture, which meant we couldn't hold official gym battles without a league referee- and our gym's ref only came on Fridays. This was unpleasant. There were work-arounds, but none that didn't involve a lot of grunt work in places that shared space with sewage pipes. Ewww.

"Well try to find it before 2:00, okay?" I whispered back to her. I composed myself and turned back to the audience. "Okay, so where were we? Oh, yes, prediction psychology. Now, I can't teach you
how to predict exactly what your opponent is thinking, and how you should react. That's so context dependant, you'll only ever learn from experience. What I can teach you are more general techniques. First, though, I need volunteers. You, you, you, and you."

I picked out four people, each of differing age: a young, brash looking boy, the teenager who got his Pokémon team Toxic'd, a young adult woman, and the smarty-pants guy who recapped my last lecture.

I had them take out their Pokémon and battle each other- but only with words. They called their attacks out loud, and I summarily decided what worked and what didn't. Three mock battles in, with much pausing and stopping, I started to get my point across.

The youngster only ever did what was most obvious. He always went for a direct, super effective attack. On the rare occasion he used status effects, they were always predictable - A Tentacool Toxicing a Shuckle, for instance.

The teenager kept betting on the opponent to react to his last attack. So, if he used Flamethrower the first turn, he'd use Energy Ball the next, hoping the opponent would switch in a Rock or Water type.

The lady was completely random, using strategies and attacks willy-nilly regardless of what her opponent was fielding.

Smarty-pants got the better of the other three. He made predictions based on what he knew about the other's personality, and adjusted to new information during the course of the battle. He only "lost" one round, when he first fought the lady and assumed she was a smart predictionist and not merely a true chaotic. Specifically, he thought her Poliwhirl would Bulk Up, which would help regardless of whether he kept in Donphan, Water-weak, or Sneasel, Fighting-weak. Instead she surprised him with a direct Brick Break, disrupting Sneasel before it had a chance to use Endure/Reversal.

"Do you see what's happening here?" I asked the crowd. Smarty-pants raised his hand, but I wanted a non-participant (and quite frankly, someone besides him) to answer.

"Some are dumber or smarter than the others," one elementary schooler noted.

"That's rude! But correct." I motioned towards smarty-pants. "As you saw on that last exchange, he didn't know her style of battling very well, so he over-predicted, and it cost him. In the other battles, our participants didn't employ enough prediction. This man-

"Clark," smarty-pants offered.

"-easily dissected Houndour's attack pattern, and opted not to switch, throwing the youngster and Houndour off guard. Meanwhile, when Houndour and Raticate went at it, neither side had any advantage, and neither trainer attempted anything strategic or predictive. I decided they would draw, but if we let them actually fight, the winner would be determined by luck and brute force. Which brings to mind this very elementary question: if you rely entirely on your Pokémon's power, what are you, the trainer, even there for?"

That drew a few chuckles.

"We're going to assume you're properly matched against opponents whose Pokémon aren't vastly superior or inferior to yours in terms of power and stamina. In that case, the outcome is heavily dependant on the decisions you make before and especially during the battle. To make good decisions, you must understand your opponent: what they want to do in terms of controlling the battle, how they'll react to your strategy, their foibles, their favorite Pokémon, tactics, and attacks,
"Now, against, say, me, you guys will have ample opportunity to figure my style of battling out before you face me." More chuckles. I should be a comedian (or not). "However, you won't always get that opportunity. Most of the time you'll be facing strangers who you don't know anything about. With high level trainers, even though they're famous and they all know each other, or they can do research from video archives, this still applies. Just to avoid being easily predicted, they will condition their psyche so that they change their personality completely from tournament to tournament. The point being, you won't know if your opponent will," and I pointed to the youngster, "always go for the kill, or," and I pointed to Clark the smarty-pants, "practically read your mind."

I paused, letting that sink in. It was a difficult concept to get through, and putting it into real battle context would be even harder.

"My lesson today will be about tactics that you can use to figure out how smart your opponent is early in a match, so you can successfully predict them during the middle of the match, when it's most important. We'll start by learning how to draw basic conclusions depending on who they send out first, and follow through with discussion of three important move categories: U-turn and Volt Switch, Detect and Protect, and Substitute. Lastly, we'll cover how to analyze what your opponent is doing in terms of what their line of thinking is, and then I'll take questions."

The lecture went smoothly, with the "class" being reasonably attentive and non-disruptive. It took about 45 minutes to finish, but then the question-and-answer session went on three times longer than intended. By the end of it, my shy, meek façade was very close to breaking. This inevitably happens when I have to deal with the plebeians for an extended amount of time.

"Yeah, but, wouldn't it be cool if you had a team where everyone knew U-turn and Volt-Switch? Then you don't even need to predict them!" This was a young adult male, name of Kevin, baggy jeans and T-shirt, stupid spiked bangs, and he was espousing decades old tactics like they were his own special discovery.

"There are numerous Pokémon who would capitalize on your incessant switching. If you're not prepared with Rapid Spin support, or careful use of Taunt or Magic Bounce, you'll become extremely vulnerable to field hazards like Spikes."

"Yeah, yeah, but you'll have the perfect counter cause you'll have the right Pokémon to always counter them after a switch!"

I sighed. Kevin had completely missed the point of the lesson.

"You can't base your entire strategy off of U-turn. Only use it to figure out your opponent's predilection for takings risks."

"Nah, but you said they could adjust to what you're predicting they'll do and start acting differently! This way, you'll always know what they're going to do!"

I shook my head and disengaged. He followed me nonetheless, and I was forced to continue to try to educate this thick-skulled man. "It only takes one Pokémon you can't quite solidly counter, and then the opponent will take the game's whole momentum from you. You'll Volt Switch your way right into a Close Combat," - just the same way you're about to Smart Mouth your way into my Fist of Fury - I silently added.

He did not relent one bit, and continued to talk at me, his brain obviously rocketing off and paying no mind to how others perceive him. I hate geeks like this- no social awareness.
"Hey, hey, Kevin, Kevin. Kevin." I repeated his name until I had his attention and he ceased babbling nonsense to me. "How about you raise a switch-happy team and bring it back here to face me in a gym battle. Ne?"

His eyes widened.

"All right! Yeah, that sounds awesome, I'll get your badge on the first try. You better prepare yourself!"

I rolled my eyes. Actually, I'm just going to lead with Steelix, lay Stealth Rocks, and Dragon Tail your team like a baseball batter. We'll see how much you like playing merry-go-round then. I only have to remember your name- Kevin Walker.

Which reminded me. Since I have some weird mental or genetic defect that makes it extremely difficult to remember faces, I usually rely on the display screen to show me my opponent's name. Which brings us round to the fact that the screen is still pitch black and offline. Connie hadn't been able to find the remote yet. I looked around but didn't see her anywhere in the main room.

Maybe Janina knew where she was?

My junior assistant was delivering a lecture to a flock of pre-schoolers. She was teaching them about basic type matchups. Apparently, the kids were having trouble wrapping their minds around Grass beating Water, for some reason, but perfectly understood Bug beating Psychics.

"Cause Bugs are squishy chirpy evil yucky and give you nightmares!" one enthusiastic kid explained to me.

"Well, if that helps you remember it, that's great!" I turned to Janina. "Have you seen Connie lately?"

"Nope."

"Huh. That's strange. I swear she must've come over here for some reason? Eh. Never mind."

"Have you checked with Ted? He's, like, hanging around the lobby."

"No, I haven't." If Ted was doing what I assigned for him, he's busy documenting our traffic for today, and teaching our temp volunteer Old Miss Aya how to greet visitors. He couldn't be counted on to keep track of his opponent's Pokémon, much less his coworkers' whereabouts. I shook my head and trudged towards the backdoor.

"Sunkern! Oddish!" I motioned for my two Grass types to come over. They had been sun-basking when I interrupted them, but they seemed happy to see me.

"Did Connie come back here?"

"Dish!"

That's a no.

"And where's Skarmory and Tyko?"

My Pokémon returned vacant, confused expressions, as if unaware they were supposed to be helping Skarmory keep track of the babe.

"Fine, fine, it can't be helped. Go back to sunning yourselves."
"Oddi!"

"Sunkern!"

They weren't content to do so, however, and followed me around the outdoors arena in my search for the missing miscreants. Even then, I wasn't in a big hurry. Trash, mostly leftover fast food wrappings, littered the stands, and I took to cleaning it up. With some disdain, I also wrapped my hand in a bag and began collecting spent cigarette butts. It was already banned inside, but I really needed to stomp down on smoking in the outdoor areas. What a filthy, disgusting habit. The plant pokemon thought so too, as they wouldn't go near the cancer sticks.

"Ugh."

"Skraaaaaw!"

A distinct shriek came piercing overhead. I bent my head, trying to locate its source. The sun was in my line of sight, causing me to shield my eyes.

Skarmory? Why is he flying in circles?

"Skarmory!" I motioned for him to come down. At first, he didn't. I shouted out several more times, the volume, urgency, and frustration increasing with each successive call. At last, he swooped down and lumbered before me, head bowed.

"Are you pretending you didn't hear me? What're you doing? Where've you been? Where's Tyko?"

Skarmory did not answer in any form, but merely bent his head and averted his eyes.

"Did you lose Tyko?"

No answer, which meant-

"Oh no."

Face-palming, head-shaking, sighing, and stomach-dropping ensued. Skarmory bowed as low to the ground as his anatomy allowed.

"Why're you sulking? I'm not mad at you," I tried reassuring him. Despite this, Skarmory continued glowering. Was he afraid of my scorn, or… did he personally feel responsible for this dereliction of duty?

"Don't waste a moment of your life feeling guilty; instead, spend that time on trying to make amends. Come, let's go find Tyko. And Connie."

As soon as I entered the gym: "Jasmine, Jasmine!"

Ted stumbled up to me.

"Miss Aya messed up the guest registry program and I can't figure out how to fix it."

"Seriously?"

"Hey! Hey! Watch where you're going! Hey come back here!"

Janina's flock of children had wheedled her into letting them play with her Pokémon, but as soon as the balls were in their possession they went scrambling off to the four corners of the compass.
"Jasmine, help me!"

"Excuse me, when are battles starting?" A young man asked this, shouldering his way through other trainers who looked like they had the same question on their minds.

Argh!

Too many problems at once!

I mustn't scream.

I am a lady of boundless patience, infinite reserve, exacting composure. I mustn't make an ass of myself and be seen to throw a temper tantrum. I mustn't. I must control my temper, despite the fact that:

1) My chief subordinate was missing.
2) My youngest, most accident-prone Pokémon was missing.
3) My video display board remote was missing.
4) I had a gym full of antsy trainers waiting for their shot at the Mineral Badge.
5) I had a gym full of rambunctious, out-of-control toddlers.
6) I had a lobby full of overprotective, over-scrutinizing, over-zealous parents.
7) I had a messed up computer system.
8) I had a pile of paperwork concerning the gym's property taxes that needed to be finished by midnight.
9) And for good measure, my bladder is acting up. I have to pee.

This is not considered a moment of unusual crisis. This is the daily, no - hourly, norm for running a gym. People dream of a job where they get to do nothing but battle with Pokémon all day. The reality is I work 60 hours a week and only 15 hours are spent in Pokémon battles. The rest is mainly administrative crap. It's not easy work, and it's certainly not easy keeping my recently-much-aggravated temper from exploding.

I shut my eyes, reciting mantras handed down to me by mother (also a workaholic, also prone to stress-related temper tantrums).

"Ted, use your Magnemite to fetch Janina's pokeballs back and use them as bait to lead the children back to their parents. Janina! Backup and reset the lobby computer." I watched the pair scurry off to perform their tasks. Ted became noticeably more skittish around the girl. She seemed oblivious to him. Heaven help me if those two end up anything like me and Morty.

"Good afternoon Jasmine!"

Speak of the devil.

My neck hairs raised on end the moment I heard his booming voice.

"Oh, and look at all the company you've got!"
"Morty?!" I whirled around, looking for the malfeasant wanna-be boyfriend/stalker. "Don't you have your own gym to run? I just saw you two days ago, how can you possibly afford to come down to Olivine… where are you!"

I pivoted around on one heel, failing to catch sight of the oddly-loud man-child.

"Up."

I looked up, and realized why Morty's voice had been so loud and echoing. His beaming, ten-foot-wide face was plastered across the video display. He winked once he saw that I saw him. The others caught sight of him as well.

"Is that who I think it is?"

"It's Ecruteak's Gym Leader!"

"The summit tournament champion!"

"What's he doing on the television?"

"Do these two know each other?"

"Duh, they're both Johto gym leaders."

"I mean, are they close?!"

"Friends?"

"Dating?"

Like a cafeteria lunch-crowd, the dissonant voices rose in an incoherent mass. I had to shout to be heard above them.

"What are you doing up there?! How? I mean, we don't even have the remote! Did you steal it?"

"Hardly. I had some inside help." Morty gave me a thumbs up signal - except I don't think it was for me, by the angle. My gaze pivoted around, neck craned, allowing me to scan the rafters.

"Tyk tyk! Pipuuuu!" Tyko, unimaginably, sat upon the central beam, four stories up in the air. Tucked under her stubby right wing was the remote. She proceeded to tap on this, happily.

"You traitor!"

Yes, that was my first reaction. The troublemaker was now colluding with the enemy. She would rightfully deserve the vengeful punishment I was now busy devising for her.

"I got it working!" Connie announced, emerging from the basement access hatch. She peered upwards, to find Morty's visage. Her befuddlement was second only to my own. "Is that that Gym Leader guy you've been bitching about?"

"Morty, I'm working! Connie, what were you doing?"

"I was trying to use the direct feed 'cause I couldn't find the remote."

"Someone took the remote," I said, pointing to the culprit.
Tyko happily chirped, evidently adoring the negative attention.

"I'm not finished with you! You'd better hope you find some insects and water up there, cause the moment you come down…!" I made a neck-wringing motion. My temper is getting the better of me. I turned to Connie. "Tyko probably accessed the remote desktop feature. The big display is just forwarding whatever's going on on the office computer's desktop. Which leads me to another question- who the heck called you over Skype?" I asked, directing this towards Morty with an accusatory finger.

"Funny. It was a lovely lady, very personable. We were having a nice conversation until the feed changed to grumpy-faced you. Perhaps my affection has been misplaced?"

"What woman?" I asked. Connie was right beside me. Janina was still in the process of resetting the lobby computer and trying to help Ted with the children, who was shying away from both her and the kids. Other trainers shouldn't be accessing the office computer. Who was this woman calling Morty?

"Grr. Are you cheating on me or something?!" I demanded.

"Ohoho." A crinkled voice sounded out from the office entrance. "Hey now young man, you disappeared on me. What're you doing a way up there?" Miss Aya emerged from the doorway. She was one of those old bats that you could not visualize as ever having had a youth, as if she was born a pile of bones and wrinkled skin. Her appearances, however, did not prevent her from acting like a ditzy, flirtsy, early-thirty-something woman.

"Well Miss Aya, I just had to declare our love to the whole wide world, so I transferred to the big screen."

"Oh dear, are we that far already? I'm not quite sure I'm ready." She put a hand to her cheek, feigning a blush.

"Morty!" I shouted.

Miss Aya had been taken in as a temporary volunteer, since she had been feeling out of sorts being cooped up at home. The thought that, even jokingly, I would have to compete with this ancient hag for Morty's affections made me seethe. I half-wanted to fire her on the spot.

"Jealousy does not suit you, Jazz."

"Like hell! Explain yourself!"

"Ohoo! I think I should be explaining," Aya broke in. Of course, now she's dropped the façade, sensing my immature temper flaring. "I thought I might phone someone on the office computer to get help with the lobby computer. I was having trouble figuring this program, er, what's it called, Skip? I think? So I just dialed in the number at the top of the list."

"And I answered," Morty said, bowing. "I thank you, graciously, Miss Aya, for taking culpability. You see, Jasmine, I'm completely blameless."

"You took the opportunity to rub me off the wrong way," I glowered.

Their looks told me I had just ejaculated something that could be misconstrued as innuendo, and-darn it! I did it again!

My internal embarrassment confused my thoughts, giving my tormentors further room to needle me.
"I thought you said I hadn't won you over yet? Perhaps, then, we should be asking why my number was at the top of your Skype contact list."

"Because…"

I could not think of a legitimate answer for that, or even a realistic lie. My vulgar form stood, limp and guilty, before the crowd of trainers. They all began mumbling and nodding to each other, rapidly drawing their own conclusions.

"So, I take it you're more eager for this relationship to move forward than you let on," Morty said across the airwaves. "I thought as much. It is one thing to tolerate me despite your sometimes violent rejection of my nature, but here now we have evidence you are keeping tabs on me- even giving my contact number a priority position in your Skype program. And look, instead of denying or refuting the evidence, you blush. So cute! I'm-"

"TYKO! Turn it off!"

My Piplup stuck her tiny tongue out at me.

"I thought you hated him?! When did you switch sides?! Did he bribe you?! I'm your sole food source, don't you forget that!"

"Pip pip!"

"Grr. Skarm Skarm! Go fetch the remote from the traitor! She's obviously been seduced by Darth Mortius, we must subdue her immediately, or the mind-control will become permanent!"

Skarmory, with ample motivation of his own, blasted into the air.

The onlookers giggled to themselves, enjoying the spectacle of the supposedly shy, reserved gym leader becoming flustered. Not to mention my complex affair with Morty was now aired out among them, and would inevitably become the subject of crass parody and rumor by the end of the night.

"Connie, shoo the crowd out to the lobby. Tell them we're preparing the arena for matches."

"Roger."

"Miss Aya?"

"Yes my dear?"

"Do not fall into the vampire's trap. He may seem cultured and nice at first, but underneath he's just a lecherous Zoroark. Don't be fooled!"

"Please, take her warnings with a grain of salt," Morty butted in. "I do have an evil side, but I reserve it entirely for this precious young lady. It's the only thing that is able to temper such a hard personality as hers."

"Don't you have a gym to run too?"

"Me? Ehhh, I already finished matches for the day," the man said, yawning.

"Some people," I snorted. "Skarm, have you got it yet?"

Apparently not, because Tyko had taken off through the rafters, expertly hopping and bouncing across the narrow beams. My heart skipped, filled with fear and anger, afraid she might fall down at
any moment. Skarmory felt this too, and his pursuit was hampered by him having to constantly dive underneath Tyko, so he could catch her if she fell.

"Ploop ploop ploop!"

And now the task looked impossible due to a stream of bubbles bursting form Tyko’s beak. They popped loudly across the steel beams, releasing a Mist attack that enshrouded the upper portion of the room. Skarmory ducked downwards, circling and frantically eyeing the cloud-cover for a plummeting blue plushy.

"Where is her pokeball?" I asked myself. I dodged past Miss Aya, ran out to the backyard, searched everywhere for a minute, could not find the pokeball, and dodged back inside. There was no change to the situation, except that the trainers were now crammed into the lobby hallway by Connie, and were shoving each other in an attempt to get a view of the comedic drama unfolding.

"Oddi!"

I skidded to a stop. Oddish held the pokeball up between her leaves, offering it helpfully to me.

"Thank you."

I took a second to pat Oddish's head, mindful that even the precious second loss was worth it to give appreciation to the neglected shrub Pokémon. And then I was off again.

"Okay! Magneton, out!"

Magneton came out, ready and sparking.

"Magneton, Thunder! Skarmory, Whirlwind!"

The latter blew away the mist with a vortex of air, the former let loose a violent cascade of electricity into the rafters. I bit my lip, unsure if the violent electrical storm had been a good idea.

Tyko had been in the middle of a jump, avoiding the electrified rafters. She misplaced her footing, though, and came tumbling down.

Good thing Pokeball recall lasers are homing. I triggered the device and pointed it towards Tyko.

"Tyk!"

She righted herself midair, and created a big, sloppy bubble that distorted the laser. The impromptu shield popped, and the Piplup escaped to continue free-falling. I was about to screech in horror, but Tyko was already ready, spurtng a mass of bubbles beneath her. She bounced, once, twice, and three times, coming to a safe landing on the floor. Then, not a moment wasted, she sprinted off in the direction of the lobby.

"Tyko!"

Logically, I should have immediately asked someone in the crowd to arrest her flight. But, out of pride and lack of time to think, I didn't, and simply dashed forward. Skarmory followed right behind me.

"Magneton, let Voltorb out and tell it to cut her off! Use Thunderwave!" I shouted over my shoulder. A moment and then I was at the door, shouldering my way through the grinning, riveted spectators. Tyko was soon lost amongst the forest of their legs.
"Jasmine! I got the computer working!"

"Janina! Stop Tyko!"

"Who?"

"Pip- argh!"

"Ahhh!"

Tyko spat out a bubble and used it as a trampoline to bounce atop Janina's head, and thence onto a shelf eight feet in the air. The girl yelped and waved her hands about her head. Tyko stopped long enough to moon and taunt me and Connie.

"You think this is funny, huh?"

"Pipipipipipip!"

Voltorb came zooming around the corner, effortlessly bouncing through the lobby like a guided billiard ball. It came to a sudden halt upon the shelf, blocking Tyko's path.

"You've got nowhere to run! Come quietly and you might get off with a punishment that you won't be taking to the grave!"

"Pip!"

Oh how little I knew. Tyko used an expertly executed Metal Claw to rip a vent cover off its screws, and before I or Voltorb could react, disappeared into the ventilation system.

I scrunched my nose in disgust. The dirty cheater.

She hadn't been idly exploring the gym, she's also been mapping it out. She probably knew the layout of those ventilation shafts better than me- or the building architects, for that matter. It makes me wonder if this entire escapade had been premeditated by her- or else Morty had told her what to do.

"Quick learner, either way," I begrudgingly muttered. Not loud enough for the compliment to reach her, of course. "Voltorb! Chase her down the air duct! Excuse me!" I dashed between the crowd of bewildered trainers, knocking a few of them aside. The parents, in particular, clucked to themselves in disapproval.

Out onto the arena floor again, Voltorb came spouting out of a vent, accompanied by a profusion of bubbles and foamy water. Tyko's 'chirp chirp chirp' echoed along the maze of ducts. Skarmory tried following along.

"Hmm."

In a way, this was harder than a Pokémon battle. How to dislodge the little pest from her hiding hole? Voltorb?

I checked its condition. Fainted. Lovely.

Tyko had the advantage of tight quarters. She held the remote hostage, so that electrical attacks were ruled out for fear of frying the device. Her attacks were simple, the rudimentary water and normal attacks usual to her young species, although she was finding creative uses for them. She knows the hidden crevices of the gym inside and out. I've lost the home field advantage in my own gym! How
am I going to do this?

Like the proverbial light bulb, an obvious fact popped into my head.

It's not like she's a trainer. I have one enormous advantage over her: Numbers.

A plan rapidly evolved from there.

"Oddish, Skarmory!"

The big bird glided down before me, while Oddish waddled out from behind me. The two stood at attention like willing, eager soldiers.

"Operation 'Catch Tyko' commencing! Operational Maneuver #1: Smoke Her Out! Skarm, take Oddish up to the main intake. Oddish, use Foul Scent and flood the ducts!"

They went off to fulfill their orders.

"Magnes!" Magnemite and Magneton were drawn out of their balls. "Maneuver #2: Annoy and Distract! Use Metal Sound on the ducts to disrupt her concentration!"

The pair made static rumbling noises and levitated loftward.

"Steelix, Choir! Sunkern!"

Steelix roared.

"Maneuver #3: Track, Intercept and Disable! Steelix, lift Choir and Sunkern to the ceiling! Choir, track Tyko's movements through sound! Sunkern, unleash Grass Whistle the moment you see the enemy!"

They too rumbled towards the action.

All my Pokémon dutifully carried out their orders. My heart could burst, I was so proud of them, working in unison, as a team. Nothing can stop us!

…

Suffice it to say, nothing went to plan.

"Odd odd ododo!"

Oddish flew backwards off the pipe, soaking wet. Her Foul Scent was washed from the air and sent back to her in a viscous cloud, which draped Skarmory and caused him to drop Oddish. The squishy grass bulb fell to the ground, the impact knocking her out. Skarmory danced about in the air, cawing, sputtering, and retching from the disgusting mixture assaulting his head and senses.

The Magnes did their job correctly, however I wasn't able to determine their effectiveness versus Tyko. Their effect on Choir, however, was much more evident. The constant pulses of ear-flaying sonar waves irritated the Corsola and made it impossible for her to track the Piplup in the aural chaos. Choir cried out, loudly and irritatingly, until Steelix was forced to retreat.

Even hidden, I sensed the commotion of the battle trending in the direction of the office, so I headed into there. My Pokémon attempted to regroup behind me.

"Maneuver #4: Call in the Reserves," I said in a slightly exasperated tone.
Pineco and Magcargo appeared out of their pokeballs.

"There you are. Hmm."

It's actually a pretty rare occurrence to have all of my non-Amphy team-members gathered together. Maybe someday, after I retrieved her shriveled husk from the clothes line at the beach after a hot, frothing day, I'll thank Tyko for the excuse to unleash my full arsenal at once.

"Piplup are cold-weather birds," I commented to myself. The thermostat was conveniently located on the office wall. I dialed the heat up to 85°.

"Skarmory!" I called my bird inside. "Take Pineco and help him Spike up every outlet inside of the gym. I don't want any interior escape routes open when bird-brain decides it's too hot for her. Go!"

I swiveled.

"Steelix, take Choir and Spike up the ground level vents outside."

I swiveled again, my sandals scuffing the floor.

"The rest of you, come with me."

The rack of heads filling the entrance hallway followed the spectacle that marched out of the office. A pack of disparate Pokémon boldly marched in file, lead by a fierce and determined young woman, heading towards the backdoor. Those Pokémon responsible for interior duties broke off at right angles, a certain crisp discipline characterizing their movements. The rest of us stormed straight forwards.

If I had to make a fool of myself by chasing my own Pokémon down in front of gym challengers, I better well look professional doing it.

"Looking good Jazz! Go teach that vermin a lesson!"

"You're next," I said angrily, pointing at the screen without turning my head. My war band exited the building. Connie, Ted, Janina, and Miss Aya joined me, with their Pokémon out and ready.

"Roof," I said. We trundled up the ladder.

As far as I could tell, all ventilation systems led to the air conditioning unit on the roof. If the Spike-layers did their job, the only viable exit for Tyko was somewhere around here.

Yes, there, a pipe jutting out of the roof near the big utility box. It was about two feet around covered with a grate. With some help from Magneton the grate was removed.

"Surround it on all sides… Hmm. Wait, leave this corridor open." I indicated a row of electrical boxes leading to a short flight of steps and an abutment in the architecture. The path reached the edge of the roof and turned left, forming an 'L' shape. If I waited in ambush behind the corner, it would basically turn into a dead end.

"Chase her down here. We'll make it a trap. Magcargo, you're with me."

I readied Tyko's pokeball.

"Mag?"

"Get behind me, and create a wall of lava when you see her. I don't want her skipping past me
somehow."

"Maglemagle."

It was 1:39. It took another seven minutes for the rising temperature to convince Tyko to abandon her hiding place. Occasional squeaks of pain and surprise indicated her discovery of the heavily spiked exits within the gym.

Steelix's roar boomed out. She had tried to escape through the ground level external exhaust.

"No good. Only one direction left," I muttered.

One more minute…

"RAARGLRLGLRWW!"

"Get her! Get her!"

"Bloody!"

"I got her!... nyah! Ouch!"

"Ton!"

A profusion of cries and energy burst out into the air. I crouched further, ready to pounce. Magcargo began smoldering behind me, bubbling and ready to use his magmatic body to close any openings.

"Pip pip pip pip pip pip!!"

Tyko flew around the corner; I lunged, she spun; I chopped; she dodged; I twisted and fired the pokeball; she hopped and dodged; I caught my balance and fired again; she ducked; I fired again; she somersaulted and fired a Bubble that knocked the pokeball out of my hand; I reached out with my left hand, catching her by the tail; she grabbed a rail with her beak and shook herself loose; I tackled; she ran under the tackle and ran into Magcargo; Magcargo billowed, turning the walkway into a smoking pit.

I needed to catch my breath, which was difficult due to the smoke. There was chaos all around. The wind swept in, revealing the current situation.

Tyko was backed up against the rail, facing me and Magcargo. Chunks of hot, molten rock clogged up the walkway on both ends, cutting off Tyko's escape routes.

"It's over. Hand it over," I demanded, holding out a hand. Tyko held the remote closer to her chest.

"Give it here!"

"Pip!"

She looked to me, to the remote, and then over the edge. Her feet shifted closer to the railing bars.

"Pip!"

"You wouldn't…"

She did.
The remote went sailing over the edge. I lunged and caught it… only for the bird to hop on top of my head and snatch it away again. I twisted, grabbing after her, managing to catch her foot- but in the process I abandoned the chance to arrest my momentum, and flipped over the railing. In a moment, we were both falling.

"Ehaaaa!"

I started screaming, before the flash of a steel surface filled my vision.

It was Steelix. He reared up as high as he could, catching and cradling me. I hugged the gentle brute long enough to catch my balance and then went vaulting and sliding down his side. Tyko, remote still in possession, could be seen skipping down Steelix's back.

"Get back here!"

Skarmory dive-bombed out of the sky, narrowly missing Tyko. The runt squeaked in surprise and dashed for the nearest cover- right back into the gym's large double-door back entrance.

My mind didn't have time to curse, it was already desperately spitting out a new plan.

"One, hup, two, hup, let's go!"

I raced inside. Tyko skidded to a halt. Connie's team leader Azumarill and Ted's Forretress had her pathway blocked. She turned to confront me.

"Don't do anything more stupid," I growled. "You almost got us killed."

"Piplo..."

I readied her pokeball.

"Recall!" I fired the laser. As before, Tyko intercepted the beam with a large, wet, shimmering Bubble.

That is, she intercepted the first beam, from the first of two pokeballs I was holding. The second beam, fired from her real pokeball, shot true.

"Got ya."

"Pip!"

"Wahh!"

No way!

She blocked it! She blocked the recall laser with the remote!

Tyko dodged a flying tackle from Azumarill, using the blue blubbery mouse as a shield against the third and fourth beams I let loose. In anger I chucked both pokeballs, ninja-like, in a way that one hit the other right above the Piplup's hiding spot, activating the recall beam mid-air. Tyko back-flipped to dodge this last technique, landing right on top of Forretress. She began kicking the Pokémon, spinning it like a top and using it as an escape vehicle.

"You are not getting away!"

I grabbed a just-arrived Magnemite and manually used its Magnet Pull to rip Forretress from under its
Tyko didn't lose a second, breaking for the office door.

Steelix churned in like a locomotive, blocking off not only the office door but also a full crescent's arc of space around her. She tried jumping over him. Steelix spun his mid-section roll-wise, sending her flying back onto the ground. I closed in.

"Pip! PLOOPLOOLOOPLOOLOOPLOOP!"

Tyko unleashed an absolutely amazing number of Bubblebeams in my direction. Taking a deep breath, I plunged forwards.

Vaulting, somersaulting, dodging, twisting, weaving, leaping, rushing headlong, and using every ounce of muscle memory from gymnastics classes long forgotten, I bullet-timed the Bubble-beams, slipping through them like a leaf amidst a storm. With one last frontal flip I brought my heel down, kicking the remote into the air. Tyko, knocked silly, recovered before I could catch my balance and lunged after the device.

She caught it…

…and a millisecond later I caught her, my hands clamping down on her sides like steel vices.

"I've got you."

Tyko, heaving and out of energy as she was, did not break a sweat. She tipped the remote and clicked.

I looked up.

"Hey, what happened?" Morty cried from the speaker. "I can't see a thing."

The video display was blacked out, except for one line of text.

"New password accepted. Please enter password to unlock video display."

"TYYYYYYKKKOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!"

_________________________________________

"Cara bella, cara mia bella!

Mia bambina, o ciel!

Ché la stimo,

Ché la stimo,

O cara mia, addio!"

La mia bambina cara,
perché non passi lontana?
Si, lontana da Scienza,
Cara, cara mia bambina?
Ah, mia bella!
Ah, mia cara!
Ah, mia cara!
Ah, mia bambina!
O cara, cara mia..."

After much heated (read: screaming, threatening, sometimes verbally and occasionally physically violent) negotiations, I repossessed the remote and the password to the video display, but only upon cessation of the rights to the background channel. That is how we found ourselves conducting Pokémon battles to the tune of classical opera for the better part of three hours.

"Cara mia, o Tyko! Ti uccidere!"

What ever possessed this bird to get into opera music in the first place?! It's just so weird!

At least it was a very good three hours for my win ratio. 15 battles, no rematches, 13 victories. Smarty pants Clark guy legitimately outplayed me with a very strong Donphan, with smart use of a Hitmontop to disrupt my strategy for countering Donphan. I even smiled, noting how Hitmontop used patience and Detect to learn what I was about to do with Skarmory, a trick I had just taught the challenger earlier. The other loss came at the fins of three consecutive Kingdras, so yeah... I was a little miffed at that one. The Dragon Tamer lass drew a cheer from the crowd for her cheapness, which pissed me off further.

Otherwise, Steelix used brute force and his tail to bludgeon most pokes into submission. Magneton and Magnemite did their trap, confuse, and paralyze routine, and Skarmory tanked most everything like a boss. My best moment of the evening was Skarmory barely surviving a Blaze Kick off an inexperienced Blaziken and knocking the Fire-Fighter out on its own.

After a while, even the music wasn't a great bother. My Pokémon even seemed to enjoy it, sometimes coordinating their attacks to the rise and fall of the singer's voice.

Of course, the one most enjoying it sat at the side of battle, firmly guarded by no less than four Pokémon. Tyko chirped and cheeped, cheering for every KO and letting off steam at every loss. Her unrestrained support for our team was ingratiating herself to the other Pokémon, even the ones she had messed with most during the bird-hunt.

"Whew!"

Five o'clock.

All done.

"Hey." The smarty pants guy strolled up to me, leaning on the banister. He had a fop of brunette hair and wore hip, thick-rimmed spectacles. He could be mistaken for a geek, if it weren't for the trendy hoodie and the fact that his pants were ironed.

"Hello. Clark, was it?"

"Yep. And Jasmine, of course, but you don't need introduction, do you? This is your gym, after all."

I tilted my head side-to-side, giving off a faint, rueful smile.

"So I've been thinking about evolving my Onix," he started off. "I was pretty impressed with yours today, my win notwithstanding. Perhaps, I was hoping you could give me some pointers?"
We chatted for a bit, him hanging off of my every word, me giving advice and chatting carefree, not thinking anything of it.

"It's five-thirty. Oh gosh. I need to close up," I remarked, suddenly surprised by the passage of time. There were still a dozen trainers or so littering the room, not doing much but not supposed to be in here all-the-same. My gym wasn't open for late-night training on weekdays, only Fridays and Saturdays.

"That's alright. Hey, if you don't mind," he said, leaning on the rail and a small, goofy grin coming to his face. "Would you mind if we met up later, at the café? I'd like to talk a bit more."

"Um…"

Should've seen it coming.

Tsk tsk tsk.

"I'm sorry," I said, awkwardly, of course. "I'm not looking for… you know… I'm only interested in friendships, nothing more, in case you were thinking…"

"But… okay, I see. Well, it was nice battling you. Maybe we can chat again… as friends."

"Okay."

"Mmm. See ya."

Clark limped off. He seemed like the kind of fellow who would feel hurt for a few hours, and then shrug it off. With his talent, he'll become a successful tourney trainer someday. With success and decent looks, I'm sure he could find a nice girl, someone more feminine and affectionate than I ever would be. So, in a certain light, I'm doing him a favor. Right?

"Clear the gym floor!" I cried to the last few stragglers. The ones who ignored me quickly got off their butts when the ground began rumbling and safety rails emerged from the ground. A fissure and several craters left by Steelix began shaking themselves into nothingness. Water washed over the clay, turning it to mud, which then began churning, as if a massive field of blenders began beating it from underneath. An industrial-strength lamp emerged from the wall, slowly hovering across the field, baking the clay into a hard, smooth brick. Even on the slower, more thorough setting, the process only took a little under ten minutes.

"Good as new," I said. What a time-saver my auto-tiller was! What a bank-breaker, too. The loan bill was coming up and I needed to figure out if I could actually afford to pay it. The property taxes on the building were also due and had to be paid out of my own pocket first, before the League would reimburse me.

"Why can't I afford my own accountant?" I moaned to no one in particular.

Oh, right. I was one of the 20% of Gym Leaders who still didn't charge a fee for casual use of my gym. Not that the local population would tolerate such a fee if I did impose one; if I wanted to become a hermit that'd be one good way to quickly vacate my workplace of human beings.

"Alas, I'm poor. What'll I do? Deal with it. As usual. Speaking of dealing with it…"

Time to go pay the traitor her dues.

Yet, when I came marching up menacingly to the little blue chick, I found a number of other bodies
crowding around her. Eight pairs of eyes glowered at me, daring me to take further action.

"So it's a mutiny, now huh?"

My Pokémon team growled and cried in unison. They were determined to protect Tyko.

"Steelix."

My utterly loyal leviathan rose behind me, ready and eager to mete out punishment.

"Piplup!"

Tyko came bouncing out of the safety of the others. She chirped once, and then placed herself, belly first, on the ground before me.

Imagine that.

She's bowing. Humbling herself.

"Owing up to your crimes?"

"Pip."

"Are you sorry?"

"Pip."

"And will you ever go racing off again, endangering yourself, the others, or me?"

"Ploop."

"You promise?"

"Pip."

"And you foreswear all allegiance to the evil Darth Mortius, and will forever work to guard your master against his nefarious designs?!"

"PIPPIPI!" she cried eagerly. I laughed.

"Then your punishment has been decided."

She cowered, awaiting and fearful of my judgment.

"You shall help me with janitorial duties tonight."

"Piplup!"

Apparently that was perfectly fine with her.

"Fine. Up." She leapt onto my proffered arm, and then climbed until she found a berth on my shoulder. "Let's go do some office work. Connie?! Where are you?"

"Here!"

"Get the stragglers out. Is Miss Aya still here?"
"No, she left."

"Okay. And the high-schoolers?"

"Training in the back lot."

"That's fine. You're free to go once the doors are locked."

"Thanks."

I led my small army of Pokémon into the office (except Steelix, of course), and there settled into the desk chair. Tyko, tired from the chase, began dozing on my shoulder. When she got too heavy I settled her into a make-shift bed made out of backpacks and dish towels.

"Cute," I uttered, seeing her slumbering, baby-like form.

"Hey. You look beat."

"Huh?!"

The computer screen came to life. Morty's visage peered at me across the digital gap.

"You're still on? Have you been waiting for me this whole time?" I asked.

"Not exactly. Been researching some occult stuff for tonight. Me and Eusine are going out again this weekend."

"How do you have so much free time? Even without probation, I'd be drowned in work if I goofed off as much as you."

"I have more help." He shrugged, ignoring the opportunity to make fun of my anti-social nature.

"And your battles?"

"I always get them out of the way in the morning. You should too, actually. Challengers tend to camp out at hostels, their tents, or the Pokémon center. They don't get a good night's sleep, so they're not as sharp in the morning."

"Hmm."

Good advice, but me being the night Noctowl, hard to implement. Wait, so is Morty…

"Do you not stay up so late anymore?"

"No. I mean, less late than I used to, but that's just a change from 4:00 A.M. to 1:00 A.M."

"How do you manage?"

"I just don't sleep as much."

"That's unhealthy."

"Probably." He shrugged again. "Mmm. Cool." He nodded to himself, staring intently at the screen.

"So you're busy this weekend. When are you thinking of searching for a Miss Amphy?"

"I don't know. Soon. Oh neat." He tapped out something on his keyboard.
"And when are you going to talk to Glacia?"

"Whenever she decides to respond to her e-mail, since she hangs up on me every time I try to call her over the phone."

"Fine. Fine. I see you're distracted, so I'll get going now."

"Wait, Jasmine!" His attention suddenly jerks to me the moment I announce my departure. It gives the sense that he thought I was going to hang around longer. It's not like I'm dying to hang off his every word and bask in his digital presence.

"I'm sorry about teasing you."

"You aren't," I retorted.

"No, I'm not. Okay, I'm sorry you were offended. I thought I could show off our relationship a little. Maybe it's just my way of fishing out your feelings, see how'd you react."

"Morty… we're not that deep yet."

"Yet," he echoed.

"Yet," I repeated. "I can't handle heavy conversation on a daily basis. We'll talk again later, okay?"

"I just wanted to ask why you kept my name at the top of your Skype list. Were you thinking of calling me?"

"Another day. I'll call you."

"Right… Alrighty."

I closed the video-chat down. The office was silent and empty, even my Pokémon had retreated to their pokeballs or other private nooks, to sleep off the weariness of another day's worth of battles. It felt lonely. Maybe I should have kept Morty on the line.

Two hours of probation and gym paperwork stared me in the face.

"Meh."

The work went by painfully slowly. I had underestimated it by half an hour, and even then it felt like four hours had passed. The amount of money left in my bank account afterwards was too depressing to mention, not to mention the amenities I would have to give up just to feed my Pokémon for the next few weeks. On top of that, I discovered the roof was going to need repairs soon. Not that I would have to pay for it, the League would, it was just that that meant another few hours of paperwork to devour my time.

I sighed. I sigh a lot these days. It's becoming part of my characterization, and that scares me.

"C'mon guys, let's clean the gym and go home… bleh." Can't even go home first. Amphy needs a visit.

It was while I was mopping the arena's sidelines. Tyko took a bottle of soap and used Water Gun to wash it over the floor, while I pressed the mop back and forth. I had thought the gym was abandoned.

"Hey."
Clark stood in the doorway. He wouldn't meet me eye to eye. "This is really kind of embarrassing," he started. Then, without giving me time to compose myself or react, he put a letter into my hand.

Really?!

"Is this a love letter?"

"Yeah, but-"

I tried handing it back to him.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I thought you understood… I'm not looking for a relationship."

He laughed, to my face. The nerve of him… the nerve!

"Why you!"

"It's not like that!" he blurted out, and pushed the letter back into my hands. I took a second glance at the written instrument, and mentally snapped. Bloody Metapods… it's Ted's letter.

"I was given this to deliver to a girl named Janina… but it felt really awkward. I'm told she's one of your employees, so I thought you'd be the best person to give it to her."

"Oh… oh…" Yes, I'm now wearing my inner chastisement on my cheeks. In other words, they were rose-red.

"It's okay. You don't have to apologize. No hard feelings."

"Who… who gave this to you?" I asked.

"Hmm? Oh, someone, a girl named Liandra," he answered, and then waved me goodbye.

Liandra?!

Who the hell is Liandra?! Just how many people hot-potato'd this love letter to someone else?! Isn't there anyone with the gumption to actually deliver it to its proper recipient?!

Argh!

I calmed myself, thought it over, and decided, painfully, what had to be done.

Luckily, the two were still around, even at this late hour, training their Pokémon in the back lot.

"Ted? Janina?"

"Huh?" The pair had been working in opposite sides of the field.

I motioned for both of them to come to me. Ted, seeing my letter, was much slower in his approach.

"Ted, I've decided this is something only you can do. Janina, I think Ted has something he wants to share with you." I put the letter into his hands and departed, quickly, not wanting to know the consequences of this drama.

"Tyko? Okay, get in my backpack. We're going to visit Amphy."
Such is a day in the life of a Gym Leader.
"Hitmontop, Triple Kick!"

"Poliwrath, use Hitmontop to advance and then Brick Break!"

I stretched out my hand, fingers extended, directing my Pokémon to defend themselves.

"Tyko, Water Gun, floor! Magnemite, dodge!"

My Piplup sprayed the ground beneath the advancing Hitmontop. The Spin Pokémon lost its balance on the slickness and veered out of control. Even as it did so, Poliwrath leapt over its partner and brought a cement-shattering palm-strike downwards. The attack was directed at Magnemite, aiming for its Fighting weakness. With a flicker of the hand, I had Tyko dive and take the attack for her partner.

"Tyk!"

That hurt her, a lot.

"Keep pressing!"

"Don't let up!"

"Peck!"

Tyko recovered and began sliding around on her belly, beak pointed outward. Hitmontop used a Circle Toss to fling her into the air. Poliwrath feinted towards Magnemite, before juiking backwards and aiming to finish Tyko off with a skyward fist.

"Gun!" I yelled. Tyko reacted instantaneously, splurting a fountain with enough force to arrest her falling and propelling her several more feet into the air. Poliwrath's fist fell just short, grazing her. The pair of fighters were doused in water.

Exactly according to plan.

"Tyko, Dive!"

"Detect!"

"Bulk Up!"

They fell for it. Both of the opposing Pokémon fell into huddled crouches, readying themselves for Tyko's airborne assault. Except, Tyko doesn't know the weaponized version of Dive (she knows how to dive, obviously). This morning, she had been taught that "Dive" actually means Bubblebeam. And, clever as she was, she understood what Bubblebeam was meant to do.

"Plooolppoolpool!" She splattered bubbles the size of her head below her, bouncing off of them and using them as mid-air trampolines, much the same way she had utilized them yesterday in her hide-and-seek escapade. The maneuver slowed her descent by three critical seconds.

"Discharge!"

Magnemite had quietly snuck up within three yards of the foes. It let off a surge of electricity,
coursing through the puddle that Poliwrath and Hitmontop were hunkered down in. The two were not prepared nor even remotely able to handle the damage.

Tyko landed with a flourish beside Magnemite. Together they gazed at the pair of singed, knocked-out opponents.

"That concludes the match," I calmly stated. Notch another win in my column.

"AWWWWWW!"

"WAAAAAAAHHH!"

Oh joy.

Melia and Delia Craters. I remember their names from previous forays into my gym. The Twin Karate Girls of Velveteen Valley, as they were known, often barged into gyms demanding double-battles. They claimed their "fighting spirit" was exponentially stronger when paired up, and that it would be a disservice to fight them separately. Impressive and spirited as their prowess was in martial combat, however, that did not translate into competence on the field of Pokémon battle. This would be my sixth victory over them, if I recall correctly. The real shame was that my winning record against them only counted as one victory over one trainer, due to them fighting as a single legal entity. It's cheating me of an extra tally in my win column.

"I will say, girls, you shouldn't be communicating detailed tactical guidance to your Pokémon in the middle of a battle, where your opponent can hear it. That's something that needs to be trained before the battle starts."

I'm not trying to say this in an overly critical tone, just inserting enough auspiciousness to convey my authority on the matter. Regardless, they took it as a put-down and began hugging each other while bawling.

I was tapping my foot in irritation, thinking of a way to kindly invite them off the arena floor. Other trainers were waiting their turn. Maybe if I used Steelix?

My temper and their despair ended suddenly, however, when a peculiar glow lit up the room. It turned every surface of the room into a scintillating screen, like a video projector—mostly white but specked with flecks of every color.

"Huh?" I know this light… but I wasn't expecting it… Which one was it?

I turned my attention to my Pokémon.

Tyko and Magnemite convulsed.

"No way…"

The Piplup fell to her knees, seemingly choking, wheezing and straining. Magnemite shivered violently, rocking back and forth in ever smaller, ever faster arcs, till it sat perfectly still, tense as a coil of a giant suspension bridge. Their skins rippled with energy. It sloughed, and then was consumed, their internal and external organs rapidly mutating.

"Both of you? At the same time?!" I muttered in awe.

The Piplup's was the simpler of the two. She merely grew to twice her height. Energy slashed across her head, leaving a pair of yellow crests adorning her forehead. Her wings became heavier, more
rugged, as if sheathed in a hardened mantle. The two spots adorning her chest faded away, and four new ones appeared. The infantile appearance gave way to a more fully-grown juvenile.

Magnemite was more complicated. It didn't have a pair of partners to form a trio with, which is probably why it's taken so long for this to happen. Instead, the very earth around Magnemite was drawn in, crystallized, and then vaporized, reforging itself on a sub-atomic level. Magnemite itself skewered, its eyeball swirling and then whirling into three different parts that slithered over the surface of its ball. The masses merged, writhed, and convulsed. A single luminescent, mercurial ball stood in place. Then it fissioned. Three distinct bodies, each adorned by an identical set of screws, magnets, and cyclopean eyes, banded together by a magnetic force stronger than the bonds that link my own cells together, emerged.

The white-hot energy shed itself from their bodies, coalescing into a sphere above them and then dissipating into the atmosphere. A gentle gust of wind blew threw the room.

And then it was over.

I and all present stared in silent awe.

"Prinplup."

"Magneton."

Wow. Just… Wow. A double evolution. I can't believe it!

This makes me so incredibly excited, I'm shivering! I want to scream and shout but even that would be too much for my limp body to handle!

"Tyko! Magneton! Come here!"

They didn't… or couldn't, at first. The pair sat in place, panting heavily.

"Hey, um… that's really neat… but…" A middle-aged man in shorts and tropical t-shirt inserted himself into my sphere of consciousness. He motioned that he would like to battle next. "Maybe we can face them?" he suggested, pointing to the newly-evolved.

"Ah, right. Sorry, but I'll be taking a short break," I told the challenger.

Contrary to what the Pokewood movies would have you think, Pokémon usually can't fight right after an evolution. Their bodies are fragile, their new cellular structure is still adjusting itself, and most importantly, their water and food-energy stores are depleted nearly to the point of dehydration and starvation, respectively. Evolution takes a huge amount of reserve energy out of their system. That extra body mass doesn't come out of thin air you know.

It would be a full day before the pair was fit for rocking the battle scene.

Of course, that didn't stop Tyko from exercising her new-found strength, or Magneton from testing its electrical potential out.

"Tyko! Stop! Hey, stop, you'll hurt yourself!" The Prinplup had finished admiring her new form and wandered over to the training corner. She was trying to smash training bricks into pieces now, even when it clearly pained her to lift her wing. I lunged after her. She tried to run away but, to her awkward surprise, found out she was no longer as agile as she used to be.

"Gotcha."
I turned to the other Pokémon.

"Magneton, come here. Come come! We're going to the office."

The magnet Pokémon abandoned its efforts of trying to replace the gym's power supply and followed me.

I settled Tyko into the office cot and dropped a coat over her. She looked unhappy to be mommied into nap-time, but soon enough the strain of evolution overcame her. Similarly, Magneton wanted to inspect every appliance and electrical equipment in the room, but eventually settled itself in front of the air conditioning vent.

"Enjoy your rest, you two. Now that you're stronger, I'm only going to work you harder, starting tomorrow."

I drifted back to the arena, smiles and grins bubbling out of my face.

The tropical-shirted challenger perked up, eager to battle. The Karate Twins had ceased their waterworks and were now peeping into the office, trying to catch a glimpse of the newly-evolved.

"Well, let's continue, shall we?"

The battle went swimmingly- and that's not hyperbole. The man's entire strategy involved a Blastoise creating a rather large crevice in the arena and filling it with water. I suppose he thought he could draw Steelix into an aquatic battle and drown the brute. That strategy actually stood a rather good chance of working, had not my senior Magneton gone all toaster-meets-bathtub on his mono-Water team. The victory put me at ease, allowing time to fly by.

My mood could hardly be better for the rest of the day. Including the two losses I had earlier this morning, I went 18-2 for the day's final tally (actual per-trainer tally). On top of that, an unexpected visitor appeared during my evening hours admin work. She paused at the door, gazing at me while I filled out an expense report. I pretended not to see her, just to see how long she would stand there.

It turned out, a long time, or rather the fifteen minutes it took to fill out the report. Finished, I gently placed the pen on the table and turned to her. She smiled, but in a reluctant, restrained way, as if she were disappointed that I had interrupted her Jasmine-in-her-natural-habitat gazing session. Her mouth opened, ostensibly to greet me, but I signaled her to silence with a finger over my lips. Following that, I tip-toed over to the cot and lifted the edge of the coat for her to see. Silently, she lit up in joy.

Our pantomimed ecstasy carried over to the lobby, where we rejoiced in much less restrained manner.

"Erika!"

"Jasmine! Prinplup!"

"Yes! And did you see Magneton?"

"What about it?"

"That was Magnemite! They both evolved from the same battle… side-by-side!"

"Splendid!"

"It was amazing!"
"I'm sure! Have you battled with them yet?"

"No! I had them rest right after they evolved."

"Oh you're a very generous trainer. I would have put them to use right away!"

"It didn't matter, I won most of my matches today."

"You did? Splendid once more!"

"I can't wait to use them in battle though! I'm so excited!"

Our gushing went on in uninterrupted bursts.

The gallivanting carried on through the evening hour and into the night. Erika brought out a thermos of what I presumed was tea and made herself at home on the ratty old recliner. I took a lounging sprawl upon the raggedy old couch. We talked about Prinplup and Magneton for half an hour, me being obliged to relate the entire event. Later, after that topic had been exhausted, we turned to gossip and other past times. She began relating all of her latest adventures in Olivinian horticulture and seedy interest stories of her ever-growing social circle. For a woman who'd been here all of two weeks, she's made quite a few friends in quite disparate populations.

For my part, I tried acting like I was interested in the tales of public comedy and private drama. My mind was otherwise occupied by planning for the new evolutions. More than once she caught me dazing off, and with a sharp knick of the forehead brought me back into the conversation. My attention was like a light switch, blinking on whenever she turned to the subject of Pokémon, and shutting off the moment she brought up boys or relationships.

"You're not paying attention, dear."

THWAP!

"Oww!"

"That's what you get for losing focus! Have I not told you the key to success is to never let your guard down?"

"I'm tired. And you're not talking about Pokémon battles, you're babbling about boys and parties and crap."

"Of course! You're tired because you're not giving yourself any breaks. You should learn to manage your time better."

"I need to learn to manufacture time. We're way past the industrial age, why don't they have factories for hours and minutes? They'd make a fortune."

"Jasmine, please pay attention!"

"What's so important?"

"I've asked you twice now and you've gone blank eyed on me. You're acting as exhausted as your Pokémon, except you haven't evolved any in six years."

"Well I'm so sorry (note the sarcasm), what were you asking?"

"If you would be interested in going to Whitney's party this coming Halloween."
"Halloween? Isn't that the weird Unova festival?"

"It's not weird, it's fun."

"But they dress up in weird cosplays."

"Costumes, dear."

"Is there a difference?"

"Costumes aren't necessarily derived from a work of fiction, while cosplays are always derivative."

She leaned back in her seat and took a sip from her thermos bottle.

"What would you wear if not some fictional anime costume?"

"Legendary monsters, or Pokémon gajinkas, or folk lore, or super heroes, or ghosts, or famous people or… lord Arceus Jasmine, use your imagination!"

"I don't like it. I've been to a cosplay convention; all the girls were wearing really skimpy clothing, and the whole purpose seemed to be to fish for attention from drooling neckbeards."

"Killjoy, killjoy. It's not like you have to wear anything too-revealing. Come as a werewolf."

"A furry costume?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"It doesn't matter what I wear, I'll be fetish bait in public!"

"You'll be among friends! Lyra and Ethan and Morty and the others all are invited!"

"I bet Morty will be a vampire. I don't want him spitting all over my neck and going "I vant to suck yer blud! Aaaa! Aaaa! Aaaa!"

I began making noises as Erika pinched me by the corners of the mouth. I slapped at her to get her to stop, in vain.

"Stop being so contrary! Come to the party! That's an order!"

"You're not my boss!"

"I'm your Onee-sama! You will do as I say, for the sake of your eventual happiness!"

I let out a sigh and collapsed into myself.

"Well, maybe. It's two weeks away, right?"

"About."

"I'll go... Maybe. But don't expect me to put any effort into my costume."

"Do try. You'll have fun with it, I think."

"I think not."

"You used to love sewing and fashion. Why not put those old skills to use?"
"I got into it because my mother made me. I stopped as soon as I got out from under her thumb. Got sick of it after having to sew three-hundred feet of fancy banisters." I shuddered at the memory of it. Ten hour days, nine days straight. My fingers were stubs by the end of it. Ugh.

"Well put that behind you and just have fun! It's the perfect opportunity to dress up and just be someone else."

"I'll worry about it later. Right now I'm worried about Tyko and Magneton."

She took another sip of her drink and clucked her tongue.

You can see how the conversation went. The above sample is but a fraction of a wasted four hour stretch of time. Erika repeatedly, almost obsessively tried to engage me to come out to various parties and social functions. I couldn't get her to talk about Pokémon or my probation for longer than five minutes at a time. Her mood was becoming more manic and expressive as my own stubbornness hardened. At last I made a solemn promise to go to this Halloween party just so that she'd quit bugging me about all the rest. Upon hearing this she lit up and clapped. She was so excited she immediately logged onto the computer to buy a two-way ticket on the ferry, just to make sure I followed through on my promise.

"Great, now you've gone and spent money on it," I grumbled. I hate wasting money, most especially other people's. She's trapped me. "Why are you being so insistent today? Do you have some sort of conspiracy going on?"

Erika leaned in close, her face drawing tight and conspiratorial.

"Yes, I do, Jasmine."

"Eh? You're creeping me out."

"It's called the Get-Jasmine-a-Life Plan, and it's very progressed. We can't back out now."

I giggled. Couldn't help myself.

"You're too much."

I patted her shoulder.

"Well…" she let on.

I eyed her out of the corner of my eye. She's got something to add, something to be wary of.

"I secretly want to doll you up."

"Doll me up?"

"YES! I want to pamper and make-up and drape and swaddle you in all sorts of things! You don't know how long I've been DYING to model your skimpy little body! If I had your measurements… oh my, I'd be on Elegance, parading down the walkway in some glitzy v-neck and Pasch-Mirada pumps! Oh, those would look splendid on you!"

"Don't be a creep, Erika, you're…"

"Not a creep. Girls can't creep on girls. I'm merely envious of you, that's all. Don't you think it's healthy to displace envy by putting the excess emotions into positive actions?"
"Well, not a creep per se, but you've got that unsettling focus and enthusiasm directed at me that I usually only see in creepy men. It's... it's..." I sniffed. There was a slightly unpleasant odor in the immediate vicinity of my nose. "It's... alcohol."

I snatched Erika's thermos from her and took in a whiff.

"SAKE! Erika, why are you drinking? Are you drunk?"

"Hmmmmm.... maybe a little."

Apply palm directly to face. Do not pass go. Do not collect 20,000 pokedollars.

Well that would explain her too-forward too-obsessive too-candid behavior over the past hour.

"Why are you drinking?" I asked again.

"No reason. Okay, reasons. I got some bad news from Celadon. Truthfully, I wanted to come see you to unload a little."

"You kind of suck at being emotionally compromised."

"Should I take lessons from you?" she teased.

"Yes."

"Oh."

"What's wrong? Do you have to go back to Celadon?"

"Far from it, I need to stay even further away. That boss I mentioned? He's gotten very nasty. He's threatening to blackmail me and the gym."

"What does he have to blackmail you with? Are you a criminal?"

"He has nothing. But it would be very inconvenient because the authorities would believe him until I proved otherwise, and that might take longer than I'd be willing to tolerate. It's a mess, life's a mess, Jasmine."

She snatched her thermos back and downed the rest of the sake in one swig. "Let's go to the party and forget all of our worries! I want to dress you up, it'd be a good distraction for me. I'm already planning your costume... a cat burglar..."

"I'll bring my own costume," I begged off. "It's still a ways away. I've got things to do before then."

"Mnhmm."  

I led the swaying young lady back to the office, where most of my critters were lounging around. Soon enough they were all collected into their pokeballs. I personally held Tyko and Magneton's pokeballs in my hand; the rest went into my purse.

"Come over to my house," Erika pleaded.

"I've got a busy day tomorrow. I can't do sleepovers."

"Oh please, dearest? I'm feeling alone."
"Why don't you find a boyfriend?"

"Oh, none of them are interesting enough."

"That's weird coming from you. Isn't there anyone YOU like?"

It did suddenly strike me as odd, come to think of it. With all her incessant focus on relationships and romance, Erika had no significant other that I was aware of. How could she pester me so much for being single when she herself is, at best, a floater? The hypocrite.

"I'm holding out for someone," she said, smiling and lilting.

"Who? Do you mean in general, or do you have someone in mind?"

"Someone in particular."

"Who is it?" I asked.

She put her finger to her lips and then to my lips, and giggled. The damn alcohol could practically be seen swilling in her eyes, like twin amber washing machines.

"Don't go coy on me, I'm sick of people keeping secrets!"

Erika looked at my fierce and indignant face, finally shrugging and giving in. Her head leaned in close, her lips almost kissing my ears.

"It's Morty," she whispered.

"BAH!" I pushed her away, even as she broke down into riotous laughter.

"You're messing with me!"

"Of course! You were very correct, Jasmine, Morty is such a bad influence. I'm sorry."

"Especially when you're drunk," I snorted.

I ended up walking Erika home, just to make sure she didn't teeter off into the street and get run over. After reaching her house and filling her with three cups of tea, she seemed to regain her sobriety and sanity, and began apologizing profusely for her conduct.

"Just don't go filling a thermos full of sake the next time you're feeling down!" I admonished her.

"Oh, yes, that is probably a good idea."

"Get some rest."

I was about to leave, before she halted me with a gentle tug on my wrist.

"About Morty… I was kidding. I'm sorry if that offended you," she apologized meekly.

"Why would I be offended?" I asked.

"Because you two seem to be getting close," she answered.

"We're not…" I began, but caught myself. "It all depends on what happens next," I said, thinking to Amphy. "I've got to go."
"You can't stay?" she asked, somewhat sadly.

"No. Good night. I'll come over tomorrow evening."

My night was spent in Glitter Lighthouse, actually. Amphy proved to be even more clingy and panicky than Erika. While my friend might have a minor nervous breakdown, however, Amphy might decide to not light up Olivine Bay if he got depressed. Then a ship might lose its bearings and crash onto the rocks or coral reefs, then we'd have a major oil spill wrecking havoc on the bay's Pokémon and marine plantlife, and then we'd have a multi-billion pokedollar ecological disaster on our hands. So, while I felt content to abandon Erika, Amphy required company. Even with my most persistent and sincere efforts, however, he would not cheer up. At length it took admonishments and reminders of his duty to get him to mount the dais and light up. I settled into the stiff guest bed sometime around midnight.

…

"Prinplup."

"Huh? What time is it?"

"Prin! Prin!"

"Amph! Amph Amph!"

A cacophony of cries lit up my eardrums.

"What happened?" I glanced out of the window. Something was wrong. The beacon wasn't there. Did something happen to Amphy? I can hear him making a racket upstairs.

"Coming!" I climbed the steps two at a time.

He'd better be doing his job, and not slacking! But if it wasn't slacking, might he be hurt? With this thought and the resulting fear I took the second flight of steps four at a time, pouncing up them like an anime ninja.

"Amphy! Amphy! Oh…" I only now noticed Tyko bouncing behind me. Even in the few hours since she woke up, I already noticed a slight change in her demeanor. She was calmer, more focused.

"When did you get out of your pokeball?" Instead of answering, though, she skittered past me and urged me onwards.

The beacon room was awash in light. Amphy was not on the dais, but crawling up one of the support beams, attempting, it looked like, to scale his way to the ceiling. He hadn't ceased to let off his tail glow, though. I had to grab a pair of tinted goggles before rushing in.

"What are you doing?"

"Ampha!" he pointed excitedly to the ceiling.

Or rather, the machines embedded in the ceiling. The massive mechanical mirrors used to direct Amphy's beam of light out onto the bay were skewered in all wrong positions. They stuttered and jerked, as if straining to align themselves properly, but stuck in place for all their effort. A whirring, grinding sound could be heard within them.

"This isn't good." I checked the bay. Amphy's ray was making it outside… but was pointed at a 30°
angle down into the shore, hardly making it out to sea where it could actually be useful.
"Yeah, this isn't good at all."

I dashed up to the device. I wasn't a mechanic, and couldn't discern what was wrong with it.
"Amphy, get down!"

"Pharos?"

"You can't do anything. Come down! Hmm. Actually, yes, come down and go outside. Light up as hard as you can. At least the boats will be able to see where Glitter is; hopefully they're all veteran captains who know the topography well enough that it'll be enough to just show them where they are."

Did that make sense to him? I hope so.

Amphy slid down the support beam. He paused before me, casting a dour look at me and worried glances up at the mirrors, before plodding towards the balcony door.

"What the heck happened?" I muttered. Should I call a mechanic? The mayor's office? It was three in the morning, no one would be up. Heck, I'm struggling to stay up.

"Prinp!"

Tyko waggled from the other side of the dais, motioning me to follow her. I did so, circling the device and finally being shown the far side of the light redirection apparatus. She gestured towards the ceiling. I looked, and spotting it, the problem became painfully obvious.

"Magneton and Magneton. What the heck were you two doing?"

Six Magnemite-bodies clung together. The pair was securely attached to some kind of gyro and were sporadically pulsing electrical discharges into the machine. It looked like they were stuck there and beginning to panic.

"So let me guess," I started. "Someone decided they wanted to investigate the machinery." I pointed a finger at what I thought was the culprit, my newer Magneton. "You started piping out tendrils of electrical energy to see what it did. Well, the motor responded by magnetizing you, which got this other sucker pulled in and the both of you stuck to the parts. Your magnetic field is screwing up the internal motors and servo-wires, causing a lockup."

I think I could teach a high school physics class for all the trivia I've learned tending to Magneton. Magneton... well, old Magneton had always been a passive problem- had to be careful with it and electronics. Now I've got a much more proactive Magneton and its curiosity has just caused this little crisis. What's next? Will it short out my just-repaired shield generator? Wipe my computer servers clean? Oh darn, I can't have my daily battle records wiped clean, that'd be the nail in the coffin for my probation. I shook my head at the stupidity and nuisance of it.

"First, let's tend to this crisis."

I looked about, searching for a particular instrument.

"There."

It's a grappling gun. Strange that such a device is kept in the lighthouse, but I think it was meant to be
used in case of fire, to allow rescue workers to scale the various vertical levels of the upper deck.

"Only to be used in case of emergency," the label on the gun read. Well, this is an emergency. The thing was heavy, especially the large-drum containing the cord. Not elegant or easy to use, contrary to spy film special effects.

"Alright. Now..." I aimed it, and then dropped the gun down to my side. Better think about this a moment.

"Which one do I take out first?" I murmured. If I recall correctly, you can't just go decoupling a Magneton with Magnet Pull from a motor it's hooked up to. It can screw with the internal machinery, or de-polarize the motor.

So... gotta think. New Magneton has Magnet Pull, which is what's keeping them all together. It could turn off its ability if it wanted to and then we'd not have this mess, but old Magneton's electrical field is creating a closed loop between itself and the motor, with new Magneton caught in the middle and turning it into an electromagnet. It can't turn off its Magnet Pull even if it wants to...

"Gah! I hope I have this straight. Too many freaking variables, between the magnetic field and electrical field and... Blah." Tyko gave me a funny look, obviously concerned about its owner muttering and talking to herself.

Okay! So reel in old Magneton first, and then new Magneton should fall off naturally after the closed-loop breaks.

I hefted the grappling gun and took aim. Hmm. This should be easy. Senior Magneton is less fidgety, right? I pulled the trigger, and the claw and cord shot out, latching onto the nearest spherical living dynamo.

"Come down!" I cried, and jerked the cord with all my might. It wouldn't budge at first. Jerking alone wasn't cutting it, so I slung the cord over my shoulder and yanked it, dogsled style. With one last heave, the Pokémon broke loose.

Then the lighthouse went dark.

I think I broke something.

"Magneton?"

A sick, pallid feeling swelled within my chest. My head creaked sideways, to see Magneton humming beside me. Except, by the fact that spare coins and small metallic knick-knacks were flitting towards it, it was clear this Magneton had Magnet Pull. In other words, my newer Magneton. In other words, I had yanked the wrong Pokémon down first.

"Aw... crap."

The mirror apparatus ground itself into uselessness. The faint smell of burned lubricant met my nose. Inside, the motors were probably either hyper-magnetized or had lost their polarity, rendering the machine useless. Without it, no beam of light. Without it, Amphy's tremendous light generation abilities were less than a tenth as operationally effective.

What if there was a boat crash? The possibility is remote, but not zero... Crap. They'll blame me. Never mind my job, I'll be thrown in jail and Amphy will be taken from me. All because I mixed up identifying my own Pokémon.
"I hope your curiosity was worth it," I scorned Magneton. Magneton stared at me blankly, and let out a reticent hum, as if its feelings were hurt. I shook my head, and then looked to my left.

Magnetron was sending sparks into a fire alarm lever.

"Magne? But you're right here..." I swiveled right. Magneton lay there.

"Gah!"

I mixed them up again! I scolded the wrong Pokémon!

"This is too confusing!"

Many minutes later, after taking my nascent aggression out on the machinery, I finally broke down and began making phone calls. After several missed tries and answering machines, I finally rung the one phone number I was supposed to never use.

"Mr. Mayor? I'm sorry if I woke... yes... yes... it's important, yes... well I'm... the lighthouse device is broken..."

You can just imagine the string of obscenities and shouting that blasted over the cellphone speaker in an uninterrupted diatribe. Not pretty at all.

I stared at my two nearly identical Pokémon.

"We're going to have to do something about this."

"There."

Maintenance crews came out in the morning to fix the mirror. I received a good scolding from the mayor's office, a mark on my employment record, and a warning to never allow any Pokémon besides Amphy into the mirror room ever again. Even with the embarrassment of being at fault, I was glad that nothing too serious came of it in the end.

However, that was merely half my problem.

"Jasmine! You're up!" Janina shouted as she passed by the office door.

12:00 noon. Following Morty's advice, I tried shifting my battling period to earlier in the day. A part of my early lunch hour was spent attending to my twins.

"Now, let's see how this works."

A wet paintbrush in hand, I looked down upon a Magneton doused in red paint, and another in blue. The two looked incredibly silly, but moderately more distinguishable.

"Tropics is back," Connie said, peeping her head in the door.

"Alrighty. You two, we have a mono-water team incoming. You're featured."

The challenger wore the same shirt, same shorts, flip-flops, and a newly gelled spiked haircut. His
cheeks and ears were red, showing fresh sunburns. Sunburns at this time of year? Must mean he spent all morning outside in the hot (for mid-October) daylight—probably training. He seemed completely unfazed by his loss yesterday. If anything, he now sported a cocky grin on his face.

"Johnathan Bohn?" I called out, tentatively remembering his name from the video screen yesterday.

"That's right. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes, I, Jasmine Mikan of Olivine City, will battle you for the right to the Mineral Badge. Prepare yourself."

"Oh I'm plenty prepared."

It was a three v. three format. Let's see if he made any adjustments before I break out the Magnetons.

"Steelix, you're first."

"Blastoise!"

Same deal. The only difference was Blastoise skipping its watering-hole strategy and gunning directly for Steelix with Hydro Pump. I had Steelix respond by using Crunch, breaking the turtle's defenses down. Even taking the super-effective hit, Steelix far outclassed the Blastoise in terms of experience, toughness, and power. Another Earthquake brought the opponent down flat onto its belly.

"That should've been enough to break Sturdy," Johnathan noted.

He retreated the fainted Blastoise. The next figure of shimmering light to emerge grew and kept growing. It was almost the size of Steelix!

"Gyarada!"

"That's new," I muttered, eyebrows raised. Gyarados roared, a sound so devastatingly loud that even Steelix could not help but flinch.

"Stone Edge!"

"Dodge! Dragon Dance!"

If I had to put it into numbers, Blastoise was probably 35 or 37 in terms of experience levels. Steelix was in his 70s. This Gyarados was closer, maybe 62ish. I couldn't brute force a victory here. I shouldn't underestimate Gyarados's skill, either, as evidenced by its next maneuver. It thrashed around in loops, dodging the Stone Edges while also pumping its muscles and blood, boosting its strength and agility, respectively. Three effects woven skillfully into a few concise movements.

"Steelix, Dragon Tail!"

Steelix is tough. He can eat one physical attack, even a Waterfall. He can also survive a specially-based Water attack, coming off Gyarados. Its Hydro Pump wouldn't even be on par with Blastoise's a moment earlier. Steelix might still faint, but not before he manages to drive off the Gyarados and its Dragon Dance boosts.

"Earthquake."

I paused for three seconds out of sheer surprise. Gyarados slammed the earth, well out of range of Dragon Tail. The shaking, crackling earth reached up around Steelix, tearing at him with seismic
waves. He survived… barely… but it did not matter. The steel leviathan was struggling to slog through the chewed up earth and was not prepared to counter-attack. The second Earthquake was more than enough to collapse him.

"Well, this is getting dire," I said aloud. Hopefully I sounded a lot less afraid than what I was feeling inside.

I had both Magnetons waiting in their pokeballs at my side. Steel and Electricity share a Ground Weakness. That Earthquake would annihilate both of them.

I bit my lip.

Senior Magneton's ability is Sturdy. Its body is resilient enough to not be taken down in a single blow, even by a Fissure, Fire Blast, or Earthquake. Johnathan never landed a blow on it yesterday, so he wouldn't know that. Most Magne-family members have Magnet Pull after all. I can have it tank one Earthquake and then counter with Thunderbolt. That'll fry the Gyarados in one shot, easy.

"Magneton!"

A red-clad pile of metal spheres popped out.

"Alright!"

"So you're back!" my opponent exclaimed while gesturing to Magneton. "This'll be over in one shot! Earthquake!"

"You're correct, one way or another," I said. "Thunderbolt!"

The two Pokémon braced themselves from across the field, preparing to send their attacks out. Gyarados was quicker. The earth rippled outwards, stretching towards my own Pokémon…

"Mag! Ma… ma… -gggg."

Magneton shivered and collapsed into a dozen rattling pieces.

My composure broke completely for a split second.

"Hyaaah!?” A little, high-pitched cry came flying out of my throat. "How'd… oh no no no no."

Red is hot, active, directional. Blue is cold, reactive, internalized. This simple association was supposed to remind me with which ability each color was correlated with:

Red=Magnet Pull. Blue=Sturdy.

In other words, I had sent out the wrong Magneton.

The next minute of battle was swift and decisive. Elder Magneton, with his Sturdy ability working as originally intended, barely hung on after a powerful and doubly super-effective Earthquake. It retaliated with Thunderbolt, dropping Gyarados. The third and final Pokémon, Buizel, another Pokémon from yesterday, unleashed a move too weak to even be deemed worthwhile before, but was now easily capable of finishing my final team member: Aqua Jet. Blue Magneton's sliver of health gave out, and the match was over.

"Congratulations. You've bested me. Here is your Mineral Badge. Keep it safe, and when you look at it in the future please remember our battle fondly. I hope you go on to have more success in the Johto League. Farewell," I said rather mechanically. My usual post-defeat concession speech
sounded even less convincing than usual.

This would've been my victory, easily, if not for mixing Magnetons up. Again.

Damn it!

Forgive my cursing, but d-d-darn it!

This can't go on forever!

I took both Magnetons out after healing them. I stared at them, long and hard. You know, except for their paint jobs, they're physically indistinguishable, down to the nearly-invisible patterns of scratches adorning their surfaces. Even their personalities are so subdued it can take a fair few minutes to tell them apart. That's the problem with being non-biological Pokémon: individuals are too similar to each other.

I should mark their pokeballs… but I don't think that'll be a permanent solution either.

For the remainder of the day's battles I was extra careful in paying attention to the Magnetons' colors. But, perhaps because that was taking up too much of my concentration and concern, I ended up forgetting other things. My record at the end of the day stood at 9 wins, 11 losses.

I silently pouted. Even a slightly-losing record was bad for my average when taking into consideration all those early losses. I needed something like a 60% win ratio from here on out to balance the numbers by the time December rolls in.

"Colors aren't going to cut it," I muttered. "Hey Connie!"

"Yeah!"

"We're closing early today. Shoo them out and lock up."

"What about paperwork? And cleaning?"

"Run the high-setting on the auto-tiller and that's all. I need a break."

"Okay. Just so I get a full-day's allotment."

"Right, right. I'll book it."

"Do it before you leave, please. Pay-day is tomorrow."

I sighed. We really need to offset our pay schedule, put a buffer between pay-period ends and pay-day itself.

"Come, you two. We're going to Erika's house." I motioned to the Magnetons, or Red and Blue as I began calling them. That brought to mind the Pallet Town duo, and the sad reminder that Red should be here within a couple months to hand me an epic tush-wuppin.

More sighs. More resentment at my lot in the world. More exasperated self-questioning about why everything in my life I decided to value caused me constant migraines. Why am I so constantly out of lock-step with the rest of society?
Erika's rental home was quiet. I waited at the entrance for what felt like forever, before growing tired. Despite constant ringing on the doorbell, and even a cellphone call, no one answered the door. She must be home, right? She knew I promised to come over. How seriously did she take my promises? Was I a trustworthy person, or did she think I'd blow her off? Argh.

I was about to leave, when I thought to take a gamble and see if the backdoor was unlocked. The sound of a shishi-odashi (more commonly known as "The Thing That Goes Doink!") rang out. The little bamboo contraption made semi-regular rhythmic taps upon the stone, as it filled up past tipping and keeled over, unloading its bowels of water into a waiting pool. It was perhaps the most quintessential artifact of a traditional Nihon garden, which is what I found myself walking into. Apparently Erika has been quite busy remodeling her backyard. I hope the home owners don't mind.

"Aha!"

Of course. The slumbering form of my friend lay sprawled across a low-lying outdoor sofa. I suppose I'll do as she did and sit silently until she wakes up. Magneton Red and Magneton Blue joined me on either side of the opposite sofa.

Erika lay on her side, curled up. It wasn't a comfortable position, nor one I would expect her to just fall into while relaxing. It was like that time after the gala, when I had curled up on the beach bench and fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. Her night couldn't have gone very well. I could see the lines of worry and stress etched into face. It made me wonder, and think.

My own life is spiraling into all sorts of directions. I keep wanting to focus on only one thing, my job and probation, but even that has been a nexus of chaos for the past month. Problem after problem, crisis after crisis. Sometimes caused by, and sometimes requiring the aid of, my greater social circle. Which means that I was not allowed to ignore my friends and family and their problems and the problems they brought upon me. I can't live on an island, insulating myself from the very people I'm relying upon.

Sleeping princess here probably couldn't help me with the Magnetons. But she has helped in the past, and maybe she still will help in the future. Even in matters not relating Pokémon - her plot to hitch me up with Morty (I'm seriously considering that that may be her end goal) - even if they annoy me, I know she does it because she cares about me. I shouldn't be such an ingrate. Even in my busy, chaotic life, I shouldn't be so selfish. I should put at least a little time into tending to my friendships and fam- meh. No.

I halted in my thought process long enough to cluck at myself. Friends, yes, but my family can shove off. Even in childhood they've made me feel... like I didn't matter. But my friends do care for me. Not always in the way I would like, but their heart is in the right place. Still... perhaps I should have come for the sleepover after all. Amphy would've survived one night on his own, right?

I cocked my head, rested my chin upon my balled hand and elbow upon my knee, contemplating my friend.

Erika, Erika, what's troubling you? I'm sitting here and I see a different you than the one who drifts into my gym half-drunk (and fully drunk by the end of the night), and still a different you than the one who motherly coddles and nags me. What are you worried about? Me? This political figure? Perhaps you're having boy troubles too? There's no way to tell, because you don't let me in. You
hide your worries because you don't want to burden me with them, since you know how stressed I already am.

"I've been awake," she said aloud, suddenly, without opening her eyes.

"Eh? For how long?"

"Since you arrived."

"Why didn't you react? Laying there and pretending sleep-"

"I just wanted to enjoy your presence. There's a time for talking, and there is a time for silence. Relationships are a thing not of words and actions, but of spirits residing within one another. Platonic, romantic, familial, all the same, all bound by the surety and knowledge of companion souls." She lilted along the quote, as if reciting poetry from a dream.

"That's from some scripture, isn't it?"


"Close enough."

She raised herself to a half-sitting position, slowly, drowsily, opening her eyes half-wide.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Bummed. These two have been confusing me. Took some losses because I couldn't tell them apart. It's caused a mess. But, never mind that, what about yourself? You don't look well."

"I'm perfectly fine," she insisted.

"Really?" I perked an eyebrow.

"Don't worry, I'm doing great."

"Well, you do seem to be busy around here." I made a wave over the zen garden.

"Yes, I thought I'd turn this little plot into my own paradise. I wanted to grow Lilacs and Hushloves from the seed instead of importing them, but I guess I won't be around long enough to see them bloom."

"Hushloves bloom…?"

"In the summer. They have a tall silver flower, with a very, very soft stem."

"Ah."

Erika gave me a quick tour around her garden, pointing out the various features and flowers she had planted. A myriad of plants, most not even sprigs yet, speckled the furrows and contours of the yard. Decorative items filled in where plants would look out of place or impractical. A stream rivuleted down from the slope, pausing at the "Doink" contraption and then emptying into a small pond. Even the shape and space of the place had been carefully selected, not just for aesthetic looks but also philosophical meanings. Apparently, not only was Erika allowed to do this to someone else's property, she was being paid by the owner to do so.

She took me over to a quartet of oddly-shaped bushes- which I quickly realized were cut to resemble
Oddishes.

"Smell," she insisted.

"Violets." I said, sniffing the first. I went to the second. "I don't know this one."

"Luna Melita. It's a kind of Morning Glory."

"It's nice," I said of the scent.

"And next."

"Cinnamon?"

"Yes! It's a special kind of banzai tree, actually." I looked again, and on second glance the skimpy bush, or rather, dwarf tree, actually resembled a Bellsprout.

"And this…" I sniffed, and immediately rose, staring at Erika. "Jasmine flowers."

Erika nodded, smiling.

"These all represent someone you know."

Erika again nodded, and began pointing to her collection.

"Violet, for Violet. Luna for Lisa, my assistant at the gym. Cinnamon for Adam, my little brother. And you as yourself, ah ha ha." A cooing, gentle chuckle.

"No Lyra or Whitney?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but they're not as close to me as the people here."

"Really? Even Violet?"

Erika shrugged. "Violet's story and spirit touched me, even in the brief time we met."

I eyed her suspiciously.

What did those two have in common?

An interest in horticulture, of course. Somewhat similar personalities. But what else?

Violet was an abused divorcée, which is why Erika felt sorry for her. No way… could Erika have been through the same situation?

Should I ask? Should I be assuming things? I want to help if I could, but I'm not sure I'm even able to help, or if it would be rude to pry into something that, if it's there, Erika clearly does not think I need to know about. It's the same with how I don't want to revisit certain parts of my life with Erika, as close as we were.

It's frustrating!

"So, these two Pokémon look out of place here. Let's go inside," Erika suggested. The Magneton's floated in behind us.

"Tea?"
"Thanks."

"What seems to be the problem today?" she said as we alighted on the counter, sipping a fresh batch of (what else) jasmine tea. "You've been mistaking one for the other?"

"I know, right? It's Violet all over again, but with my own darn Pokémon."

"I should think your… solution," she smiled, noting my paint job, "might eventually work, if you accustom yourself to it."

"They don't like it, I think." I looked at the pair. It was hard to tell. Especially Senior Blue, it hardly ever showed any emotion whatsoever. Still, you could see the spots where the Pokémon had tried rubbing the offending pigment off their surfaces. "Besides, I'm concerned that it's not enough."

"Why not evolve one?" Erika suggested.

"I was just thinking about that. The problem is, I don't know anything about Magnezones. Do you know how to get them to evolve?"

Erika shrugged.

"Not a clue."

"And still, that'll leave one as a Magneton. I've started to notice that Magneton, the species, is just not strong enough to pull its weight anymore. Trainers are getting stronger, and getting wise to my tactics. I feel like leaving even one as a Magneton will put me at a disadvantage."

"Hmmm… true." She spent a moment thinking. She left her spot to go rummaging around a packed cardboard box.

"Your birthday is November 20th, right?"

"Correct."

"Happy early birthday," Erika said, returning to the counter and dropping a heavy object into my hands. It looked like a crystal, which when held up to the sunlight refracted it into purples, blues, and greens. The center was like a bright indigo star.

"What is this?"

"A solution, should you need a reason to keep one Magneton a Magneton. It's an Eviolite Stone."

I pondered the item. "I don't want to take."

"Nonsense, I have dozens of them at the gym. We found a small quarry of the raw crystals while digging up a new park in Celadon. It was trivial to get them cut and radiated."

"What does it do?"

"Increases the defensive properties of an unevolved Pokémon. Specifically, it transforms the potentiating energy of a Pokémon's cells into structural resiliency, allowing them to take greater punishment. A factor of 1.5, actually."

"That's… a lot. Why haven't I heard of this?" I asked, confused. Something this good should be everywhere. And Erika makes it sound like it's not that rare of a raw material, either.
"I already said, but let me explain. It works by taking the energy Pokémon store in their cells for the purpose of evolving, and transforms that energy into a network of force dispersal. However, that also means Pokémon holding it cannot evolve, as that energy can't be stored or used for evolution. As for a Pokémon that is already at the height of their evolutionary tree- they do not store potentiating energy, so the item is as good as an inert rock to them."

"Ah."

Interesting piece of ore she's handed me. It's also unusual, and kind of pleasant, to hear Erika sharing her technical expertise on Pokémon with me. A nice break from boys and spiritual wellness and other such silliness.

"So, one Magneton may hold that, and the other may evolve, and you shouldn't feel like you're holding yourself back."

Erika went into the kitchen and began to prepare a meal. "Fancy curry?"

"Over what?"

"Rice and carp."

"Sounds good."

I sat down, staring intently at the "birthday" gift and wondering, worried, about the decisions it entailed.

How do I evolve a Magneton? And which one is the proper candidate? I glanced between the two.

"Hey, have you two been listening? Do you understand the situation?" I asked them.

Soft buzzes indicated, more or less, they had caught the gist of it.

"Who wants to be a Magnezone? Here." I scrambled over to snatch up Erika's tablet computer. Like me, she did not have a desktop; but unlike me it wasn't because of the costs. She just didn't care for technology.

"Ah, how do I use this… stupid fruit products. There we… grr. There. Which of you wants to look like this?" I asked, holding up a photo of a Magnezone. They stared intently at the tablet. Whatever constituted "thinking" for them began happening, as indicated by their vibrating eyeballs.

"It reminds me of a UFO," Erika called over. "Not very pretty."

"I agree, but it's much stronger."

"Bzzzt."

Apparently that wasn't a good enough reason for either of my Pokémon, as they both backed away, showing their disinterest.

"Oh come on. One of you is going to evolve."

Both showed me the same non-reaction, which was as good as a "Screw you," from them.

I dragged them towards me.

"One or the other, I'm definitely turning one of you into a Thunder-spewing space saucer, so unless
I of you floats forward I'm going to decide by a coin toss!"

"Don't be so hasty," Erika cautioned while beating the curry mix. "You don't even know how to do it, or how long it'll take. Perhaps rest and introspection will shed light on it. And give your Pokémon more time to come to terms with your wishes, too."

I sighed, leaned back, and acceded to her council.

"We need to be stronger," I lamented. "Me, sharper, smarter. You, faster, more powerful," I said, indicating not just the Magnetons but all of my team. "Or else we're not going to be able to keep this job. How am I going to take care of all of you without a job? I might have to let some of you go."

That's cruel, Jasmine. You're using the threat of releasing them to convince them to evolve.

But it's the truth, and it's just as cruel to myself, to think of abandoning any of my Pokémon. Graveler had been a brat and prima donna and reckless home-destroyer, and I sometimes hated her, but even she had been hard to let go. There's no question I would snap if I lost one of the Pokémon I truly loved.

Which is maybe why I'm fearing losing my job so badly: that primal fear and uncertainty about losing what's mine, my companions.

You pathetic girl, you. You still keep telling yourself that, don't you? It's all about the Pokémon, right? Right?!

It's as much of the truth as I care to admit to myself, that's all.

A cordless phone was shoved into my face.

"What's this?" I asked. Erika lay the phone in my lap.

"This is a phone."

"Y-"

"It has Morty's number dialed in, just press the Call button."

"Ohhhh. I see."

Silly me.

Morty, even disinterested and only having passing knowledge, came off like an expert on the Skarmory expedition. I wouldn't put it past him to be an expert on every Pokémon in the nation. Should've called him for advice from the start.

See how this works, Jasmine? Even your friends who can't immediately help you, can help you along the way to where you need to be.

It just makes me feel really spoiled to have to rely on them so much, and not being able to return- no, "able" isn't the right word- not being mindful of the ways I can return their generosity.

"Meh." With a new thought, I didn't press the Call button right away.

"What if Morty construes this as the last thing I want from him for my kiss?" I wondered aloud.

"You don't have to keep to that silly contract," Erika said. "It's your lips. You may kiss him
whenever you're ready. Don't let him pressure you into it."

"I thought you were rooting for him."

"I'm not rooting for him, so much as I'm rooting for you. Only do things you're comfortable with, then you'll be happy in your relationship." She hummed as she fed the fish into the oven to bake.

"Eh. I feel bad though. I don't like going back on my promises."

"Hmm." Erika paused. "I think it's very like you to do it that way."

"Huh?"

"To ask for trials before you kiss him. It's organized, and has rules. It's a way of looking at your life and controlling it, so that it's comfortable to you. While I've been trying to break you of your rigidity, sometimes it's endearing."

"Thanks, Mrs. Psychoanalysis."

"Although, I wonder. Morty says you were quite the troublemaker in middle school."

"I was not."

"Collapsed the gym floor. Ran off alone during field trips. Organizing the headscarf mafia…"

"He told you about all that?!"

"We've shared a few conversations about you," she admitted. "Although, I should preface, Whitney is a far more lucrative source concerning your middle school years. I simply decided she's not as reliable or accurate a narrator as the boy."

I mulled that revelation over.

"Well, you can trust Whitney to not have an agenda, though. Morty's hiding things."

With dinner safely cooking, Erika rounded the counter and came over to me. Her hands fell on my shoulders.

"Dear, we are all hiding something. It's part of being human." She reached over and pressed the Call button.

"Hello? Who's this?"

"Morty, it's me. I'm on Erika's home phone."

"Oh! Hey, one sex. Sec, sec I mean."

Over the line I could hear a racket created by bodies stirring. What sounded like a snort, but it wasn't Morty's.

"Hey… no. Yeah, it's her. Geroff!"

"Who's there?" I asked.

"Eusine, I need some privacy now. No, you mayn't. No. Just between us."

A rasping sound, more movement, and finally a door closed shut.
"There, I'm alone now. What's up?"

"Who was that?" I reiterated.

"Eusine. We were… uh…"

"What were you doing?"

"Um… nothing."

"What were you doing?" I asked again, this time with more sternness in my voice.

"Stuff. Things girls of your character would probably not approve of."

"You were looking at porn, weren't you?" I fired.

"…"

"There's a certain point where that'll have to stop."

"I understand," he said, voice fairly crackling, failing to hide a giggle.

"Anyways, I wanted to ask a technical question about Pokémon."

"Shoot."

"How do you evolve a Magneton into a Magnezone?"

"Wait, you want to evolve Magneton?"

"Yes. Why is that so surprising?"

"I figured if you wanted to do it, you would've done it by now. Hasn't it been, six years, I think, since it evolved?"

"Well, it's certainly not a matter of just throwing them into a lot of battles, because I've done enough of that. There must be some special condition," I explained. "Can you help?"

"Right. I see. Hmm."

His "hmmm" lasted for a good minute. I was worried he had left the phone to go google it.

"I don't have a clue," he finally answered.

"But you're a Pokémon genius."

"No I'm not. Clever, maybe, but I only know what I know, and that's not a lot compared to everything there is to know about Pokémon. You should ask a professor about this kind… wait. Hold on, I'll call back."

He hung up.

I was stuck staring at a dead phone.

"Rude!"

Magneton Red gave a little zap to the phone in emphasis.
"How cute, it thinks you are mad at the phone, dear," Erika said.

Morty didn't call back right away.

The curry meal finished, we ate it, and shared a tub of vanilla ice cream, and he still didn't call back. Magneton Red finished a 93 turn game of chess on the tablet and he still didn't call back. Erika broke out a round of sake and I argued her into stowing it back and he still didn't call. Magneton Blue blinked *three times* and he still didn't call back.

"What's taking him so long?"

I was bored and Erika took her tablet to look up a flower she wanted to show me. My cellphone wasn't equipped with wireless internet, but it could download basic news and weather info. I took it out and discovered it was on silent… and had seven missed calls.

"Heh."

I feel neither guilt nor sorrow as I called Morty.

"Hello."

"There you are! Finally!"

"You don't have Erika's phone number?"

"No, only her… never mind. I've got your answer."

"Tell me, then."

"Eh, well, first, I wanted to know if this was going to be request number three for your first kiss."

He said "kiss" and the way he said it, I think I blushed. "No, it's separate. You think number three will be so easy? You haven't even started on task number two!"

"I actually have. It's just going to take a little time."

"Fine. Tell me how to evolve Magneton."

"Now wait a second. I should just tell you how to do this, for nothing?"

"You rotten scoundrel, be a human being and just fess up! It's not costing you anything!"

"It's not gaining me anything either."

"It'll gain you my gratitude!"

"Your gratitude is fleeting and soon forgotten by your own self."

"What, a 'thank you' isn't enough? You obviously managed to get the information easy enough, it's not like it's a great expense to yourself!"

"It actually was costly, in a way, to acquire, believe me."

"I don't believe you. Fess up!"

"No!"
"If you won't tell me, there'll be no picnics, let alone kissing!"

"Well if you're going to be that way, you can just google it."

"I tried!"

"And what, you failed?"

"My google no jutsu failed! I got a lot of junk links that were confusing and didn't get me anywhere!"

Seriously, they expect me to believe Wondercharge Lubricant will evolve Magneton in under five minutes? Pah! And it's available for an outrageous price from a single vendor? Talk about scams.

"Please just tell me!"

"I'd like something in return," he insisted.

I fidgeted in my seat. Is there any way I can pry this information from him without terribly compromising my pride? Perhaps…

"I'll tell you something private if you tell me this," I said, slowly, seductively.

"Oh?" That caught his attention. "What might that be?" he said, a hint of eagerness in his voice. I know, too, what he's thinking. It's not so much what naughty thing I tell him, but more the fact that I'm willing to tell him something naughty about myself at all that's perking his interest. Hehehe.

"I'll tell you what kind of undergarments I'm wearing," I said.

He went silent for a moment.

"Including the color?"

"Especially the color," I said with forced sexiness dripping off my lips.

"Take it to a place with a strong magnetic field, preferably one of 3.5 million jiggawatts or more. Easiest place is near a power plant dynamo. Level the Pokémon against local creatures. Use special-type Steel and Electric attacks in rotation of equal and increasing power to attenuate to the magnetic field. When it hits a new potential plateau, it'll evolve."

Morty sputtered all of this in rapid fire. I wonder if he's salivating on the other side of the line?

"Thanks."

"And your panties?" he whimpered.

"Just plain white cotton panties. I don't own any sexy underwear, you dumb idiot."

Ha!

Seriously, what did he expect? Me in a thong?

"Ah, well, even still, a picture would've been sexy at least."

"As if I'd give that to you."

"Heh! It's not like haven't seen your naked butt…"
"GODDAMIT MORTY I DO NOT NEED ANY MORE REMINDERS, ANY MORE MENTIONS, ANY MORE HINTS ABOUT INDIGO, EVER, FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE, AND THE AFTERLIFE TOO!"

"Sorry, sorry! Just playing."

Erika looked up at me. She knew exactly what I was talking about too, so she didn't seem to mind the sudden and violent outburst.

"Sa, well, I want you to know it wasn't trivial getting that info," Morty said. "I had to call Volkner."

"Oh."

And suddenly I'm calm and cowed a little.

"And he wasn't too happy when he heard who wanted to know."

"He still told you, though?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

Let it drop. I needn't drag that particular issue back up.

We chatted for a few more minutes. Morty repeated the procedure to me to allow me to write it down. I, with great reservation and tight-lippedness, thanked him.

"Too bad I can't come over so often," he bemoaned. "I could've gotten a peep, under the circumstances. Delicious innocent loli panties…"

"No way."

"I know."

"You pervert."

"Hey! I resent that. You're…"

"I'm what?" I challenged him.

"… a prude," he finished, not sounding too enthusiastic about the tease himself. Even Erika heard it, and by her expression found it sort of odd.

"Morty, dear, don't insult Jasmine," she called loudly enough for him to hear.

"He's not, he's doing the opposite," I said, becoming apologetic for the man.

"I don't understand," Erika said.

"Um…" There's no easy way to explain this. "Considering certain things he knows, um… it's actually a compliment."

Erika starred at me inquisitively, then shrugged her shoulders and went back to her own devices.

"I don't think of it as a compliment, but thanks for defending me. It's nice, for once."
"And… thank you for asking Volkner for me."

"No problem."

"Now, go back to tending to your Diglet."

"I was only-" he exclaimed, but I cut him off.

"I don't want details. Just promise me you're not doing it with Eusine."

"Not a yaoi fan, are you?"

"No."

"Well, um… it's really, really not what you think it is. Just, not very girl-friendly either."

"Bye now."

"Keep in touch soon," he said, and clicked the phone off.

Haaaaaa!

"So, it's basically battling near a power plant," I said. That was a lot of effort for a simple answer. I really wonder if I shouldn't subscribe to a Pokémon scientific database, just to get straight answers on this kind of stuff.

"Here," Erika said, putting the tablet up to my face so that I could inspect a new flower on it.

"I don't like red flowers."

"Oh… What about pink?"

"Only very soft pinks, like a cherry blossom."

"I see."

We talked, and did various hobbies, and the Magnetons sat around being bored. They probably would enjoy the lighthouse more, but I don't want to risk another mechanical crisis like last night.

"So, it sounds like you'll be off to evolve one of these soon," Erika said, finally indulging in my Pokémon-centric interests.

"Yeah."

I was beginning to worry.

"Magneton Red or Blue? Which one just evolved?" she asked.

"Red."

The Magneton in question was floating about me, apparently listening in. Perhaps, being younger, it was more malleable to evolving?

"I've already decided I'm not waiting. I'll go out early tomorrow and finish this," I declared.

"Why so soon?"
"Because I'm really scared about my record. I'm not even up to a 50% win ratio yet. The longer I stay below, the harder it will be to make up the average before the deadline. I need to win more. Simple as that."

Senior Blue was being itself and nudging away, perhaps sensing the incoming debate. As if, if it put Junior Red between itself and me, I'd evolve Red instead.

Does it really not want to evolve? Is it becoming like a Graveler, set in its ways, unamenable to change?

Which should I choose? There were so many things to consider.

Younger Magneton, by its focus and actions and general extroverted spirit, seemed like it wanted to evolve more. Older Magneton was becoming grumpy and didn't want to change. Clearly, from the perspective of what the Pokémon wanted, one was more willing than the other.

But… the youngster just evolved yesterday. I can't imagine it will be easy or painless to evolve again so soon. Add in the fact that it might not reach its full potential without at least a few months of stability as a Magneton first.

There is their value as competitors to consider.

Younger is more adept with its Steel attacks. Older is more skilled and outright stronger with its Electric attacks. Do Magnezone's have a strength in one or the other?

What about that TM? Um… I forget the number. Hidden Power. That's a weird move that can be different types for different Pokémon. The Magne-family doesn't have a very wide move pool; more than once I've thought of teaching this TM to them to make up for that. Older Magneton's hidden type is Fire. Younger's is Dragon. Of the two, which would be more useful?

Then, the last thing to consider was ability. That was the one crucial area, in terms of competitiveness, that these Pokémon differed. Sturdy or Magnet Pull?

I bit my thumbnail, trying to sort it all out in my head.

That proved insufficient. I took to a notebook, and then to discussing it with Erika. She seemed to want to give primacy to the Pokémon's own preferences:

"That's how I figured which of my three Gloom to evolve as they did, or didn't, in case of Lea, who did not evolve. Nascallei wanted to be a Vileplume, and Beasance wanted to be a Bellossom."

The quiet debate roiled on.

"Should we have them battle for it?" my friend suggested.

"No, I don't think that'll work. What will we ask them? Win and you get to evolve? Blue might throw the match."

"Hmm, right."

The hour was getting late, and I was seriously considering staying over with Erika. I'd have to call Connie to postpone gym battles until the evening, if I even held them tomorrow. That is, if I go to the power plant instead of the gym tomorrow.

In other words, if I could come to a decision.
Erika, by the late hour and my inactivity, automatically assumed I was staying. Seeing her prepare bedding and laying out pajamas for me, I gave in and went along with it. Self-fulfilling prophecies, indeed.

"We probably shouldn't sleep in the same bed," I said. Erika looked unhappy about that.

"Because you're uncomfortable sleeping with another?" she inquired. "You needn't-

"No, it's for your comfort. I'm a sheet-hogger."

"Oh, I see. Then I'll take the blow-up-" she began.

"No! Don't give up your bed for me. I can't take much more generosity!"

She sighed. "Very well. You may suffer upon the flat, bumpy, blow-up mattress yourself."

"Also, I can't make absolute guarantees that Lyra and Ethan weren't committing acts of nature upon that mattress before they left."

Oh that's gross.

That is how I found myself shifting uncomfortably atop an ungulated throne of bumps and flabbiness, staring at two Magneton floating side by side, probably expecting to be put in their pokeballs soon.

"So you two," I began.

"Magne."

"Neton."

They answered one after another.

"I've been thinking hard all night. I want to know how you really feel about this whole evolution business."

"Magneton."

"Maaaaaagne. Zzzzzzzzt."

As best I can interpret:

Younger Magneton is willing, but okay with whatever.

Senior Magneton is reluctant, but will if it has to.

"Right. sorry," I said, going a little soft eyed. "But I've decided. Magneton," turning to the younger one, "You just evolved. It won't be healthy to have you do it again so soon. You'll benefit more from Eviolite, as you don't have Sturdy, and you don't need as much firepower when you're trapping those nasty hazard whores like Forretress. I'd like you to get more experience in your current form rather than evolve early. And maybe it's selfish, but I want a Magnezone right away. And Magneton," I turned to my older one. "I think you're better for the job. You've gained a lot of experience as a Magneton. And I think I know why you're afraid, and I'm telling you it'll be alright. You don't have to worry."

Magneton, older Magneton, I mean, was not a single Magnemite. It didn't need to atomically forge
two extra sets of bodies in order to become a Magneton. It was originally three Magnemite. Three Pokémon, with three souls and three consciousness. In my years of googling and reading up on Magnemite psychology, one of the most fascinating things I came across is the interaction that goes on inside a Magneton.

You'd think three minds would create a more active Pokémon, more robust, three times as much curiosity? But no. Three different consciousnesses in one body actually makes them more docile. My Magneton hasn't really been bored and lacking a personality all this time. It's just content. It has all the intellectual stimulation it could want right within itself. Every second of every day each brain has two partners it can discuss and mull over and joke and think about whatever Magnemite think about with. My younger Magnemite, with one brain split between three bodies, can't say the same. All the brains are exactly alike, they were cloned from the original. They need more external stimulus to satisfy their intellectual needs. In fact, with it split up into three, it becomes slightly schizophrenic and needs even more stimulus than it used to as a Magnemite.

"You're worried that you'll merge into one brain, don't you?" I said, touching and caressing Magneton Senior. "I know it looks like that would happen. But all the research says there's still three minds in there, three personalities. In fact, they theorize, because there's a bigger and more complicated neural complex, you can actually expand yourself. You'll be able to communicate with yourself in ways you never dreamed of. So don't be afraid. It's new, I know, and a little frightening, I know, but even I had to put my faith in moving forward, for all of our sakes. God, I leapt off a cliff with nothing but my not-one-minute captured Skarmory to help me land. So… just, please… do it for me, and for us, and for yourself?"

Magneton stirred. The three eyes, which almost always lay vacant and unfocused, were now staring, not at me, but at each other. They were consulting.

I remember it. June, or July, when I was fifteen. I had just committed to switching to the Steel type. Magnemite had been my only Steel-type Pokémon before Onix evolved. It was a lot like Younger Magnemite back then. It wanted to get into everything, test every little electrical device with a Thundershock, bathe watches and computers with magnetic energy. But it had been a Magnemite for a very, very, very long time. In fact, it was older than me. My teacher found it stuck in a junkyard some three years before I was even born. I was given it as a parting gift before I moved to Ecruteak for middle school. Fast-forward a few more years, and after 18+ years of being a Magnemite, it was getting bored of itself.

It was so excited to meet the other two. They were wild, hanging about a power transformer. As the deputy gym leader, I was asked to take care of them, as they were causing outages. My Magnemite took an instant liking to them. Even if Graveler or Onix was more suited for the task, it personally wanted to defeat the trouble-making pair. Right then and there, it gutted its way to victory, and then took them in. It wasn't two days before the trio fused, and I had a Magneton.

Ever since, it's been content to battle and train as ordered, and otherwise just laze away watching me play computer games or watch tv.

Magneton floated up to me. It gave me a small jolt on the hand, which hurt, a sharp, very painful pain… but it was gone so fast I hardly felt it. Magneton then hummed and lay on my lap. This was its way of telling me-

"I'm not sure about this. I'm not happy about it. But I'll trust my master."

"Thank you," I whispered.
You're probably expecting a long tale about how I evolved Magneton? Well, I'm not going to do that. Why? Because, like most training, it was boring. It consisted of doing the same two attacks for nine straight hours outside the local nuclear power plant. I was afraid the guards would come and haul me off for blasting random Rattata and Pidgey so close to the security perimeter, but luckily they recognized me and what I was doing and merely waved. I was also worried that the magnetic field wouldn't reach so far out. It did, of course, but I think the distance and subsequent loss in strength was what made it take so long. I was pulling my hair and about to give up at seven o'clock, until it finally happened.

Magneton lit up in white, rainbow-speckled light. Its parts morphed and shifted, and when the glow faded I was left with my own personal Miltank-abducting dinner-plate.

I was glad. I had a new Pokémon, so to speak. I looked forward to employing it in battle. I was relieved that I didn't have to keep thinking about the pair as "Younger" and "Older" Magneton, or Senior Blue and Junior Red.

Magnezone's response to its transformation was mixed. It was a little shy and stubborn, at first. Then, as if to say "Let's see if this was worth it," it began unleashing Thunderbolts into the nearby tree line. … That was a mistake.

The first bolt sheered a 70-foot tall, 3-foot wide Douglas Fir in half. Nine more venerable giants were truncated, decapitated, sawn in half in both the horizontal and vertical directions, and otherwise blasted to smithereens. Magnezone was in the process of fine-tuning its electrical laser-beam in order to sculpt a tenth tree by the time I recovered and slapped it into halting.

I panted from my sudden burst of energy, whilst Magnezone eyed me. What were its three consciousnesses thinking? You know, I bet they're becoming more like a hivemind now that they're directly connected to each other. Either way, I can't have it chopping down the forest.

"Someone got a little power-trippy," I muttered.

Magnezone decided it wanted to fly alongside me and Steelix as we rode home that night. Every lamp post and traffic light got a taste of its Spark, sending the instruments into momentary discombobulation.

My cellphone buzzed. A familiar number showed up on the screen.

"It's such a pity we have to live this far apart," he said.

"Morty?"

"Sunday. I'll be over six o'clock, evening."
"Amphy. There's someone I want you to meet."

It was precious, to watch him transform. One moment, an indifferent, downcast, moping Pokémon going about his job; a twitch, registering my voice, and at first he deigned to not even look my way. After a second, there came the decision to force himself to take a glance at me, just to assess the situation, before returning to pitiable self-commiseration. The glance quickly returned, morphing into a steady gaze, and then hardening into entrancement. The creature's body ruffled, picked itself off the dais, and slowly rose into a full sitting position. He didn't let out a single sound.

I want to liken it to a full-body erection.

Men of any species can be so cute when they're excited. The way they hold themselves when stricken is so harmless and so effeminate compared to their usual boisterous, command-the-world attitude. As females, it's gratifying to see the spell we can cast over them. Amphy tensed up, all trace of depression vanishing from his demeanor, replaced by immediate worry, curiosity, and longing interest.

It was true, then. Amphy was suffering from love-sickness, and we had brought the cure.

"This is Spectra. She's going to be joining you, to help share the job of keeping the lighthouse lit. You don't have to do it all by yourself anymore."

I hardly think Amphy cared much about how hard he had to work at the moment.

Spectra bounded over to him. She was a sleek, youngish Ampharos. Her black neck and tail stripes were thinner, and her head gem was smaller. She was a darker shade of yellow, but that may have been due to tanning of her skin under her fur. Her first action, without any hesitation, was to hop atop the dais and immediately investigate Amphy.

The pair stared at each other for a while. They broke off, their gaze wandering across the rest of their bodies, and then turned to sniffing, and then gentle, quick prodding. Spectra was far more aggressive in their introductory dance. She moved deftly, without hesitation or compunction. Amphy was shyer, waiting for clear openings and perhaps signals from her that it was okay to try this poke, that sniff, this nudge.

"Cute," Morty said, walking up beside me.

"Adorable," I responded, with sincerity.

Spectra, finished with the greetings, jumped atop Amphy. My Pokémon yelped in surprise, but made no resistance. The female pushed him down, until he submitted and rolled over. She proceeded to use him as a seat, from which she surveyed the room. The mirrors, reflecting their tail glow, especially caught her attention.

"Does that mean she likes him?" Morty asked.

"Maybe. Ampharos are a matriarchal species. Boys are the naturally submissive gender. Kind of the opposite of humans. She's showing him whose on top, literally."

"Mmm."
We watched the pair get to know each other, to see how they interacted. Amphy was completely beside himself in response to her presence. He cooed and yelped, lilted and bowed his head, and practically tip-toed his way around her. When the machinery started up, for a moment he forgot that his job was beginning. When Spectra took a second interest in the machines, he perked. Several minutes were spent with him showing her what he did and how things worked. Spectra followed along with courteous attention. When she finally understood, she cried suddenly and loudly, a happy yelp. Then the room was lit up, bright as a sun, with her tail glow. We humans had to vacate the room, or else become blind.

"Ampher! Ampher ampher ampher!" We could hear her knocking and hitting Amphy upside the head, and using the goggles to peer inside, spotted her shaking his tail forcefully. Amphy finally got the hint and lit up to his maximum brightness. The beam reaching out into the darkness more than doubled in strength. It wasn't a shaft of light anymore, but a solid column of energy. I would not envy a Wingull that wandered into that death ray.

That's how it went for an hour. Spectra forcefully berated Amphy out of his shyness, making him teach her all about the lighthouse, the things in the lighthouse, us humans (apparent from her incessant pointing towards me and Morty), and above all, Amphy himself.

"She's tsundere," I noted. I turned to Morty, a soft smile on my face. "She likes him."

"Just because she's assertive doesn't make her tsundere. I don't think you understand the trope."

"Technicalities, technicalities," I waved him off.

"And what about him?" Morty asked.

"Isn't it obvious? That was apparent from the moment he saw her."

"So what does that mean?" the man asked.

I nodded, exhaled, purposefully allowing my emotions to flutter.

"If this keeps up, I would say you passed the second trial."

"That's good to hear."

"Do you want your third task now?" I asked.

"No, actually. I'm tired, and this took a lot of work in a short amount of time. Tell me tomorrow. I'll take a day vacation, stay here in Olivine."

We sat side by side in the doorway, looking goofy with our industrial-grade sun-goggles donned, and watching our Pokémon quickly fall in love. The hours without words wore on, and I began to understand what Erika meant by simply enjoying another's presence. At some point, without my notice, his hand had found mine and was laying gently upon it.

Thankfully not crisis, but curiosity, broke the silence at last.

"Where did you find her?"

"A ranch north of here. She was one of the herders for the wool-producing Mareep. They said they had enough Ampharos for that job and she was one of the young, antsy ones who wanted to get out."
"Mmm. How'd you know to look there? Do you have a friend with connections?" I asked.

"No, actually, you do."

I stared at Morty, puzzled. He let out a slight sigh and bowed his head.

"I cheated," he admitted. "I didn't know anything about Amphanos. I was worried sick I'd pick the wrong one. That was kind of a mean demand you put on me."

"I'm not sorry. It was necessary. But what do you mean by you cheated?"

"I didn't find the ranch on my own, or pick her. I had help from Ethan and Lyra. It was Ethan's uncle who owned the place; Ethan got me the invitation and did the negotiation. And Lyra pointed out which Ampharos I should take."

"Oh…"

I remembered back to the other day, how friendships are not centered around a singular person, like the hub and spoke of a wheel. They were spider webs, each friend being their own person and also friends with each other.

"It's okay. I won't fault you for relying on someone else. At least Lyra and Ethan are my friends."

"They seemed to know about the problem before I even talked to them," Morty noted.

"Yes." I thought back. It was Ethan who first specifically diagnosed love-sickness in the pokemon. It would make sense that he told Lyra.

"So Lyra picked an Ampharos knowing it was going to have to be compatible with Amphy. I suppose I should have expected that; she has a way of understanding and empathizing with Pokémon. She's better at it than me."

"You're not worried about that whole business of Pokémon taking on their owner's personality traits? What if Spectra is nothing like me? Wouldn't that make us incompatible?" Morty asked, concerned.

"I'm not worried about it. You only had her for a few days, how is your personality going to be reflected in her?" I shrugged. "I don't care, anyways. I really just wanted Amphy to be happy again. You could say," I started, tentatively, before stopping myself.

Morty perked up, showing he was listening and wanted me to finish.

"I value Amphy's happiness even more than my own, you could say," I finished.

Morty nodded, taking that into contemplation. We returned to gazing at the pair through our goggles.

"She's perky," he noted. "Likes to control things. Stubborn, sometimes. Curious. She cares about those around her a lot, but also finds ways to nag people. She was constantly nagging me about how to handle and train her. She barged in while I was trying to make a meal for her and showed me how she likes it. When I was taking the tour and trying to help herd the Mareep, she berated me the whole way through and finally showed me how to do it properly. Actually," Morty said, "I think she's not like me at all. She reminds me of you."

"But Amphy is nothing like you either," I stated.

"True. Well, I hope you really don't care that much about them matching our personalities, because that might be the death knell for our relationship."
"I said you shouldn't worry about it."

I got tired, and made to leave. My back hurt from sitting without support for so many hours. While stretching, I took one last glance at the couple I had begun calling Glitter Shipping. Spectra was laying flat on her tummy and enjoying a nap. Amphy was anything but sleepy, laying down close beside her, head and tail bowed in shyness. His gaze never left her. A wavering of their light, or a whiff of breath, and Spectra woke. She spotted Amphy staring at her and gave him a quick nibble on the ear.

That meant affection. For Amphanos, that was the equivalent of a quick peck on the lips. Their first kiss, so to speak.

Amphy's head gem glowed, the equivalent of blushing.

I was surprised, at how quickly and how easily it all had gone. Maybe, with their simpler minds, it's easier for Pokémon to fall in love and accept affection than it is for humans. My thoughts turned to the human male still sitting beside me.

"Where are you staying?" I asked Morty.

"Well, I was going to get a motel, but I don't want to spend the money."

"I'd rather you'd not stay at my place, for various reasons."

"Understandable. Can I crash here?"

"It's not very comfortable."

"I'll manage. Besides, I want to keep tabs on Spectra. Technically I'm her owner, but I don't know how it's going to work going forward."

"You're not her owner, actually. You signed over her ownership to the City of Olivine when we did the paperwork. You're just her caretaker." We had arranged everything even before we introduced Spectra to Amphy. Regardless of whether they fell in love or not, we convinced the mayor that the lighthouse needed a backup beacon Pokémon. After the mirror-machine crisis, and showing him the minimal increase in cost, he readily agreed.

"I see. I suppose I could cede that over to you if this works out."

"I hope it does."

"Good, good."

We passed down the stairs, and out towards the exit. He and I both gave a knowing glance as we passed the book room. Then we were outside, in the hazy darkness. The doubled ray of light slowly swept over our heads. Part of it was large, and extremely bright, and reached well past the visible horizon. Within the larger column was another ray, less bright, but also not so solid. It was flecked with all the colors of the spectrum. I guessed it was a Flash augmented by Signal Beam. That would be Spectra's, and maybe how she got her name.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked me.

"Different things."

"Like?"

"I see."

He stood limp, hands in pocket, staring out into the pitch-black sea.

"What about you?"

"Worried," he said.

"About what?"

"If you'll like being kissed."

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"I figured as much."

"About the third task…" I lead on. He turned to me, taking my hands in his. His eyes met mine. He has such nice eyes. Mesmerizing, literally.

"I know. These trials aren't really a way to get what you want out of me," he said. "I would've done them for you anyways. They're just delays, aren't they?"

I nodded, confirming.

"To give you time to sort out your feelings. I think you're confused, and maybe afraid about romance. Am I right?"

"Afraid? Confused? Not the words I would use, but you're on the right track."

Why do I feel the tiny wet dint of a tear in my eye? This is nothing to cry over.

"So I wanted to ask you this. For the third test, think about what's most important to you. What is the most sincere thing you can have me do, to show that I care for you. I don't want you questioning; I don't want you questioning; I don't want you to have a shadow of a doubt that what you're doing isn't something you'll be ashamed of later. I want you to want to kiss and be kissed, love and be loved. There's nothing in this for me if you aren't happy with it yourself."

"You can sense it?" I asked, shyly.

"Sense…?"

"The shame."

He clasped my hands together.

"Jazz. Jasmine. If you'd be willing to open up and tell me what's wrong, I'd consider that more worthwhile than a thousand kisses. More precious than taking you to bed with me."

"I…." I can't. It's not in me. It's too painful. Let him keep going on and worrying, and assuming that my problem and reticence is with the act of sex itself; and let him think that Indigo was a bigger deal to me than he assumes, and keep assuming that it was Indigo that caused my depression and himself the root of my trouble. I don't care. Even if it hurts him, I don't care. The pain of prying open the coffin of memories is too great, the burden too heavy- I can't even face my fears myself, let alone expose them to someone else- anyone else! I'd rather kiss you, show you my nude figure, take you to
bed and have sex- Farfetch'd as the idea was- than bear my past and soul to you, Morty.

I feel like Amphy is the only one I can trust.

"That's okay," Morty said. "At least, I hope you find it in yourself to be intimate with a guy like me, and be comfortable with it. Think about what you want most. Come visit me tomorrow. You'll know where to find me."

Morty turned and ventured back inside the lighthouse. It was just me and the night.

What I want most?

I want Amphy to be happy. Because, of all the things in the world, the only thing I can conceive of making me happy is for Amphy to find happiness first. Maybe then, only then, can I start thinking about my own happiness.


My name is Jasmine Hayate-Mikan. I'm the pretentious, self-appointed class president of class 1-B of Olivine City Riverside Elementary School. I'm seven years old and four-foot-two and extraordinarily self-centered.

We were halfway through 1st grade and things were just peachy in my eyes. The boys were afraid of me. The girls despised but respected me. The teachers adored me. I was the most perfectly precocious child, owning up to my mischief head-on, proudly, and inevitably twisting others' perceptions of my actions into grudging acceptance, if not outright awe and admiration.

On this particular day there would be an exception; and by exception I mean my actions would become so outlandishly presumptive all past instances would be as eggshells before a flock of full-sized dinosaur Pokémon.

To preface, let me explain a school policy. Recess follows lunch. The children are sent out into the playground to work out all the pent-up energy accumulated through consumption of sugar-saturated cafeteria meals. The rules for our playground were rather strict. No food, drinks, or candy was allowed onto the play area. No sporting equipment, balls and the like, that was not a part of the raggedy school supply was allowed. And most fervently, no Pokémon.

That last rule made me mad.

"There's Pokémon right there!" I exclaimed, pointing at a pack of Sentret creeping up to the fence. "We should be allowed to catch them!"

"No, you're not awowed!"

"Shut up dummy!"

"Kevin shut up!"

"Don tell me to shut up! I'll tell the teacher on you!"
"No you won't!"

"We won't let you into kickball if you do!"

"Shut up, all of you!" I shouted at the small mass of 1st graders. I stood upon the monkey-bars, addressing them as a revolutionary leader would. "We have a big issue here! Big! Middle-schoolers get to keep and catch Pokémon. 4th graders too! They pull their Pokémon out after school and have fun with them. I don't like that! I think we should be allowed to have Pokémon too!"

"Yeah!"

"I wanna Ferlgator!"

"Pokémon! Pokémon! Pokémon!"

"No Pokémon for recess means recess is no fun! Recess is supposed to be fun! If we all tell Mr. Nettle, he'll have to let us have Pokémon!" I shouted, voice rising, intonation deepening. I had just watched Citizen Llane with my dad and was entranced by the big, emotion-stirring political rally scene.

"Follow me! Tell everyone to gather up! We're gonna storm the principle's office!"

It truly wasn't hard. I was the smart girl, the clever girl, the girl who stood up against older kids and deftly manipulated the teachers into the palm of my hand. When the boys tried to sideline me because I was a "weak girl", I beat them up. When the girls tried to bully me and tease me, I teased them back ten times harder and cleverer. No one really liked me, but absolutely no one wanted to be my enemy.

Thus, at 12:40, the school principle stepped out of his office, only to find himself surrounded by 120 small children. Our timing had been perfect; one of the teachers who was supposed to be watching us was taking a long bathroom break, and the other was chatting to her mom on her cellphone.

"What are you kids doing here? Where are your teachers?" the principle stuttered.

"Take him inside. Mr. Nettle, you're our hostage now!"

"Hostage? Don't be ridiculous, you've been watching too much TV, Jasmi-" His disbelief was cut short by ten sets of hands grabbing his arms and dragging him back into the office.

"We demand freedom! We demand justice! We want Pokémon!" I shouted through a make-shift megaphone/wall-poster. "We will not relent! We will not back down! We have Mr. Nettle! Just do as we ask, and no one gets hurt!"

For seven glorious minutes the 1st graders ruled the school. The older kids looked on from their classrooms, too indoctrinated to believe something like this would actually work. My army stuck up their noses at the cowards, and then continued going about their duties. Posters, depicting a crude logo and my bust, underneath which read "Jasmine's Political Power Party Super-Pac for Student Freedom Fighters!" were distributed at large. I had wasted dad's entire stack of blank 8'x11' paper to print those out. With willing hands and lots of tape, they found their way onto every door, poster board, window, and lamp post on school property. Mobs of kids rampaged about the halls, co-opting and absorbing any other children they found into their mass, like an amoeba. Pokémon, "borrowed" from older siblings and friends, were let out onto the hallway and into the classrooms. There was shouting, there was singing, there was fighting, there was dancing. My revolution was setting at full sail.
Then the school security officer Mr. Bloom burst through our perimeter like a bulldozer, grabbed me by the back of the collar and hauled me away. A dozen other teachers surrounded the mob, and with much shouting and threats dispersed them.

Even when shouted at, even when threatened, even when I received a day's suspension and two weeks' detention, I was unfazed, ignorant. I deftly defended myself to my accusers, calmly explaining, in 1st-grader logic, my position. I claimed injustice, and countered that children were the most disenfranchised minority in society. The magnitude of what I had done failed to register upon me. The magnitude of what I had attempted failed to register with my homeroom teachers; they hadn't even suspected that I would attempt a coup upon the school administration. Until that point they only thought of me as the perfectly proper, perfectly-behaved teacher's pet.

Then my daddy showed up, and brought me home. He scolded me, and I repeated the same arguments. Upon hearing my well-reasoned and logically sound arguments, he relented, or else gave up. I was set down in the den and left there.

"Wait for your mother."

I was proud. I was elated. I prepared the most succinct and eloquent defense of my actions, replaying the exact words I would use the moment the door next opened.

*Crick.*

"Mommy, please let me say something fi-"

*SLAP!*

My cheek burned red. My eyesight veered 70° to the right so that it was now staring at the bookcase, such was the force with which it was hit. My neck hurt. My eye throbbed. My cheek was in agony. It was not a strike meant for a child, but for an adult.

"Mo-"

"Shut up! How dare you! How dare you make a mockery of our family! How dare you make a mockery of yourself! Do you realize what you did?! Do you?! You do not touch your elders! You do not go around organizing rebellions! You follow the rules to the letter little lady!"

"Mommy-"

"Are you not ashamed of yourself?! You wretched child, are you not ashamed? Say that you're sorry!"

"I'm sow-"

"Don't even try! You're not sorry! You're just a stupid little child who knows nothing! Do you hear me? You know nothing about the world! This is reality! Reality is not TV, is not your storybooks, is not the newspaper. Those are for adults! Those are for make-believe! They aren't for you! So don't go copying those fake characters from TV and making a rebellion! In fact, don't even pretend to copy them!"

"Mommy, I'm soww-"

"Shut up! Shut up!!!"

Tears were flowing freely. I started gasping for air, hiccuping.
"Shut up! Don't cry!"

"I'm sowwy. I'm s-s-s-sowwy. I wasn't going to hurt Mr. Nettle."

"You have the presumption to even say that! You aren't sorry enough! You're only sorry because I'm yelling at you. What'll it take for you to understand how badly you've f***ed up today? Do I have to take away your toys? Your TV privileges? Must I take you out of school? Banish you from your friends?"

"Nooo…"

"How do you think this makes me feel?"

"I dun know. I'm sowwy. I'm sowwy."

"Sorry isn't good enough! I was mortified! Everyone at the party heard the principle come on the phone and say that you had taken him hostage! You had led a big rabble of little kids, babies, and taken the principle hostage! I was mortified! That's not the child I raised, I tried to tell them, but you think that will matter? I'll never get a hosting contract from the Chamber of Commerce ever again! They think I'm a joke of a parent!"

"But Mommy…"

"Shut up Jasmine!"

"Mommy!"

"Shut up and listen! You're going to sit here. You're not getting dinner. At eight o'clock you'll go straight to bed! From now on you're banned from the computer. No toys, no pencils, no books, nothing! One month! And from now on, forever, no make-believe, no imaginary crap! No more fantasizing! God, Arceus, Void, Buddha, and Christos, why we ever let you watch adult shows was beyond me. I thought you were smarter than that! I thought you knew to tell the difference between reality and TV, but I guess I was wrong!"

"But Mommy, I'm really sowwy-"

"SHUT UP! AND QUIT CALLING ME MOMMY!"

"M-m-mom…"

"DO NOT CALL ME MOM! OR MOMMY! OR MOTHER! YOU ARE NOT MY CHILD!!!"

"Daddy" peeped into the bedroom at seven o'clock the next morning, and did not find the little girl he had sent there the previous evening.

"Jasmine?"

"Father. I'm here."

"Are you alright? You don't sound alright."
He was no longer "Daddy", he never would be "Daddy" ever again. Only "Father". Maybe "Dad" in a moment of laxness. But never "Daddy".

I was suspended for a day, but could not be left alone at home. They decided to leave me with a family friend, the current gym leader of Olivine City. Mr. Beret had a reputation for sternness, gruffness, tough love, and discipline. The grey-headed man was a former Navy captain, and still dressed like one. He specialized in Water-types, but wasn't averse to raising others. They said he was good, good enough to have made a career in the tournaments. But he loved this city, and this gym, and put his all into serving both.

I got a firsthand look at how he got to be so good. Grueling, bone-crunching, back-breaking, labor-intensive training. I lifted cement blocks, ran laps, and dug grave-sized holes right alongside his Pokémon. It hurt, it was stressful, and worst of all, I didn't understand anything.

When at last Mr. Beret determined I was in enough agony, he led me to a balcony overlooking the gym floor.

"Stay there, Jasmine. Watch the gym battles."

Seven years old is not old enough to comprehend why life happens the way it does. The world suddenly felt dizzyingly large, vast, empty, and ominous. Heretofore everything I learned seemed new, exciting, filled with possibility. Now, everything unknown seemed dark, threatening, and scary. Seven years old is old enough to know right from wrong, but not old enough to discern what version of "right" and what version of "wrong" were correct. Now I couldn't be sure who to listen to, where to find my moral compass.

I wanted it all to end. Everything.

Seven years old is young, very young. I did not understand many things, could not look upon the world with the wisdom of an adult yet. But, even at that early age, I saw clearly something fundamental about the act of living: It is not inherently intrinsic. Each person needs a reason to live. Then and there, with my little seven-year-old world caving in, and trying to contemplate a seemingly dark and hostile future, I was afraid I would never find my reason for living.

It was the first time I asked myself- "Why am I alive?"

Then, a little pit-pat-pit-pat-pit-pat trailed up the stairwell. It got louder. It ceased, right beside me. My mind came back from the brink. I felt a little, soft paw alighting on my shoulder. I looked up.

"Ampha."
Amphy. My beloved Amphy. Are you going to be happy? Is Spectra going to be your dearest? I hope so. It's high time I repaid you, for saving my life.
My First Kiss

"To: Jasmine Hayate-Mikan, Olivine City.

Fr: Gym Leader Oversight Committee, Human Resource Department, Pokémon League
Nihon National HQ, Indigo Plateau.

Sbj: Probation Status

Date: October 22nd, 2012.

Reporting Period: September 15th through October 20th. Probation Status: Active.

Primary Benchmarks:

Gym Leader Rules and Regulations Coursework: 75% complete. Grade: 82%. Status: Passing.

Gym Leader Competitiveness Coursework: 83% complete. Grade: 96%. Status: Passing.

Gym Leader Facilities Maintenance, Rules, and Regulations Coursework: 74% complete.
Grade: 69%. Status: Failing.

Exam Grades: Status: Pending (not yet taken).


Maintenance and Recordkeeping: Up to date. No issues outstanding. Status: Satisfactory.

Ethics and Conduct: 2 outstanding complaints, 4 resolved. No significant issues raised. No infractions outstanding or assessed. Status: Satisfactory.

Gym Leader Competitiveness Benchmark: Absolute Success Ratio: 46% (158W/178L/4T).
Status: Failing.


*See highlighted areas and links for further information."

I bit my lip. I wanted to pretend it was the mouse acting on its own, highlighting that lone 46% over and over, trying to delete it from existence. The web page would not allow it. It was a reality I was forced to accept.

This is my probation status update, sent via email overnight. Two failing grades, and a crop of exams yet to be studied for, much less taken and (hopefully) passed. I frowned, furrowed my eyebrows, analyzing and excusing away what I could.

The poor facility coursework grade was to be expected. It's boring, redundant, arcane, and mostly inapplicable to my boring, gimmick-less gym. I really only needed to redo some of the coursework.
after actually studying; that should bump my score up above the 70% passing mark.

Exams would also require studying. They would be available to take as soon as I finished all the coursework. Test-taking had always been my strong suit in high school; I expect these to be easy, if not tedious. I'd already passed the summit's exams, which were supposed to be harder than probation's due to time constraints.

Which left the big, fat, failing 46% win ratio.

There was nothing I could do to wish it away. No logic or imagination that could erase it, nor comfort to assuage my fears about it. I either beat enough trainers flawlessly to pull it up, or I didn't. If I couldn't bring it to 50% by December 10th, midnight, I fail. I lose my job.

My bed shook as I leapt backwards into it. The comforter and pillows were disheveled and musty, having not been washed in weeks. Had I not been accustomed to my own bodily odors, I'm certain I would be disgusted by the woman-reek. The same for the bathroom. For all the things I had to sacrifice in the name of time and probation, shaving my body was not one of them. It made me physically irritated to be growing hair all over like a boy. Even if it left the bathroom looking like some Neanderthal cave, I made sure I covered every last inch of skin with a razor. Though, honestly, I couldn't afford to take the time from my work schedule just to indulge in extensive hygiene upkeep. I borrowed from my sleeping time instead, which was contributing to ever darkening rings under my eyelids.

The fridge was almost completely bare. The pantry was semi-full of cheap, instant-made meals and a box of cereal (but no milk to eat it with). The only decent meals I got each week were from visiting Erika's house. Her carp curry was the last thing I ate that didn't taste of preservatives and starch. As if cued by the cognition of my lack of food, my stomach growled, hungry.

"I wonder what Pokémon snacks taste like?" I said aloud.

Work would begin in half an hour. I was supposed to give a lesson in survivability tactics today. My preparation for that consisted of a single notebook page full of scribbles, doodles, and 2 single-sentence paragraphs (and the sentences were grammatically incorrect, too). If the listeners had more than an elementary-school education, they were going to figure out I was phoning it in. After that was over, gym battles awaited. After that, homework. After that, recordkeeping. After that, cleaning. After that, training. After that, grocery shopping. After that, delivering supplies to Amphy. After that, attending to my other Pokémon. After that…

Even if I pass probation, that only barely gives me enough breathing room to enjoy a minimal social life. Well, to be sure, I would have plenty more time, but not money; and it seems you can't do anything these days without plenty of time and money.

This is it. This is the rest of my life.

If I'm lucky. If I pass probation. If not? I don't want to think about it.

You're going to have to think about it, Jasmine. Just in case.

I fail, and then I lose my job. Could I get another? Even minimum wage jobs were hard to find, and full-time work nearly impossible. Being a former Gym Leader would garner me a lot of respect from the community but won't impress prospective employers. Especially the "former" part; they'd look twice and thrice before hiring someone booted out of their old job.

On a minimum wage salary, there was no way I could keep my apartment. The bills, the rent, the
utilities were way too high. I'd have to figure something out. It'd be difficult. Would Erika take me in? I'm sure she would, for a time, but that wouldn't be a permanent solution at all. I couldn't impose on her like that for longer than a few months. And she has to go back to Celadon, eventually.

I doubt I could even keep a low-paying job. I once tried to work as a cashier, to supplement my Gym Leader income. It was a disaster. I was let go after the first two weeks. The boss said I lacked "people" skills. I wasn't able to connect with the customers, or my coworkers for that matter. The pace of the work was too much for me too; I made too many mistakes because I felt rushed to get as many customers out the door as fast as possible.

The only logical, reasonable action I could possibly think of-

Go home.

She would take me in. I'm sure of it. Yet, with everything that's happened between us, and how our relationship was veering when I left, I'm sure home life would be like walking on a tightrope above a canyon of broken glass. It wouldn't be my own life anymore. I'd be an ancillary to her will. Everything I wanted that she opposed, every argument I made against her, would be answered by "Who is feeding you? Who is sheltering you?". And she would be right, and I would fall quiet, and have to choke back my tears and suffer in silence.

The worst of it, the absolute worst of it, was that I was certain what her first demand would be:

"Get rid of your Pokémon."

At least, the ones who didn't earn their upkeep. Steelix was my vehicle, he could stay. But what about Tyko? No. Skarmory? I made a promise I would always love him, but I'd have to abandon him as well. Choir, Oddish, Voltorb, Magneton and Magnézone, all "unnecessary expenses" in her eyes.

Amphy?

They daren't.

They tried before. It was everything in their power just to separate us the first time, when we moved to Ecruteak. I hated them for it. I wistfully hoped that Father's decision to move us back was because he saw the growing separation anxiety and depression I was under.

Going home would be a waking nightmare. I'd become a slave until that woman croaked. Which at this rate, might not happen until I myself kick the bucket from heart attack.

There were no good options. Only bad options, and uncertain options.

Mother…

Perhaps I should have listened to you all along.

"You'd better find a man to take care of you. You're going to lose your way with those dreams of being a Pokémon Trainer. Most don't make it. Even the talented ones don't survive long."

"Mother, as if you're one to talk. Don't go throwing your broken dreams at my feet."

"Don't be rude to me, young lady. I'm only trying to look out for you. Besides, it's only because I've been where you are that I know what's best. And I'm warning you, you need a back up plan. A real job, or a husband. Either works, but from personal experience, men are easier to come by."
A "back up" plan. That's what she called marriage. A way to survive. A cold, calculated, economical approach to relationships. I never heard her use the word "attraction" or "love" anywhere in those discussions.

How was I treating Morty, then? Was it hypocritical of me to condemn my mother's view of relationships, when I've been using the enticement of a kiss to get Morty to help me? Would I half-heartedly say "It's fate!" with hands held palms-up, as I blamed my manipulative ways on my upbringing?

Should I use Morty as a back up? Would he be willing to take in an unemployed female into his home, feed and raise her, marry her? Are his feelings strong enough?

Are MY feelings strong enough to tolerate that kind of situation? Could I live my life acting against my wishes, just to satisfy the basic demands of survival? What should I value more, emotional well-being, or material worth? My relationship with my Pokémon, or my dignity?

Who was right? Was I wrong?

My gaze met the ever-familiar blankness of the apartment ceiling. It found no answers, no divine insight there.

God?

Do you exist?

Are you just a myth, a rumor?

Why don't you talk to me?

How about you, Cristos?

Buddhas? Sha-rafi? Giant flying spaghetti monster?

Arceus? They say you created the universe, that you're omniscient. Do you know what I should be doing? Who I am? What I believe in? Because I can't even tell myself what I believe anymore.

Anyone?!

What should I do about my life?

Should I let Morty kiss me?

That's a weird way of putting it. Shouldn't it be: "Should I kiss Morty?"

Yes, it should.

I don't know what to believe in absolutely, but I know what I don't believe in. I reject my mother's view that relationships are foremost about economic advantage. That's too ruthless, too devoid of happiness: or rather, it casts aside happiness as the basic goal of living. It calls for survival for its own sake, not survival for the purpose of making life worthwhile. What's the difference? Her conception of life lacks 'hope'.

So if I am to be kissed, it should be me kissing, because that's what my heart and mind tell me is right. Not a means to an end, an end in and of itself.

Yet, that only leads me back to the fundamental question, "Should I kiss Morty?"
Answers, I want answers! From who, though?

A thought crossed my mind.

I bounced up, back into a sitting position. My netbook was where I left it. I reached under my bed and pulled out a box of knick-knacks and electronics. An old, OLD thumb-drive lay at the bottom of the heap, where I half-mindedly tossed it three years ago.

Ninth grade school work. Creative writing class. Mrs. Acadia taught that. A very whimsical woman. Her hairstyle always reminded me of a Wigglytuff.

I found what I was looking for.

"What is a Kiss?"

-by Jasmine Mikan

What is a kiss?

A dastardly desire, a union of the instruments,

Once reserved for sucking thumbs,

And swallowing fetid substance,

And festering germs,

Gateway to the putrid innards,

Exit for vomit and profanity,

Now locked upon another,

Pairing of the grotesque,

The binding of unsavory parts for the sake of-

What? Mutual affection? Mutual pleasure?

Yet there my classmates go, teasing each other's mouth-rims,

Throwing their PDA out in public as if willing and proud that the world-

-That I-

Should see their lust put on display

Taunting us with an act so wholly moronic without relative context,

Without a subjective point of view,

To make amends for it.
It's just kissing,
Yet it's more than innocent touches of the lips,

For kissing is for kids, and more than kissing is for adults,

And for these classmates of mine who seek adulthood before their time,

I know kissing and more than kissing goes on beyond the bedroom doors,

Behind the stalls, under the stairwells, away in the woods,

And I've been left to chortle, alone,

Gazing at their stupidity, no partner in the pleasure that would justify it, and

left wondering,

"What is a kiss?"

And telling myself,

"How disgusting! How banal!"

And umpteen times over asking myself why should they enjoy each other like they do,

As I cannot see the reason, nor the motive, nor the opportunity,

Whimpering and begging to understand,

Seeking, searching; if only there were a way to make sense of this,

That somewhere between the earth and the stars there was a path through the darkness, to teach me
where the sense lay in such a perverted, deviant action,

Made and forced and slaved to wonder, wonder, wonder-

If this could ever be made clear to me, if I should ever see their gentle smile reflected in the mirror, if
ever I should look upon the world with their eyes so full of joy, if ever I should hear from my own
throat the same voice of calm and certain and sublime satisfaction,

Wishing, yearning,

And still, still, still wondering-

If this sin they a call a kiss

Should be, could be, my lot, my downfall, my perversion-

My sorrow, my joy,

My pleasure, my bane,

Mine …
My fifteen-year-old self is calling back to me, filled with the same doubt, the same troubles, the same longing that afflicts me today. Six years years on and I’ve answered nothing. Well, I must forgive my fifteen-year-old self for not being able to sort it out, because that was January 2006 I wrote this. Before everything fell apart. Before I entered the free-fall of misery and mysandry that has lasted up until this September, year 2012. Six years, and a little, of self-suffering, induced by a preternatural hatred for the opposite sex.

Yet she, myself, reminds me that I once yearned for this. There was such a point when boys did not revolt me. I tried locking that part of myself up, tried throwing away the keys. Indigo was the last of it, the final click of the vault.

Morty, you've tried to atone. To make up for what you've done. To open the door to my feelings. To undo the locks placed upon my heart.

It's worked.

There was the September night you caught me shamefully masturbating, and you were astute enough to not pick upon it. You let it go, pretending not to have seen it. You realized I had a line of tolerance, and though you take devilish pride in playing chicken with that line, you never actually cross it. You apologized for the mere fact of being there to see me like that. You apologized for tormenting me, for causing me pain, both in middle school, and all the way through to Indigo. That meant a lot to me. You told me you only wanted what's best for me. That meant a lot to me. You told me you would always think of me as an angel. That meant a lot to me.

You told me you liked me.

And that, at last, unlatched that tiny lock that Indigo clicked shut.

It's only the first barrier. The tiniest step. The door to my heart is guarded by locks the size of your head, chains meant to anchor ocean liners, latches of titanium thick as redwoods, and flanked by vigilant Steelixes and Dragonites made of animate obsidian.

But, the mere fact that it happened, that I've come to even conceive of being in a relationship, is a sudden, dramatic, complete reversal of where I was headed. You showed that the door has a weakness.

Since the summit, you've said many hurtful things, but you've done so much more. I hate your mouth, but your actions tell me how much you care for me. Your sacrifices tell me you're out to win me, and to make right what is still so very wrong.

Helping me catch Skarmory.

Taking three airplane flights in a single day, and wasting all of your prize money, just to personally deliver my lost pokeballs back to me.

Agreeing to my set of three trials. Being able and willing to convince Volkner, who must despise me for his rejection, to come and fix the generators.

Giving me advice about Magnezone.

Trying to throw matches in my favor, so that I could pass probation.

Sharing a picnic.

Sharing your inner feelings.
Finding Spectra.

Creating happiness for Amphy, at last.

That final one is so utterly important to me. You've no idea, I couldn't tell you because words or even actions are completely insufficient to relate how much that silly little sheep means to me. You made him a happy Pokémon yesterday. I haven't seen Amphy in such high spirits in years.

Could it be possible, then, that you'd be able to find happiness for me as well? Could I be happy with you?

I don't know.

But I know, now, that you've earned the right to try.

Reading my old poem, I now realize what kisses are.

They are the first, most innocent step towards physical consummation. It is sex for children. And what is sex?

Sex is something you do with someone you love.

I've decided, then.

One final task, Morty. It's so simple. It's easy. If you have been sincere this entire time, then this task is trivial. If not sincere, it will be impossible.

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Work flew by like a blur. Connie, Janina, and Ted were on fire; they defeated an inordinate number of visitors. I barely had any challengers. Just as well, because I could not possibly focus on battling today. The paperwork was left by the wayside. It was Monday. I could neglect it for the night and still have four days to finish it. My thoughts were consumed, a vortex, spiraling around this one central idea of "a kiss". Who knows what elementary mistakes I might make trying to calculate the gym's expenses, when I can't even add the number of years I've languished in this rotten, lonesome hell. I want to end it!

"You're distracted today," Connie noted.

"I'm facing a big decision."

"Like what?"

"Morty," was all I had to say, and she understood.

"Normally, I'd say don't rush it. But you're you. You've done the opposite, you procrastinate way too much," Connie said. "Go for it. All in. It's about time something nice happened to you."

"Thanks, but…"

"Hey listen, you think it's easy being your assistant? I'm in engineering school, that's a royal pain in the ass! I don't have any time to be here listening to you mope. I'm certainly not here for the money. It's a crap wage you hand us. But I come anyways. You know why? Because I love battling. And I
like the people here. And most of all, because Seth encourages me. He tells me I'm beautiful, and brave, and that when I feel like the world's overwhelming, to keep pushing as hard as I can. Boyfriends are nice like that. So if you even think Morty could do the same for you, go for it. You can always break up with him if it turns sour. But you have to try, you have to risk it."

"Haha… thanks, Connie. I'll keep it in mind."

Steelix carried me across town. We took the back roads, sailing above fences and single-story rooftops, a captain upon her vessel. Random strangers saw me and recognized me, waving their hands as I passed by. I smiled back, even though the dim light would not let them see it. Groceries were quickly picked up.

Seated atop Steelix some 16 feet in the air, Glitter Lighthouse was visible all the way from downtown. The Ampharos' beams were shining, both of them, stretching out in opposite directions. They winded round, and round, and round. There are no similes to even describe it accurately. I was mesmerized. A slow tap upon Steelix told him to slow down, to delay our arrival.

"You're so good, Steelix."

"Steelix."

I leaned down and hugged his head.

"You're like a father to me. You know that? You always protect me."

He nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment, slowly, so that I wouldn't lose my grip.

"But you might have to give away your daughter someday soon. She's taking a gamble. If it works, she'll be happy. If it doesn't, she'll be unhappy, and happiness will have to come from some other place. But she won't be afraid. Because you'll be there. You'll keep her safe, right? You'll make sure it never gets too bad, right?"

"Schteel."

We approached the lighthouse, the sound of Steelix's rumbling impossible to miss from a hundred yards out. A silhouette could be seen leaning in the doorway, waiting for us.

Without a word, warning him to not divulge one either, I led him up to the pinnacle of the lighthouse. Amphy and Spectra were, of all the ridiculous possibilities, dancing. Waltzing, to be precise. It was very apparent that it was Spectra's idea, because she was throwing herself body and spirit into the act, stomping, stepping, swaying, gliding, and twirling away. Amphy was clumsily carried along with her. Their forms were lost in the intense glow of their tails, just two stars circling each other in constellation.

I took a seat outside, at the railing. The last tint of sunlight was turning violet at the very horizon. Vision was fading, adjusting to nighttime, becoming directional in tandem with the Pokémons' rays. The young man's figure was lost in the darkness as he took his seat next to me.

"How was your day?" he asked, at last. A simple question. Uncreative. An attempt at geniality, an invitation to the familiar. There was no need for that tonight.

"My day was like that nebula picture from the Farsight Space Telescope. Surreal. Blurry. Incalculable. Awing. What about yours?"
He didn't feel up to replying after hearing that kind of answer from me.

A moment's silence. He was fishing for something to say. I dared him, without saying anything out loud, to bring up the subject first.

"Missing out on gym battles. I'll have to make up for it when I get back," he ventured.

He's such a coward. Waiting for me to broach what we obviously came here to discuss.

"I left Danielle in charge. She's tough, might take over the gym some day. Might kick me out of the job, actually, she's that good... and determined. No worries about me and her, though. She's rejected me, more than once."

He's flirting with it now.

"Spectra and Amphy are getting along... really well. She's treating him like a pet, but he isn't taking it all lying down. When she goes too far, he lets her know. They played something like flashlight tag before you got here. He made her upset because he got super-competitive about it. I think she respected him more because of that though. It's good they're finding a balance."

"Morty."

"Hmm?"

"Just say what's really on your mind," I implored.

He sighed.

"I'm worried about you," he said.

I tilted my head.

"You know, when I heard about how you treated Volkner at the summit, I wasn't surprised. Not a lot, anyways. But when I talked with your friends, I was aghast. Shocked. They told me you hated men. Despised us. All of us, every single one. I didn't realize you'd become like that. I knew you hated me, of course, blocking me out during the teleconferences, avoiding me during the summits. Understandable. Certain other men, some of the others who've crossed paths with you: Edward, Tony, Ricky, Falkner. We wronged you, in one way or another. Hating them- it's strong, and unhealthy for your psyche, but it's understandable. But all men? Everywhere? Even Volkner? Volkner is an upstanding guy. A really, really upstanding guy. He's got everything I've got, and he's not a douche bag or a complete pervert like I am. I was disappointed you'd rejected him. But when I heard you rejected him merely because he was a **man**- well, I was afraid."

He has no idea. He continued, ignorant.

"I felt like it was my fault. Not necessarily because I was the sole cause. You were acting funny, showing signs, even way back during Indigo. I didn't recognize them right off the bat back then. You were focused on becoming Olivine's permanent Gym Leader, so that muddled things up. My assumptions blew up in my face. Anyhow, I felt like I had done you a great wrong, through all that we've been through. Not just in what I did to you, though. What I failed to do for you."

He stretched out his hand. I took it in my own. I could feel the sweat in his, how nervous he was getting. His fingers manipulated mine until the tip of my index was laying on the vein of his wrist.

"You feel that?" he said.
"Your pulse? It's fast."

"Yeah. That's me being scared."

"Why are you scared?"

"Because I want you to believe me. I'm telling the truth right now, and I'm opening myself up. You'll never believe- no, make that- you should never believe me outright. My words lie. My brain lies. But my heart doesn't. So feel my pulse. This isn't a lie."

"Okay."

"I care about you, Jasmine. Always have. So it hurt me to realize that I wasn't there, that my dumbass actions alienated you, when I should have been around to protect you, to make sure you didn't become the way you are today."

"Morty," I said, interrupting. "Is this about more than just your feelings towards me?"

We continued to keep our focus straight ahead, following the Ampharos' beams out into the dark nothingness, eyes averted from one another.

"This is about how my feelings for you make me feel like shit, because I couldn't do anything to make you happy."

"Why'd you never confess those feelings?"

"I never thought you would return them."

"Why did you think that?"

"Because nothing I did seemed to make you interested in me... or happy."

"That's funny, then," I said, not laughing.

"What is?"

"I mistook your intent. I would have been happy just knowing that your antics were out of affection."

"We were children."

"We were children," I echoed.

The undying truth of human aging. Wisdom only comes from sorrow. We are wise after we are young, and so waste our youth becoming wise, and sad.

"Why now, then? Why do all these things for me?"

He leaned back on one hand, still clutching mine in the other, staring upwards.

"To atone? To rectify my mistakes? To wash this guilt away?"

"Not to win me over?"

"I would only say that if I thought I still had a chance."

"Why would you seriously think you don't have a chance?" I asked.
"I assumed we were too far gone. Too much bitterness."

"Too much bitterness? From what? Indigo? I've told you, many times, you hurt me, but you didn't break me. I came to Indigo broken."

"What then was it that made you this way?" he asked.

"I don't want to say."

He took his hand away. He rose to his feet. I stared after him, and waited. He did nothing, shifted around on his feet.

He's waiting for me to join him.

I didn't.

He beckoned me to.

I shook my head.

"Jasmine, please," he begged.

Reluctantly, I got up. We still didn't face each other, but out of awkwardness, could not maintain our pose. So we began circling the balcony of the lighthouse, side-by-side, going along with the rotating beacons. The light slowly overtook us, washing us in the warm glow of the Ampahros' illumination, twice a minute.

"A kiss, Morty. You asked for a kiss," I finally said, giving in.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Do you know what a kiss is?"

"What is a kiss?"

"It is a prelude to sex. Something intimate, but still innocent. Something for children. The sharing of... lower bodily extremities... (we both cracked a smile) are for when no more secrets exist. Kisses are to show affection, but still keep some privacy. You know what the opposite of innocence is, right?"

"Sinfulness?"

"Knowledge."

"That strikes me as odd."

"Me too."

"Knowledge and sin, wrapped up together," he let out with an exaggerated huff.

"Do you understand, then, a little of my plight with sex?"

He turned his head toward me, as we continued circling the deck.
"You're afraid that having sex is sinful?"

"Not really. I'm afraid that the intimacy sex creates— or implies— or promises— opens us up to things we'd rather not know."

"So what you're saying…"

"We have secrets. We have pasts that, clearly, we're not ready to share with each other. You said it yourself, when we're ready… to… fuck… we'll be ready to share those secrets. But a kiss is not yet sex, is it? A kiss is just a tease, a promise, a prelude."

"I see," he said.

We walked awhile longer in silence, absorbing each other's words.

He spoke again first.

"I want to kiss you."

"Nn."

"No, really. I want to kiss you. Because I think you'll enjoy it. But having heard what you have to say, then… I now want to kiss you, because I want to show you I'm ready to go that far. Take a step to that point where we become intimate enough for you to share everything with me. And maybe… I could share that deep stuff of mine with you."

"That's your real feelings?" I asked.

He gulped.

"Yes."

I'm shaking.

It's so close.

I don't think I'm ready.

I didn't realize coming here, but I feel like I'll never be ready for this.

There's too much at stake. Too much confused. Too much clawing at me from the deep recesses of my soul.

I'm about to give out. To run away.

Why?

I don't know why.

That dark spot in my mind. It's like Amphy's ray has swung by and, for a moment, lit up the ugly wraith lurking within. It's telling me,

"You'll regret it. Don't kiss him."

It's telling me:

"Remember what happened."
It's telling me:
"Romance is futile."

It's telling me:
"Boys are evil."

I feel light, weak, pitiful, helpless.

Then the light passes, and the wraith hides, and I'm unsure, and my bravery returns at half-strength to do battle with my ever waxing and waning fears. I'm about to cry.

But if I'm never ready, I will never take a chance. And, I'm so absolutely convinced that if I stay still, do nothing, never take chances, I will forever be unhappy.

Morty paused before the doorway.

"Jasmine."

He grasped me by the hand. Positioned himself in front of me, so that we were face to face.

"I want you to be happy. Call me mad, call me perverted, but through my life I've known the company of girls, and it has made me happy. Taking them on dates, out to the movies. Getting to know their families. Caressing them. Fucking them- excuse my language. Pleasure can make you happy. Pleasure in and of itself, and pleasure as a symbol of the bond between a man and a woman. It's not something to be shy of. It's not something to be afraid of, or ashamed of. It can only hurt because it is so intimately entwined with our happiness.

Losing that happiness, feeling betrayed, not having that someone there that once gave you happiness, because they abandoned you, or cheated on you, or hurt you…"

"Abandoned…” I echoed.

"Yes, abandoned- left, dumped, decided you were worth nothing and treated like shit. Making you feel unwanted."

"Unwanted…” I echoed to myself, softly. Was that a coincidence? Did he know? That one damned word…

He's adamant and forceful about this description, and almost yelling it, his voice raised. Does he not know it's about to make me cry?! But he kept going, oblivious.

"It all hurts so much because you trusted them, and they stole the feelings you had for them. So I'm saying, that's the risk we all take. You can't have those wonderful, life-sustaining feelings without the risk that it could all crumble. So I know you don't want to feel those feelings of betrayal, but let me ask, do you want to feel the opposite? Do you want nothing at all? To be alone, never to be hurt, but never to find joy in someone else's company?"

His eyes, oh, his eyes. I realize now, what's in them.

The void, empty, meaningless, abyssal nothingness of death is reflected within them. It's a reflection. That's me in there. I am lonely, and to live like I am living is death itself.

I shook my head.
"I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life," I said. "I just don't know how to live together."

"It's called trust. Trust me."

"Okay," I uttered.

"Ask of me- anything. Anything at all. Something I can do to prove to you that I am worthy of your first kiss. I will move mountains. I will break the Pokémon League. I will raise Amphy and Steelix and Tyko and anybody else to the height of bliss. Whatever it takes. Let me feel your lips. You will not regret it. You will enjoy it. For every reason, I will make you a happy woman. I promise."

He's so eloquent. I can't fight it.

The task I had in mind, for so long, that was so important to me…. the ONE thing I would ask of him.

Oh gosh, don't cry!

Don't fear!

I gulped, and swallowed a thousand regrets and a million fears and a billion bitter memories, and in a faint, feminine, reluctant voice, I voiced my demand.

"Tell me that you love me."

"Jasmine…"

He startled me. He shifted, and his presence pushed me back, back against the glass door. I could feel the coldness of it on my shoulders. I could feel the warmth of his breath. His cosmically-deep, deep-blue eyes staring straight into mine. His golden hair, falling over his forehead, unkempt, but luscious still. The shaft of Spectra's light swept by, and his face lit up, and I saw concern, and care, and lust in it. Then a long interlude, where it grew dark. Then Amphy's beam came, brighter, and straight on into his eyes, illuminating them to their very core.

If it's possible to tell someone's soul from the look in their eyes, what I saw there startled me.

"Jasmine," he said again.

His left hand took my right and pinned it above us. His right hand took my left and guided it to his hip, and then his heart. His heart was beating, just as rapidly, just as heavily as mine.

"You know me, don't you? Trust what I do, not what I say. I speak with my actions."

"Tell it to me," I commanded, meekly.

"Listen, then."

And he leaned forward, 12-inches, 6 inches, 3, 2 1…

He stopped. He paused. He waited. The rough of his chin and the delicate, smooth skin of his labia oris lay not a centimeter away from mine.

I couldn't help myself.

I closed my eyes, and closed the gap.
They were… softer than I thought they would be. Much softer. The grizzle of his afternoon stubble scratched at my chin, slightly, but not enough to distract from the pillowy- no, even a pillow, even a marshmallow doesn't compare to this softness. It's solid yet exquisite.

It's pleasant.

I knew it would be pleasant.

I didn't realize, did not fathom, could not remember, how pleasant the touch of a man's lips upon my own would be.

It lasted, not long, twenty seconds, maybe twenty centuries.

He pushed, so delicately, so infinitesimally harder, to deepen the kiss for just a moment, and for a brief, tiny second, my pleasure turned to excitement, to ecstasy, and I almost could have tricked myself into wanting more.

Then he let go, and gave me room to breath.

But my breath did not return.

Instead, a sob.

"So how was it? Your first kiss?" he asked.

I let out a breath, a long sob. I opened my eyes.

And in them?

Tears.

"Jasmine?"

"No," I uttered, in a faint, impossible-to-hear whisper.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head.

The darkness has come. Memories have unearthed. It's all flooding back, to the fore and center, the sensation of pleasure awaking what should have been put to rest, forever.

"Jasmine, I'm sorry. Did you not like it?"

I shook my head again, and pulled away, out from under his arm. I turned, opened the door, trying to get away. He followed. I went faster. He sped up.

"Jasmine! What's wrong?! I'm sorry if I did something… I thought you wanted… please… I'm sorry!"

I went down the stairs, through the viewing bay, to the common room, then to the door leading to Amphy's quarters. Morty, at last caught me by the wrist, suddenly.

"Tell me what I did wrong? If I hurt you, in any way, I didn't mean to! I'm sorry I took your first kiss like that!"
I spun around, slowly, looking at him.

"You can't take what's not mine to give," I said.

"What?"

I shook my head one final time.

"You weren't my first kiss."

And then, in tears, with him watching helplessly, I drifted into the room and locked myself, and my memories, inside.

Part 2 - End
Autumn Showers

Part 3 - The Gym Leader's Lust

The season has finally arrived. I could tell from the cascading stream running down my window in an endless fount. It was drizzling yesterday morning when I got up, pouring yesterday night when I went to sleep, and still pouring when I woke up a few minutes ago. The rain turned my window into a warped looking glass, partially reflecting my room, and completely distorting everything behind it beyond recognition. I reached up to touch the surface, and drew away. The glass was freezing cold.

Olivine only sees these kinds of week-long soakings once a year, after the last gasp of summer fades from the air. Spring hurricane season brings the harder, more torrential downpours, but those hardly last a night, they blow over so quickly. Late October and November rainstorms? We'd be lucky to see the sun two or three days from now.

I can't say for sure if the dismal weather brought on this mood, or if heaven was empathizing with my disturbed thoughts. Either way, the weather and I were on the same page today.

"Mmm."

There it is again. That fleeting thought, that curious sensation. Having tried to fight it and fight it all last week, and invariably losing, this time I gave in easily. My head twisted, turning, searching for something soft to touch my lips to. They found my pillow, a linen lining made of the utmost quality of thread, and yet it was not so soft as what memory presented to me.

_I wish he were here_, I thought to myself.

-And just like that, there was a knock on my bedroom door.

"Morty!"

He entered the room uninvited, but welcomed nonetheless. Without a word he threw off his soaked headband, pulled the sweater over his head and shoulders, and tossed that aside as well. His chest was outlined in crisp detail under his tight, rain-slicked, black undershirt. His tennis shoes came off next, then his socks. His undressing came with all the grace of familiarity, as if he'd been here before, as if he knew by experience what was about to transpire.

"You're here."

"I'm here."

"For…?"

"You know exactly what I came here for."

I nodded, slightly frowning, a twisted facial expression to hide the fact that it was really a grin straining to take hold of my cheek muscles. Could he see it for what it was? Could he read my body language, or must I tell him directly and destroy what dignity remained of me?

He said nothing, but took an unnecessary amount of time to step up to my bedside. I lay there, on my
back, waiting for an overture that wasn't coming. Still, even though I truly wanted it, there was no way I was going to just give him permission, let alone ask or heaven forbid beg him for commencement.

I allowed the grin a small foothold upon my face, lowered my brow, and raised my eyes, hoping that alone would drill my desires telepathically into his brain. He always seemed like a borderline psychic, right? Mind-reading or merely body-language reading aside, he got the hint, and bore down upon me. His body was raised above mine, one hand supporting himself on either side of my head, his legs straddling my waist. His eyes began perusing me, judging me. I shied away from his gaze. One of his hands lifted up, caressing my cheek.

"Don't be ashamed."
"I-I'm n-n-not… Not ashamed."
"This is natural."
"You're right."
"It's what you want."
"Exactly."
"Then why are you blushing?"
"What we're doing is forbidden."
"By whom?"
"The universe."
"I don't recall the universe handing down any commandments. Did this universe come and speak to you? Did it say 'Thou shalt NOT enjoy thine body'?"
"It did-"
"Well, then-"
"Let me finish. It did say that, but not in so few words. In the winds, in the earth. In the tales of old and tragedies of the news, in the cries of the night and the forlorn moon. I feel it in society's judgmental attitude, pressing down on me like the Earth's mantle, crushing me. I hear it in my teacher's words, their whispers, their lectures. I see it in the hard stares of those who have raised and nurtured me. They all cry to me, 'Your innocence, you must protect it! You must not allow yourself to fall prey to sin, little girl! You must save your dignity! Shame! Shame!'. But you know what?"
"What?" he asked.
I bit the lip of my now-face-splitting grin.
"That makes it more exciting, doesn't it?"

And remembering his advice, I showed him, not through words, but by taking his hand and placing it upon my mons veneris, that I was ready to be ravished.

He looked down, back at me, and then down again, stunned at the very existence of his hand in the place that it was. Was he wondering what had gone wrong with me? But Morty, nothing has gone
wrong with me! Everything has gone so right! And you, too! All traces of that childish buffoonery and
snarky, thoughtless teasing had gone up in smoke, like a magic disappearing act. Leaning over me was the man I had come to yearn for these many months. A responsible, passionate, loving, caring, kind, strong- not of the body, although he was that- but strong in his moral fortitude and spirit. Not a man's man, not a womanly man, but a woman's man.

The hands that had been intertwined, massaging just above my vulnerable parts, relented. His was still following my lead, and mine lead it to his pants, where they found a clasp, which was easily undone.

His penis came out. Yes, I said penis. There is no need to couch it in metaphor; I do not want to shy away from this sight, but take it in, savor it. What I'm seeing is a shaft of great girth (since bigger is better, or so I'm told), fleshy, like a handlebar sheathed in skin. It was already half-erect, the foreskin hanging three-quarters of the way up. Just a small flap of flesh, but supposedly the most sensitive area of a man's body. I wanted to hold it. I wanted to caress it, and play with it. I did. My hands wrapped around the shaft, tugging and probing this most curious of instruments. Yes, it was as soft as I imagined. A rapidly hardening core, to be sure, but the sheath was exquisitely malleable and soft. Just as soft as those most delectable lips of his. I motioned for him to bring it to my face, so that I might fiddle with it with my own lips.

"No, no. I've had my share. Tonight is about you."

I quickly learned that the pleasure derived from pleasing your lover is still second fiddle to the pleasure of taking your lover's 10-inch living cock into one's wet, pleading vagina.

Slowly, his hips began their rhythmic massaging. Being on the bottom afforded my hands freedom, which were utterly busy pleasing those parts of my privates not already pulsating from his cock's pounding. His one free hand spent equal time helping my own down there, or else coddling my boobs.

From tit to clit to slit to tit to clit to slit to tit to clit to slit, an unending waltz of stimulation, all to the sound and image of him rocking within me…

"Ahhh!"

"Like it?"

"Ahhhhhhhh!"

The image of Morty and his messy blonde hair and space-deep eyes and swimmer's abs and hiker's thighs making sex upon me in a relentless, pleasure-powered manner washed out until there was nothing but the feeling of being fucked- and to my dying shame- I loved it, I loved it!

My crescendo came, my kegel muscles crimping tightly together under spasm-induced ecstasy. Oh! There are no words for this bliss! Only moans and cries and other inarticulate utterances not found in any language but the beautiful, primal, universal language of the human animal.

My fingers squeezed hard upon my mound, digging into the flesh, trying to force the orgasm to last a few seconds longer. But it couldn't, and I regretted letting myself orgasm, because that signaled the end of the pleasure.

And with it, the figure of the godly Morty faded into nothingness.

I sank into my bed- tired, worn, a little happy, a little distraught, and most definitely alone.
A sigh escaped my chest.

In a mere week's time I had tripled my total number of orgasms for the year. This was my first today, and undoubtedly not the last. Although, the hallucination had been so real, my efforts so vigorous, I wonder if the evening's session will be as good. Probably not.

"You're actually planning an evening session, you idiot. What's gotten into you?" I asked myself aloud.

For ten minutes I simply remained, motionless, drained, emotionally blank and hormonally satisfied for the time being. Then a glance at the clock told me the day had yet to begin properly.

"Amphy?" I called out.

The naked sheep was still asleep. Luckily my muted cries had been unheard or ignored. He lay there, chest slowly rising and falling, on an impromptu bed in the corner. How embarrassing would it be for me to have him see that?

Somewhat shameful, but not mortally so. He was just a Pokémon, after all. It's not like I was telling him to join me, or getting off to voyeurism with him as the spectator. That would cross the line, in my mind. But an accidental peep couldn't hurt, right? Otherwise it'd be very difficult to indulge during Amphy's sleepovers.

Well, in any case, the Ampharos was sound asleep. Recently, it was all he wanted to do when I dragged him back to my place. For a Pokémon who had been practically imprisoned in the lighthouse since he was a kid, he sure made a fuss about leaving it. I suspect that pushy vixen currently lighting the beacon had something to do with his sour mood. Separating the two for even a night was like pulling teeth. In the end, it took a forced recall using his pokeball to get him to budge from her side.

"Hmmph!"

Amphy, you'd better at least show mommy some appreciation for bringing you a girlfriend!

Instead, though, he had sulked about the rather-empty apartment, and then dropped into a heap of laundry and old blankets.

The day was getting on. Eight o'clock. Even if I had purposely delayed activities at the gym to accommodate my Noctowl-behavior, I still needed more time to prepare myself.

A rushed breakfast, a rushed shower, a rushed toiletry, a rushed dressing, all made achingly slow due to the condition of my body, and I was almost ready to go. I paused before the mirror one last time, to make sure my spike-tails were set properly. God-forbid they fall out; people would laugh their butts off if they saw through my reason for wearing my hair the way I did.

"Huh."

I looked myself up and down, and on an impulse took off my shirt and unclipped my bra.

"Does Morty really want this?" I asked my half-naked self.

The reflection that greeted me did not strike me as a paragon of modern feminine beauty. I hated when people called me a child, but honestly, my body was giving them valid ammunition. On my skinny chest, where my ribcage was faintly visible, lay two little bumps you could hardly call breasts. They weren't big enough to cup properly, even in my small hands, nor did they jiggle or bounce. If
not for my nipples showing through my delicate dresses, I wouldn't even need a bra. Throw in a narrow, child-like chest, child-like waist, unfeminine butt, oversized forehead, and spindly arms and legs, I'm surprised any male at all would ask me out. Aren't they afraid of being branded a pedophile?

Yet, I felt unattractive only when I forced myself to compare my body to the movie actresses and super models. You know, the stereotypical "10/10"s of society: nice curves, big boobs, buxom lips and rich hair, well-proportioned facial structure, big eyes, long, smooth legs, straddling hips, the works. Basically, what men are taught by the media to chase is totally different from what I was looking at. The only argument I could make for myself was the fact that I completely lacked fat- and even then, isn't a little fat a good thing on a woman? Also, maybe I have nice legs. Maybe... If I were taller.

But you know what? As myself, from my unique and subjective perspective, I felt like I was attractive. If I were a boy, a scrawny, sleek, petite, mousy figure would be just the kind of girl I'd go googly-eyed for. Given the numerous overtures I've rejected over the years, I know at least a significant fraction of the male population agrees. You know, perhaps I give pedos a legitimate adult to lust over. That's an unsettling thought.

I shook my head, and pulled my bra on and dress back over my head.

Why are you so concerned about your looks this morning, Jasmine?

Of course you know why.

The same reason you lost your mind and began masturbating twice a day after having spent three years schlicking yourself off once a season.

The same reason that even now, this very moment, you're absent-mindedly touching your lips.

He's changed you.

You thought you could change him, but he's returning the favor, and doing a damn efficient job of it.

You kissed him, when you thought you never would.

It was pleasant.

You said yourself that kissing was a prelude to even more intimate contact.

It's a step in a process, yes, but a process I can always halt if I feel uncomfortable.

You'll end up wanting sex.

No!

Yes you will!

Even if I give in, it'll be me allowing him to have sex with me! Not the other way around!

You poor misfortunate soul.

Stop berating me. Who are you, anyways, my subconscious?

I'm the dark demons of your memory. Because of me, you're never allowed to enjoy the company of another man ever again.
I hate you! Morty actually wants me!

Morty is just using you!

Morty is manipulating me, but so what? I believe he's only doing it because that's the only way he knows how to express his feelings! If the end product is us falling in love, then I don't care how we get there!

As if. Tell me, does Morty act like a guy in love, or does he act like a guy out to take your virginity and then dump you?

That's not relevant! That's not even what happened! Shut up! Go away! Come back with more believable threats! Why am I arguing with myself?

I shook my head violently.

No, I'm not going crazy. There's no schizophrenic voice inside my head playing devil's advocate. Just my memories, and my overbearing conscience.

I'm going to have to confront this if I'm ever to have a satisfactory relationship with Morty. Or maybe I won't. Maybe the very act of having a successful relationship with Morty will prove that evil experience was a lie. Maybe I really can get what I truly want, for once. Maybe I can love and be loved. Maybe…

And maybe Amphy is groggily pulling on the hem of your dress and begging for breakfast.

"Hey!"

"Pharooo."

"Good morning. You're up! Shouldn't you be getting some more rest, though? You're taking tonight's shift at the lighthouse, you know."

"Pharoooooo."

"Fine, fine," I said, shaking my head in feigned exasperation. In short order I produced a bowl of hot oatmeal for him, which he gobbled up.

"If you're not going to sleep, you'll have to come with me to work."

He gave me a tilted, forlorn look, like he was confused and didn't like the options. Tired, and not having time for him to decide, I zapped him into a recently-bought ultra ball.

"So come to work and sleep, we can do both, brat."

I clicked and turned the button to a certain setting. "Amph amph pharoooa." Amphy's faint, digitized cry came from within. The two-way speaker system on these new pokeball models is wonderful, I think. "Amphara!"

'Amphara'- That generally corresponds with 'female' or 'girl' or 'other person' or 'loved one' in his own Pokespeak.

"You can see Spectra tonight. I know you like her, but it's not good to spend every waking second with your significant other when you're just starting out."

"Ampha! Phanna phan.... amphara...."
"Shush and let me explain. You'll burn yourself out and won't acclimate to each other's personalities properly. Little annoyances will turn into big fighting messes. Learn to savor the experience. Take me and Morty for example. I'd probably cause a homicide, myself or someone else's, if I had to put up with Morty twenty-four hours a day, day after day after day."

"Pharos."

Although dejected, Amphy reluctantly agreed with my advice. Best to let a relationship build slowly, right? Amphy and Spectra will have LOTS of time to cuddle and paw-paw and do whatever love-struck Ampharos do. The species can live to over a hundred and they'll still probably die in that lighthouse, (unless we somehow move to pure space-travel or teleportation for shipping goods across oceans?). Amphy is very likely going to outlive me, morbid as the thought is. He shouldn't be in any hurry to become a dad.

"Eh."

I stared out the door into a semi-solid wall of water.

"Let's get this show started."

Olivine, or at least her streets, was virtually abandoned. I rode upon Magnezone, trying to keep the umbrella angled towards the rain. Even wearing a coat, I had forgotten to cover my legs in anything and was soon shivering. My mind continually vacillated between the miseries of the weather and the vexations my love life was causing me. Occasionally a car would run up behind me and start honking. It took a few seconds each time to come to my senses and have Magnezone levitate out of the way so they could pass. The gym was where I left it, as I had left it. A small mob of trainers huddled under the doorway awning, waiting for me to unlock the doors.

"Open for business," I tiredly called out as the automatic doors slid apart.

Work was merely alright. Actually, I couldn't tell you how work really was, because I wasn't paying attention most of the time. My mood was perturbed by the self-interrogation I had given myself in the morning, making it hard to focus on the more complex tasks. I had Connie take over the day's seminar about damage assessment and calibration (something she was better at anyways), and instead taught a group of elementary school children about basic attacks, like Ember, Metal Claw, and Tail Whip. Afterwards I endured a longer-than-usual battling session. The clock ticked off five hours, but you could have told me nine had passed and I wouldn't blink an eye. My mind just was not in it today. Somehow or other I worked out a 17W/14L ratio by 5:00 P.M. Tyko stayed at my side and acted as my assistant, directing my Pokémon better than I could. The little braniac is turning into quite an asset; surprisingly, she's more useful off the field with her smarts and team spirit than on the field with her Water-typing and attacks. Skarmory was the more visible star for today. Too many people were relying on Fighting and Ground attacks to counter my Steel defenses, neither of which impressed the airborne raptor.

My mind drifted off again and again. Something was pressed up against my lips, and I realized it was my own fingers.

"Go!"

Another battle? I'm getting tired of this.

"Genga! Gegara!"

Someone was using a Gengar. The ghost blew Skarmory out of the air with a Focus Blast, but
thanks to Sturdy my Pokémon barely managed to avoid fainting. Tyko urged me to switch for Magnezone and set up a Light Screen (as seen by her outlining a rectangle-shape with her limbs). I robotically followed her advice.

Gengar. Same as Morty.

I wonder if Gengar's perverted tendencies came from Morty, or if it was the other way around? Actually, I bet they both started off as deviants, and their behavior became self-reinforcing when they paired up. I frowned, remembering the time Gengar- Haunter at the time- snuck into my shadow during P.E. The Pokémon had made it look like my silhouette was engaged in all manner of disgusting sexual acts. The boys had a real good laugh about that, while I was caught futility trying to stomp my perverted faux-shadow into submission. Then, to cap off the shame, Morty jumped in and used his own shadow to start complimenting the lewd display.

Yes, our two shadows pantomiming fellatio, that really happened. I couldn't show myself in gym class for days.

Now?

If Morty asked for a blowjob, I would have to give serious consideration before turning it down, and even then only politely declining- as opposed to screaming "No!" and delivering a slap.

Magnezone suffered serious damage, but the Lightscreen and Thunderwave it managed to set up made it a simple job for Steelix to mop up.


Why'd it have to be you?

It's not that you're no better than any other guy. In fact, you're far worse than most of the guys who've asked me out. Yet, I've given you my second kiss and I'm deliberating whether or not to give you my virginity. What is it about you that makes me want to toss aside every deep-rooted prejudice and give in to my base desires?

Is it only because I've known you so long?

Or does it have nothing to do with you, and it's only something that's going on within myself?

I don't know.

I don't know what to do with this Scizor, either. It's been giving me a headache, the way it dodges everything. Seriously, it's annoying. Magnezone can't keep a bead on it. It's threatening to Brick Break, and Tyko doesn't even wait for me, she switches out Magnezone for Skarmory herself. My steel clad bird takes the attack easily enough, but can't counter-attack. Really?! Would Morty have such a hard time figuring out how to hit this damnable bug? And why does it have a yellow tint to it? I've seen a lot of red-shaded Scizors and once upon a time a shiny green Scizor, but never a mustard-colored Scizor. I wouldn't put it past the trainer to have spray-painted it with some special paint for a stat boost, or just because he liked the color. Morty did that once, with his Spinarak, painted it purple and white.

The bug lazily back-peddled, easily avoiding Skarmory's undirected attacks, but no longer attempting to counter-attack, either.

"Hey, Jasmine? You seem distracted," the opposing trainer called out to me.
"I'm... eh." I shrugged.

"Well, it's just not like you. I've been holding back, 'cause I only wanted to beat you at your best, but if it's a bad day, I can come back later."

Ugh! This guy! How condescending! And why does he act like he knows me?

For the first time since he stepped up, I took a hard look at my opponent.

He had a white collared shirt and tie on, black slacks, and dress shoes. His demeanor was rigid, professional. A pair of sharp glasses adorned his nose ridge. His hair was neatly brushed to the side. All in all, he was certainly trying to project an upper-class, respectable image to me, the Gym Leader. There was something really strange about this trainer. I squinted, trying to get a better look at his face. It was blurry, unrecognizable from this distance.

He caught me staring intently at him and began shifting around.

"So, um, Jasmine, can we continue, or...?"

"'Kind sir'? That's stretching it a bit, but I'm flattered. And thank you for the rematch. Still, it doesn't seem right. I mean, your Prinplup is practically running the battle for you. I do think-"

"Hold on, when did you and I battle?" I blabbered out. I don't recall seeing such a smartly-dressed opponent anytime today, or in the last week for that matter.

"Last month. Don't you remember me? From the park, at least?" he said, concern in his voice.

I shook my head.

"Who are you?"

I then immediately regretted having asked. Partly because he flinched, as if hurt. Partly because I sounded stupid. And partly because I realized I could have just looked at the big video display board for my answer.

'Challenger Warren Avery' was displayed. An old profile image of a much punkier, glitzy-fashioned young adult appeared beside the name.

I tilted my head, wrinkled my nose and brow. It couldn't be...

"Warren?"

That same Warren? That pugnacious Cooltrainer who called me a 'cunt' and then deigned to try to get me to hang out with him? What was he doing back here?

No wait, that's a stupid question; he wants my badge. More relevant: why was he so radically different? Where was his blazer? His earring? Why is he hiding his tattoo? Even his haircut is different. He's unrecognizable from before; I couldn't tell who he was at all! It's like he's abandoned his Cooltrainer identity, and is trying out the role of professional businessman or academic. I'm confused!

"Yeah, it's me, Warren! You seem startled," he said, finally relaxing now that I remembered his name. "Is it because of my dress? I hope it doesn't come off as too presumptuous."
Even his manner of talking is different!

"Um, well... you've gotten a more mature look to you now. I was just taken aback," I said, excusing my reaction.

"More mature? Why thank you."

"Well, um, I'd rather we continue the battle, so don't worry yourself about me," I said, still unsure of this whole ordeal.

"Ah, but I do worry about you," Warren admitted. "I wouldn't want to do anything to offend or upset you. So if I have to, I'll forfeit."

"No, don't do that," I told him.

What's wrong with him? He isn't acting very characteristically. I'd be more at ease if he started cussing right now. Instead he's being polite and reserved and formal, and worrying about my fragile ego. What happened?

People change, Jasmine.

Yeah, but not in the space of a month! Something's fishy here!

Oh shush, you don't know what goes on in other people's lives.

Just concentrate on the battle! You still have a winning record against him, don't let him become a weight on the 'defeat' side of your scales!

"Very well. Let's have a good match," he said good humouredly. "I hope you put your all into it."

He ordered Scizor to stand its ground. Perhaps he was waiting for me to go first, to show that I really was making an effort to direct my Pokémon.

Well, I did pass on his suggestion that he forfeit. I'll have to try to win now. My first order of business was trying to figure out what the deal was with this weird Scizor.

"Hmmm."

"What is it now?" Warren asked.

"That Scizor... I don't remember it from our last battle. Did you train it recently?"

"Yes, in fact. Do you like him? He's very good."

"It's his color I'm interested in. You used a special Metal Coating when you went to evolve it, didn't you?" I said.

"You're right!" he nodded.

Pokémon that use Metal Coat to evolve adapt the Coat's elements into their biology. Specially-made Metal Coats have different compositions to imbue their recipients with unique properties. For instance, my father augmented a Metal Coat to have a depleted uranium-rich composition, which we used to evolve Onix. That caused Steelix's hide to become extremely dense, slowing him down, but also added a lot of weight and power to his attacks, and boosted his defenses. The depleted uranium was especially effective at boosting special defense. It was probably the same for this Scizor: its Metal Coat had some element or mineral mixed in. What gave off a yellow tint? Copper? Titanium?
"I'm wondering what the properties of his coating are," I explained to my opponent.

"Well, that's a secret," Warren said. "But, if that means you're taking me seriously now, I suppose I should be serious too. Scizor, retreat. Ludicolo, go."

If I recall correctly, Ludicolo uses nothing but direct special attacks, favoring Grass attacks.

"Magnezone, you're up."

Our "real" battle began in earnest.

It turned out to be a bitterly difficult one. Nerve-wracking for me. Many times I wanted to shut down and just eat the loss, and my thoughts scurried to Morty and what he would do in this situation. Yet Warren stood through it all calm and carefree, as if winning or losing didn't matter to him at all. More than once he offered to resign, and each time I turned him down- now more out of pride and my refusal to accept such a lame victory.

Magnezone attempted to blast Ludicolo with its electrical death-ray. The foe responded with an Energy Ball, causing a mid-air explosion. The stupid-looking Pokémon followed with a Leech Seed, which surprised me. I switched out for Skarmory, thinking to make use of Drill Peck or Brave Bird. Scald chased Skarmory away and out came Magnezone again. This time I tried having Magnezone use Thunder, which missed, and was forced back to Skarmory after another dose of Leech Seed.

"Kraaaaawww!"

Skarmory was not happy about this opponent either. He desperately wanted to dive in on the partial-Grass type, but I refused to allow him. Either the Scald would burn him, or he'd get Leech Seeded, or else Warren would switch out for his Magcargo and the Steel bird would get fried like a New Year's Combusken dinner.

"Leech Seed, ranged fire," Warren ordered.

Skarmory snapped at the incoming Leech Seed pellets, eating them. I wondered whether they'd infest his digestive tract, or if his stomach enzymes would dissolve the vegetative parasites.

"Whirlwind!" I ordered. Skarmory dove around a long-range Scald and flitted out a series of vortexes. Ludicolo stood its ground against the voracious wind, defying the gale for ten whole seconds before finally bowling over. A completely nonplussed Warren lazily held his pokeball aloft, snapping up Ludicolo's digitized-mass signal.

"I suppose it's back to Scizor, then."

This yellow-tinted Scizor was like nothing I'd ever seen in combat. Stupidly, stupidly well-trained. Not enormously strong- no, not until it Sword Danced three or four times. Not extremely fast- unless it was blinking across the field using Bullet Punch. Double Team made it impossible to track, and when I successfully did figure out its location, it U-turned its way to another position. Skarmory was flustered and utterly frustrated at its inability to hit the foe with anything. Superpowers were doled out with impunity, wrecking Skarmory and very nearly fainting my Pokémon.

Yet, every chance he had an opportunity to finish Skarmory off, Scizor backed off. It'd Roost off whatever glancing blows Skarmory managed to deal, and then wrecked up an additional Sword Dance or Iron Defense. When I tried switching Skarmory, Scizor would swoop into its path, cutting off his retreating lane. My bird couldn't get close enough for the pokeball's laser to hit it. Then, cornered, Skarmory would get caught in its claw and flung back to the center of the field. Even through Skarmory's ridiculous defenses and resistance, Scizor's Acrobat attack flung Skarmory...
bodily into the air like a rag doll. Stealth Rocks? Spikes? Whirlwinds? All dodged with ease, as if the Pokémon had the acuity of vision and mental acumen to be able to predict Skarmory's attacks before they happened. It was completely uncanny. The foe's Pokémon was doing all this with barely any input from its trainer.

Warren never even raised a corner of his mouth. It was plain he was toying with me, but his demeanor was that of a man concentrating fully on the battle. The fact that he wasn't even gloating was starting to rake my nerves.

"That's enough."

Skarmory Roosted off the latest damage, breathing heavily. I noticed as Scizor glided in for its own Metal Claw, it wasn't looking too preppy either. It brought its big clawed limb down on Skarmory's back. The attack landed with an unimpressive 'kling' before Scizor slouched down onto all four limbs. Looks like it's out of energy. I guess its one weakness was low stamina.

"So that's his limit," Warren said to himself. He addressed me next. "I'm retreating Scizor from the fight. Consider it a TKO."

It pained me to not get a fair shot at knocking out the aggravating bug, but what was I to do? Give up the KO? No way.

"If you had that Scizor when you first battled me, I don't think you'd be here today," I ventured, hoping to hide my growing anger.

"Oh, maybe, maybe not. Even if I won the badge, I can think of a few reasons to stick around town," Warren replied. I cocked an eyebrow at that last statement. Then it was back to the battle.

I wondered if he would bring Ludicolo out, or Magcargo. Or some other Pokémon that I hadn't seen before. It turned out to be the middle option.

"Tyko, you're in," I commanded. The juvenile cried and jumped into the arena. The fire of competition and Magcargo's lava body lit up in her eyes. Warren shook his head. He ordered a basic Smokescreen, which failed in its purpose of concealing Magcargo. Prinplup knew exactly where to fire a Water Pulse and faint the opponent in one hit.

The reverse happened immediately after, where Ludicolo's Energy Ball found its way through a heavy screen of Bubbles and Mist to nail the Prinplup for super-effective damage. It was enough to stun her, causing the subsequent Giga Drain to knock her clean out. We were down to a familiar matchup: fiesta-plant versus power-plant.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Energy Ball!"

"Flash Cannon!"

"Hydro Pump!"

We called out ranged-attacks and our Pokémon followed through, firing powerful elemental energy shells at each other. The flashes of green, blue, yellow, and silver streaked across, like a light show, like a firefight from a science-fiction shooter game. Explosions rang out, beside and between our two Pokémon, never hitting true, never causing damage. It was going to be an out-and-out shoot-out, until one side got a shot through.
"Hydro Pump!" Warren called again.

"Thunderbolt!"

"Energy Ball!" The attacks blew up in the air.

"Flash Cannon!"

"Hydro Pump!" The Steel and Water projectiles collided and exploded into steam.

We were waging a high-speed, high-stakes war of attrition. A stalemate of perfectly countered ballistics, where neither side could get through, unless one side slipped up.

As bad as Scizor was, this was worse. My brain was racing, withering, trying to keep up with the pace of the battle. I had less than a second to call out the correct counter to each incoming elemental bullet, and then pray for Magnezone to act in time. My nerves were coming undone, I felt like I was going to snap, and then lose it, and then Magnezone would lose it too, and get hit, and I'd really lose.

ARGH!

Warren's speeding up, calling more attacks faster. Ludicolo was straining itself to keep up, exerting its mental faculties and bodily stamina to pump out more Energy Balls and Hydro Pumps than seemed physically possible.

I need to do something! Anything! I can't keep up!

"Tri-attack!"

Water blocks Ice and Fire. Grass blocks Electricity. But Ludicolo can't use both at the same time, so it didn't matter which type of projectile it chose. Something was getting through…

And under stress and strain himself, suddenly confronted with the dilemma, Warren could not decide which counter to order. Ludicolo, like Magnezone, too focused on readying and firing its attacks to be deciding which attack to use on its own and completely reliant on its trainer's instructions, could not make up its mind either.

So that, all three elemental prongs of the Tri-attack hit true, gouging Ludicolo for Fire, Electric, and Ice damage. Its rare typing meant none of the three elements were super-effective; but it also meant none were resisted. Ludicolo fell to its hands and knees (or what passed for knees), eyes bulging.

"Ludicolo! Don't you frickin quit on me!" Warren shouted, reverting back to his old crass self for a second. "Mud Bomb! Use Mud Bomb to intercept the next Tri-Attack!"

Ludicolo mumbled, shakily lifted itself up while clutching a handful of wet clay scooped from the floor at its feet. It prepared to toss this straight at Magnezone…

"Sonic Boom," I ordered, my heart and mind finally letting out, relaxing.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The sound waves blasted Ludicolo, completely oblivious of the Mud Bomb weakly-hurled into their path.

"This fight is over," I mumbled out.

"So it is. Ludicolo, you did well. Come back."
"Thank you for challenging me, it was an excellent battle (no it wasn't! Lies! LIES!). I hope you return again (don't you dare come back here!), and I wish you better fortune then (I will never let you beat me!)." I finished my obligatory speech and bowed. These formalities feel insulting to me, given the emotion I put into these matches. I'm too competitive, and so half the things I say in my speeches are insincere at best, outright lies at worst. Maybe I'm not fit to be a Gym Leader, maybe I should've been a professional tournament trainer?

Ah, well, at least I still have my victory. Make that 19 wins today. Or was it 20? 21? I lost count. I should be fortunate that there are any wins at all. Until Warren forced me, I wasn't paying attention to my job at all. Pah! Now that I'm actually in the mood for battling, it's already time to close shop.

Warren collected himself. I expected him to turn and leave, or else confront me, or do something. He didn't. He just stood there. Waiting for me to come and shoo him out? I didn't want to walk over, so I simply shouted out to him.

"Um, you can't stay forever. We'll be closing soon."

"I know." He shook his head, smiling to himself. "You're really an awesome woman. Do you know that? I've never met a girl who commanded Pokémon like you do. You saved Tri-attack until the last moment, when I wouldn't expect it or be able to react to it in time. It was risky saving it for so long, but in the end you caught me off guard. Truly impressive." He's giving me too much credit, I merely forgot Tri-attack was still a part of Magnezone's arsenal. "But, I don't want to give up," he said. "One or the other, I definitely I want to accomplish at least one of my goals here. I'll be back."

Warren surprised me, giving me a flourish and a bow. Even as his forehead dipped towards the ground, though, his eyes never left me. I found it unsettling.

After he departed, I found myself in the office, resting. Connie popped in to say goodbye.

"Bye."

Now Connie was gone. I peeped out to see what my other assistants were doing.

Cleaning the gym.

I observed them for five minutes. The chore was not difficult. I never required them to make the arena spotless; just pick up the soda cans and sweep the more offensive collections of dust, bits, and trash into a pan.

What struck me as odd was that Janina and Ted continued to sweep and pick up the same areas for the entirety of my observational period. In fact, it seemed like they wandered between a select few points and applied a very non-aggressive sweeping technique to them. I'm sure after the third brushing that particular corner did not need any more attention.

The worrisome part was that these two were displaying the exact same behavior- on opposite sides of the gym from each other. Their paths never crossed, their self-imposed perimeters did not overlap.

Great!

I know what this means: Ted's confession didn't go over well.

Well, damn. I was afraid this would happen.

"Hey, you two! If you aren't ever going to get to cleaning the middle bleachers, just go home!" I shouted. Janina, without a word or a glance, sprinted to the exit, dropping her broom on the floor as
she left. Ted sort of stood there staring at the trash for a minute. Then he too beat a slow retreat, head bowed.

That's what you get for getting your hopes up, kid.

It is a miracle the human race exists. It is mind-boggling. Bewildering. The fact that two flawed creatures like a man (gross, perverted, arrogant, violent, greedy) and a woman (vain, picky, selfish) could stand each other long enough to fall in love, conceive of not one, but two or more children (to keep the 2.1 replenishment ratio)- simply strikes me as impossible. Yet here we are.

Here I am.

...

...

I'm guessing Warren wants to ask me out. He very nearly tried to do so at the park the other week. Maybe his new persona and outfit is meant to impress me? I don't know. I certainly don't like him. What's more, I don't believe in his ability to change himself into someone I could like.

Why don't I like him?

Can you even say, Jasmine? Why do you reject Warren, objectively?

Why did you reject all those other boys? What was it about Volkner that turned you off?

Can I even really say? I don't know how my brain functions. Sometimes there's things I can identify, sometimes it's not so obvious.

For instance, Edward just rubbed me the wrong way. I didn't know what a bastard he would become later on, but in his manner of speaking, in the way he carried himself and interacted with me and others, I kind of envisioned the nasty, mean-spirited core he was trying to hide, or else keep at bay.

Davie was a slob. Alec was fat. Trevor was downright obese, and an obsessive otaku who spoke about his figurine collection in a genuinely frightening way. Leroy was kind, but also kind of stupid. Shigure had no affection or interest in Pokémon whatsoever, which was sad, because he was the most handsome man I'd ever personally met. Ah, well, deal-breakers.

Volkner? I don't know. Maybe there was nothing that turned me off from him. Well, maybe he was a little shy. He seemed to lack confidence, although I've now learned that he only lacked confidence in the narrow field of "Jasmine-flirting". Troy was the same way. But that's it. Otherwise they were respectable, handsome men with a common interest in Pokémon and geekery. But I rejected them nonetheless. Why? Perhaps, more so than any fault of their own, they were collateral casualties of the other, more crude attempts of the chauvinistic members of their sex asking me out. My general malaise towards men had ingrained itself too deep, too tightly, for me to look past their gender. A few bad apples can ruin the mere appearance of a basket of apples.

Warren struck me as that untrustworthy type: like he only said what he thought I needed to hear in order to like him. I'm not going to fall for it though. He came into my gym with a complete lack of respect for me or my gender, and only changed his attitude when he marked me as his crush. I was most definitely not going to allow him to date me and then let those ugly misogynistic attitudes seep up later on.

Besides, he had tattoos, and a pierced ear. That kind of counter-culture style really irks me. Could you even call it counter-culture? Seems like most people these days are messing up their bodies for
the sake of self-expression. Why do that? So they could stand out? Be special and unique? You
know, when everyone's tatted and pierced and holed and drugged, the only unique ones left are the
squares like me who haven't done anything to their body. I'm satisfied with being plain and ordinary,
but it bothers me that fewer and fewer people my age want to be ordinary along with me. So
anyways, his whole style offends me.

An awful lot of things offend you, Jasmine.

I caught myself staring at the office computer screen. The desktop was nearly empty, containing only
a few programs and the Pokémon League logo in the background. One icon caught my eye. Skype.

There was one boy, currently, who I haven't rejected. Just the opposite. I've gone so far as to touch
my lips to his. In a moment of weakness, I've fantasized about sharing with him in the most intimate
and compromising of human acts. Well, multiple and increasingly frequent moments of weakness, I
must admit.

What made Morty different?

Why have I locked my heart up so tightly for six years, and in as many weeks, let it back open? Why
should I make myself vulnerable again? I don't want to have to feel those feelings ever again. What
in my mind and my heart and my soul makes me believe that THIS time, Morty, Morty of all people,
will come through?

Honestly, nothing. Not his words, or actions, or character, or anything that has happened to me
recently, or any epiphany or coming-to-terms with the universe, has convinced me that I can at last
trust this boy with my feelings.

Yet, I've done so anyways.

"Hope," I uttered aloud. I followed it with another word: "Shame."

I hope to be loved one day?

I'm ashamed of myself?

No, even these don't bite deep enough. Another word, another feeling, something that dwells so deep
that even the monster of six years ago has yet to scrape its bottom.

"Wanted…" I whispered.

It's quite useless. Those things are in the past. Experience is supposed to inform our decisions about
the future, not shackle them to a wall and torture them until they were bleeding stumps of
indecisiveness. The way I cried and locked myself away in the face of my second kiss was shameful.
Almost as shameful as my first. But the two aren't related.

Are they? Are they not?

When I ask, "What makes Morty different?", am I really not asking myself "What makes Morty
different from him?"

Morty is very different from him. But I can't decide if that's a good thing or a bad thing. It tears me
up, to try to compare them.

Yet, I know this: unlike him, Morty says he wants to make me happy. Unlike him, Morty cares about
me, and my feelings, and what I want. Unlike him, Morty wants a future with me.
I dialed Skype up.

Please be on.

The familiar swoosh and beat of the program coming online sounded out. In a moment I was logged on and browsing through the call options.

"Messages?" Two text messages lay waiting for me. I checked who they were from.

"Blah!" I stuck my tongue out, such was my surprise and distaste. For the sake of curiosity, and to ensure it wasn't something genuinely important, I opened the messages, starting with the oldest. The contents were nothing to be excited about, only annoyed by.

"Mother, no, I am not helping cater your stupid party. I am going to my own party. Delete. DELETE!"

I heaved a sigh.

"That woman."

This reaction was repeated all over again when I opened the second message, which was only different in the date that she wanted me to help her with. An important ball or reception or some crap was being held next month, and she REALLY wanted my help on it. I was tempted to oblige her on this one, if only to extort money from her.

I'll sit on it, I decided.

For now, Morty. His number was still on top of the recent-caller's list.

"Hullo?"

The screen was black. I tapped the thing, and remained silent while the two of us negotiated the technical difficulties.

"Jasmine, is that you? Jasmine, what're you doing? What happened last week? Why are you calling? Are you okay? Jasmine, are you okay?! Hey, why aren't you talking?!?"

I smiled privately, enjoying his consternation. Finally the video feed loaded. His gaze instantly fixated on me.

"Jasmine? What the…"

I wore an innocent grin for him. Forced, I suppose, but it's the 'me' I wanted him to see at the moment.

"So… why don't you start," he said.

"You're cute," I responded.

He made a funny face.

He's taken aback. He doesn't know what the hell I'm up to.

Truth be told, I'm only copying him. Figure out the other person's weakness, and say anything and do anything, truth be damned, logic be lost, to put them off-balance and ready to play right into the palm of your hand. These were classic Morty tactics for social engagement. It was nice seeing them
work in reverse.

"Jas-"

"You're really cute. I wonder if your cock is as cute? I've been trying to imagine it."

Mix some half-truths in there.

"Jasmine, are you on drugs?" he asked earnestly.

"Silly! Maybe… Is love a drug? Is lust a drug? Because I'm pretty high on both right now."

"Seriously. Caffeine? No, that wouldn't do it. Must be wine, that's all you drink. How much have you had? Are you going to be alright? Don't do anything rash."

"You're so cute-sounding when you're worried!" I meant that. He was cute when he was blushing and frowning at the same time. I liked the way his bangs flopped over one of his eyes, too. The façade really tickled my fancy.


"I had a really really really really really really really really hard battle, and it was with this shit-for-morals asshole too, and I think he likes me and I'm thinking of saying yes if he asks me out."

"Now you're not making any sense. Are you Jazz? Same girl I met in middle school? Is there a Hypno back there somewhere mind controlling you?"

"Why would there be, dumb dumb? It's just horny ol' me and my lonesome, and two hundred miles is just too far apart… I wanna jump you."

"Jasmine, just stay there. I'll call Erika to come and take care of you." He began to get up and made it offscreen before I called out.

"Sit down, Morty."

He obeyed.

"You are cute when you're being honest. I just wish I didn't have to act like I had smoked a marijuana joint to get you to that point."

"You were messing with me."

"I was."

"That, in itself, is really concerning. You're not the kind of girl to do that."

"I'm the kind of girl who embarks on psychological experiments though."

"So you called to test me," he said, sounding annoyed.

"No, not at all. That was bonus, the metaphorical cherry," I explained. "I called to ask whether you were going to Whitney's Halloween party."

"Yeah."
"As a vampire?"

"Sheesh, me, a vampire? Heck no, Ghost-Eraser."

Well that should've been obvious. I rested my head on the table, still staring into the screen and thence into his eyes. We remained silent and conversation-less for a minute.

"Is that all you wanted?" he ventured.

"Yeah," I said meekly.

"Are you going?"

"Erika bought tickets for me."

"So that's a yes."

"Yeah."

He relaxed a little bit hearing my answer.

"Then, I guess I'll see you there."

And that should've been that. Except, I wasn't about to hang up, and he wasn't going to end the video chat before I did, so we both sort of sat and stared some more. Growing bored, he went to work on something else on his desktop. His eyes darted to and fro, and occasionally he typed something into the keyboard. His expression never changed from a dull focus.

"Morty," I said.

"Hmm."

"You aren't asking about it."

"About what?"

"What happened at the lighthouse."

"…"

We continued our annoying habit of being unable to answer each other with complete and consecutive sentences. But at last he replied.

"It felt wrong to press you."

"Does that mean you don't care about me?"

"No. I just don't know how to care about you, the way you'd like to be cared about."

"Mmm." That's a really considerate thing of him to say.

"So what should I do?"

"Forget it," I said.

"What's the matter? Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it. Anything."
"No, that's what you should do. Forget it ever happened. Pretend it never happened. Erase it from your memory."

He seems disappointed. I've basically told him I'm rejecting our first and only kiss. Of course he's sad. This might sound a lot like a break up- Which made this final exchange so important.

"Morty."

"What now?"

"If you forget about it… well… um…"

I inhaled. Here goes nothing.

"I wouldn't mind another… first kiss."

And that finally brought joy to his face, and my own.

Our broken, bored conversation lasted another hour, in which absolutely nothing new, consequential, or interesting was exchanged. He finally gave in and ended the call, reluctantly.

I found myself at the lobby door, looking out. The rain was as steady as a shower faucet. The skies were a dull grey and growing darker. Steelix didn't like the rain and Magnezone was tired from battle, so I was faced with the prospect of walking home through the puddles. My sandal-clad feet were already looking forward to getting soaked.

Should I be happy? Should I be sad?

How am I supposed to forget it all and move forward? That seems impossible. But if I wanted to follow that dream called "Hope", I had to do the impossible.

A gust of wind blew in, bringing a spray of cold, cold water into my face.

Come to think of it, my depression was never like this weather. It was more like a… a… hurricane. Less sad. More perturbed, more unsettled. And it had a deep, dark hole in the center that I didn't want to think about.

It's dark now. I let out Amphy. "Come on, let's get you to the lighthouse."

"Amph."

He lit up a soft Flash. With one hand I grabbed his paw, and with the other I hefted my purse and the umbrella. We set out into the gloomy weather.

Autumn is supposed to be my favorite season. I feel like it's going to be a long one.
Here's a picture I drew to show Jasmine's costume. Pardon the poor quality, I am a writer after all, not an artist. The cosplay comes from the Pokemon universe's equivalent for a Sailor Moon anime.

I stood before Erika's door, an oversized coat wrapped tight around me. I was shivering. Perhaps the steady gust and intermittent drizzle was the cause. Or perhaps I was dreading the inevitable shame that would accompany my current apparel. Erika was a woman, and yet, that didn't make this any easier. In fact, I was more nervous showing this getup to her than to any of the men at the party. All the courage and enthusiasm I was about to display is purely theatrical and completely fake on my part.

I lifted my finger, and, digit shaking, pressed the button.

The doorbell's dinging had hardly ceased when the door was yanked violently open. Erika stood there, giving me the creepiest Erika face I'd ever seen. Was that drool? No, just my imagination, but I wouldn't be shocked, with her mouth sloughed open like it was. Her eyes were wide open, her hands were held high, ready to pounce.

"Let me see! Let me see! Are you a succubus?! A witch! An Ampharos gijinka? What about a zombie? Show me!"

I shook my head.

"You're so gross."
"Ahahahaha!"

"Don't tell me you've been drinking again."

"Only a little thimble. I'm quite excited, is all. To see you stepping out of your comfort zone and do something like cosplay, it's been something I've always wanted to see. Please be a dear and take off that coat already!"

I sighed over my shoulder. The coat came off, and I flourished and twirled for her viewing pleasure.

"Nope, no comfort-zone abandonment here! Only Lass Jasmine! Tada!"

"Ah!"

Erika halted, as if turned to stone.

I know, it's not what you're expecting, Erika. But aren't you shocked to see me in my old high school uniform? It's been three years since I wore it!

"Aren't I pretty?"

"Pretty boring," she said, deadpan.

"ACK!"

The metaphorical sword split my head in twain. So cruel, Erika, so cruel!

"How do you still fit in that thing?" she asked, taking on a concerned and disapproving look. Her reproachful assessment led her to circle me, inspecting every angle and coordinate of my being. "How is that a costume? That's so very unflattering."

"No, look! You see, with this gold armband, I look a lot like Magical Girl Aki Kinyobi-san!"

"Who?"

"You know, from Magical Girl Shyuu-chan."

"That's a very old anime, I don't remember it."

"You don't even watch anime."

"I did when I was a child. I still don't remember whoever you're trying to pass yourself off as."

"Kin-san!" I declared, proudly and defiantly. "She was my favorite anime character. All the boys wanted her but she never let down her guard! And she had kind of occult-based magic too, so it fits the Halloween theme."

"Oh, I'm starting to remember. Wasn't she the one who had a tsundere crush on the male lead? Not that I saw the ending, but I got the impression she lost him to the protagonist."

"Aww, don't remind me!" I huffed, indignant.

Yes, in my youthful naiveté, I thought the best girl would inevitably capture the heart of the cool and aloof Prince of the Sun, Nichi-kun. My idea of who the "best girl" was differed from the general population's, however, and the creators betrayed me. I guess I stopped following anime after that as well.
"I'm sorry. Still, while I'm delighted that you thought of a character to cosplay as, it's quite simply… underwhelming." She circled me one more time, and then ushered me deeper into the house. Into the bedroom, to be exact.

Unlike the rest of her serene estate, this area was a mess. The fact that various bits of fashion, costumes, accessories, decorations, arts and crafts, ceremonial implements, and all manner of other miscellanea was piled waist high into every corner did not soften the impression. One could probably create a world-encompassing trivia show out of the catalogue of items present here.

"Hmm, hmm, ah!" Within seconds she had booted up her tablet and began googling Magical Girl Kinyobi. The cartoonish image of a bright and forceful blonde greeted her back in different clusters of images.

"Hmm, hmmmmmmm. Right."

My grand entrance had been a source of genuine pride for me. I thought I was being devilishly clever, spending next-to-no effort to mimic my favorite fictional character. You couldn't even call it a costume, just a lucky excuse of a cosplay that took zero time or monetary investment to procure. The fact that my efficiency and practicality annoyed Erika was making the situation even more fun. It's not often I get to turn the tables like this.

Unfortunately, Erika was one step ahead of me, and knew exactly how to subvert my intentions. Her eyes skittered between me and the internet images.

"You're nothing more than Aki's high school uniform! Jasmine! You ought to at least dress up in her magical girl outfit!"

"But that would take too long!"

"Nonsense! It's quite similar to her school uniform, you just need the accessories."

"But…."

"No buts! Take that off! I'll modify it really quickly."

And like a busy Butterfree, she set off about her room collecting tools and supplies. I sat upon the bed, glowering. It was the work of ten minutes of expertly-trained sewing to add the additional touches needed. The job finished, my former uniform was thrown at me. For want of something to cover my bare skin, I was obliged to put it on.

"You ruined my uniform. It looks terrible," I complained.

"Well then, you should have made the outfit for yourself, properly, instead of forcing me into a rush job," Erika scolded me.

"I didn't force you into a rush job," I threw back.

"We can quibble over intent and obligation, but that would serve no purpose."

"You ruined it," I repeated, this time with an underlining moaning tone. My hands gripped the desecrated article of clothing.

"You were never going to wear it otherwise. Here, you're not complete."

She tossed an accessory out of her closet.
"A tiara?"

"It's not exact, but it'll have to do. Hmm, where's the wire? She wears it like a Shedinja's halo, how am I supposed to replicate that?"

"Just don't worry about it!"

"Ah!"

A thin wire coat-hanger was chucked out.

"Fashion that into a headset and use it to lift the tiara off your head. It'll look like a halo."

"Grr."

She continued sorting through her junk heap while I obeyed. By the time I had the circlet firmly in place atop my head, looking fake and silly, another article of clothing was thrown into my face.

"Wear these."

"No! These are lewd!"

"You've no choice, your character is wearing them."

Grouching the whole way through, I tugged the thigh-high stockings on one after another. I barely had them straightened out, when yet another pair of objects were tossed into my lap.

"And these!"

"No! They're even lewder!"

"Ehem."

With much mumbling, consternation, and negativity, I donned the white, opera-length gloves. They were razor-thin, so it wasn't much of a loss in terms of tactile operation, but it still bothered me. I wiggled my fabric-covered fingers, and then my toes.

"There!"

Erika took a glance over.

"I feel like a slut," I moaned.

"You mean you feel sexy. Learn to think positively and use your allure to your advantage!"

"That's something Mother would say."

Erika eyed me. Her gaze lingered in its direct stare into my eyes, and then wandered slightly, to the side of my face.

"You're still missing something. Earrings." She ran off to the bathroom before I could stop her. She returned with pearl-studded gold earrings in hand. She reached up and began poking them into me.

"OWWW!!! OWWWWW!!!!! Cut it out!"

"Just… one… sec… what the??!!"
After the last spike of pain I slapped her away.

"Where's your piercings?" Erika asked me, bewildered.

"We've been friends how many years now?" I shouted. "Six? Did you once, ever, EVER, notice me wearing earrings?"

"Oh don't be silly, every girl has…. no, it couldn't be," she uttered, eyes growing wide.

"I never got my ears pierced," I told her.

"Of all the… Jasmine, I knew you were conservative, but that is outright prudery. I can fix this."

"No!"

Despite hearing this objection, she pounced off to gather supplies. She returned, a needle, a lighter, and sanitization balm in hand.

"Erika!"

"Sit still!"

She began manhandling me into position.

"ERIKA LISTEN!"

I had to scream to get her to pause.

"I do not want my ears, or anything else, pierced! I like myself and my body just the way I am! Don't you dare stick that needle near me, or so help me I will go straight back home and ditch this dumb, debauched party! Do you not you care about what I want at all?!"

Erika had continued to wrestle to gain access to my ear lobe, until I shouted that final sentence into her face. She halted and gave me that look: the one with the softened, understanding, forgiving eyes, and weak smile. The needle was laid down. She sat herself on the bedside, and turned towards me.

"I understand. I'm sorry," she said.

My heaving chest relaxed by a fraction.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I suppose I just go headlong into what I believe is good for you. I wasn't taking into consideration what you wanted."

"It's not that. I can be a baby who needs pressuring sometimes. But, really, this is why I ask people to be more serious around me. Then they- you- would know when it's something I'm just complaining about, and when it's something I actually care about."

"I see."

"Just… listen! That's all I ask. No one respects me."

"Was I acting too much like your mother there?" Erika asked tentatively, apologetically.

"No. Not really. Kind of. It depends."

Mother never wore jewelry herself, or much make-up. I guess I never got into that stuff because I
lacked her example to go by. She never pressed me into it either. In fact, she never really pressed me into anything, except for a very select few things:

Stay out of trouble.

Get good grades.

Beware men.

That was it. That was the sum of every life lesson she had taught me. Everything else had been an unending deluge of "No!'s".

"She never cared so much about this stuff," I half-explained to Erika. "You're much more of a 'mommy' than she ever was."

Erika, being my closest confidant, knew of my difficult home life. She understands I don't get along with my mother. However, I don't know how fully Erika comprehends the situation, since she only has bits and pieces, snippets of stories I've told her over the years.

"Mmm. Well, I'd prefer not to be your parent," Erika said. "Especially since I'm only two years older than you, it would make me feel old." She nodded to herself. "The earrings aren't necessary at all. You look quite adorable as is."

She motioned for me to stand up and look at myself in a full-length mirror.

I twisted and turned, studying what had to be the sluttiest display of fetish-wear I had ever graced the world with: A borderline-loli female in white thigh-high stockings and olivine-yellow pleated skirt, showing off a perfect three inches of zettai ryouoiki. A white sailor-scout school uniform with the sleeves tucked and sewn inward, so that my shoulders were bared for the world to see. White satin gloves that reached well beyond my elbows. A short scarf, matching my skirt in color, with crimson edges, pinned by a large ruby gem. And the ridiculous tiara, held awkwardly two inches above my head by an obvious and ugly-looking crooked metal wire.

I don't look anything like Kinyobi-san. Whitney's going to make a mockery of me. The men are going to devour me whole. I hope the others have equally ridiculous costumes, I don't want to be the only object of humiliation walking around. Well, Morty at least should look silly in a Ghost Eraser uniform. I want to see what he does for those gadget-goggles the male protagonist wears for the finale.

"You are beautiful," Erika said, standing beside me.

"I wouldn't use that word," I said.

"What word would you use?"

"Jail-bait."

"Oh. Hahahaha. Ahhhh… ."n

"What about your costume? You haven't even gotten dressed."

"It's a complex piece of fashion. I had so much free time, so I put my all into getting it perfect. I'll have to put it on on the way- another reason I desired our own cabin for the boat. But first…"

Her hands reached up and began tracing lines around my cheek, while still staring at my reflection in
"Can I at least put some lipstick on you?" she asked.

"No."

"Oh. You are hopeless. What about blush?"

"Blush? Something light would be okay."

"Finally."

We left her home and arrived at the dock with barely three minutes to spare. The city buildings, and then the hills, and lastly the lighthouse, sank below the curve of the Earth. Off to Goldenrod we go.

Goldenrod

It was mortifying to make my entrance into the party. My skimpy figure was practically designed to draw attention from the opposite sex. And draw it did: all 100+ males in attendance craned their necks to take a glimpse at me. More than half let their glimpse turn into drooling stares.

"Erika! You told me Whitney was throwing a party. You didn't tell me she was renting out the west wing of the Goldenrod Convention Center!"

Erika smiled innocently. "Oops?"

She was dressed as a fantastical fairy, incorporating elements of various Grass and Bug Pokémon, some I recognized, some I didn't. Her wings were like a Beautifly's: delicate, swirled, and glimmering. She had done something special to their support, since they seemed to furl and unfurl, as if alive, as she moved about. Her robe was patterned after some Pokémon I had never heard of, something called a Lilligant. Of course, her head was crowned by two tang-shaded blossoms, exactly like her Bellossom. The entire regalia was both ethereal and majestic. Yet, despite its lilting, fragile appearance, it wasn't easily damaged nor did it impede Erika's movement whatsoever. After a quick glance around the hall, it was apparent that she could place at least bronze, more likely gold, in any costume contest.

"All the boys are looking at you," she said to me, teasing.

"All the girls are looking at you, though."

"Oh, I'm so embarrassed! Whatever will I do if they flirt with me?!" she said in a playfully mocking tone.

"Don't tease me. It's because they're jealous. You're a beauty queen. Meanwhile, I'm a walking porn-star."

"You're not a porn star. You're just an attractive lady in a suggestive outfit, which so happens to come from an anime that most of these young adult males grew up watching. Honest, honest, Jasmine, do you not enjoy the attention?"

"I think the only kind of attention I enjoy is when people fear me," I said.
"Tsk tsk. Relax a little and enjoy yourself! There'll be drinks somewhere, you should help yourself to a margarita."

I tried taking her advice and relaxing, but couldn't. By the time we reached the opposite side of the hall the number of male gazers had only dwindled to a couple dozen. Ghouls, goblins, zombies, bandits, shonen heroes, abominations, super-villains, and other fanciful characters pivoted their gaze as I swept by. It felt humiliating, and I was silently uttering the refrain "creep" "creep" "creep" "creep!" "CREEP!" to each interloper. What if one of them decided to approach me and start flirting? How was I supposed to act modest and turn them down while wearing this?!

My gloved hands reached down to the hem of my thigh-highs, gripping and tugging them. Annoyingly, the stockings weren't even well-fitted and kept sliding off. Was it worse to show more skin, or to keep up the charade of covering it up? I read somewhere that it was the ratio of covered-skin to revealed-skin that created enticement. Just give the mind a little tease, and let imagination do the rest, or so the article said. The act of imagining was stimulating by itself, and the mind often creates a more perfect image than what actually exists underneath the clothing. The magic ratio was something like 85%.

"Hey! That's cute, but stop trying to hide behind me," Erika told me.

I had subconsciously fallen behind my friend and was using her as shield against the gawking males. It was working, too, if only because the more confident and curvier figure of Erika diverted their focus.

"Why did I let you convince me to come here?" I said. I hate parties! Too many boys, too many people in general! "And dressed like this?!"

"Why indeed? I think you secretly wanted to open up and let loose!"

"No way," I said, forming an X with my two forefingers.

It felt like an eternity, but we made it to the serving table. Erika poured a tiny glass of magenta liquid, stirred in some crushed ice, and handed this to me. She repeated the process for herself, except she made her portion five times larger.

"Alright, now, sip!" she commanded. I stared down into quivering vile of poison, thinking, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how much am I going to regret this?" My guess was a 4.5, which fell below the threshold of absolute refusal (a 5). It really was a tiny bit, a single shot-glass full, so I gulped it down in one go.

The alcohol hit my stomach like a malicious dodge ball.

"Very well. Now, just let the drink do its thing and you'll be fine! Go forth, and have fun! And do not come looking for me, you should learn to socialize with strangers. Remember, everyone's wearing a mask, figuratively if not literally, so just pretend to be Kin-san if you get too nervous."

I clutched my stomach and leaned forward a bit.

"I don't feel so good… parties, alcohol, and me don't mix well…” I muttered. "They don't mix well for you either, but for entirely different- hey! Where'd you go?!"

I twirled around, but Erika had already dropped out of sight.

Great, I'm alone, intoxicated, and that werewolf was acting a lot like a real werewolf towards me. Feeling much too exposed, I wandered off to find a hiding place.
The West Hall was fully decorated for the occasion. Either Whitney was secretly ultra-rich, or she had a benefactor backing her up- probably the City of Goldenrod. Orange, yellow, and black streamers draped across each support beam, stringing together paper puppets of various spooky Pokémon: Shuppets, Ghastly, Sableye, something that resembled a night lamp, another that resembled a pumpkin with a creepy face cut into it. Cobwebs were clustered into the corner, fanning out till they lapped upon several tables. Each table was decorated with the same kind of Scary Face pumpkin Pokémon- although, these looked less like pumpkin Pokémon and more like… real pumpkins? There were little candles stuck inside each one, lighting them up and making their grimacing facades even more ominous. A note laid out on the table called them "Jack-o-Lanterns", and said that the city school kids had cut them out. It was an Unovan Halloween tradition to carve effigies of the 'Pumpkaboo' Pokémon species, even though the Pokémon itself was native to the Old Continent and not Unova.

I was picking my way around the tables, admiring each one of these horrifying vegetables, when Morty's distinctive voice sounded out from within the cobweb mess.

"We as a society are becoming terribly afraid of death. Our mad attempts at prolonging life as long as possible, creating overly peaceful and docile conditions for our society, pouring trillions into disease and natural disaster prevention, negotiating with terrorists rather than starting wars with them, even banishing capital punishment, has left us terribly insulated from the horror of death."

"You make it sound like these aren't good things," some conscientious contrarian interrupted.

"I'm not arguing whether they are good or bad policies. I'm merely proposing a theorem. We're all absolutely doomed to die, someday, somehow. It's not a crime to try to prolong that day or make it less painful, but in the process we've sanitized the subject and tried to hide it away. When forced to confront it, the shock is multiplied by our artificially-increased sensitivity to it. We don't act rationally, our response isn't emotionally or spiritually stable. Trying to do away with the concept of Death only creates a situation of untenable duplicity, akin to society-wide PTSD."

"That's bullshit," the contrarian broke in again. "What would you know about death, Morty?"

"A little more than you might think. I am the Ghost-specialist, after all."

I tip-toed about the perimeter, until I found an opening in the cobweb. Inside was a small, intimate hollow decorated like a witch's cave. A triangle of couches surrounded a waist-high brewing pot, upon which lay an oversized Ouija board. Morty and about eight other people lounged upon the furniture, deep in discussion. He himself was dressed in the iconic, scampy, mod-tech uniform of Ghost Eraser II. My jealousy sky-rocketed when I saw that even the complex gadget-goggles were impeccably replicated and now served to replace his usual headband.

Morty!

After what happened the last time we were together, I was certain our next meeting would be awkward, to say the least. Instead, given the trending of my thoughts over the past two weeks, the sight of him incited a very different and peculiar frame of mind. All thoughts of embarrassment vanished, replaced by consternation and anticipation.

Jasmine, it's not a matter of whether you want him, it's only whether you'll allow your fears to get in the way of what you want.

I hate men. I hate being the subject of lust and perversion. I hate exposing myself.

But these hatreds absolutely pale in comparison to my hatred of being weak, alone, and afraid.
I steeled my nerves, and formed a plan.

"I'm surprised, Morty. You never struck me as the philosophical type," I called out.

"Hi Jasmine. Come take a seat." He scooted over, but never so much as looked at me. I flaunted my way through the den and alighted in the proffered spot. He began lecturing the group for several more seconds, paying no mind to the interruption, when he stopped mid-sentence. The group stared, expecting him to continue his extrapolation on humanity's struggle to cope with mortality, but his thought processes had ceased.

He must have finally noticed me in his peripheral vision, because his head craned backwards and sideways, trying to take in, and comprehend, the cosplay-garbed vixen resting herself beside him.

"You're Jasmine?"
"Undoubtedly."
"Jasmine was never so sexy as you. I must be mistaking you for someone else. Pleased to make your oh-so-seductive acquaintance. My name is Yusuke, the Ghost Eraser. You are…?"
"Aki Kinyobi-san, Princess of the Horizon. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Morty glanced me over once, inhaled, resumed his dignified posture, and launched anew into the mysteries of the human psyche. Ha! As if I was going to be ignored just like that!

The alcohol must be taking effect.

It's the only reasonable explanation for what follows. Or rather, it's the only explanation that wouldn't completely humiliate my usual modest, sober self.

Because, it's just completely against my character to be reaching under the impromptu table and trace my fingertips over Morty's calf. His speech did not miss a beat, making me wonder if he could even feel my touch.

My hand lay flat on his thigh, and then began rubbing it up and down its length. No response. Was the glove taking away too much of the tactile sensitivity? It felt very thin wearing it, but I couldn't be sure. Morty's pants were fairly thick and baggy, so that might explain it. Or… Morty did feel my touch, and was just a Pokestar-class actor in hiding it.

I sighed, and withdrew my hand.

"I think what you're getting at is the question of whether society fundamentally needs to accept the impossibility of a totally civilized polity."

"Exactly! Civilization's ultimate goal is to create maximum comfort for minimal effort. A machine for hedonism, with the end game of immortality in mind. Yet, as far as we know, and as is the current reality, immortality is impossible. Therefore, civilization's endgame is impossible, and trying to force it towards that goal is like trying to drive a Rapidash over a cliff." Morty paused to let that sink in.

I resumed tickling his thigh, hidden beneath the table, while everyone else was engrossed in trying to disprove Morty's theory of social futility. Either he didn't feel a thing, or pretended not to. His demeanor was completely unfazed and concentrated solely on his current rhetorical opponent. That is, until he reached a point-

"Religion might have been the answer once, but the very notion of a scientific universe is uprooting
the absolutes of a divine and leaving nothing in its pla- eh?"

-and suddenly stopped, when he realized the backside of someone's hand was now gliding over the bulge of his crotch.

Finally, got a reaction out of him.

"Um- forgive me, but I think someone wants a word with me," he said. He got up and left.

The group stared after him, then at me. When I shrugged my shoulders and slouched down, their suspicion withdrew and the debate continued. I listened intently, willing myself to try to comprehend vocabulary and logic way beyond my intellect. After a sufficiently long interval, I acted like I was lost, had ultimately lost interest, and bowed out.

Where'd he go? I asked myself first. When I couldn't spot him, I proceeded to the next question.

What was that?!

Like I said, that was the alcohol.

Or maybe, it was me. Or Morty. Or me being influenced by Morty.

Settle yourself!

The truth of the matter was, that was me making a flirtatious play on Morty, for reasons I'm still trying to grapple with. It seemed like such a natural progression, considering that we had already shared a kiss, I had fantasized much dirtier acts with him in mind, and that he was known to engage in and invite much dirtier acts himself. The only thing preventing the two of us from jumping on each other, I thought, was my own reticence and conscientiousness.

My private parts winced.

Yes, yes, I know what my body wants.

And I know exactly what is going on here.

I'm getting horny.

Don't let it control you! Remember that mere minutes ago you were nearly panicking about how much of a slut you resembled. Now you're actually doing slutty things! Shame on you, Jasmine! Shame!

Yet, Morty just makes me feel different. His presence gives me the courage to try things I would otherwise die from due to blushing-induced internal bleeding. He gets away with so much… I've seen him dry-hump a woman in the middle of a dance floor, the absolute center of attention of the crowd, and he was applauded for it! I wish I could as easily express these things inside of me with the same boldness, the same lack of consequence as he does. It's as if when I act out beside him, anything I could bring myself to do will be overshadowed by whatever outrageously sexual response he has, and thus my own trespasses are ignored, and thus my shame isn't such a big deal.

After searching frenetically for five minutes, I settled down out in the open, hoping to spot Morty, or at least some familiar face. I was wondering if I had somehow chased him away, when he reappeared… coming out of the men's restroom.

In short order he spotted me and marched over. He grabbed my shoulder with one hand and leaned
in very close, so that he could whisper in my ear. He had an angry look in his eyes.

"The next time you want to play with my Johnny, wait until I'm not actively engaging the Goldenrod University Debate Team."

"I didn't force you off."

"You did," he responded in a harsh mutter.

"What a baby," I said into his ear. "You never respected me or my limits, and from all our time together you've never demonstrated limits of your own. So why are you so ashamed of getting a hand-job now? Is the Goldenrod University Debate Team the one group of folks you respect enough to want to avoid their critical judgment? Or..." and I paused, and glanced at the hand on my shoulder. It was shaking slightly. I could see a slight sweat on Morty's brow. "You rubbed one out, didn't you?" I accused.

"Do not underestimate the compulsion of an erect Johnny," he said angrily.

"Disgusting," I replied.

In truth, I wanted to break down and roll all over the floor, laughing my butt off in the process. Of course, I won't, because that would be the end of our little game, and the first to break tsundere mode forfeits. I was now one up after that last round; wouldn't want to spoil my lead.

"Unfair," was his next accusation, as if reading my thoughts.

"All's fair," I replied.

"You can't reroll your class like that. You're supposed to be the stubborn shrew," he said, his voice softening a tiny bit.

"I leveled up and got new loot. Halo of Courage," I said, pointing to my ill-supported tiara. "Drape of Seduction," and I flipped my scarf in his face. "Trappings of Temptation," and showed off my fabric-sheathed hands and legs. "Raiment of the Succubus," I finished, twirling in a pirouette, skirt flaring out. Some lucky person might have caught a glimpse of my panties. Not that I didn't mind, but it seemed a worthwhile risk in exchange for the slack-jawed face Morty was making.

Still, even as I lost balance and began falling, Morty caught me with an arm around my waist.

"Princess Kin-san was always too rash. She needed someone steady and cool-headed to back her up," he said.

"Like the Prince of the Sun... but she lost him to Shyuu-chan," I replied, regaining my feet.

"You complained a lot about that ending, back in the day."

"I was mildly upset," I admitted.

"You wouldn't have been, if you had bothered finishing the anime."

"What? There were two more episodes, I seriously doubt the creators suddenly changed their minds about the pairings. My dream ship is sunk."

"Ah, poor girl. Aki-chan found a new love on the last episode."

"Really? Who?"
"Prince of the Silver Halo, Naota-kun, of course."

"Naota?! But he was such a cold bastard! No one liked him!"

"And that was why he and Aki were so perfect together. He tempered her impulsivity, and she brought out his warm interior."

"Are you saying you're my Naota, out to woo me?" I accused.

"Well, you're not entirely like Aki, so I'd say it's unfair to compare me to Naota."

"I don't know. I'll have to go back and watch it again."

"You can, but don't worry about it too much. It's bad to try to shoe-horn ourselves into simple anime characters."

"Yeah, you're right."

I was infinitely more rational than Kin-san was, and she could come off as bi-polar sometimes. Cool and calm one moment, excited and rushing headlong into danger the next. I wouldn't want to be compared too closely to her either.

"So, you're obviously looking very pretty, and if I may say… sexy?" he ventured.

"You may say that, as long as no one else hears it," I told him.

"Heh." A smile broke out on his face. "And what do you think about me?"

I looked over his outfit, checking to make sure my first impression was correct. The gadget-goggles were outfitted with a short antennae and silver trimmings. The one-piece flight-suit, abyssal blue in color, was baggy and ill-fitted exactly like the movie. A belt containing a row of actual Geist Balls hung loosely around his waist. Oversized yellow boots made it impossible to miss his heavy footsteps. Lastly, a stylized Haunter logo, complete with erasure symbol overlaying it, adorned his back. The only thing he was missing was a Slaking. I nodded.

"Impeccably accurate- and by that I mean impeccably dorky. Really, Ghost Eraser? Way too cliché for you."

"Oh grief." He shook his head. "I didn't pick this costume because I'm a Ghost-type specialist. I'm a Ghost-type specialist because I was a huge fan of Ghost Eraser."

"Makes sense," I said. "I remember you spouting off every quote in all three movies in between classes."

"Haha. Fun times."

Oh god, it was never ending.

We both fell silent at the same time. I bowed my head, presenting him with an oversized forehead and gimmicky halo. My hands began twiddling in place.

"So, what do you want to do?" I asked.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. What do you want to do?"
"Aw, now don't start this. We can't both keep asking each other what the other wants to do. That's rude."

"Well I did ask first," I said.

"I want to catch a bite to eat," he said.

"Is that all?"

"Hmm?"

I raised my head and looked him in the eye.

"You don't want to… you know." I stood on my tippy-toes to reach up to him, closing the gap between us to a mere inch.

"I wouldn't mind," I said softly. "Even in front of everyone."

"Forward, aren't we?" he said mockingly. Yet, his tone was only so accusatory; at the end there was a pitch towards the serious and honest side of the spectrum.

"Nnn."

"Which one would this be for you? Number three? Five?" he chided.

"Let's just call it my first, okay?" I said. "Just be a pervert and kiss me already."

He leaned in, and we were about to touch lips, when he very suddenly drew back.

"Sempai!" he cried out.

"Wah?"

The hell, Morty?! We were about to kiss, damn it! Why'd you go and ruin it! Damn it!

"Sempai!" he practically shrieked.

"I'm not your sempai, you idiot!" I screamed.

My blood is boiling, but Morty wasn't facing me anymore, he was staring over my shoulder. As soon I registered the fact that I was no longer the center of attention, immense jealousy flared into every fiber of my being.

"Who the…"

Morty rushed past me, knocking me in the shoulder and turning me around in the process.

A man, a little older looking than us, surrounded by a crowd of girls in scantier costumes than even I was wearing, stood regal as could be. I couldn't tell if his garb was a costume or cosplay, or just something he wore every day. A long, flowing cloak wrapped around his shoulders, over which fell a dark grey mane of hair. His most distinctive facial feature was his sharp nose and severe eyes, like a Fearow's. The rest of his figure was hidden by his throngs of followers and the same crimson cloak.

"Sempaiiiii!" Morty cried. "It's been ages! Ages! Where have you-"
The man peeked over to the origin of the shrill, girl-like cry, and found a googly-eyed Morty. His countenance heretofore had been serene and cordial, graciously acknowledging and entertaining the gaggle of young women.

That changed the instant he spotted Morty.

I swear, the room went dark. A dark aura the likes of which you'd expect from a mystical martial-arts movie villain emanated from his figure. His eyes turned **white**.

I kid you not, optical illusion or merely power of impression, but his eyes turned white, and **glowed**.

"**MORTY!!!**"

As if pushed away by a wave of chi energy, all the crowd members between Morty and this monster shrank away. All the lights in the room seemed to dim. Morty himself came to a complete standstill, frozen with fear.

The monster marched, slowly, surely, up to Morty, and upon reaching the hapless victim, yanked him by the collar till he was hanging in the air. Their faces were close enough to kiss, but I seriously doubt any intimate homosexual moments were going to pass between them. Unless, you know, there was such a thing as homoerotic face-melting.

"**WHO IN HIGH HEAVENS ALLOWED YOU TO USE MY DARKRAI IN A POKÉMON TOURNAMENT?!!!!**"

"Sempai, you're so mean! Please forgive me! Calm down, please! Oh dear Giratina, please help me, he's gonna kill me!" Morty begged, crying.

"Ask it yourself!" And to my and many other trainers' slack-jawed disbelief, the man unleashed a full-fledged, ceiling-scraping, nether-twisted Giratina into the room. The monstrous Pokémon bore down on the pair and roared into Morty's face.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit, I forgot, you actually caught one. Shit. Shit. SHIT!"

Morty fell apart in a psychologically incapacitated mess, babbling something about Game Freak, Pokegen, and Missingno.

After much gaping and squinting and memory-churning, I decided that I might recognize the daunting fellow who was now verbally murdering Morty to death. I couldn't place a name, but I knew he was quite famous. Naturally, being the owner of a Giratina would make him famous regardless, but I remember seeing his face all over the news some time ago. For what, and his name, I can't remember… think… think!

"Hiya! Oh, Tobias is here. Cool beans."

Whitney appeared by my side. She was dressed as a professional baseball pitcher. She waved to the man, who took a moment to drop his freakishly villainous façade to say hi.

"Hello, Whitney, it's nice to see you again. I would love to chat, but I'm in the middle of a torture session, so please bear with me and I'll be with you shortly."

Then he resumed his glowing-eyes demon impression and continued throwing threats into Morty's face while shaking him like a ragdoll.

"I should stop him before he hurts Morty," Whitney said. I touched her by the elbow.
"I could bear to watch for a little longer," I told her.

"Hehehe. I'm sure. How've you been? What's with that getup? Are you from some anime? You look like a princess. Cute."

"It's a character from Magical Girl Shyuu-chan."

"From what?" Whitney asked, puzzled.

"An anime."

"What kind of anime? Who is Shyuu-chan?"

Whitney never watched anime as a child. She was way more into the live-action shows, or sports, or movies, or anything else really. It was useless to try to convey exactly who I was.

"I'm a princess," I said succinctly, which wasn't technically inaccurate. More importantly-

"Who is he? Why does he have a legendary Pokémon?"

"Don't you recognize him?" Whitney asked, starting to sound exasperated with my ignorant responses and inquiries.

"Kind of…" I scowled.

"Tobias Takuto Wolfram."

"Umm…"

Things began clicking into place.

"You know, former world champion," Whitney said to jog my memory.

…

"Wait wait wait wait wait wait. That Tobias?! The 2008 tournament winner?! The guy who swept through the Lily of the Valley Conference with only a single KO to his team? Legendary legend-catcher Tobias! Him?!?!"

Oh dear Arceus, how could I make such a stupid mistake! This was one of the greatest trainers in modern history! What was he doing here? How does he know Morty? What's going on?!?!

"Argh! Nothing makes sense!"

"Of course not, you baby-tantrumed your parents into moving back to Olivine before high school. You'd know everything if you had stayed put."

"That's not fair," I spat at her. "It's not like you were ripped from your childhood hometown. Just tell me the deal!"

"Nah, it's funnier if you find out on your own," Whitney said, waving me off. My blood veins were practically popping out of my forehead. I jumped up to try to grab Whitney in a head lock, but she dodged out of the way.

"Fowl ball!" she cried, and teetered away.
"Jasssssmiiiiiine….. help…. meeeeeeee."

Morty moaned aloud, hands clawing at thin air.

"Who do you think is coming to save you? Your girlfriend? Fa! As if I were afraid of someone like that! Now explain to me your irrational abuse of power via my Pokémon!"

I tepidly strode up to the pair. Shaking my head, I banished the mystical flare eminating from Tobias. He was still imposing, and still very angry, but his eyes no longer appeared to be glowing. Power of impression, indeed.

However, his Giratina was still very real, very large, and the crushing aura eminating from it was not a trick of the mind. I purposefully approached so as to put Tobias between me and the legendary beast.

"Um… hi. I'm Jasmine. I know he generally deserves it, but could you please not kill Morty today? I would like to kiss him again before he's reduced to cinders."

"So you're the girlfriend. Different, very different from what I expected." He stared from me to Morty and back again. "Very well." He sighed, shook his head, made a pleading glance to the heavens, and then dropped Morty to the ground.

"Sempai, don't judge me!"

"I should have known. You stick around, I'll deal with you properly later. In the meantime, I have to give a good scolding to him."

Tobias' wrath settled into a calm fury as he stormed off. His followers clung to him like a hurricane's storm-surge, washing away any resistance. I don't think I've ever met someone with so much presence. Sheesh.

I dropped to my knees and began nursing Morty back into a semi-sensible state of mind.

"Oh Morty, Morty, Morty. That's a world champion who just clobbered you. Do you know everyone on the planet? And why are you calling him sempai? Is he your senior in something?"

"High school," Morty gurgled out. The boy struggled into a sitting position.

"We were the Phantom Five. Got into a lot trouble together, and had a lot of fun too. He was our leader. I was only a freshie when I joined, and he was a senior. We got to be kind of infamous around the city. Did I ever tell you about the graffiti wars? No? Maybe someday I'll tell you. A water tower was involved, it was magnificent." He interjected a sigh. "I miss those guys a lot. Only one year with them, but damn, it was a great one." He shook his head.

I used Morty's head to rest my crossed arms upon, and then laid my own head down on top of them. Tobias, now stalking about the upper balcony, had returned Giratina into its pokeball and pulled out a familiar Darkrai.

"Explain that Pokémon," I demanded.

"Long story," Morty muttered.

"Abbreviate it."

"Tobias lent me and Eusine Darkrai in order to track down a Suicune. I wasn't supposed to take
Darkrai to the Gym Leader Summit but I did anyways. That's how that all fell out."

"But you said the Darkrai belonged to Eusine," I told him reproachfully.

"Sort of…" Morty rolled his eyes. "I didn't want it known that I knew Tobias personally."

"Why?"

"He's not just a great trainer you know. He collects legendary Pokémon as a hobby. These aren't just strong Pokémon, they've got mythical powers that transcend science. There are criminal teams who'd kill to get their hands on one… can you imagine how much damage they'd do with it? Hell, the military wants to research them. It's bad enough that Darkrai has mind-control powers, imagine a machine that can duplicate those powers! It's a dangerous line of work. He's been targeted for kidnapping and assassination more than once. I don't want to become collateral."

My memory was coming back to me in bits and pieces. Tobias had completely annihilated the world tournament four years ago. The array of Pokémon he deployed was, quite simply, unbelievable. A Darkrai, Giratina, Latios, Jirachi, Deoxys, and Moltres.

"Okay, I see. I mean, it's still unbelievable, but I suppose I have to accept it. How'd he catch all those legendaries? And why?"

"How? I have no clue. He was always a smart, cool guy. But he wasn't really special until he came back from overseas. Said he learned something while studying Pokémon across the globe." Morty shrugged his shoulders. "Never told me much about it, at any rate. Although, I think he doesn't catch them just to be a super-great trainer. He doesn't spend much time training them- in fact, he can't. Most of them aren't very obedient. They're headstrong, willful, intelligent, and have agendas of their own. You should've seen the crap I had to go through just to get Darkrai to obey basic commands."

"You mean Darkrai wasn't fighting at full power?" I asked, astonished.

"Yes and no. He wasn't holding back himself, but he wasn't employing the tactics I wanted him to. He could've done a lot more damage at the tournament. Volkner and Sabrina never would've stood a chance."

"Sounds cheap," I stated.

"Yeah, I guess. I kind of regret taking him now." Morty rubbed his shoulder. "Mainly because I now have to deal with Mr. Wolfer's wrath."


"Eh, well. Just in the last decade, you think about Team Rocket, Magma, Aqua, Galactic. We've got a few lunatics running around, even if they are ineffectual. And then remember, the rest of world isn't nearly as peaceful as Nihon."

"Is he a spy or something?" I asked.

"No, just a trainer. Although, I heard rumors."

Morty became dark and serious.

"They say he's been hired specifically to catch legendaries by the Pokémon League, since he's so good at it. Some he gets to keep, others he hands over to League officials."
"Why?"

"To keep them out of criminals' and trainers' hands. Wouldn't want Pokémon who can space-warp city-blocks out of existence roaming loose, do we? And you certainly don't want to have to fight those kinds of Pokémon in a tournament- especially a smaller tourney, full of relatively weaker Pokémon."

"Mmm. Yeah, you're right. I had enough trouble with just a Zapdos," I said, recalling me and Volkner's battle.

"And Zapdos is one of the weaker legendaries," Morty noted.

"Yet this guy just catches them by the bunches."

"That's right."

I shook my head, aghast and yet, impressed.

"You've got one amazing friend there," I remarked.

"I don't think he considers me a friend. At best, a stooge, a lowly minion."

"Mmm."

That's one mystery solved, at least.

"He thought I was your girlfriend," I remarked.

Morty froze.

"Um…"

"Have you been going around telling people you have a girlfriend now?" I said.

"I… might have… been bragging a little."

I gave him a soft slap on the cheek.

"Don't go presuming such things. Especially as we haven't even kissed yet."

"But we have ki-" I gave him a more forceful smack.

"No we haven't."

I held his head in my hands, and gazed into his eyes.

"Jasmine… this isn't really a good place. We should go somewhere private."

"Eh… yeah. Actually, let's just wait."

The crowd, having gotten over the shock of Giratina's appearance, settled back into their routine. Staff hands were busy preparing something. Chairs and tables were being moved aside, a large space in the center of the hall was being cleared.

"Lots of help. I'm guessing Whitney didn't pay for this by herself?"

"No, she just helped promote it, actually. Our actual- never mind."
I eyed him, warningly. No more secrets! I silently mouthed.

Morty resisted for a moment, and then calmed down and fessed up.

"Tobias is paying for it. The League pays a pretty penny for Pokémon that can bend space-time."

"Does Whitney know Tobias?"

"Faintly. She and him dated for a week or two."

"Sounds more than plausible." As long as I accept that, somehow, the legendary Tobias Wolfram went to Ecruteak Central High School, it wasn't unbelievable at all that Whitney had tried to ask him out. It was only a matter of who rejected who. Probably her dumping him, since she usually let me know all about the guys who ditched her (via five-hour telephone calls of her blabbering and spittling tears and snot, but hey...).

"I'm just having a hard time accepting all these connections."

"Why?" Morty asked.

I shrugged, not venturing a guess.

"You isolated yourself from all the rest of us during high school. It was really tough to keep tabs on you; the only person I could get any word from was Whitney, and you know how reliable she is."

"You worried about me then?" I asked, a little surprised.

"I never stopped worrying about you, from the day I met you," Morty said.

"Even after Indigo? Even after I said those things to you?"

"Especially after Indigo," Morty said.

"I see..."

I patted myself off, got up, and then helped Morty up as well. His index finger traced a line down the seam of my glove, then moved up to draw circles across the top of my tiara.

"Do you know who else is here?"

"Hmm." I paused for a second. Who would be the most improbable person I could think of?

"Mr. Stone?"

"No, of course not."

Who else? Mmm, what about the current world champion? That looming disaster should be headed this way about now, right?

"Red," I guessed.

"Good guess, but no. Someone closer to us."

"Um... I don't know. Who is it?"

Morty scanned the audience, and lit up.
"Actually… not one person." He motioned towards a gaggle of people hanging out around a wide staircase. Taking me by the hand, he led me towards them.

"Oh!"

Erika was chatting with a pair of familiar faces: Lyra and Ethan. Behind them an unknown stranger was chatting with the young red-headed man who had accompanied Lyra and Ethan during our visit to Blackthorn. Silver, I think, was his name. A group of Morty's friends from his gym gathered round in their own group. To my shock, Volkner stood there chatting with them. He was dressed in a space-suit and talking in hushed tones with another young man, this one with a big red afro for a haircut. Even as we approached, Volkner glanced up, took in the sight of me and Morty, and returned to his own conversation. About six other people lounged around, some I faintly remembered, others I didn't.

"Well, it's like almost everyone we know is here," Morty said to me. He then called aloud. "Hey guys! Guess who I found!"

"Jasmine!"

Lyra came skipping up to me, hugging me and taking hold of my hands and prancing with them.

"You're a sailor princess! How gorgeous! I love your costume!"

"Thanks."

What a ditz, my costume's nothing to be excited about!

She herself was garbed as a witch, with orange and black striped stockings, a tattered robe, and pointed hat decorated with fake spider webs. She caught me taking in her appearance and stepped back to give me a better view. Her flaunting ended with a dramatic curtsy.

"How've you been? I know it's only been a few weeks, but it feels like forever!"

"I'm doing alright. Where have you been? I thought you were staying with Erika?"

"She kicked us out, so we've been camping around Olivine. I've been kicking butt in the battle tower, got to 58 consecutive victories!"

"Wait, Erika kicked you out? Why? I'll talk with her if there's something I can do about it…"

"Oh no no no, it was our idea. We weren't very good house guests," Lyra said, waving me down.

"No bad feelings. Besides, camping is fun, and we're used to it."

"Lyra, what about the login information?" Ethan came stumbling up to us. He was matching Lyra, dressed in a wizard robe and hat, but otherwise wearing a business-casual suit underneath. His voice and expression were full of concern at the moment. At least, until he caught sight of me. Then he froze up, like he had been hit by Paralysis.

"Um… hi, Jasmine. Um… anyways, Lyra, I really need that password."

He quickly deflected his awkward greeting with a return to whatever matter he needed to raise with his girlfriend.

"Silly, it can wait."

"No, it really can't. We need to get you registered by tonight, or else you're not competing."
'What is this for?' I asked.

'It's no big deal,' Lyra said, laughing.

'She needs to transfer her official residence back over to Johto, since her Kanto trainer's license expired and we can't be flying all the way to Vermillion to renew it. Otherwise, she won't be able to compete in the regional tournament this winter.'

'It'll be fine! Let's have fun!' Lyra protested.

'It's due midnight! You've had too much to drink.'

'No I haven't! And it's due the end of the month. We still have time.'

'It is the last day of the month!'

Lyra bit her lip in consternation. 'You're such a killjoy.'

'Hey,' Ethan backed down a bit. 'I'm sorry. It's just due, alright? I'm just trying to help you. We don't even need to leave the party, I can do it right here on the Pokegear. All I need is your login info.'

'I forgot.'

'You forgot!'

'I forgot.' Lyra waved a hand across her brow, posing dramatically.

Ethan really looked like he wanted to choke her, but restrained himself from so much as throwing an insult her way. At length he backed down completely, resigning himself to defeat and misery.

'Lyra, you should do as he says,' I told her. 'If it's absolutely necessary for you to compete in the Johto tournament, then it's something you just have to take care of. Unless you don't plan on fighting.'

'Oh… I guess. It's not like I have to…' she said, gazing at the ceiling. 'I'm the reigning champ, yeah? I can just have the tournament winner fight me afterwards.'

'You mean a championship bout?' I inquired.

'Yeah, that.'

Crowning a regional champion is quite a tricky affair. It's not a simple single-elimination tournament like the world championship. The rules change from region to region, and Nihon and its regions have notoriously convoluted rules.

First, there's the tournament. The rules for the preliminary rounds are determined less than a year in advance, and change every year, depending on the whimsy of the tournament organizers and the availability of trainers. The field gets whittled down to 32 trainers, who compete in seeded, 6v6 single-elimination matches. The winner of the tournament is crowned the champion of the tournament. I.E., the "2012 Johto League Tournament Champion". However, there were several more levels of "champion" that could be attained.

A tournament winner can elect to challenge the region's Elite Four. These were four extremely strong trainers hand-picked by the Pokémon League. Defeating all four in a row, without a loss, granted the title of League Champion (in this case, the Johto League Champion). Trainers who attain this title are
given special privileges by the Pokémon League, and also special duties. They are expected to not merely be awesome trainers, but to represent the Pokémon League as goodwill ambassadors, and positive advocates for Human-Pokémon relations.

Yet there was another, final, title to earn. If they chose to do so, the winner of the tournament may challenge the previous year's victor. If accepted, the pair fight in one final, epic clash to determine who would be the regional champion. Consecutive victories means that the reigning champion can keep their position indefinitely. Lyra, who had succeeded at every one of the previous steps, was formally called the Johto League Champion Regent. This was the highest Pokémon League-sanctioned title anyone could carry, short of becoming the World Champion, of course.

"You know, the general population won't respect you if you just sit and wait for the tourney winner to come and challenge you," I warned her. "They call that being cowardly."

"Oh, who cares. That's just a bunch of name-calling," Lyra replied.

"And you don't get nearly as much prize money if you only battle in a title defense match."

"Ah…"

"We… need money," Ethan hesitantly added.


"Only because we're poor and you still spend on every little thing that catches your eye. Like last night."

"It was a charity to help abandoned Pokémon!" Lyra protested.

"Which is all well and good, but maybe we could have afforded a 1,000 donation? Not a 15,000P giveaway!"

I eyed Ethan, who returned the knowing glance with a roll of the eyes. Now I have a clearer picture of what he meant by "she's a handful". He shook his head and looked over to me again.

"I heard that… you and Morty might be becoming an item," he said, trying to divert the topic.

"It's looking probable," I said, looking to Morty for backing. The manchild took on an aloof grin.

"Well, that's great. You look… fantastic." Ethan spoke to Morty next. "Treat her nicely, she deserves it." He returned to me. "And don't go giving him too harsh a time," he said. "Unlike a certain other girlfriend…" We all turned to the brat, standing alone and pouting like a child. Lyra crossed her arms, pursed her lips, and stared defiantly at the lot of us.

"My my, what severe expressions we all have. You need much more liquid refreshments!" Erika exclaimed. She shooed us like a flock of Mareep towards the drinking counter. When we arrived however, no one was willing to refill their glass except her. After much urging, Morty, and then myself, took a little bit of margarita, if only because we didn't feel like letting Erika drink all alone.

"They're staring at me again," I noted. A fresh influx of males into the party brought with it more creepers. Strangers ogled me from the fringes of my vision- whenever I turned to face them they looked away out of embarrassment. At least, most of them, the more decent ones, looked away. A select few took my cold stare as a sign of interest and gave me suggestive gestures, like a Rocket-clad idiot throwing a "call me!" signal my way. I snorted and stuck up my nose at that.
"Don't worry about it. Ethan."

"Yeah." The two men nodded to each other. I found myself paired off with Lyra, and the two of us were snuggled between our respective male companions. The lewd leering fell off significantly once Morty locked arms with me and drew up to his full height.

"You're tall," I noted, mildly surprised.

"A little over six foot," he said off-handedly.

"You slouch over so much, I didn't notice." He was a full head taller than me. This could make kissing a slight nuisance.

"They're starting to dance," Lyra said.

We lined up on the sideline, watching the myriad of ghoulish creatures intermingle. The overhead lights dimmed, strobe lights came out, and dubstep party music began blaring over the loudspeakers. The beat hurt my eardrums, like usual, but the alcohol was making it more tolerable. For comfort's sake, I clung closer to Morty's body.

"Oh sweet! You're in for a treat," Morty exclaimed.

"What?"

He pointed to the floor, where Tobias was now enchanting a crowd with funky, almost tribal dance moves. He was pretty good at it. Very shortly he was joined by his Darkrai and an Infernape, who synced up perfectly with him. A tall, dark-haired woman ventured right up to him and the pair began dueling a disco-tanga. Another man in a mask came in and ramped up the pace.

"That's Narina and Will. She was our gang's biggest follower, and Will was Tobias' second-in-command."

"Elite Four Will?" I said, surprised.

"Yeah."

This "Phantom Five" gang was starting to sound like a legend in its own right. Who was the last remaining member, I wondered? What could top an Elite Four member, a Gym Leader, a World Champion, and… whatever Eusine claimed to be…

"That's cool…" I said, growing bored of the dancing. It's not that it's not interesting to me, or that they're bad, they're actually pretty good- but it was growing generic. I've seen these same moves in popular music videos.

"Nah, nah, I didn't mean Tobias. Keep waiting… here he comes. This is so cool." Morty urged me with gestures and words to pay attention. A familiar spiky blonde head was waiting on the sideline.

"Brother's got a quick hand…" an echoing voice began singing over the speakers, and a particularly impactful dubstep tune started playing. This was the signal.

"Volkner?"

"Yeah, he's awesome. Watch."

I did, for a minute, and then turned to Morty.
"That's nothing special, he's just walking really slowly. I could do tha-"

And my head was forcibly pivoted back towards the dance floor, followed immediately by eyes popping, nostrils flaring, and jaw dropping.

Volkner wasn't **dancing**- he was **morphing**. His body seemed to flow about on its own, like an Arbok perfectly synchronized to the music beat. It was like watching someone doing the Robot- and this robot was a year 2052 model.

"That's really-" I began exclaiming, when Morty put a hand over my mouth and pointed. The beat picked up, and then Volkner REALLY got going.

"That's impossible!" I piped.

That's literally impossible! No human could keep their balancing while gliding around the room like THAT! It's defying the laws of gravity! It's his feet slithering across the floor, effortlessly gliding from one side of the dance space to the other without either foot leaving the surface. His legs were doing something completely unrelated, and his hips something else, and his hands and arms were like an animatronic puppet spasming in perfectly controlled shudders, perfectly synced with the beat.

"No way," I uttered in disbelief, as the music began playing backwards- and Volkner didn't lose a beat, he began replicating- exactly! - his motions in reverse order.

"It's called liquid dancing, and Volkner's one of the best I know."

I couldn't peel my eyes off of him. Neither could anyone else, until the music calmed and Volkner came to a slow standstill, as if powering down. Cheers and applause erupted.

"Can you do that?" I uttered to Morty.

"Nope," came his head-shaking reply.

"Hmm."

"What?"

"Disappointing," I said.

"Me?"

"Mmhmm."

"Don't put it that way. Volkner's just awesomely gifted like that."


"Can you dance at all?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, a little. Wanna go out there with me?"

I squirmed.

Kin-san wouldn't hesitate. Should I act in character? Morty's shifting on his feet, making as if he's about to dash out onto the floor regardless of consent. It's going to happen no matter what I say.
Better to take control and lead rather than let him control me like a puppy on a leash.

"Let's go."

I grabbed him by the wrist and yanked him out onto the floor.

Luckily for me, no one wanted to follow up Volkner's act with their own solo exhibition. We were the first ones out there, but when it became apparent we were there just to boogie for ourselves, other couples began joining us. Soon enough the sidelines were empty and the dance floor was swamped.

Between the drinks and Morty's reassuring presence, I think I lost myself. My body began jumping and swaying with all the grace of an amateur teenager, but I didn't care. I was having fun and showing off for Morty. We swung around each other, broke into break dancing, and then he busted out what he called the "Zombie Shuffle" which wasn't half-bad. When I was at my limit and tired he twirled me around and I somehow found more energy to keep going.

I think I actually smiled, and laughed.

"You look like you're having fun," Morty shouted over the music's din.

"I am!"

"That's great!"

Was it so surprising? I suppose that, for his sake, I could learn to let go and enjoy a party, something that's never happened to me.

"Heyo ghouls and goblins, how ya doin!" screamed the DJ. The crowd roared in joyous affirmation.

"Now now now, we creepy-crawlies are hogging all the spotlight, yo! Clear the floor, and let out those bogey-mans, give them a little fun time!"

Morty and I stumbled, exhausted, to a pair of seats wedged into a kind of alcove. It afforded us a little privacy. Morty paused long enough to let Gengar and Mismagius out, and then joined me in sitting. The Pokémon joined a small crowd of others in taking control of the stage. Honestly, the creatures were better than most of the humans in their erratic, breath-taking dance moves. It was a fun break watching them.

"I'm happy," Morty remarked, taking in deep breaths.

"Me too."

"And that's why."

"Hmm?"

"I'm happy you're happy."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Haha."

I leaned back.
My smile evaporated into a frown, then the smile surged back to my lips, then faded again. Was this okay? I felt like, with everything that's happened to me, and every problem still on my plate, it feels wrong to be happy, to have fun. What's wrong with me? Is it just my basic nature to be an unhappy woman?

That's like Mother! I don't want to be like her!

"Hey, Morty."

"Hmm?"

"What are your parents like?" I asked.

He let out a whooshing sound.

"Let's see…" he began thinking of an answer.

I vaguely remembered meeting them at school functions, but never got a sense of who they were. Mr. Matsuba was short, and he always wore a grim expression. Mrs. Matsuba was tall and proud-looking. They had never really conversed with the children, and preferred polite conversation with the other adults.

"My dad's kind of sour and grumpy, like a pickle. He's a curmudgeon, but a likable one, with a good heart under all the grumbling. He likes to fish. Mom is a nag, just like any other mom. She knits and house-keeps and reads. They mostly keep to themselves, not really social Beautiflies. I guess they're pretty normal parents. Love them all the same."

"Mmm."

"How about yours?"

"I don't like to talk about them," I said.

"Oh…"

"Hmm?"

"Usually, when someone asks a question about someone, they also want to talk about the subject concerning themselves, too," he explained.

"No, no, I was just curious about your parents."

"I see. Well, there's really not much to say."

He says this, but then he goes into a half-hour showcase of funny or interesting stories concerning their odd little trio. I asked him about his grandparents, and whether he had any uncles or aunts, but he vehemently avoided the subject. Instead, I got another tale of a disastrous encounter with a family of Girafarig-worshipping neighbors. Descriptions of sons forced to mimic each other down to the last detail, even though they weren't twins, enthralled and distracted me.

"Your mom runs a diner, right?" he remarked.

"No, not even close."

"Oh. I guess Whitney was wrong."
"Yeah. She's a professional caterer, for parties, like this one, except her usual clients are business people."

"Ah. Sounds like an interesting job."

"It's not."

"Oh."

"She makes me help her, usually without paying me, so it's kind of a sore point for me," I explained. "Oh, that's stupid."

"Very stupid indeed."

I huffed, and sighed, and leaned back and closed my eyes. I really didn't want to discuss my parents. "I wonder... was she a trainer?" he asked.

"No, never. Never owned a Pokémon of her own."

"Oh."

"What?"

"Eh, just trying to gauge how much alike you are to her," Morty said, shrugging. "Most people who know the both of us don't think me and my dad are anything alike. Then again, I take after my mom more."

"Sounds like it, although I'm confused. You're super-extroverted, but they sound introverted," I said.

"Eh, just the way I grew up, no particular reason for that."

"Mmm. I see."

We sat silently for a minute, trying to grasp for conversation material. "She wanted me to help her with a party that was today," I blurted out. "No, a Worker's Union meeting. Boring crap, and I would've been stuck hauling around food and utensils and decorations. I don't regret coming here instead at all."

In truth, I likely would have been forcibly drafted if I didn't have this excuse. Mother still has one last vestige of leverage over me: she's covering my health insurance. "I don't want to talk about that stupid woman," I exclaimed.

"Stupid? Well that's being a bit harsh on the woman who brought you into this world. Then again, how smart could she be, treating you like she does, and only managing a catering job? Stupid might be a proper adjective after all," Morty conceded.

"Well," I said tepidly, "She's not stupid stupid."

"Really? I mean, she sure sounds like it, from your complaining. Just the fact that she throws boring parties and you have to run a Pokémon Gym, I bet you're way smarter than that dumb woman."
"She's extremely smart!" I said, pulling myself up and staring him straight on. He took notice. "That's part of the problem! I can't get anything past her!"

Morty furled his brow.

"But still-"

"Technically, it's not Mrs. Mikan, it's Dr. Mikan," I told him.

"Your mother's a doctor?"

"Doctorate. She has a Ph.D. in Psychology." I didn't mention her other academic accolades: triple major in Psychology, Sociology, and Biology, and graduated as the valedictorian of her undergraduate class.

"A Ph.D.? Dang, Jazz. Next you'll tell me she's a bombshell too."

"Judge for yourself," I said, handing him my cellphone. The picture folder was opened to a rather old photo of the three of us. He stared for a moment at the screen.

"She's hot," he said shortly. "And your dad's not bad looking either."

I raised an eyebrow.

He handed my cellphone back to me.

"If that's what you'll look like in twenty years, you're pretty well off," he remarked calmly. "Good looks, and a doctorate? What is she doing running a catering business?"

"I don't know. Couldn't find a job out of college, probably."

"Heh. Well, goes to show you college isn't all that. Have you ever considered going?"

I shook my head.

"I've been running the gym since I was fifteen. No time for school. I barely graduated high school."

"You're not dumb."

"No, but I need time to study to be able to pass tests and finish homework, and time is not something I have in abundance. What about you?" I asked in turn.

"I take classes on the side, actually. At this rate, I should have a B.A. sometime in the next... oh, twenty years."

I giggled.

"It does kind of weigh on me," I admitted.

"What does?"

"Not going to college. It was one of the few things my parents actually expected from me, and I kind of ignored them so I could take over the gym. I don't have any backup plans if I lose my job."

"You won't lose your job," Morty tried reassuring me. "We'll make sure of that."

"I don't know..."
"Really, don't worry about it. You've got the duration of this party to put it out of your mind, relax, have fun, and recharge. Tackle if full-power once you get home."

"Alright."

If there was a subject that I wanted to avoid more than my parents, it was probation. "My Dad was always like- 'Don't you go payin for college, boy! You get em scholarships or you say no! I'm not payin for that hoo-ha, and I'm a warnin you not do so either! Interest rates are absolute murder, theft! Oughta be a god-damned commandment against it! Eighth mortal sin it is, usury! Greedin basterds!'"

"Hahahaha! Does your father actually sound like that?" I managed to ask in between stomach-curling giggles. "I can't even do it properly," Morty admitted with a laugh of his own.

As usual, our boring conversation went on, while we watched the Pokémon slowly grind to a halt on the dance floor. The humans were let back on, but the music changed out to slower, jazz-inspired tunes. Gengar and Mismagius returned, panting. "Did you bring your Pokémon?" he asked me. "No, I didn't want to lose them."

"Oh right," and Morty chuckled. A swath of hair fell over his face. I reached up and brushed it out of the way. Upon second thought, I swatted it back into place, half-covering his face. There's something about that look, the hair hiding one eye, that is very seductive. "I was really surprised to see you cosplaying," he remarked. "I could tell."

"Did you do that on your own, or did someone convince you to dress up?"

"I wanted to just do Kin-san's high school cosplay. Erika added the gloves and scarf and tiara."

On second evaluation, Ghost Eraser Yusuke was the perfect cosplay for Morty. The character and the man were extremely alike, right down to the barrage of sexual innuendo and devil-be-damned attitude. The costume itself was so impeccably well-made, I started to doubt Morty made it himself. It didn't matter, though, because he looked very roguish and handsome in it regardless.

I sighed. He brushed the bangs away from his eyes and adjusted his goggles to prevent them from falling again. I was miffed. That theory about covering things to make them more enticing? It wasn't just applicable to thighs and stockings. I reached up and ruffled his hair, loosening it and letting it fall back to partially cover his face. "What are you doing?"

"Improving your unsightly mug."

"By getting hair in my eyes."

"Yes."
Morty took my playing with his bangs as a sign that he was allowed to reciprocate. I batted away his first and second attempts, but on the third relented. He clutched my skirt and flitted about with it.

"What are you doing?" I asked in turn.

"Skirts are so pretty on women. It's a shame, I think, girls don't wear them so often anymore. Hoenn, especially, it was really rare to find a girl who wasn't in short-shorts or jeans."

"You like them? Is that a fetish?"

"Not a fetish!" he said defensively. "That's too strong a word, makes it sound abnormal. All guys like to see girls in skirts."

"It's because it's easy access to... you know what."

"Maybe true, maybe not. Maybe it's just the shape, accentuates the female hips."

"Hmph!"

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "You think you don't have any hips to show off."

"You read my mind."

"You're always acting self-conscious about being womanly enough, Jazz. Like with your boobs." He tried to squeeze them, but with Thunderbolt-like reflexes I intercepted his hand before he could so much as graze them. My hand brought his hand upwards, till his fingertips just barely lay on my lips.

"You have to start here," I warned. "That's as far as you're cleared for."

"Hmm." He was pondering something.

"What?"

"I can't say."

"Why not?"

"You told me to forget about it."

"Oh... that."

Yeah, THAT.

"I shouldn't pry, even though I want to," he admitted.

"You really shouldn't."

"In that case, you promised something in return."

"You mean these?" I began guiding his fingertips side-to-side, grazing my lower lip.

Morty turned on his side, reached one arm behind me.

"Do you want to be kissed?" he asked honestly.

"Very much so," I answered honestly.
"Why?"

"Because you're the man I’ve come to trust with my happiness. And a part of that happiness is being able to share our lives with each other. We've just done that, talking about our families, and worries, and what we've done recently. Now, the other side of the coin, is being able to share our bodies with each other," I said all matter-of-factly.

He leaned forward.

"You over-think things," he said. "Let's just kiss and enjoy it."

"Okay."

I leaned towards him.

I was closing my eyes in anticipation, so I didn't realize it at first. The yearned-for touch of his soft lips never fell upon my own. Of course, a few moments later, Lyra and a dozen other females screamed at the top of their lungs, and I opened my eyes and comprehended the situation.

The lights had gone out. The West Hall had been plunged into utter darkness.
"Everyone remain calm!"

A sphere of light illuminated the central staircase. Tobias stood, hands raised in a "calm-down" gesture. Behind him a foreign Pokémon provided visibility with its multi-candled limbs.

"There is no need for panic. The weather station warned of storms coming in from the south that could knock the power out for a short duration. It will be back shortly, I promise you. In the meantime, use this coincidence to your advantage; it is Halloween, after all, the festival of all that is horrifying and macabre. Do not panic. You are allowed to feel tense and perhaps a little frightened, but do not panic. I am sure this ceremony will-"

A gust of violent wind rushed through the hall, squashing the flames of Tobias' Pokémon. The man's voice cut out at the same moment.

"Hey!"

"What was that?"

"Where'd he go?"

"Someone got a Pokémon with Flash?"

I couldn't see anything.

A hand gripped my wrist, but not too tightly.

"Morty?" I called into the dark.

"I'm right here."

"Do you have a light?"

A *fwick fwick fwoosh*! and a tiny flame sputtered to life. His face was drawn and casted into ominous shadows.

"You could always be counted on to have a lighter," I recalled.

"For hobby-related reasons," he added. "Not smoking."

"You remember how much I hate cigarette smoke."

"You bitched about it non-stop during our bar-hopping adventure."

"Nnn."

"Never mind that, looks like I won't be allowed to enjoy myself."

"Why?"

"Mission control, come in. Come in mission control."

He had gotten out his cell phone and was now speaking into it. There was no response, and a glimpse of its screen showed only a static display.
"It's not supposed to be static-filled, is it?" I asked.

"No, it's not. Even if I didn't have coverage… this looks more like something's jamming it." Morty glanced about him. "I don't like this."

He began inching forward into the darkness. Various bodies hugged each other, forming grotesque silhouettes that we passed without comment. Here and there throughout the vast hall little puddles of light spilled into existence: Trainers using Pokémon with Fire attacks or Flash, or tiny dots of light signaling electronic devices. Like Morty's cell phone, all of the phones were static-infected and non-functional.

"I forgot to tell you this, but I was "volunteered" to lead security here by Whitney. I kind of shirked the job off to someone else; it didn't sound like there would be anything to do. But I'm thinking I'm going to have to resume my position now," Morty explained. "Do you have your Magneton?"

"No. Remember, I left everyone at home."

"Drat… I guess that's why you asked me for a light. Okay…” we managed to reach the staircase. Morty held the lighter out, to see if Tobias was still there.

"Oh shit!"

He backed off and immediately went for my eyes. His palm covered my vision, taking away what little I could see.

"Fuck!"

"Get off me! Stop cursing! What was it?!"

"You don't want to see!"

"I can handle my own stomach, let me see!" I wrestled his grip off of me and swatted for the lighter.

Even in the incredibly dim-half light, the sight made my stomach curl. I kept my poise for ten seconds longer than I should have, perhaps out of stubbornness, perhaps out of shock.

Tobias' body lay flat on the ground, face-down. Multiple things, long and sharp, protruded from his back at irregular angles. A pool of glistening blackness lay over his cloak and all around him. It smelled like raw steak.

I turned away, fighting the urge to choke and vomit.

"Morty, Tobias… is he…?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better check."

"I…” Morty took the lighter from me and steadily, gingerly made his way back to the ghastly scene. He hunched down, rocking the figure back and forth. His thumb went to the wrist, holding it for a minute before letting it fall.

"We… should leave it there. For the police."

"Call them."
"Who?"

"The police."

"With what?"

Oh crap. Cell phones are jammed.

"Jasmine, listen."

"I'm listening."

"This is a murder scene."

I tried breathing normally. I know the situation felt unreal. The body wasn't imaginary, though. This was really happening.

"We can't let anyone panic."

I'm about to panic.

No, I mustn't. I'm the Ironclad Gym Leader, I should be able to handle anything… even a murder.

*Keep calm.*

I must have told myself that a hundred times within ten seconds, as my body shivered from scalp to toenails, and my fists balled themselves so tight the skin began hurting where the fingernails dug into them.

The disturbed feeling passed. I settled myself down and allowed the logical side of my brain to take full control.

"So? How're you supposed to keep this from everyone?" I asked. Meaning, how were we going to make sure people with less resolution than I from screaming their heads off and causing a riot.

"White lies. Half truths."

Morty called out loud.

"Will! Narina! Whitney! David! Get over here! Tobias fell and hit his head, he's knocked out and there's blood! He's hurt badly!"

"What?"

"Did he say someone's hurt?"

"The guy in charge is unconscious?"

"I don't like this, man!"

"Keep calm!"

"Morty, I'm coming!"

Formless, sourceless voices called out from the darkness. The crowd was tense and restless, uneasy about the sudden fall of the apparent authority in charge. But Morty's explanation kept them from outright panic. Eventually, the four staff members made their way to the scene. Morty, the de-facto
leader now, calmly explained the situation. The other two men followed him and confirmed the fatality.

"Is he… really…?" the woman named Narina asked. The men nodded, and her knees buckled. The man named Will ran to her side and propped her up.

"What do you think happened?" Will asked. "An angry spirit? A curse?"

"During a spook party? Too convenient," Morty said. "I chase geists down for a living, they're never this forward. A murder during a Halloween party- who does that sound like to you?"


"Right, a human. This was an assassination."

"They finally got him," Will uttered, voice quivering.

"Hey, Will, don't pussy out right now."

"Of course not… I foresee some existential deflation and incidental crying in my future, but this is the present… and the present reality is… we must be calm and figure out how to proceed. Will's voice had little confidence in itself, but the rest of his body language showed he was holding together.

"Alright. Will, Narina, you get the easy job. Stay together, run until you can find the police station. David, Whitney?"

"Y-y-y-yeah?" Whitney answered. By her quaking and shivering, she was taking this the worst of all of us.

"Help me bar the doors.

"Wha-wha-what?"

"We've got to make sure everyone stays inside."

"Why?"

"Because we are all murder suspects now."

Morty's face was contorted into an expression of dead seriousness.

I ventured one last look at the murder site, and the outline that was once Tobias laying at the bottom of the staircase.

Good god.

He really is there… and yet, not there at all. It's just a corpse.

This is the first time I've been in contact with death. I tried holding myself, closing my eyes, and evaluating my mental health. Once the shock of the gore has passed, how would I handle this nightmare?

Strangely, I'm not as disturbed as I thought I would be. Is it that I'm a cold-blooded individual? Or am I just caught up in the need to act professionally while the crisis was still ongoing?
I'll find out later, after it's over.

That is, if I get out of here alive.

"Morty, wait up!"

He and the group began moving towards the front entrance. David and another friend were left to guard the body and discourage the curious. All around us I could hear muttered whispers and nervous shifting. These people might stampede if word got out. They knew something bad was up, but none suspected how serious the situation was.

"Who's there?" a voice called from the dark.

"Lyra?"

We were soon joined by Lyra, Ethan, their friend Silver, and Silver's friend.

"Proton," the man introduced himself. I gave him a long, hard stare. He seemed vaguely familiar, and I began spot-checking my memory to see if I knew him. A face flitted just beyond my reach. It was different, and yet the same. This man's hair was ragged and worn, as if having seen too many dye jobs, but was kept neatly trimmed. He wore a brand-new but cheap business suit. Yes, I was sure I knew this man, somehow, from somewhere, but couldn't place it.

"Do you want something?" he asked, almost snidely.

"No," I replied, and he returned to Morty's side. Ignore him, he's just another typical snobbish male.

In short order a small group formed and gathered around the front door. Morty stood before us, staring resolutely into each of our faces, one by one.

Me, Lyra, Ethan, Silver, Proton-weirdo, Will, Narina, Whitney, Volkner, Volkner's friend, a guy named Shaw, and…

"Ugh!" I whispered out a groan.

So, the bastard himself was here.

I gritted my teeth.

"Now, I've met and trust each of you. If any of you had anything to do with this, and something goes down, you'd better hope you get all of us, because this group," Morty motioned to the small semi-circle formed around him, "is now responsible to itself. Keep aware of each other and never, no matter what, go out alone. Preferably keep in groups of three or more. Hopefully we won't get blindsided from within. More than likely, though, our culprit is somewhere in the crowd. Which means, we've got a suspect hunt to conduct."

Morty turned to the closest pair of living bodies.

"Will, Narina. You two more than anyone here, Tobias was your friend. I trust you had nothing to do with this, right?"

"Absolutely not," Will muttered, gritting his teeth. "Whoever did this, I am now devoted to their utter destruction."

Narina sniffled, but braced her body upright. "I loved him. I would never betray him. This is too much…. I swear I will do everything I can to find justice for… my beloved."
Tears about to cross their eyes, Morty acknowledged their feelings and opened the door. "Stay together. Get the police. Hurry back."

"Yes!"

They moved through the exit, and were lost into the night. I took a peep outside. City lights still shined in the distance, but the local block was blank and dark. The power outage wasn't a big one… but very specific.

Then Morty shut the door… and locked it.

"All the other exits are locked," he said. "The only ways out are the emergency fire exits, and those are guarded by battery-powered alarms. We'd know if the murderer tried to dart through them."

"What are you planning?" Lyra asked.

"One group takes charge here. They'll comb the crowd and keep an eye out for suspicious activity. Don't go overboard. Don't start on a power trip. We're not necessarily here to catch and convict, only prevent the murderer from escaping or hurting anyone else. The police can handle everything when they get here."

"So… why do anything at all?"

"I'm worried about her." Morty nodded towards the ceiling.

"You mean…"

"Mission control."

"Who?" I asked. Morty turned towards me, taking me by the hand. He paused a moment before answering.

"Danielle. My gym aide. She's running the tech booth, for video, stage lighting, music, and other stuff. I'm worried for her."

"Why?" I asked, a twinge of jealousy pinging upon my heart.

"If someone wanted to kill the power, they could do it in two places… the fuse box, or the tech booth," Morty explained.

"Oh…"

Crap. Perhaps I shouldn't be so jealous of a possible crime victim.

"Like I said, group one, stand guard. Group two, we're going deeper into the building, find mission control, make sure she's alright. Then we give a comb-over of the facility, and meet back here. Anyone have Pokémon?"

Several hands were raised.

"Alright. Volkner, Flint, Ethan, Lyra, you've got the strongest teams, you're coming with me. Jasmine, sorry, but you'll have to stay with Falkner."

I sank my clawed fingers into Morty's shoulder, suddenly, and dragged him to my ear.

"Under NO circumstances am I staying with him!"
"Huh?"

I nodded towards Falkner.

"What have you got against-"

"Never mind my reasons, I'm coming with you!" I whispered viciously. He gulped, and assented with a nod. "Alright, Jasmine, stay close behind me."

The gym leader from Violet City glared at me as I passed by. I sneered back.

That… dick head… I wish I never had to see him again! Damn it, this is so aggravating! Is it not asking enough of my emotions to have to deal with a homicide, and then to throw this bastard Falkner into the mix?! If the murderer wanted to add one more victim to the night's total, I wouldn’t cry if it was him.

Ugh!

"Everyone stick with your partner, in case we get separated," Morty warned.

I felt safer than I had a right to feel, given the circumstances. A guest huffed his way up to Morty and whispered a short message into his ear. Morty patted him and ordered the helpful guy to stay put and help keep the peace.

"He said the doors leading deeper into the convention center were opened. There's a possibility someone went back there," he explained, responding to our fearful expressions. We subconsciously clung tighter to one another as the hallway entrance loomed.

Morty pulled Volkner aside for a brief moment and whispered into his ear. Then, grabbing our pokeballs, each other, and our nerves tightly, we filed into the darkened hallway.

"I think we're lost."

"Well, I never claimed to be a good leader."

The six of us stood huddled under the faint red glow of an exit sign. However, the exit designated was nothing but a locked door leading to the basement. Flint assaulted the doorknob, ineffectually, for a few minutes. Seeing his failure, we resigned ourselves to the bleak situation.

"It's a big building," Lyra said aloud, reminding us of the obvious. Even so, I nodded. From overhead, the convention center looked like four rings arranged around a central octagon, which housed an indoor stadium. The other rings contained large exhibition halls, theatres, an ice rink, an opera house, a botanical garden, three food courts, and a small indoor water park. All of these facilities were intricately connected by hallways, lobbies, stairwells, and elevator shafts. That is to say nothing of the business plazas, the mall, the 4-star hotel, and the radio tower that were connected to the place via the Goldenrod Underground. The scope of the building was mind-boggling. It put Battle Tower to shame. What I had called the west wing was actually the largest hall of the western ring; in other words, our entire party had occupied a mere 4% of the convention center's full square footage.
We were somewhere in between the central octagon and the west wing proper. That's about as good as I could tell from the signage. Doors lined the corridor to either side, all locked.

"Where is the tech booth?" Volkner asked.

"Top floor, near the arena. If I could get to that one central lobby, the one with the seven stories, I could get us the rest of the way. I think."

"You're hopeless, Morty."

He shrugged. I couldn't see him shrug, but felt it, because I was leaning against his back. It made me feel safe, and also hid my nerve-wracked silhouette from the others.

In truth, our wandering around the dark halls had gotten to my nerves. Not that I was particularly scared of the dark, or what or who might be lurking in it. What was weighing on my mind was my own reaction to Tobias.

Is he dead? Really dead? What does it mean, what is it like, dying? And then, being dead? Do you feel anything? Is there an afterlife? Does it hurt? Is there nothing? Should I be scared of my own death now? Am I going to die? Why do I feel so indifferent, unmoved? Shouldn't I be even more scared, crying?

Questions like these tumbled about my skull like a barrel full of golf balls sent flying down a hill. It would have given me a headache if I hadn't been so adrenaline-pumped as to not feel it.

The others fell into a small, level argument as to which way we should be headed. Morty acted like he was retreating into thought. His hand reached behind and pinched my forearm lightly.

"Are you scared?"

"A little. I've never…" I drifted off without finishing my sentence.

"What are you thinking about, Mort?" Volkner asked suddenly.

"How Tobias was killed."

"Yeah… gruesome."

"Granted, but just how did they do that? I didn't recognize those spine-like things. And it seems both excessive, and blatantly attention-grabbing. This doesn't feel right."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying it doesn't feel like a professional assassin. Not what I would expect from a news headline. They'd use guns, or poison, or an explosive, and they'd wait for some privacy. And because it was Tobias, the reason you'd want to kill him, is to take his Pokémon, but none of his pokeballs were missing. Besides, most of his legendaries would be kept locked away. Instead, he gets stabbed to death in the middle of a party. This is all so…"

"Orchestrated?" Flint offered.

"Yeah, that's the word."

"You think it was staged?"

"In a sense. The killer might have been deliberately gunning for showmanship. Making a statement."
"A terrorist."

"A criminal team," Morty concluded.

"Rockets?"

"No. They aren't this blatant and vain. Besides, they'd be more interested in stealing his Pokémon than just killing him. I'm thinking Galactic."

"That would be like them. You've got the Sinnoh connection too, what with Tobias living in Celestic Town nowadays," Volkner said.

"Do we know of anyone with Sinnoh or Galactic ties around here?"

"It wasn't us," Flint said, indicating himself and Volkner.

"Of course not."

Lyra appeared some ways down the hallway. She was outlined against a bright red light, as if a bonfire had erupted behind her.

"Phlossia."

Typhlosion stood erect and blazing, fully prepared to offer us his services as a mobile floodlight.

"I found a map. We need to head this way," Lyra called out.

"When did you go wandering off?! Don't do that without telling us!" Ethan called back to her.

"Come on, I'll race you!" Lyra responded, turned, and took off. Ethan limped off into a sprint, attempting to catch up with her. Typhlosion, shrugging, slowly marched after them, taking his flaming glow with him. The brief stint of illumination was gone before we even had time to adjust our eyes.

"Ethan! Lyra!" Morty shouted several times over as soon as he realized the pair were racing off. It was useless, of course. Their footsteps could be heard rounding the corner and fading off into the distance.

"Idiots!"

Morty committed a facepalm.

"Hey Volk, got a Flash Pokémon?"

"Raichu. Electivire. Jolteon. Take your pick. But do you really want to clue the killer in on our presence? I thought that was why we weren't using lighting."

"Yeah, that was my reasoning, until the lovey-dovies broadcasted our position to the whole building. Might as well show in force now."

"Right. In that case-" and Volkner unleashed all three Pokémon. One by one their bodies emerged, crackling with electricity.

"Flash."

I had to avert my eyes as the trio lit up.
"Amphy would be really useful right now," I said with regret.

"How is he doing?" Morty asked.

"Glued to Spectra."

"Ah, so I guess that's working out."

"This isn't the time to be talking about it," I reminded him.

"Come on, let's get moving," Flint said, overriding our conversation. Volkner's Pokémon led the way. Even together, the Electric-types couldn't project their light down the hallway, so we only got about 20 yards of visibility in any one direction. As we made our way forward, Morty spotted something on the wall and jogged up to it.

"Here's the map that Lyra was talking about…. the hell?"

The "map" was nothing but a child-like doodle, a crude representation of the convention center drawn in crayon. Torn edges surrounding it showed where the actual map must have been ripped from the frame.

"I seriously hope Lyra wasn't using this for guidance. It's got our current position in the north wing, and four stories up. That's impossible."

"Is it?"

How's he to know where we ended up after all of that bumbling and stumbling around?

Yet, Morty had the answer right at hand. He pointed to an intact directory beside the map, clearly indicating that we were on the second floor- certainly not the fourth floor.

"And look at this," he added. "It's saying the passage to the tech booth is that way," and he pointed to a blank wall. "I don't… is this really something the assassin did? Or is the staff so careless as to let their grade-school offspring draw replacement maps for them?"

"Um… Morty."

I tapped his shoulder.

"Sec, let me think."

"Morty!"

I reached around him and placed my hand against the bottom of the map. What I, and then he, saw there caused our eyes to widen.

Crude effigies of two girls and four guys were drawn holding hands. Two of the men had blond hair, one had unkempt black hair, a fourth had a giant red afro, one of the girls had a witch's hat, and the other girl wore a sailor scout dress.

"Fuck."

Chills ran up and down my spine.

Tiny numbers were written beneath them.
"Lyra and Ethan, 1 and 2," I whispered, and then covered my mouth.

Morty tapped his own figurine- silently mouthing a "5".


"What does it mean?"

"Nothing good."

He studied the ominous map one last time, then set out.

"I'm not going to trust that thing. Let's move out. If we find the tiered lobby, I can get us the rest of the way there."

He took a hold of my hand, forcing me to keep up with him. "Don't leave my side," he whispered into my ear.

Minutes passed, or an hour, it was hard to tell. We passed along the passages as silently as we could manage, which wasn't very silent at all. The footsteps of four people and three Pokémon echoed before and behind us. The Pokémon, in particular, grunted and crackled loudly at regular intervals, as they were forced to recharge and renew their Flashes.

"Sinnoh," Morty said.

"What about it?"

"Did you recognize anyone from your region in the party? Anyone dubious?"

"Yes, and no," Flint answered. "I mean, I know a few folks here, but no one who'd be an assassin or working for the Galactics. I didn't see anyone suspicious coming along with us."

"How'd you get here?" I asked.

"Tobias organized an airliner to hop around the country and pick up guests. Most of the non-Johto party-goers came in on that flight."

"Rich bastard," I muttered. Men have all the money, it's not fair.

"Well, it's not like the tickets were free," Flint said, trying to defend himself.

"Don't kid her. They were 70% off," Volkner scolded his buddy.

"An airliner. I wonder… if we get the manifesto for that flight, we might be able to figure a clue out," Morty conjectured.

"What if it was a local job. Manifesto would be useless."

"What if it wasn't a human?" I suggested. The three men gave me funny, condescending looks.

"A Pokémon did this?"

"N-no. I was referring to… you know…"

It had been nibbling at the edge of my mind. The way that room had gone dark so suddenly, the unnatural gout of wind that blew through, and the way in which Tobias was impaled- I just felt like it
was unnatural. Not the work of a hit man at all.

"You think it was a ghost?" Morty asked.

"I think we shouldn't rule anything out," I uttered. Morty let out a quick laugh.

"Don't make fun of me."

"Scaredy-cat."

Oh he did not just say that! In this situation! In light of these events!

Speaking of lighting, Raichu huffed and panted, and its Flash gave out momentarily. A moment later Electivire's also burned out. We were left with the weaker Flash of Jolteon for visibility. Luckily, the space up ahead was not completely awash in darkness.

"Here we are. Hey!" Morty rushed out into the open.

We had trod out into a large lobby, with multiple tiers of overhanging walkways layered upon one another. A food court sprawled out one floor beneath us, while six stories of balconies were stacked above us. The ceiling opened to a skylight, and the full moon was just peaking through a thick cloud cover. The glass was glistening with raindrops. Tiny flashes streaked through the sky, evidence of far-off lightning. Morty was excitedly waving towards the far side.

"What is it?"

"See them? See them?!"

I strained my eyes but could not see what he was gesturing at.

"Third floor," Volkner said.

"What is it?!" I cried again, frustrated at not being able to discern what they were glaring at.

"There's someone there. Can't see their face, but they're looking at us. We've got to hurry."

"To catch them?"

"If we can. Volk, Flint, go right. Me and Jazz will go left. Use the stairwells."

"Take Jolteon with you," Volk said. The men sprinted off at max speed. I struggled to follow, not being able to catch up. This ridiculous costume was too tight and making it hard to run.

Morty was ahead of me, with Jolteon bounding in front of him, creating a small pool of light.

"He's going to get away! Jazz, hurry!"

"I'm trying!"

Morty hit the stairwell three steps at a time. He was at the top before I could even manage to reach the first step. Jolteon, it should be noted, only needed two leaps to reach the next floor.

"Morty! You said I shouldn't leave your side! You-!!!"

I clambered up the steps and nearly rammed into his backside. I was shocked and breathless.

"Don't you dare leave-" but then I noticed he hadn't paused to allow me to catch up. He was staring
down at his cell phone.
Which was now ringing.
"Hello?" he said, confused, as he brought it to his ear. A faint voice could be heard on the other side.
"Morty! Don't follow him!"
"Mission control, is that you?"
"What? Mission control? It's me!"
"I know! Danielle, don't talk, listen! I'm with Jasmine, Volkner, and Flint. We're pursuing a figure and suspect he might be responsible for a murder."
"...Oh I see.... Well, by all means, chase that cheery chap into cheerful oblivion, and I won't care one bit. Not one bit. Not at all. It's your own lives, right? But if you do value your continued existence, you'll listen to me!"
"What are you saying?"
"It's a trap! Don't follow him!"
"How do you know?"
"The power outage is a ho-" and her voice cut out. The cell phone's display devolved back into a puddle of static.
"Gah! Techno-shit."
"We could use Volkner, couldn't we."
"That's alright, he'll be right- shit."
Just as he uttered that curse word, Morty and I witnessed the glob of light signifying Volkner and Flint vanish around a far corner.
"They're gone," I uttered.
Are they still in pursuit? Or are they dead? Captured? Worse? Who the hell knows! Were we going to run after them, despite Morty's second-in-command telling us not to?
"Everything's going wrong," Morty said. "What is up with the cell phones? Even if the power is down, even if the radio towers are jammed, the display should still be working. This is beyond me. Here," he started forward again.
"Wait! Danielle said it was a trap!"
"Even if we don't go, Jolteon's not going to listen. Look, he's already on his way."
Loyalty to one's master, a common trait amongst the Eevee family. The spiked-furball was losing no time in dashing to where Volkner was last seen. If we didn't keep up, we'd be left with lunar rays for illumination.
"Jolteon, be careful!" Morty called out. "You have no idea what's down there! At least look before dashing in!"
The Pokémon took Morty's advice into consideration— for all of two microseconds. It power-slid to a stop before the corridor. The only "caution" it showed was launching a Thunderbolt down the darkened corridor before launching itself headlong into it. We were a good ten-plus seconds behind it. By the time we faced down the same corridor, we couldn't see any sign of the trainers or the Pokémon.

"Crap."

"Huh?"

Morty stared again at his cell phone. The display was fuzzy and static-ridden, but beneath the interference one could barely make out the symbol for an incoming text message. The man flipped it open.

"Badguy using comp. virus, jamming sys. Tr- reprog."

He took a moment to comprehend the message.

"I think she's battling a computer virus in order to send us info," he said.

At that moment, a blast of wind barreled down the corridor. Three distinct cracks, like lightning or gunshots, rang out from deep within the darkness.

"The hell?"

Then the lobby went completely dark.

And not a moment later it lit up in a freakish, blinding glow.

I flinched, instinctively, as the rumble rolled through the building and my body.

That was real thunder and lightning, coming from overhead.

Although, that certainly was not natural lightning that caused the sounds we heard a few moments ago.

Things are happening fast, and rather than not having time be scared, my sense of time was dilating in order to give me plenty of mental space in which to fear.

I reached up to my chest, and felt my heart beating beneath it.

"I want my Pokémon," I said.

"If the power wasn't out… we could've gone to the PC in the outer lobby to fetch them."

"IF the power wasn't out…" I echoed.

Morty patted me on the shoulder, and then reached down to his waist.

"Uh… oh…"

That tone he's making- it wasn't reassuring.

"What else went wrong?" I asked, afraid of an answer.

"I'm missing my Pokeballs."
"What? Where'd they go?"

"I don't know. The ballroom. I put them down when I let Gengar and Mismagius out."

"All of them?!"

"No. Wait."

The dim flash of a Pokeball releasing sprang out before us.

"Shup shup."

A Shuppet.

Honestly?

We're doomed.

Morty's phone dinged, another message from the tech booth breaking through. We both stared at it.

"Flint done for- RUN!"

We obeyed.

"Up."

Morty hauled me up several flights of stairs. The ground floor of the lobby dropped further and further beneath us, until it became a rather fearful fall. I noticed this because the alternative, looking inwards and into the darkened chambers, was an even more fearful prospect to me.

"Top floor, and then… small corridor next to large corridor. There." I was dragged towards a small hallway leading off into the darkness.

Now we had nothing but the dim light of emergency exit signs and smoke detectors to lead our way. Their lights didn't even illuminate their surroundings, merely provided points of reference as to what was empty space and what was wall. My sense of spatial orientation was completely thrown off.

Morty, out of desperation or perhaps super-human nocturnal vision, charged forward regardless. He managed to not run headlong into any of the corners or turns the meandering hallway made. Even when the hallway ended abruptly, he only hurt his outstretched hand in his mad dash.

"Owww!"

"A dead end?"

"The hell?"

He banged on the wall, and it gave out a hollow ring, proving itself to be a set of double-doors. A metallic shaking followed.

"Doors. And they're locked. Can't get to the tech booth from here."

"Your friend needs help on the first floor. Go find him."

This text message came in crystal clear.

"Stop! Trap!"
This message was fuzzed over, like the others.

"She's contradicting herself," I said.

"No, I think the virus is impersonating her."

"Then which one do we believe?"

"The one that's not crystal clear. The virus is trying to suppress her message and make sure its own gets through."

"What if that's what it wants us to think, and it's really the reverse?"

"I don't think a computer program is smart enough to use reverse psychology."

"But it was a human who programmed it, right?"

"That's…"

"**Your friend is dying, hurry!**"

We read the urgent message, indecision rooting us in place.

The cell phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Morty! Not much time- Go down, take same passage, use stairwell at end, come round! Do not listen to-" The call ended abruptly.

"She wants us to go around," Morty said.

"I heard. Is it a good idea?"

"Now I'm worried. What if the virus can duplicate a person's voice?"

"And you were just doubting its abilities."

"You convinced me otherwise. Whoever's orchestrating this, they're clever. Sick and twisted, but clever."

We stood like Wobbuffets, unable to initiate action, only able to react to circumstances.

"Come on. At least let's go back to the lobby," I said. I didn't like the dark. The moonlit lobby, dim as it was, seemed a much better location if we were going to diddle around and act like target dummies.

Morty was pretty much glued to his cell phone. He seemed attached to the thing, dreadfully waiting for each bit of communication from his assistant.

The lobby was as we had left it.

I myself peeped over the railing. Shuppet joined me.

"I can't make anything out. Or hear anything."

My gaze was drawn to the corridor, five stories below us, where Flint and Volkner had disappeared.
into. I twice saw a shadow of a person emerge, stop, and stare up at me. I blinked, and the shadow shifted, proving to be the work of clouds crossing the moon's light.

That feeling of unease that had been flirting about me since seeing Tobias' body had turned to fear. Whether boxed in by walls, or standing out in the open and exposed, no place felt safe in this strange and cavernous building. My body shuddered.

What am I afraid of?

Something felt wrong here. Something I couldn't explain. Things were not as they appeared to be. That was the sense I was getting.

"Ugh." I looked over to Morty, who had let out a grunt of disgust. He was staring at the glowing screen again.

"What is it?"

"Another message from the imposter. Not anything you'd want to read."

"Tell me it," I said.

"It was a very graphic threat. We need to move, it knows where we are."

"Mmm."

With as much caution and courage as we could muster and mix, we tip-toed our way around the railing and down one set of flights. Shuppet fluttered about us, ready to offer what pathetic little resistance it could in case we were attacked. The darkened hallway beckoned.

"We go down this, find the emergency stairwell, go back up, and we can get to the tech booth," Morty said. "Siphon, use Will-o-Wisp."

It wasn't much, not enough to even reach the floor directly before it. Still, the Ghost Pokémon's little ball of phantom fire at least gave me a sense of up and down, and told me in which direction to take each hesitant, probing step.

"Duh naaa duh, duh naaa duh! Duh naaa duh! GHOST ERASER!"

"Eeeeep!"

I jumped like a startled Pichu. I am a girl, after all.

Morty's cell was ringing. A call was incoming.

Silently, I cursed at myself. What would happen if something actually jumped out at us? I couldn't waste a second to flinch, I needed to react instantly, or I might die!

"Hello?" Morty answered. "Hello? Hello?"

He kept calling into the device, but there was no response.

"Hang up," I hissed at him.

"Wait," he said, also whispered.

"Why not? It's a dead call."
"No, there's someone on the other end. I can sense it. It's like they're just keeping quiet, but I can hear the ambient sound."

There was a boom. Thunder rang out, both overhead, and over the phone's speaker. It was nearly simultaneous.

"They're in the building somewhere," Morty whispered.

We had been marching into the darkness, but now stopped. We each held our breath, listening for whoever- or whatever- waited on the other end of the line. I really expected for some voice to scream out at us at any second. Maybe Danielle's scream, maybe something else. Yet, nothing. Absolutely nothing came. Only the hollow emptiness of an open line.

It's too much.

Say something you bastard!

The moments passed and the tension wracked my brain like a monstrous Ariados.

I can't take it anymore.

"For Arceus' sake Morty, hang up!" I begged out loud.

"For Arceus sake Morty, hang up!"

My eyes went wide. That was my voice, coming from the cell phone.

Morty held up the screen in shock. Shuppet floated in front of us, Will-o-Wisp at ready. Before us, the darkness gaped like an abyssal maw.

Lightning cracked. The corridor faintly, briefly lit up in front of us.

An empty corridor all the way down to its end.

But in the reflection of the phone's screen, outlined against the lobby, I saw a dark figure.

They were behind us.

"Go!"

We sprinted.

It was already my second sprint in the past few minutes. This came after an evening of exhaustive dancing. I was tired and running wore me down even faster. Even so, gripping Morty's wrist in one hand and churning my legs as fast as they could go, I somehow found the reserves to keep going at full tilt.

I was scared. Scared of what was chasing us, and scared of hitting the far end and knocking myself dizzy, and then letting what was chasing us get a hold of me. Each step pounded into the carpeted flooring, hurting my feet, my legs, my lungs.

Something cold and icy caught my ankle. I tripped. Morty stumbled over me.

I couldn't see. *I could not see.*

There was something there, with us, fighting and grasping at us. I only caught glimpses of a body,
but couldn't make out any details. Morty fought back, not out of bravery, but desperation.

"SHUP!"

Siphon the Shuppet flew into the fray, firing off Will-o-Wisps at point-blank range. There was a grunt. The brawl intensified. Something hauled me backwards, through a void, into a closed space. The sounds of the melee receded.

"UP!"

By touch, I ascertained that I was in a stairwell, one of those drab, emergency ones that people used when they got too impatient for the elevators. Someone crawled up the stairs beside me.

"Morty?"

"Keep going," he said, out of breath.

"Are you hurt?"

"Don't worry about it."

"What about Shuppet?"

"Don't worry about it."

We reached the top and spilled out into the hallway. Morty slammed the door behind us and leaned against it.

"Got to… hurry," he panted.

His phone dinged. Another text.

We read it as we stumbled onwards.

"Help her." it read.

Morty knocked on doors, one, two, three, four, and stopped at the fifth.

This one was different.

A faint light, the pale, unnatural kind made by computer screens, flooded out from underneath it.

Morty pushed me to one side, putting me further down the hall, away from the tech booth's door, and away from the stairwell.

"Mission control. Danielle. Are you there?"

There was no answer. We listened.

Nothing from inside.

Nothing from down the dark corridor in either direction.

We took a minute to collect our breath.

A knock rang out. I jumped, but realized it was Morty. A shaking, also Morty, trying to see if the doorknob was locked. It was, apparently.
"Hey, Danielle! Are you in there?! Answer me!"
Silence, silence, silence, and…

"Morty?" a muffled voice called from within.

"I've brought help here with me. Has anything happened here? Are you safe? Are you hurt?"

"I'm…. Morty…. I'm fine."

"Open up."

"Okay."

Morty's head turned to me but I couldn't make out what kind of expression he was giving me. He didn't say anything to go along with the gesture. His focus returned to the door as an accompanying clicking sound issued from within. The edifice swung inwards.

The last I saw of Morty…

A face of eyeball-popping terror, a body gone rigged, bathed in blindingly bright, sickly-shaded luminescence, and something reaching out and pulling, or sucking, him into the gaping maw of madness.

My hearing was decimated by the wail of what could only be described as Hell's chorus. Otherwise, I would have been able to hear my own piercing scream rip through the building.

The door slammed shut, and I was again surrounded by total darkness. Without regards for safety or direction or sanity, I tore off sprinting into the void.
"A child's fears are simple and easy to banish. Why is that? Because they do not know what death is. It's difficult to explain to a child what it means to die. In the end, one can only say that death hurts, because a child understands pain. So a child fears death as something that causes great pain, and so all their fears revolve around things that cause pain. Sharp things cause pain. Nasty critters cause pain. Fighting causes pain. Falling causes pain. Germs cause illness, which causes pain. The darkness hides things that cause pain, whether it is a sudden drop, a blunt object to run into, or something imagined, something monstrous, which could cause, again, pain. We teach them that Hell is a burning pit of fire, because to a child, nothing in the world hurts more than getting burnt. How simple is it for them to believe death is merely the ultimate form of pain? Very simple, and simpler still to teach them that they need only keep themselves safe, follow the rules, and they won't have to 'die'.

The moment one matures from a child into an adult is when one stops fearing the prospect of 'dying', and starts fearing the prospect of 'death'."

My father once brought me to his church. Mother wouldn't come with us, she detested what she called "religious indoctrination". I didn't understand what she meant by that. Nor did I understand the pastor's sermon, even though I had begged not to be sent away to the kid's mass. Now, all these years later, I still remember the priest's lecture crystal clear, like an audio recording. It came floating back to me as I stumbled into the blackened void.

Why am I running?

I don't want to die.

Is that really it?

I don't want to die. There is a difference.

I'm afraid of the dark and afraid of what lurks in the dark. I'm afraid of what it could do to me, and the excruciating pain it might put me through. I fear the million ways an invisible persecutor could find to violate my senses and cause torture upon my mind.

My running pitter-pattered to a halt.

I'm still just a child.

I was shocked by the sight of Tobias' corpse, but that was normal for any human being. Yet, I wasn't disturbed by it. Everyone mentions the deep and profound sense of loss and despair when they have a brush with death. I couldn't feel that. While I had been terrified throughout this ordeal of getting injured, even mortally, the thought of becoming dead, thence ceasing to exist, or else facing the great unknown, had failed to cross my mind.

"Does that bother you?"

"What?" I asked, searching for the voice that suddenly called out.

"Does it bother you that you are only afraid of how much it's going to hurt?"
"No," I answered. "Isn't it natural? I don't really think anyone outgrows the fear of being impaled or mind-raped or shot. Pain is painful for a reason, it creates the fear that tells us what to avoid for our own safety," I said.

"But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why keep yourself safe?"

"So we aren't hurt."

"You just reasoned pain only exists in order to prevent… what, more pain?"

"No, not just pain. Injury. And death."

"Why prevent such things?"

"Because, shouldn't we want to exist, and be healthy, rather than not exist, and be unhealthy?" I reasoned out.

"Exactly!"

"I don't get it. Who are you?"

"You're certainly capable of understanding the issue on an intellectual level, but your subconscious disagrees. Oh, don't lie to yourself. You truly are incapable of fearing your own demise."

"Wah? No, I am afraid to die. I want to keep living. Who are you?"

"You're telling fibs, and sadly, the only one deceived by them is yourself. Why are you blithe to the prospect of not existing? And are you not disturbed at this fact?"

"You aren't answering my question!" I whined.

"You aren't answering MY question, and I did ask first."

"I don't care! I don't want to deal with such deep stuff right now! I don't think about it! It's irrelevant! So tell me who you are!"

"Could it be… you're an idiot?"

"Oh, you're just screwing with me!" I cried. "I don't worry about that stuff because it's not worth worrying about! There's no way to tell what death is like, so let me just be scared of what I can see and control! Like the assassin who's coming after me!"

"Wait…" the voice said. "Do you not believe you'll die here?"

"It's not a matter of whether I believe I'll die soon or not! I can't allow myself to even entertain the notion, when I ought to be worrying about how to stave off that notion! Maybe I might be petrified by the thought of never seeing, never eating, never speaking, and never thinking ever again, but as long as there's a chance I can put it off for another day, another minute, I'll be afraid of the danger that could kill me right this instant, thank you very much! Come traumatize me about the permanence of death when it's imminent and unavoidable!"

My rant faded into the atmosphere.
"Such a child. You do understand, though, that eventually, you WILL die?"

"I'm tired of arguing with you. Show yourself already! Who are you!"

"If you took a moment, you'd recognize my voice."

I searched and pickled my memory, all the way to my dim infancy, and could not place it.

"Think harder, Jazz."

The hell? Of course I would have trouble placing it, if all I searched for were distant and difficult-to-remember voices. The answer was too close, too fresh, to recognize at first. The fact that I had failed to place it instantly caused me great concern for my state of mind at the moment.

"Morty, where are you?" I called out.

"Right here."

Behind me, and close. I spun around.

No one stood behind me. Yet, as I watched, my shadow contorted, wavered, and rose out of the ground. A mass of shadow coagulated into a fat, floating body, complete with grinning façade.

A Gengar- which began speaking.

"Recognize me now?"

It was Morty's voice, coming out of the Pokémon's mouth. I was dumbstruck.

"Morty?" I said.

"Yes, and no."

"What? Explain yourself!"

"I am all that you fear."

"What's going on here?!" I yelled. I looked around, expecting to see walls, lobbies, doors, and other signs of the interior of the convention center. At least, I expected the near total darkness of being deep within the building's bowels.

Instead, I found myself in the middle of an endless plain, bathed in a low-lying mist, and beyond that, the darkness of night. Stars, only a handful of them and all very faint, pricked the sky here and there.

"I was running from the tech booth..." I uttered.

"And you ran right into a cloud of hallucinatory gas. A very specific and obnoxious poison, actually. It causes you to fall unconscious and then experience that which most deeply frightens you," the Morty-Gengar explained.

"I'm having a hard time believing you," I said.

"Why is that? You see me and hear me, you see where you are and the bizarreness of it, and you don't believe the most logical explanation for these phenomena? Truly, an idiot."

The creature drifted about me, arms folded across its back.
"Being a child, I imagine this fictional plane will be full of vicious monsters and creepy, invisible ghouls. The kinds of things you’d find in a Pokewood horror film. Like this lovely monstrosity."

I followed the Gengar’s gesture, and beheld something that made my throat tighten.

Its shape was that of Steelix. Its body was that of a biological creature, made of flesh and blood, bone and muscle, nerves, veins, and organs—yet without skin. Steelix had spines of metal sticking from each body section, this thing had spines of bone and marrow, with blood dripping off of them. The beast towered over me and roared. The roar was the sound of a jet-engine airliner attempting to mimic the screeching of nails upon a chalk board. I was forced to cover my ears. Its maw was filled with barbed, squirming, undulating pincers. Digested filth spittled out across my face.

"It's disgusting," I said.

"You aren't moving or flinching," the Gengar noted.

"It's not real. You told me as much."

"So if a monster such as this appeared in reality, you would be scared?"

"Maybe. If I thought it could hurt me. But it won't, because this isn't real. And it couldn't, because I would have my Pokémon, and they'd protect me."

"But what if Steelix himself transformed into this creature?" the Morty-Gengar asked. As if angry at being taken lightly, the monster swung its tail down upon me. I was sent flying. The image and feeling of my spine being snapped in half flashed before my mind. I stood up, feeling my back. Truly, I was dreaming, because the supposed injury had vanished quicker than it could be inflicted.

"If Steelix himself turned into this… thing?" I eyed the angry, grotesque mockery of a Steelix. It was bearing down on me. It's maw came down, trying to consume me. With a swift mental command, I whisked myself away by a hundred yards. Now, in the distance, the creature seemed small and less threatening.

"I would be afraid, yes. But less because it was trying to kill me. I'd just be rational and try to devise a way not to be killed, if I could. I'd be more afraid that I had lost my Pokémon."

"There." It seemed the monster Steelix had lost track of me and was circling about, searching. Morty-gar, however, had no trouble keeping up with my teleporting. This was such a weird dream. "So you seem to fear losing those who are close to you. Congratulations. You have discovered an adult fear," it said.

"An adult fear?" I repeated. "Don't tell me you're going to be so crude and just show me my Pokémon dying. That would be cheap. You know, if you're supposed to be scaring me, you really shouldn't have told me about the hallucinatory gas."

Morty-gar nodded.

"Of course, of course. Although, that's not the point. Faking a fearful situation would not have the same impact as what is intended."

"You're saying you could do worse?"

"The worst," Morty-gar said.

"I can take anything you throw at me," I said, perhaps too brashly.
"Anything?" It smiled a wicked grin. "Dear Jazz, remember that I am you. I know everything about you, even the dark little things you've tried so hard to forget."

The Gengar's face skewered in place. It was now wearing Morty's face like a mask.

"I hate you. You disgust me, you prude. Why would I stoop myself to doting on a sniveling, undeserving toddler who refuses to offer anything of value to her partner? You'd better have sex with me or I'll take my affections elsewhere."


The Gengar's face went back to normal, although it still had Morty's voice.

"Ha ha ha ha. All he wants you for is sex. Isn't that something to be scared of?"

"Shut it. It's cheap and blatant and I know there's more to Morty than simple-minded lust. I don't know everything about him, and whether it's all good intentions or not, but I want the chance to find out on my own!"

My words were true and confident, but the tone in which they were uttered betrayed me. The Morty-gar smirked, sensing my dishonesty. It then assumed the mask of a dear friend, Erika.

"Look at me, so pretty, so pretty! Pity me! Love me! Need me! I'm Jasmine and I'm the center of the universe, why won't you pay attention to me!" I would have become outright exhausted of this constant, self-centered, desperate pleading for attention, if the pathetic childishness of it weren't so funny. You're such an amusing distraction, Jasmine. I enjoy, no, relish the opportunity to corrupt such a delicate thing as yourself. I wonder how you'll break first- will you become a total slut, or an emotionless husk of a little girl?"

"Piss off!" I screamed. These weren't designed to scare me! They were making me angry!

"Insecure, are we?" my persecutor taunted. It began skipping around me, a look of glee on its face.

"I can go on. Would you care to hear Lyra? Or maybe Pryce? Oh, what about Beret?"

"Don't you dare!" I shouted. "Leave the dead alone!"

The drawn, ancient visage of my former mentor appeared.

"It's a damn shame what you did to my gym. Ruined its good name. How did you ever think you were going to be a Gym Leader? A young, inexperienced brat like you?! Phaw! Talentless children like yourself belong in school, not a gym. I knew I should have handed the reigns over to Edward!"

I lunged at the ghost, and toppled right through the intangible bastard.

"How dare you!"

"Me? I'm no one. I'm you," Morty-gar said. "I'm not saying a thing. These feelings are all yours, all deep inside of you. Why do I sound like Morty? Because you're afraid of him. What he could do to you. The power he has amassed over you, all in the name of, what? Love? Hahahahaha!"

The Gengar lowered its brow and gave me an absolutely evil, deadly-serious stare.

"Morty could rip you to pieces."

I returned the death-stare with one of my own.
"You know nothing," I sneered.

My body quivered. In fear? In anger? Both combined?

Anger. Yes, anger was winning out. These fears it is laying before me are nothing, insignificant. They hold no water, and only serve to release my rage. The Morty-gar's hostile grin dissolved into mock fear.

"Oh, scary, scary! But deep down inside, you know you're afraid of these things," it tried telling me.

"You are me," I said. "But even you can't know what hurts me the most, because I abandoned that part of me, a long time ago. It's gone, sealed, buried, locked away. I won't ever return to it."

"Really? I'm dying to know about it…" Morty-gar said. It lunged suddenly, putting a hand into my chest, searching about. I felt its cold fingers pass across my heart, causing it to skip a beat. "Where oh where is this deep dark fear of yours? Oh! Oh my! Here it is! Why, fascinating!" The invader turned its eyes upwards, as if focusing on the feeling of scrounging about my innards. I was paralyzed, powerless to stop it.

"I see! Your first kiss… He's not who you'd expect at all! And… that's it? In a way, it's underwhelming, but all too fitting. Could this really be the reason for your mysandry? I know there are many women who have had much worse. In all, I'd say this rather puts you in a poor light. To get so upset over something so-

Fear. Anger. Both erupted into my being. My limbs, formerly paralyzed, came alive with fire in their veins. I grabbed the Gengar's arm. I ripped it out of my chest. My eyes lit up in fury. My voice came, not in a shout, but in a cold, whispered fury.

"You know nothing!"

This bastard, this bastard, this bastard! Trying to make light of it. Trying to somehow corrupt it, turn it into something I did wrong, trying to blame me for what happened. It's absurd. It's unforgivable. I won't forgive him.

Trying to look at that situation, and see how that entire first kiss fell out, and tell me it was "nothing" without knowing why it meant much, much, MUCH more than "nothing" to me, is an insult to my very existence.

The misted void that surrounded us grew cold, and darker still, and closed in on me. I noticed my skin was bare. I felt naked, completely naked, and alone. The false Morty-gar creature was nowhere to be seen. An image, faint as a hazy dream, drifted closer and closer, like the ferry come to take me across the River Styx. This image grew, and materialized.

It was a house.

My house.

Not the apartment I live in now, but my house, the one I grew up in.

Inside.

To the left.

A study.
And there, a cabinet.

All else faded into blurred nothingness, but this cabinet. Then, even that too drifted into obscurity, and all that was left was me and the bottom drawer of the cabinet.

I reached up, feeling forced to open it…

No!

I won't!

YOU MUST!

I don't want to face it! Get it away from me!

OPEN IT!

No!

DO IT!

I-

"JASMINE!"

I jumped, violently, smacking him in the face.

Who is he?! My senses reeled.

He held my gloved hands down, so that they couldn't thrash about. Gloves? My Halloween outfit! I was awake.

"Thank Arceus, you're back." Volkner leaned back in relief.

"Volkner?!

"It's me."

"And me," said another male voice. Ethan appeared beside Volkner.

"Where's Morty?"

"Don't know. Haven't seen him."

"What happened? Where's Morty?" I asked stupidly, not registering the answer I had been given.

"We're near the arena." Volkner motioned towards a long row of windows, beyond which a vast empty space opened up. "We found you on the staircase over there, sleep-talking. I guess you got hit by the hallucinogen too."

"That really happened?" I asked, incredulous.

Volkner and Ethan nodded.

"Jolteon found me and shocked me back into consciousness. I found Ethan same as you, unconscious but acting out."
"You too? Hey, wait, you found me over there- you didn't try anything perverted, did you?"

"No," Volkner answered flatly. Not feeling reassured, I inched away from him, to put some space between us. It's still awkward, trying to act nicely with him. We didn't really resolve his feelings the last time we met, and I doubt we ever would. I wonder if he still felt anything for me? How long do boys hold a crush? A sudden urge to find out took ahold of me.

"What did you see? In your nightmare?"

I knew as soon as I asked it how stupid and insensitive a question it was. Would I, for a moment, be willing to reveal what had transpired in my dream? Heck no. Would they even believe me? A Morty-voiced Gengar showcasing twisted perversions of my friends while they persecute me is not really outlandish for a nightmare, but it might say something bad about how I really view the people in my life.

Could I then expect an honest answer out of Volkner? Probably not. Seeing their blank expressions, I wager I'm not going to get an answer, period.

"I'm- never mind. What should we do now?" I asked.

"There's the problem," Volkner said with a sigh.

"He wants to catch the culprit. I want to get back to the ball room," Ethan said with a slight huff in his voice.

"Aren't you worried about Lyra?" I asked. "Where is she?"

"Somewhere being an idiot," he said, eyes averted, but a hint of annoyance and anger in them. "She ran off, even when I begged her not to. I have no clue where she is right now."

"That's rather harsh. She could be dead," I said. "She is your girlfriend after all."

"Yeah, well…" He bowed his head, the shame of being reproached showing in his posture. "I think she'll be okay. She has Typhlosion with her. If he can't protect her, I doubt you or I or Volkner could do any better," he tried excusing himself.

"But, even so," I said. "Shouldn't you want to be by her side? It's your duty as a boyfriend."

"I do, but…" his voice drifted off into nothingness. He knows I'm right.

"Speaking of boyfriends, where's yours? Did you lose him too?" Volkner questioned me.

Flashes of nightmarish memories popped across my vision. I gulped.

"We went to the tech booth to find his assistant. When we got there… something took him. I don't know what, or how, and I don't want to explain what I saw because you wouldn't believe me… but it was horrible, and I have no confidence that I could go back and fight it."

I tried saying this in a level and calm manner, but even I knew my fear was showing. Cruel and hostile as it was, Morty-gar was right, I was like a little kid, terribly afraid of the simple thought of excruciating pain and death. In his last moments, Morty certainly looked like he had been in pain enough to kill a human outright.

"So, at least we know where he's at, or his corpse. Could you show us the way back there?" Volkner asked. I shook my head.
"I told you, I can't- won't go back."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"No… No." My head-shaking continued into excess. "That wasn't human or even a Pokémon that took Morty. It was something else."

"You're saying it was something supernatural."

"I'm saying it wasn't something I can explain!" I snarled. "I'm not going back!"

Volkner looked at me funny. He bowed his head and let out a sigh.

"Well, that's that. Let's go with Ethan's idea, go back to the ballroom, wait for the police."

"Just like that? What's with the sudden change?" Ethan demanded.

From their tone, I felt like they had argued about this for awhile before they found me. In response to Ethan, though, Volkner shrugged and shied away.

"You were pretty adamant about hunting down the culprit before, why not now? What's changed?" Ethan demanded.

"Nothing. I'll tell you later."

I had my head bowed, still haunted by the images of Morty's abduction. Still, in the periphery of my vision I caught Volkner staring at me with soft eyes, and Ethan glancing between me and him. The latter eventually tilted his head, narrowed his eyes, as if he figured something out. Even when his idea had won out, he didn't seem happy about it. Maybe my guilt-tripping him over Lyra had shamed him, or maybe he was suspicious of Volkner's reasons for changing his mind. Whichever, we picked ourselves up and again went bravely into the darkened labyrinth of the convention center.

"I'd feel safer if you guys had your Pokémon out," I ventured.

They agreed, and let loose their entire teams. My escort blossomed to two men and ten strong Pokémon. I'd feel even safer if I had my own Pokémon here, but this at least dispersed the fear of being ambushed from my blindside. Jolteon led the way with its Flash ability. Ethan and Volkner took up positions on either side of me. They were close enough that I could feel our arms brush against each other's as we walked.

Along the way, each of the boys filled in the details of what had happened to them.

"Lyra swore she saw a person in the cafeteria. I couldn't tell if it was a person or just a shadow, but whatever it was dove into a food outlet. I told her it was too dark and to be careful, but she didn't listen. The moment she darted inside, the security gate clanged down and I got trapped outside. I went looking for the employee access hallway and I guess that's when I got gassed," Ethan explained.

"Flint and I thought we were on the tail of the culprit ourselves. We got maybe thirty yards down that hallway before a lot of chaos broke out. I couldn't see anything of what happened. Just a lot of small explosions, like gunshots or flashbang grenades. I stumbled away, found myself in a locker room, and got gassed there. Jolteon found me, got me back up, and went searching. Found Ethan later, but… I did see one thing interesting in the meantime," Volkner said.

"What was it?"
"You know how the power's supposed to be out?"

"Yeah?" me and Ethan acknowledged.

"It's not the power that's out. It's the lights, and only the lights."

"Huh?"

"The elevator in the tall lobby, the one with the view over the whole place? I saw it travelling upwards."

"Did you see who or what was using it?"

"No," Volkner said shaking his head. "But I waited till it was clear and tried for myself. It was definitely working. Also tried out the powered doors, and the phone booth. The line was jammed, but it had an error message, so it was getting electricity."

"In other words, the storm isn't to blame for our power outage," I said. I remembered looking out of the doors before Morty locked them… it seemed only the convention center and its attached buildings were affected by the blackout.

"Right. After hearing your story, I think it's extremely likely someone sabotaged the lights using the tech booth. That room might even be the nerve center of this attack."

"When you said someone or something used the elevator, when was that?" I asked.

"Soon after Jolteon woke me up."

I checked the timing.

"That might have been the same person who followed us down the corridor and attacked us." The boys looked at me with confusion and alarm. I told them about the assault preceding Morty's abduction.

"That makes it pretty clear, then," Volkner said.

"What's clear?"

"This is the work of a group of humans. Probably some sick psychopaths out to scare and kill people. It's pretty elaborate, a big game to them. I doubt it's a terrorist team. There's no point and nothing to gain by terrorizing a bunch of kids."

"I mean, what else could it be?" I said, thinking his conclusion was obvious and unneeded.

"Ghosts," he said simply.

"Ghosts. Like…?"

"Spirits. Creatures from the beyond."

"How could you possibly entertain that notion?!" I asked, exasperated.

"Did Morty ever tell you about his hobbies?"

"Not really," I said. That kind of stuff didn't interest me, and Morty seemed to sense that and steered conversation away from it.
"He swore he found evidence for the supernatural. Never a concrete encounter, but all kinds of crazy stuff. He was always worried that one day he'd actually confront the real thing- and that it'd be hostile."

"You believed him?" I said.

"No, at least, not until tonight. It was just a possibility I had been considering. What happened to Tobias- it wasn't normal, even for a homicide. I didn't feel ready to discount any theory right off the bat."

"You felt it too?" Ethan asked.

"Hmm?"

"The way Tobias was killed. Something felt off."

"Yeah. It was too… theatrical. Staged."

The boys nodded to each other.

"Lights go out, not a second later he's got strange spikes sticking out of his back, no one hears a thing, and his Pokémon vanishes. No one was near him before the attack, and everyone I spoke to didn't see, hear, or feel a thing in those seconds. If it wasn't something crazy and supernatural, it was a perfectly-executed attack. Superhuman."

"So what is it? Spirits or ninjas?" I said.

"Neither," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess that's the point. We can speculate all we want, but we don't have enough information to go on."

"Right," Ethan added.

I reminded myself that reality is hardly neat and cozy. Clear explanations only exist in movies and books. Even when they convict people in murder cases with ample evidence and months to study the case, there's still a lot of interpretation left as to exactly what happened. We're in the middle of a crisis and have an absolute hodge-podge of clues to go off of. Ethan's idea, even if it was a little cowardly, was starting to sound like a great idea. Better to get back to the crowd, bunker down, and wait for the police to come. The bad guys, even if they were spirits, would have trouble doing what they're doing when a couple dozen officers backed by the entire infrastructure of the Goldenrod Emergency Department come rolling in.

At last, I was starting to feel secure again. I had an escort, we had a plan, we had the cavalry coming, and the bad guys were probably not so big and powerful as we imagined- seeing as we've managed to survive this long. Everything was going to be okay.

"Are you feeling a little dizzy?" Ethan asked.

"No, not really. Just tired."

"I'm feeling dizzy."

"Guys…"

Volkner was the first out onto the ballroom floor.

The place was empty.
"Where is everyone?" naturally was the first thing out of our mouths.

The place was abandoned. It was dark, and everything was mere shadows and outlines, but there was enough light from a skylight to ascertain the absence of living beings anywhere in the room.

"Wasn't someone supposed to be guarding the door?" I asked. We saw no sign of the group that was left in charge. The doors leading outside were shut. I jangled and pounded on them, to no avail.

"How'd these get locked? I thought Morty closed them from the inside."

"Would he be stupid enough to lock us in?"

"Maybe."

"I would most definitely be stupid enough to lock us in."

"You idiot, why would you-" I began. "Morty?!"

I whirled around. Air, nothing else, not even shadows. The boys looked at me in confusion.

"Jasmine, are you alright?" Volkner asked.

"I heard Morty."

"Of course you heard me," he said. I furled my brow and swiveled my head in rapid arcs. I couldn't find him, and Volkner's look of alarm was growing more exaggerated.

"Down here."

I looked down.

I jumped backwards, almost falling. Luckily both of the men lunged forwards to catch me, holding me up.

Before me, Gengar rose from the ground.

"Jasmine, what is it?"

I gasped and pointed, trying to squeak something, anything, from my fear-choked lungs.

"They can't see or hear me, idiot," the Gengar told me...

In Morty's voice.

Sh-

It's real now. It's right there. I can see it, hear it, touch it. The ballroom is stretched out behind it, placing me squarely in reality. This is no hallucination.

"You thought waking would rid yourself of me? How foolish. I will follow you everywhere!" The specter reached out its arms skyward in a sign of blessing, as if baptizing the night.

"Volkner, Ethan, do you see a Gengar?"

"Where?"

"Right in front of me."
"No, I don't see anything."

"Crap."

"You're in for it now," Morty-gar threatened. It began advancing. Little midnight-blue Will-o-Wisps flickered into existence about it, until they became a cluster, and then a horde. I began backing up in terror.

"Stop it," I said. Not to the aggressor, of course, why would such a thing listen to me? My words were addressed to the baffled humans standing by, doing nothing.

"Jasmine…"

"Stop it!"

I stumbled and tripped my way away, fleeing to a recess in the decorations. I ducked under a sheet of fake cobweb, searching for a hiding place.

"Grim grinning ghosts! Grim grinning ghosts! Bwahahahaha! Jasmine, come out!"

The form of the talking Gengar could be seen hovering back and forth amongst the forest of streamers.

This is unreal.

"Gotcha!"

An arm reached around my shoulder, grasping me. I screamed.

"Calm down! Calm down!"

Volkner had a hold of me, I realized. He was whispering into my ear from behind.

"It's not real. It's just an after-affect of the gas. Whatever you're seeing is not real."

"It's right there!" I cried. The Gengar came to a landing twenty feet in front of us. With a maniacal laugh it began a slow advance. The Will-o-Wisps blossomed into fiery violet Gengar-shapes. Their mocking outtakes added to the leader's.

"You're not real!"

"Boo!" It lunged. I struggled, hit Volkner on the chin with my head, and jumped away. The Gengar dove into Volkner. The man seized over, clutching his abdomen. A moment later, he leaned upwards.

"Not real?" Volkner said. Yet, it was an echoing voice, like it had been put through a synthesizer. "We are very real, Jasmine."

Volkner, or the body of Volkner, waved his arms, directing the Will-o-Wisp clones towards me.

"Azu!"

Azumarill! It jumped in front of me, protecting me. Ethan's Pokémon flailed against the onslaught, trying its best and succeeding only at being a punching bag.

"This way!" Ethan beckoned. I followed.
My legs and feet hurt. My lungs are out of breath. I've done way too much fleeing for tonight, and there was no end in sight.

"Where- huffhuff- are we- huffhuff- going?"

"There's the entrance lobby. Those doors should be unlocked."

"I- can you see the Gengars?"

"Wah? No, they're not Gengars, they're… never mind."

"Wait up!"

I chanced a look backwards. Volkner was sprinting after us, and behind him galloped Azumarill, a deathly glow in its eyes.

"Volkner! Are you alright?!"

He caught up to us. I kept a certain distance between him and myself, at least long enough to observe his demeanor.

"The… whatever it is… hopped into your Pokémon!" Volkner exclaimed, alarm and shock in his voice and in his eyes.

The Pokémon had closed the distance. Volkner pushed me back behind him, while Ethan jumped out in front. I felt humiliated and yet grateful to have the two men throwing themselves out front in an attempt to defend me.

Now is NOT the time for pride, Jasmine! Swallow it and let the idiot males sacrifice themselves for your sake! Just stay alive!

Ethan raised a pokeball.

"Return!"

The laser hit the Azumarill, dissolving it into compact data-energy and sucking it back into the ball.

"Huh. I didn't expect that to work."

The ball lighted into violet flames, and began glowing. An ominous synthetic cackle burst from within it. Ethan batted it away, while Volkner was already urging me to flee again. The three of us made it to the opposite side of the ballroom.

"Here."

While they fidgeted with the door (something had been jammed into its latch), I took a peep back into the room.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh afterlife and all that is holy.

The ballroom was not empty at all. It was-

"Hraah!" Volkner yelled in exertion as he rammed the door with his shoulder, busting it open. Just as quickly, he was pushed back and the door slammed shut, throwing him to the ground. Ethan rushed at it, but couldn't budge it.
"Hold it! They're coming in!"

I heard voices, human voices, on the other side.

"Let us in! Let us in!" I shouted, my eyes widening, my feet peddling backwards until they hit the wall.

"It's a trap!"

"Don't let them in!"

"Donphan!"

A grunt, a stamp of feet, and a crack, and the door bounced open, sending bodies flying.

"Jasmine, hurry up!"

I can't move. I'm still trying to comprehend the horrifying sight of a few dozen zombies slogging across the ballroom floor towards us. I couldn't tell whether they were the corpses of people or Pokémon, but they certainly weren't "alive". Not with the way they shuffled, the unnatural groaning coming from their throats, and most especially the blue glow emanating from their eyes.

"Jasmine, get in!" Ethan and Volkner ran back for me, grabbing me by the shoulders and forcibly hauling me inside the doorway. The crowd scurried to re-block the opening. Moments later the broken doors began trembling, coming under a relentless assault.

I found myself laying on my butt with arms stretched backwards to support me, and breathing very heavily. The toll of the night's exertions intermixed with fear and adrenaline was just about bringing me to the limit.

"That was…" someone mumbled out loud.

Ethan stumbled up to me.

"Jasmine, why the heck did you freeze up-" and he stopped himself mid-sentence and suddenly turned around.

"What were those?" I gasped out. Ethan didn't hear me, or otherwise refused to answer, because he simply stood there, back-facing-me, and sulked.

"Ethan, what were those? Why aren't you answering me?"

"Please… stand up," he asked softly.

"Why?"

"Just, because."

"Why must I stand? I can't! It's impossible! I'm tired! Why don't you sit?!" I reasoned in short, to-the-point logical bursts. "What's wrong with you?"

He mumbled something that I couldn't quite catch.

"What is it? I hate when people mumble around me!"

I do hate it, it feels like they're talking about me in a negative light and don't want me to hear it.
"Um..." he began. "It's your... undergarments. They're showing."

THUNK.

That's the sound of my thighs instantaneously clamping shut.

"Why would you think about something like that in a situation like this?!" I whined out loud, embarrassed.

"Who is it?"

"Who came in?"

"Some trainers."

"Are they real? Are they alive?"

Mistrustful murmurs broke out all around us.

"I'm alive!" I shouted back. "I'm a Gym Leader, so is he-" I scanned around, looking for Volkner. He was leaning against the wall by the door, apparently catching his breath. Although, I would say he also looked like he was contemplating something, because of the way his head was tilted and his hand was rapping the wall.

"Who? Gym leaders? Are you with the staff? Do you know what happened to that guy?"

"A lot happened. We're missing some of the staff. What happened here?"

A woman kneeled down beside me.

"We started hearing strange noises and things swishing through the air. Before we knew it, some of the people starting getting attacked. Then... they died. Or we thought they died. But then they started rising up. And the lights started flashing and weird glowing things were flying around. It was terrible. We all rushed into the lobby here to get away, but the doors are locked from the outside. We're stuck."

I gave the jittery woman a hug, appreciating the bravery it must've taken just to keep a level head and deliver that explanation to me.

"Does anyone know what happened to the staff that were here?" Whitney, Ethan and Lyra's acquaintance- Silver, was his name?-, bastard #1- I mean Falkner, bastard #2- I mean that Proton fellow, and the others- they should all be around here.

"They got caught by the... mob," the lady told me. "They fought to give us time to evacuate into here. Some people ran towards the exterior doors, but they were locked. I saw some of the staff run that way with their Pokémon, to try to help them. But the zombies were so close, and then-"

It was asking too much. This lady's gaze sank to the floor and did not return. Her body began shivering. I tried putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder- but her skin was cold, and she did not make any gesture of appreciating it. Looking around, I saw the same face in each one of the trainers.

All young, all lost in disbelief.

As in, "How could this happen?" was written across their downcast stares. We thought we knew how the world functioned, what was possible and was imaginary. Certainly there were mysteries to be solved, but they were always rare, and far off, and happened to other people, and had scientific
explanations. Most of all, they were not supposed to be so violent.

My gaze went to Ethan. He had a different expression. Furrowed eyebrows, eyes staring off into the distance. It was the same with Volkner. With a little effort, I brought the trio together.

"They're all shell-shocked," I said. "They don't know what to make of this."

"We were just assaulted by ghosts and zombies," Volkner said deadpan. "What did you expect?"

"I'm saying, even now, do you honestly believe we're under attack by the netherworld?" I asked.

"It looked pretty real to me," Volkner said.

"I don't know about that," Ethan replied to him. "This is all too unbelievable for me."

They're trying to put up a brave front, but even I can sense the doubt in them. They can't decide whether it's ghosts or humans or Pokémon or something entirely different attacking us. I've got to show them that it really doesn't matter- we need to take action right now, regardless.

"Did I ever tell you guys the story about the gym basement?" I said. They shook their heads 'no'. "Morty roped me into exploring a supposedly haunted basement. It was dark, and spooky, and freaky things began happening to us, just like now. In the end, though, it was just a Haunter."

The pair took notice.

"Guess what? We caught that Haunter. It's the same bastard that leads his team now, his Gengar. Now I'm not saying this is just a bunch of Pokémon, but I'm convinced there's a rational explanation for everything that's happened."

Volkner nodded, understanding.

"It's easy to forget that when a banshee jumps into your chest and starts using you like a marionette," he said, somewhat shakenly. "But you're right. It's not a question of who's doing this, but how we're going to react to it."

"Right," Ethan added. "First, we survive. Then we can get answers."

"With courage, we can do both," I told them. "But if we just sit on our butts and give up, like I saw you two doing, we're not going to survive this."

Ethan shook his head. Volkner spoke out loud.

"That's not what we were doing," he said.

"I don't want to hear excuses. Come with me!"

"She really is the iron-clad Gym Leader," Volkner muttered. Ethan nodded in agreement.

I practically dragged the pair across the room. As we passed the entrance to the ballroom, we took nervous glances towards it. The zombies, or whatever they were, pounded the doorway relentlessly, but the makeshift barricade the folks had erected was holding. At the other side, we arrived at a row of terminals inset into the walls.

"Are you scared?" Volkner asked.

"No."
"You talk about courage but you froze up back in the ballroom. It's okay to admit when you're scared."

"There's a difference, now," I said defensively.

"What is that?"

"You'll see."

"You sure you're okay? You're shaking."

"Adrenaline," I said succinctly. I gestured at the nearest terminal.

"Can you get this to work?" I asked. Volkner inspected it.

"A PC?"

I had remembered passing these on my way inside. Because of the power outage, I had assumed they were as useless as the lights and cell phones. However, Volkner mentioned the power wasn't necessarily out, which left a slim hope for me.

"Yes. I want my Pokémon," I told him.

"Why?" he asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Ethan inserted. "So we can fight back."

I nodded to him, and he nodded back. We shared a grin, the first in a long while. Seems like he's caught on faster than goldie-locks. "I don't care if it's evil spirits, dark Pokémon, or rogue assassins, I refuse to believe this is something we can't fight!"

Volkner chuckled, and resigned himself to following my lead.

"Stubborn, as always."

Finally.

We've been combating fear and disbelief, uncertainty and doubt this entire time. I've come to realize, it is our own fear that's been our greatest enemy this evening. We can face this threat down decisively, and if we die, at least we'll go down struggling to the last.

It took five minutes for Volkner to fix the machine. He kept mumbling something about computer viruses and networking. In the end, he got his Electivire to peel off the access panel by force. A freshly-exposed power switch was flipped, the machine rebooted, and we were in business.

"Okay. You'd better do what you need to do in a hurry, before the main server re-infects this terminal," he warned.

"You may want to go faster than that," Ethan uttered. I followed his wide-eyed stare. Outside, beyond the glass exterior, stood a giant.

It was like a Tentacruel; like an octopus or squid or jellyfish Pokémon, but uglier, and with thicker tentacles, and it glowed neon pink and purple. Also, it was huge. As in, six-stories-tall huge. One massive, translucent arm reached through the bay windows. It passed through them effortlessly, like a ghost, before scooping up several shocked bystanders. The people and Pokémon it touched began glowing pink and then fainted.
"Okay, this is getting a little too much to ignore now," Volkner uttered.

I ignored him.

I wasn't scared. Quite the opposite. I was emboldened. Nothing could touch me now.

Because I just extracted six pokeballs from the PC.

"Ghost Eraser time," I said coolly.

The next ten minutes was… chaotic. Awesome. Frightening. Dizzying. Everything happened in a blur.

The giant translucent monster was joined by three of its pals. The crowd of humans rioted, running to the corner and the walls. They busted down the doors to the ballroom and poured through them. The zombies didn't stand a chance, they were crushed under the stampede. Will-o-Wisps and auroras and fogbanks and strobe lights broke out across the ceiling, turning the world into a blinding special effects show. Battles exploded across the convention center.

The first squid monster had phased most of its body into the lobby now. People were dropping left and right. One of its tree-sized limbs took a slow, heavy swing in our direction.

"Magnezone, Thunderbolt!"

"Electivire, Zap Cannon!"

Our Pokémon added to the incandescent atmosphere with their attacks. The limb was vaporized instantly.

"I'll hold these big ones off!" Volkner shouted. "You help the others!"

"Can you do it alone? You'll get overwhelmed!" I cried, concerned. Volkner gave me a grin over his shoulder.

"It's not like you care about me," he said in a smug, vindictive tone. Then he turned his attention back to the monsters. "Get going!"

I nodded, and readied my pokeballs. We dashed to the door; by the time we reached it, I had my full team out and ready. Inside, the ballroom was absolute hell. The living and the dead intermixed, special attacks and spectral filaments flashed across the air like gunfire in a video game, plasma sizzled across the walls. Black silhouettes of Gengars and Misdreavuses rained down on us from above. Blobs of ectoplasm emerged from the floor and swallowed humans whole. The shrieks of ghouls and humans and the crackle of Ice Beams and Shadow Balls were only drowned out by the reverberating boom of thunder. Through it all I pushed forward, unleashing the full might of my Pokémon, six at once, upon anything that seemed remotely threatening.

My Pokémon… my good, dependable, loyal Pokémon. Without even hesitating, they're flinging themselves against human corpses, intercepting great billowing balls of violet flames, grappling with pale lichs and morphing demons, all without even a moment's hesitation, fear, or bewilderment. They're braver than I. Which is why, seeing them so methodically calm and aggressive in the face of overwhelming freakishness, I found the courage to stand up to what had made me scared shitless not half-an-hour ago.

'My Pokémon will protect me from my fears,' I thought.
"Even the fears that can't be beaten?"

Morty's voice, but with the now-familiar chilling depth. The persecutorial Morty-gar had returned, right at my back. I twirled around, attempting to chop the offender in half. It leapt out of the way, landing ten yards out. A group of zombies flanked it on either side.

"You're the leader," I said.

It took a quick bow.

"That is correct, little girl."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I am an amalgamation of all the fears and regrets of humanity. I am Fear itself. What do you see when you look upon me? A Pokémon? A Gengar? That is not my true form. My image is merely the receptacle of all of your doubts and dreads."

"Meh, sounds like a bad sci-fi script."

"It doesn't matter what you think of me," it said. "Only… what you think of your own inner self. My best weapon is Reflection, ripping away the illusions one has cast upon oneself in order to show the dark and ugly soul lurking underneath. From there, it's just a matter of letting the individual self-destruct. I've already seen into your dark little corner and it's very dark and dismal indeed. You wouldn't last five days were it to come out."

I grimaced.

"You'll find I'm tougher than that," I spit out through gritted teeth.

"Oh, ohoho, false courage, I like that. It makes the downfall sweeter." The Morty-gar grinned, one of those insane expressions with the face split from one side to the other. "Of course, this is assuming my minions don't rip you to shreds first."

The zombies pounced. Rotting bodies flipped through the air, gaping maws pointed at me.

"SCHTEEL!"

The lot of them were batted aside by an Iron Tail. Steelix circled me, protecting me from the waves of undead coming in from all sides.

Skarmory scythed through everything in his path. Tyko Bubble Beamed the field, or used Water Gun to knock off those that had managed to clamber atop Steelix's hide. Magneton and Magnezone zapped flying ghouls, and shielded us with Light Screens when the rain of dark projectiles swept over us. Magcargo vaporized them en masse with great gouts of Lave Plume.

Yet, the bodies were endless. I felt something was wrong, very wrong. There hadn't been this many party guests to zombify. How were they getting fresh bodies for their troops?

"Heheheh!"

Morty-gar kept pitching powerful Shadow Balls at us that had to be blocked with precision Light Screens.

"Ouch!"
The last Shadow Ball burst into pieces upon smashing itself against the Screen- and then the remnant shards promptly re-curved around the shield and splattered across me and my Pokémon.

"Get that Gengar! Kill it!" I ordered. Magnezone sent a Thunderbolt in its direction. There was a giant flash and boom: real thunder from the storm outside. I couldn't tell if Magnezone's attack had hit true or not.

"Nyah nyah, catch me if you can!" The Gengar was back-skipping across the floor, even as a literal tsunami of zombies rushed forward to attack us. I thought we were going to be overwhelmed.

"Donphan! Heracles!"

"Brutus! Lancaster!"

What could only be described as a wall of brute force plowed through the zombies like a bulldozer. A Feraligatr, Donphan, Heracross, and Tyranitar worked together to open a path forward, sending zombies flying like splashed water.

I took a glance behind me.

Ethan and Silver were holding out pokeballs in each hand.

"Go! Stop it!" Ethan yelled.

"I've heard you were one of the best in Johto. Show me what you can do!" Silver commanded.

"Yes!" I shouted, saluting them.

They were putting their trust in me.

I jumped atop Steelix, and in an instant my mobile fortress was plowing its way forward.

"Magnezon, concentrate on screening! Tyko, call targets for Magnezone! Skarmory, pass here! Magneton, mercury!"

Magnezon rounded up a batch of concentrated magnetic energy into a static Mirror Shot. I had it attach this to Magcargo, and chucked Magcargo up to where a diving Skarmory could pick him up.

"Cut him off!"

"SCHTEEL!"

Thunder-infused Dragon Breath bellowed out from Steelix's maw. A clean path was torched all the way to the grand staircase. There, a body lay on the ground wrapped in swathes of shadow. Mortygar hovered over it, surrounded by little white flares. It was chanting something to the corpse.

"What is that? Tobias's body?"

For a moment, I was afraid it was going to turn Tobias's legendaries on us.

The reality was much, much worse.

"Ah! You're here already! Useless undead pieces of shit," the evil Gengar moaned. "I'll let you deal with this while I go visit your friends..." It tried skipping away, bouncing up the staircase. The pompous, arrogant idiot... it chose to make a mocking, tongue-dangling face at me as it retreated. Which meant it did not see the dive-bombing Skarmory coming from behind. Magcargo was released
like a ground-pounder, nailing the ghost square in the back.

"GRAH! You!" It danced in pain and fury. Its claws came down, viciously slashing Magcargo. Little chunks of burning pitch went flying off in all directions. It might have shredded Magcargo to pieces, had Skarmory not swooped in and forced it to back away. A barrage of Thunderbolts and Mirror Shots from Magneton followed. None could hit, the monster was too agile.

"Your aim isn't good enough," it sneered. The Gengar fell into its own shadow and zigzagged away, all the way to the top of the stairs. Once at the zenith, it took up a solitary position.

"Shadow World," it muttered. It raised its hand.

All the auras of the room shuddered, and then began drawing inwards, sucked towards the Gengar's palm. A lightless pitch began forming, expanding outwards.

"Weavile, Ice Shard!"

"Thunder!"

"Hydro Pump!"

Ranged elementals attacks poured in from my fellow trainers. They looked about to tear the evil overlord a new one, but an inch away they veered suddenly and inexorably upwards, getting drawn into the dark orb. With each wild, desperate beam, the orb grew, and grew, until it could encompass a small car, and then a small bedroom.

Morty-gar's grin took a turn for the demonic. Its eyes burst into flame.

"I'll draw you all into the nightmare world. I WILL SHOW YOU TRUE FEAR! BEG FOR MERCY! BEG! BEG!!!"

I leapt off of Steelix, allowing him to take up his position.

"Formation T. Rail gun," I commanded.

Magcargo had not taken the Shadow Claw beating in vain. The positively-charged Mirror Shot he had carried was now concentrated directly within Morty-gar's core.

Magnezone lay atop Steelix. Steelix coughed, and then pointed his maw outwards. A single spine of steel emerged from his mouth, crackling with power. Magnezone lit up. An ear-piercing whine sounded out from the Pokémon.

The Morty-gar was about to say something, maybe to ask what I was up to. It didn't get the chance, however, because it took .005 seconds for the 10-pound projectile to explode out of Steelix's mouth, cover the 20 yards of distance between Steelix and its target, ram itself straight down the bastard's throat, and unleash a 700 million joule electrical discharge throughout its body.

Which was very pretty and all, but truly nothing compared to the unexpected bonus of causing a concentrated imbalance in electrical charges. One that was strong enough to attract an actual lightning bolt straight through the ceiling.

5-billion joules of electrical energy hit the specter in an instant. Morty-gar was left naught but a sizzling blob of ashes.

I took a step forward, tentatively.
It heaved.

"You're still alive?" I asked.

"You're still alive?" it echoed back at me. A spindly, crumbling finger pointed towards me. Or, rather, the object that lay directly before me. "I... am... fear... itself. I am immortal," it gasped out. Even as its remains fell to dust, my own body turned to jelly.

Not because the object before me began rising. Not because I realized it was a body being zombified. Not because I was out front and vulnerable.

It was because, what I had assumed was the corpse of Tobias, was not Tobias.

It was Morty.

"No," I whispered.

I backed away.

I tripped, fell over backwards.

"Steelix, help me. Someone..." I whispered.

It felt like no one heard me.

My Pokémon collapsed, having spent too much energy on that one attack.

"Help me."

Morty's form staggered towards me. His face was hollow, pale, drawn, and dry, like a mummy. His eye sockets were hidden behind the goggles of his costume, but through the plastic, I didn't see anything. They looked empty. What looked like dried blood spewed across his cheeks. One gnarled hand lifted, reaching out for me.

"You're not Morty... you're... no..."

I stuttered, stumbled, drew backwards. I fled. It followed.

"It."

That was the problem.

If it were anyone else, I could handle this. I could fight. I could try to save myself. Yet, it had to be him. The man I had been preparing to give my heart to. Dead. Nothing but a memory and a mindless body out to tear me to bits. Even if I live through this, what would I have left?

Nothing worthwhile.

So here I am, cowering and stumbling until I had gotten myself trapped in a corner, with the risen corpse of my childhood friend slowly, unstoppably, marching towards me, and the sudden realization of why I was afraid dawned on me- and the meaning of it made me want to laugh and cry at the same time.

You've lost him, Jasmine. You've lost him and that upsets you. A guy. A man, a male, and you care about him. You're human, after all. You have a heart that can love, after all that's happened.
Yes, you have a heart. Isn't it so sad? Here, when your life's about to end, and you're just now realizing how much you wished all that crap hadn't happened? You're realizing how much you wanted to live and love and be loved just like any other girl? You poor child!

I told you I was immortal! You can burn my avatar to cinders, you won't ever be rid of me.

I realize that now.

That's the spirit. Accept the inevitable.

But, at least, I learned the truth about myself.

The truth? That you're just a sad little girl with regrets, who's going to die a pathetic death at the hands of her zombified lover? Very funny indeed.

It's better than what was intended for me.

That's… what?

The disembodied voice drifted off, as if that one little sentence had put to rest every doubt and fear I had harbored all these years.

What is your deal? it asked from far away, as if confused, baffled, and repulsed.

I'm not sorry.

Not sorry? For what?

For living.

…

He's bearing down on you now.

I'm petrified. There's nowhere to run. No way to fight, as evidenced by the table he just sent flying aside with a casual flick of the arm. No reason to, either, I might as well just let my life end and hope for an afterlife. Even as his tattered Ghost Eraser vest fills my vision, I can't do anything, I certainly can't bring myself to look up into his soulless face. All I can see is the seared remains of his utility belt and the six dusk balls clinging to it. A cold hand dug into my shoulder.

This is it. This is the e-

Wait a second.

Dusk balls……………..

…

Fuck, I'm an idiot.

The creature gargled in my face, preparing to feast upon me.

I kicked it in the shin, then in the stomach, sending it stumbling backwards.

"How could I be so- completely- utterly- absolutely- stupid!" I screamed out loud.

"JASMINE! DIEEEEEE!!!!!!!!!!" the zombie screeched, and lunged back towards me.
I stepped forward. My head bowed, my hand balled in a fist, shaking. My words came naturally, instinctively, and deliberately.

"For the love of the golden sun and the silver moon, so that justice and kindness may prevail all the days of the week, on this hand I swear I will uphold my oath."

I raised my eyes, and my fist, staring down the incoming zombie with indomitable determination. My voice rose to a crescendo.

"This hand of mine glows with an awesome power. It's burning grip tells me to defeat you! Take this! My love! My anger! And all my sorrow! SUPER! MAGICAL! SOLAR! SAILOR! PUNCH!!!!!!"

My fist met the zombie full in the face, my whole weight thrown behind it.

For a microsecond, I thought I had made a mistake, and was about to break every bone in my hand. Then, the zombie's face gave way, like putty, and the entirety of the being purporting to be Morty's deceased corpse shifted. Its toes lifted off the ground, going airborne, as light and feeble as a rag doll. It created an absolutely beautiful arc as it was flung by the force of my punch, glided across the air, and then, upon reaching the far wall, splattered in a dozen different directions.

The entirety of the room, exhausted humans and the zombies besetting them, ghouls and specters flittering about, Pokémon of every size, shape, and status, all turned their attention to my one defiant attack.

"It's a hoax!" I yelled at the top of my lungs.

My damning finger pointed out the remains of "Morty's" body. Or, should I say...

"Ditto."

The face morphed into the three plain, horizontal slabs universally characteristic of the most contemptuous Pokémon alive.

A god-damned Ditto.

Which means...

I pointed an accusatory finger to the top of the steps, where the fake Gengar had been kabitzed.

"I know you're there! This is all your doing!" I shouted. "Show yourself."

"Tsk tsk tsk. You were always so very smart, Jasmine."

The auroras and Will-o-Wisps and mists and strobe-effects evaporated. The zombies toppled over. The multitude of spirits faded into thin air, as did the purple squid-monsters. Silence and calm overcame the formerly chaotic scene.

Spotlights blinked on, gliding across the ballroom, and coming to rest at the target location. A poof of smoke erupted, and from it, a figure emerged, stepping into the limelight. He held his hands outwards, a massive, unapologetic grin covering his face. The swirl of his hair bounced up and down, as if to mimic his excitement. His cerulean cape floated, carried on an intangible breeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I must commend you for the grandest of performances! You have suffered all the "tricks" our staff could muster, and now, it is time to enjoy your "treats". Happy Halloween!"
he announced in a big, bellowing voice.

The man stepped forward, hands held outwards in grand gesture. Everyone in the room, having come over their shock, began clapping, in cheerful acknowledgement of the great hoax that had been played upon them.

All except one.

"Eusine! I am going to kill you!!!!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.
"How did you know it was a Ditto?" Morty asked.

I sighed.

It would be annoying to have to explain my reasoning out to this blockhead, but I feel compelled to take the opportunity to school him. His preying upon my gullibility and insecurity was getting tiresome, and I didn't want him, or anyone else, to think they could manipulate me so easily anymore.

"Your costume. It was too damned perfect, I remember. I was jealous of it. You even had legitimate Geist Balls on your belt. Do you know what the one thing a Ditto can't replicate is?"

"What?"

"Pokeballs. Any kind of pokeball."

"Really? Why is that?" he asked, rhetorically. He knew full well that Dittos cannot replicate pokeballs. I wouldn't have spotted the essential clue if he didn't. Still, I appreciate the fact that he's playing along.

"Let me demonstrate," I said, and took out my pokeballs. The six of them were lined up on the Ouija board that served as our table. Currently the balls were in travel mode, meaning they were compacted to the size of golf balls. I picked one out, Steelix's, and clicked the button. The ball instantly ballooned to deployment mode, about the size of a baseball. "See that? Ever wonder how a pokeball changes size? It's not collapsing in on itself mechanically- you know, like a spyglass or telescope. Somehow it's stowing away that extra volume and mass somewhere else. How is it doing that?"

"It creates a pocket dimension," one of the strangers answered.

I smirked. The question was meant to be rhetorical, but that's okay.

"Yes. Everyone knows that," I said, continuing. "It uses string dissonance technology to cram the particles that make up a Pokémon into a smaller space than what physics normally allows, thus creating a 'pocket dimension'. Now, here's where it gets technical. The device that accomplishes this feat, the Meta-energy Dissonance Prism Unit, is big. Like, really big. It weighs twenty pounds, three feet across, shaped kind of like a Solrock. It can't possibly fit into a pokeball, as is. Along with that, all the devices and computers needed to make a modern pokeball function- they can't fit into a pokeball either! Or at least, what you and I think of as the size of a normal pokeball."

Here I took Steelix's pokeball and began tampering with the mode toggle (the thing that controlled its size). After a few seconds, it snapped. The Pokeball popped like a balloon, except it didn't quite break, so much as forcefully expanded to its actual size.

"This is a pokeball without the Dissonance Prism Unit acting upon it," I said. I tried holding up the ball, which was now larger than a beach ball and heavier than a bowling ball. My muscles gave out and the thing fell onto the table. "When they manufacture a pokeball, the Prism Unit is built first. The unit transfers itself into the pocket dimension, and then it's keyed to a specific pokeball. The prism unit can then shrink the pokeball's volume and weight down to a comfortable, fits-in-your-palm size."

"How do you know all this?" Morty asked.
"Probation homework," I retorted. "A chapter on Pokémon catching methods, followed by a voluntary wiki binge on Pokéball science, ending with an episode of "How it's Made: Pokedevices." Do you have any idea how big Silph Co.'s factory is? It was a repurposed rocket manufactory warehouse. Space rockets: you know, the ones the size of small skyscrapers. Big, BIG building."

"Okay, we get it."

The woman, Narina was her name, chimed in.

"That's really interesting! But how does Ditto fit into this?"

With a click and some grinding, I forced Steelix's pokeball back to its normal orange-fruit size. The pause gave me a moment to organize another round of science-babble.

"How do you think Dittos copy stuff?"

"I assume they just… copied whatever they saw," Narina said. "I've never thought about it much."

"That's kind of correct- well, for some stuff. Over the course of its lifetime, Ditto accumulate a genetic library of sorts. If you've ever seen them in their free time, they're constantly rubbing, wrapping, and cramming themselves onto anything that captures their curiosity. Their outer cells react to whatever they touch, taking in the chemical and physical properties of the object. So, when they want to transform, they do this," I said, and held out a hand. After ten or so seconds, Morty got the hint and handed me a pen. I began drawing on the Ouija board's surface.  

"Here's a Pokémon, a human, and a machine." I drew rough effigies of each, and then an arrow from each to their own box. "This box is the image, or imprint, that a Ditto captures when it sees something or remembers something it wants to transform into. The imprint is then checked against the genetic library it has stored." I drew a duplicate of the Pokémon, human, and machine in the boxes. From the top box, containing a Pokémon, I drew an arrow to a circle, and wrote DNA in it.

"Ditto are weird. In their DNA coding, they seem to have the DNA of every Pokémon on the planet. So that when the imprint goes to check the DNA, it's got a good template for what to transform into. The imprint and the DNA are sent along in a bundle to the cellular level, where mutations are triggered that allow the Ditto to transform. Because it has this pre-stored DNA info, a Ditto's most accurate copies are that of other Pokémon."

I repeated this process for the human, but skipped the DNA section, and instead made a cloud and wrote "memory" in there.

"Humans are more difficult. Ditto may or may not have a sample of a human's DNA to work off of, but they can't replicate the minute differences of a human brain. So, while they might be able to copy, very roughly, what a person acts like, they'll never be able to pass as a fully-sapient human being. Still, if they've gotten a sample of the person's DNA, they can replicate looks very accurately."

For the final flow chart, I simply left out the intermediate steps altogether.

"For inanimate objects, there's no DNA, pre-stored or acquired, to use. Ditto have to rely entirely on visual cues and guess work. The more complex an object is, the harder it is for Ditto to copy it. A hammer is easy, a diamond drill-bit, not so much."

When finished, my chart looked like this:

Pokémon-> Pokémon(imprint)-> [DNA]-> cells-> Copy(accurate)
Humans-> Human(imprint)-> {DNA(?)}-> cells-> Copy(semi-accurate)

Object(pokeball)-> Object(imprint)-> cells-> Copy(variable accuracy)

"Now, guess what a Ditto has a really, really tough time replicating accurately?"

A hand was raised by a young man. "The Prism thing."

"Exactly! In fact, they can't replicate it at all! Dissonance Prism Units work on the sub-atomic level. They manipulate things tinier than quarks and electrons. Dittos can only mutate on the molecular level, at best.

Sadly, Ditto have no imagination. They are entirely reliant on imprints in order to transform. They can only transform into things they have seen, and even then, they can only transform exactly into that object. That's why you'll never see a Ditto transform into something crazy, like the Gojira Monster."

A man in the back cleared his throat. It was Tobias, who spoke up.

"Very perceptive. We had quite the difficult task in training the Dittos to turn into zombies. We had to create a role-model, if you will, out of Will. It took all morning to apply the make-up and affects. He was not at all happy about the ordeal."

"No, I was not," Will interjected. Narina giggled, obviously on the giving end of the make-up application torture session.

"Mmm. So, may I ask, what happened when you tried to make the Ditto create Morty's Geist Balls?"

"It didn't work," Tobias answered. I nodded, satisfied my theory was panning out.

"It's because they were shoddy, non-functional, and the size of beach balls, weren't they?"

"Again, correct."

I smiled.

"That's because, the Ditto tried to replicate the pokeball, all the way to the inner machinery. But, without being able to duplicate the complex Prism Unit, they couldn't shrink the Geist Balls down from their actual size," I said.

"Yes. We tried forcing it, but it was like a bowling alley with no safety rails."

"So there you have it. Dittos couldn't copy the Geist Balls that were a part of Morty's costume."

"You are… such a nerd," Morty told me.

My smile grew to Koffing proportions.

"When I saw the fake Morty zombie toting around Dusk Balls, I thought something was really suspicious. It meant someone or something had given the zombie fake pokeballs to replace the Geist Balls."

"What are Geist Balls?" a stranger asked. I allowed Morty the pleasure of answering this one.

"They're just Pokeballs with a good homing mechanism on them, to make it easier to hit phasing
Ghost-types," he explained. "They were made up for the Ghost Eraser movie, but when the series became popular Silph Co. decided to invent a real product line for them. Of course, they don't work nearly as good as the movie versions."

"So!" I butted in. Best not to let Morty start on Ghost Eraser, it's the one subject he will rant about for hours on end and never shut up. "It was odd that someone had to replace the Geist Balls for Dusk Balls, because, if they were actually raising a dead Morty into undeath, he'd still have his Geist Balls on him. My intuition was that this zombie was a doppelganger, which, for the aforementioned reasons, immediately made me think of Dittos. The fact that Dusk Balls were used struck me as too crude and too careless for it to be anything other than the work of human pranksters employing Dittos. If it was a hallucination my mind would have projected Geist Balls onto his belt, not Dusk Balls."

"Ah, so that's it. Although, you were so sure it was a hoax just because of this singular hint?" Tobias asked.

"I've dealt with a situation I thought was supernatural before, but ended up being the work of a silly Pokémon."

I eyed Morty, and the Pokeball at his waist containing Gengar, before continuing. "Because of that experience, I've become extremely suspicious of anything that purports to be "supernatural". It only took the littlest crack in the façade to convince me it was all fake. I made a guess and was right. The zombies were Dittos, and everything else was the work of... special effects, I guess. You'll have to explain that to me. Anyways, congratulations. At least for a little while, you had me and everyone else suckered and scared out of our panties. This was one of the worst nights of my life... All thanks to that grinning maniac right there."

"Ah, your praises, they shower me," the grinning maniac retorted.

Eusine sat beside Morty, a barely-contained drivel of laughter dancing across his lips. His cape was hung on the chair behind him, exposing his clashingly-coordinated jazz suit. He had calmly and patiently waited for me to finish dissecting the flaw in his plan, before finally speaking up. "Your intellect is astounding, when given enough time to work, Jasmine dear. I'm just glad we led on as long as we did; I felt certain you all would catch on earlier. It was fun, while it lasted."

"Eusine, I have your death warrant. I'll nail it through that eggshell forehead of yours when you're asleep," I growled.

"Spooky! Scary! Although, my motel room is on the second floor, and there are no elevators. I am out of your reach."

"Ugh!"

We were gathered here, in the same nook I had first met Morty earlier this evening, discussing the grand success of the hoax. By 'we' I meant Morty, Eusine, and I, as well as Tobias, Will, Narina, and a bunch of other strangers. And by "we", I really mean to say I and Morty and a bunch of strangers, and Eusine just happened to have escaped my wrath and was also present.

"That was too funny," Morty commented. I fumed, remembering the ordeal.

After so many hours of dancing, sprinting around, coming under attack both mentally and physically, being drugged, going through multiple adrenaline highs, and actively participating in a Pokémon war, I was ten kinds of exhausted by the time I sprinted off to strangle the grand perpetrator. He
easily fluttered out of reach, refusing to be caught, just like the Pokémon he so obsessively chases. I
had finally collapsed on the grand staircase, unable to climb it in order to reach Eusine, who was
taunting me from the top. Morty eventually appeared and found me there in a pitiful state. He carried
me to our present location, the others joined us, and that was that.

"You better hope I don't ever recover, Eusine. Dead man walking, I swear!"

"What a dire acquaintance you have there, Morty! Knowing your antics, it's a wonder that you're still
alive and present!" Eusine said, ribbing his friend.

"It's like a matador handling a Tauros. You need to learn to use the teasing as a diversion, rather than
a bulls-eye," Morty said while leaning back, throwing a wink over in my direction.

"Hmm? I understand, but that doesn't seem to work for me. What is your trick?"

"You need to know the victim's soft spot, what exactly makes them feel small and insecure," Morty
answered.

"Ooooh, I see. And what is Miss Mikan's soft spot?" Eusine asked that question in such a dirty tone,
I wanted to gag. I looked to Morty, hoping he wouldn't force me to add him to the night's hit list.

"Mmmm." The grown man-child rolled his eyes. "Not saying."

"Aww, spoil sport."

Well, the man-child goes against character.

_Maybe he wants to keep a monopoly on the teasing-Jasmine gig, _I thought.

"Ugghh," I groaned, in order to hide a brief, faint flush of a grin. "Hey, guys, could you please start
explaining how exactly you pulled off all that crap?"

"Like this!"

The room went dark suddenly.

Crap! AHHHHH! Someone's covering my eyes! Get them off!

"Get off!" I waved about.

My attacker relented, skipping around and into view. Lyra stood bouncing on her tippy-toes, with an
enormous grin plastered on her face. Behind her an exhausted looking Ethan and Silver filed in,
followed soon thereafter by Volkner and Flint.

"Were you in on this?" I demanded to know.

"No! Well, not originally." Lyra says that, and I could see Ethan behind her rolling his eyes.

"We're all here," Volkner announced.

"Where's Erika?" I asked.

"Somewhere. Don't know. Probably enjoying the bar," Morty answered.

"Where's Danielle?" I asked, this time addressing him directly. He leaned his head, as if thinking.
"Probably still in the tech booth, winding things down. It was a really complex stunt they pulled, not easy to organize at all."

"Well, that brings us back to how we pulled it off," Eusine intervened.

"Soooo?" I led in, tired, but curious enough to stave off both my rage and drowsiness. Eusine and company were all too happy to oblige.

"Well. Let's see. Tobias."

The legendary tamer gave a curt bow from his standing position.

"I merely slipped away to apply some cosmetics and props. Morty's friend orchestrated the lighting and air-conditioning units in perfect timing, and her Pokémon was also blessed with good timing. My part was rather simple to play, if not easy. It was quite difficult to stay still and feign death for so long a period. My secret? Niquin. Two pills and then I took a nap while everyone ran around ventilating their wits into the atmosphere."

"Huh."

Morty was the only one who had touched the "corpse"; I only looked at it from a distance, not close enough to tell if it was fake or not. The dim lighting and the tense situation made the body appear in worse condition than it really was. Maybe in broad daylight I wouldn't have been fooled by Tobias' feint.

"The specters in the lobby-" Morty began.

"Were Gengar and Mismagius," I intruded. "I already figured that one out. That's why they were missing when we were attacked in the hallway. They were the stalkers who were attacking us."

"Er, right," he said. "The cell phone jamming, the lights, the giant Malamar, e.t.c., were all Danielle's doing. She's pretty tech-savvy, but not just that, she really has a good instinct for the theatrical. Could've been a movie director."

"What's her job?" I inquired. Morty slipped me an eye.

"She's my assistant."

"I mean, her normal job. I doubt you can afford a full-time employee." I could barely afford part-time volunteers, there's no way he pays someone with so much talent enough to keep them sticking around.

"She's a performer. Kind of a dancer."

"Like the kimono girls?"

"Yeah, like that. She had a gig there, once, even. Why so curious?"

"I'm jealous!" I would have said, if I were honest.

"I'm worried for any woman who spends too much time around you," I said instead.

"You spend plenty of time around me, how is that turning out?" he fired back.

"Exactly, look how my life's been going since you came back into it."
"Point taken…" His countenance softened. He looked me in the eye. "You really don't need to worry. Danielle and I… there's nothing between us. Maybe animosity. She'd sooner blindside me and take over the gym than go out on a date."

"Nnn," I mumbled.

Explanation tentatively accepted.

The group sensed the seriousness of the last few seconds and grew restless. Need to get back on topic.

"And the Gengar?" I asked.

"What now?"

"Back to the topic. There was a persistent Gengar, not your own Pokémon, but one who had your voice. It was acting like the ring-leader of the operation."

"I don't know anything about that," Morty said. Eusine shook his head, as did Tobias.

"Maybe it was the gas," Eusine offered.

"Gas?"

"Dream gas. It causes a semi-lucid state of consciousness, bringing to surface whatever thoughts are on the mind. Naturally, in the setting we prepared, it would incur nightmares. In strong enough doses, you could even hallucinate."

"Sounds like an illegal drug," I muttered.

"It is, or at least, it would be, if collected and distilled. As is, we're using the raw material, and that would be problematic to ban completely."

"Why?"

"Because…" and Eusine released a Pokeball. A large, fat, floating blob of pink appeared in the air.

"What is that?"

"It's a Musharna. A Pokémon from Unova. It releases the dream gas as a way of neutralizing predators, or instilling pleasant feelings in its friends. Banning dream gas would be tantamount to banning Musharna, which would be a great affront to all the trainers who own one. So the government just criminalizes the milking and distillation of the gas itself. That also protects the species from being exploited. For our purposes, we brought in a few dozen and had them hide in the air vents."

"So I was right about that," Volkner said.

"You did think we got hit by a hallucinogen," I added.

"Well, to tell you the truth," he started. Morty threw a wadded-up piece of paper at him. Volkner flinched, looked annoyed, and then recomposed himself.

What was that about?

"What were you about to say?"
"Just, I was doubting the whole affair from the start. I just didn't want to say it, in case I was wrong. Even if it was way less likely to be real, I didn't want to do something stupid because I assumed it wasn't."

"Oh."

"Fuck- it was real enough for me."

Flint had been hanging in the background, but now he spoke up. He looked quite possibly more pissed than I had been at the height of my rage-fueled hysteria.

"Hey, you know, if it were my choice, I could think of way more fun things to do than get bashed over the head, blinded, gagged, handcuffed, and left in a broom closet for an hour." He slammed his fist into his palm.

He is mad.

"You were going to blab," Eusine said defensively.

"And you should have let me. Your prank went way too far."

"It was just a little fun, and we had everything accounted for. Food, a medical station, fail safes for the power, we checked every guests' background for heart pacers and PTSD, just in case anyone might be dangerously affected by the show. We even paid a hefty fee just to keep the Goldenrod emergency workers on standby tonight."

"You still went too far, and without consent. That's a rotten deal in my books."

"Oh, you're just being a poor sport. Should've played along like Volkner, he obviously had fun during the grand melee."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Both Volkner and Flint responded deadpan to Eusine's statement.

"I agree with him. You're evil and you perpetrated evil things upon guests that they did not agree to. Honestly, you'll probably be sued by someone. You're lucky if I don't sue you. You guys got really carried away," I added.

"Well, speaking of getting carried away…" Eusine said. He pointed out of the nook, into the ballroom proper, and up towards the ceiling. I followed, and seeing what he was pointing to, wilted in my seat.

"That's not- you made me do it," I tried excusing myself.

In the middle of the ceiling a two foot hole lay gaping wide-open. Its edges were melted and blackened, and rain dripped in from the exposed sky.

"I suppose, if you sue me and win, you might be able to foot the repair bills for that," he said nonchalantly.

"…"

My response consisted of silence and a facepalm.

"That was so cool!" Lyra piped in. Heretofore she had been having her own conversation with the people on the other side of the nook, but now she seemed interested in our conversation. "I mean, I guess I wasn't doped in the gas so I didn't exactly see what you were aiming for, but dang, you
would have destroyed it! Like, obliterated!"

I winced.

It dawned on me, that I really shouldn't have used Railgun.

Steelix upchucks a steel spine from within his gut and deploys it as a Stone Edge attack. Magnezone charges the projectile with an immense negative charge, as well as explosive electrical and gravitation energy, and then the two Pokémon combine to fire the spine at hypersonic velocity. Magneton puts a positive charge on the intended target, not only creating a homing beacon, but increasing the incoming projectile's speed even further due to the magnetic attraction. Upon impact, the stored charge explodes, sending out an electromagnetic explosion and blowing apart the spine into hundreds of shrapnel pieces, inflicting even greater damage.

It's a high-powered combo attack that could seriously injure even physically-tough Pokémon like Shuckle or Rhydon.

Yet, that power was nothing compared to the real, honest-to-god, natural lightning bolt that had honed in on the strong electrical charge the Railgun attack had given off. Thank goodness the Morty-gar was just an illusion. That bolt could have struck a real person or Pokémon- and they'd be dead, for certain.

You lucked out, Jasmine. And they really, really, really shouldn't have gassed you. Your head is full of deep turmoil, and letting a hallucinogen take hold and let that turmoil out into the real world is just a bad idea. You can't be blamed for reacting to the situation like your life depended on it. Under the context, Railgun seemed appropriate. The Morty-gar was sucking up the room with a miniature black hole. That's pretty dire, or would have been, if it were real.

The question is, would I be able to convince a judge that that was the case? Or would he treat the dream gas like alcohol, where intoxication was not an excuse? I have no guarantees that I'd be forgiven.

Or, I could keep my mouth shut, let Eusine foot the repair bill, and pursue my revenge in some other format.

I grumpily snuggled deeper into my seat.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this," Eusine said to Morty. The pair smiled to each other and then gazed upon me.

"I hate you two."

As far as having to deal with them goes-

Morty is bad. Eusine is worse. Morty is smart and perceptive; he has a way of waltzing with one's feelings, always dancing on the edge of intolerability before pulling back. One minute he could be infuriating, the next sly and funny, and the next sarcastic and annoying. Yet, once he got tired of picking on you, he'd dial it down and then maybe let you peep into his softer side, where he could be surprisingly kind and comforting.

Eusine's teasing was every bit as annoying, except without the finesse. But what made him head and shoulders more contemptible than Morty was that, even after he had reached his limit and entered into his "down-time", he would obsessively, tediously expunge upon one single Pokémon: Suicune. Without interference, it was entirely possible for him to carry the topic for five straight hours. I would know, I sat and listened to him for five straight hours before (it was a bus ride to
Blackthorn for a pokemon trainers' convention). It's a bad idea to ignore him, too, because he'll notice that and become offended. And if you so much as imply that this pokemon is not the goddess of the cosmos, you're in for a Geodude-meets-Surf torrent of obnoxious arguments and refutations.

"Did you know Suicune was scientifically proven to be the most beautiful Pokémon? In a 2008 survey of 14,578 people, Suicune captured 32% of the votes for the title of "Most-Beautiful and Graceful Pokémon", the most of any Pokémon. Now, it would have captured over half of all the votes if not for a persistent and misguided belief that a certain aqueous serpent in any way, shape, or form is, in fact, "beautiful". However, I have come to accept that a certain percentage of the human population have inherent genetic flaws in that part of the brain which governs perception. As for the other 50% who did not choose the wondrous Suicune or the pretentious Milotic, I see that they have mainly picked candidates from other regions, and so might not have had the chance to be fully informed of the existence of Suicune, and therefore do not yet appreciate its supreme beauty, grace, candor, nobility, and modest yet luxurious majesty."

This was what I found myself nodding off to about a half hour later, after the topic of conversation had meandered without guidance from one subject to the next. Morty looked like he was getting bored of it, too. Another young man, I think his name was Dexter, naively challenged Eusine's assertion, stating that the world-over adored Dragonair. Eusine turned on him at once. Having successfully divested ourselves of the nuisance, Morty and I snuck across to the other side of the nook.

"I can't believe that dimwit organized this entire hoax," I told Morty.

"He didn't, actually. He only funded it."

"I thought Tobias funded it?"

"No, it's the other way around. Tobias was the chief organizer, Eusine bankrolled the ordeal. Him showing up at the end and making that grand speech was just him showboating, something we allowed him to get away with," Morty explained.

"Well, that's not shocking," I said. "Although, I can't imagine how Eusine got rich. I was under the impression he didn't have a lot of money, the last time I saw him. I didn't know he went into business… unless he made it as a game show host?"

Morty shook his head.

"No, he just got a nice inheritance from his uncle about a year ago."

"Oh."

I let out a sigh. Of course I wouldn't know that. I had stubbornly kept myself out of the loop these past few years. It's something I'm starting to regret.

"How much of this was your doing?" I asked him.

"Not as much as you think. I wasn't told about it until the last second, and only because Danielle blabbed it to me."

"So… How'd they rope her into doing it without going through you?"

"Not sure. I think Tobias knew her from high school or somewhere else."

"And she blabbed it to you? Accident, or intentional?"
"You're really harping on Danielle, aren't you?"

I wiggled where I stood, unsure how to express myself. Morty hovered over me.

"You worry too much about it. There's nothing between us."

A frown came to my face. How can he just say that? It's not in his nature to refrain from flirting with any pretty young woman he meets. The fact that, as his assistant, she would be around him pretty much every single day… it made me jealous.

"You're making a big deal about nothing."

"How can I trust you that it's nothing?" I asked accusingly.

"You just have to," he replied.

His hand began gliding up my waist, but I brushed it off.

"If you did this to me, you'd do it to her."

"No-"

"What? Are you saying you've never made a move on her?"

Wouldn't it be natural for him to hit on her? If she was as disinterested as she claimed, she'd not stand for provocative behavior. She'd report it to the authorities, or quit, or both. She didn't do either, to my knowledge, which means Morty really hasn't made any serious advances towards her… or else he has, and she acquiesced to them.

Morty bowed his head. He took a glance around, to make sure no one else was listening.

"Listen, Jasmine. I know it's a touchy subject, so I tried to avoid it. But maybe I'll have to share sooner or later, and I hope you'll learn to deal with it."

"What is it?"

"I'm not a virgin. I've had lovers before. And Danielle… was one of them."

I was right. My heart skipped a beat. My mind felt shaky and faint, like a limp slinky.

"Don't do that."

Whatever it is I'm doing, I'm going to continue to do it.

"You're pouting. Really, Jasmine. Please. It was once, a long time ago, and I'm over it, and she's very over it." He led me by the hand and seated me into a sofa. He himself took a footrest and sat on it, facing me and leaning in close.

"Do you want to be happy?" he asked. I nodded without saying anything.

"Do you want to have friends, and maybe someone who is more than a friend?"

"Of course," I said. "I was hoping that could be you… but-" he cut me off.

"It doesn't matter if it's me, or someone else. You just have to realize, almost everyone our age has done it. You can't narrow down your choices to just other virgins. It's not feasible, and you'll miss
out on some really good opportunities."

"You talk like you don't expect us to last," I said.

"No, that's not what I meant," he said. "Maybe, if I somehow break through, we can be together. But maybe I won't. I can't say right now."

"Why can't you be sure of that?" I asked.

"After what happened back at the lighthouse, it kind of erased all sense of progression I thought I had made in building this relationship."

"Well, ignore what happened at the lighthouse," I told him testily.

"That's not the point, really. It doesn't matter, whether you're looking for a boyfriend or a friend or anyone else you want to get to know- you can't act hostile towards them just because they've engaged in coitus."

"I know that!"

"You know it in here," and he reached out and tapped my forehead. "But you don't act calmly and normally towards others just because you know you ought to. You let your emotions dictate your words and actions, despite what your logic is telling you. That's being a little dishonest with yourself."

"It's not that…" I started. How do I explain this? This thing, this sex thing, it's weird and omnipresent; but I didn't, and never would, feel prepared to deal with it.

"Are you jealous?" he asked.

"No!" I cried softly.

Can he tell that was a lie? Yes, it's in his eyes, the twitch of his eyelid, really, that shows he knows I mean the opposite. No surprise, it was a blatant enough lie.

"You don't need to be."

"I'm not," I said, reiterating the transparent and useless falsehood.

"What exactly is it? What is bothering you about this-" and he nodded downwards, towards our nether regions.

"I-" I can't answer that!

What a crude thing to ask for!

What I cannot tell him, is that I'm bothered by the fact that I'm in the dark, and unready, and lack all self-confidence, and can't bring myself to face myself over these fears about sex- and he's cool as a Meowth, without a single shred of doubt. I hate that. It's ironic. Most girls want someone experienced to share their first time with, but I want someone who's inexperienced and clumsy and insecure, like me. I wanted the chance to be able to explore it together, and not have to worry about being judged against already-existing standards.

Even if they're separated and have no intention of hitching up, Danielle is past this mess. She's gotten over the hump and rid herself of that scarlet wall and the psychological barrier that comes with it. I don't know her circumstances, though, so it might not have been a big deal to her. She probably
wasn't Morty's first, and Morty's probably wasn't hers.

Still, she has had that experience with Morty. She knows him in a way that I don't. That upsets me. It further upsets and vexes me that I have to get myself over this paralyzing fear of sex and men in order to just get to that same level of understanding as her. I feel like I'm wishing Morty was an asexual virgin, so that I could freely pursue a romance with him without sex making matters even more difficult and muddled than they already were.

And heaven knows, just the "romance" aspect, trying to find within myself the love for him and being able to acknowledge that love to myself and to him, was proving to be more than I could handle.

I can't tell him any of this.

"Are you afraid I only want you for sex?" he asked. I shook my head "no".

I feel like, if I ever get over my emotional issues, sex would be a rather easy issue to navigate. Really, I mean that. Look, just yesterday (or technically, two days ago, since it was 12:05, I noticed) I had schlicked off to the thought of draping my naked self atop him. The desire was there, it was real. It was bashing itself like a battering ram against an unmovable wall, with the title "The Great Wall of Jasmine's Insecurity" inscribed across it.

"It's okay. I want you to be happy, I want to coddle and flirt with you, and treat you like you deserve to be treated. You're precious to me. And to let you know, it's been a part of my code that I've never had sexual relations with more than one woman at a time."

I waved him off.

"It's not like I'm worried about you cheating," I told him.

"Why is that? I mean, I want you to believe I'm loyal and trustworthy, but so far, that's been hard."

"Because I'm not yet so invested in this, to worry about sharing you," I said. "We aren't official, so I guess it's logical- if you want to try your luck elsewhere, for now, that's ethical."

"You'd have no problems with that? Me leaving you?"

"No, there's the problem. I'd hate you for that."

"For cheating on you? But-"

"For leaving me."

"Huh? … Oh… Huh."

There was silence between us. His gaze kept trying to take me eye-to-eye, but I averted my gaze downwards.

His hand strayed across my thighs. It felt nice, I admit. I enjoyed it; the pressure of another human's fingertips, imprinted upon the fabric of the stocking and thence against my skin, and the tiny bump and change of sensation when his fingertip drifted from the thigh-high's top and onto my bare skin; it was small, soft, slow, and sensual, and yet non-threatening, non-invasive. Although I didn't want him to stop, I didn't want him to get bolder, either. So I put my hand over his and held it in place.

"I just… Morty I'm tired."
He frowned upon hearing that.

"I know. It's too late now, but- Danielle said she was going back to her motel after taking care of the gadgetry. But, sometime soon, come over to Ecruteak. You two should meet, and then I'm sure you'll find there's absolutely nothing to be jealous of. We're strictly coworkers now. My main focus in life right now is you."

"Um…" I began thinking. "How much do you pay her?" I asked.

He gave me a look clearly saying 'What a random thing to ask.' He's probably trying to tie it into this whole jealousy narrative he's concocted.

"What, do you think I pay her for her to be eye-candy, or something like that? She gets the same salary I would give a man."

"That's not it. How much does she make?"

"I'm not supposed to be sharing other people's finances… but it's about 65,000P a month."

65,000. That's not even enough for my apartment rent. Although, I could find supplemental work, a little part time greeting job, or rent out Steelix's muscle.

"Hey, Morty," I muttered out.

"Right here," he responded.

"If… if I lose my Gym Leadership… would you consider hiring me?"

I know. I know.

It's completely unreasonable, and pathetic. It's akin to asking him, "Will you take me in?" It's selfish and crude and much too forward, especially considering I myself have been denying the depth of our relationship.

I didn't want to nix this option, though, in case I needed it. Who knows? It might be easier to fall in love if I lived in Ecruteak with him. It would be tough leaving Olivine, really tough, but getting fired from my job, I would expect my life to become tough anyways.

"You're not going to lose your leadership," Morty said, trying to reassure me and side-step the question in the same breath. I frowned, feeling unsure. He noticed my reaction, and leaned in close. "We'll check those bridges out if we get there," he added.

"Mm." His free handed lifted to my chin. His head tilted forward, his lips floating nearer. It looks like he's aiming for my forehead.

"What are you two talking about?" A bundle of energy, far more energy than should be legal past midnight after a crazy horror-fest, bounded into our personal space. Lyra beamed, completely ignorant of the moment-murderer that her interruption was.

"We were discussing Jasmine's usual concerns. I was trying to help her through some touchy issues she's been having."

"What, sex? You know, she's not very fond of talking about that. You shouldn't press it, you'll upset her."

"She's not that sensitive," Morty replied.
"Tsk tsk." Lyra shook her head reproachingly. "She's allowed you to sit close to her. For Jasmine, that's MAJOR progress. You should be honored. So don't push it! And come over, we're having a nice conversation."

"About what?"

"Pokémon, of course."

"I'm tired," I complained. More accurately, I'm lazy, and don't want to get up. Lyra took note, conferred with the others, and compromised. The rest of her company, which consisted of Silver, Ethan, Volkner, Flint, a girl in pink, and Morty's friend Jeff gathered around.

"Hey, Morty, tell your pal Eusine to let go of Dexter."

The two mentioned had been arguing over the merits of various legendary Pokémon since we left them. Morty motioned to Tobias, and then to the bickering pair. The senior male made his way over.

"Good luck!" Morty called out.

"Why do you even hang out with him?" Jeff asked.

"Eusine? Because he's pretty cool when he isn't drooling over Suicune. Also, he's funny, in a quirky, obtuse kind of way. Also, we're both into ghost-hunting. Oh, and he's rich."

"I see how it is."

"Yeah, he basically funds a third of my gym's income."

A third of the gym's income? Just given for free?! Dang, that was one rich uncle he lost!

"I kind of feel sorry for him, to be honest. He was bullied in school- and after school, for that matter," Morty added, taking a second to cast a sorrowful look towards his comrade.

"Hey, Jasmine, what was that attack you did? The one that blew up the ceiling?" Lyra caught my attention.

"You saw that? How?"

"Surveillance video. It's a long story. But you first. I want one of my Pokémon to learn that attack."

So I proceeded to educate her about the Railgun combo and how it was impossible for her team to replicate it. I also gave her a stern warning to avoid using it during thunderstorms, on account of the chance (ha ha) a real lightning strike might fry the victim.

In turn, I got a tiny bit of her story, although she was definitely skipping some details. Throughout her telling, Ethan kept shooting her stern looks of disapproval.

"I caught on early," she said. "It seemed pretty obvious what had happened, but I guess that's because I had hints from some whispers between the staffers that I overheard beforehand."

She explained how she had her Smeargle sketch the dire-looking map and used it to replace the real map, and how she had snuck off before anyone had a chance to catch up to her. There was an obvious time-skip between that and when she appeared in the arena tech booth (different from Danielle's tech booth, this one was exclusively used for controlling the Pokémon stadium). From there she started joining in on the fun, playing with the controls to spook a group that had wandered onto the stadium floor. This alerted Danielle, who called in, and the two decided to collaborate.
"I was wondering why Ethan never caught up with me, though," she said.

"Because you shut the shop's security gate on me," Ethan broke in.

"Yeah, but after that? There were ways around it."

"I told you, I was knocked out by the dream gas."

"Excuses excuses. From what I heard, you high-tailed it back to the ballroom as soon as you woke up."

"And how was I to know you didn't return to the ballroom yourself? It was the best option we had," he countered.

"Well, we could have gone searching for the miscreants who were causing trouble," Volkner interjected.

Ah, he should know better than to insert himself between two squabbling lovers.

"Yeah, thanks Volkner! Why didn't you do that? What if there was an assassin? What if I was captured? Would you come rescue me?" Lyra put to her boyfriend.

"Of course! -if I had known."

"What if I was killed? Would you avenge me?" she followed up quickly, brushing off his answer.

"Well, that's a bit-"

"Hopeless!" she cried, shrugged her shoulders and gave a big, exaggerated sigh. "What happened to you that you got so scared and ran away?"

"Nothing. I wasn't the one who was assaulted, it was- I thought you were the one in danger," Ethan said.

"If you thought I might be in danger, then why'd you run away? Why didn't you find out for sure?!"

_He messed that one up_, I thought.

The couple fired figurative eyebeams across the void between them. Who would give in first?

"You goof! I thought I trained you better than that! Jeeze." Lyra sighed again, climbed over, sat in Ethan's lap, and draped herself over his upper body. "I just thought it would be nice for you to play the hero for once! Lighten up, be a manly man! But you took the perfect opportunity I gave you and blew it!"

"This isn't another tirade about getting me to be assertive is it?"

"You're shy, I get that, I like that- sometimes- but you can't always rely on me to be the pants in this relationship. I worry about you so much! I want you to be able to stand up for yourself when I'm not around," she said, and began stroking his cheek. He gently slapped her caressing hand away.

"You mean I should be a reckless hothead like yourself? You know full well I can be aggressive when it's called for, BUT, it's like you're asking me to make that my de facto response to every situation. That's not me, that's not who I am."

"You used to be like that," Lyra said.
"Not anymore. That's in the past."

"You're not as fun! What happened to that kid that hit on every woman he saw, dove into a burning tower to get his hat back, and kicked the asses of a dozen Rocket Grunts for the sake of saving his favorite radio host?"

"He grew up," Ethan said curtly.

I vaguely remember Ethan when I first met him. He came rolling in to Olivine looking for 1) a gym badge, 2) easy money, and 3) "booty". He came off as rude at first, but quickly reverted to a goofier, kinder, more modest persona when called out on his behavior. I guess there has always been this more level-headed side to him, even if Lyra couldn't see it back then.

"I bet that kid would have jumped at the opportunity to track down an assassin. He wouldn't have been a little Abra about the situation."

"I made the best decision I could," he said.

"The best decision isn't always the right decision!" she told him.

I decided it was time to intervene, out of pity for the besieged man.

"It's not like he ran away scared," I said. "I was the one who got frightened; I made Ethan and Volkner escort me back to the lobby so I could fetch my Pokémon."

"Oh, oh, OH! So you abandoned me for her, dearest?!" Lyra pouted.

"Well, you know what?!!" Ethan said, his voice rising, his temper finally breaking out. "Even if I did, my effort was better spent on her, a mere friend, than on you, my girlfriend, because she wasn't purposely deceiving her significant other! Why should I be held accountable about 'abandoning' you when you pull stunts like faking distress? I did my due duty, I chased you as far and fast as I could, you were the one running off blindly and you were the one who triggered the security screen that kept me from following you. I would have been right there by your side and we could have had a good scare together, but you decided to split us up! What does that say about our relationship?!!"

"Gah!" She suddenly hugged him tightly. "See! That's the kind of attitude I wish you'd take more often! It's adorable when you're angry!"

"The hell?"

"I knew you had it in you."

"Let me breath," he demanded, pushing her away a few inches. She used the space to give him a peck on the nose.

"I was just messing with ya," she said.

"You weren't getting jealous?" he asked.

"You ought to know by now that I'm always jealous," she answered. "But I'm not worried about you going and cheating on me. It's not in you."

"Hey, Lyra, to be clear, Ethan and I- absolutely nothing flirtatious happened between us. Right, Volkner?" I turned to the blond-head for support.

"No one was thinking about those things in that situation. We were too worried about, you know,
"surviving," Volkner put in. I gave him a smile for his support, and he returned the gesture.

"You guys don't know Ethan very well. It doesn't matter what's happening, he's always got room for a little bit of perviness-" Lyra told us.

"Don't go spreading lies," Ethan growled. He reached up to try to physically muffle her.

"It's true!" She successfully fought him off. "But that's what I love about you. You're so gallant!" She turned to me. "He played bodyguard for you? That's really like him. It wouldn't matter if it was you, or me, or Erika, or a complete ditz or stranger, he'd fight off a Tyranitar to show off to a girl."

"You're exaggerating," her boyfriend chimed in.

"It's just, sometimes he can be a little short-sighted," she said, turning towards him.

"You're outright lying now."

"Oh shush. But you know what would happen if you actually cheated on me, right?" she warned, innocently.

"I have an idea, but quite frankly I don't care. I have my own morals, I don't need your "disincentives" to keep me loyal," he replied.

"Ohhoho. Do you care so little for me?" she asked, in a pouty tone.

"It took me ten years to find a girlfriend, do you think I would let you go now? Why are you so pissed at me tonight?"

"I'm not pissed at all. Just teasing! I know you like it."

He sighed.

She tried for another kiss. This time, Ethan gave up and passively accepted it on his lips.

"It's not a fun game," he said to her. "I hate when you pretend like you're mad at me, just to get a reaction."

I slouched over and snuggled into Morty's lap. His body felt big, and protective, and comforting.

"We're not like that, are we?" I asked him in a whisper.

"No, we're much worse. You aren't trolling when you act pissed at me, you are pissed at me."

"Really?"

"And you're way less forgiving about me having incidental contact with other women," he added.

"I guess."

"And you're very touchy about physical contact."

"No I'm not."

"Yes you are."

"No, I am not."
"Yes, you are. How many times have I been denied a kiss tonight?"

"You mean how many times have I been denied a kiss? One time we were interrupted by the fake blackout, the other by you dashing off to greet Tobias."

Speaking of which, Tobias finally returned, accompanied by Dexter and Eusine, who had seemingly reached a truce in their argument. Some others had left, Will and Narina had joined us, and so this little group was all that was left in the nook.

"If you're really not so uptight as I think you are, you don't mind this, do you?"

I felt a trio of fingers began massaging my butt cheek. My heart thumped, but I resisted the urge to jump up.

"I don't mind, although, it's not feeling like much. The skirt's in the way," I whispered to him.

"Well then," and he began creeping his hand downwards, to the hem of my skirt, and once it reached that point, began snaking underneath it. I twisted, denying him access.

"Not here," I growled.

"Where's Whitney been?" Lyra asked out loud. Apparently she had settled her conversation with her boyfriend. Ethan looked upset still, although that lessened over the course of the next few minutes as Lyra bribed him with kisses. In the meantime, she began inquiring to each of the members if they had seen the redhead.

"I don't know where she is, but I know who she is with," Will claimed.

"Who?"

"The Dewford Gym Leader, Brawley was his name?"

"Yes, correct. But, how'd he get here?"

Thinking back, I had barely seen Whitney this night, and less still of other trainers I might recognize.

"Um, this can't be good," I spoke out. "Brawley and her have a history, and not a good one. He's currently dating her rival, Maylene."

"Oh, the short pink-haired girl?" Will asked. "I saw her present as well."

My stomach hit the floor.

What the hell are those three doing together?

"That's bad. That's really bad."

We had nearly started an uncivil war the last time those two women met. To bring them together with the object of their obsession present could only precipitate catastrophe.

Tobias spoke up.

"I think it's relevant you should know, but this entire ordeal was not my idea."

We all turned towards the man, predicting what he was about to divulge and dreading it.
"Whitney convinced me and my young apprentice Eusine here to put on a horror show for the party. She told me it was all a part of the gamble to 'win back what's rightfully mine' as she put it."

My mind raced. Stitching together what I heard from her and what I've learned about her, I figured out the situation fairly quickly.

Whitney is a fiery hothead who has no reservation about acting like a tomboy. So it's odd, but fitting, that she falls absolutely head-over-heels for big, burly men with an alpha-attitude and a fierce protective streak.

The last I saw her, she was shaking from the apparent murder of Tobias. Except, having master-minded the hoax, she would know the truth and would have been faking fearfulness herself.

Theory: if Brawley were invited and spent the evening lost in the party, she would be stalking him, which is why she didn't hang out with us. Once the scare tactics began, she would be feigning damsel in distress in order to lure out his chivalrous side. Perhaps she had given up trying to compete directly with Maylene, knowing she'd never be a more appealing feisty, aggressive tomboy. Instead, she'd try to act submissive and vulnerable and snatch him back to her in that way.

"You look smug," Morty told me.

"I'm 85% certain I know what happened," I told him.

"Tell me."

"She did to Brawley what Lyra tried to do to Ethan: force him into playing the gallant hero. Except, Brawley wouldn't have any trouble playing the part; I'm only worried about what he thinks of Whitney once he found out it was a hoax, and what Maylene did to interfere."

"Well, they're missing now, so chances are we'll find them in a bloodbath tomorrow morning."

"I don't think it would go that far," I said.

Morty patted my hip. "Just joking."

"I know."

"You took it seriously."

"My joke is that I take everything seriously," I told him.

"Oh yeah, I forgot."

He chuckled and I gave him a quick half-smile.

As conversations will, it went on for a little bit before anything new caught my attention. Lyra dropped an interesting line about the autumn alliance competitions, but just as she started, Narina burst in.

"Beers for everyone!" She dropped a 12-pack onto the table and began handing them out.

"Pass," I said, waving the proffered drink off.

"Do you not drink?"

"I dislike the taste of beer, that's all," I told her.
"Aww! What about margarita? Or wine?"

"Wine, yes."

"I'll go get you some, then."

"Why? I'm not really in the mood for alcohol," I protested, but she had already left.

"We're going to play a game," Will piped up. "It's funnier when drunk."

"I don't want to be drunk."

"Just go along with it. Have a tiny bit," Morty whispered to me.

Narina returned with a plastic cup filled to the brim with red wine. She put this before me.

"What kind of game?" I asked them, while staring into the pine-colored liquid.

"Never Have I Ever," Will answered.

"How does that go?"

"Everyone takes a turn saying 'Never have I ever… and then follows it with something that they've never done. If you have done what they said, you have to take a sip. The last person with beer in their cup 'wins', although it's not really the point to win."

"Why?"

"It's a drinking game," Morty explained in a whisper into my ear. "The point is just to get everyone else as drunk as possible."

I counted fourteen people present: Narina, Will, Tobias, Jeff, pink-clad stranger girl (I later learned her name was Komuri), Volkner, Flint, Lyra, Ethan, Silver, Eusine, Dexter, Morty, and myself. Someone's Jigglypuff and Siphon the Shuppet also sat around, but I doubt they'd be participating.

"Okay! I'm first!" Lyra said. "Never have I ever lost a gym battle!"

All the Gym Leaders took a gulp, as did Ethan and Will. Morty eyed me expectantly as he downed a small sip. I rolled my eyes and took a sip myself. Like earlier in the evening, even the tiny bit of alcohol hit my stomach hard. It felt cold and cramped and made me shiver. It feels awful. I hope these questions aren't very applicable to me.

The game continued.

"Never have I ever… took a skinny dip." Three people raised their cans, including Morty.

"Does that include hot springs?" I asked.

"No, just bodies of water where you're not supposed to be naked," they clarified. I gratefully set my cup down.

"Never have I ever played an instrument." Pause. "Really? No one? Aw come on!"

"Never have I ever been to the Safari zone." That netted four drinkers.

"Never have I ever been overseas." Six drinkers, with Narina taking a cute, miniscule sip.
"Only because Tuscano Island," she said. Tuscano is a popular resort off the coast of Hoenn, technically its own nation.

"Never have I ever swallowed," Narina stated. No one drank. She seemed disappointed.

"Never have I ever done it in public."

Two cups rose.

Wait… are they talking about sex?

"Never have I ever played a Halloween prank on someone," Ethan said pointedly. Of course, the staffers all took their shots, as did a rueful Lyra.

"So tame, so lame," she lamented. "You don't have to be so uptight Ethan, try asking something more bold!"

"What, like never have I ever done a strip tease?"

"Right! Like that!"

"August 1st," he said simply.

"Oh, right," she uttered, taken aback somewhat, and then she took a shot.

Morty's turn.

"Never have I ever had a threesome," he said with suppressed glee.

Volkner took a long, hard look at his friend before taking a swill. Flint and the pink-dressed girl followed suit.

Oh I get it, it's not just a drinking game. Half these questions are lewd; it's a game of 'truth or dare' without the 'dare' option. They're trying to figure out what sexual activities others have engaged in, and the beer is just an excuse to get over the embarrassment.

"Your turn."

I contemplated my glass for a second.

"Never have I ever had sex," I called out.

Groans erupted from the players. Some shook their heads, others cast laughably annoyed glares at me.

"So cheap. So cheap," I heard muttered.

All of them took their shot, eventually, although no one drank very deeply.

"Never have I ever kissed a man," Tobias said. The girls huffed, but did it.

"No."

"Yes!" Lyra cried. She shoved Ethan playfully.

"Come on! Come on!" she taunted him. I and everyone else raised an eyebrow.
"You too Silver!"

"That did not count. That was not a kiss," Silver asserted.

"Oh, not the first time. But the second time, at the park sure did," she insinuated. Ethan and Silver threw begrudging, spiteful looks towards each other. "Sip up you two!"

"For the record," Silver told us in a serious, threatening tone, even as he raised his cup, "we were blackmailed."

"I'll never live it down," Ethan moaned.

Lyra looked like she was overcome with bliss.

They drank, and the group burst into hysteria.

I was hoping the ringing laughter would distract from my own round, but alas, Ethan noticed out of the corner of his eye.

"Jasmine?"

Oh joy. The sight of me raising a cup caught Lyra, Eusine, Ethan, and Silver by surprise. Shocked faces followed the motion of my cup rising to my lips and tipping upwards. I downed a quarter of the wine at once, and then gently placed it back down on the makeshift table.

"Really?!" rang out in a chorus.

"Don't ask," I implored.

They looked from me to Morty and back again. Morty, enjoying the awkward and implicit attention, broke out into a goofy grin. As if to emphasize the implications, he scooted over and put an arm around my shoulders.

"She's not as prudish as she wants you to believe," he told them.

Will was impatient for his turn, and so took it, and the game moved on. Smiles of enjoyment and discovery soon glazed over with the haze of alcohol. I resisted drinking too much more, and luckily, the sexually-oriented topics largely spared me.

"Never have I ever dumped someone because they were too fat." That one got me.

Lyra sat for a rather long minute, before a glance at her boyfriend brought a rueful smile. "Never have I ever w- ouch!" Ethan had elbowed her in the ribs.

"Not that one," he warned.

"Fine, fine. Never have I ever motorboated."

Seemingly all the men reached for their cups. I get the feeling she wasn't talking about aquatic vehicle riding…

"Never have I ever lusted for a Ditto." Okay, that one was pretty direct.

"Never have I ever picked up my Pokémon's poop."

"Never have I ever chewed a stick of gum."
"Never have I ever stolen from the pokemart."

"Never have I ever done it poochy-style."

"Never have I ever licked cake dough off a ladle."

"Never have I ever licked someone's snatch."

On and on and on, dozens of questions that became ever more vulgar and specific. A few people dropped out, their glasses drained. Morty was one of the first, which slowed down the rate of consumption since he had been asking the more perceptive questions. I was looking to be one of the final contestants.

"Never have I ever cursed out loud at an opponent," I said. Flint downed the last of his beer.

"Never have I ever built a robot."

"Never have I ever tried anal."

"Narina, don't lie."

The woman giggled, and glugged down her can of beer. "It's not like we have to suggest something we've never done. I'm allowed to call myself out, right? Right Tobias? Come on, sip sip!"

Tobias shook his head. "I have never engaged in that act, giving or receiving."

Flint shook his head, as if glad he'd already been knocked out. Poor bi-guys. I'm sure the group doesn't mean to be homo-hostile, it's just too easy to pick on.

"Never have I ever joined a social networking site."

Everyone drank.

"Silver, you're up."

Silver paused a moment.

"It's late," he remarked.

"Nah, just do one last one."

He took another long moment to decide. The wait increased our expectations…

"Never have I ever killed a man," he said.

Everyone stared at him, bewildered by his macabre suggestion.

"Come on, we'd don't have any serial killers here, we're just kids. Did you really think you could nail someone on that one-" Volkner began, when he stopped, and all attention focused on the one beer can now rising into the air. In a slow, precise motion, it was tipped up and the last little portion ingested. The empty container was then slowly and deliberately set down on the table. We all stared, our reactions carrying more shock than any sexual question could possibly elicit.

"It was during a war, and that's all you need to know," Tobias said calmly.

My turn.
I know I should pick something light, or even sexual, just to break the mood, but now that the taboo was broken, I became sidetracked in my own thoughts. Silver, me, and Ethan were the only contestants left. I don't know anything about Silver, but my intuition, provoked by his own statement, led me towards one guess in particular. Should I use it? Would it hit home with him? Would it hurt him, if true? Do I want to needle him like that? Yes, and no. I do, but I know I shouldn't, but the alcohol is making it sound like something I want to try… but I'm not the kind of girl who lets a bit of wine control her actions so easily.

How's that saying go?

'There was a point where we needed to stop and we have clearly passed it…'

'…But let's keep going and see what happens.'

"Jasmine?"

"Never have I ever… lost someone close to me," I said.

The rest of the party stared, as if expectant, as if pitying.

Sifting through my memories, a face and a name appeared, and the thought of having forgotten him made me wince. It's been three years, too soon to be forgetting the loss of my teacher…

I raised my cup, ready to take a swill. Yet, before I could taste the dry liquid, the vessel vanished from my hands.

Morty had it in his hand, and then on his lips, and then chugged every last drop down his throat, before returning the cup to my possession.

He looked me straight in the eye, for a brief moment.

"We're done here."

Then he left.
The convention center was dying. I found myself standing beneath a solitary drizzle gazing upon the desolation. Trash and decorations littered the landscape in various states of obliteration. Dazed and drunken husks of humanity drifted around, trying desperately to recall the address of their overnight accommodations. A few wearied Pokémon sat on tables, balconies, upturned trashcans, waiting for their masters to retrieve them. The gloom and despair hung thick over everything. The party had ended, and with it, joy.

I turned my attention upwards, and found the hole in the ceiling through which sparse rain clouds were now precipitating upon me.

"That's going to be a story to tell my children someday," I thought.

'Are you kidding? You'll never have kids,' I then thought.

I can't tell whether the general sense of loss and forlornness was infecting me, or if I was projecting my own feelings onto the party-goers.

Since Morty left, my thoughts had been agitated, and I didn't know why. It's almost as if I had actually been having fun, despite all the stress and nuisance the horror hoax had caused me, and then Morty's abrupt departure had ended it.

Had he really lost someone close? Who? What does he think of when hears the word "close"? And how would he interpret "losing" someone? Death, right? At least, that's the way I intended it, and no one would misconstrue it as anything less, after the very specific 'never have I ever' comment Silver had suggested immediately preceding mine. He must have had someone dear to him die, then, and it's only my wishful thinking that he might have meant something less serious.

Who?

He did mention once that his grandmother had passed away recently. Although he also said he wasn't affected by it as much as his mother was. It's impossible to tell if he meant that particular relationship, and if that loss affected him more than he was letting on.

The other possibilities? His mother is alive, his father is alive, he's always been a single child, and I never heard him mention any other close family members. Which leaves friends and former lovers. Yet, without even a hint as to the existence of such a person, I can’t begin to guess who they were and what they meant to him.

I'm vexed. It vexes me.

I took a deep breath.

This must be how he felt, when I locked myself away after our first kiss. He had no idea what I meant when I told him he wasn't my first kiss. Just thinking about it, my stomach is roiling over and heart is fluttering, and my blood goes cold.

Still? Still?! After six years, after so much pain and agony spent just to repress his memory as deep down as possible, and the tiniest little tangential reminder STILL brings me to my knees?!

I stumbled until I reached the now-familiar grand staircase, and sat down on its lowest step.

I repeated this phrase in my mind a few dozen times, helplessly and vainly hoping it would fix my emotional turmoil, and yet every rewinding only brought the subject back to fore.

Let it go. I just want to let it go. It doesn't matter anymore. I can move on. I can be with Morty. Morty, that fixture of my middle-school life, can be there for me; he can fix me. I only need to let him.

How?

By taking him in, allowing him the intimacy of my body and my spirit. I very much feel like he's after both. Isn't that normal for a relationship? Isn't that the basis of all loving relationships? Physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual connectedness- are not these the foundations of love itself? Has he given you any signal, any sign, any clue, that he is being insincere, dishonest, or disinterested?

That was the case six years ago. I had missed the signs. Or that young man was being dishonest about his intentions. He misled me. And I paid for that, dearly. Is Morty now doing the same? Will I fall for the same trap?

I wracked my brain, my every moment with Morty these past two months, searching for something solid and concrete, to say whether he truly wanted me as his girlfriend, and perhaps, eventually, also his wife?...

I can't find anything that would absolutely sway me towards that conclusion. Yet, unlike six years ago, I can't find any warning signs. Nothing blatant, nothing subtle, nothing at all that would indicate Morty is not desiring of a relationship with me.

There are other issues. He's obviously hiding something, or many somethings, and they seem rather dark. They may even be connected with me and our interaction with one another. I haven't yet ruled out that he may not be exclusively seeking my affection, but also keeping himself open to other advances. I don't want him to cheat on me, but at this point, with the way I've treated him, do I have the right to demand he be exclusive? No, not logically. I think, then, if I should find he's been screwing around with Danielle, for instance, I should just sigh, shake my head, and say "Yep, that's typical Morty. Let's just move on Jasmine."

That's not really my concern, though. I think, even under those circumstances, I could stand to be his friend. He'd probably tease me, flirt with me, and try to win me over again. I'd reject him, of course, but not so violently and wholly as I did after Indigo. There would not be another irrational fit of isolation and anti-social depression, I promised myself. Everything would be okay, for a given definition of 'okay'. As long he didn't abandon me, I feel like I would be okay.

That was the worst-case scenario. The way things have been going, though, I'm feeling the better scenarios are more likely. He wants me. He wants to fuck me and then he wants to cuddle with me, and talk with me, and share his life with me. I think.

With how messed up you are, Jasmine, you'll probably never get to that point where you'll be 100% sure he's sincere. At some point, you just need to trust him. No matter how many tasks you set before him, no matter how much you demand he prove his love, at some point it's simply going to come down to a leap of faith and trusting him with your heart.

I bit my lip.

It's torture, absolute torture, to think of it. If I go that far, I won't be able to brush off any surprise
offenses so easily. He's my last chance, my last grasp at a normal life, before I give up on humanity and myself. It'll be much worse than when-

"Jasmine! Jasmine!"

Whitney bounded into view. My cascading worries were interrupted but not forgotten. I appraised my friend sourly, instantly on guard against whatever drama she had stewed up with Maylene and was now about to unload on me. However, her demeanor was the opposite of expectations. She was absolutely brimming… and covered in some unidentified green goo. It slathered and flicked off of her squirming figure like mud off a shaking Lillipup, forcing me to try to dodge the mysterious substance (mostly failing).

"What have you been up to?" I immediately asked. She rolled her eyes and then looked me up and down in turn.

"Hahahaha! I'll tell you all about it! But first, what have you been up to? You look sick. Thinking about love and crap again?"

Ack, she knows my body language even better than Erika.

"Well, yeah, you're right. Just, a lot of things that have been bothering me. You know, me and Morty."

"Finally."

She galloped up and sat beside me, throwing an energetic embrace over my shoulder.

"Tell me tell me tell me you like him."

I leaned my head back, eyes closed, taking in a breath of cool air.

"Yes, I like him."

"And does he like you?"

"Yes."

"Has he said that?"

I had to search my memory for a bit, but I distinctively remember him saying those words during the train ride back from Blackthorn.

"Yes, those exact words. He even asked if I liked him too."

He did ask me that, I remember. There, further proof. If all he wanted was to have sex with me, to butter me up before humping and dumping, he'd only tell me he liked me. But he asked if I liked him back. He was worried about that. That shows sincerity.

I smiled, faintly.

"Yes, I'm sure he likes me."

"Then… what's the big deal? Go public already!"

"There are just… personal issues."
"You and your personal issues! Girl, I would not be glum about your situation if I were you." She patted me on the back.

"Why? How'd your night go? I heard you were suckering Brawley in to playing the hero and you the princess. And I know all about the hoax and you being the mastermind behind it."

"Oh gosh, really? You're such a know it all!"

"I'm just smart. So, how'd that plan turn out?"

"A complete disaster!" she exclaimed.

"Okay…" She's awfully happy for having borked her plan up.

"Um, so it turns out, Brawley hates sissy women. That card didn't play. On the other hand, once he found out I was only faking fear, and Maylene was actually being a scared little Skitty for real, that started a huge argument! I'm 99% positive they just broke up. In other words, Brawley's single again! Ha! It wasn't the home run I was aiming for, but I've gotten to second base!"

"Exciting," I said, deadpan. Whitney was always a big thinker and big dreamer, she hated details and detested doing things in increments. For her to be this excited about mere milestones shows how insane her affection for that surfer-boy is.

"Well, let's work on netting our men together, how about that?!" she offered. "We can share in each other's woes and successes!"

"No, I'd rather play this game solo," I replied using a gaming term.

"Fine! Though, I bet I get Brawley before you lose your virginity, nyah!"

"Get out," I pushed her face away.

"Seriously, seriously! Hey, stop!" We play-fought for a minute, clawing and slapping, as if little girls.

"Is it having sex what you're afraid of?" Whitney asked.

"Kind of," I admitted.

"Why? It's no big deal. It's fun!"

"It doesn't seem that way to me," I said. I really don't want to poll the slut of the group (sorry Whitney, but you are) for sexual advice.

"It's not, it's really not, trust me. And believe me, you get a romantic sucker like I know Morty is, and take him to bed, and you've got him, hook, line, and anchor."

The saying is 'hook, line, and sinker', I wanted to correct her, but let it pass.

"Don't you have any reservations?" I asked her. "You can just up and do it with anyone?"

"Um… yeah," she admitted.

"How?"

She shrugged her shoulders.
"Don't know what to tell you. I see a guy I like, I get horny, and we play ball."

"But... you're not afraid? You don't care about how others see you? Or if he'll hurt you?"

"Meh, no. Too many people will try to put you down just because you're a girl, no matter how pure you are. So I say, 'Why bother?' I don't need their respect. That's why I love my job, as long as I win, I don't have to play office politics to keep it."

"So you've got no fears, whatsoever, about sleeping with anyone?" I asked, my incredulity rising.

"Well, duh, yeah, I'm not so stupid. I worry that they'll beat me up or rape me or murder me, but that's why I try to hang with the right crowd. Like you! I know I can trust any man that you'd tolerate, even if you're only like 'I hate men, and you're no better, scumbag, but I'll tolerate your presence because I haven't sensed anything suspicious about you yet!'"

"Heh. If you think I'm a good judge of character, you're going to end up in a garbage dumpster someday."

"You're funny, Jasmine."

"No I'm not."

Whitney perked a little.

"Oh, yeah, and I use contraception. Don't really want a baby, especially with no dad to take care of it. Any man who doesn't want to use a rubber is suspicious, and I get the heck out of there. So there's that safety precaution."

"Ugh, really? Really?!"

I did not need to know that.

Furthermore, I did not need to be reminded, WHATSOEVER, about the primary function of sex. I.E. procreation. Blah!

"If you do do it with Morty, remember safety! And get him tested first, Gona's a bitch!"

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Thank Arceus no!"

I buried my face in my palms.

Of all the people I could have had the 'sex talk' with, Whitney was not even ranked on my preferred-persons list.

"Well, fine, I'll keep that in mind, pervert."

Feels weird calling a girl a pervert, but Whitney deserves it. And by her facial expression, she's taking it as a compliment.

"Good luck with Brawley, and I'll see you again sometime. I'm gonna go find Erika. Goodbye."

"Oh! Shit. I forgot to tell you! You're staying at my place tonight."

Oh. What?
"Huh?"

"Sleepover party! No, really, where did you think you were staying?"

"I thought we were going back to Olivine…" I muttered out, voice squeaking.

"On what boat? It's almost one in the morning."

"Yeah… wow, I can't think these things through."

"You're lucky you have me and Erika to look out for you. Oh, and while you're here, remember what today is?"

"The 1st?"

"The first what?"

"Of November?"

"The first Thursday of November," she corrected me.

"Oh… crap! Telecon!"

Yep, I had completely forgotten. The Johto League Gym Leader's Association teleconference was this coming morning… in about eight hours.

"Don't worry about it, just pop over to my gym and we'll set you up there. Morty's staying in town so he can join us too. Maybe I'll put you two on a joint line?"

Ugh!

"I give, I surrender," I told her. "Let me just go find Erika."

"Okay! But when you do, tell her we're meeting at the fountain out front. We're going night-riding before we head home."

"Okay."

I waved Whitney a temporary goodbye.

So now where is Morty and Erika?

Goofing off somewhere, I'm sure.

My search took me all around the ballroom and lobby, and eventually outside, with no sign of the pair. The pool-sized fountain gracing the front parade was gurgling and lit with dim blue flood-lamps. There were human and Pokémon figures gathered around it. I thought that my friends might have already joined the others and so headed in that direction, when my ear caught a familiar voice.

"Check."

"Bold-"

Morty, and Will. I spun about and spotted them surprisingly close by, at an outdoor patio. A flood light over-lit them, and an in-progress chess game was arranged between them. Will was laid back in his seat and looking smug, while Morty was hunched forward and leaning his chin on his knuckles.
I began dashing forward, eager to see Morty, when I paused and thought better of it. 'How often do I get to see Morty interact with people when I'm not around?' my thinking went. In a quick, Ninjask-like movement, I darted behind a nearby lattice and began listening in.

"-but rash," Will finished, as he leaned forward to move a knight to the defense of his king. "Your play is sloppy tonight. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Morty replied while retreating a chastised bishop.

"Nonsense. You've been carrying around like a lost Cubone all night."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Really?" Will leaned over the chess board, a hand held poised in the air above the assembled hosts of black and white. "Tell me, then, using your gift, what move I am about to make. I promise not to take it back if you guess correctly."

"It's not a 'gift'. Just good intuition."

Morty settled into a posture of extreme concentration. His hands were held up to his temples, massaging them in slow circling motions. I couldn't make out his facial expression from my vantage point, but I could hear his breathing pattern change. It became lighter, with longer pauses in-between breaths. At one point it stopped altogether. The moment stretched out into seconds, and then longer, and I was worried he'd suffocate himself.

He let out all his pent up carbon dioxide in one big gush, and then shook his head indicating a negative outcome to his thought processes.

"I can't do this," he said.

"It's not coming to you?"

"No, that's not it. Too much is coming, it's all jumbled. Like memories trying to overwrite one another."

"Ah, that dilemma," Will nodded. "When the premonition begins to incorporate knowledge of itself, the feedback loops indefinitely until eviscerated. Experienced precogs can discern where to prune off unlikely possibilities and get a clear conclusion. If you wanted, I could train you. You could become my greatest padawan…"

"Hell no," Morty replied gruffly. "Besides, I don't want to be a psychic. I like surprises."

"A pity."

Will began to take his move, but was cut off by Morty moving one of Will's pawns for him.

"Oh, so you did foretell my move. You're not entirely lost."

"Not really. That's just the move I would make if I were you," Morty said.

Will's expression turned wry. "Clever-" and he followed it up with a silently mouthed 'bastard'. "But don't think you can side-step the issue. What's on your mind?"

"The usual issues."

"So, life, death, and women."
"That's about right- wrong order though."

"So, it's a woman problem. Is it to do with the young lady you were snuggling with all evening?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't understand what the problem is. You two looked quite close and happy. A cute couple, even. Is something the matter that I can't see? Are you fighting?"

"No. It's deeper."

"Who is she?"

"She's Jasmine Mikan, Olivine's Gym Leader."

"I know that much; I mean who is she to you?"

"Um…" From the string of repressed groans and gurgles, Morty didn't sound like he wanted to answer that question.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Will pressed.

"No… kind of… it's complicated."

"Why is it complicated?"

"It just is."

"Excuses and excuses. What a nuisance. Don't make me invade your mind."

Morty mumbled unintelligibly, searching for a cohesive response. Will used the pause to sneak a knight into the middle of Morty's line. I momentarily lost focus, noticing the pieces were modeled after units from the Avantastica video game.

'I want that chess set,' I was thinking, and started off on a mental tangent. Then Morty gathered his thoughts and began speaking. My focus snapped back to my would-be boyfriend.

"It's just… my history… our history, that makes it difficult."

"History? I had assumed you met at the Gym Leader summit last month."

"No, we go way back- to middle school."

"Oh!" A look of recognition lit up in Will's mask-shrouded eyes. "Is it that same young woman you were always going on and on about?"

"Same one."

"Ah, her! To tell you the truth, that was very annoying. I think you would have fared much better with your dates if you didn't constantly compare them to her."

Morty shrugged and responded by moving a bishop.

"She was my muse, my angel. Something about her, always hit me in the heart. Back then, anyways. I mean, she's always had this comically serious side to her, and she always kept to her own high-minded ideals, and yeah, she was kind of a bitch and a prude. But she changed, and I think it's my
"That sounds very much like the individual you brought to the drinking game. What do you believe has changed?"

"It's hard to put a finger on it. How do I say it? For instance, her opinion of boys. She went through the same phase as every little girl where she thought boys were made of boogers and acted like Mankeys, but you could tell she had a soft spot for a certain kind of guy. Literature class, she always had way too much of the romantic novels memorized and analyzed. During discussion, we'd all groan when she'd blurt out spoilers because she had read ahead ten chapters. History novels, adventures, dramas? Not so much, no special interest. Just romance books."

"And now?"

Morty shook his head slightly.

"Hates men. Hates romance. To call her a prude would be a gargantuan understatement. She despises the very fact that sex exists, and is needed for procreation. If it were up to her, we'd all be born from osmosis."

"Sounds harsh."

"It's just one thing, though. I think- no, I know there's something deeper. She keeps hinting at it, a reason for her to be this way."

"Obviously. If she hates men so much, why was she cuddling and acting very much in love with you? You've kissed, haven't you?"

"Eh… I'm not allowed to talk about it. And that's just the thing. She keeps me quiet about our relationship. She doesn't want others to find out."

"It sounds like a self-image problem. She's afraid of being seen as a slut, but still has sexual desires. She can't reconcile the two."

"I've never asked her to do anything even remotely slutty."

"From how you describe her, she might believe even the tiniest indication of romantic feelings is slutty. It may be her making too big a deal out of a small thing, like a kiss, or it might be the fear that a small opening will lead headlong into prostitute-like behavior."

"Neither. I'm sure it's neither. It goes beyond sex, even beyond romance."

"Well, if you keep arguing with my observations I can't help."

"It's… it's… I don't know."

"Calm down and figure out how to explain the issue as precisely as possible. Until then, you're going to lose in three turns unless you figure out what I'm doing."

Morty paid no attention to the board and moved at random. Will didn't bother reprimanding him for trying to move his rook like a knight and simply returned the pieces to their proper position. The blond-haired began rambling while gazing at the clouded night sky.

"She used to be happy. She used to love her life. She used to be bold, even reckless. She had hope for the future, and big ideas. Now… I mean, I think I'm having an effect, getting her back to her old
self, but I can't be so sure- but she's shyer, and tepid, and most of all, she's unhappy. Just a little while ago she was asking me about a job at my gym, like she didn't believe she was going to pass her probation. The girl I knew wouldn't give the thought of failure one neuron of brain matter. Something happened to her." 

"Something happened. I see. Check, by the way."

"What? How the hell did that happen?"

You weren't paying attention, dumb-dumb. Maybe you shouldn't vent your frustrations and play chess at the same time.

Morty and Will traded several pawns. On Morty's next turn, he picked up his queen and thumbed it for a minute, before placing it back in its original position. Will seemed disappointed.

"I don't know what to do with her," Morty finally admitted. "I'm worried I'm going to hurt her-again."

"What did you do to her?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I insist. Was it serious?"

"It wasn't... assault or anything. I didn't rape her."

"Are you sure?" Will cocked an eyebrow. "Don't lie to a psychic."

"Here." Morty offered his forehead. Will placed his fingertips to it, while Morty solemnly recited a statement of affirmation.

"I did not rape nor even touch Jasmine Mikan."

"You are telling the truth- oh, and your next move is a bad one. Consider where my knight can go," Will said as he released his mind-perusing grasp.

"It's just..." Morty started, "I can't be sure she wasn't raped by someone else. I have no way of telling. She won't say it. I got close, I think, and she broke down crying and bolted herself in a room. Can't get answers from her. But if it is what I suspect it is, then I put her in that situation, and that means I'm at least partially guilty, and it makes me sick- SICK- to the fucking heart, because she means too much to me for me to allow that kind of awful crap to happen to her."

"Morty," I whispered to myself in pained self-reprisal.

He's talking about Indigo. No matter how many times I tell him, Indigo was not the worst thing that has ever happened to me. Indigo may be the point at which I disowned you, in particular, but it was what happened long before that made my life the ninth circle of hell these past six years. My unjustified hatred of males started a long time ago, because of someone you probably don't even know. I hardly remember him myself; you shouldn't be bothering yourself about it. Why can't we both forget these awful things and concentrate on our futures?

"Sometimes I think I've learned enough in three years about how to handle these kinds of situations. I wish I could go back to Indigo with the knowledge I have now and redo it all... I lost her, and now I've got her back, but only barely."
You blond-haired dolt! Just because the Indigo incident was when you lost me, doesn't mean that's when I lost myself. You know, I really ought to set the record straight for you. Soon as I get another good opportunity, I'll explain it in terms you can understand. Indigo is not to blame for me being a bitchy-little shrew that won't have sex with you.

Besides, under-aged drinking and getting caught butt-naked aren't exactly lifelong, emotionally-scarring occurrences.

"I understand now," Will said.

"That I'm worried I helped ruin a woman's faith in the universe and denied her happiness for the rest of her life? Yeah. Fuck me."

"But you're making an honest effort to help her, right?"

"I'm trying. I've got a plan. It's a little risky. A lot of the times I'm wondering if I'm doing the right thing. Every little setback and fight we have, I'm paranoid it'll hurt her and she'll go back to isolating herself and closing herself off to the world."

"Wouldn't want that."

Will captured a pawn, and now Morty's remaining army was looking pretty sparse in comparison to Will's.

"I don't have any clue what will tick her off. You know, I spent a month planning a kiss. Just a kiss. One whole month. I thought I did everything right. I asked permission, repeatedly, and let her time to think, and encouraged her to introspect, to make sure she was okay with being kissed. I busted my back finding a Pokémon for her. Had to lasso an Ampharos from an open-range ranch. You know what happens when you try to throw a cord around a hostile electric sheep? Buzzap. Finally get her to agree to the kiss. I went through a lot to try to make it as comfortable as possible. It looks like it's going smoothly, and I'm thinking, 'Hey, Jasmine will finally get to experience physical intimacy for the first time. She's liking it. She'll be happy.' Not three seconds later, she starts crying. That's when she locked herself in. I stood outside the door. She didn't stop bawling for three hours. You see what I mean? Unknown unknowns. Emotional landmines. Every day I feel like I should just back off and leave her be, because I'll never be anything but a pain for her."

No, don't you dare do that, Morty.

"Are you sure you want to move there?" Will asked.

"Why?"

"I will checkmate you in the very next move. It's very much avoidable."

"I don't care. You'll win in, like, ten turns max." Morty threw himself back into his seat.

"So be it." Will ended the game with a deft diagonal slash of his queen. "Thanks for the game. I wish you would have put a little more effort into it. It's rare I get to employ my abilities to their fullest in a chess match."

"Sorry, sorry," Morty said. "That drinking game and what Jasmine said got to me. I can't think straight."

"Well, I'll be passing through Ecruteak next week, we can have another match then."
"Sounds good. And sorry, again."

"It's fine. I should be apologizing for being such a poor listener. You know how daft I can be when it comes to interpersonal relationships."

"Yeah, I know."

Will began picking up the board game. Morty remained motionless and star-gazing. It looked like they were about to part ways when Morty spoke abruptly.

"-The reason I was so ticked off was because Jasmine's stupid "never have I ever" reminded me of her."

"Who?"

"Katrina."

Will's cleanup activity drifted to a halt. He turned and placed a reassuring hand on his comrade's shoulder.

"Now I truly understand everything. I'm terribly sorry, and hope you find solace in your endeavors."

…

My heart is thumping. Words of terrible weight stampeded across my mind's railways, leaving echoes of thunder and distress in their wake.

"Never have I ever lost someone close to me."

"We're done here."

"-reminded me of her."

"Katrina."

It's only a name, one that has no meaning to me. No face, no context, no clues. I have never heard Morty or anyone connected to Morty utter this name in any conversation. The only significance these seven letters hold for me is the ability to put a name on an issue I've long known Morty has been struggling with. This must be what he and Volkner had been arguing about during the practice gym battle, and all the other "silence!" warnings Morty had shot to him. Every time he looks away when I've asked him a difficult question, this is the reason for that. She is the key to understanding Morty.

"Katrina."

"Jasmine."

I squeaked and jumped in place. Two hands had caught me in the ribs and sent a surgical tickling strike into my torso and up my spine.

"What are you doing here, crouching like this?"

My jittered head wobbled about until it could face my tickling assaulter. Erika's viridian-garbed frame stood over me, her face jokingly reproachful. The commotion caught the attention of the two men, who were craning over to get a better look.

"Hello! I caught an eavesdropper, should I bring her over?"
"Well, it's impolite to listen in and not introduce yourself," Will said. Even though he had seen me earlier in the party, it seemed like he was just now taking notice of my existence. I felt like I was being appraised, and by the slight smirk on Will's lips, it was all approval. Morty, on the other hand, didn't seem too happy to see me. He wouldn't even speak to me.

"So this is Jasmine. Pleased to meet you, I am Will."

"Will Itsuki of the Elite Four, psychic master, mind reader, game theorist and entertainer."

"I see my reputation precedes me," Will said. "May I ask what you were doing in such close proximity while concealing your presence?"

"Nothing," I responded.

"Really? Because, from the outward evidence, it appears that you were spying upon me and my young colleague. Are you curious to hear what we were talking about?"

"Shut it," Morty muttered.

"It's impolite to talk about someone behind their back. The bulk of the conversation revolved around dear Jasmine here, why not be honest. I'm in the business of truth, after all."

I waved Will off.

"I don't need to hear it. Morty's a pathological liar and manipulator, he probably told you only what he wants you to hear, to get whatever he wants out of you."

"While I agree, I am both a psychic and his senior from high school; I'm well aware of his antics and how to unmask them."

"You underestimate him," I growled. I took the male-in-question by the arm and began tugging at him.

"What?"

"We're going some place private. I need to talk to you."

"How much did you hear?"

"All of it," Erika answered for me, interposing herself between me and Morty. "Now now, don't fight young ones. We're holding up the group. You may talk later." She turned and bowed to Will.

"We are going to tour the local bars. You are welcome to join us, if you'd like, but we must hurry."

"No thank you. My date is expecting me."

"You're dating?" Morty asked, voice rising in surprise.

"Is it so hard to believe? I am a psychic, not a robot. Romantic feelings are not beyond my ken."

"Who is it?"

"Komuri. I thought it would be obvious."

"You weren't acting like a couple at all!"
"Well then I suppose I am daft at this whole romantic social-construct-thing. Do we need to kiss in public to make our relationship apparent, or is that too much?"

"Who is Komuri?"

"The girl in the pink kimono at the drinking game," Erika informed me.

"How do you know about the drinking game?" I asked her.

"Insect-sized robotical spy drones," she said, managing to keep a straight face while answering. "But never mind that, let us go."

Morty and Erika bid Will farewell, and began moving off towards the water fountain.

"Have fun with Komuri," I told him as I prepared to leave.

"I will- and no, not that kind of fun. We are going star-gazing," he said to me. I gave him a quizzical look. "For a supposed prude, your mind is fairly quick to the gutter, Jasmine. Adieu." He tipped a salute to me as I hurried off, trying to hide my embarrassment.

Gah! Men! Mind-reading men are the worst!

My attempts to get Morty alone were thwarted, as Erika would not leave my side. The man followed us at a short distance, and would drift just out of reach every time I slowed down or sped up to catch him. When we arrived at the fountain, a small company was waiting and ready to get going. Whitney immediately beset me with a large number of questions, mainly consisting of how she should attract Brawley, and I was afraid she actually expected useful advice from me.

"I have no clue how to attract men. That's your specialty."

"But you do it all the time!"

"So do you."

"They just want me for sex- not that I mind, usually, but this guy is different! I want more! Like, for him to bring me to bed, but also be there making breakfast in the morning. I want the kind of love where he'd wait a year till sex and be happy with dates and kisses and each other's company- not that I'd make him wait that long- I mean, me and Brawley have already done it- twice! But it's the sentiment, right? I want him to think of me as marriage material. How do you do it? All the best guys fawn over you even when you reject them. How do you snatch a guy's heart?"

"Look pretty, innocent, and meek," I offered.

"But Brawley doesn't like shy girls."

"Well that's my grand secret. I don't know what else to tell you. Play hard to get?"

"I tried that. He ignored me!"

"Maybe you two aren't compatible, then."

"Yes we are! Don't you dare say that!" She's shouting in my face with a fanatical vigor, the act of which is raining spit all over me.

"Erika! Can't you help Whitney?" And by 'help' I mean help her learn basic manners! Erika trotted over behind Whitney and put her hands on her shoulders. The touch acted like a balm, calming the
"I concur with Jasmine. Feigning disinterest is often the best way to attract assertive, extrovert types like Brawley. However, it's not good enough to pretend like you are too good for him, you must actually strive to be a prize worth winning. Increase your status and seek to excel in whatever traits Brawley values in a partner."

"But that's kung fu! I can't beat Maylene at martial arts!"

"I'm sure that martial arts are not the only thing Brawley is interested in. Successful couples often have similar, but not exact, interests in common. If they're too similar, that causes rivalry within a relationship, which creates conflict and tension. You want something a little different. So what else might Brawley be interested in?"

"Um… Maylene is into skiing, I think. And croquet. And cooking."

I snorted.

"What?"

Erika answered.

"Even Jasmine knows you can't keep trying to be a better Maylene. Maylene will always be the best Maylene in the world. You need to establish yourself as the best woman in Brawley's world, and filch him over to yourself with your own unique qualities."

"Erika's right. And it's not just comparing yourself to Maylene. It's trying to be someone you're not, and emulate what you think Brawley wants in a girl; it will never work. For instance, there's this punkish ace trainer by the name of Warren who tried dressing himself up in order to flirt with me. Just because he hid his tattoos, though, doesn't mean I'm going to forget they're there, or the things he called me when we first met. There's no way he's taking me on a date, no matter how good of a 'nice-guy' impression he makes."

"Well said," Erika told me.

"Oh I got it!" Whitney looked like she had an epiphany. She slapped her fist into her opposite palm. "I have to remind Brawley why we started dating in the first place, and improve on that as much as possible! Thanks!"

"Also, try lessening whatever negative behavior traits that may have driven Brawley away."

"Hmm." She's pondering. "He complained that I was too much of a crybaby sometimes."

"You might be bipolar, drugs can fix that," I said jokingly. Whitney glared at me for a moment, wrath in her eyes, before realizing I actually was joking.

"You're not very funny when you're trying to be funny."

"Sorry… not."

"What is it that Brawley liked about you? What are you good at that you can show off to him? In particular, what do you have that Maylene can't match?"

"Mmm, well…." She's having to think for this answer. Ideas began getting thrown out before being summarily rejected:
"Sports. I can beat her at baseball and basketball and volleyball. Brawley only cares about fighting sports though. Being feisty? No. Cute? No, Brawley thinks we're about equal. I can bring him to cooler social functions, but he's not much of a party-goer. Oh I know!"

A big grin and a pause triggered my instinctual dread.

"I'm better at sex than her."

Kill me, right now.

"How do you know?" Morty broke in.

"I just know. I have confidence and experience!" Whitney replied.

"Experience, really? That's not exactly something a girl can waive around on her romantic résumé," I said.

"It's a new age, Jazz. Guys are figuring out it makes for better sex if the girl knows what she's doing. Passive virgins are out of fashion."

"Hmph! That doesn't seem to be deterring you."

"Maybe it is? Maybe I'd rather like to confirm for myself how good Whitney is in the bedroom."

Morty ducked around and threw an arm around Whitney's shoulders, and used the other to stroke her bangs aside. "You're not opposed to friends with benefits, are you?"

Whitney was blushing. "No, but-"

"MORTY!"

The man in question suddenly found himself being dragged off Whitney by the goggles worn round his forehead. He tottered backwards and nearly fell on his buttocks. The assailant, of course, was an angry and jealous yours truly.

"Et et, don't be so possessive, Jazz. You've not earned that privilege to monopolize me."

"So you're suggesting I need to *beep* you to make us monogamous? How crass."

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting. However-" and he drew close to my ear to whisper this, "-once we've done it, I won't defile that bond by cheating on you. I won't even joke about. That's a solemn vow that I promise to keep."

"Look at her, she's becoming flustered. What did you tell her?" Erika asked.

"How sexy she looks in her costume," Morty made up on the spot.

I'd forgotten that I was even wearing my costume; it was actually quite comfortable. Morty's lie/compliment unexpectedly made me feel flush and light, and I prayed I wasn't showing it with a blush on the cheeks.

"You're back to your old self," I muttered.

"I wish I could say the same about you; but we're getting there." He put a hand through my hair, ruffling it, before realigning my halo.

"Take off your spike-tails," he said, trying to undo the orange tangerine-looking clasps by himself. I
resisted.
"No, they stay."

"Why?"

"They just stay!" I insisted. It was bad enough he saw my undone hair at the summit, but luckily I had found some gel and he didn't notice at the time- I wasn't going to give him a second chance. After one last effort, he gave up, and settled for brushing my hair out.

A glance sideways brought to my attention the fact that the rest of the group was staring at us with googly eyes.

"They're so perfect together," Whitney whispered.

Embarrassment levels going critical. I freaked out and pushed Morty away with a flail of arms. My gloves came loose in the process, so I stepped back to pull them tighter. Morty didn't pull his gaze off of me.

"I need you alone," I told him.

"Wow." He grinned. "Are you in a hurry to get it on?"

"No, nothing of the sort," I said.

The grin turned to a disappointed frown.

"Well, I'm not in the mood for a scolding. If you don't want to get frisky, fine by me. At least allow me some beer!"

"This looks interesting," Erika said.

We had arrived at a club and were encouraged to pile inside. Despite the late hour, it was still fairly busy. Even in costume we didn't feel out of place, since a good number of other former party-goers had also made their way here. The music was some unholy mix of disco and techno, the base turned painfully high. My head was pounding within a minute of entering, and I wanted out, badly. My friends, however, wouldn't allow it. Thankfully, the club was non-smoking.

"Here, drink up!" Morty tried shoving a can of beer in my hands.

"Morty, a word, please?" Erika took Morty by the cuff and pulled him. He resisted, determined to transfer the beverage to my possession first. I took it from him only to give it to some drunkard at the bar who was demanding another round from the bartender. By the time I convinced the man it really was a free drink just for him, I had lost track of Erika and Morty.

A quick search of the club was half-fruitful. I spotted Morty again, this time talking with Volkner. The latter nodded and headed towards the exit, while the former began stumbling towards the front stage. He spotted me and beckoned me to come join him inside the noisy, shuffling dance crowd.

I shook my head.

"I'm too tired for this."

Apparently I was the only one, because my friends jumped right into the dance floor and began hopping around, acting like they were dancing. Erika was far less modest a dancer than I would have thought, and Whitney was your typical teen dubstepper. Morty, probably trying to outdo them, was
making all manner of sexually suggestive moves. When someone threw in a Milotic and Morty began grinding on it, I became incensed. Still, I didn't want to cause a scene, so I hastily concocted an idea to chastise him.

"Magneton." People awkwardly parted to make room for my Pokémon. It's not often that you wish for a weaker Pokémon, but right now, I'm missing Magnemite's relatively smaller and less conspicuous body.

"Can you Magnet Rise Morty's pokeball over here?"

"Mite."

The first part of the plan worked. In a second I had Gengar appearing before me.

"Hey, Gengar, look at your master," I ordered the confused ghost. Gengar gazed to the dance floor, already anticipating what I was going to ask of it.

"He's drunk and dancing in public. Embarrass him," I ordered. The Pokémon was happy to comply. It used Shadow Sneak to waft through the crowd without being noticed.

"Oh, and this is how we do it up north," Morty shouted, and began kick-dancing, somewhat poorly (I don't know if it was because of lack of skill or sobriety).

Whatever Gengar had been planning to do, though, failed upon first contact. It jumped out of Morty's shadow. The human, without any hint that he had noticed the incoming prank, whirled around and grabbed Gengar by the cheeks. He stuffed his face into the Pokémon's. "Can't you wanna, can't you gonna, can't you Hypnotize meeeeee!" he sang aloud to the climax of the music. The very next song followed instantly, and was all too appropriate for Morty's act.

"We're up all night to have fun, we're up all night to get some, we're up all night to get lucky!"

Morty really is a psychic. Or a sorcerer. Or something weird at least, because Gengar was completely at his mercy. The Pokémon and trainer pair began miming each other, busting out insanely good dance moves Morty had been incapable of a moment before. After a minute of watching their increasingly provocative antics, I noticed the singular shadow wavering beneath the two.

"He has such a close bond with his Gengar, he can even hypnotize and mind control it. He's making it use Shadow Sneak to help him move about."

I turned right, to find Ethan beside me.

"Hey."

"Hi."

Morty began pounding the air with his pelvis in perfect sync with the beat of the music. The crowd, especially the women, began cheering. Gengar reciprocated to the other side of the room, drawing laughter and a few catcalls. I was fuming.

Beside me, Ethan stared with glum expression at another provocative sight. Lyra was dragging Silver all over the dance floor in a whirlwind of flourishes and pirouettes. The young man could hardly keep up, but he made a valiant effort of trying. Lyra was laughing.

Morty continued his cocky routine without showing signs of slowing or stopping. The music's beat felt like it was turning my brain to mush.
"Want to get out of here?" Ethan asked at length.

"Sure."

Outside on the roof patio a small gaggle of trainers were comparing a trio of Pokémon. Coming nearer, I made out three Metapods with different levels of Harden reinforcing their hides.

Volkner and Flint were among them. The latter tipped the former off to our arrival, and whispered something in his ear. Volkner nodded.

"Don't like the noise?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Yeah… too much for one night."

"Mnhmm."

The four of us settled down and watched the strangers tend to their Metapod contest. It occurred to me that I was in the company of six men and zero women, and it made me feel uncomfortable. Not for the reason that I was afraid of these men doing something to me: Ethan was a nice guy with a girlfriend, Flint seemed pretty chill, and Volkner, although he made a point to sit by me, didn't show any other signs of wanting to engage or put pressure on me. The three Metapod owners didn't even notice us, let alone my presence as the sole female.

No, my consternation stemmed from the fact that no other female had become sick and tired enough to want to escape the mental grind occurring downstairs. Why am I the only woman who has to be so introverted? Can't I have companions, or at least strangers, of my own gender to provide emotional support? It gets lonely being so vanilla.

That's my problem in general, I think. My life is so vanilla, so unpretentious and aesthetically modest, it's hard to find someone similar to share it with.

Tattoos, piercings, hair-dyes, smoking, drugs, loud music, loud cars, loud voices, profanity-laced language, fast roller coasters, crowded parties, hot weather, thrill-seeking, shallow, crass jokes, constant-energy and constant demands, short memories and shorter attention spans, the ever-grinding need to establish one's identity by being as mega-awesome and outlandish as possible, indulging in any and all manner of experiences with no restraint or reckoning- UGH!

How… vulgar. All of it.

Clean and simple.

That's all I want.

Who else has that same kind of lifestyle aesthetic?

"What's Morty up to?" Volkner asked me sidelong.

"Making himself a target for non-charging prostitutes."

"You could just say sluts."

"It's a dirty word."

"Mmm. Well, that's Morty. He's a party animal when he's drunk."
"I see. Does this happen often?"

Volkner paused.

"Every so often. Not rare, not common."

"I see."

"Does he sleep with the girls he meets?" I asked, a question out of the blue. Again, Volkner seemed like he had trouble answering it.

"No. No… Never." He fell silent for a moment. I noticed his hands gripping his knees tightly, like he was straining himself. "Morty's not that kind of guy. He won't have sex with a stranger. He won't do it with someone he doesn't know really well. It's his own moral code, I guess, and sometimes it pi-… makes me mad how often I have to listen to him complain about it."

Volkner lifted his head.

"Do you mind? Telling me about him?"

"I guess not," he said. "Although, I don't know that much, only met him two years ago."

"It's fine, whatever you feel like you can share. And you don't have to share anything, if you don't want to," I added, mindful of the toll that I was taking on him. I'm asking him to divulge secrets on his close friend, and also his (successful) romantic rival. It was a wonder he was giving me these insights, and a wonder still that he wasn't lying about them in order to paint Morty in a negative light. At least, I think he's not lying.

"Morty is super picky with his women. You can't tell, because he'll flirt with anyone, and he keeps his pickiness secret so that he can get away with flirting to all the girls. But when it comes time to take them upstairs, he won't do it. The woman gets mad because she feels cheated, and usually Morty gets a big slap for his efforts. Then, you know, every so often, he meets someone he feels a connection with. I don't know what he's picking up on. A certain look, a kind of joke, a shared hobby, it's always different. He meets them a few times, he starts asking her out, they go on dates, and eventually I get to hear about how good or bad she was in the sack."

Volkner sighed.

"Then I get to hear about how she's not perfect, she's not nice, she's too this or too that, and they break up. Or really, he breaks up with her. Always him dumping the woman. Most don't take it well. He's got like, three crazy exes who stalk him whenever he shows up in their city."

"Sounds like a real lady killer," Ethan chipped in. Apparently he'd been listening too.

"He is, he is. Got the charisma to hook them in, and the candor to keep them too. But, hey, some guys are good at Pokémon battles. Some are good at science," he pointed a thumb to his chest. "Some are Bosa Novas. I wish I'd never met him, but at the same time, I'm glad I did."

"Why's that?"

"Every time he moans about women, it hurts. He'll say things like - 'It's been a month since I've gotten laid,' or 'I think there's rust growing down there.' Other times, like when he just dumped a girl, he'll be bellyachin about some miniscule tick that caused him to hate her. I'm like, 'Really? Really?! You're bitching to me about not getting the 'perfect' woman and expect me to sympathize with you? I've never had four consecutive dates in my life. Three, once, that's my record. I try finding out why
it didn't work out, and get an earful about all manner of vague crap- like 'You're not assertive enough' or 'It's no fun around you' or 'There's just no spark'. That's if I'm lucky. Lot of girls just call me a loser or a creep for trying to find, you know, closure. If you're going to call it quits, at least have the guts to say it to my face and tell me why, you cowardly bitc-----… I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay," I told him. He had gotten carried away, but I couldn't help but feel bad for him. After all, I was one of those women, albeit probably one of the more direct and polite ones, who had turned him down. I realize I blame men for oh-so-many faults, instinctively, but deep down I know it's not a problem distinguished by gender, but something common to all humans. The need for procreation, combined with the egregiously complex mind of a logical yet emotional species, has given rise to this tiresome, grating, debauched process we call romance. There is no sense and no blame to be had in trying to understand why a man and a woman (or a man and a man, Flint being present- gosh, homosexuality makes it even more complicated!) aren't compatible with one another.

"I felt the same way, too," Ethan said. "It doesn't really go away, even if you meet the right girl. It just… changes."


"You know what they say about grass across a fence," Ethan offered in response.

The conversation went on and on. A few loose comments about how difficult it was for a man to attract a lady or the pressure of maintaining that spark were flung out, which didn't exactly make me angry, but at least turned me off. At some point an exhausted Silver stumbled up to us and took a seat. With his arrival the talk almost immediately turned to Pokémon battles, and I lost interest completely. Instead, my mind ventured off into introspection.

I guess the common line of thinking is that men think about sex much more often than women. It's not true, I believe. We girls think about it all the time, when it's relevant. Maybe the reason for that perception is that men have more internal pressure to act on their instincts, to try to find opportunities to copulate. Women are more sensitive to external pressure, which is usually stressing us against promiscuity.

"Don't be a slut. No one likes a slut. No man likes used goods."

"Don't spread STD's. Be careful of your health."

"Easy girls can't make demands. A key that opens many locks is a master key, a lock opened by any key is a shitty lock."

"Premarital sex is amoral and corruptive. It will send you to hell!"

"Don't get pregnant. You don't want to be single and saddled with a child. Prevention isn't 100%, just don't have sex and you won't have to worry about it."

"You're more than your body. You deserve the respect to be seen as a human being, not a fuck toy."

Yet, all through the evening, I'm looking at my own external pressures, and it's all biased towards sexual proclivity. My friends are all doing it, in one capacity or another, and they're making it sound like it's not just fun, but very reasonable. They make it sound like it's as acceptable and innocent as going to the movies.

Yet, look at all the drama that comes out of it. These men are torturing themselves emotionally trying to get a chance to fuck a woman. Well, they're also trying for a more long term arrangement, which I assume includes dates and caring for each other and such.
What's the deal with Morty then? He keeps sending mixed signals. If he complains about the lack of sex in his life, why won't he just go home with one, or all, of these women he has such an easy time hooking? Why does he break up with them?

Do you think it's possible, Jasmine, that he's hung up on you?

It seems like the most plausible explanation for all of his behavior. Say he fell in love with me over the course of middle school, but couldn't figure it out until high school, after I had left. He became regretful and tried, in vain, to forget me and move on, but couldn't. Now he has a chance to finally hook up with me, and is paranoid about my feelings towards him. Like any regular guy, he wants sex, but he doesn't want his desire for sex to be the thing that keeps us apart. So he's been trying to make me feel comfortable about sex so that it's not an issue that stands between us anymore. It's a logical approach, and also a kind and considerate one, if a little selfish. Behind the cocky, smug exterior, he really is soft and squishy on the inside, isn't he? I wish it was the reverse.

This is my best theory as to the enigma that is Morty. Why he acts the way he does towards me, and towards the world in general. I could light up his world by just saying "I love you- ravish me." It makes me feel warm and special, thinking that I have the power to make Morty happy. I just wish I could say the same about him. I'm not so sure if he can make me happy.

Why?

Because of trust. I don't trust him yet. I don't remember how to trust humans. Not after what I've been through. Knowing what I know about my own life and my own existence, it's made me lose faith in our species. We're full of lies, secrets, selfishness, and malice, and there's nothing you can really do to guarantee a partner's evil side won't rumble to the surface someday and ruin your life.

I'm afraid he's still hiding something: Katrina. Whoever she was, she meant something to him, and I don't know what, and I don't know how that pertains to our relationship, and that scares me.

I'm afraid of my own issues. I'm afraid to share them, because that might completely upend how Morty views me, and darken the image of a snow-white angel he has of me. Would he then abandon me, the same way he abandoned all those other women, because they couldn't live up to the ideal of that same snow-white angel? I absolutely cannot have that; I cannot allow myself to fall in love and then have him walk away from me. It would be the end of me. So I'm terrified of anything in me that would drive him away. I'm terrified of wanting to fall in love, knowing I might lose it.

Why? What caused this? Morty? Edward? The Indigo incident? No, not at all. When I agreed to go out that night to celebrate, I was in the same state of mind as today. Desperate, despairing, confused, vaguely hopeful, and willing to take one last chance on someone I thought I could trust. Up to that point there were a select few boys I had not yet lumped into the disgusting mass of hedonism I came to view men as. Their actions that night added themselves to that god-forsaken group. Mr. Beret passed away soon after, taking away another male from my short list of respected men and furthering my depression. The only one left was Pryce.

Was it because of that guy from six years ago? The Olivine Lighthouse incident? No…

My heart fluttered. It was right after that incident. What he did to me was bad; he pushed me over the edge into the abyss that I find myself in today. But he didn't dig the abyss. Someone else did.

It's really confusing. I don't know what to believe about anything anymore.

"Hey, Jasmine, what's your take?"
Huh? My attention returned to the group, particularly Silver and Volkner. They appeared to be waiting for me to tell them something.

"What's that? I dazed off."

"Who is the strongest trainer in the world?"

"Steven Stone, of course," I said without hesitation. This answer elicited groans from both males.

"You're kidding," Volkner said.

"Another plebe," Silver said.

Both appeared equally exasperated.

"Who else?" I responded.

"Red. Once in a generation prodigy. He's going to beat Stone's record, and Stone too, someday. He got close, the summit was a fluke. There's rumors of a rematch going around," Volkner said with calm conviction.

"Red is soft. He's not deserving of the title. He'll get upset, and often," Silver asserted.

"He's still miles better a battler than Lance! The nunchuck couldn't strategize his way out of Diglett's Tunnel!"

"When your Pokémon are three times stronger than the nearest competitor's, your best strategy is to just overpower them! Finesse can be strategized against. A 395 bAT Giga Impact can't."

"Oh, right. And those same Giga Impacts sure looked like they were overpowering Red's para-flinches."

"That was ages ago. Lance has gotten better."

"So has Red, and he's young and so are his Pokémon. His ceiling is up in the stratosphere."

"Maybe one day he'll pass Lance up- like when Lance is an old, Alzheimer's-riddled decrepit. Right now, the Dragon Master has the more powerful team."

"Right now, ha ha, don't make me laugh. Red passed Lance the moment he won the finals. Face it, he's got a 2-0 record against Lance, and a world title under his belt. Jasmine, back me up. Red is better than Lance, right?"

"It's irrelevant," I shrugged. "Stone is the best. You're arguing for second place."

"Stone is overrated/a cheating hack." (they said this together, in unison, but with different choice epithets).

"He has a perfect record, plus three world titles. It's pretty clear to me," I said.

"You're just rooting for him because he's your boss. And you're just pushing Red because you hate Lance," Silver accused the pair of us in turn.

"Perfect record, three trophies," I repeated, wishing they'd leave me out of this argument.

"There are *so many* legit reasons he shouldn't be considered," Volkner said. He began listing
them, too: "He didn't start his official career until he was twenty-seven. Majority of all losses for all hall-of-famers came before they were twenty. He's got at least thirty losses, all conveniently off the books. His best wins were all close, luck-of-the-draw style victories, hardly the dominating performances other all-time greats have displayed. He grew up in the weakest generation with the least parity of any of world champion. And even then, he never battled the one trainer most people considered to be his greatest threat."

"That's because he married her!" I exclaimed.

"Point is, that pretty record is manufactured, not a true testament of his entire career. And that's the only thing keeping his status afloat. Three world titles, but one came from the Castellian games, and that's… wrong. That's two titles, and most pros agree his quarter-final win in the first tourney was a miracle. That leaves one legit, unchallenged title. Other people have two. Red will win another one, you can bet on it."

"The only person who's still alive with two titles is Oak. 68' wasn't exactly a "resounding victory"."

"Sure, luck may mean the difference between winning and losing, but it doesn't make them great, or strong, when they need it for a come-from-behind win."

"Are you trying to say the outcomes of the tournaments don't matter?"

"No. I just think, in context, some championships are better indicators of their skill than others. Red had the best run out of all of them. Good wins against seven out of the top ten ranked trainers in the world, in the same tournament. Stone beat three of the top ten. Even Tobias only beat five of the top twenty-five in his championship. And if you want further proof, Red has one loss in the past two years. One loss, period. He hasn't even lost an unrecorded pickup match or anything of the like."

"That we know of. Also, you're forgetting a fairly major battle that happened right after your own defeat," I needled him. "It's two losses in the last two years."

Volkner seized up.

"Fine. You watch. If Red doesn't go undefeated for the next year, I'll eat my words."

"Using trophies and records is shameful. The only way to measure worth is by eyeballing battles between great trainers. Lance passes the test. He's proved, over and over again, that he can brutalize anyone he wants to. Red would be decimated if they ever fought again," Silver argued adamantly.

"If you want to split hairs and argue about sheer power," I said, "Then you might as well say Loft was the greatest of all time."

"Well…." they both sort of fell silent at that. Volkner recovered first.

"He doesn't count. He retired from battling before his Pokémon really got to their max level. And the records are really fuzzy from his era. Hard to know what he really accomplished, and how much of those stories were just exaggeration."

"Nevertheless, he exists."

"Existed. He died."

"No, he's still alive."

"He passed away in Ghomolta years ago."
"They ran an article on him last year, it said he shut himself up in a cabin in Sinnoh."

"Really? But I thought…

After a little more bickering, we determined that we didn't know squat about the status of the famed Sebastian Loft. It was as if he really was a legend, shrouded in mystery and known only by rumor and tenth-hand information. Still, if even a fraction of the things he was said to have done were true… deserts lit up with mushroom clouds, behemoths and leviathans made into puppets, battles with a psychic, psychotic demon, landing on the moon…

Regardless, Silver indicated he wanted to keep the debate squarely in the present and the provable, and so I again insisted that Stone held the mantle until someone matched his feats or else beat him outright.

"His wife could beat him."

"Probably, but it wouldn't count for the same reason my practice sessions with my dad didn't count against my gym record," I said. "That's the point of records- to be able to compare trainers against each other. And to do that fairly, you need measurables. Uniform rules, uniform battle configurations, and foreknowledge that the results matter, in order to ensure a trainer gives it their all."

"If a trainer needs regulations and records to convince him to take a struggle between enslaved creatures seriously, that person is fucked up and belongs in jail," Silver replied.

"It's not just about putting in effort," Ethan chimed in. "It's to prevent gambling and conflicts of interest. They use overall records when they consider who to invite to tournaments. If it weren't regulated, people would win-trade and manipulate the system to make money or gain easy access to everything."

"That's right," I said, agreeing with Ethan's logic.

"Which highlights what's wrong with Stone and every other hackneyed tourney-dweller. They only do it for the money," Silver opined.

"I seriously doubt the top-tier do it for anything but glory," Volkner countered.

"Glory, power, wealth, it doesn't matter the prize, the point is none of them believe in anything greater than themselves. It's all selfish and self-aggrandizing. Lance, and Lance alone amongst all the big shots, fights for a cause. Why do you think he never entered the tournaments, never took a salary when he was CEO?"

"Because he was a dictator who wanted to impose his idea of justice on the whole community," Volkner said.

"At least he had ideals he wanted to see come to fruition. Stone and Gabriel and Jacine and Nivenson are all corpses, content to keep things in a steady state of decay."

"Take that back. Don't lump Stone with those others," I demanded.

"He talks pretty, but in the end he hasn't accomplished anything, and he's not doing anything to assert his will. He had all this power and reputation at his disposal, and what did he do with it? He made sure the League was back in the black. That was his "big" accomplishment: he balanced the checkbook."
"He's done way more than that!" I insisted. "You're not a Gym Leader, you wouldn't know how hard it was to try to run a gym during Lance's tenure. They made it unbearable! Stone reformed the system to make it friendlier, so that we could actually make a living doing what we love!"

"Oh, that explains why all you leaders support Stone. He gave you all a pay raise."

"Sheesh."

Volkner and I rolled our eyes.

"Only a pay raise in the sense that we were finally making minimum wage."

"You can't be serious. I've seen your salaries, they're better than minimum wage," said Silver.

"Not when you divide it by the actual number of hours we work. 35 hours a week, yeah, sure. Welcome to my Wednesday."

"Mmhmm."

"Try telling that to the poor who do the same hours and make two-digits a day."

"We're not some third-world country," I said.

"You're being bitter," Volkner told the red-haired youth.

"I am righteously bitter."

My first impression of this guy was wrong. When I first met him he was brooding and sour, and struck me as a dark and edgy fellow with a personal axe to grind. I didn't think he was actually into social justice and stuff. It's a little admirable, but I don't like his tone. It's like all political activists, an insufferable "you're with me or against me" attitude that knows no manners. The things he was saying about my childhood idol was making me a little mad. I know I shouldn't let him drag me down to his level, but I can't help it. I'm Full-Metal Jasmine, stubbornness is second-nature to me.

"Have you ever met Stone? He's an insufferable, arrogant prick. He acts like he's the greatest human-not trainer- *human*- who ever lived," Silver said with a sneer brought by memory.

"I have met him, and he was very polite," I told him.

He also forced me to sing for him, but saying that would weaken my argument.

"He treats you special," Silver spat out.

"Why me?"

"I meant 'you' as in women. He's a womanizer, he gives you all free passes."

"Eh." I didn't follow the tabloids, so I wouldn't know about Stone's personal habits beyond the miniscule contact I've personally had with him. There's never been a major story about him cheating or harassing females, though. I doubt it's as big a deal as Silver wants to imply.

"I've watched Stone and I've never seen anything besides him being an upstanding human, as far as men go, and an outstanding trainer. He hasn't been beaten because his Pokémon are strong, fanatically well-trained, and they have a brilliant tactical mind directing them."

"Idiot, that's not what makes Pokémon strong."
"What makes a Pokémon strong?" I asked, tone of voice becoming aroused and irritated.

"The bonds shared between trainer and Pokémon. That drives them to succeed and become stronger than anything training or strategy can achieve."

Mood rapidly deflating.

That's shocking. I never suspected Silver of being in the pro-Pokémon political camp.


"He only talks about it, he never shows it."

"He does. Just because he has a different rapport with his Pokémon than what you'd expect, doesn't mean he doesn't hold the same regard and respect for them as Mr. Pokémon himself."

"I want to see it. I'd like to battle him, firsthand, but he won't accept my challenge," Silver said.

"You've challenged him?"

"In person, multiple times, but he makes excuses or calls me too young."

"Ohhh, I get it. Red…" Volkner led in.

"Yes, Red is my ticket to Stone. If I beat Red, I can get Stone's attention and challenge him to a match."

"That would work. Red and Steven are said to be really close," Volkner nodded. "Not that I think you'll be able to beat either. They're far beyond your abilities."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm pushing myself to improve every single day. With all their politicking and prize-winning, I doubt they're putting as much effort into training. And, I still believe my bond is stronger than theirs. Just give me time."

"Why do you want to beat them so badly?" I asked. "It's a little obsessive."

"So I can prove myself and my ideals to the world. If I dent Stone's perfect record, I can get my message out."

"Careful, that's what Forester tried, and look how that ended up."

"My Pokémon are vicious, but they're not monsters, like his. I'm not going to cause a massacre. And I'm not doing this for my own gain, or just to show up the "great and mighty" Steven Stone. I have something that needs to be heard, and needs to be taken seriously."

"Now I get why you love Lance so much. You sound just like him," Volkner said.

"You won't beat him. Stone, I mean," I said.

"I think I can," Silver shot back.

"Because even if you do, no one is really going to listen to you. You'll just be known as the guy who upset Stone's record. But you won't have Stone's record, or his titles, or his other accomplishments. Beating Stone won't transfer the respect the world gives to him over to you. It's something you have to earn on your own."
"Yeah, I know I have to earn it. But at this point, just to earn it I have to start by beating Stone. It's doable. Red proved how rusty he's gotten back at the summit. That prick has it coming, I can feel it. I want to be the one who does it."

"You've got a long way to go,' Volkner insisted. "You have to get by Red, first. And he's stronger than Stone."

"We'll see. They don't have the same bond I do with my Pokémon."

"Hmph!"

"What?" Silver demanded of me, annoyed at my outburst and snarled face.

"Battle me."

"What?!"

"Battle me. You talk on and on and on about the bond you share with your Pokémon, you start sounding like the same prick you're accusing Stone of being. Well show us the proof. Have a gym battle against me, and then we'll see what kind of 'bond' you have with your Pokémon, and how far you have to go to challenge Red."

"You?! You're just a Gym Leader. Aren't you on probation? They're saying you're the weakest leader in Johto."

"Well then, why not? It'll be an easy win for you, right?" I insisted.

"Fine. Sure. Actually, that's a good idea. It's not the world, but I've got to start somewhere. There's a lot of Leaders from Nihon here, I bet beating you would be a nice warning shot for them."

"You're underestimating Gym Leaders, and her," Volkner warned.

"I'm not underestimating anyone," Silver said.

We brought cold, hard stares down upon each other.

What was he thinking?

He bad-mouthed Steven Stone, both his ability and his character. That's idiocy, in my eyes. It shows a total lack of respect for what Stone has accomplished on and off the field. It takes discipline, skill, and guts to simply reach a 50% win ratio against all the challengers I face in my gym. To go beyond that, to never let your guard down and go full force against every opponent, even when they are determined as all hell to take you down, and defeating every single one of said challengers-sometimes handily, sometimes just eking out a win- for over two-thousand battles, is beyond the comprehension of mortals. Stone is legend. Stone is deity.

And, ever since I was little, I identified with Stone. We had the same tastes in Pokémon and battling style. I loved his "Fear me mortals!" attitude on the battlefield. Most of all, I once read a piece where he admitted he was kicked out of his parent's home at the age of seventeen, and had to work his way up in life. Eventually he proved his overbearing parents wrong and successfully brought a squalid university up to the heights of academic and financial success. He took over from his father at Devon, and soon after they began making literal shiploads of money by releasing a ton of cool trainer devices and apps. To this day I'm a diehard Devon-tech fan and all my gym equipment is purchased from them. Steven went on to start battling professionally, while also globe-trotting and financing his own geological and paleontological expeditions. Then came the world championship trophies, and
then his marriage to another of the modern era's superstars, and then the ultimate job: CEO of the
Pokémon League itself.

I admired Steven. He went from a roofless rebel to the top of the world, all on his own effort and
ability, and with a style and conduct I couldn't help but admire.

No, I wouldn't date the man, even if we were the same age. I couldn't actually live with his celebrity-
status or lifestyle, or find myself attracted to someone with such an outsized personality. It's not like I
wished he was my boyfriend. That would be too much. Just, I'm content to stand back and admire
him from a distance, as a legend, as a symbol of endless aspiration.

Secretly, I kind of wish Stone was my dad.

When Silver tried to overturn my lofty image of my idol and boss, and put him in the worst light
imaginable, I had to really hold it together and not let myself burst into a shouting match. Now that
we've agreed to a Pokémon battle, I don't have to act uncivilized. I can take my anger out through
my Pokémon.

I hate to involve them in this, but it's not a petty feud. It's a battle of ideals. Silver obviously idolizes
Lance. I wasn't fully aware of how Lance had affected the Gym Leader system, because I wasn't in
full control of my own gym at the time. But listening to the older leaders, they all despise Lance and
his brand of justice. They say he put countless restraints on Pokémon ownership and Pokémon
competition, and made enemies with virtually every segment of trainers. The purported conspiracy of
the day was that Lance wanted to end the very concept of Pokémon ownership.

I can believe that. Not because I think Lance hates Pokémon, but the opposite: he doesn't trust
humans to be good trainers to their Pokémon. He acted like only he and a select few trainers, the
exceptions, were capable enough and loving enough to be entitled to share the same breathing space
with Pokémon, let alone command them. That's arrogant, and elitist. According to Silver, your bond
with your Pokémon is strength itself. Follow that through, and it means if you have a good
relationship with your Pokémon, you'll naturally be a strong trainer, and vice versa. Well, I've seen
plenty of loving and tight bonds between Pokémon and trainer, but that didn't mean even my
Graveler couldn't plow through their Ledian. I'm with Steven on this one. Mutual respect is a worthy
thing in and of itself, but it's not a means to power. I think Silver is missing that. He wants power for
who-knows what reasons, probably to save the world or enact justice of some sort, and he believes
power comes from respecting and loving of one's Pokémon. While that's good that he wants to be
best friends with his Pokémon, and getting stronger is as good a reason as any for wanting that
positive relationship, he's foolish if he thinks that alone will help him become stronger. That puts to
shame all the hard work, mental and physical, great trainers and great Pokémon put into becoming
the best competitors they could be. It also ignores reality; that sometimes, many times, it's as much
about luck and genes and fate as it is about mindset.

I'll teach him that. I'll teach him to respect the Stone philosophy of Pokémon battling.

"We'll settle this tomorrow," Silver said.

"Let's. Whitney's gym. Twelve o'clock." The boat didn't leave until four o'clock. Lots of time for a
match.

"Should I tell Whitney we're requisitioning her gym?" Volkner asked.

"No need," the woman herself blurted out. She practically appeared out of thin air between us. "This
is awesome! Silver versus Jasmine! How unexpected! I can't wait to watch! Ah! But before you do,
I'm gonna say, my gym's kind of a mess."
We gave Whitney quizzical looks, hoping she'd explain.

"Power surge. Video display is bugged, lights are wobbly, and the gym floor… yeah let's not get into that."

"The shield generator?" I inquired.

"Offline. We're using a pair of Girafarigs."

"Oh…"

"They're awesome at it, don't worry. I'd be more worried about the field."

"What's wrong with the field?"

"Um, you'll see." She winked at me.

"Good. Everything's set."

"By the way, have you seen Flint? I've been meaning to ask him- oh there you are! Hey Flint!"

Whitney bounded off to the other side of the patio.

Silver stewed, muttered something and then began to leave. As he passed me by, he stopped to give me a word.

"Those who were bad-mouthing you, saying you were the weakest leader- they're just pundits, commentators. Amongst all the Johto trainers, they're saying the opposite: you're the strongest Gym Leader in the region. I hope they're right- I want to prove I'm for real. Don't disappoint me."

Boys! Always, ever, insufferable arrogant assholes! All of them! In a fit of childish rage I stuck my tongue out at the retreating figure. I thought that would be the last I heard or saw of him, but he abruptly halted in place, and began rapidly back-peddling. By the time he reached us he was walking as fast as it was physically possible to walk.

"Silver! Ethan?! Where are you guys?"

"Not dealing with her," I thought I heard Silver mutter. Then, to our astonishment, he vaulted over the railing. It must have been a twenty-foot drop, so we all gasped and waited for the crunch and cries of pain. Instead, we heard the poof of a pokeball. The red-head appeared, surfing upon a gliding Gliscor. The Pokémon and its rider sailed around a building and were lost to the night.

"Hey!"

Lyra pitter-pattered into view. Her hair was worn down and tangled, and her witch outfit lay disheveled upon her shoulders. Her black and orange stockings hung loose around her shins, and sweat glistened on her forehead.

"Hey, Jasmine, have you seen Silver? Or Ethan?"

"Silver just left," I said truthfully. "And Ethan…" I was about to turn and point out Ethan's presence, before realizing there was no Ethan to point out. At least, not in the location I last saw him.

"Weird," I said.

I felt a tug at the hem of my skirt. With enough presence of mind not to shriek, I took a quick glance downwards. Ethan was crouched beneath a table, hiding under the paper cloth draping over it. He
put a finger to his lips, silently begging me to keep quiet. I nodded.

"I haven't seen him at all," I told Lyra. She sighed and dipped her shoulders.

"Gosh. Boys are so hard to manage. I'll go check the restroom."

When she was safely out of sight, Ethan climbed out from his hiding spot.

"Phew."

"What was that all about?"

He gave me a "Oh boy, this is awkward" kind of shifting of the eyes.

"Payback," he answered. "For what she put me through during the hoax."

"Pretty devious of you."

He found a table nestled into the corner, out of view of the main patio entrance, and took a seat. Out of a sense of boredom and unwillingness to wade back into the music to find Erika, I joined him. Whitney sat down with Flint and began chatting about sports. Volkner stood at the railing and contemplated the city skyline. Every so often he stole a glance towards me, in turn catching me glancing at him. Our eyes would meet for a fraction of a second, and then dart away in embarrassment.

"Who do you think is the strongest trainer in the world?" I asked suddenly. Ethan paused a moment before deciding.

"Tobias."

"Really? What about Stone?"

"Stone's pretty good. I'd like to see them battle."

"What about Red?"

"He's overrated," Ethan said in a huff. "Even I managed to beat him."

"Really?!" My eyes went wide. Ethan beat Red? How? When? Where? Was Ethan actually a super-awesome trainer and no one knew about it?

"Yeah, although, no one really knows about it, and I'm not supposed to talk about it. He wasn't really primed, either."

"Tell me about it- and him." I guess I wanted to know more about the doomsday train that was headed my way and what to expect, but also, a hint of curiosity about the man himself and his character crept into my mind.

"Red's moody. He doesn't talk much, and he doesn't think much of other people. Literally. He doesn't think about others. He's too wrapped up in the game, and in Pokémon. I guess he has a nice side, but it's hard to get out."

"Mmm. Sounds familiar," I said.

"Anyways, something happened. They didn't tell me what or why, just that he decided to go live up on Mount Silver for a year. It was starting to look like he wouldn't come down. Professor Oak
recruited five of us—me, Lyra, Blue, Silver, and Green, to all climb up there and bring him back down—"By any means possible" were his exact words. I kind of got he was only half-kidding about beating him up and dragging him down the slopes if we had to. Anyways, we ventured up."

"What happened?"

"Red had himself a nice cozy cave all set up. He was supplying himself from a nearby monastery. Spent his days training and his nights praying, or something like that. Well, we stayed with him for a few nights, trying to convince him to come down. He wouldn't budge. Lyra finally got ticked off and managed to tick him off, which was scary, because Red is inhumanly patient. Their egos went on a trip and she finally roped him into a Pokémon battle. He beat her, pretty badly. Then Green fought him, and she lost, and then finally his rival, Blue, and he lost too. Silver wouldn't have any of it and sat out, so I was the last guy. Everyone expected me to battle, I didn't feel like I could say no."

"So you battled… and won?"

"Yeah. Red only used Revives and Potions in-between matches. Didn't recover his Pokémon's power, he didn't have any Ethers. Pikachu couldn't use Thunder, Charizard's flames were almost spent up too. Got out one Fire Blast which leveled Heracles- my Heracross, I mean. Finally swept him with Froslass. It was last January, there was a heavy blizzard rolling in. It was one of the reasons Oak wanted Red off the mountain, he was afraid he'd get caught in the cold weather and freeze to death."

"Right."

Mt. Silver claimed the lives of about three climbers a year, usually during the post-winter storm season; although accidents can happen year-round. Despite its popularity amongst trainers, the summit still wasn't a safe and cushy tourist attraction.

"So you fought in a blizzard?"

Ethan nodded.

"Not the smartest thing for us, but it ended up deciding the match. He couldn't target Froslass with her Snow Cloak ability. Pikachu tried a Double-Team Volt Tackle, but ended up tackling a boulder, not Froslass. Ice Beam, and done, I beat one of the strongest trainers in the world."

Ethan leaned back in his seat.

"I don't feel like I accomplished anything though, and no one else ever gave me credit for that. It's not recorded anywhere, and even Lyra thinks it was a fluke. Maybe she's jealous I finished what she couldn't, and that's why she wants a rematch with Red."

"I see. Do you think she can do it?" I asked.

"Hmm? Beat Red? Yeah, she has a chance. Typhlosion's a titan. It can go one on one with any Pokémon in the world, including Tobias' legendaries. The only thing holding her back is her other team members."

"Togekiss, Sudowoodo, Hitmontop," I started listing, trying to remember her team lineup.

"Oh, she has way more than that now. We went all over Nihon and overseas too. Visited Kalos, Larencia, Unova, Proust. The problem is, even though she has all these great Pokémon, and spends the time to train them too, because of sheer logistics she can't give them enough real experience in actual matches. She's stubborn and tries giving them all equal opportunities, but that equates to, like,
two battles a month for most of them."

"That's no good," I said, shaking my head. "I'd rather concentrate on a core team of experienced veterans."

"Same. She disagrees. Insists on trying to catch them all, and train them all too. It gets annoying, and expensive, and hard to keep up with her horde. I imagine her mother and Elm are getting concerned about the little army of critters she's storing up in New Bark Town."

"Hahaha," I laughed a little. It was thinking about Pokémon forming their own army and taking over a village that somehow tickled my senses. Like, "Show those nasty humans who they're dealing with! Viva la Pokerevolución!".

"What's so funny?"

I told him my thoughts.

"Viva la Pokerevolución!" I said, with as much enthusiasm as my tired, worn out body could muster. Ethan had a good laugh at that. He's got a nice smile. It's a smile that's in his eyes as much as in his cheeks and lips.

"What about Typhlosion? How'd it get so strong if it has to share the workload?"

"Oh, Typher never leaves her side. He's always around, the two won't leave each other for a single moment. He's more the boyfriend than I am, in some respects. So, whenever Lyra gets in a pinch and her inexperienced pokes start going down, she panics and orders Typhlosion onto the field. Typhlosion does his fire thing, burns everything to the ground (I've lost more than one hat to that stupid monster), and in the process gets more battlefield experience and becomes even stronger. It's a self-reinforcing cycle."

"She's the proto-typical "I only train my starter!" trainer," I ventured.

"Exactly!"

I chuckled at his enthused reaction.

"Ha."

"Who was your first Pokémon?" he asked.

"Voltorb."

"You have a Voltorb?"

"Yep. Don't use it much in battle. I guess, as a Gym Leader, I have to field my best Pokémon all the time, in order to keep my ratio up and keep my job. So I could be guilty of the same thing as Lyra."

"Six at a time is better than one at a time," Ethan offered.

"I suppose. Although, for a long while I was just relying on Steelix, and Magneton a little. None of the others could stay conscious long enough to actually gain anything from fighting."

"Well, that was all you needed, as I recall."

"I don't recall."
"Don't you?" Ethan asked. He looked very sad and disappointed.

"Recall what?"

"How it took me nine tries to beat your Onix."

"I don't remember that at all."

"Huh."

He slouched back into his chair. Wrinkles spread across his brow, as if he was thinking very hard. A vacant expression flitted across his face, toying with the idea of staying, before a forced effort banished it.

"Back to Red. And Silver. Can you give me any more heads up?" I asked.

"Red… you might stand a chance, if you're well-prepared and catch him by surprise. He's good because he's got good Pokémon, good strategies, and awesome reflexes."

"Explain that last one to me."

Being able to think and react quickly to the evolving situation was a critical skill for a trainer, but there were so many ways one's reflexes can affect the outcome of a battle. This area seriously interested me, and I was hungry for details.

"He's a quick thinker, and dexterous. Once his Pokémon are in range of a pokeball's recall laser, he can switch them out—" Ethan suddenly snapped his fingers "—faster than you can blink. Here's a good example: I had Froslass fire off a Shadow Ball at his retreating Espeon. Not only did he get Espeon out of the way, he had Charizard out in time to intercept it with Air Slash."

I cocked an eyebrow.

"That's fast."

"Really fast. Uses a two-arm single-motion approach, recalls and replaces at the same time. A year ago, the judges kept catching and penalizing him for having two Pokémon out at the same time, but now he's gotten better at his timing and doesn't make that kind of mistake. His weakness, if you want to call it that, is that his teams are so honed on executing their strategy, they're not very versatile individually.

"Oh? So, for example…"

"For example, Pikachu. It's all about speed. Thunder, Volt Tackle, Electroball, Quick Attack, Double Team, Iron Tail, everything revolves around its speed. It doesn't have any utility moves that I can think of, and no defenses whatsoever."

"How is that little rodent so unbeatable then?"

"Even a one-hit-KO is useless if it can't land. Thing's too fast, and it'll deliver its own devastating attacks first. He's sacrificed everything to make sure it's as offensively powerful as can be. I think that's why he's never evolved it, he thinks it'll lose too much agility if he does."

"Really? I thought it was because his Pikachu didn't want to evolve and he was deferring to its wishes."

"It might be both." Ethan nodded. "Espeon is also overspecialized. Lots of utility, almost no
firepower. Snorlax is a pure tank, vulnerable to status. Charizard is well-rounded, and powerful, but no utility."

"His team sounds pretty balanced," I said.

"The team overall, yes. Together, they can take on anyone or anything. His overall strength ties in with his reflexes; he has a whole lot of unique ways he can use his Pokémon in tandem, even if they aren't on the field at the same time. Because he can switch them so fast, you're almost always going to lose if you try to counter him switch for switch. He's awesome at tempo and progression, and pretty good at prediction. He's constantly evolving his game, innovating and coming out with new tricks every single tournament. All around, he's one of the best tacticians in the history of the game. Not the world, history."

"That might be stretching it at this point…"

"I'm sort of a history buff. I like watching and reading about old matches. Red easily ranks up there, based on talent and ability. Yet for someone supposedly as good as he is, his Pokémon are not individually able to deal with a whole lot of unexpected surprises. They're undisciplined in some areas and prone to emotional tantrums. The Pikachu, especially, is too spunky for its own good. It'll try to keep fighting long past the point it should have been retreated, and Red allows it. That's the kind of stuff that's keeping him from being an all-timer. He's weak to gimmicks, I think. I don't know which one, but someday a gimmicky, classless trainer is going to beat him."

"Lyra?"

"No. If Lyra beats him, it's going to be an all-out slugfest. I'd double-check the shield-generators before allowing that match."

" Hmm. I think I'm starting to get an idea on how to fight him."

"Tell me, I'll give you feedback."

"Stealth Rocks. Spikes. Play strong defense. If I can keep forcing him to switch out and chase me over the battlefield, I can wear him down. Forcing switches will be easier if his Pokémon aren't as versatile as you say they are."

"Espeon has Magic Bounce for an ability, so be aware of that," Ethan advised.

"Oh, crap. Well thanks for the heads up. That's definitely something I need to be wary of, especially considering my status-and-hazard oriented play style. Now, on to my immediate opponent:

"And what about Silver?"

"Well, I know less about how Silver fights than Red, actually. I haven't seen him too much in actual matches… just… street brawls, and gang fights, and other dirty stuff."

Sounds ominous, and yet, believable.

"Can you tell me about his Pokémon, then?"

"His team leader is Bruce, a Feraligatr. It's an all-round beast, even gives Typhlosion trouble. Let's see… Weavile, Crobat, Granbull. I don't know who else he's bringing."

"Gliscor," I mentioned, remembering Silver's hasty escape. "And Tyranitar," I added, remembering how the great behemoth had supported us in the Ditto-zombie war.
"Oh, right, those two. Nothing surprising, they're all pretty much standard for their species."

"I know them all," I said. They were all natives to Johto and seen at my gym on a regular basis. "I think I have a good idea of what they're all capable of."

"They're just strong, simple as that. He's not going to surprise you, just overpower you, if he can."

"Well, that's good. Defense is my forte."

"Ha, right."

"Thanks for the advice," I told him. He quietly beamed.

"It's nice just sitting down and talking about the game, isn't it?"

I nodded in agreement.

"It's been an interesting night. I had more fun than I've had in a long time. Learned a lot, as well."

Learned a massive amount, both about myself, those around me, and even my Pokémon. I finally got a live-combat look at the Railgun team-attack, and it surpassed all expectations. I think I understand now how I respond to primal fear, and how to better handle it, and just how much I rely on my Pokémon for my emotional well-being. When the threat comes in the form of spooky, dangerous monsters, I'm glad I have a team of loyal monsters of my own to protect me. If it were something more existential, more psychological, like a conflict with a person or depression or dealing with the shock of facing humanity's mortality face-to-face, I'm going to need a more substantive pillar of emotional support. A boyfriend might work.

However, the prime candidate for that position is currently break-dancing downstairs with far too much alcohol in his system. If I can't even rely on him for a full evening's company, how am I going to share all my inner fears with him? He'd better show me something to believe in by the time the night is through, or I'm going to lose faith in him.

Looking at Ethan, it feels like he's in the same boat. The issues are different, but it's obvious he's worrying about Lyra. When he's talking to me about Pokémon, he becomes animated, at ease, and vivid. As soon as the conversation hits a lull, like right now, he slumps back into a sad, self-absorbed state of agitation.

I feel sorry for him. Should I express that? Would it make him unhappy, or insecure, to bring up relationship issues? What if I talked to him about my problems with Morty? Volkner had his own things to say, but he's not an objective observer; he's good friends with Morty and my ex(current?) admirer. Ethan is impartial, could he have better insight on how boys think?

No, no, I'm sure that would just remind him about Lyra, and I'll hurt his feelings. Better to steer the conversation towards something happier. Pokémon again? It gets tiring staying on one subject…

"You're costume is nice," I ventured. Now that I look at it, he's not some generic wizard. The suit underneath looks old-fashioned and custom-made; I think he's cosplaying someone from The Unown Files. "Is that Bristol?"

"Close, it's from-"

"Unown Files, season twelve," I tried guessing ahead of him.

"Closer, but still not it."
"Ack! Um…"

"Hint, it's from the newest novel."

"No! I don't read the novels! I don't know who it is!" It must be from book seven, they haven't adapted that one yet.

"Pistol, Bristol's twin brother." He turned his cloak inside-out, holding it up for me to view. An elegant pattern, reminiscent of many interlocking angel-wings, was printed onto the fabric.

"He works for Castle Triss. They meet-"

"Please no spoilers!" I implored. Despite my infinite procrastination, I really enjoyed that series and wanted to finish it unadulterated once I had enough time.

"Okay, okay! But you'll love him, I promise."

"Mmm, I hope so. Bristol's kind of… crude."

Ethan shifted his eyes, as if mischievous thoughts were being shuffled across the plane of his cerebellum.

"Their interaction is… pure gold. If you hate Bristol, you'll think Pistol is a godsend."

Ethan quieted down for a moment, generally looking at me and maybe fishing for something to say. After a few uttered starts he finally found something.

"I like your costume, too. You make a great Kinyobi-san."

"Really? You're the first person tonight to recognize me."

"Not surprised. Most people forgot about Aki, if they even remember the anime."

"Yeah. And really, it's nothing special. We cobbled this together at the last minute. I mean Erika did, I wasn't going to dress up originally."

"Still, you look great. And your impression of her was perfect."

"I know, right?" I leapt up, the after-effects of the alcohol still granting me a precious quantum of courage to act silly. Standing posed, one hand extended out and held up, as if waiting for the magical flame of the sun to descend upon it, I burst out. "This hand of mine glows with an awesome power. It's burning grip tells me to defeat you! Take this! My love! My anger! And all my sorrow! SUPER! MAGICAL! SOLAR! SAILOR! PUNCH!" My fist split the open air, as if it were ready to knock out another menacing Ditto-zombie.

"Ahahaha! That was awesome! The Ditto's face- pure gold!" Ethan couldn't stop laughing, he was hunched over and clutching his midsection. It was infectious, and the next moment I was joining his comical riot.

"What's so funny?"

Our laughter stopped dead. Behind Ethan stood an erect, humorless witch.

"Hey."

"Hey Ethan. Why is it that you never want to go dancing with me? Even if it's embarrassing for you,
I wouldn't laugh at you. Not one peep. But you don't, no matter how much I implore and how much I beg and no matter how much I tell you how much it would mean to me. Are you just going to keep ignoring my feelings?"

"I'm not-" Lyra didn't allow Ethan to respond.

"It's terribly lonely, having to come up with all the fun ideas on my own, and then having to run ten or twenty of them by you before you finally pick something we can do together; and then it's usually the most boring and placid activity I came up with. I feel like this relationship is getting too one-sided."

"No-"

"You used to be so energetic and fun, and surprising, and every once in a while you do something spectacular and that gives me hope I can get you to remember how to be yourself again, but you always revert right back to this depressing funk you're in. What do I have to do to get through? Aren't our romantic evenings enough for you? Do you need more alone time? I think I give you enough space already."

"Lyra, it's just tough-"

"So I am a patient girl, and I let it pass without thinking much of it, but now, this is twice in one evening. I'm starting to think you're doing it on purpose."

"What am I doing wrong?"

"You're being difficult, and lazy, and it's bothering me. Make it up to me and come dance."

She took Ethan by the cuff and began leading him towards the stairs. Her progress was abruptly halted. Ethan was not budging from his position.

"No."

"What?" she asked, turning back to him and revealing a bewildered, genuinely confused expression.

"No. I'm not going out to dance. I am tired and exhausted. I will not."

Lyra clenched her fists.

"Say that again."

"Let's go back to the Pokecenter," he suggested, or at least, it sort of sounded like a suggestion, and not just a veiled demand.

"We're not going anywhere but the dance floor. Come."

Despite her counter-"offer" and physical insistence, Ethan would not move.

"You're being stubborn," she said.

"I'm within my rights," he said.

"Come on."

"No."
"Ethan?"

"What?"

"If you just do this one thing for me, I'll-" and she leaned in close to whisper in his ear. Ethan's eyes popped open, but his face soon turned hard.

"I'm too tired for dancing, and you think I'm up for THAT?! Cut it out."

"How could you- How- Why are you being a dick tonight?! All I wanted was some special memories we could treasure, but you just have be a bonehead and fizzle every last thing I try to do for us! Why? Tell me why! Are you sick of me? Is that why you're running off to hang out with other girls?"

"Lyra, we were just talking about Pokémon," I butted in.

"Jasmine, don't get involved," Ethan warned me gruffly. He went as far as to place himself between me and Lyra.

"You'd rather chit-chat with Jasmine than have sex with me?!"

"I'd rather chit-chat with a Rattata than have anything to do with you right now!" Here, Ethan was the first to raise his voice above a civil volume. The argument seemed like it was about to blow up. Out of instinctual fear I stepped back to gain distance- and then the argument did blow up.

Ethan's insolence earned him a slap across the cheek. When Lyra attempted to follow through on a Double-Slap, he caught her wrist mid-air and held it in place. She struggled, couldn't break free, and so resorted to a verbal barrage.

"I'm sick and tired of you being sick and tired all the time! After everything I do, after all the pervy crap I put up with, and this is how you repay me?!!"

"Fine! You want to know why I don't want to dance? Because you're the one who treats this relationship like an afterthought! Your idea of romance is running off into the nether and scaring the shit out of me! I'm your boyfriend, or at least I think I am. Most days I feel like I'm third string after Typhlosion and that red-headed rival of yours!"

"Well, I wouldn't have to settle for Silver's company if you had half a nut-sack to actually do something!"

"There's plenty I'd do with you!"

"In the bedroom! Fuck, you're fun enough in the sheets, why not in public?! I'm getting tired of trying to drag that side of you out into the open!"

"Cut that out!"

"What if I tattled your dirty little secret to the whole wide world?"

"Don't you dare!" Ethan cried. His pupils were dilated by fear. This was something genuinely scary for him. Lyra sensed her advantage and pressed into him.

"I can shout it out, rip it off like a band-aid! Wanna try it!" She had her finger pointed at his chest and began pushing and poking, forcing him back against the wall. He looked around desperately, hoping for some miracle of intervention. None was forthcoming. "What're they gonna say, when
everyone hears that you like to-

"Stop! Fine! I'll do whatever!"

"At last!"

She didn’t back off of him, though, but merely leaned forward for intimacy.

"Don't blurt out private things like that!"

"Well then, don't go sulking off with other women… or men… when I want a piece of you. You want to mess around, you'll find your dirty laundry gets passed around just as easily."

"Grr." Ethan didn't like that comment at all.

"Come on. Don't be sour, and don't be a puss, and definitely don't be lazy! We can even indulge your fetish when we get back."

"There's no privacy at a Pokecenter-" was the last thing I heard out of them before they disappeared back into the club, Lyra practically dragging a cowed Ethan behind her.

"I was right, we are nothing like those two," Morty said from behind me. Instead of acting surprised or shocked, I managed to tip backwards into his chest. He closed his arms around me and began rocking me. "I promise to never blackmail you with your secrets," he added sincerely.

"Kind of puts relationships into perspective," I commented.

"Yep. Sometimes they work out, mostly they don't."

"Why is that? Do you think they'll break up?"

"Nah. Relationships die when couples get to know each other and figure out they're not meant for each other. Those two have known each other for a long time, they're not suddenly going to stop liking each other."

"But they've been fighting all night long."

"It's normal for couples to have fights every now and then. They're just jealous for each other, I think they will get over it."

"I hope so."

I want stability and peace and harmony amongst my friends. It's hard enough dealing with my own problems, having my friends radiate their stress creates an anxiety-inducing atmosphere.

"Don't worry about it. It sounded like they were going off to have angry sex."

"Why would you sleep with someone you're angry with?" I asked, puzzled.

"Relieves the bad chemicals from the bloodstream and releases the good chemicals."

"Oh."

Angry-sex?

That's kind of a novel idea to me. Does it really work? I guess, looking back at it, I could imagine all
those times I've gotten ticked off at Morty, and jumping on him and banging him into submission with my pelvis… it's kind of alluring…

No! Don't think like that! I've got to save myself! For a while longer, at least.

"They'll be fine. Here."

"Who are you texting?"

"Erika. Telling her to grab those two on their way out, make sure they watch the gym battle tomorrow."

"How do you have Erika's number? And how do you know about my gym match?"

"Word travels fast," Morty said, nodding over to Volkner.

"Oh… So, they'll be okay, you're sure?"

"I'm sure. I know you worry a lot when your friends are fighting. It's nothing, they'll be okay, couples need to vent every once in a while. It's normal for a couple."

"That's good to know, considering how often we bicker."

"Do you think we really fight all that much?"

"I guess." Thinking at it, isn't it just me fighting, and Morty taking it passively? It's hard to get him to be serious, even harder to rile his emotions. He's said some dire things to me at times, but since the Gym Leader summit, I've never once burst his temper. "Maybe not. But you have a way of making me mad all the time. Like why'd you go dancing like that?"

"That's just me."

"It was disgusting, rude."

"I wish you were part of it."

"No! Too many people watching!"

"Does that mean you wouldn't have minded if we were alone?"

He flipped me around, still holding his hands around me. They lowered down, now clenching and pressing against the small of my back.

"I don't know about that," I said truthfully.

"Well that's not an absolute no, is it?" He swayed, trying to get me to slow dance with him.

"I'm way too tired."

"Not asking you to dance, just want to know what you think about dancing. Among other things."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Whatever's on your mind. I want to know more about you."

"I hate Bug-types," I said.
"Don't tell me something negative. Tell me something positive."

I shook my head.

"There's precious little positive in my life right now."

"Such as?"

I leaned my forehead against his chest.

"Like you."

His hand went through my hair, rubbing it thoroughly.

"What were you doing up here?" he asked out of lazy curiosity.

"We talked about stuff. Volkner was all about relationships, and he and Silver dragged me into an argument about the world's strongest trainer."

"Tobias," Morty interjected.

"-and Ethan and I conversed about Pokémon tactics. He had some nice insight into Red."

"Ah, Red. That looming freight train."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Last I heard, he destroyed the sub in Azalea Town. That was two weeks ago, though."

"Hmm. Any idea how you're going to beat him?"

"Yeah, I won't. I'll let him roll through. I can take the loss. Rather lose my dignity than have my Pokémon injured."

"Really?"

"When I said he destroyed the sub, I wasn't using metaphor. Two of their Pokémon suffered career-ending injuries. They fined Red like, two million pokedollars and warned him to use more restraint."

"Scary."

"Are you worried?"

"Very. I've got a razor-thin margin on my ratio. I can't afford any losses."

"Mmm. We'll have you prepared. Don't stress too much. Upsets happen, Red's not Stone, he's not invincible."

"I hope so."

"Come on. Let's get going. Tell me about Volkner, what did he have to say?"

I felt it was safe enough to regurgitate everything Volkner said about Morty to me. Morty took it in stride, agreeing with every assessment without shedding any additional light on the subject. He seemed more interested that I would provoke a conversation on the topic of sex.

"You've been giving it some thought, I see," he said.
"I can't escape it, really. It's all you guys want to talk about."

"True. We're kind of a perverted crowd."

I cocked an eye.

"It's true. Gym leaders, trainers in general, we're more liberal than the average community. We're in our own little world, traveling around, without a lot of restrictions and no one looking over our shoulder all the time. It's pretty conducive to just doing whatever the heck you want, and the natural urge is to to get down and jiggy."

"I never got that feeling at my job," I said.

"Then Olivine's an exception. Although, I wonder why. You'd think with the port there, it'd be a pretty cosmopolitan place."

"No, not really. All the conservatives come to Olivine for vacation. Hipsters go to Goldenrod, and hippies go to Hoenn."

"No, hippies go to Sinnoh. They're artsy-fartsy up there, not down south. Bangers go to Hoenn."

"What are bangers?" I asked, innocently. In return, I got a diatribe about a sub-culture I didn't know existed, and soon wished it didn't exist, period.

"Their drug of choice are HGH's and roids. All about extreme sports for them."

"Okay, that's enough, new subject."

By then we had exited and gone a block down the street. Erika waved us down, and so we found our group departing. People trickled off in various directions, until only four of us remained. Our last gathering place was the monorail station. Whitney's flat was a twenty minute ride out towards the eastern uptown. Morty had found lodging somewhere else, a "new friend's ultra pad" as he put it.

"Ten minutes till the next train. Morty, nine o'clock sharp, meet us at the gym, don't oversleep. Enjoy yourselves until then, you two," Erika said to us, and then scooted off to give us privacy. She joined Whitney, and if you looked hard enough you could see the sly smiles on their faces.

"So, ten minutes to chat. You want to do the whole mushy-talk thing?" he asked.

"I'm no good at it, and you're no good at it."

"Usually, I am, but you're hard to be lovey-dovey with."

I shrugged my shoulders. He shrugged his too. He took my hands and began rubbing them. I allowed him. We stared into each other's eyes, and then glanced away.

They gave us this time to be alone, and yet I can't think of anything I really want to say to him. Even the things I was determined to bring up with him, I didn't feel right to do so. It would break the mood, and cause another difficult conversation that we might not have time for. Apparently, he didn't feel the same way.

"Did you hear everything between me and Will?"

"Very little" I said, lying. He smirked, like he knew I was lying and forgave me anyways.

"It's okay. You caught me."
It's like he wants me to ask, or he's daring me to. I uttered something, mumbled again, but fell silent before it could turn into anything coherent.

"Maybe another day," he said.

"Nnn."

This is familiar. It feels like I've had so many of these moments throughout my life, and increasingly frequent this past month or so. Two silent almost-lovers standing idly in the dark, wondering what to do, what to think, what the other was thinking, not knowing anything.

Risks and rewards, I was thinking. Divulge a little, and likely nothing will come of it. Divulge a lot, and the prize could be enormous, but so could the penalty.

*He* hurt you and then he abandoned you.

Morty, though, hurt you and then tried his hardest to make it right. You didn't let him.

You would have forgiven that young man anything, if he had come back. You might be tempted, sorely tempted, to take him back right now, if he came along. Not because you love him, but because your emotions, and instincts, and heart, and everything but that section of the cerebrum that makes you, *you*, loved him. I can't erase the memory of him because it has been chiseled into the fabric of my maturation. I am who I am today because of our meeting. If only he hadn't… I could have been happy…

He didn't come back. The last you saw of him was the backside of his shirt and hat, walking off into his future- a future without you. You weren't wanted by him.

Morty wants you.

Let's repeat that.

Morty wants you.

Isn't it unfair, that you shut the door on Morty, when you wouldn't have done it to *him*? Isn't it about time you started allowing Morty the benefit of the doubt?

Why not?

We went over this. It's because I have trust issues, and I don't want to be hurt, and I can't even stomach the smallest possibility of being abandoned again.

But, as is, you're drowning in a void of your own making. You wander around your own tiny apartment without anything to do, and your loneliness and boredom are like an addiction: you have to summon up a massive amount of fortitude and energy just to get to work, or come out to a friend's party, and that alleviates the sinking feeling for a time. Then you come home, and the feeling returns, and it's worse than ever, and you feel like you've accomplished nothing. You need someone to fill that gap. To assure you that you're needed and loved, at all times, and never forgotten about.

Someone like Morty.

It's time to have a little faith.

"Hey Morty?"

"Hmm?"
"Sex."
"What?"
"I said sex."
"Yeah, what about it?"
"Isn't it weird that I said it? I usually just use some sort of epithet instead."
"So you want to make a point about sex?"
"I don't know. That boast you had at the summit. I should lose my virginity before New Year's. Were you being serious?"
"Very serious."
"Why do you want to have sex with me?"

We wavered before each other, like a pair of Lumineon's courting.
"It's not that I want to have sex with you- I want to know why you haven't had sex before. Because I don't believe you just 'haven't met the right guy', and I don't believe you are asexual."
"How would you know that?"
"Because of what I saw at the lighthouse."
"It's about helping you."
"Having my virginity taken is supposed to help me…"
"No. Figuring out why you are so hostile to losing your virginity, in spite of the evidence contrary-wise, and fixing that- that's what will help you."

His gaze drifted away into the cityscape.
"When you're ready, I hope you're willing to share."

He cares so much, it's hurting him. He won't look me in the eyes, because he doesn't want to see the pain in them, but I can still see it, and sense it.
"Will you share your fears too?" I asked.

He went stiff.
"Yes."
"Before or after I share mine?"
"I don't know. Depends."
"Before or after sex?"
"After," he said without hesitation.
"Do you like me?" I asked.
"Yes."

"Do you love me?"

"Eh… in a way. You're very precious to me."

I fell into him and put my ear against his chest. His heart was beating, not fast, but hard.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" I asked faintly.

"Extremely."

"Do I have a nice personality?"

"You have an abrasive personality- but a big heart, and deep convictions, and a beautiful mind. It makes me feel like a listless ass in comparison."

He lifted my hand in his. My gloves were fairly dirty by now, and it was a wonder I still kept them on.

"You make a pretty sexy sailor scout," he said. "You should dress up more often."

"Cosplay?"

"Cosplay, cocktail dresses, doesn't matter. Your body's the perfect shape for a fashion model. As much as I know the emotional stuff is all-important- I'd be lying if I said I wasn't sexually attracted to you."

"I know. I can feel it."

Without warning my hand went under and between us, stroking the outline of a bulge.

"Hehe." We both grinned. He couldn't help himself, could he?

What was I thinking, earlier?

If I never take a risk, I'll never know what I was missing out on and I'll be stuck with my miserable single self all my life. I won't be hurt, but I will still have to live with the numbing pain of monotony and self-loathing. Like it or not, that bastard didn't just hurt me and go away- he left an axe in my soul that won't go away and still hurts and still causes me pain and emotional turmoil, no matter what I do to try to forget it. I feel empty, like there's a slowly growing hole in my chest that's gnawing at the edges, trying to consume me whole. Pretending I can ignore my feelings and try to remain single and lonesome and happy is just like trying to fill that hole with straw.

There's no point. There's really, absolutely, truly no point in trying to avoid that pain of betrayal from Morty. That pain already exists, right here inside of me, and can't possibly get worse if this relationship goes down the same road.

But, if the relationship works, if I find love in Morty's embrace… I have a chance at finally healing. Maybe. Hopefully.

Someday…

Take a leap of faith.

Give in to your bodily urges, allow it the carnal satisfaction, and pray that the spiritual satisfaction
will follow.

Fine. I'll do it.

Not now. A little more, wait a little more. Test Morty a little longer, search for any sign, anything that this will go wrong. Wait for the other disturbances to clear up. Figure out what's going to happen with your career first. Get settled. Get stable. Be rested. Be patient.

When? How long?

Just a little more…

After my probation ends.

December 31st.

I've decided. If nothing else, if everything stays the same, no better and no worse than what we have now, on December 31st I'll tell him I love him, and take him to bed.

Damn all the fears and logic and history and pain that would interfere, I'll dash them to pieces, with excessive alcohol if I have to, if it means finding a way to be happy, for once. For that chance, I'll risk everything. Two months, and we'll see where we stand. Just, promise yourself you can endure until then.

The monorail train arrived in a screech. My friends beckoned me to follow them on board. There was only a minute or two to say goodbye. We were still leaning on each other, for warmth as much as for affection.

I wanted him to look me in the eye, and at first, he was reluctant to.

"Morty."

"Hmm?"

I leaned up and put my lips to his in a kiss. There were no more words to describe this one than the first. Like that one, this was sublime. It was better, in fact, because it lasted longer, and that torrid feeling of shame was nowhere present this time. I pressed harder into him, standing on my tippy-toes to do so.

Soft. Each time, that's the sensation I was most surprised at, and most pleased by- how soft lips are. Not sloppy, not slobberly, not rough or chapped, but soft, sensuously soft. Fingertips are sensitive, but the lips are ten times more sensitive, and they're touching something just as sensitive, and the feeling is mutually passed to one another, and when it hits the brain it becomes soft, soft pleasure.

I like it. I like it very much.

The warning bell for the train's departure sounded out.

Reluctantly, we parted lips.

"Jasm-" I put a finger to his lips to silence him.

"Don't ruin this one," I said with a soft smile. "Goodnight, Morty."
I'm feeling a bit skittish in the heart and sluggish in the brain. The reason is most definitely the four hours of sleep that my body is currently trying to function off of, and failing horridly. Sleepovers at Whitney's were always interesting, to say the least, and last night's debacle was no exception. Without getting into too much detail, I was treated to a museum showcasing the physical manifestation of Whitney's sexual frustrations.

"I did not need to know what you did on the couch that I just slept on," I was telling my friend while we entered the gym. "That was not information you needed to volunteer. That was gross. I feel like I've been violated now."

"Ruff ruff!" Whitney replied in mimed insult. My enraged face contorted further.

"Not to mention, your food is atrocious!" She had nothing but sugar-saturated cereal meant for little children and some leftover rice available for breakfast. Guess which I picked.

"There's a snack machine in the lobby. Here's some change, go eat up, princess!"

"Don't tease me!"

"I would never tease your esteemed highness," she said in a deep and mocking bow.

Which brought to light the fact that I was dressed up in Aki Kinyobi's full sailor scout regalia, sans the dorky halo. How this happened, my groggy morning memory somewhat fails me. First there was the realization that I had not brought any change of clothing, then my prideful refusal to don any of Whitney's party-rock-inspired wardrobe, a long and arduous argument over social norms ensued, Erika's mediating voice intervened, the rational that I should dress to the occasion ("Gym Leaders are entertainers and performers as much as they are battlers, dear-") was put forward, and finally tired acceptance occurred. Hence, I was back in my uniform, skirt, stockings, and scarf.

"Put on the gloves, you've got to complete the look!"

"No! I can't handle the pokeballs with them on."

"But you're incomplete!"

"I look like a fantasy-movie reject!"

Bicker bicker bicker, all the way to the snack machine. Even as I stuffed my mouth on a bag of chips courtesy of Whitney's charity, I continued to argue and harass her. Our mobile melee was carried past the lobby and out onto the gym floor.

"I don't need to be eye-candy for the men, they gawk enough as-is. Dressing up ought to be for- hey Whitney?"

"Impressing men with our looks is what gives us control over them! Being demure plays right into their-"

"Whitney."
"-designated domesticated role they've reserved for women! What is it?"

"What the heck happened to your gym?"

"Huh? I told you, a power surge."

"No, power surges don't do this."

"Uh, yeah they do."

I gawked.

Whitney's gym uses a mosaic of rising and falling blocks, eight feet on a side, that can be configured into any floor plan desired. The idea was to create mazes that challengers had to navigate en route to battling Whitney. One of her devilish tricks was to have the maze reconfigure after each Gym Trainer battle.

So when I heard her floor was messed up by a power surge, I expected, at worst, an unnegotiable maze of randomly assorted blocks locked in place.

I did not expect a giant, semi-compact clump of cubes hanging in mid-air and slowly orbiting the room.

"I'm supposed to battle… where, exactly?" I uttered.

"Well, you can fight on top of the sphere, or inside of it- it's hollow. Or you can try to dance around the projector field."

"That was rhetorical. This question isn't, you clodhead: what the heck happened here?!"

"I switched from hydraulics to anti-grav for my block system. Hydro was breaking down all the time and took too long to repair; anti-grav is faster, you can replace a projector in ten minutes. More expensive though. Ah, well, the instructions didn't say it would go haywire when a power surge struck."

I don't even... it's like a planetarium. I'm not sure how I'm even supposed to field my Pokémon onto that, let alone fight a battle on top of it. Even as I watched it, the mass of cubes flipped over suddenly, without warning. Below, the exposed anti-grav projectors crackled with ominous electrical arcs.

Right, so that's safe...

"Come on in. I've got everything set up for the teleconference," Whitney urged me away from the Distortion World set piece.

"How are you going to fix this? We can't battle on that!"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it. Come on, it's almost time."

I was forced backwards into the office, staring at the problematic playfield the whole way. 9:00 was fast approaching and the third member of our troop was nowhere to be seen. Reluctantly, my worries and voiced concerns switched from my upcoming match to our missing Ecruteak Gym Leader.

"Four," Whitney corrected me.

"What? Who?"
"I invited Falkner over to join us, too, since he didn't want to fly home in the dark."

"You invited that bastard?!"

"Sheesh, what's your problem?" Whitney gave me a "Get over yourself!" kind of look.

"I hate that boy. Must he be here?" It's bad enough I have to deal with his misogynist messages and incessant opposition during the telecons, but considering our history together, it irks me to be in the same city as him, let alone the same room!

"Piper down. Be civil, it's really not like you."

"You should heed her advice. You've been getting more volatile in public lately, and your polite and shy persona is losing credibility," Erika warned, coming up from behind me. Of course, she had a stiff, yet pretty, cream-white dress readied for today. Too bad she had failed to mention we were staying overnight, or I might have been spared the indignity of my current outfit.

"You're all doing this on purpose," I bemoaned. "You wanted to see me in your costume some more, didn't you?"

"No, it merely slipped my mind, I swear."

Ignoring her, I turned on Whitney. "And you just want to set me up with Falkner, don't you?!"

"Sure, why not? That'll free up Morty for me, and I won't worry about winning Brawley anymore!" Whitney cheerfully exclaimed.

"Troll," I replied, deadpan.

The man in question, Falkner that is, appeared at the doorway. Immediately dagger-like stares were sent flying at one another, although no words were exchanged. Whitney thought nothing of our hostility and went up to greet him.

"There you are. Missed ya at the party."

"Sorry. I was hanging out with the Kanto crowd," he replied. "Why is she here?" he demanded, nodding my way.

"She's my friend too. No one wanted to go home early, so they all stayed overnight. Nice timing, right?"

"Awful timing, if you ask me. I hope she's more civil in person than over the web."

"As if I'm the one who acts so childish after not getting my way," I muttered to Erika. My friend responded with a silently mouthed agreement.

Whitney sat us down at various computer terminals around the office. I purposefully found the two that were closest to each other and reserved both seats. Another glare dared Falkner to try to take this seat, and thankfully, he didn't even threaten. He took the workstation farthest from me and everything was set. The atmosphere of the room settled down to a stalemated, if not entirely peaceful, state.

Ten minutes past nine, and still no sign of blondie.

Twenty-minutes past, and I was starting to get worried.
Chuck and Clair appeared on the computer screen.

"What's the deal? Why are you all shoved onto one little window?" Clair demanded to know.

"We're all at my gym today."

"Huh?"

"We had a Halloween party last night, it was a blast. Literally. The four of us are sharing my office for the telecon," Whitney explained.

"Annoying. Fix it so you all go back to your proper windows! And where's that blond mongrel? Is he going to miss another meeting?"

"I'm here."

"Morty!" I squeaked. He practically stumbled through the doorway and straight to my side.

"Ugh." His throat and his body made all manner of unseemly noises. The dark rings beneath his eyes had gotten noticeably saggier.

"What's wrong?"

"Uhh… had trouble sleeping."

"How many hours did you get?"

"Two, maybe three if you count rolling around the bed and over-thinking things."

"Poor thing." I lowered my voice. "I hope I didn't keep you up with that little present last night," I said to him. Morty shrugged it off.

"Nah, although that was nice."

"Alright, we can start," Whitney declared.

Except we couldn't, because the most important member of our group had yet to appear on screen. After several more minutes of awkward fidgeting and dilly-dallying, it became apparent that we were missing our association chairperson. The silence dragged on until it became tension, and then nervousness. It was as if no one wanted to be the person who asked the obvious first. I nudged Morty to fulfill that role, but he refused with a shake of the head.

At last, Chuck saved us.

"Where is Pryce?"

"I don't know," a chorus of relieved Gym Leaders chirped.

"I transferred all the relevant files and accounts over to him," Clair said. "Can't do a thing without him."

"I'm kind of busy today, I can't be here forever," Falkner complained.

"Give him a little more time," Morty urged.

"Hmm, well, he's right, we can't waste the whole day here," Whitney said.
"Pryce told me he had an important matter for us," Clair said. "We have to wait. Hold tight everyone. I'll make a call."

My nerves were tightening a bit. It's rather uncharacteristic of Pryce to be rude or lazy like this. He kept an orderly life, and rarely overcommitted himself. His claim was that if he wanted to keep a lax, obligation-free schedule, he better well be on time for the few occasions he was expected to show up for.

Whitney grew bored. She sent an invite to a game of Jump'n'Bump over the local network. Morty accepted, and after a little coaxing, I joined in as well. Falkner and Whitney's team dominated, on account of Erika sucking at computer games and having to rely on a crappy AI partner, and I dragged Morty down with a poor, distracted performance.

"Come on Spoink, you can do better than that," Whitney called over, referring to my game avatar. As I watched helplessly her Bunnelby ground-pounded my Spoink yet again, smashing it into a pile of sparkles.

"What do you think happened to Pryce?" I whispered to Morty. He shrugged, clearly upset and worried himself.

At 10:10 I began getting antsy. The game wasn't meant to be entertaining for more than a half-hour, Pryce's absence was weighing on our minds, and I also began wondering about the arena and my upcoming match with Silver.

Click.

The video feed for Pryce's gym winked on. What I saw almost broke my heart.

"My apologies," Pryce said.

He looks terrible. His voice is cracked and groggy, worse than us sleep-deprived kids. His usually trim chin was coated with stubble, obviously not having been shaved for several days. He had to slowly lower himself into his seat, so that the crackling of worn joints and strained muscles was palpable. His eyes, oh god, his eyes were teary and red.

"My apologies. Shall we begin?"

"Is something the matter?" I asked openly.

"No, Jasmine, I'll be fine," he said shortly, and motioned, feebly but with determined effort, for us to drop the matter and continue. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. You all must have busy schedules, so let's make this short."

Not reassured in the slightest, we settled in for the meeting. Role call, minutes, and other formalities were skipped, with only the barest of official procedures being tacked on.

"Well, on to the two most pertinent topics. Firstly, the National Gym Leader Alliance."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Now that he's taken a seat, it seems like he's okay for the time being, and his voice is getting stronger and surer.

"The League has taken proactive measures and ruled against collective bargaining. Joining the alliance would be symbolic at this point. However, they have agreed to 'fair wage increases' to cover
the true cost of operations and regulations. In addition, we will be allowed a stipend of 5,000 to hire assistants."

"8,000 for all assistants combined?" Chuck asked for clarification.

"No, 8,000 per head, per month, although a limit of only two. We are not to take anything for ourselves."

That's good. Even if the amount is tiny, it'll help keep Connie happy. That's enough for a college textbook, or an arms-full of items from the pokemart. I don't know who I'd give my second slot to, Janina or Ted. Perhaps I can make them split it? Whatever, I'll figure it out. Best of all, that means I can stop paying them out of my own salary, which makes it an indirect wage increase.

"When do these go into effect?" Morty asked.

"January."

Crap. That's after probation. Here I was thinking I could use the funds to streamline my gym and make it easier to keep my job.

"When are we getting actual pay-raises?" Whitney asked.

"I asked about that-" Pryce suddenly bent over, letting out a painful-sounding cough, before righting himself, "-that, but they didn't have any answers."

"Ridiculous," Chuck stated, and everyone nodded in agreement. "We can't live on our salary alone."

"It's hard, I know," Pryce admitted. "Especially for you younger ones. You don't have the generous pension rates my generation had."

Morty shook his head in disappointment. "It's the local government's fault too. Johto has more regulations than anyone else in the nation. We don't have time to take side jobs like Sinnoh, Hoenn, or Kanto."

"Is it really that bad?" Erika asked me. She had taken the terminal on the other side of the desk, and was now leaning across.

"It's mostly one stupid law. Here, Gym Leaders are personally responsible for everything that happens at their gym, legally speaking. So on top of all the work we put in, we have to double-check every last little thing to make sure it's okay and in compliance, because if something goes wrong and someone gets hurt, we're on the hook, not the Pokémon League. That's probably an extra ten hours a week for me. Plus, I usually oversee the open-practice periods, since I don't really trust anyone but Connie to run the gym, even during off-hours, and she has college classes."

"How many hours do you work?"

I wrinkled my brow in calculation.

"Without probation? Sixty, thereabouts."

I marveled at that. How was I having such an active social life, working on probation work, and keeping my gym in order and operational, all at the same time? There didn't seem like enough hours in the week to do it all.

I let out a yawn.
That's how. I've sacrificed all my spare time, and a good chunk of my sleeping, eating, and personal upkeep time. My apartment is worse than ever; it hasn't been cleaned since before the summit. I've been forced to skip some days for shaving, so that the stubble in my armpits was chaffing and irritating. I haven't had a proper meal in six days; the closest I've come was the burger joint we stopped by before coming to the party.

"Sixty hours is far too much. That's how much time I spent on my gym and flower shop combined," Erika said, appalled.

"I know, right?"

While I was preoccupied by Erika's question, the topic of wages and unionization was concluded without much more of note. Pryce began slowly tapping at his computer keyboard, apparently struggling with the new technology.

"There it is," he declared. "Our second vital item to cover today."

We awaited in not-so-eager anticipation.

"So, last meeting we agreed to reject the Pokémon League's candidate for Azalea Town's vacancy. Well, now they've sent back another candidate, and this one looks closer to our-" -and here he specifically shifted his gaze upwards, and I could tell it was meant for me "-specifications."

Falkner let out an exaggerated sigh. He shot me a glance from across the room, as if warning me not to cause another ruckus over the League's decision.

"Well, who is it?" Whitney piped in.

"One second- there. Take a look."

A face popped up on my screen, followed by a short biography.

She looked middle-aged, maybe upper-twenties. Her hair was shoulder length, jagged, dark, and had a tinge of olive-green to it. Her eyes matched, olive irises and dark, focused pupils. She had a sharp nose and distinct chin, and lips that were drawn into a forced smile. Her whole look was reminiscent of a personified thorn bush, or so I thought.

"Her name is Jade Aokigahara. She is highly ranked, averaging as the sixth best trainer in Johto over the past two years, and has earned two victories in Premier Tournaments. She is-" another pause for emphasis, "-a Poison-type specialist."

Grr. I thought we asked for a Bug specialist!

"However, her team leader is an Ariados, and she is familiar with many Poison-Bug dual-type Pokémon. She has familial ties to the area, and is considered a promising entrepreneur capable of revitalizing the local economy."

"AND she's a woman," Falkner added.

Right, rub in the obvious, nascent retard.

"Yes, Falkner, she would balance the gender ratio of our league," Pryce said with a weary sigh.

Falkner shot me another dirty look, as if to say 'Happy now, bitch?'. I didn't want to keep fueling this childish feud, so I turned my attention to the computer screen.
I looked over her profile carefully, taking my time to dissect it. Although I can't say I liked everything I saw, there wasn't anything I could object to either. She was a female, a Bug user, if not specialist, had community connections, and had very credible achievements, both in Pokémon battling and business operations.

"Hmm."

Looking up, both to the screen and the physical room, I found myself under the watch of everyone else present.

"What?"

They just kept staring at me.

"I don't have any objections," I let out, annoyed that everyone expected me to cause a scene. It's like, 'Is that how far my reputation has fallen?' It seems I can't be a stubborn, willful, idealistic feminist, and a shy, modest, respected maiden at the same time. One or the other, can't be both.

'But they're both facades,' I caught myself thinking.

"Good, I suppose we don't need a vote. Jade will be the new Gym Leader of Azalea Town. Make sure to call and congratulate her when she takes up residence."

Pryce let out another cough.

"Now, that's all that's important today. My sincere apologies, but I'll be off. You may leave a message in my e-mail if you need to speak with me."

With a click, his video feed cut off. The other Gym Leaders began a light discussion about money matters that quickly devolved into argument.

"That's really unsettling," I whispered over to Morty. "Pryce-"

"Are you there?"

A message window appeared on my screen. It was Pryce. He hadn't left after all, but why?

"I'm here."

"Good, good. I was afraid you would leave."

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Just a little under the weather. Don't worry about it. Let me worry about you- although I probably shouldn't, given my news."

"What is it?"

"Your progress report came in."

My chest thumped. Oh, wow, he gets those? I hadn't gotten anything this week, I was a little worried.

"184 and 183. Do these numbers mean anything to you?"
"No, I can't think of anything."

"That is your win ratio. You are just above 50%.

"!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

I only meant to put three exclamation points up, but ended up mashing the button down before hitting the return key. My jaw dropped.

I've done it.

"Congratulations. You may celebrate a little, but don't rest easy. You still have to hold it there until the end of probation, and you also have your written exams to complete. Oh, and I'd be chilled to think of you stooping so low, but don't do anything like win-trade or baiting the fishies, the League would not be happy about that."

"Thank you so much for this news! No, I promise I'll do my best and earn my gym back the right way!" I typed out. By now my seat was shaking from my rump eagerly and repeatedly departing it in favor of going airborne, only to be routed by gravity. In simpler terms, I'm giddy.

I pointed at the screen for Morty.

"Nice! You know, I'm pretty sure only Clair has better than you in the Johto League."

"I have to work for it, I can't slack off like you all," I countered. Yes, it is worth reminding myself that I have to keep winning in order to maintain that ratio. Not only do I have to win more than I lose, I need to keep beating all the former challengers who come in for rematches, or else that will erase victories and add losses at the same time. Still, if I can keep going at this rate, I'll be sitting pretty come December 10th. As for the written tests, everything but the facilities upkeep section will be a breeze, and even that one shouldn't be too much trouble.

Honestly, I can't describe how excited I am.

For the first time in forever, I feel like my life is back on track. Heretofore I had 'hope': vague, intangible, and unsatisfactory. Now I have 'progress': real, concrete, and believable; something I can be proud of.

Recap:

I have a positive win ratio, and the vast majority of my paperwork is finished. I have supreme confidence in myself going into the exams.

I'm surrounded by loving and caring friends. They just took me out for a wonderful, memorable night, full of horror and hoaxes and laughs and thrills. In the moment, it hadn't been any fun, but looking back I'm sure I can laugh about the whole murder-mystery/ghost-hunting experience.

My Pokémon are with me. They're getting stronger and bonding tighter than ever before.

My precious Pokémon, Amphy, has finally found happiness in the embrace of another of his own kind. Spectra is fast becoming family to us, and the love of his life.

And, maybe, very likely, I've found the love of my own life, sitting right beside me, the enabler to all of the above. Last night, we shared a kiss- uncorrupted, untainted, pure, blissful, happy, and without any reservations- a kiss that I welcomed and enjoyed. I have no regrets about it.
My life is so happy right now. I would say I can't describe it, but I think I just did!

"Besides your career, how are you faring? I hear you are being more sociable." I haven't talked with Pryce lately, but he does have a knack for getting the latest news and gossip.

"You could definitely say that."

"Was that Whitney I heard in the background? Are you two together at the moment?"

"Me, Whitney, and Morty are all at Whitney's gym for the teleconference. Long story, spook party last night. Oh… I guess Falkner's here too."

"Falkner? I've heard you were warming up to a certain fellow, might he be the one?"

"No! Heck no!"

"Oh, I must have been mistaken."

"It's Morty. Morty's the one I've been hanging out with," I messaged.

"I see."

That's all he wrote. I was wondering if he would add something onto that, but after a minute, nothing was forthcoming. Did he not approve of Morty?

"Is something the matter?" I finally messaged him.

"No. Sorry. I think it's wonderful if you've found someone who can make you happy."

"I can't tell from text whether that's sarcastic or not."

"Me? Sarcastic? I'm offended, young miss. Whatever gave you that foolish idea?"

"I don't know. Do you not like Morty?"

"He's as fine a young man as I've ever known, if typically foolhardy. I don't mean to dissuade you from a relationship with him."

Okay, what is that supposed to mean?

"Is there something else?" I asked directly.

"Well, it's all so abrupt and out of character for you."

"I guess it would look that way. My life is in kind of a whirlwind right now."

"No need to explain further. These messaging programs aren't the best way to have a proper chat."

"Yes, I agree."

Trying to text with Pryce was always a bother. If people thought I was being overly anal for insisting on correct grammar and complete sentences when texting, Pryce just carries it to a whole new level. Texting with him is like writing a formal two-way essay via Slugma-mail.
"I don't know if I'll have any time though to come meet you." Or money, I didn't add.

His answer was slow in coming, again.

"Excuse me."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, just my cold. Once I get past this bug, I'll be sure to find time to come see you then. I think it's time I shared a little piece of wisdom I was saving for you."

"That is?"

"Something private, I'm rather reluctant to share over the internet. They say the government is spying on our email now."

I smirked. Don't tell me Pryce is falling for that choke-worthy conspiracy theory.

"You're joking."

"I am."

"It's hard to tell."

"It's the texting, it can't convey feelings. That's why I wanted to see you in person. So don't go doing anything rash before I have a chance to talk to you again, alright?"

"Yes, grandpa."

His next entry was also slow in coming.

"HAHAHA! That was very funny."

Oh, so he was busy laughing. I didn't think I said anything terribly funny, though.

"Good luck on your probation endeavors. Keep in touch."

"Will do. Bye."

The window went dead, Pryce's icon showing an 'offline' tag.

"Seems like he cares about you," Morty said over my shoulder.

"Eeek! Don't snoop on me!"

"Sorry, sorry." He backed off a bit, allowing me to swivel around in my chair to face him.

"Spying on me? Curious about me?" I asked him.

"Guilty and guilty," he responded. "You two have always been close. Kind of made me wonder if you were related somehow. Grandpa? Was that actual?"

"No," I waved him off. "We're not related. He's just been very good to me over the years. Unlike most men." I glared and frowned directly at Morty.
"He is a nice guy. Helped me out when I first got the Ecruteak job, so I guess I understand."

"No, you don't. Without him, I never would have gotten my job. I would still be stuck at home and
working some crap minimum wage job with no free will. He stuck his neck out really far." I puffed
my chest out in pride. "Did you know I was the fourth youngest person to ever represent a gym,
ever, anywhere?"

"Really? How old were you when took over?"

"Fifteen and one month."

"Freshman in high school, and you were leading a gym… dang. I wish I could have started out that
early."

"You would have missed out on your precious high school years," I pointed out.

"Yeah. How'd you get away with that? I thought the League was pretty strict on the 18-year-old age
limit. Was that Pryce's doing?"

"Mnhm. I was the acting Gym Leader, but he was the sponsor. He was on the hook for anything
that happened in the gym." For the three years I played the role of Gym Leader, but didn't actually
own the position, I was fairly nervous. Any screw-up or malfeasance I did would be legally pinned
on Pryce, and we'd both take the fall. I didn't even realize how much liability he was taking, and how
many hundreds of risks and infractions I could have accidently put to him, until I took the Gym
Leader qualification courses for myself. Finishing my certification was an immense relief.

"I get it, he means a lot to you." Morty went silent.

"What is it?"

"I'm jealous."

"Jealous? Of Pryce?"

"Yeah. I want to be the guy you look up to like that," he admitted.

"Impossible," I said in rebuke. "I don't want to look up to my boyfriend; I want to look him level, in
the eye." For emphasis I pulled Morty down by his sweater, until we were even in height.

"Like this."

Morty rolled his eyes and dropped another head's worth of height below me.

"Don't you mean like this?"

"What? No!"

"Because you seem like the kind of girl who wants to top in a relationship."

"That's a trap," I asserted. "If I say yes, I'm a control freak. If I say no, you're getting me to admit I'm
inwardly meek and just want to be dominated by a man."

"You're over-thinking this."

"Get off the floor."
He did, and then pulled his chair up to mine and sat himself forward on it, close enough to talk privately, without being overheard. A glance sideways and I caught an eager Erika trying to listen in.

"Are you staying for the battle?" I asked.

"Of course."

"What about your gym?"

"It'll be fine. Danielle's there, she can take care of challengers."

"She's already back at the gym?"

"Yeah. Drove back overnight."

"And you're not worried she'll think you're shirking your duties and piling all the responsibility on her?"

"Not worried at all."

"That's inconsiderate."

"Hardly. She would think I'm lazy no matter what I do. She doesn't mind the extra work, she just uses it to justify her ambition of stealing the gym from me."

"Aren't you worried she'll steal your gym?"

"I thought you were studying the rulebook."

"Not this part."

"Or you skipped over it. I hope you're studying, exams can be tricky."

"Just tell me about the rules already."

"There are no rules for taking a Gym Leader's position. It's near-impossible. She'd have to catch me doing something criminal, or committing major infractions, and even then she's not guaranteed the spot if I get kicked out."

"That's not going to stop her from trying."

"No, and that's what I like about her. She tries so hard, it's cute. And she tends to nip a good number of the more dangerous trainers from reaching me, makes my job easy."

"Kehkeh, you make it sound so idyllic. How do you have it so easy and I struggle? I don't honestly think it's because you're better than me."

Morty leaned back in his seat, searching for an explanation.

"I bet it's because I levy charges, and you don't. Extra money makes everything easier. You have, what, four under-aged assistants?"

"Three, and only two are under-aged."

"I have twenty."

I nearly gagged.
"Twenty?!"

"It's because I made my gym a hip place to hang out. Got a lot of volunteers to work under me. They get the privilege of hanging out with the cool ghost squad, and I get cheap labor."

"Dastardly. I mostly get challengers and school kids."

Thinking on it, I do get a remarkable number of middle schoolers. I guess the free admission makes it a popular destination for field trips.

"Wow, I didn't even realize," I said.

"What's that?"

"How kid-oriented my gym is. Like, I have four classes this week, where I'm supposed to teach kids how to take care of their Pokémon. The basics: pokeballs, grooming, feeding, watering, what the different groups require, giving attention, yada yada."

"Cute," he said, looking directly at me.

"Don't say-"

"You'll make a good mother someday," he added on. I looked away, face reddened.

"Especially don't say that," I warned him.

"It's 10:50. When's your match?"

"Noon."

"Let's grab something to eat, then."

I assented, and we made to depart. I told Erika where we were headed. Outside in the main battle hall, Whitney was busy dictating to a chaotic horde of engineers, trainers, and Psychic and Electric Pokémon, trying to get them to work together in an attempt to fix the arena.

"We'll have this right as rain!" Whitney called after me.

Once out the door, Morty led me down a corner, towards what looked like a park and a row of small outdoor eateries. We made it to a corner before he pulled me aside suddenly. My back was placed against an arch, and Morty's masculine body loomed over me.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"I can't wait. I want another," he said.

"Really?" I rolled my eyes, huffed, sighed, and at last, gave in.

No matter how I felt about it after-the-fact, kissing is always utterly pleasant in the moment. This time, it was short, deep, hard, but as I pulled away I hesitated for a long while. Our lips faintly danced upon one another, barely touching, like a pair of feathers brushing in the wind.

This state of affairs lasted a minute, before I tore away, embarrassed. There were other humans taking glances, or stares, at us. Even young couples were gazing with mixed looks of perturbed wantonness and guilt that they could not be so brazen as this pair of crazy lovers.
"Do you need more?" I asked faintly.

"Are you willing?"

"No. I'm hungry."

"Then come on. Also, look over there."

He took me by the waist and guided me towards the diners row. His arm outstretched and pointed to a table in the middle of the plaza. There, sitting, eating, and chatting happily, was the couple who had last been seen gnashing at each other's throats.

"See? Angry sex leads to happy good mornings."

Ethan seemed at ease, responding crisply, and usually with a smile, to anything Lyra belted out. One of their Pokémon, it looked like a Vulpix, was hunched proper-like on the table. The pair took turns feeding it spoonfulls from their own desserts.

"Do you want to join them?" Morty asked.

"Could we have a meal to ourselves?"

"Of course."

And so the hour before my match was slated to start passed by peaceably and pleasantly. We ordered, ate, Morty offered to pay the bill, but I insisted on covering my share. I later found out that he lied about the tab and still ended up paying for half of my meal (gosh! inflation in the big cities is killer!). We talked about this and that and filled in the details we hadn't already shared about our lives. We played footies. Lyra spotted us on our way out, and so we ended up joining together on the way back to the gym. She had a joke whose punch line escaped me, but everyone else thought it was hilarious and so I laughed along with them.

"We're getting a new Gym Leader in Azalea soon."

"Really? Are they any good?"

"Supposedly."

"Awesome! I ought to go down there and challenge them sometime!"

"But you have Azalea's badge already."

"Doesn't matter, I just want the competition."

"How long are you going to hang out in Johto snacking on small fry? Why not go to Unova? That's where the powerhouses are gathering this winter."

"A little while longer, I guess. I'm waiting for a few last things to finish here."

"Do you mean Red?"

"Yeah, he's one thing."

"What's the rest?"

Lyra waved her head goofily and coyly and didn't answer out loud.
"So what's the new Gym Leader like?" she asked instead.

"Her name is Jade, she's a Poison-type user, and we don't know much more than that," Morty said.

"She runs two businesses in Mahogany: a trainer academy and a profitable pharmaceutical company, her father and mother are both from Azalea, although she wasn't born there, her favorite attacks are Toxic and Double Team, and she would have, on average, the fastest team amongst the Johto leaders. She relies on kiting tactics to wear her opponents down before finishing them off with coverage attacks."

Heads turned my way, broadcasting disbelief.

"I actually read the bio, unlike you," I retorted, specifically to Morty. "I don't think it's prudent to rubber stamp appointments. We're going to have to work with this person for at least a few years, we ought to put more consideration into it."

"Jasmine, half that stuff wasn't even in the bio, and yes, I did read it."

"Use your brain, dummy. Aokigahara is one of the most prominent clans in the Azalea area; Toxic is on four of her Pokémon and Double Team is on three; Crobat, Venomoth, Seviper, Tentacruel, that centipede-thing, and Ariados are all fragile speedsters, a stall-and-kite strategy would be second nature to them. It's basic deduction."

"You're a regular Prof. House. Got anything more?"

"No," I said in a huff. "I don't know anything about her personality, which is what worries me. What if she's another pain in the bun like Falkner?"

"What do you have against Falkner?"

"Something that happened awhile ago. Don't ask about it. It's nothing."

"If you say so."

"On topic, the first time we would have a chance to meet her, I'm guessing, is the holiday ball."

"Sooner, for me. I'm planning an excursion down to Ilex soon, got a haunted shrine to check out," Morty said. "I can scout her out for you, see if you two would get along or get into a catfight."

"That's not necessary."

"Suit yourself."

"I'm excited. A new Gym Leader, and she's kind of a mystery. I guess I'll get to meet her and battle her before any of you. Lucky me, right?" Lyra beamed.

"Even if she changes the badge's name and appearance, though, you won't need to earn it; your old Hive Badge is still legal tender."

"I know, I just like to test myself against all the greatest trainers. She is good, right?"

"I think so, yeah. Didn't they say she's ranked seventh, or close to that, in Johto right now?"

"That's right," Morty nodded.

"Which ranking? Who's number one?" Ethan asked consecutively.
"Um… I don't remember. Jasmine?

"I don't remember either. How do they figure rankings out, anyways? Do they only count trainers from that region, or are visitors included? How are they scored? Win ratio? ELO? Power Rankings?"

"Don't know. That's the problem with rankings, they're so subjective. Even ELO is supposed to be all statistics, but based on what formula you use, you can bias it one way or another. That's why I was wondering whose system they were using."

"True. Oh I see."

"Still, hey, Ethan! Show them that site you use."

"What site?"

"That one you're always checking before matches."

"PGL?"

"Yeah, show them that one."

"PGL?" I said aloud.

"Pokémon Global Ladder. They release rankings for trainers all over the world," Ethan explained. "I don't think their system is particularly better than others, but they're the most comprehensive site, and the forums get a lot of good, smart debate."

"Show them," Lyra insisted.

Ethan brought out his smart phone, pulled up the website, and handed it over.

**Pokémon Trainer Global Rankings**

**Filter: Johto League participants**

**Filter: Search- Jade**

3 Results Found:

#8 Jade Aokigahara

#345 Jade Lei'shan

#1875 Tsubasa Jade

"According to this, she's ranked eighth in the region," I announced. That's pretty darn impressive, especially for a would-be Gym Leader. Very few trainers get to be that good and then opt for the less-lucrative honor of squatting in a gym all day waiting for brats to come and steal your badge. The tournaments and circuits offer too much money to pass up, and finals victories are much more glamorous. I voiced this wonderment out loud.

"Why would she take the Azalea position? She's obviously good enough to compete in the Johto League Championships."

"Who knows? Why does anyone become a Gym Leader?" Morty asked.
"Pride. Civic service. By accident, or because they can't do any better."

"Which one of those apply to you?" he put to me.

"All of them," I responded, refusing to be shamed by the circumstances that brought me to my present situation.

"It's a distinction, isn't it?" Ethan said. "Your job isn't just a recognition of how good you are in the arena, it's also the service you do outside of battles too, right?"

"True," I said. "But, I got the job because Mr. Beret picked me to succeed him. Olivinians never batted an eye; Beret's word was the word of god, no one was going to argue with him. I guess I inherited the goodwill he spent his lifetime stockpiling."

"You've lived up to that legacy," Morty insisted. "You've done pretty good by your city, I hear."

"I don't know. What have I done?"

"Made your gym into a community learning center," Morty said. "They think of it as a safe haven. Gang activity has gone down since you started letting teens hang out there for free."

"Really? How did you know that?"

"You think I'd ask you to be my girlfriend without trying to get to know you? You're in the local newspaper pretty regularly, you know."

"Well, I guess," I said. It's kind of hard to remember that I'm a local celebrity, subject to scrutiny, idolatry, unfounded criticism and ignorant praise, the same as TV stars and politicians.

"I remember when I first got to Olivine," Lyra chipped in. "Everyone thought of it as a bum tourist trap. A long time ago it used to be the place people go to for vacation, but then it became the place you'd go to in order to catch the boat or plane to your real vacation. Then you came along and pushed your Steel-type team, and that got the attention of the industry leaders. Your mayor spun it into a media campaign and the big businesses were wooed in. Now it's a high-tech industrial boom town."

"How the heck do you know this?"

"My high school courses. Johto Econ 102. I guess if I ever go to college, I want to major in Business."

Typical school kids start their Pokémon journey at the start of summer break, and then return home come autumn. Those who are good enough to break into the circuit competitions and go pro don't go back home, they just stay on the road and keep battling. Still, education is mandatory, and they end up taking long-distance classes using the computer stations at the Pokémon Centers. Lyra was on a business track, judging by the fact she was taking a regional econ course. This surprised me.

"I never pegged you for a corporate tycoon," I told her. She beamed.

"What can I say, I want to be rich."

Ethan chuckled.

"As long as you're in sales, and not accounting," he teased her.

"Implying what? That I can't control my spending?"
He let the joke go and turned to me.

"Let's not forget, you are solely responsible for the Pokémon who is solely responsible for the safety of the shipping industry, which itself is the lifeblood of your city. Olivine has a lot to thank Amphy for; so that's thanks to you too."

A soft smile came to my face.

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

They're buttering me up. It's too nice, too much goodness. I may be blushing or otherwise showing signs of self-inflated bigheadedness, so I averted my attention back to Ethan's smartphone. There were all manner of filtering options to choose from, and so I began fiddling with them.

"Where am I ranked?" I wondered.

I typed in my name, Jasmine Mikan, in the search engine and got a "0 results found" message.

"Inexplicable," I uttered out loud. Am I so bad that I'm not even ranked? Not even the 1876th best trainer in Johto, in case Tsubasa Jade was the worst ranked trainer here? Morty looked over my shoulder and correctly guessed at what I was trying to do.

"Here, try this."

He set the search options to look for 'similar', rather than 'exact', results. My name immediately appeared on the screen.

#10954 Jasmine Hayate-Mikan

"That's even worse!" I cried. I'm not even in the top ten thousand in my own region?!

"Silly," Morty teased me. He tapped the top of the screen, where one of the filters had been reset. I got over my 'DOH!' moment quickly and fixed it. I feel better, actually, knowing I'm the 10954th best trainer in the whole wide world.

"98th," I said. "I rank 98th in Johto."

Okay, worse than I hoped, but better than I feared.

"Take it with a grain of salt," Ethan said encouragingly. "They're notoriously slow at updating recent results, and the rankings aren't that great of an indicator. The discussions are more useful."

"Eh. It's an ego thing," I admitted.

"I know the feeling. I see my name in the 300s and it hurts."

"What about me?" Morty asked.

"I'll try. Matsuba, Matsuba only, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know why they messed up your last name. Actually, that's one thing I never figured out about you. What exactly is Hayate? Your middle name?"

"My dad's surname," I answered.

"Oh? Not Mikan?"
"No. Hayate-Mikan is my full surname, my dad's and mother's last names put together. It's because-
and I fell deathly silent. Before Morty had the opportunity to inquire, I quickly entered his name in
and brought the screen up for all to see.

"32nd in Johto."

"Nice!"

"Awesome!"

Curiosity overtaking us, we began madly fiddling with the settings while waiting for the crosswalk
light to turn green.

"Who's number one in Johto?" I wondered.

I shouldn't have bothered. Of course, it was the young woman standing right next to me.

"I'm the best, the very best there ever was!" she began humming upon seeing her name atop the
rankings.

"That must mean they're going by region of origin, and not by trainers that are currently visiting,"
Ethan said.

"Why's that?"

"Because Red would be #1 if he was included."

"Ah, pooey. I could beat him," Lyra insisted. This started a small squabble about who could beat
who and a recap, with differing viewpoints and interpretations, of the summit battle royale that was
held earlier this year. In the meantime, I browsed the rest of the Johto ranking list.

And promptly stopped, upon seeing the very next entry.

#1: Lyra Kotone

#2: Silver "Silver"

#3: Lance Cross

#4: Reena Tungstein

#5: Molly Hale

"Crap."

We had just entered the gym. Contrary to my fears and worries, Whitney had actually stuck to her
word and fixed the chaos that was her arena floor. Well, 'fix' is a strong word. 'Fix' implies
everything went back to normal, which was not nearly the case. Rather, what used to be a flat, tiled
arena floor capable of morphing into mazes, and what had recently been an asteroid field of free-
floating blocks, was now something in between. The floating blocks were now arranged into a neat,
flat, circular platform, flanked by multiple, smaller platforms.

So, I suppose it would be feasible to battle atop that. It was only floating thirty feet in the air, no big deal if I or my Pokémon fell off, directly into the field of crackling anti-grav projectors. And really, I won't have to worry about getting myself, my Pokémon, or anything else dirty, as the blocks were solid metal and couldn't be used to burrow through, or crushed up into Rock Slide and Stone Edge projectiles.

"Getting nervous?" Lyra asked me out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"Are you getting nervous about the match? You're shaking," she elaborated.

"It's the air conditioner," I lied. What am I supposed to say? I just found out I'm about to battle a trainer considered to be the second best in the entire region, one who is more highly ranked and thence supposedly more powerful than Lance Cross, the legendary Dragon Master, the same Lance who had soundly defeated me at the Gym Leader summit (which, I might add, started this whole probation nonsense in the first place), and who, last night, my opponent himself had argued was the greatest trainer in the world? That's who I have to face?!

"I don't get it," I muttered to myself. "Why would he argue for Lance being the best in the world, if the whole world thinks he himself is even better? It makes no sense! Why'd I do such a dumb thing and challenge him to a gym match?!!"

"Hey, it'll be alright." A big hand landed on my shoulder. It was Morty, come to calm me down and reassure me. It worked. My nerves responded to his touch by relaxing, ever so slightly.

"I hope you're right."

Nothing in my voice was reassuring, an accurate reflection of my stressed out mind.

"He is second best in the region. Only behind Lyra," and I nodded in the prodigies' direction, "and only because she won the jackpot with that genetic freak of a Typhlosion."

I shuddered, instinctually remembering the inferno my gym had been turned into that day. It was still the worst, most one-sided defeat I had ever experienced.

"Number two, and it's for the marbles. #2 vs. #98. I'm better than that, right? I'm not so far behind him that it'll be impossible, right?"

"Relax. It's just a ranking. It doesn't mean anything," Morty tried to reassure me again.

"Of course. I know I'm better than that, I'm a Gym Leader dang it! I just wish I'd gotten some more respect."

"It'll come once they pick up on the fact that you're winning the majority of your gym battles."

"It'll skyrocket once I beat Silver," I asserted.

Argh!

I really hate the rankings system. So many people take these things too seriously, as if a single number could measure your entire worth as a Pokémon trainer. Pokémon training wasn't so simple as to be boiled down into simple components, let alone a singular integer! Success in the arena came
from all sorts of metrics, like emotion, concentration, strategy and tactics, physical and mental strength, type matchups, training- a countless number of factors! So when one trainer who no one thinks anything of beats a highly-touted trainer, the public and media become all shocked and cry upset, and blame it on the higher-ranked trainer choking or having bad luck. It's stupid. Vito came into my gym with the #1 rank in Hoenn and I completely outsmarted him and beat him fair and clear. Rankings don't mean a thing once the pokeballs go flying!

I clutched the ends of my scarf with balled fists.

Argh!

You're getting nervous and scatter-brained, Jasmine. You can't even concentrate on one thing to freak out over, you let yourself obsess over multiple things at once, and that compounds your stress.

Calm down.

I breathed in, and then out, deep as I could. Morty rubbed my back again.

"You look beautiful. Go knock him out," he said, giving me a gentle push forward.

How am I feeling? Not much better, but functional.

Is Silver really better than Lance? Why does he consider him so much better than himself? Am I up to the task of even giving him a game, let alone beating him? Would we even have a fair match, or would Whitney's technical problems screw everything up?

Questions, questions, questions-

I guess I'll find all my answers once the battle starts.

Whitney appeared, bounding towards me with her usual vigor and unwelcome optimism.

"Like what I did with the place? Turns out, this anti-grav stuff is really fine-tuned! You can do anything with it!"

"It's good," I said.

"What's up with you? You're tight as a pitcher with bases loaded."

"Stop that! Yeah, I'm worried, but everyone fussing over me isn't helping!"

I don't think I'm actually scared, or lacking in confidence. I guess what's at stake is my pride, and the difficulty of the match (or impossibility, if the power difference was as large as indicated) was making me conceive of the prospect of losing, badly, and having to swallow my pride. Why is it that in the face of crisis and uncertainty, I get hung up on the worst possible outcome? I don't know. It may be I'm a natural-born pessimist.

"Do you guys even know why this whole battle is even happening?"

They shook their heads.

"I was wondering that. Silver never challenges Gym Leaders."

"It's because you wanted to settle an argument about who was stronger, Lance or Stone," Ethan said. He gave me and Lyra a rueful look, as if regretting admitting that he had been hanging out with the rooftop gang rather than Lyra.
"Not who is stronger. Who is right. I got angry when he started accusing my boss of being a heartless corporate hack."

"And I was angry that you'd insinuate that Lance is a dictator and narcissist."

We swiveled, to find Silver standing before us, arms crossed. He wore a light jacket and a heavy frown.

"A Pokemon battle won't settle our difference of opinion, but I still want to fight you," Silver said.

"Right," I nodded.

That was all that was said between us. We made our way to our respective sides of the arena. The mini-platforms were lowered in order to allow us to board, and once we did so, lifted off three stories into the air. I took a deep breath.

"Let's get this started! Commencing battle! Whitney versus… Jigglypuff!" Whitney yelled.

"Huh?"

I looked to Whitney, who was looking and pointing an outstretched arm and finger to the video display. My confusion increased. The board was supposed to show our picture and names, but instead, where I expected my face to be, I got a yellow smiley face instead. Beneath it was Whitney's name. On the challenger side there was a portrait of a Jigglypuff and the challenger's name was "Jigglypuff".

"Like I said, power surge screwed everything up. But don't worry! The profiles are the only big thing messed up, everything else is cool."

She cycled through the video board's options, showing us the six slots representing our Pokémon, and also pointed out the two Girafarig positioned on either side of the field, fulfilling the shielding requirements for the match.

"What are the rules?" Silver asked.

"Six on six, single-battle, no restrictions, usual clauses, play nicely. I'll be the judge! All set?" Whitney asked each of us.

I nodded, taking out my first Pokémon.

Silver did likewise.

"Alright! It's time for a battle!!!

Chapter End Notes

"Transmutation" is a side-story to Olivine Romance that follows the back story of Silver. If interested, you can find it under the Olivine Canon series page.
I stared across the battlefield, taking stock of the situation.

The main arena was a circular platform made up of steel cubes, hovering twenty feet above a field of anti-gravity projectors. Orbiting the central platform were five 2x2-cube platforms. These traveled around the platform at variable distances, some farther, some closer, some higher or lower, and at a leisurely pace, making about one rotation per two minutes. The anti-grav projectors were in a grid-based array, one for every cube, each featuring eight spikes arranged like flower petals. Electricity coursed between the spikes and the steel cubes, filling the underside area with an ominous, crackling field of energy.

My opponent and I were mounted on independently-moving cubes; a control interface for maneuvering the cube had been provided. Having sized up the terrain, my focus came at last to rest on the human facing me down from across the chamber.

Remember who Silver uses in his team- Gliscor, Crobat, Weavile, Feraligatr, Tyranitar, and who else? Alakazam, was it? No… So what's the common thread?

They're all physical attackers.

Skarmory might be able to win this match all by himself. Even if he couldn't last long enough to sweep Silver's entire team, the armored bird could cause a lot of damage before he went down. Or I could use him strategically, a pivot to counter unexpected tactics. The terrain was also favorable; Skarmory's aerial capabilities would benefit from fighting high up on these floating platforms. And regardless, I want field hazards set up right away.

The choice for my lead Pokémon was obnoxiously obvious.

"Skarmory!"

"Weavile!"

Perhaps too obvious? Ice attacks are nothing to sneer at, but coming off a fragile assassin like Weavile? Would the opponent have the punching power to even tickle my tank?

"Battle, set, begin!" Whitney cried.

"Skarm Skarm, Stealth Rocks!"

"Fake Out."

Crap!

I didn't even realize how close Weavile had snuck up to Skarmory in the three seconds it took Whitney to announce the start of the match. Skarmory held up his wings to block the sudden backhanded attack. The damage was negligible, but the force sent Skarmory off the edge of the platform.

"Skarm! Fly back and get those rocks up!"

"Ice Shard the Stealth Rocks!" Silver commanded.

Skarmory sent razor-sharp minerals scattering across the field. Weavile reacted, flinging off icicles...
like throwing-knives at each individual rock. The rocks’ placement was messed up, getting knocked in random directions and encased in bright white ice.

"Now the Stealth Rocks are even bigger and sharper. Was that really a good idea?" I wondered aloud.

"They're not really "stealthy" now, so yeah, I'd say it was worth it," Silver answered me.

Ah, poop, he's right. There's no missing the Stealth Rocks now- the icy coating was broadcasting their position, and had destroyed their homing capability by freezing them to the platform.

Silver's as good as advertised.

"Skarmory, Spikes."

Skarmory took a landing on the platform in order to prepare for the next batch of field hazards. His wings bristled upright, small spines growing from them.

I can still lay Spikes easily enough. Try icing these, Silver, it won't take away any of their function, but just make them sharper!

"Ice Punch."

As expected, he's going to start attacking. Wait for the Weavile to get close, and then order a Steel Win-

PSSH!

Weavile bounded several yards beyond Skarmory, the latter flipping end-over from the brunt of the impact.

Fast! Too fast! I didn't have any time to order Skarmory to counter-attack!

"Ice Punch."

"Steel Wing!" I ordered preemptively. Weavile was already darting through the air. Hearing my orders and seeing Skarmory readying his iron wing-scythes, the foe flipped end-over, caught the ground with its long claws, and pivoted away at the last second. Skarmory slashed at air, missing the fleeing opponent.

So if I command Skarmory to attack, Weavile will know what's coming and run away. If I wait for Weavile to lunge, he'll finish his attack before Skarmory even registers my words.

"Skarm, look at me!" I made my Pokémon glance in my direction. A suspicious Weavile took the opportunity to dart in and clock off another Ice Punch. It really did nothing, though.

I began making motions and gestures, hoping Skarm remembered the rudimentary sign language we had worked out for instances such as this.

"Roost!" I ordered.

The next Ice Punch hit with more fury, and yet did even less damage. Skarmory was nigh-invincible to this thing. I wonder if it was necessary to actually attack the Weavile? Couldn't I wear out its stamina by just doing nothing?

"Sword Dance."
"Skarmory, get off the main platform!"

Skarmory dove off the edge, gliding up and around one of the satellite platforms. Weavile finished its Sword Dance. Its movements changed from graceful but wispy to strong and decisive. As a test, it dug its long claw across the flooring, gouging out a deep gash in the metal. Seeing its handiwork, Weavile grinned evilly.

"Not enough. Sword Dance again," Silver commanded.

I need to do something, quickly. This could get out of hand if I keep letting it set up.

"Skarmory, Air Slash."

A ranged attack, just to annoy it. I want to bait it into coming out and fighting in the air. Sadly, Skarm's Air Slash wasn't up to the task. The slice of wind was too slow, too weak, and lazily dodged by the foe. It let out a dry laugh and then executed a second Sword Dance.

"Spikes," I commanded.

Oh, right!

"And then Whirlwind!"

If Skarmory can threaten to both spike up the platform, and then blow Weavile either off the edge or back to its pokeball, that'll force the assassin to come attack Skarmory.

"Skar! Skar! Skar!" Skarmory swung its wings out, letting fly spikes to scatter all over the platform. Unfortunately, in doing so he lost altitude. When he dipped below the edge and was forced to flap up higher, Weavile took its chance to strike.

"Weavile! Yehehe!" A powered-up Night Slash raked across Skarmory's back. Weavile's leap carried it to a mini-platform, from which it rebounded and slashed at Skarmory again, barely missing a second blow.

Skarmory wasn't looking too good. The single Night Slash had done more damage than all the previous Ice Punches combined.

"Skarmory, whatever you do, stay airborne! Dodge the Ice Shards! Stay airborne! Don't go near the big platform!"

Skarmory needs to land to use Roost, but he can't land on the main platform without coming under assault. What about the auxiliary platforms? Only one looked like it was out of Weavile's jumping range, and that one was currently on the opposite side of the arena.

"Ice Shard."

Skarmory tried to dodge the incoming hail of projectiles, with little success. At best, he could divebomb and take the hits across his back, where his armor was strongest. Yet that maneuver was killing his altitude and bringing him dangerously close to the anti-grav projectors.

Ah, what if...

"Skarmory, dive under the platform."
Silver smirked. What was he thinking?

"Weavile, go chase it. Be careful."

I gawked, literally gawked, as Weavile slid off the edge of the platform. In one graceful, acrobatic flip, it had swung itself under the edifice and latched its claws directly into the metal's surface. The creature began advancing rapidly, as if it was crossing a set of monkey bars.

"Ha. I was right."

We humans maneuvered our own platforms lower, to get a better view of the arena's underside.

"Figures, a Steel-type like Skarmory would be affected by the anti-grav, just the same as the cubes. Now he's pinned down- or rather, up- and can't fly. Did you consider that when you sent him under?" Silver said.

My turn to smirk.

"I was counting on it."

Skarmory cawed, battle-ready.

Roost complete.

"Thanks to the anti-grav, Skarmory can Roost on the underside of the cubes."

This battle was getting truly three dimensional, and thus, bizarre.

"Steel Wing."

Skarmory adapted quickly to the upside-down orientation of the battle. He lashed out with razor-edged wingtips, attempting to cut down the incoming Weavile. Weavile itself was in a tricky position- it was still agile and acrobatic enough to dodge Skarmory's slow slashes, but it couldn't exactly dance around Skarmory either. It had to keep one claw dug into the platform overhead at all times, or else fall. At one point Skarmory got behind it and swept a Steel Wing clear through its hold… only for Weavile to expertly switch arms in mid-air and ward off Skarmory with a Night Slash.

The two fought in close melee for a minute, both hampered equally by their respective predicaments. Skarmory couldn't fly, and Weavile couldn't let go. Tooth and claw and bladed feather intermixed in barely discernible motions. There was hardly anything I or Silver could do at this point. Any strategy we could order needed an opening first, and that required one Pokémon or the other to gain an advantage in the topsy-turvy close-quarters-combat.

'Come on!' I caught myself frustratedly thinking.

Skarmory lunged with a Drill Peck. Weavile spun around, grasped the underside with both hands, and kicked Skarmory in the face. Skarmory shook the pain off, and retaliated by grasping Weavile's foot in his beak.

"Throw him off!"

"Get the battle back upstairs!" Silver implored.

Skarmory beat against the surface as hard as he could, throwing himself downward and off the platform's surface, with Weavile's leg still caught in his beak. Weavile lost its grip and began falling.
The anti-grav field kicked in and pushed Skarmory back upwards, and as he began ascending, Weavile caught ahold of his attacker, flipped itself over, and forced Skarmory downwards while propelling itself back upwards. My Pokémon fell, in a motion that looked more like jumping upside-down, before "falling" back towards the platform. Weavile was ready with a vicious Night Slash scored across Skarmory's forehead.

"Skarm! Whirlwind!"

"Taunt!"

Weavile backhanded Skarmory across the beak, and followed up by a grabbing motion that brought the foes face-to-face. Weavile uttered something guttural and obscene into Skarmory's face, before swinging away.

Skarmory, instead of executing the Whirlwind I ordered, went mad and chased after Weavile.

"Skarm! Stop! Ignore the Taunt!"

Useless. Skarmory was blinded by rage. Whatever Pokespeak Weavile had framed its insult in, it had clearly gotten across to Skarmory and gotten under the bird's feathers. The latter dashed after the mocking foe, all the way to the edge of the platform. Weavile back-flipped end-over, reaching topside. Skarmory followed suit, going airborne. It dove after Weavile, hooked beak outstretched, to find nothing but air. Weavile pirouetted, catching Skarmory's backside with a Night Slash.

"Skarm! Darn it! Air Slash!"

"Ice Shard!"

Skarmory had mind enough to obey my offensive playcalls. The two ranged attacks collided, with the Ice Shards ripping through and shattering all over Skarmory's general location. My Pokémon responded with an angry caw and a headlong charge.

"Stop!"

He's not listening.

I need to get Skarmory calmed down so that he can use Whirlwind. Otherwise, he won't last against Weavile and it's double-dose of Sword Dance; the rest of my team won't stand a chance otherwise.

"Weavile, backflip and counter."

Skarmory dove in. Weavile somersaulted backwards and prepared to lunge forwards… but was knocked off-balanced, barely dodging a Steel Wing. Skarmory zipped by, banked, and returned for another pass. His rage did have the interesting effect of making him fast and reckless, something Weavile couldn't quite get a bead on.

I studied their next few exchanges, trying to discern something I could do.

Weavile was having trouble initiating close-quarters combat with something that was both speedy and airborne. When facing a fast opponent, he prefers to engage directly, feint, and then slash at an opponent's backside as they pass. He can't seem to catch Skarmory's banking, altitude-gaining motion after each pass.

"Skarm Skarm! Stop! Listen to me!"
I waved frenetically to try and get the attention of my Pokémon. How long would that Taunt keep its emotional hold over him? The rest of the match?!

Silver's looking every bit as disgruntled as I am. His hair keeps falling in a disheveled mess over his eyes, causing him to continually try to brush it aside.

"Ice Shard."

Skarmory dove low and fast, dodging the shards and knocking Weavile's ankles from under him. Weavile fell flat to the ground.

Silver cocked an eyebrow. Not a look of worry, but understanding. What did he see, what did he learn from that?

"Skarmory!" I honestly was about to retreat him, even going so far as to hold up his Pokeball- but decided not to.

"Whirlwind!" I ordered one last time, hoping he'd come to his senses.

"Kkk. Arawww!" Skarmory let loose a series of Air Slashes, which Weavile dodged neatly but lost ground. It flinched, sensing its back foot hanging over the edge of the platform. It had almost backed itself off.

Skarmory saw its opening and let fly a Whirlwind, at last.

Good boy! And clever too! Blow the ninja over the edge!

Rather than brave the oncoming cyclone, Weavile back-flipped off the platform. Ah, that's suicide… no, hold on!

As it fell, the foe caught the edge with its claws and held on. The Whirlwind flew harmlessly over its head.

Weavile raised its head back over the brink, looking for Skarmory. Then it disappeared. A loud cackle of cries and scuffling could be heard. Silver was busy shouting tactical guidance to his Pokemon, but from my angle, I couldn't see the fight. What had my bird done? Gotten behind and underneath Weavile while it was dodging the Whirlwind, obviously, but now what?

I tried driving my observer block around, to see if a better view was possible. More sounds from below alerted me to change course.

They're back under the platform. Skarmory is using the anti-grav's push to wuddle along, but now it was being relentlessly chased by… oh what? Weavile's walking upside-down without holding onto anything! Now with both arms free to deliver Night Slashes and Ice Punches, it pursued and swung away with glee at a panicked Skarmory.

"Skarmory, get over here!"

Skarmory tried flying, but was awkwardly shoved back to the underside surface. Weavile caught up and slashed, evoking a cry of pain. I was close enough to make out Skarmory's eyes scrunch up, and also the assailant's smirk. Then my focus was drawn to Weavile's feet and their magical grip on the ceiling.

"Frostbite Foot," I uttered, surprised. I didn't think it existed outside of the movies!
You know how things, especially exposed skin, stick to freezing-cold metal surfaces? In ninja movies, Ice-jutsu users freely freeze and unfreeze their feet, so that it can act like a "glue" to allow them to walk up walls and across ceilings. Weavile was doing precisely that. Its feet were coated in a light blue glow, and every time they touched the surface a small layer of frost solidified.

At first the foe's steps were unsure and slow, but as it got the hang of the technique, it began to practically dance across the inverted field of battle. It even began weaving in somersaults in order to unleash Low Kicks. Skarmory defended as best he could, Roosting off increasingly powerful blows.

"Skarm, Whirlwind."

"Weavile, all four!"

Weavile crouched, slamming all four sets of claws into the block and froze its hold in place with large, volley-ball sized ice cubes. Skarmory's gust of wind smacked into it hard, pinning it against the surface and even pushing its lips, eyelids, and ears back (like a dog-Pokémon sticking its head out of the window on a car ride- very comical looking, although I didn't have time to laugh). Its reinforced grip, however, kept it from being blown away. Skarmory exhausted his attack.

"Pursuit."

Weavile dashed, swung, and lunged after a retreating Skarmory.

No matter what I do, Weavile has the terrain advantage. Can't fight on top, can't maneuver on bottom, can't out-dodge between the orbiting platforms... Skarmory can't even take into the open air, because Weavile's Ice Shards are stronger than Skarmory's Air Slash. I bit my lip in frustration.

"Skarm, Whirlwind yourself away.

Weavile backed off, lest it get caught in the rip of air current. Skarmory hurtled away, out from under the platform and into the open. His chaotic escape had brought out on the opposite side of the arena. The time it took me to navigate to a better viewpoint gave Weavile the chance to return topside as well.

"Weavile, Ice Shard, and then- you know."

"Skarmory, dodge!"

Skarmory flew in low. The spitfire shards lanced over his head, and then barely off his tail, tracing him like machine-gun fire. He wheeled and turned in a great circle, then a small circle, and then a short uplift followed by a steep dive. Weavile backflipped to avoid the Steel Wing, bringing it more towards the center of the platform.

"Skarmory, slower, straight!" I exclaimed, hoping to take advantage.

Again Weavile let loose Ice Shards in rapid fire. A haphazard hail of darts whizzed over Skarmory's head. My bird dove low and fast. His talon scraped along the steel, sending out sparks in his wake. It wasn't for show, either. As Skarmory approached at high speed, Weavile again backflipped...

Skarmory's scraping will slow him down, just a tad, just enough to catch Weavile as it lands, instead of passing under it at high speed. Then, Steel Wing for the-

"Yah!"

Weavile twisted in midair, bring down an Ice Punch directly into Skarmory's back. My Pokémon
cratered into the ground, with Weavile landing directly on top of him.

"Skarmory, Steel Wing!" I cried, but my bird did not, or could not, carry out the attack. I hovered in as close as the shields would let me.

Skarmory wasn't moving.

"No way… Not even that should knock him out. Eh?" I startled. Skarmory's eyes were open, and his beak was moving, quite lividly, actually, snapping open and shut like hedge-clippers. However, the rest of his body was coated in a thick, impermeable layer of ice.

"Oh- it's frozen," Silver commented, showing neither remorse nor excitement at my misfortune.

Bad luck.

"Weavile, Sword Dance. Don't use Brick Break or Low Kick to finish it off, those might break the ice. Use Ice Punch."

Grr. Let Skarmory try to break free on his own? Or switch out now, before the Weavile gets any more power-boosts? An impossible decision.

"Skarmory, return."

Drat. Skarmory's a free KO for whoever I send him back in on, if I ever get that chance.

"You are pretty good," Silver said in compliment. He smiled, as if relieved. "That took a lot of work."

"You surpass your reputation," I said in polite reply. I've seen too many trainers rely on the brute strength of their Pokémon to rise up the rankings. Silver, though, was smart. He was at a total disadvantage and yet still came out of this matchup on top. "Frostbite Foot was unexpected. I didn't think that would actually work outside of the movies."

Silver lifted a corner of lips in a slight grin, and nodded. "I'm lucky it did work; this is the first time I've used it in battle. Got the hang of it, Weavile?"

"Weav!" Weavile lifted each foot, showing off a slick of ice on its underside. It then began sliding around the arena as if it were an ice-skating rink. So, yeah, it can do that too. Oh wait, it's not just having fun, it's building up blood pressure and activating nerves in order to boost its Attack- a.k.a. another Sword Dance. I'd better switch in Skarmory's replacement.

Who won't get one-shotted by Fighting, Ice, or Dark melee attacks?

"Magnezone."

"Low Kick."

He's going after my Pokémon even before I have a chance to react. Magnezone, luckily, could think for itself. It pushed off with Levitate, letting Weavile slide harmlessly under it. A Thunder followed, blasting the ground beneath.

"Heyeh! Wev wev wev wev!"

Even though it had cleared the blast radius, Weavile still performed three floating long-jumps. I was confused for a moment, until I connected the consecutive jumps with the three bolts of lightning that composed Magnezone's Thunder attack.
The stage is entirely made of metal. It's conducting the Thunder and radiating it outward, like a shockwave. If Weavile doesn't jump, it gets electrocuted, even if it dodges the initial strike. I can use that.

"Thunder on target!"

"Diagonal!"

Weavile threw himself into a long jump, barely dodging the Thunder and yet keeping airborne long enough to also avoid the shockwaves. Dang it.

"Thunder!" I ordered again. Sometimes it's not about strategy, it's about execution. How many times can Weavile avoid the duel threat? He can't dodge forever.

"Platform." Silver pointed to one of the side platforms, just as it was making its closest approach in its orbit. Weavile bounded up to the platform's ledge, pushed off, and went flying towards Magnezone. Too fast, Magnezone can't dodge.

"Thunder, self!"

A terrible crack sounded out, and an explosion of photons and electrons filled the air. Did I get it?

Argh!

"Coup."

Weavile had gotten off some attack in the split second before the Thunder hit. Magnezone was reeling from taking both the enemy's attack and its own Thunder, and was slowly drifting downwards.

"Brick Break."

It only took one chop, and Magnezone hit the floor.

"Magnezone is unable to battle! The first KO of the match! What an awesome battle!" Whitney shouted. She doesn't seem particularly miffed about me losing. "Jasmine, next Poké, please."

Great. Weavile's too fast and too agile for any of my Pokémon to land a shot. And, with all those Sword Dances, simple melee attacks have become brutally effective. I'm going to lose this gym battle if I don't neutralize this darn creature NOW.


Silver cocked an eyebrow. Weavile saw the emerging form and hopped about in anticipation.

"Magneton? How is that any better than Magnezone? Weavile, just be careful of the Thunder and repeat," Silver said. He's too careless.

"Weavile!"

The dark form skipped ahead, its focus kept squarely on Magneton. Its pace was fast, but not too fast. It's waiting for the Thunder to come, so it can dodge and use the opening to close in and deliver the knockout.

"Magneton… Discharge!" I said, trying to gage the exact moment to call out the command.
But, I was too quick. Weavile sensed the attack and instinctively somersaulted backwards fifty-some feet. The Discharge radiated outwards as a large, crackling sphere. It slowly enveloped a space one-hundred feet in diameter, or roughly half the width of the central platform.

"Hmm... Let's try Ice Shard."

The shards flew in, fast as bullets, but mostly missed or bounced off Magneton's small, hard shells. Maybe with some extra Sword Dances, and maybe if Magneton just sat there as target practice, the shards would eventually pelt it into fainting. Sure. Get real.

"Mirror Shot."

Magneton's bullet was faster, heavier, and more accurate than Ice Shard. Kiss my tush, Weavile.

"Vile!"

Still not fast enough!

I gawked as Weavile back flipped to easily dodge the bullet. The second Mirror Shot flew in, and was also dodged. This time, Weavile's jump was quicker and better executed, giving it time to lunge forward ten feet before the third Mirror Shot scraped by.

"Look for an opening and get in there," Silver ordered.

Three more shots, three more times Weavile dodged and charged. It had almost gained enough ground to make a dash at Magneton directly.

"Discharge!"

And again it was forced far back.

It's a stand off.

"Side dash."

Weavile tried a spiraling pattern to close the distance. Mirror Shots rained in like mortars, blowing up just inches behind the foe.

"Never mind, back off." Silver shook his head. He underestimated Magneton's Mirror Shot's rate-of-fire. Weavile couldn't get close enough dodging side-to-side. It needed to use the more direct route. Only, it can't because I'll use Discharge. "You're making this difficult," he complained. "Alright, same old."

The pattern repeated itself, with Weavile dodging Mirror Shots and closing in, and I waiting for the last second to order a Discharge. It felt like a video tape on replay. Weavile closed in, Magneton let off a paralyzing sphere, and so Weavile backed off- again. How droll.

"Now!" Silver shouted.

What? Wah?! No! Discharge! Discharge!

"Discharge!!!" I yelled.

But Magneton fizzled.

Weavile had gotten used to Discharge's exact range and dispersal. Right at the point where the first
wave expanded to its maximum radius, Weavile crouched, and then launched itself forward the instant the electrical shell evaporated.

It's really fast. Magneton doesn't have enough time to recharge for a second Discharge. Too fast for Mirror Shot.

"Brick Break!"

"Block! The block!"

Magneton strained, unleashing its full magnetic powers. One of the blocks making up the stage shifted and rose halfway out of the ground, directly between Magneton and Weavile. The latter's Brick Break smashed into the metal, punching a large, nasty-looking dent into it.

"Grr. Up and over!" Weavile followed suit, pressing its advantage. Magneton back peddled as fast as its Levitate would allow it. It sent out a few Thunder Shocks, which hit but could not even slow the enemy's advance.

"Mirror Shot!"

"Brick Break!"

The shot burst out at point blank range. Weavile's Brick Break met it not six inches in front of Magneton. The two attacks collided, the energy-based one exploding. Brick Break blocked it, sending most of the impact back into Magneton.

Weavile landed atop the uplifted block, while Magneton went spinning off into the air. The only thing keeping Weavile from pursuing was Magneton's position out over the edge. The creature opted to wait for a convenient orbiter to pass by.

"Weavile, Ice…"

"Mirror Shot."

"Punch!"

Weavile's cold fist met the Mirror Shot's sphere in perfect swing, like a batter hitting a baseball—wait… no… crap! Not like a batter, like a catcher! The Igglybuffin-black-rat caught the Mirror Shot! How?! Did it… No way… It froze the shot? You can freeze the light energy of a Mirror Shot? I don't believe it!

"Ice Shard."

"Wait!"

Silver eyed a mini-platform coming around behind Magneton.

"Now! Advance!"

Magneton let loose a barrage of Mirror Shots to counter the Ice Shards. Some collided and bounced off of each other, the rest were dodged by their respective targets. Weavile wasn't concerned about hitting Magneton with its icicles, though. It was just a distraction. The foe raced in, bouncing its captured, frozen Mirror Shot like a basketball. Then it leapt.

"Discharge!" I shouted.
In mid-air, it can't possible get away from this one, right?

Weavile hurled the Mirror Shot straight at the sparking Magneton. The electrical wave ignited the ball. The frost shattered, and the latent energy exploded, with full force, about three feet in front of Magneton. My Pokémon was stunned; its Discharge lost power and failed to expand.

Weavile hit the orbiting platform, bounced off, and delivered a Low Kick to Magneton. The trio of steel bodies went flying back to the ground. Same maneuver that got Magnezone- can't let it end the same way.

Weavile landed back on the main platform's ledge and immediately raced to continue its assault.

"Watch the blocks."

Magneton tried to gain time by lifting blocks in between it and the dangerous assassin. Weavile flitted around them to the point of nearly ignoring them. The last block lifted from directly underneath it, throwing it slightly off-balance and causing it to sail right over Magneton. Without losing a beat, it pivoted and returned with a vengeance.

"Night Slash!"

"Discharge!"

Too many Discharges in too short a time period. Does Magneton have enough battery for this one?

"Oooo!" The crowd of spectators let out a cry. Weavile's claw whispered past Magneton's shell, drawing a tiny scratch across its surface. Another inch deeper, and that would have ended Magneton's stay on the battlefield.

Yet, just as close as Weavile was to playing plastic surgeon on Magneton's face, it was even closer to getting fried by Discharge. The sphere burst outward, barely, almost, so-close-it-looked-like--it-actually-touched, caught Weavile in its grasp.

Weavile, or rather Silver, seems really afraid of Discharge. I think I get why. He believes he can sweep me with Weavile, as long as he keeps the thing from being paralyzed. That's leverage in my favor. Being feared is almost always a good thing during competition.

Unfortunately for me, Magneton looks like it's out of electrical power. Its sparks turned from white to blue, and then died down. All it has left is magnetic energy, basically Mirror Shots.

Weavile's little tumble to dodge the last Discharge gave Magneton some distance, but that couldn't possibly last now… Gotta play for time.

"Magneton, Mirror Shot."

"Weavile, it's out of Discharges. Go for the kill. Wait… No, first, catch the Mirror Shot."

Which it did, promptly, as it had before, using an expertly timed, perfectly executed Ice Punch to cradle the Mirror Shot and freeze it.

"Now finish it!" Silver commanded.

I need a strategy, a tactic!

The opponent can dodge Mirror Shots with ease. The wider its dodge, the less time it has to advance and gain ground before having to dodge the next Mirror Shot. So it can only close the distance by
coming in a straight line, dodging or jumping over the Mirror Shots with as little a margin as possible.

I don't see how I can… I really wish Magneton had Discharges left… but even if Magneton could use Discharge, it'd just trigger the frozen Mirror Shot that Weavile is about to lob at it, and… Grr. Discharge… Lanturn! Got it!

A glance left… the Girafarig were in place.

"Magneton, scattershot, and then double barrel!" I slapped the palm of my hand against the back of the other, showing Magneton what I had in mind.

Magneton buzzed in acknowledgment. It fired off a single Mirror Shot, ripping past Weavile. It was deliberately misaimed, though. Weavile's reflexes nearly made it jump straight into the projectile's path, which slowed it down, for one critical second. My Pokémon gathered light energy, coalescing it into a five-inch sphere of Metal-based heavy energy. But it didn't fire it off- not yet.

Weavile had regained its footing and charged at full speed.

"Brick Break!" It knew what to do. The frozen Mirror Shot in hand, it was cocky, confident, and headed straight for Magneton.

"Mag! Mag!" Magneton fired.

"Wv- Wev!" Weavile saw the Mirror Shot coming and ducked. Its reflexes saved it- because a second Mirror Shot came whistling in, fired less than a second after the first. Less than a second was also the time it took Weavile to jump, letting the missile skim a half-inch beneath its chin. Its tail was nicked, causing Weavile to wince in pain, but did not slow it down. Having cleared both shots with the bare minimum movement, it raced in, unafraid of a non-existent third volley. Twenty feet. Ten feet. No time for Magneton to do anything.

"Weavi."

PLAT!

A sound like a wet towel slapping a hard surface rang out.

A silvery light-ball exploded behind Weavile's head, knocking it to the ground, followed by the frozen Mirror Shot falling out of its grip, shattering on the surface, exploding, and sending Weavile flipping back over again.

"Magneton! Tell me you've got a Thunder Wave left!"

Magneton hummed. No, it didn't even have a Thunder Shock it could fire- but it did have something almost as good, for our purposes. The trio of metal cannonballs flew at Weavile, knocking it to the ground again. There, hovering over the foe, it hummed and shimmered. The only visual indication of the attack working was Weavile suddenly falling face-first to the floor, chest hugging the surface. It screeched and struggled to lift itself, as if its limbs had suddenly turned to lead.

It's a Gravity attack! Cool! I didn't think Magneton could use it to trap opponents like that! Good thing my Pokémon can take its own initiative, or else it'd still be at the mercy of Weavile's assault. Although, Magneton had expended too much stamina, and looked ready to Struggle, with no way to put up another defense. It needs to end this right now.
"Get up! Please! Counter! Brick Break!"

"Back! Get back!" I yelled. "You've got it trapped, don't risk close-range! Finish it with a Flash Cannon!"

Magneton let out a low, depressing hum. It was tired. A Flash Cannon was beyond it now; it'd need a minute just to charge up for a Mirror Shot.

"Agility!"

Weavile's fur rippled with wisps of air and energy. It powered its way to its feet.

Amazing. I thought the gravitational well would pin this thing to the ground, permanently! Agility lightens a Pokémon's weight, allowing them to move about more freely, so I suppose it makes sense that it could be used as a counter to Gravity. The foe is slower now, but still… It's crouching, readying for a charge, and Magneton is too tired to get away…

Zero electricity, zero defense, low stamina, low magnetic power- what can Magneton use here?

Its ability?! Yes!

"Magnet Pull!"

Weavile rolled forward and slashed, missing Magneton, who pushed itself off into the air with a desperate Levitate. Weavile immediately followed by crouching for a leap. It took off, Magneton's sputtering form in its eyes, a Brick Break or Night Slash ready on its claws, glad to finally finish its prey off.

And before it rose three feet, the enemy was buried under a pile of rocks.

"Ha!"

Silver gawked.

"How the…" he uttered.

It's so great, I really want to explain it to him, but he might gain an advantage if I do, so I remained silent and smug looking.

But for everyone's else's sake: Skarmory's Stealth Rocks were still around, albeit frozen and not very stealthy. Weavile had been so skillful in dodging them, it had practically forgot they were there at all. What it didn't know is that Skarmory's rocks are laced with heavy iron. Magneton's Magnet Pull had drawn all of the rocks towards its location at once, crushing Weavile as they converged.

But that only explains the coup de grace, not the strike that made it possible.

"Was it- where did that Mirror Shot come from?" Silver asked.

"From Magneton, naturally," I answered truthfully.

How the Mirror Shot hit Weavile from the blindside… well, chalk it up to the beauty of physics. Firing off two Mirror Shots in a row was supposed to catch Weavile off guard, the first serving as a distraction for the second. Weavile was too agile and dodged both of them. That wasn't the real intent though. The actual tactic was to draw Weavile into a straight-line charge, ensuring that it would stay in the exact same line-of-fire after it had dodged. Behind Weavile, the first Mirror Shot hit the shield wall and exploded. The second Mirror Shot, perfectly aimed, perfectly timed, hit the explosion and
bounced back in a straight line. It smacked Weavile in the back of the head on the return voyage, giving Magneton the opening to use Gravity on the relentless bastard.

"Weavile is unable to battle! I'm not sure anyone understands what just happened, but it looked really cool! Silver, who's going to come out next?!!"

Whitney, you are a referee, not a color commentator. Please stop shouting.

Silver ignored her commands for a minute, as he was still mumbling to himself, apparently trying to figure out what had happened to his Pokémon.

"Silver, we're waiting."

"One second," he shot back.

He doesn't like surprises, does he? Or going deeper, he doesn't like things he can't understand.

"Stealth Rocks, I get, they were magnetized somehow. I don't get the Mirror Shot. Did it bounce? Off what, the shields? No, Mirror Shots would explode when they hit a shield… I… I give up. Go, Gliscor."

Gliscor. This thing reminded me of a Sentret and Drapion having a mutant baby, and then the mutant was bitten by a vampire. Basically, a really creepy, ugly Pokémon.

"Magneton, rest up."

Magneton hurried back, all too eager to catch a break and recharge its dynamo.

"Tyko, you're up."

Silver pressed his lips together tightly. Is he mad that he lost Weavile? That's his own fault. He tried too hard to get the sweep, but it's too early in the match for those kinds of plays. Even supreme power and speed can be held at bay with the right combination of attacks. If I were him, I would have switched to the Ground-type Gliscor as soon as I saw Magnezone.

Gliscor glided in place like a kite, sizing up the little penguin opposite it. Tyko tried to keep tabs of it, but also kept glancing back towards me, wondering if I had a plan for dealing with this nasty piece of business. Unfortunately, my plan entirely consisted of-

"Tyko, Water Gun!"

Ice Beam would be better, but the Piplup line doesn't learn it naturally. I want to order a TM, but can't afford it yet. For now, a super-effective Water Gun will work.

"Dodge," Silver commanded casually.

Gliscor flew out of range of the stream of water. Tyko couldn't bring it high enough, the arc of water fell short.

"Bubble Beam."

"Dodge."

This was harder. The bubbles lingered in the air, rapidly consuming open space until Gliscor was forced to navigate a minefield of little watery bombs.

Gliscor rushed out of the bubble-spray, taking a few light hits on the way, until it was out of range of all of Tyko's attacks.

"There. Alright, it's a Prinplup, not an Empoleon- it's not a Steel type yet, and doesn't have the immunities… rain Toxic down on it."

"Gloxxxic!" Gliscor snarled in glee. It began shooting off black bolts of slime from its barbed tail-stinger, aiming wildly across the arena. My Prinplup waddled and leapt aside in order to dodge, only to have to scramble back to her feet and dive again. It was apparent Gliscor could continue spewing Toxic rain until my Pokémon was hit and was poisoned.

"Bubblebeam, shield." Tyko couldn't obey. She had no opportunity to do anything but stumble around, desperately trying to save her health. I could do nothing to help her. Silver was content to let his Pokémon run rampant. The game was out of the humans' hands.

Tyko sputtered a glob of water on the ground in front of her, and then dove into a slide. She tobogganed in an S-curve around to the outside edge. Gliscor crept closer, unwilling to let its prey get away. It didn't yet notice how much altitude it had lost in doing so. I clenched my fists and lips. Yes, I know what Tyko is doing, but I don't want to advise her, on risk of giving away her plan.

"Gliscor, pull up."

"Glisc!"

It refused, instead closing in. It wasn't afraid of taking a Water Gun when Tyko was too busy dodging. Just a little closer, and its Toxic bolts would come in too fast to dodge.

Tyko! You've got one shot!

"Tyk! Plooooo!"

Corralled against the edge, Tyko did the unthinkable. She jumped off.

Gliscor was taken by shock, instinctively diving in after Tyko. Big mistake.

"Ploop!"

Tyko rocketed skywards, a series of Aqua Jets propelling her higher and higher. She couldn't go as high as when she was a Piplup- which is why it was critical to get Gliscor as low as possible.

"Toxic!"

"Bubblebeam!"

In mid-air, at close range, neither party was going to miss. The poison and bubbles crossed paths, engulfing the opposing Pokémon. Tyko came down, practically drenched in noxious filth. Despite her suffering, her focus never wavered from her opponent. She wanted to see if she had done enough damage to make her poisoned status worthwhile.

"Gliscor!" Silver called out, trying to get a handle on his Pokémon's condition as well. Unfortunately for all, a cloud of mist and bubbles concealed it.

"Tyko, don't bother."
If it's not falling out of the sky right off the bat, than it's healthy enough to fly- and if it can fly, it can make lazy laps around the perimeter while Tyko chokes on the poison. She's under a time-limit now.

"Return. Magcargo, please take her place."

I couldn't think of any way for Tyko to be useful, and so I switched her.

"Gliscor, what are you doing?"

That's what I wanted to know. The thing hadn't come out of the mist yet, and it's been a good minute.

"Gliscor, if you can hear me, I want you to use Earthquake."

Gliscor's outline slowly emerged from the dissipating cloud. It seemed fine, slowly flapping its wings in place.

"Are you Confused? Slowed? What's going on?" Silver shouted out.

I couldn't figure out what was wrong with Gliscor either.

"Flamethrower."

Magcargo's Flamethrower is stronger than Tyko's Water Gun; it could actually touch the ceiling, which meant Gliscor was not safe staring off drunkenly into space.

The flames billowed, catching the creature on the backside and at last snapping it to its senses. It dove and darted back towards Silver, taking additional fire damage on the way. Light brown patches of crisped skin painted its wings and back.

"Gliscglisc? What should I do, master?"

"Roost up, and then Earthquake."

Easily said, and easily executed. Gliscor restored its health with a quick rest, and then swooped over. Magcargo reared up, readying another Flamethrower. The billow of flames arced overhead, missing the diving Gliscor, who was in the middle of crashing into the stage and causing an Earthquake.

"Glaaaah!"

Well that answers one of my earlier questions. How well do seismic waves travel through steel? Well, they don't. At least, not on this platform, anyways. The individual metal blocks aren't physically connected to one another, or the ground beneath them for that matter. Gliscor's ground-pound simply drove the block downwards without transferring any seismic energy horizontally. The block and Pokémon disappeared beneath the surface.

So, in a second the anti-grav should push them back up…

"Mag, wait… wait… Heat Wave, now!"

On my mark Magcargo let loose a gust of red-hot air, which washed over the stage. Just as it hit the hole, Gliscor and the block came flying back up, nearly perfectly synced to take the Heat Wave in the face.

"Gawawah!"
Gliscor again returned to its master, hoping for the chance to Roost, and a new tactic that would actually work against this fire-belcher.

Magcargo is doing surprisingly well. I thought the type matchup would disfavor him, but Gliscor can't use Earthquake unless it's directly on top of Magcargo. If the foe doesn't know any other Ground-type attacks, Magcargo actually has the advantage.

Silver will probably have it use Toxic again.

"Safe Guard."
That should ward off the poison.

"Toxic. Wait, stop!" Silver saw Magcargo mumbling and silver-etched runes appearing in the air, warding off potential status afflictions. "Switch to Rock Slide."

Gliscor doesn't have any rocks on it. The field isn't the typical compact dirt, either, it's solid steel. What's it going to use for Rock Slide?

The Pokémon swooped over across the field, at an angle away from Magcargo.

Of course. The pile of Stealth Rocks.


Magcargo's outer shell melted and reformed, acting like a newly-casted shield made of red-hot iron. Unique to the Magcargo and Torkoal families, using their blast-furnace inner temperatures and Iron Defense in conjunction eventually created a shell that was harder than industrial-grade steel. It increased their defensive capabilities by a factor of four, not two. However, it took time for it to cool off and gain that level of strength. In this case, too much time.

Impromptu Rock Slide/Stealth Rocks began pelting Magcargo while his armor was still hot and brittle. He cried in bursts, short, pained calls. His instinct was to turn towards me, putting the thickest part of his shell towards his attacker. His antenna eyes were drooping and staring at me, as if begging to be recalled.

"Just a little… oh gosh."

Gliscor was not content to hurtle singular rocks one at a time from its stockpile. Seeing its attack do damage but not come close to fainting Magcargo, it became ambitious. Its wings and claws encompassed the pile, picking up a horde so large I'd need a wheelbarrow myself to move it. Grabbing that many pointy objects was not without pain or damage to Gliscor, but the payoff would be worth it.

"Good. Make it rain," Silver said. He was confident and reassured, expecting to take the KO. Everything had been restored to its proper place; he would win this battle handily, unless I came up with some clever miracle.

And not to burst your bubble or anything, I really didn't have anything up my sleeve. Nothing miraculous, anyways. Maybe just one last-ditch attempt to save my Pokémon.

"Gliiiiii!" Gliscor floated into the air above and then let loose all of its heavy payload.

"Return. Magnetpull, reverse!"
Magcargo vanished into its pokeball, coming back to my hand. In the same instant, Magneton materialized in its former location, with the Rock Slide bearing down on it. It hummed, thankfully mindful of the battle and able to obey the moment it was released. The ice-clad, iron-laced Stealth Rocks went flying out in all directions, a grenade-like shower of shrapnel and debris.

"Huh… Okay, dive-bomb, direct Earthquake," Silver ordered next of his Pokémon.

Magnet Bomb? Mirror Shot? Gliscor could actually take a few of those without stopping, and all it took was one Earthquake to end Magneton. It didn't have the fierce burning power of Magcargo's Flamethrower to keep the flying scorpid at bay, either.

"Oh. Magnet Pull."

The Stealth Rocks are still iced over by Weavile, right? Maybe if I can get them to shatter on its body, that'll nail Gliscor's severe Ice-type weakness.

The asteroid-field's worth of frozen pebbles once again converged on a singular point, with Magneton at their epicenter. Gliscor tried maneuvering at first, and wasn't very successful. At the last second before impact the flurry became too thick and it had to break off.

"Reverse."

The Stealth Rocks went flying again in an explosive pattern. Gliscor was forced even farther aloft. It began looking tired and wearied of this play.


"Not before we're even," I countered. Last I checked, he had five healthy Pokémon and one knocked out. I had one KO on my team as well, but also four wounded, tired, and/or incapacitated combatants.

"Earthquake. L-shaped," my opponent commanded. What that entailed, I was afraid to find out. Gliscor began heading straight below, but Silver waved him off. He signaled for his Pokémon to come closer to him, away from Magneton's position.

Which to me was odd. Sure, he wanted to avoid the rain of ice shardlings, but Earthquake was an attack that depended on proximity for damage. What's more, we've established that in this arena 'ground'n'pound'-initiated Earthquakes won't work beyond the floor block they directly hit.

"He's doing something funny," I warned Magneton. "Be ready to Levitate."

It was a mistake to merely tell Magneton to be ready to fly into the air. Gliscor suddenly dove, driving straight into a block at its feet. The Pokémon vanished into its self-made hole again. A moment later, there was a loud 'thud', followed by a rumble. The stage began rocking in horizontal motion, violently. It happened too fast for me to react. Magneton inexplicably tried to run away from the epicenter, instead of going straight up into the air. This seemed to exacerbate the damage.

"That was a proper Earthquake. Strong too. I wonder, with all the blocks suspended with anti-gravity and detached from one another, how Gliscor got them to transfer seismic waves."

"If you tell me where that third Mirror Shot that clocked Weavile from behind came from, I'll tell you my secret," Silver offered. I shook my head. Besides, he ought to have figured that out by now, and I have an inkling what Gliscor just did. Judging from the side-to-side shaking of the blocks, he probably just had Gliscor strike from the side, making sure the blocks did contact one another, violently.
"Magneton, don't let him do that again. Magnet Bomb."

"Get away."

Magneton powered through its damage and brought the poles of its three magnets together. Silvery vibrations tingled between them. A spark, and something heavy and invisible blasted off towards Gliscor. At first the Pokémon wanted to block it.

"Dodge," Silver ordered.

It did, by dropping flat to the floor. The wave of crushing magnetic pressure went flying overhead. The would-be victim looked back, wondering and thankful for its master's advice. That small glance brought Gliscor's attention off the field, a mistake on its part.

"Forward!" Silver shouted, going so far as to point at the field. Gliscor's attention returned, just in time to see a thicket of Stealth Rocks pouring towards it.

Magneton's Magnet Pull was limited, in that the Pokemon could only use itself as the epicenter for its action. Magnet Bomb lets Magneton exert its magnetic influence anywhere on the field of battle. Gliscor is on the receiving end of this right now as it tries, in vain, to dodge the hailstorm and find room to take off. The magnetized Stealth Rocks attempted to chase the bomb off the edge, and pelted and plastered themselves on Gliscor's body in the process.

I was right. Freezing the Stealth Rocks made them visible and difficult to miss, but also imbued them with a little Ice-type essence. Get them to impact with enough force, and they'll shatter and cause Ice-type damage. They could and are dealing some major injury to Gliscor. Would it be enough?

Maybe, maybe not, but they might not have to. Gliscor still couldn't find room to fly, and was backed up on the corner edge. A particularly large chunk of ice-rock bonked it on the head, and over the side it went.

"Gliscor!" Silver screamed. He had his Pokeball out and pointed, prepared to capture his Pokémon before it fell onto the anti-grav below. Yet, he never triggered it. Gliscor was apparently spared the KO-by-falling-and-getting-itself-electrocuted.

Oh, right. Maybe it did land on the anti-gravs, and didn't give a Hard Stone's worth about the electromagnetic pulses eminating off of them. Had its Ground-type given it immunity even to such scary electrocution machines as those littering the room's ground level?

"Dig."

No way… It can't Dig through solid metal, right?

A moment later, I was proven disastrously wrong. Of course Gliscor couldn't dig through a solid block of steel. That inability meant little to the maniacal creature as it smashed upwards, ramming the block straight into Magneton's underside. My Pokémon was momentarily flattened against the sky-rocketing platform. The fact that its parts were splayed out and disconnected told me all I needed to know: Magneton wasn't going to recover from this.

Gliscor glided out from underneath, jubilant in the success of its sneak attack. The block began falling, landing awkwardly so that it didn't quite fit back in the hole, but was tilted diagonally instead. Magneton's components slid off, like a heap of junk being dumped into the garbage.

"That's a KO. Gym Leader Jasmine, four remaining Pokémon; Challenger Silver, five. Next up, Jasmine?"
I made a pass overlooking the audience. Erika was biting her lip. Morty was staring hard at Gliscor and had his hands entrenched in his pockets. Lyra was laughing and conversing with a tense-looking Ethan. Falkner was staring directly at me in an unpleasant fashion. The other gym trainers and challengers were chatting idly.

They can all sense it. The score might have me down by one battler, but the gap was much larger. Skarmory's frozen, Magcargo's tired, Tyko is poisoned. I have one healthy Pokémon left. Silver has four and a half.

"Magcargo, I guess."

If I hadn't been a dunce, I could've had Magneton Levitate and avoid the Dig. Magcargo didn't have the same option. He even lost the boost from his Iron Defense; I had recalled him too quickly for the heated armor to cool off. It would take time to repeat the gesture.

"Gliscor, Dig again."

"Magcargo… Shell Smash."

Might as well abandon defense.

Magcargo's shell broke off, freeing the magma snail of its weight. The speed boost wouldn't be impressive, but enough. I silently motioned for Magcargo to move to the right of the platform. Just in time, the block it had formally stood on exploded out of the ground, followed by Gliscor.

"Gliscor can't use Dig if it doesn't know which block to target."

"And Magcargo can move around while Gliscor flies underneath," Silver finished my analysis. "I know that. Now what are you keeping secret? You're not the chatter-box type, you wouldn't point out the obvious if you weren't trying to distract me from something else."

I smiled. He noticed that I smiled.

And I was smiling because I knew he knew I had something up my sleeve, when I actually don't have anything at all. It's a bluff, and it's working. Gliscor's becoming more cautious.

"Can you Rock Slide, Gliscor? No." Silver looked around for the Stealth Rocks it needed as ammunition. Magneton's last Magnet bomb had sent most of them over the edge and scattered around the anti-grav projectors.

"Fine. Dig. Keep the thing on the defensive."

He'll try to figure out what I'm going to do, and a way for Gliscor to locate Magcargo while it was below-deck. Can't allow that.

"Smokescreen," I ordered. This'll catch him off guard.

Gliscor punched another hole in the floor, lifting a block clear out of its nook and flinging it several yards away. The emerging Pokémon swerved away, defending itself from a possible Flamethrower counterattack. Instead, it was confronted by a smoke cloud that was completely impenetrable to the eye.

"Ignore the cloud. Keep knocking the platform away until you've cornered it."

"Scara."
It dove back under and proceeded to pound and punch a series of blocks out. The procession of disturbed geometry disappeared into the cloud, although its progress could still be seen by swirling columns of smoke and loud clanging sounds.

Boom!

Another block blown out of place.

Boom!

Boom!

Three, two, one…

"Lava Plume."

"Mag!" The smoke cloud was, naturally, pitch black- that is, until it turned the color of white-hot charcoals. The haze was set abroil, rolling, pitching, and pluming in chaotic fashion, like a storm cloud in fast-motion.

Gliscor emerged out of the top of the burning miasma. It held a block beneath itself (impressive strength), using it like a shield against the awakened inferno. Having cleared the danger zone, it hurled the block back in, hoping to catch its enemy by chance. Magcargo, fortunately, emerged from the smoke in a different location, safe and sound.

"Okay, turning Smokescreen and Lava Plume into a fuel air bomb. Did not expect that." Silver is looking concerned and agitated.

"Why is that so unexpected?"

"Because I heard you were a Steel-type specialist, and an electro-magnetism expert on top of that. No one told me you employed Fire and Water tactics too."

I crossed my arms. "Well that's the disadvantage of being a Gym Leader. Everyone knows your type-specialization, team, and tactics ahead of time, and can prepare appropriately. We have to innovate constantly just to stay on par with challengers."

Silver nodded to himself.

"That's true. Well then, I'm sorry- I haven't taken you seriously. It's time I played for keeps. Gliscor, dive bomb and Earthquake."

"A point-blank Earthquake? Magcargo will burn you with Lava Plume," I asserted.

Silver smirked. "Take it as a sign of respect, that I'm willing to trade Gliscor for Magcargo."

Gliscor rose into the air.

"Flame Burst."

Magcargo spouted bursts of fire from his mouth, aiming high. Maybe a dozen went shooting towards it, and about a third of them hit, dealing significant damage. Yet it didn't stop Gliscor from getting into position and dropping down directly on Magcargo.

Crap. No time to even issue a new command.
"Maggle! CARRRGH!" Magcargo acted on instinct and released a last-ditch Lava Plume, but it was too little, too late; the incendiary cloud failed to stop Gliscor's dive bomb.

A crash sounded out. Little wisps of smoke from the abortive Lava Plume swirled about, quickly lifting.

The ensuing scene was… odd.

Magcargo was moving, trying to squirm backwards. Laying overtop of him was Gliscor, who seemed to have a tight hold and was not letting go.

"I don't get it. Wasn't that supposed to be an Earthquake?" I asked, puzzled.

"Gliscor, what are you doing? Don't Body Slam, I ordered you to use Earthquake! What stopped you?" Silver demanded sternly.

We all stared at the struggling Pokémon.

"And… Gliscor is knocked out and unable to battle! Magcargo's Lava Plume took him down at the last moment!" Whitney announced. We all gaped at her. She pointed to the monitoring board. Gliscor (properly pictured, but misnamed "KarmaHoudini" by the glitched equipment) was shown at zero health. "The score is even again! Neither trainer has used their team leader! Who will gamble first? Who will be patient? Who will seize the momentum? And most importantly? Who. Will. Prevail?!"

Okay, Whitney. That's over the top. I think you're hamming it up on purpose now.

But back to the matter at hand- I don't think it was Lava Plume that knocked Gliscor out. It hadn't taken that much damage since its last Roost, and Lava Plume didn't have enough 'impact' to completely stop a dive-bombing Gliscor. It should have been able to pound off the Earthquake and then collapse, if it was the burn that did it in. Something else KO'd it, in mid-air, before it hit the ground. Judging by Silver's confused expression, he had come to the same conclusion.

"Tyk tyk tyk!"

"Hush, Tyko!"

"Prinplup! Prinplup!

"Don't whine! I know you want to fight again but I can't have Toxic build up in your system. Wait your turn!"

As soon as Tyko came out, she would have about three minutes before the Toxic overcame her immune system and she would faint. I'd better wait for the right opportunity.

But if not her, who? Frozen Skarm Skarm? Or Steelix? I wanted to wait a little longer before unleashing my behemoth. Let's keep the lava-blob out for now.

"Alright, Nightbane, you're up."

Night-what? Oh, Crobat. Funny. Silver didn't strike me as the kind of guy to nickname his Pokémon. True to its moniker, this four-winged bat had a much darker than normal skin tone. It fluttered all around the floating platforms, getting a feel for the geometry of the arena. It quickly took to using the outer platforms for cover from Magcargo's targeting.
"Confuse Ray."

Crobat popped its head up from shelter, eyes aglow, and let fly dazzling orbs of light. Magcargo was caught by surprise and froze stiff in confusion. His eyestalks wavered in circles, as if he was dizzy and couldn't keep balanced (though, being a snail made of lava, balance should never be a problem for him... sigh, such is the craziness of Pokémon battles).

"Glare... no, never mind. Double Team."

Magcargo has his eyes shut tight, trying in vain to blot out the world spinning around him. He wouldn't be affected by a long-range Glare attack if he couldn't see it. That must be why Silver canceled his order. Instead, he'll have Crobat become uncatchable and then use hit and run tactics.

Time to unleash another trick.

"Mag, on next contact, plan 13."

"Mrgle."

He was okay with that, even though it was asking a lot.

"Smokescreen."

Magcargo's flames flared, burning excess fat and fumes and unleashing the noxious mass into the air. Once again blackness shrouded the battlefield.

Okay, so it's a Crobat, a Flying-type. Silver, do the smart thing and use Whirlwind...

"Clear that crap out before it can blow up again. Defog."

Defog? Good enough.

Three of the many clones of Crobat circling the arena's airspace broke off their pattern and flapped up to the billowing cloud. No sign I could discern told which one was real, and even if I could, they're darting in and out so fast I couldn't keep track of them anyways.

Simultaneously, they began beating their wings in unison. The force of their efforts shoved the Smokescreen up and away, clearing the battlefield. Magcargo was left exposed, with no shelter. He still hasn't gotten over his confusion, and as such is rapidly crawling his way forwards, for no apparent reason. At least that was the only bad news- the good news was that the smoke was now swirling around the video display, just where I needed it. The other piece of fortune was that the direction of the Defog gave away the real Crobat's position.

"Flamethrower!"

Magcargo is Rock and Fire type, a combination doubly resistant to Fire-type attacks, which is good, because he just aimed the jet of flame directly into the ground beneath him. The flames flared out beneath and around him, like a boiling kettle over a gas stove set on max.

"Snap out of it!"

"Nightbane, keep it confused. Don't let up."

Come on! Attack already!

"Magcargo, how are you holding up?"
"Marg!" he quipped. He powered up a Flame Burst in his maw, but before firing it, clamped his mouth shut. A bulge and slight puff of smoke signaled he had eaten the explosion. The impact hurt, but seemed to have done the job and knocked him back to his senses.

"Smokescreen!"

"Defog, and then Confuse Ray."

"Yawn!"

"Safeguard!"

"Flame Burst!"

"Double Team!"

"Smokescreen!"

"Defog!"

"Flamethrower!"

The Pokémon didn't even know which orders to obey. We humans were calling them out based on what the other was saying, not what the Pokémon were actually doing. Crobat sensed Silver yelling Defog the most and committed to that action, even though Magcargo never got off another Smokescreen, Lava Plume, or even a Yawn, all gas-based attacks that might've been affected by Defog. Instead, my Pokémon went with the last attack I ordered before having to catch my breath, which was Flamethrower.

The result was Crobat kicking up a gust of wind, that mostly succeeded in venting the incoming Flamethrower and making it much stronger. Crobat recognized the danger before Silver and began diving away. Magcargo wouldn't relent; the spewing flame followed it like a predator giving chase to its prey. Up and around, down low, finally getting a reprieve by ducking under the surface-level of the platform, popping up at another side, only for the Flamethrower to immediately resume, giving it zero room to rest.

Come on. Do it. I dare you. Run away.

"Nightbane, under and away. This way."

Crobat needed another series of barrel rolls and S-turns, and getting nicked by the flames once or twice, to reach the safety of the underside again. I presume it glided flat and low as it dared, coming out the other side and continuing onwards. The angle and range wasn't good for Magcargo's Flamethrower, so my Pokémon halted to take a breath.

"Confuse Ray."

"Lava Plume."

Magcargo was hit first, and subsequently hurt himself spewing the burning ash cloud much too close to himself.

"No no no. Seriously?"

My fist balled tight. This wasn't working. Silver's stalling. He knows about Flame Body and won't risk a direct attack. He's content to let Magcargo knock himself out.
"Shell Smash, again."

"Haze," Silver responded. Each Pokémon managed to obey perfectly, bringing both combatants right back to square one.

How to convince him to try to finish Magcargo off? Think- play upon his fears. He's cautious, not a risk-taker.

Wait, if he's so conservative, why is he bothering to take on Magcargo with Crobat? It's not a good match up. It exposes Crobat to burns and Rock attacks, without being able to counter-attack very effectively. He ought to switch to Feraligatr and end it with one Aqua Tail. Why isn't he?

I pondered the discrepancy for a minute. In the meantime, Magcargo continued to try to arc Lava Plumes or Flamethrowers in Crobat's direction, and generally hitting himself more often than anywhere near the flittering opponent.

Silver is saving Feraligatr for last. Common tactic, leave your power-broker for the final confrontation. It keeps them at full strength in order to best take on your opponent's team leader. It's especially a good idea if both trainers have one Pokémon who's much stronger than the rest of the combatants. But… all of Silver's Pokémon are strong, he should be projecting power at critical moments. Unless… is he afraid of Steelix?

Feraligatr's long-range attacks suffer from its poor Special Attack. Steelix has monumental physical toughness, he could take Aqua Tails and Aqua Jets. At peak condition, it wouldn't be a contest, the water gator would dominate. But if Feraligatr was weakened first… I'd have a chance. Silver knows that, and he's trying to conserve his team.

So, should I change the paradigm?

"Ste-" No, wait, let's make him think I'm changing the paradigm.

"Magcargo, get back over here."

"Nightbane, Confuse Ray."

The renewed confusion caused Magcargo to zig and zag and stumble, but failed to stop him from retreating in my general direction.

"Steelix would be a better matchup here. Return." Despite the order, though, I held my arms limply at my side. Magcargo noticed.

"Pursuit!" Silver ordered hastily.

Magcargo swiveled around, throwing himself bodily at the diving Crobat. The two collided in a dull crash, with Crobat coming out slightly better. However, he was now right on top of Magcargo.

Awesome.

"Smokescreen!"

"Crap. Cross Poison!"

Black plumes billowed out of Magcargo's back. Crobat, on Silver's realization it was too close to dodge or retreat, went in for the kill. Its poisoned-tipped, whip-like wings slashed across my Pokémon, just as the smoke covered them both whole.
"Is he down?"

The multiple Smoke Screens used throughout the matchup hung heavy in the air. I spotted Silver glancing up, checking the video board for the health monitors, and then grimacing because the display screens were obscured by the haze. It took less than a second, an action so common and habitual that everyone, including myself, do it many times a battle without even thinking or remembering it. This time, though, it mattered.

"CRO!"

The smoke lifted just enough, revealing Magcargo slumped on the ground and Crobat hovering triumphant over it. Silver sighed in relief.

"Ref?" he asked, wanting official confirmation. Whitney took a breath, just a moment, ready to deliver a judgment.

"Lava Plume."

The air lit up. The Smoke Screen, made up of fine particulate ash matter, combusted. The fuel-air-bomb combo exploded in slow motion, the temperatures within it soaring to unimaginably dangerous levels.

"Nightbane!"

Silver's Pokémon flapped out of the inferno, its motion stuttered and weak. Black burn marks traced across its wings and lower body.

"Magcargo is down. Nightbane the Crobat is the winner!" Whitney announced. Silver was not amused.

Good work, Magcargo. Eking out that last attack might have caused you to faint, but you've crippled Crobat in exchange. The battle is a net zero for both of us, which is as good as I was hoping for.

"Greeeeat," Silver muttered in exaggerated, drawn out fashion. "Nightbane, return." He retrieved the bat into its Pokeball before the Burn could do any more damage. "Who taught you how to battle?" he asked belligerently.

"I'm self-taught."

"Tauros shit. Teaching your Pokémon to know the difference between Return the attack and "return" to its Pokeball. Faking the knockout, obscuring the video boards, just to get a cheap shot. These aren't tactics you learn even in Pokémon academies."

"You think it's poor sportsmanship?"

"I think it's dirty." He frowned. "Like Team Rocket."

"Phaw!" I spat out. "How would you know?"

"I would know, better than anyone," he retorted.

"Well it's nothing like Team Rocket! The metagame is just as big a part of the battle as the Pokémon on the field. It's your loss if you can't take advantage of it."

"I don't need cheap tricks to win. I guess Gym Leaders do, though. Who taught you?" he repeated his question.
"I told you, self taught."

"I don't ever remember Lyra saying you battled like this. She said you were conservative, traditional, defensive, and a power-gamer."

"I've evolved," I responded simply. "It was a recent development. Now I play smart and devious, on top of all those things Lyra told you."

In truth, watching recent battles, Morty and Volkner's match in particular, awakened me to the world of the metagame- i.e. the conflict of wits that occurred between trainers. It's not enough to tell your Pokémon to Earthquake or Thunderbolt; you've got to know the opponent will hear your command and attempt to counter it. Or else they'll try to order an attack first. Trying to relay ever-more complicated commands to one's Pokémon, while disguising what those commands are from your opponent, is the challenge of a true expert trainer.

I take it Silver isn't so fond of this extracurricular activity. Although, he's been able to decipher what I and my Pokémon have done pretty quickly and devise countermeasures. The same trick won't work twice on him, and I'm running out of prepared strategies. I'll have to innovate- something I'm not good at.

"Fine. If that's the way you want to play, let's see you take on Lancaster."

A Tyranitar. It was big, very big for its species. Maybe two full feet over the average. Like a skyscraper of rough armor, spikes, claws, rock-like hide, and cold rage.

I really need to beat it without resorting to Steelix. And then I need to weaken Feraligatr. And then I have to worry about his sixth Pokémon, which I completely forget who it was. Shoot.

Who do I have left? The Magnes? No, they're both out. Skarmory's frozen still. Tyko's poisoned. Magcargo just fainted.

Oh great, that means I AM down to Steelix!

How did this happen?!

"Um… Tyko. You're up."

"Tyk tyk Prinprin!" I barely flicked the button and she leapt out of her Pokeball, right onto the stage. Ignoring her imposing foe, she turned round on me and started giving me a hissy fit. Her chirps of displeasure were audible and constant, like a pack of Spearows rolled into a ball.

"What's wrong with you? Concentrate! You're poisoned-" I stood transfixed. Tyko was blowing bubbles my way. A Bubble attack, a weak Water attack, and even then, this was especially weak. The littlest bubble popped against my forearm.

"Ouch!" I stood annoyed, aghast, and shocked, trying to comprehend why Tyko would be mad enough to send a Bubble attack at me.

It took a moment, and then I felt it. A slight itching sensation, followed by a lurch in my stomach. I looked down at my arm.

Where the Bubble had impacted, the skin had turned indigo.

"Oh, that's what you were bugging me for! That's what happened to Gliscor!"
I silently, stilly danced in inner joy.

Silver, you gave me my next trick!

"Alright! Let's hurry!"

Knowing Silver, if he's coolheaded he'll play defensively and let the Toxic run its coarse. If he's pissed, he'll go for overwhelming offense-

"Stone Edge!"

Yep. Pissed.

Unlike Gliscor, Tyranitar's body is partially made of rock. It can crumble and mold excess body mass into living stones, to use in Stone Edges in case no natural sediment is readily available. Steelix can do the same thing- but not this fast, nor this strong.

"Tyrar!"

The stalactite-shaped projectiles came arching off its forearms and back. They were hurled in a spinning motion, like ninja stars, making them even more dangerous and difficult to avoid.

"Aqua Jet!"

Tyko exhaled a jet of water, propelling her forward, towards the hulking giant. Her habit of leading us on wild games of hide-and-seek were paying off. Her maneuvers were surprisingly agile, being able to slip, slide, and dodge in tight S-shaped curves. Spikes impacted left, right, forward, and behind her, but she slid out of harm's way with ease, making all of them miss.

"Little runt. Lancaster, Sand Storm!"

"Bubble, shield."

Lancaster spewed a disgusting amount of sand from every orifice, and then whipped it into a frenzied whirlwind. The vortex began expanding, encompassing more of the field by the second. Tyko responded by creating an enormous purple-tinged bubble and then hopping inside of it.

"Not enough, layers!"

The Sandstorm was encroaching. The bubbles came in spurts now, embedding within one another like an onion. The Sandstorm arrived.

"Stone Edge."

Oh boy. The sand is already devouring the outer layers of Tyko's bubble shield, but the Tyranitar isn't waiting. More rocket rocks came pounding in. My Prinplup was a sitting target and couldn't dodge. She tried, but the first stone cut right through her shield, and the next three hit her in various places. The Sandstorm lacerated her skin and the Toxic was eating her internal organs. This was going to get ugly- no, who am I kidding, it's already ugly, and about to become hopeless.

"Tyko, um… um… Water Sport!"

Tyko glared at me, as did Silver and Tyranitar. If their bemused, befuddled expressions didn't convey their total shock, their complete lack of action did.

"Why on Earth would she use Water Sport?" Whitney asked.
"Do it!"

"It's code for something else," Silver determined, "be on guard."

"Tyra!" Lancaster hunched back into a defensive posture.

But I really was ordering Tyko to use the wimpiest, most useless attack in her arsenal. What good is Water Sport? It doesn't do any damage, it hardly weakens Fire-type attacks, which Tyko already resists and the Tyranitar is showing no indication of using, and it's wasting precious time and energy. 'Why use Water Sport?' they were asking.

Of course, as I hoped, the sheer perplexity of the command was putting Silver and his Pokémon on guard, keeping them from obliterating Tyko with their next volley of Stone Edge. That's good. Now to hope Tyko follows through.

Ah, there she goes. She understands. A fine mist of water vapor flew up into the air like a fountain, and then misted across the arena, hitting the entire floor, including Tyranitar. However, it appeared to do nothing.

"That's enough," Silver spat out, upset by the interruption. "Stone Edge and finish the Prinplup before it follows through on her strategy."

"Tyko, dodge!"

"Push it back!" Silver yelled.

The incoming spikes were dodged, their shrapnel wasn't. Tyko quickly went from leaping and rolling, to outright sprinting back towards me. Just as she reached recall range her steps slowed; the Toxic was finally affecting her motor skills. It was enough for a razor-edged stone to smash into her backside and lay her flat.

Down and out.

"Finish it."

"Wait!" Whitney held up a hand, halting Lancaster from causing further harm. "Prinplup is unable to battle. Jasmine is down to two."

Tyko seemed like she was still moving, trying to push herself back to a standing posture… but then the last bit of Toxic hit her and she collapsed. The video monitor agreed.

"Good work, Tyko. You did enough."

"What did she do?" Whitney wondered. Murmurs arose from the crowd, discussing the possible answers to that question. I suddenly remembered we were being watched, and by more than the tiny crowd present at the start. A few dozen trainers were gathered around, observing our battle. All the more reason not to embarrass myself- I can't show weakness and attract more hungry challengers to Olivine.

"Come on, where's your grand strategy?" Morty shouted from the sideline.

"Don't give up! It's not in your nature!" Erika shouted in encouragement.

I waved them silent. It's undignifying for me. I don't need cliche'd catchphrases for support right now- I need time.
"Well, it's now or... well, I don't really have a choice anymore, do I?" I said innocently. "I guess-well, I guess it's time for my strongest. Steelix."

My strongest Pokémon unfurled before me.

He really is magnificent.

When I caught him he was just an average Onix. A decade and an evolution later, thanks to hard work and a prodigious diet of quarry granite and iron ore, he weighed a full five tons, and was seven feet longer than average for his species. His metal armor was heavy on high-density iron minerals, increasing his weight and toughness. His surface was smooth and reflective, his muscles were loose, his expression focused. Years of training to increase his strength and stamina, thousands of battles from which he gained mental resiliency and machine-like precision, and most of all, a close bond we had developed, that let one another know exactly what we were thinking even in the heat of battle: all things that made him strong. Because of him, I was considered one of the best trainers in the entire Johto region.

Sorry; forgive for me waxing on about my Pokémon. It's just the sight of him made me feel like I was the one winning this fight. Steelix would win this for me. I was sure of it.

"Iron Defense," was my first command. Time to stall.

"Fire Blast... oh, right."

Silver muttered something under his breath, probably realizing the Water Sport would dampen the explosion.

"Sand Stream the arena, Lancaster. Clear the air."

Tyranitar began gushing sand from its mouth, like a high-powered sand-blaster. It waved it back and forth, targeting the fine mist in the air. The Sandstorm renewed in strength. It was getting difficult to see the arena.

He's got to do something else soon, Sand-based attacks can't harm Steelix.

"Fire Blast. There. There. There."

Tyranitar continued standing back, very near its own trainer's side of the arena. Each time Silver pointed, a little sun with five fiery arms screamed out and burst into an explosion. I noticed the blasts were coming in too slow, slow enough even Steelix could dodge them.

What's he planning?

"Got ya."

Tyranitar suddenly spat out a much larger, much faster Fire Blast, straight at Steelix. Dodging this would be impossible... ah! Steelix, no!

Steelix was trying to lay low and rail his way forward. He had inexplicably become trapped- the random Fire Blasts had super-heated the floor tiles, creating a deadly maze for Steelix to navigate. The metal leviathan didn't want to solve mazes, though, not when a dangerous Fire Blast was headed straight for him.

His low maneuver brought his chin into direct contact with a glowing tile. He grunted in pain and pushed through, exposing his entire underside to damage. The Fire Blast went over his head and
harmlessly exploded on the shields, but I'm not sure Steelix avoided more damage than he took
dodging it.

"Iron Tail- the block!" I shouted.

"Brick Break!" Silver ordered.

Tyranitar set into a defensive stand.

"And then hit him with Delta tactic!"

Steelix began pounding the arena floor with his tail, as if he wanted to start an earthquake. It didn't
work for that, though. However, one of the levitating blocks dislodged itself and jumped into the air.
Like a baseball batter, Steelix sent this flying in Tyranitar's direction.

"It's a midfield flyer!" Whitney exclaimed.

Tyranitar timed his strike well, smashing the block at the right point to send it flying overhead.
Steelix repeated the attack, and again Tyranitar sent it spinning off over the edge.

"Wait for it. Delta, now!"

"Steelix, double-bat!"

Steelix sent two flying at once. Whatever Delta tactic was, the foe hesitated executing it. The
Pokémon stopped, letting the blocks fly safely past it.

These were followed by a third, better-aimed block. Tyranitar tried to leap aside, but in what looked
like slow motion. It seemed to trip, and so the bulk of the block smashed into its lower back.
Tyranitar cried out in injury.

"Got him!"

"Switch back to Fire Blast. Lancaster? What's wrong? Lancaster!"

"Now! Iron Tail!"

Lancaster lurched about, clutching its chest and looking like it was about to drop. There was little
resistance as Steelix's massive tail came down, flattening the foe into the ground.

"Lancaster the Tyranitar is unable to battle!" Whitney declared.

Silver's arms dropped to his side.

This was the second time one of his Pokémon had mysteriously dropped, fainted or disabled with the
barest of damage dealt to it.

He's going through the stages of grief right now, in sped-up motion. Denial, anger, despair,
bargaining. The latter stage prompted him to address me directly.

"You- tell me. First Gliscor, now Lancaster. They're linked. What did you do to them?!!"

I shrugged.

"It was nothing I really did to them. You're blaming me unjustly."
"Don't give me that crap!"

"It's the truth. I'm sorry- I mean, it's just the way battles go. We can't tell each other what we're planning, that's fair sportsmanship. You know that, don't you?"

"Cut it out! That nice girl routine sickens me! I know that's nothing like who you really are, and it wasn't an accident either; you've beaten three of my Pokémon!"

Why is he so mad? When I first met him, I thought he would be better composed in the midst of battle. Learn a little sportsmanship.

"Calm down, please."

"Really, I could care a fuck's wit about being calm. I want to know what your deal is!"

I held up my hands.

"I'm trying to win. So are you. Isn't that a Pokémon battle? We're here to have fun, aren't we?"

Silver looked like he was letting off an ear-piercing screech, but no sound came from his shuddering chest. After a moment, he was obliged to breath.

"Jasmine."

"Huh?"

"Ask for a time-out. Two minutes."

"Um… okay… Hey, Whitney, how about a tiny break?"

"Only if Silver allows it," my fellow Gym Leader answered. We looked to Silver, who was struggling to get his temper back under control. A slight wave told me I had permission, and so I guided my hover-platform over to Lyra. She beckoned me closer, for privacy.

"You're noticing it, right?"

"That Silver's having a breakdown?"

"Yeah."

"What's his deal?"

"He didn't expect to lose a single Pokémon against you."

"Really?! That's kind of arrogant."

"Not arrogant. He needed a one-sided match."

Lyra nodded to the horde of trainers gathered around the edges of the battling space.

"Those aren't run-of-the-mill challengers. There's a lot of trainers from last night's party- and most of them are elite top-talents, or else Gym Leaders. Silver wanted to show them his power."

"That's fine if he wants to try, but I'm not going to ease up on him just because of that. That would ruin the spirit of competition."

"Oh no," Lyra said, holding up her hands. "I'm not telling you to go easy on him. He'd absolutely
hate you for that! But I'm saying, please don't antagonize him more than you have to. He's really trying to use this battle to say- "Here I am! I'm worthy, I'm strong, I'm ready to take on Stone, and the whole world!" He's got big plans in mind, and he needs legitimacy in the eyes of society in order to do it. Losing to you, who isn't highly ranked-

"Hey, that ranking was stupidly under-adjusted!" I protested.

"It's not about reality, it's about perception! He's gonna get mad if he doesn't beat you."

"What do you want me to do about it? Throw the match?" I asked, incredulous. Here Lyra shrugged and gave me a pat.

"I guess not. But if he does explode, don't think less of him. He puts a lot of pressure on himself. He isn't as mean-hearted as he wants you to believe."

"Time's up!" Whitney declared. "Back to your regularly scheduled programming of mid-air-mania!"

I steered away, wondering what purpose Lyra's warning served. There was no way I was going to throw the match just to avoid hurting Silver's ego. In fact, wasn't that why I initiated this match? Silver was being haughty, and I thought he needed to be taken down a peg.

Right. He's acting like a stupid, prototypical boy, only thinking about himself and his pride and putting us women down in the process.

"Fire Fang."

I didn't even see Silver release his next Pokémon, but regardless, the battle was back on. A pile of mean-looking lavender was sprinting in Steelix's direction.

"Granbull."

Okay, he's got a mouth full of fire and he's coming directly at Steelix. Anything smart and clever I can do? Not really. Brute force it is!

"Steelix, Iron Tail."

**WHOOSH!**

It was a blur, and then it was over. Steelix's tail came round like a bull-whip, smacking Granbull across the face, neck, and shoulder area. A crack like the leading edge of thunder sounded out. Granbull went shooting sideways, and in the blink of an eye it had smacked into the shields clear across the room. From there it slumped to ground and did not move.

One shot. Heck yes! Go Steelix!

Silver looks like he's going to erupt.

"That looked like it was super-effective. Wow. Okay, so, two left each."

Silver is shivering. He's mad. Unbelievably mad.

He never said a word. Crobat was released, but without commands from its master, it tried a foolhardy Wing Attack straight at Steelix. It was ineffectual and merely opened the burnt bat up to a melee counterattack. A casual Crunch from my Pokémon finished the foe in one blow.

"Wow. Not even a contest," Whitney remarked.
"It was not meant to be," Silver muttered.

He deliberately threw his last Pokeball, unleashing a warrior of a Pokémon. Feraligatr looked so very small against the titan that was Steelix, but it never showed the tiniest hint of intimidation. It knew it was the favored here, it had the advantage. The fierceness lit like fire in its eyes.

"I'm staking everything on my partner. No more excuses, no more niceties."

"Right. Final round, Feraligatr versus Steelix, begin!" Whitney shouted.

Silver at last wrenched his gaze up, to give me a direct and overwhelmingly fierce glare. His hands were already motioning signals, a kind of sign language. Feraligatr responded by shuffling, posturing and roaring, and by the time I caught on that it was a disguised Dragon Dance, it had already completed the attack and speed buffing ritual. These two must have an understanding with one another beyond what Silver's displayed with his other Pokémon.

This is going to be hard, really hard- or impossible.

Stop. Think. Be careful, and use everything you've got.

I noticed the floor beneath Steelix was sagging. Like Skarmory, the electromagnetic anti-grav projectors must be acting on his body, lifting him up. Skarmory, though, by necessity of needing to fly, is lightweight. Steelix weighs several tons, and it's showing. I wonder…

"Super Power."

Ah! Here's two opportunities in one!

"Steelix, return! Skarmory!"

Feraligatr roared. The air around him seemed to shiver and bend, as if looking through a spyglass. This effect began thickening and condensing, concentrating itself within Feraligatr's chest. As it did, the room began shaking and humming.

Steelix disappeared in a flash, replaced by Skarmory tumbling end over end. He's still frozen and unable to lift a claw, but that will change soon. Super Power is gonna hurt, but if he survives it, which he should, the force should shatter the ice-

"HUROH!"

My eardrums burst from the roar. I blinked, and Feraligatr had already covered thirty yards and driven its clawed fist into a still tumbling Skarmory. The air warped, and the floor depressed, forming a crater that the anti-gravs could not smooth out. The force was overwhelming- the ice shattered, but so did Skarmory's body. Metallic feathers could be heard splintering and cracking off. His body lay at the center of wispy, concentric rings of condensation emanating outwards. I was afraid I was looking at a corpse.

"Brutus, Dragon Dance."

He's not even waiting for me to switch. Is that fair, or legal?

"Skarmory's out. I think, Jasmine… never mind. Medics!" Whitney remembered protocol and bypassed my assent. A Gym Trainer rushed out, equipped with Potions, a special Heal Ball, and other medical instruments. He carefully checked over my Pokémon. I steered myself as close as I dared, heart hardly beating.
"She's… she's hurt," he said to me.

"It's a 'he'," was all I could think to say.

Skarmory's hurt. What does that mean? What're they going to do?! Damn it, damn it!

"Sorry," The medic began gently prodding and picking at Skarmory's wings, and then chest and beak. He nodded, and then recalled the Pokémon into the Heal Ball.

"Well, it's good and bad news," he said, turning to me.

"The damage isn't superficial, the healing machine can't fix it. The good news is that the bones and muscles are okay, it was all damage to the pinions. Skarmory won't be able to fly for a few weeks while they grow back."

A few weeks.

"Will he be okay? Otherwise?" I asked meekly.

"Probably. He'll be moving on his own again by tomorrow. No battles for a week, period, not even training. Even then, if he can't fly, he won't be as effective, so don't push him into tough matches. Got all that?" I nodded. He began packing up his stuff. I looked worriedly upon the Heal Ball nested in his bag. Protocol dictates that he personally delivers the Pokémon to the Pokémon Center, and I would have to pick Skarmory back up later.

"I won't be able to pick him up locally, can you make sure they upload him to the PC Network?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

I smiled, faintly, and then frowned. The staffer rushed back off the arena floor, clearing the way for us to finish our match.

It's rare in a Pokémon battle for an injury to be so severe the healing machines can't fix it. When it happens, it's tragic, and usually means one side was vastly overmatched and took too much of a risk.

Which just goes to highlight the gap in power between my Pokémon and this… this monster.

Feraligatr was waiting impatiently. Its physique had grown considerably, looking like a martial warrior from a prototypical shonen action manga.

That Super Power- that wasn't normal. That was like my Pokémon's Rail Gun in terms of power, except he did it with one Pokémon, with far less setup.

Silver's expression was calming down, even a tiny hint of smugness radiating from the corner of his lip. It's a response to my face, I'm sure. He's glad I'm aghast. He likes being respected, and feared, he takes joy in it. He must have hated being looked down on, treated with gaiety, being toyed with and outsmarted. Now everything is back in its proper place, according to him. It makes me want to puke.

"It was a mistake thinking Skarmory could withstand Feraligatr. You should have withdrawn him from the match. That injury is your fault."

My fists went white and tight.

Damn. Him.

"Steelix." I threw the Pokeball as high as I could into the air. "Earthquake."
Steelix materialized… about forty feet above the arena. Feraligatr was forced to lunge out of the way, barely avoiding the falling leviathan. Steelix did not just fall, but actively hurled his weight into the surface as he landed. The entire stage rocked, rumbled, and finally fell apart under the impact.

Yes. That's more like it.

The once cohesive platform had been obliterated. Some blocks remained where they were supposed to be, others began floating around in odd, random orbits, untethered to any specific point in space. Most just fell to the bottom floor in large jumbled heaps.

Feraligatr found safety on top of a pair of free-floating blocks.

Steelix?

He was flying.

'No way' Silver silently mouthed. Around the room, the same response emerged from the onlookers. I stole a glance at Morty. He was smiling, and nodded my way in kudos.

Okay, so Steelix wasn't flying, more like hovering, and only a few feet above the anti-grav projectors at that. But the effect was no less inspiring. The crackle of electricity was constant and engulfing. It surrounded Steelix, making it look rather like he was swimming in a pool of lightning.

"Come down and fight, big bad gator, or are you scared?" I taunted. Uncharacteristic of me, I know, but I was feeling more than a little animosity towards this Pokémon.

"Brutus, don't let her get to you. Stick with ranged attacks. Ground-type. It's weak to Water, isn't it, Miss Jasmine?" Silver said, addressing me. I gulped. "Hydro Pump."

Ranged special attack. Feraligatr isn't so good at converting stored energy into elemental water and forcing it out at an enemy- in other words, he's a brawler, not a special attacker. On the other hand, Steelix does have a weakness to Water attacks, which should make up the difference.

The stream of water arced from on high, blasting Steelix across his torso.

"GRgRGLELRGLE."

"Isn't Water weak to Electricity?" I wondered out loud.

Sure, Steelix was hit. But the electric energy surrounding him, levitating him, and coursing through his mineral armor, found its way back up the Hydro Pump and into Feraligatr's body.

Unless it wanted to fry itself some more, Feraligatr couldn't use ranged water attacks on my Pokémon. So sad, because that's about all the ranged attacks it knew, I assumed.

"Brick Break the blocks," Silver ordered. Feraligatr pounded the block it was standing on in Steelix's direction, leapt to another in the same motion, and repeated the action. Pretty desperate, but not something I could ignore.

"Steelix, volley."

Steelix used Iron Tail to bat the block straight back at Feraligatr. The latter jumped from platform to platform, its enhanced speed giving it the agility to dodge the return fire. It never got hit, but came close several times. I was at sixteen when I gave up counting the blocks Steelix knocked back at it. My Pokémon struck out more often than returned, though, and so the 'strikes' began piling up around
it. After a few minutes, there was enough of a heap to constitute its own arena.

"Good enough. Jump down and engage."

"Iron Tail!"

"Aqua Tail!"

The element-infused tails collided, emitting a powerful shockwave. Feraligatr's won out and continued into Steelix, slapping him around. Steelix recovered and whirled around, trying to Constrict Feraligatr. The foe jumped, and came down with another Aqua Tail, aiming for Steelix's head. Steelix managed to move out of the way, taking the blow on his more heavily armored midriff instead.

"Move left and then Iron Tail!"

There, he's back in the lightning bath. Iron Tail is now infused with Electrical power, it'll roast Feraligatr.

"Dodge, don't parry," Silver countered. Feraligatr jumped out of the way and responded with another Aqua Tail.

Steelix grimaced, and in revenge swept its tail horizontally. The block Feraligatr had been standing on went flying out beneath it. The water gator tumbled, directly on top of an anti-grav generator. Sparks flew, followed by smoke.

"Did I get him?!"

A crunching sound came out of the chaos.

"No, don't break my brand new generators!" Whitney cried. Indeed, Feraligatr had saved himself an electrified execution by simply bashing the projector into pieces.

"Body Slam."

Steelix lifted his bulk up and let it fall atop the opponent. The two collided. Feraligatr took the tackle with both hands. The machinery beneath him crumpled further, sending them into the ground.

"Earthquake." "Seismic Toss." We humans called out our attacks in unison.

Feraligatr acted faster, pitching Steelix clear into the air and over to a different corner of the arena.

"Woah." Whitney let out a whistle.

I stole a glance at the audience.

They're all impressed. Strategy doesn't mean much anymore, it's just two titans going at it with all their might. This isn't exactly a high level, high concept battle between trainers; but a brawl between two brutally strong Pokémon.

"Earthquake," I ordered again. Steelix acknowledged, and crashed down. The shockwave spread through the room, across the field of anti-gravs. As they were hit, most of them fizzled and went offline. Blocks began falling out of the air, creating a rain of boulder-sized, boulder-weighing artificial meteors.

"Agility."
Feraligatr, now free to go wherever he wanted, dashed on all fours amongst the block-shower. Generally it was making its way towards Steelix. My Pokémon rent off another Iron Tail, sending a veritable tidal wave of blocks surging towards Feraligatr. Feraligatr powered his way through, taking my metaphor and turning it literal by swimming through the debris.

"Dragon Breath," I commanded.

Why?

Ranged attack, and the slim possibility it would reignite the anti-gravs. It didn't, and Feraligatr used another block as a shield for himself.

"Aqua Jet."

"Dig."

"Wait, Jasmine! Silver! You're destroying my gym!"

"Build a proper dirt-floor arena!" I shouted angrily at her. Steelix, in the meantime, burrowed his way into the machinery and concrete.

"I'll charge you for the damage!!!"

"You have League insurance!" I shouted back at her, while trying to trace Steelix's path underground.

"Brutus, remember your first battle?"

"Feral."

"It's like that. Don't get sucked in. Earthquake."

"Earthquake!" I countered.

Rumble and tumble, boulders will crumble.

Old nursery rhyme, and very apt description for what is currently happening to Whitney's gym.

"Sand Storm."

"Water Sport," Silver said, grinning.

He saved his Pokémon from the Sand Storm's residual damage, and I saved my Pokémon a few moments.

"Rest!"

"Aqua Tail!!" Feraligatr bounded away. A hollow in the earth seemed to indicate where Steelix was hiding underground. Feraligatr pelted the area ahead of arrival with a Hydro Pump. Just as it was about to leap in, though, it stumbled and sank.

"Gah!- a burrow trap. Mud the whole place," Silver said.

"Steelix, are you awake?"
No answer, so no.

Feraligatr blasted the area around it with high-powered water jets, reducing everything down to the concrete. Bits of machinery and battered blocks lined a newly formed clearing, with about ten inches of water filling it up. What looked like Steelix's spike poked out of the far side.

"There! Aqua Tail! Max impact!"

Feraligatr leapt, water encasing and propelling its tail.

"Steelix, Crunch!"

The spike disappeared. Too late, the foe realized it was aiming at Steelix's tail. Steelix's main body emerged from the rubble, his head actually behind Feraligatr's landing spot. The massive jaws clamped down, deftly catching and then crushing the gator in its grip. A howl of pain came from the victim.

"Crush him!" I wanted this finished!

"Aqua Jet!"

Feraligatr spouted water from his mouth, propelling him and Steelix's head together willy-nilly. The best imagery I can offer was an over-pressure water hose flying about uncontrolled. After watching in fascination for a few moments, I decided Steelix was liable to get his head bashed into a block.

"Dragon Breath!"

That popped Feraligatr right out.

"Earthquake!"

It was myself giving the follow-up command, but Feraligatr decided it was a good idea too. He smashed the ground beneath where he was to land, sending a seismic ripple across the gym. It met and coalesced with Steelix's formidable shaking. If the generators weren't ruined yet, they were now. I felt sorry for the Girafarig pair- they were really being taxed just to keep the violence from turning the entire building into rubble.

"Sword Dance."

"Steelix, use Body Sla-"

Steelix was about to lunge forward to carry out my attack, but instead fell forward, his head hitting the ground chin-first. I looked beneath him. The cement floor was awash, he had slipped. This gave Feraligatr the opening it needed.

"Super Power!"

Oh crap.

Feraligatr was building power. Steelix was too far away to interrupt or carry out a preemptive strike. He'd have to defend himself. He's at full health, but could he take on that powerful of a blow? Could he avoid it?

No, he's at a terrain disadvantage.

Only one hope then.
"Brutus! Now!"

Brutus the Feraligatr unleashed his full might. With far too many power-ups, and too much sheer might, its strength would not be denied. The pool of water itself was parting before it, pushed away by the aura of the Super Power. The Pokémon charged, while Steelix remained a sitting duck.

I inhaled, put my lips together. Steelix wouldn't think of this tactic, he wouldn't dream to try it, not in the face of such an impending blow. But if I yell, Feraligatr will hear and pull back.

Please, please please.

"Gatr!"

Steelix pulled his head back, Feraligatr launched itself and connected with Steelix's chin. The Super Power exploded directly into my steel leviathan's head.

"Counter!"

Steelix froze.

For a second, he was completely still, completely defying gravity, inertia, and the force of the Super Power that should have sent him end-over-end, and just hung there in the air.

Then, using the tension of his coiled body, Steelix sprung forward and downwards, smashing Feraligatr into the ground. The very force that was supposed to send Steelix flying was reflected back at its user. The Counter drove it into the ground, and an earthquake stronger than any of the deliberate ones used so far rocked the building to its core.

The shaking faded. The battlefield went deathly still. Dust obscured everything. Was that it? Who had won?

Ah!

Wait! Movement! A Pokemon!

Two Pokemon!

"Body Sl-"

"Ice Beam!"

A slim, weak-looking bolt of ice traced up and down Steelix's flank. It drew a doodle of white frost on the metallic skin, barely looking like it had any effect at all. Except, at two points, at the joints connecting Steelix's major body-segments together, the ice wedged itself in and pierced his inner muscles with a needle of coldness.

Steelix hung still as a ghost ship.

We all held our breaths.

Seconds stretched to eternity.

My Pokémon, my greatest Pokémon, reared himself up to his fullest height. He towered above the field, casting his shadow over the desperate, exhausted Brutus.

And nothing…
Nothing happened.

And I knew, with a tear in my eye, that it was over.

"Steelix is fainted. That's the match. Feraligatr is the winner. Silver is the winner," Whitney said, almost in disbelief.

Steelix, you're too much.

Even knocked clean out, you refused to fall. You're still holding yourself upright even after you've fainted. You're amazing.

"A Counter, knowing you could survive using the Sturdy ability… but Brutus had just enough to withstand it. Just enough. Just… damn."

Silver balled his hand into a fist and bit it. Is he crying? Shouting? What emotions are going through his head?

"Yay! Go Silver! You did it!" Lyra was heard shouting and cheering, even though, barring a few claps from random trainers, she was the only one celebrating.

I steered my observer platform over to Silver's. They gently bumped up against one another.

He's still biting his fist, I think. I don't see blood, though.

After a minute without response, he heaved, ran his hand through his long hair, and turned to me.

"You won," I said simply.

"Barely."

"'Barely' is good enough." I rummaged in my costume, pulling out a small object. I always keep a spare on me, in case of events like this.

"Here."

I held it out. A Mineral Badge.

He looked at it bewilderedly.

"It's my badge, for you."

Sure, it hurts that this will cut into my ratio. But damn it, that was an intense battle. The most intense one in my life. I had staked a lot of emotions on this match, and still lost. I guess I'll have to work extra hard next week to keep my ratio up above 50%.

Silver continued to stare at the badge without taking it.

"I don't want it," he replied.

"You earned it."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did."

"No, I really didn't. I didn't want to win this battle as much as you did. This was an embarrassment."
"Cut that out. You won. I think you proved me right. The other night, you said the bond between a Pokémon and its trainer created strength; believing in them, that's what was most important for winning a Pokémon battle. But that's wrong. That's only a tiny part of what goes into winning."

Silver stared at me, head tilted, eyes still glaring.

"Willpower alone isn't enough to win a battle. Victory is the sum of everything you and your opponent do and don't do. Luck, training, genetics, the weather and season- heck, even the most trivial things determine the victor. Ever hear the story of Steven Stone's battle against Michigan Roy? One of the closest battles he ever fought. And yet, he won, because a spectator shouted "High Kick!" when Roy shouted "Psychic", and Roy's Medicham got confused and followed the spectator's order. One crashed High Jump Kick later, and Stone's perfect record survived. Do you see what I mean? There's no way to ensure you win all the time, to be so strong that you never lose. You've got to accept your bad wins just the same as your good losses."

Let's see if this thick-skulled boy gets it.

"It's why it's a sport. It's why we play the game, to see who wins," I said, with an innocent smile.

Am I upset I lost?

But mad?

No, surprisingly, not mad. I'm rather happy that I took on the number 2-ranked trainer in the entire region and came within a hair's worth of health of beating him. Heck, if Skarmory hadn't been frozen, he could have dealt the finishing blow... but then, you can't go back on what-ifs, because I benefited from a lot of those chance events myself.

And I'm a Gym Leader. The system is rigged against us; we aren't supposed to win too much. That would deprive the tournaments of challengers, wouldn't it?

Yet Silver is still making a sour face and refusing to accept the situation.

Thinking back on what Lyra said, and remembering how some challengers behaved after a sore loss, I didn't want something unseemly to happen here. Violence is best kept between the Pokémon, who can handle it.

How to diffuse the situation?

I guess it's pretty moot now to be keeping secrets.

"Hey, Silver, about earlier? Magneton was able to magnetize the Stealth Rocks because they're made of the same material as Skarmory's wings. They're metal, basically. And how Magneton took out Weavile- well, it's like billiard balls. The first Mirror Shot exploded on the shield, sending the second shot straight back towards Weavile. I was gunning for that shot from the start, that's why I tried so hard to keep Weavile from strafing."

It's working. He's sensing that I'm trying to make an overture. He's comprehending what I'm saying, and the knowledge- being able to make sense of what used to be senseless losses- is helping him cope. His body stopped shivering in rage, and he held his head up again.

His eyes stared directly at me.

"And what about Gliscor? And Lancaster?"
"I wasn't completely lying when I said they were your doing. Or rather, Gliscor's doing. You poisoned Tyko- my Prinplup, remember?"

"Of course I remember."

"The Toxic also poisoned the Bubble Beam she was firing at Gliscor. Gliscor… it has Hyper Cutter, doesn't it?"

Silver didn't respond, which I took as a yes.

"As opposed to Poison Heal. Gliscor ended up poisoning itself. It took a little more time, but the poison eventually got to it."

"So you're saying… that Prinplup used Water Sport to poison Lancaster. Because her body was poisoned, so was any water that came out of her. You just needed any Water attack that would get the spray onto my Pokémon, no matter how weak it was."

He does catch on fast.

"That's correct. Do you see now?"

Silver looked relieved.

"You're lucky."

I shook my head.

"I'm smart. I know how to adapt in the middle of battle." He shook his head back at me, telling me I didn't understand him.

"No. You're lucky you were born with such an amazing mind. I can't create new, out-of-the-box strategies on the fly like that. You're like Lyra." He tossed a begrudging nod to his rival. "She's a ditz with everything else, but she knows how to pull crap out of her… rear when she's battling."

He paused, taking in Steelix. "And you know how to train your Pokémon. He's pretty strong. Really strong. And your other Pokémon- they're not as strong, but they're disciplined. They know how to execute your tactics. Even if whatever strategy you've come up with is brilliant, if your Pokémon can't adapt to it on the fly, it's useless. But yours can."

"Thank you," I said. He's suddenly become very magnanimous.

"I need to learn how to do that. It'd help make me stronger."

"It could- although, you're already very strong yourself. Your Pokémon are strong too."

"Not strong enough."

He's pondering his Pokéballs, turning one over and over and over in his fist. "I've had to learn the hard way you can't get anywhere in this world without trusting and loving those you rely on for strength. I took that to heart, but I still lost. I fought and fought, got stronger, bonded closer, tried to trust my Pokémon- nickname them, get to learn their needs and wants, spend time with them outside of training, all so we could be better at fighting- but still, that didn't mean I always won. I guess now I'm learning that that trust is only a starting point."

"So you realized it," I said. "Being the best trainer you can be is important. But, being the best trainer in the world isn't important, because it's way too hard to control everything, and besides, only one
person gets to claim that title."

"But I NEED to be the best," Silver responded. I was taken aback by the strong emphasis he placed on that word. 'Need'. Like his life depended on it. Or maybe his dreams depended on it.

"Why?"

"Because-"

"Hey Silver, please." Lyra interrupted. Silver, surprisingly, took notice and went silent. "You're always trying to shoulder too much. You need to rely on people the same way you rely on Pokémon."

"That's a lot harder to do. Lyra, I told you what my childhood was like."

"And I told you that wasn't normal! You were raised by thugs, not nice people."

I had a question.

'Hey Silver."

"Yeah?"

"What exactly are you trying to do?"

He squirmed and stuttered, trying to figure out what to say in reply.

"I'm going to change the world. I'm going to bring down the Pokémon League," he said. I was taken aback, just a little horrified at how candidly he spoke of revolution and rebellion, but also very incredulous and doubtful. Take down the Pokémon League? That's absurd! He saw my expression and began explaining.

"No, I'm not gonna hurt anyone, except maybe some fat buzzards' wallets. It'll be non-violent-protests, boycotts, media blitzes, corporate takeovers, political campaigns. Anything, anything ethical, I'll do it. I can't allow that corrupt organization to exist any longer."

"Why not? What's so bad about it?"

"It created me. Or rather, my god-awful childhood. My mother was a political extremist who wanted to burn it all down, and create some social utopia. My father's family made a fortune off the system, but then got cast out by rivals. They turned to crime to keep up their greedy lifestyle, and my father… well, you might know him. Giovanni."

"Your father… is Giovanni?! The Giovanni?!"

Whah whah what?!?!

When we first met and Silver said he was going to take over his father's company, I didn't think 'company' meant the infamous crime syndicate that nearly destroyed Indigo Plateau, Saffron City, and Goldenrod!

"Think about what we're doing," he said, gesturing to my Steelix. "We're forcing Pokémon to fight each other. Why?"

"Because…"
"It doesn't matter 'why'," he cut me off. "No matter how good our intentions, no matter what the Pokémon want, you can bet, someone, somewhere, is abusing Pokémon, is abusing the system, is making money off of it. No matter if the battles themselves are just or unjust, the system that we humans have set up to organize those battles is corrupt. Its purpose is to fuel the lifestyles of the rich. They sure as hell don't care who it hurts, as long as they keep living large."

He pointed a thumb at his chest.

"I was a victim of their callousness. So were my Pokémon. So were a lot of people and Pokémon I've met. I don't want anyone to have to suffer the same childhood as me. That's why I have to force the League to reform itself- or else raze them to the ground."

"Why do you need to do it alone?" I asked. Lyra nodded, also eager to hear his answer.

"So I can surpass him. I need to be a leader that's respected. I'm young, inexperienced. I don't have any background in politics, business, or management. I'm still studying those, getting better, but still a novice. Proton is working on that side for me."

Proton? That sleazy guy he hung out with at the party? Why does that name sound familiar? I swear I've heard of him before. Years ago… Ah! A glance around the hall led me to spot the man. He was hanging back, behind the thickest part of the crowd. His hat was worn low over his brow.

Silver continued.

"But what I can do, what I am good at, is training Pokémon and directing them in battles. That's where I excel, that's the skill that gets you noticed by the masses. I'll be the best trainer in the world, and then use my position to gain a following. No one listens to a second rate runner-up. I need to be on top to command the spotlight. Only one person gets that chance, and right now the current guy in the brights is doing nothing with it."

"That's not true. Stone is a good person, doing what he can to help us all. You're overestimating what one person, even the best, can do."

"You're underestimating his power, and his laziness. He's been infatuated with his wife, and he's still beholden to the cronies on the board of regents. If he had any spine he'd disband the board."

"He can't, they're his boss," I argued.

"He could too. Laws be damned, he has the power and support of anyone who really matters," Silver said.

I'm not nearly astute enough to argue politics with this guy. Better to appeal to emotion.

"Listen, I think everyone is doing their best to try to improve the situation. You can't go blaming the extremes and labeling people and telling them you're going to burn down society. You'll alienate the very people you need to help you with your goal. You can't do things alone."

"She's right," Lyra added.

"I know that." Silver shook a little from emotion. As if he was frustrated that he couldn't do it alone. "That's why I'm in the middle of taking over Team Rocket."

"Taking over the Rockets!" I repeated.

Is he crazy, or brilliant?!
I shook my head. That's besides the point.

"It's not my place to judge you. You're doing what you want to do to achieve your goals. I guess I disagree with them, but that's my opinion and it's not going to change your mind."

"No, nothing will."

"That said, I have my own goals, and losing to you didn't help them. I want to win too. Still, vitriol and hard feelings don't serve anyone's goals, so, right now, even if we've had this battle because we disagree on things- let's not make it personal. Let's at least respect each other as opponents."

Silver nodded.

"I've got nothing against you, personally. I can live with it. And I did win," he pointed out to himself, reminding himself the alternative could have been defeat, and then he would have been truly humiliated.

"From now on, I'm just going to battle for myself. The opponent doesn't matter. It's for me and my Pokémon. No need to hate your opponent. I tried that once. Became obsessed, wanted to kill my foe I was so enraged. It didn't work out well- nearly got me killed, and solved nothing. So, from now on, we'll fight for our goals, not our egos. Hey," he said, turning to me. "You too, okay? Don't go starting Pokemon battles because you dislike someone. From what Lyra's told me, that's not like you."

I cringed.

It's kind of sad, to me, that I fell so easily for a trap I've long hated: pitting Pokémon against Pokémon, for any reason other than the love of competition and partnership with our Pokémon. That's why Pokémon follow our orders, and why they're willing to fight: because they enjoy it, because they want to prove themselves, and because they love us for all the things we do for them. Any other reason is worthless and discourteous to the creatures we send out to battle. It is our duty as trainers to respect that.

Sometimes, though, I'm a hypocrite and challenge others to a battle, just because I take issue with something they've said or done. Some personal feud and I forget my philosophy and just tell myself- "I want to humiliate you." This was one of those times. How sad, that it took a self-righteous jerk like Silver to remind of that.

"Well, good game."

I held out my hand, with the badge still in it.

He took my hand, shook it, and then placed the badge back in my palm.

"I'm not interested in the League's tourneys. Lyra told me you were in trouble with them and couldn't afford to lose gym battles. Let's just keep this an unofficial loss for you, okay?"

"Fine," I said, outwardly offended but inwardly grateful.

Lyra was right about him. He can be kind. He's just too wrapped up in his crusade to remember to be nice all the time. What a typical man- but I can admire the nobility of it.

"Return, Steelix."

"Return, Feraligatr."
We recalled our Pokémon in unison, and then steered our platforms down to ground level to join our friends. Morty approached me with a frown, which evaporated when he saw the relatively good mood I was in.

"That was one hell of a match. Too close, about a dozen "if-only's" in there," he said.

"Yeah. That's the way it is. I guess I need to buff up my Pokémon, especially everyone not named Steelix," I replied half-cheerily.

There was a tap on my shoulder.

"Hey, are you the Gym Leader here?"

"No," I said, turning my head, "that'd be Whitney over the-"

And I froze.

Behind me stood a young man with a red cap and piercing eyes.

The reigning world champion.
Whitney versus Red

There was an unsettling silence in the room. It was too large a space, with too many living beings crowding it, for the air to be so deathly still one could hear a Pokeball click open. Yet, that simple mechanical sound carried to every nook and ear as clear as a 21-cannon salute at a funeral procession.

Whitney's Blissey emerged amid a shower of sparkles. The pyrotechnics coalesced into distinct shapes: stars, hearts, kisses, and flowers. They hung in the air for a few moments, and then faded into wisps of smoke. All around, trainers were thinking the same thing: that a Gym Leader would be caught using a Pokeball Seal, during a match against such an opponent, came off as childish and immature rather than showy and entertaining.

Her challenger made no sign of acknowledging the faux pas, nor any sign of emotion at all. His gaze was like a rock: expressionless, unmoving, plain, almost non-sentient. His entrant into the match was no secret, and was already out and moving to the combat zone. The universally popular yellow mouse squeaked in joy, except it would be a grave mistake to dismiss this particular individual as "cute" or "playful".

Blissey and Pikachu took their place.

The arena, if you could call it that, was the crater Steelix and Feraligatr had recently carved into the floor. Beneath them was flat, smooth cement. Surrounding were the remnants of steel cubes, anti-grav generators, and other unidentifiable bits of machinery and superstructure.

The contestants stared each other down, the humans at one another, and the Pokémon at one another.

I myself stepped forward, timidly.

"Are both contestants ready?" I asked.

"I'm ready!" Whitney yelled out, with more enthusiasm than seemed appropriate. She's nervous- not scared, but nervous, and more than a little excited. Opposite her the young man appeared bored, as if this were a mere formality. He tipped his hat to show me he was ready.

'Ready to dominate her,' I thought.

The video screen continued to glitch out, calling the man "Silver Silver" and Whitney "Jasmine Mikan", respectively (seriously? it waits until *after* our match to display our names properly? Stupid piece of equipment!). Without its guidance, I was dreading my role as referee for the match. I suppose I'll have to try hard to remember that one study session from three weeks ago, and wing it for the rest.

"Very well. Remember to play fairly, keep your Pokémon's safety in mind, and have fun." I really doubt either participant is going to have "fun" here. "Let the match begin."

- Twenty minutes ago -
"Hey! I'm the Gym Leader here! Oh hey, you look familiar- you're famous, aren't you? Red! You're Red, from Pallet Town! Wow! WOW! What are you doing here?"

Whitney's response, upon being called over by an overwhelmed me and subsequently meeting Red.

"I'm here to challenge you. To a gym battle," Red said curtly.

"Well, I… hehe… I guess. There's a lot of challengers today, and the gym's not in great shape, obviously-" Whitney sheepishly gestured to the wrecked arena.

"I don't mind. Can we battle today, or should I come back later? I'd really prefer now."

"Well-" Whitney looked around the room. Of those who were paying attention, over half were gawking in silence, and the rest were whispering excitedly to their peers. "I'm betting the others wouldn't mind waiting their turn. The shields are being taken care of by Girafarigs right now- I suppose we could, as long as the Pokémon are good."

Intimidating, isn't it? Just speaking with him was troublesome, perhaps because of the overwhelming awe in which we hold his accomplishments.

"Red."

"RED!!!"

Silver, and then Lyra's reaction to seeing the famous trainer. Here are two people who have no business fearing him. Lyra, especially, seemed more-than-cordial upon sprinting up to us.

"Let's battle! Right now! I'll show you how fluky Mt. Silver was!"

"Ms. Kotone," Red said in reserved exasperation. "I'm here for a gym battle. You can wait for another day, can't you?"

"You know I hate waiting! Oh, how've you been, by the way? Last time I saw you, you got owned by Steven. How'd that turn out? Did he put you up to this? Are you dating anyone?"

Her questions were ceaseless, careless, and begged for a conk on the noggin. The recipient of her interrogation sighed and gave up the conversation.

"So can we fight?" he asked Whitney.

"Don't ignore me! That's your biggest fault, ignoring girls!"

"I'm in the middle of something. You're very hyper, calm down."

"But I'm excited to see you!"

"We can fight," Whitney interjected. "I'm going to go check on the Girafarig, just to make sure. Jasmine, come with me."

Whitney waved me over. I complied, and we began walking and talking as we went. Red was left to fend off Lyra's aggressive conversationalism. Ethan joined them, I noticed, but didn't say much. Very noticeable was the absence of another person from their company. Silver was far off from the group; despite his unwavering glare in their direction, he kept his distance and deliberately kept himself out of their sphere of awareness.

I guess he doesn't want to face Red right now. Or Lyra. Or both. I wouldn't blame him.
My head returned as Whitney began addressing me.

"Hey, I know it's asking a lot right after a match, but can you play ref for me?"

"Huh? I guess…"

"Thanks! I don't have anyone else qualified. You know the rules, right? You're doing probation, you've studied it more recently than I have, so you're the best person here for the job, right?"

"Officiating was one of the first things we reviewed, so I'm hazy, but I think I can do it," I answered tepidly.

"Thank you so much!"

Under normal circumstances, being a ref is no big deal. There aren't too many rules that come into play in the middle of a normal battle. Having a referee is usually a formality, only necessary for high-level matches, matches with special rules, or technical disputes that arise after the match has been decided. I spend most days at the gym doing without one. However, this isn't a normal battle, because my friend is not about to face a "normal" trainer.

"Are you really going to fight him?"

"Of course," she said.

"Seriously? You're not just going to phone it in?"

"Nope."

"But wasn't it you who told me we ought to let him blow over and be on his way?"

"I don't remember saying that. And it would be against the Gym Leader code, wouldn't it?" Whitney managed to crack a smile. "Besides, I've been planning for this ever since I heard about Red taking the Johto tour. I've got a strategy that will give me a chance."

I pondered that, but did not inquire. I'll find out in due course, I'm sure.

It didn't even take the battle starting for me to find out what Whitney meant, though. We checked the Girafarigs, and Whitney determined they needed a short break before the battle. We met back up with Red, with Whitney taking the lead, even brushing Lyra out of the way so she could address him.

"Jasmine will play umpire."

"Her?" Red gave me a glance. I didn't like his direct gaze, so I averted my eyes.

"She's a fellow Gym Leader."

"Of Olivine," he said. "I remember her."

He remembers me? From where? When did we meet, when did I tell him my name and position?

Um… a long time ago, before he was famous, maybe? No, impossible- I'm not that bad recognizing faces (okay, maybe I am), but I would never forget a name like Red, and I- ACK! I'm stupid.

The Gym Leader Summit.
So much happened then, it's easy to forget we ran into each other there. Even easier to forget, considering my conversation was with Steven Stone, and Red just sort of hung in the background. Looking back, this is my fourth close encounter with the legend, and each time I've gotten the same weird vibe from him. I can't quite place the feeling, though.

"Right, she's our ump for today," Whitney restated. "She's the strictest rule-follower here, so she should be perfect for the job."

Red nodded. "I saw her battle at Blackthorn recently. You must like to travel," he directed this inquiry to me.

"Not really. It's rare," I said quickly. "Just coincidence."

"Hmm."

"Anyways! The reason I wanted to introduce her is that, as the Gym Leader here, I want to exorcise my rights and make a special rule for this match." Whitney beckoned me in close.

"That is?"

"A Duel Battle."

"You mean a double battle."

"No, Duel. D-U-E-L."

"What is that?" Red asked nonchalantly, as if not really caring, as if he didn't care what hoops, hurdles, and handicaps he was placed under, as if it wouldn't affect the outcome in the least bit.

"A best-of-five round of Pokémon battles, one on one, no individual limits. However, matches are between set Pokémon. No switching. Once one Pokémon wins, it is replaced by another and cannot participate again."

"So, basically, a series of one-on-ones."

"Yep. First to three KO's takes the game."

"That's fine by me."

"Sounds okay," I said. "I don't see anything wrong with it." Objectively, the rules should not favor either side, a requirement for special battle conditions. Gym Leaders have the disadvantage of a well-known, preset, monotype team, but they also had the advantage of being on home turf. These are permissible conditions; however, the rules of the battle themselves should be neutral. At least in theory.

Yet I saw Whitney wink at me, and guessed there was something else to it. There must be an indirect benefit for her to be asking for one-on-one, no switching, no double-entry matchups. What was she thinking?

The contestants went off in order to prepare and wait for the shield-Girafarig to come off their rest. I tucked myself into the proffered sweater of Morty. His trademark flame-patterned scarf fell over me, which I used like a shawl.

I told him the rules of the battle.

"I think I get it. Not a bad idea," Morty responded.
"What is it?"

"Pikachu." Morty pointed at the active little rodent. It was busy squirreling about Red's feet, overcome by the attention it was receiving. "You already heard what it did to Clair's gym. It's a powerhouse you and I could never hope to compete with."

"Probably not." The list of super-elite trainers from all around the globe vanquished by this little electrical rat was long and impressive. Even a pre-schooler knows of the "Flying Thunder God", team leader of the Red Pokémon Dominance Squad. A single bolt of lightning from it(he?) could flip the planet's electromagnetic poles (or so the memes say).

"Whitney is counting on Red's Pikachu being that much stronger than everything else- including Red's other Pokémon. In a Duel Battle, she only has to worry about fighting Pikachu once. Pikachu can only earn one KO for its team, and then it's stuck in the cheer squad."

"I see." That was obvious, and I'm sure would have been apparent to me if I had just thought about it some more. "Whitney can eat the loss from Pikachu, and then try to win three other matchups against Red's less ungodly-strong Pokémon," I conjectured.

"Exactly."

"Devious," I quipped.

Her chances of winning were still miniscule, but by marginalizing Pikachu's contribution through officiating fiat, those chances were at least better than 0%.

"Can I keep your sweater?" I asked.

"Sure."

Morty cast a glower at some of the males who were checking me out. The sailor costume attracted attention, which was good when I was playing Gym Leader and wanted the attention, and bad all the rest of the time…

…not that I minded being a little lewd, I guess. It was just becoming a distraction.

"Okay. Looks like they're ready. Be fair- don't favor Whitney, even if we know her and like her. You've got to stay impartial. And no pressure- you've already lost, your day can't get any worse. It's Whitney's turn to sweat it," Morty said, trying to reassure me.

"But I'll be worried for Whitney and her Pokémon anyways. She's my friend," I grumbled as I trotted to the central arena.

Back in the present, the foes squared off.

Red was almost dismissive of the fact that the match had started. He didn't say a word at first. His Pokémon darted from one side of the small field to the other, making itself a moving, unpredictable target, but not yet attacking.

"Blissey, Reflect!"
I gulped.

Whitney was actually going to try to KO the Pikachu. I suppose, for appearance's sake, she has to try, but in the end, would even the token effort be worth it?

"Defense Curl too."

Blissey enveloped herself in a thin, translucent layer of light, one that glimmered from some angles, and reflected images like a mirror from other angles. Seeing Pikachu do nothing about it, Blissey then tightened herself into a plumper, rounder ball.

I looked to Whitney, confused and trying to guess what she was aiming for.

Pikachu is specially-oriented. Blissey is specially-defensive. Their physical abilities were relatively lower, so why was she defending against something that was already unlikely? Unless…

"Pikachu. Angle 170 and attack on signal." Red held his fist outward.

Pikachu understood and complied. It let out a crackle of electricity that momentarily blinded Blissey and Whitney. When they regained their vision, they discovered Pikachu had already closed in on them- on the near side. The rodent was actually between Whitney and Blissey, and had begun a slow charge towards Blissey.

"Pik-pik-pik-pika!"

It was closing in. Blissey turned, ready and hoping to defend itself.

Red's fist unfurled slightly, into a thumb sign. Pikachu made one final hop, coming within five feet of Blissey.

"Blissey-" Whitney called out. "Mirror Coat!"

Red's thumb went down.

A blur, a thump, a crack, and a fainted Pokémon- that was all I heard and all I saw.

Blissey lay floored, eyes clenched shut, mouth parted, breathing- but only barely. A black bruise the size of a basketball formed on her chest.

"Wait!"

I paused a moment to search for any sign of recovery, but the Pokémon wasn't moving a muscle.

"Blissey is down and fainted. Pikachu wins this round. Trainers, please replace your Pokémon and prepare for round two."

"That was a Brick Break, by the way," Red informed us.

All too easy, wasn't it? Whitney figured she could rely on Pikachu's inferior physical ability, and her own Blissey's Reflect and Defense Curl, to entice the opponent into launching a Thunderbolt. Blissey would then probably have survived, and used Mirror Coat to launch the energy right back at Pikachu and get the cheap KO.

Red saw right through it. Pikachu ran behind Blissey so it could look for Red's signal and charge at the same time. Red could then decide between a physical or special attack less than a half-second before Pikachu actually executed it. What's more, once it connected, the Brick Break shattered the
Reflect and completely pulverized Blissey, to the point that I doubt any number of Defense Curls or Reflects were going to save it. That attack had been overkill.

To top it all off, it felt like Pikachu wasn't even trying. The thing isn't breathing hard, it's actually doing victory laps around the arena before returning to its trainer's side. Some in the audience were cheering for it, especially the younger women.

Ethan was right. Red's a frickin genius, beyond my ken, and he has an absolute monster to work with. I can come up with something clever, a tactic that puts an opponent off guard. He came up with something that Whitney couldn't counter even if she knew exactly what was coming.

God. Damn. It.

"Next up."

Whitney gave off a helpless grin. "I didn't think that was gonna work anyways," she said. Her grin turned a little dastardly. "But now the real battle begins."

Alright. Time for a victory run.

"Begin when ready," I announced.

"Go Venusaur."

"Hyper Beam."

BOOOSH!

A ray of light, an explosion, and a wide column of smoke rose out of the ground where Venusaur had just materialized.

A Togekiss, somewhat exhausted, floated in the air near Whitney. She, the Pokémon, looked pleased with herself, having gotten the surprise attack off with perfect timing, just as she emerged from the Pokéball. It was the same tactic that had proven effective against Maylene at the Gym Leader summit.

"Hey, Venu, stop being lazy."

A glob of black sludge shot out of the smoke column, aiming straight for Togekiss. She saw it coming and glided upwards.

"Parahax time. First, Thunder Wave!" Whitney ordered.

A cannonball of poisonous slime smacked into Togekiss from above, exploding, and coating her in a massive layer of sludge. She dropped to the ground and flailed about.

I blinked a few times.

The video board replayed the action, giving us a clear look at what had just happened. I stood aghast when I saw it.

Even before the first Sludge Bomb had launched, another Bomb had been sent skyward in a high, parabolic arc, such that it arrived after the more direct shot. Not only was it timed perfectly, it seemed presciently-aimed, crossing at the exact moment and point in space where Togekiss retreated to.

"Good Time on Target," Red said to his Pokémon.
Venusaur stomped out of the smoke, looking bored.

The creature can predict the opponent's movements even before they initiate the action that causes said movements, and then perfectly aim not one, but two Sludge Bombs in combination to hit the flying foe. Oh, and the Sludge Bomb also happens to be strong enough to one-shot a tank like Togekiss.

"Togekiss…" She's struggling, heaving, and retching, but she hasn't quite fainted. Still, the rules are clear enough.

"I'm going to start a countdown, if that's alright," I said. "One. Two. Three. Four-" I counted to ten, and could have counted to one-thousand, but Togekiss was not getting up. Her movements were becoming weaker and feebler, evidence of the poison taking effect on her body.

"Ten. That's it. Togekiss is technically knocked out. Um, Whitney? Please recall her. Oh, and Red, a new Pokémon, for match three."

So, Whitney, I hope you realize you have to win three in a row now. Venusaur basically ignored that Hyper Beam, and if the rest of Red's team was similarly tough, you're going to need something spectacular just to hurt them. Please, show me something...

Whitney was biting her lip. At last, she let out a laugh, somewhat half-hearted and kind of creepy sounding. Actually, very creepy sounding. She's giving a look I'd normally associate with yandere psycho-bitches from anime.

"Oh cool. Look at that. You know, if I don't get a single KO here, I'm gonna blow a fuse," Whitney said somewhat direly.

"Snorlax."

Red recalled Venusaur and replaced it with a trailer-home-sized pile of fat and muscle. The Pokémon rolled from side to side, stretching its limbs and giving a great heaping yawn.

"Miltank."

Miltank was Whitney's first Pokémon, and still her strongest. I remember when she came to school one day, freshly arrived from a dairy farm, with a new Pokéball in her possession. She was sooo excited, and wasn't afraid to share it, unfortunately for the rest of us. We battled, naturally, and I was quite upset when my Onix loss to Miltank's Bulldoze attack. It seemed offensive to me, at the time, that my Rock-type should lose to a Normal-type.

"Don't get mad at me," Red warned the woman with the deteriorating psyche. "Blame Stone. He forced me into this. I shouldn't be here."

"I won't have to blame ya when I steamroll ya."

"Begin when ready," I announced nervously.

"Defense Curl," Whitney commanded. Miltank curled herself into a ball.

"Roll Out, huh?" Red muttered. "Snorlax, Bounce."

"Bounce huh?" Whitney echoed. "Then let's Sub!"

Miltank spun in place, and then rolled backwards. To my and most everyone's disbelief, Snorlax
launched itself skyward— I don't mean to say into the air, because that would imply Snorlax rose some twenty, thirty, or forty feet. I mean to say, Snorlax rocketed to the ceiling, and would have gone on much higher if it hadn't been stopped. It then bounced itself off the ceiling, gunning for Miltank.

The meteor of fatty tissue smacked into the ground directly on top of a rolling Miltank, completely flattening her. Or rather, her substitute: the real target was rolling away in another direction.

"Yes! We survived the first attack!" Whitney shouted. No one else looked terribly excited by that trivial victory. "Now Work Up!"

Miltank unfurled long enough to enact a few dozen high-speed pushups, sit-ups, and stretches. The impromptu workout session raised her attack, something she was going to need.

"Hmm." Red looks like he's actually having to think about this one. "Yawn," he ordered.

"Raw Milk Drink!" Whitney ordered.

Eww. I've seen this one, and it's both disgusting and effective at what it does. Miltank produced a plastic jug from a fold in her hide, and rapidly filled it from her udders.

I… it's horrible. I just… Miltank drank its own milk. As a girl, that really squicks me out. Even worse, I know it's not fresh milk, but deliberately sour milk that's been fermenting too long inside her.

I want to choke.

Okay, seriously, I want to choke. I cannot describe how puked out I am by this. Whitney once used this against my Steelix. The awful taste alone knocked my Pokémon out.

Sorry. I just can't fathom how sick this is, nor how Miltank could drink it herself.

Yet, because it was so noxiously offensive to the taste buds, it could prevent Miltank from becoming drowsy, confused, or infatuated.

"Hmm." Red doesn't understand. Whitney better act before he picks up on the fact that Miltank isn't going to fall asleep anytime soon.

"Swagger," she ordered.

"Body Slam," Red commanded.

Miltank faced down the incoming behemoth, and began taunting it. She stuck her tongue and udders out and began jiggling them. At first it had no effect, and Snorlax ignored it. The latter leapt up for a belly-flop. Miltank rolled backwards and resumed her vulgar gesture. She began mixing butt-spankings and other crude taunts in with her udder-twerking.

A second Body Slam, and a third, missed, and by the fourth, Snorlax was becoming enraged. Its inability to hit the small opponent was getting on its nerves. When Miltank began pantomiming overeating and barfing, the opponent went berserk.

Whitney's Pokémon barely dodged the fifth Body Slam, which was good, because this one put a three foot dent straight into the concrete floor.

"Don't get hit by that," I cautioned Miltank.

Snorlax hobbled around, pained by the impact of its own attack. A red bump formed on its noggin.
"Snorlax. Snorlax, calm down. Listen. Rest."

Snorlax turned towards the Miltank, considering whether to go for the kill or obey its master. It attempted a sixth Body Slam, this one barreling into the remnants of an anti-grav unit and obliterating it. Electrical sparks zapped the brash offender. I cocked an eyebrow at this development.

That's interesting. Red's Pokémon don't always follow orders, huh?

"Rest, take a Rest, Snorlax!"

Red's Pokémon finally obeyed, dropping to a sitting position and sighing itself to sleep. Its self-inflicted damage was cured, and its temper was calmed down.

"Yes! Alright! Okay, Miltank, Defense Curl and Work Up, together!"

Miltank was becoming stronger, buffer, and much harder to kill. Too bad Whitney couldn't carry Miltank over to other matches, if she finishes this one. With all these power-ups, she would be more than a match against Red's other Pokémon.

"Now, Roll Out!"

Miltank made a rolling charge at Snorlax. The attack was too weak at first, bouncing off of its prodigious belly. She turned around, using her momentum to hit harder, this time smacking Snorlax hard enough to budge it two feet across the floor.

"Snorlax, Bounce."

"Eh?!"

Snorlax fell onto his back, which caused him to recoil and then bounce towards the ceiling. Miltank's Roll Out cruised right under it.

"Miltank, use a coated Roll Out! Meet it head on!" Whitney cried.

Miltank churned into the crater of cement, picking up an appreciable amount of debris and incorporating it into the Roll Out itself. In a manner of moments she bounced back.

Okay, so now it's a truly Rock-type attack, with lots of buffs, lots of speed, and lots of momentum, meeting Snorlax's Flying-type Bounce attack- she should-

"Focus Punch."

Snorlax smacked the ceiling, but instead of bouncing off it, it burrowed into the surface, letting the building absorb most of its momentum. The Pokemon began free-falling, and as it did so, it held still, concentrating. Miltank, still following her initial orders, bounced off a ramped surface and gunned for Snorlax.

"Mil-" Whitney began calling, but there wasn't time to avert disaster.

Snorlax met the oncoming Miltank fist-first. The cement armor shattered and exploded. Miltank halted mid-air, her Roll Out stopped cold, her eyes and tongue bulging, her belly collapsing under the pressure of an impossibly powerful punch.

Snorlax continued the punch all the way to the ground, blasting another crater into the cement. A shockwave blew through the arena, going so far as to penetrate the shields and buffet the audience. I gripped myself against the wind sheer.
Miltank lay flat out, fainted. All the Defense Curls did for her was save her a trip to the emergency room at the Pokecenter.

"Sleep Walk ability," Red kind of explained.

"I've never heard of it," I said.

"Snorlaxes spend most of their lives napping. They use Sleep Talk to defend themselves when something tries to eat them. A rare few, like mine, have become so good at it that it's become automatic. Being awake or asleep has no meaning to Snorlax, he can still battle no matter his status."

Red finally gave off an expression besides dull boredom: pride, for his Pokémon. He went up to it and began rubbing its belly. The Pokémon responded with happy growls of affection.

"Ref?" he asked, addressing me.

"Well, I guess… Miltank is no longer able to battle. The round goes to Red. That's three victories for him."

Red spoke to Whitney.

"We can go on. I'll forfeit if you can KO one of my next three," he offered, coming off as rather arrogant.

"That's okay. I'm good. The match is yours," Whitney said in resignation. She looks like she's in shock.

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

There she goes.

She went sprinting to her fainted Miltank, kneeling down as if to tend to her. In truth, I knew she was just trying to hide her tears. She's emotional like that. I walked up to her and began comforting her with a rub on the shoulders.

"It's okay. It's okay," I cooed.

She'll be alright. She always cries after a big loss. It doesn't take long before she's right back to her usual cheerful self. The only thing I worry about is the possible bout of depression that sometimes hits her afterwards, when she starts hating herself for her tendency to have emotional breakdowns.

"I know. I know."

I took a look at Red and recalled the match.

Pikachu took 0.3 seconds to see Red's signal, switch from a Thunderbolt to a Brick Break, and hit Blissey with it.

Venusaur launched two perfectly synced Sludge Bombs that predicted Togekiss's movement and hit it mid-air.

Snorlax executed several precise commands while asleep, and prepped a Focus Punch in under three seconds, then connected with it, while falling.
Every attack one-shotted Whitney's Pokemon, even though she was the second-most defensive Gym Leader in the Johto League (me being the first).

Her Pokémon failed to do any appreciable damage to their opponents. Snorlax withstood a few preliminary Roll Outs and some confusion-caused self-harm, Venusaur shrugged off a Hyper Beam, and Pikachu was never even threatened with an attack.

This was the true difference in power between us regular Gym Leaders, and the world freakin' champion.

Red wasn't even trying. He barely lifted his voice, let alone show his full abilities. It's too damn… unfair.

I can't take this guy on. Not at all. Not even close. The only way I'll survive him is by making sure I have enough wins to cancel out my inevitable loss at his hands.

Oh god, oh god, he's coming this way. I'm shivering.

"Hey," he said, plainly.

I nodded, and that was all I could do to acknowledge him. My shyer, more timid personality was coming out in full force.

"I guess we're going to have a battle."

"I guess so."

His stare went from my face to my Pokeballs.

"But not right now. Your Pokémon already had a tough fight today. I'll wait till I get to Olivine." He paused, like he was struggling to decide what to say, or whether he should say what he wanted to. At last, he came out with something, but it didn't seem like what he was really thinking about.

"I'm sorry, ahead of time. I don't like these one-sided affairs any more than you do."

"I… guess. Couldn't you- like- not fight us?"

Red shook his head.

"If I don't do this, Steven wins. I can't let him control my life."

"Why?" This came from Whitney, still moping at my feet. "Why are you doing this?"

"I just said…" Red said, a little taken aback. He gulped, sighed, and shrugged. "It's long and complicated, but it basically boils down to whether or not I'm a better trainer than him… and a better person, period… and lot of money is involved."

He didn't seem to like admitting that last part.

"Money?"

"Don't judge." He tensed for a moment. "It wasn't parties or mansions or anything selfish. I just made a naïve decision, invested in some people that had good intentions but no money-sense, and now I'm in debt." His shoulders slumped.

"So you're blowing through tourneys for the cash prizes."
"NO!" he responded vehemently. "No. Not that simple."

He shook his head.

"It's not about the money. That's just the leverage that Steven is using over me. It's about something else."

"What is that?" I wanted to know. I'm suddenly very curious. He may be a titan in Pokémon battles, but right now he's showing a human side. There's more to Red, I think, than a young man trying to become the very best trainer there ever was.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Oh how painfully predictable. Another guy with his secrets. Everyone wants their privacy, everyone thinks their past is too heavy to be sharing, everyone is afraid of everyone else's judgment.

I'm not so different, I realized. Oh well. Whatever. At least, in time, Morty will find out.

Speaking of…

"Hey, champ."

Morty strolled up to our little gaggle.

Red clearly didn't like being addressed so casually. He glared at the new arrival, and subconsciously gripped a Pokeball. Even Pikachu leapt up to his shoulder and bristled its fur.

"Hi."

"I'm Morty, a Gym Leader."

"Red."

The two didn't shake hands.

"So I take it you're on the Gym Leader challenge. Heard you came from Azalea, which means, your next stop is north, Ecruteak."

"That's right."

"That makes me your next opponent, then," Morty said.

"I guess so."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"At least you are," Red responded. Morty laughed, playing off Red's succinct response.

"I'm on foot, so it'll take a couple weeks."

"That gives me time to prepare," Morty said.

"If you think it'll help," Red said.

Volkner, and Eusine, and me, and some others… Morty likes to take brooding, mopey, difficult-to-work with people under his wing. I bet Red would fit right in. Right now, though, the world champion was giving my boyfriend a frosty glare that shot down any hope of cordiality between the
two.

"Well, see you up north." Morty leaned over to me. "Care to join me upstairs?"

"In a bit. Hang around."

Once Morty departed, Red turned his attention to the despondent Whitney, who was refusing to give him her gym badge.

"Don't worry about it, she'll come to," I reassured him.

"Hey, Ms. Akane, I know it's hard to accept, but I won. Please, I would like my badge."

"You can wait," she huffed. She made a show of wrapping Miltank's forehead with her outer shirt.

"Whitney, think about how Brawley would see you right now," I lectured her.

She sniffled, rose to her feet, and turned to Red.

"Here."

She shoved the badge into Red's hand. He took it, gently, as if it were a precious heirloom. The crisis solved, I wandered away to find Morty and the rest of my friends. Red and Whitney began some low discussion.

I met Silver on the way back.

"What're they talking about?" Silver asked me.

"I don't know."

The man stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"Hey."

I stood frozen, a little alarmed by this physical contact.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings," he said.

"Oh… apology accepted," I replied.

"You showed me I wasn't ready to face him." Silver nodded in Red's direction. "I'm glad I found that out. I'll keep what you taught me in mind."

"That's good. I'm glad too." Maybe, just maybe, the world's population of snobbish, stupid males decreased by one today, thanks to me. That's an accomplishment I can be proud of.

"Hey Silver."

"Hm?"

There was something he had said earlier that interested me.

"You mentioned your childhood being bad. Was it because of your parents?"

"Yeah. A dad like Giovanni, that's not hard to guess."
"And your mother?"

Silver paused for a few moments.

"She never did anything for me that didn't have an ulterior motive."

"Mmm." I nodded, eyes starting to get teary. "I can relate."

"But," he continued, "even fake love is still comforting." Another pause. "My dad, I have no idea where he's hiding. My mother, I found her, recently. She tried to kill herself, so they locked her up in a mental hospital. Basically, the League is making her life a living hell in there. I can't do anything about it."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Don't be. It's not your life. I'll deal with it."

His hand finally left my forearm, and he drifted onwards to where Red and Whitney stood.

Now to find Morty.

"Jasmine."

"Hmm?"

It was Erika, signaling me. She was conversing with the Proton guy, which I found odd, but she broke off in order to engage me. I scurried over obediently.

"What're you doing with him?" I asked suspiciously.

"Private business, please don't worry about it." I cocked an eyebrow at this dismissive answer. Of course I'm going to worry about my friend, and any interaction she has with an apparent sleaze-ball male.

"You're not flirting with him, are you?"

She chuckled.

"He could be a romantic interest, or a business partner, or a rival. Which answer would you find most acceptable?"

"None of the above."

Another chuckle.

"You needn't worry. He's just an old acquaintance, nothing more to it than that. Rather, I have a message for you. Morty's on the outdoor balcony, upstairs." Erika gave me a sly, knowing smile. "He told me to direct you there."

Eh, is it really my business to pry into Erika's love life, if this is what I think it is? No. She's one of the few people I know who manages to keep her affairs private, something I appreciate. Let's worry about my own man.

"Okay, thanks."

"Oh, and do you have all of your belongings?"
"In my backpack, in the office."

"Alright, I'll fetch them for you. Meet me by the Pokecenter at 3:00. It will take an hour to get on the boat, it leaves at 4:00."

"Three o'clock, I'll remember that. Thanks, for everything."

My dearest friend took my cheeks in her hands for a brief moment and gazed into my eyes.

"You're beautiful, and so innocent. Don't let Morty get too frisky, alright?"

I blushed.

"I'm always careful of that kind of stuff. You know me."

"I hope I do," Erika called after me, as I drifted towards my next rendezvous.

Morty was at the balcony rail, leaning on it and staring off into the horizon. It was a sunny day, only a few clouds crossing the sky. The temperature was cool, but not uncomfortable. The city of Goldenrod stretched out before us, looking just like its namesake: a field of golden-speckled habitats, stores, and public halls. In the far distance you could just make out the tallest skyscraper, the Radio Tower, lording over the other buildings.

The man didn't notice me, so I tip-toed up to him from behind. For a minute I pondered how to greet him, before deciding on a touch upon his shoulder. He reacted like he was expecting it.

"Hi there," he said calmly, lazily.

"Morty?"

"Hmm?"

"I just lost a big battle. Cheer me up."

He turned, embraced me, and his lips found my bare neck and began tracing kisses up and down from there.
Farewell Goldenrod

The boat cabin rolled to and fro around me. Waves were gently lapping against the side of the vessel, rhythmic and soothing in their cadence. The lights were dimmed. The bed sheets lay heaped in a cradle. Everything was perfectly situated to veil wanton activities from the conscience of their perpetrators. It felt dream-like.

My pelvic region ached. My fingers worked furiously, trying to wretch a stubborn orgasm from my swollen genitals. Don't get me wrong, the sensations that had been springing off the nerves from that region of my body had been quite pleasurable for a while now, but at this point I just wanted to climax. A small whimper escaped my chest.

..."You make cute noises when you're having fun. It's adorable."
"Morty, shut up."
"You're adorable," he said, and this time he cut me off with a sudden, aggressive thrust. I was certain that, if not for the sailor skirt getting in the way, his hand would have entered me. I cringed, out of fear, and out of pleasure.
"Were you going to say something?"
"Mmmmmm."
I took his arm by the wrist and controlled it. Despite the shackle of my grasp, he tried penetrating further. My grip strengthened, and pulled him away. Rather than let him press against my hole, I guided it upwards by an inch.
"Exterior only, please."
"Interior?"
"Exterior. Outside."
"Less fun."
"Only for you. For me, the fun button is right here." I manipulated his fingers, so that the tips of his forefinger and middle lay a-straddle the tiny bump of sensitivity unique to the female anatomy. He took the hint and began pinching it. I winced.
"Gently."
"I know how to handle a woman."
"You know how to handle used-goods. This is factory-fresh merchandise."
Morty withdrew his hand completely and fell into uncontrolled laughter. "God, stop, you can't do that!!" he gasped out in between heaves.
I cocked an eyebrow.
"I'm sorry, I'm not sorry. I want to scold-" laughter- "you, but you're just too-" more laughter- "so,
like, don't insult my past lovers, that's petty, but really, that metaphor, right now— no, stop… STOP!
-followed by another riotous outburst.

I was getting irritated at his tirade of humor and figured the best way to end it was a kiss. Yet he
couldn't even bring himself to shut up then, so I went for the weak point.

"Oh, gosh, hahahahahawahawahawowo- WOAH!"

My hand grasped the fabric covering his genitals. I could feel it clearly. It feels strange. There's a
mixture of softness, looseness, elasticity, plump hardness, and solid hardness. On the underside it felt
a lot like my own vulva, but right above that there was a mass of flesh I'd never imagined: stiff but
not inflexible, fleshy, and flanked by what felt like two rubber balls.

Morty could not stop laughing entirely, but it died down to silent, internal mirth. His mouth tried to
contort out of its plasticine grin and into something more appropriate for the newly awakened
feelings he was receiving from his crotch.

"So this is a cock."

"What of-of-of it?" he chuckled out. Still not quite over his mirth, I see. Let's do something about
that.

I cupped and cradled his privates in my fingers, saying nothing. My gaze darted between the hidden
object I was fondling, and the reaction of the male it belonged to. The corners of his mouth twitched
every so often. The frequency of said twitches increased when I formed an "O" with my thumb and
forefinger around his tip and began rubbing.

"You're too good at this to be a virgin."

"No, I'm just a natural. I've also had plenty of practice on myself."

"Hmm, really? That's unexpected."

"You'd be surprised. Back in middle school, how often do you think I'd get sick of your antics, come
home, and blow off steam with a schlick?"

"Is that rhetorical? No? Okay… three times a week."

"Twice a day."

"Horny little nymph, weren't you?"

"I didn't have much else to do in Ecruteak."

My machinations on his pants continued without pause. The tension building in his system was
killing him, I could see; nevertheless, never more than the tips of my fingers caressed his covered
dick. No palms, no pumping, and nothing remotely close to ejaculation was allowed to him.
Touching him here was fun and enjoyable, but the thing that truly turned me on were all the curious,
pained expressions alighting his face.

"You can get a better view underneath the pants," Morty offered, hoping I'd take the bait and relieve
him of his torture.

"Clothes stay on," I reprimanded him.

"Is that your kink, miss fashion model?"
"I mean it. Keep it in your pants. Isn't this enough?"

"For me? No, not really. Take it out."

As usual, Morty was proving too forward, and I too reluctant. It was not a bad thing, I decided. This was our ritual dance, the tsun-tsun needing coaxing before she could blossom into the dere-dere.

"Hey!"

"I think it's time you got a nice look at it."

"Stop it!"

"But don't you want to see one? Just a glimpse- I'm betting you'll feel less embarrassed once it's out."

"I said no- hey, what're you doing-"

He tried unzipping his pants himself, and almost succeeded before I slapped his hands away.

"Grr. Impudent!

He should be elated, he should be exulted, that I've deigned to take this step with him! This isn't kissing. We'd already spent fifteen minutes kissing- and to be sure, it was bliss, pure bliss! But bliss has its side-effects, such as memory loss and insanity. And so, having lowered my barriers, I somehow, someway, forgot that I was Jasmine the Shrew, and assented to "petting."

It was innocent, at first. My breasts were the initial target. The feelings from the fondling of them were… okay. Nice, but nothing exciting. Morty tried pinching the nipples, but that hurt me more than anything, and the bra and blouse were dampening the effect. At that point Morty assumed we had reached my limit for the day and resumed kissing. However, as we came close for our lips to meet, my crotch lurched forward, pressing against his thigh.

He dared not bring it up. Too shy? Too nervous? Too oblivious? I could only conjecture. Anyways, he wasn't taking the hint, so I began rubbing it up and down, and at its apex our pelvis areas, though fully clothed, briefly touched. THAT got his attention. One thing led to another, and now here we were, coddling each other's privates.

"Come here."

Without warning, he took my shoulders and spun me around. We fell, he into a sitting position, with his back against the wall, and myself into his lap. I could feel his breath on the nape of my neck, and his muscular abs pressed against the exposed skin of the small of my back. Locks of sand-colored hair tickled my ear. My one hand went to his head, taking in that lush mane and combing it between my fingers. It felt rich and smooth, and I wanted to play with it. Yet, I also wanted to play with that other part of him, the one that I had just discovered.

His attention had returned to my nether regions.

"But I can't reach yours from here," I protested.

"Your holiness has commanded that we remained clothed- ergo, I'm not getting much out of it anyways. Besides, I've had plenty of fun over the years. This is all new to you."

"Mmm."

It was very new to me.
I couldn't quite get over the fact that this wasn't much different from a regular session of masturbation for me- actually, even less than that, because I would not allow him to touch me skin-to-skin. I knew best what my bare body wanted by way of masturbation. Yet, it somehow magically felt better, because it wasn't my hand. It was someone else's- a man's, a man I loved.

I- let's call it 'squeaked', although it was something between a flinch, a hiccup, and a squeak.

'A man I loved.' I silently repeated to myself.

Does that mean I've fallen in love?

Is that even something I can determine through introspection? What does love feel like? I have no idea!

I know what infatuation is. I've felt it before, strongly. It took what seemed like forever, but today I can safely say I am infatuated with Morty- utterly, engrossingly infatuated. But to say I love him?

And then thoughts of "love" and the dilemma surrounding its definition vanished, because he started a rhythmic caressing motion with his fingers that hit all parts of my mons pubis. It was as if he was a guitarist and I was his instrument, and he was strumming out an old love song on me. The soft cotton of my panties, indented by the tips of his fingers, glided across and around and impressed into every fold, bump, and vale of my vagina.

This is unfair!

But it feels incredible!

But I don't get to reciprocate!

But it feels INCREDIBLE!!

My thighs began squeezing shut on their own accord. It made Morty's caressing more difficult, but he responded by going at it harder.

"Morty."

My pelvis was clenched tight, but every few seconds it fluttered. The pulses of quivering grew closer together. Five seconds. Four seconds. Two seconds. Just a little bit more…

"Morty, stop."

"Hmm?"

"I said stop."

"Right now? But you're almost…"

"STOP!"

I leapt out of his lap, landing on my hands and knees.

An expression of infinite concern crossed his brow.

I stared at him, panting.

"I'm sorry! Are you… is this okay with you? Are you having second thoughts?"
I shook my head.

"Then- did it not feel good?" he asked, only slightly less worried.

"No- it felt TOO good." He patiently awaited an explanation, while I caught my breath.

When my breathing and innards settled, I resumed my position in his lap. His hands went downward, assuming we were going to resume our play, but I held them off.

"Hold me."

He did. His long arms wrapped around my stomach and clutched me tightly to his chest.

"What's wrong?" he said softly from behind my ear.

"It was too good. I was about to climax."

"That's a good thing."

"No, not right here, not now."

"Why not?"

"I know it's not- well, "love-making", technically, but it's an orgasm caused by another person. That's a milestone, isn't it? It's something special that I'm not yet ready for- I'd rather save it for a special occasion. Not when we have so little time left, and in this place."

"I understand."

"You don't mind?"

"Let's see." He bowed his head, recounting. "Clothes stay on, no penetration, no climaxing." He raised his head and leaned forward. "I know you might think that's being really harsh and restrictive, especially for a guy like me, but you're wrong. That's already light years ahead of what I thought you were ready for. And one can still get pretty naughty with those rules."

"Nevertheless, I…" My voice trailed off.

"I didn't ask, and that was my mistake, but I will now: are you okay with this?" he asked earnestly.

"I don't know."

"Mmm," he mumbled, but it sounded more like a "grn" in intonation.

"Are you going to be okay with yourself when you get home? You're not going to hate me or yourself for doing this?"

"I don't know," I repeated.

"Can you tell me why you don't know?"

"Because I hate sex."

"Why do you hate sex?"

"Because… because… because…"
How am I supposed to answer that? No answer could encapsulate six years… no, twenty years… of pain and hurt, of a thousand little experiences and three great shocks that molded my attitude into what it is today. I could not give an honest, accurate answer, and so I repeated the word "because" for minutes on end.

"Because someone hurt you?" Morty ventured.

"It wasn't you," I said out of reflex. His grip suddenly tightened, constricting me, but only for an instant, and then it relaxed. Did he just have a small panic attack?

"Someone else hurt you," he said, this less an inquiry and more a statement of fact.

"Yes…" I answered cautiously.

"I'll kill him."

"Don't!"

I can't believe Morty would say such a thing… and how calmly and quickly I dismissed the implications. But my mind was awash with the lingering affects of arousal, and took weird priorities in its thought processes.

"You mustn't. I don't want to date a murderer."

"Then I won't kill him."

Funny. I wasn't worried about the morality of my boyfriend at all. I just didn't want Morty to become focused on this figure, because, firstly, that young man was not the entirety of my anguish, only the key, and secondly, because that would drag all the painful things I've been trying to forget back into the light.

"It's the past. I know you think you need to unlock my past to fix me, but that isn't going to happen, and it doesn't need to happen either. You're doing well, just as you are."

"Huh," Morty huffed.

As if he wasn't satisfied with that answer. Which miffed me, because I really expected him to reply with a "I'm glad", or "Okay, but I still love you", or something of that sort.

"Can we please just kiss? I won't get to see you for some time, and I know I'm going to miss them. Your lips, I mean."

I craned my neck over my shoulder, so that our eyes and mouths could meet. He pecked me on the lips, twice. I swiveled sideways in his lap, taking a more comfortable sitting posture, and gave him a deepening amour.

"All exterior, you said," Morty said with a chuckle.

"Hmm?" I tilted my head, curious.

"You don't know how nice interiors are."

"I am a woman, I am the interior. It's nothing I haven't lived with all my life. It's not about being inside or outside, but about penetration-

"Here, let me show you what I mean," Morty said, and plunged forward. Our lips met in a hard kiss.
My lips were forced apart. Something wet and soft and prehensile entered between them and began interrogating the interior of my orifice.

"Huh?"

I broke off the kiss.

"Please?" he pleaded.

"...Alright," I assented softly.

The shock over, I lent him easier passage, and reciprocated this time.

Our tongues tasted one another, spurring a sensation that neither lips of the mouth nor lips of vagina had ever created within me.

My body shivered in acceptance.

'Kalos' kissing. This is it. My first.

Perhaps it was just the clothes, but I expected more from the fondling of my breasts and clit. Underwhelming- compared to the hype- would be my interim judgment on those activities. I'll reserve final judgment for when we are naked.

But this? The kissing of tongues? Curse the bastards who ever downplayed the pleasures of kalosing! This is heavenly!

... 

His tongue in my mouth, mine in his. His right hand on my vulva, messaging, precise motions alike to a piano player gliding over my clit and labia. His left hand caressing my thighs, teasing the divide between bare skin and the hem of thigh-high stockings. His chest pressed into mine.

Ungh! Come on!

But the orgasm wouldn't come.

I collapsed, hoping to rest and then return to my hedonistic endeavors.

The boat cabin's utilitarian interior stared me in the face. Morty's image faded away.

My dream vanished. My brain screamed for a climax my clitoris was not quite willing to give it.

Outside the window, the docks of Goldenrod slid by slowly, in a rocking motion. The ferry was travelling along the coast and would not break out to open ocean for another half hour. The captain had said we were going to Cianwood first, and so we would not reach Olivine until almost midnight. If I wanted, I could still go topside and bid farewell to the region's capital.

But I'd rather stay in here, masturbating to a dream.

Curse it! But it felt so real...

"Jasmine, you're being silly," I told myself.

These weren't fantasies that were driving me horny.
They were memories.

Real, concrete events, things that actually happened.

I, Jasmine Hayate-Mikan, had well and truly spent an afternoon on a gym balcony, engaged in romantic conversation and sexual foreplay with a man.

A renewed cringe pinged upon some nerve deep inside my pelvis.

"Why did I tell him to stop?" I moaned.

I was so close then, and now, my clit is too sore! Damn it! I could have had something stunning to remember this trip by, but I denied it!

Jasmine! Damn it, what are you saying?! Where did this little beast, this slutty side of you come from all of a sudden? Weren't you dedicating your life to eternal prudery? Weren't you saving your first mutual masturbation for something special, like your birthday? That's not even a month away, you didn't have to wait too long! But no, you threw yourself into it with abandon, and now your first frenching and first petting happened on some meaningless November day.

No!

This day was not meaningless. That I had the courage and foolishness to take that step, and actually do it, and got to experience those wonderful sensations, with a man I hope will be the love of my life- THAT alone made this day meaningful!

But what happened to you? At least, if you're not going to condemn yourself for your uncharacteristic hedonism, what triggered such a drastic change in behavior?! At least make sense of it all!

I was always capable of this. The moment Morty spotted me in the library, I could foresee doing these sexual things with him. It only took clearing away the obstacles of doubt, fear, and pride for it to happen. Why now, on this particular day? I suppose it's Silver's fault. It took a little while, until after Whitney's catastrophic loss, but I started feeling the bitterness of defeat myself. Giving in to my urges seemed a lot less consequential after I was stripped of my dignity as a Pokémon battler.

I will not curse this day, or look upon it with shame. This was what my better half wanted. My happy half, my vivid half, the part of me that I wanted to empower and express and live as for the rest of my life. Come what may, I will sanctify this day as a happy memory.

My only regret is that I did not consummate it with an orgasm.

…The thought of which took a hold of me and made me horny again.

I propped my head up on the pillow of the bunk bed and began laying into my pubic area, more vigorously than before.

Maybe if I try sticking a finger inside… my G-spot is pretty sensitive too, you know. I can get off by fingering it, even if it makes my panties a little sticky.

"Morty… Nnn. Nnnn. NNNnnggggh!"

"Jasmine?"

I froze.
Fear gripped me. 

The door was open, Erika stood there, stiff as a statue, her gaze staring me down. I lay spread eagle, the middle and ring fingers of my right hand curled inside my vaginal canal, my left hand enmeshed in my labia. The blouse of my sailor scout uniform was rolled up over my boobs, my skirt was rolled up across my tummy, and one stocking was halfway fallen off its limb. A faint, damp stain covered the sheets beneath my buttocks. The bed was perpendicular to the door, therefore my body was arranged pointing legs first at the entrance and Erika. Her view would be explicit; I could not be in a more compromising position.

"I apologize. I should have locked the door. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have been doing that here. Don't judge me! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It's not what it seems. Don't you dare talk about this to anyone! I was seduced, I swear! This isn't me! I'm sorry!!!"

My apologies, excuses, and threats ran on endlessly.

Erika made no comment whatsoever, merely letting me vent.

We were in the dinner cabin, as far away from the other passengers as possible. However, dinner time was approaching and the room's capacity for privacy was rapidly shrinking. Erika noticed this and shushed me with a finger to the lips.

"Whispers, dear."

"I'm sorry! I can explain what that really was about… I was having trouble with my tampons; as you well know, my period typically starts at the beginning of the month, so when I discovered I had forgotten one, I had to improvise, which wasn't a smart solution-" I began ranting in a fierce whisper.

Erika sent me such a disarming, disapproving half-smile, I was forced to shut up.

"I heard you crying Morty's name, and thought you were upset."

"That's because Morty indirectly gave me the idea to use a capsule of chapstick and tissue-"

"Jasmine, you are a terrible liar. I know what you were doing."

Charmeleon-owners would say their Pokémon are the purest, deepest shade of crimson on the planet. They are wrong. My cheeks currently hold that honor.

"I… I… I…"

I stammered, stuttered, and started to cry.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's natural. It's wholesome."

"It's not who you think I am!"

Erika shook her head with a smile.

"You are wrong. I've suspected all along."
"You did? You knew th-that... that... that I'm a slu-sluuuuuuuut!?!"

I buried my teary face into my arms.

"That you are a normal, but precious, young lady with perfectly natural lady desires- yes, I knew. I'm glad."

I sniffled, and took a peep at my friend through a crack in my burrow.

She went on. "Glad that I confirmed my suspicions, even if I am sorry it had to be in such an invasive manner. I am very sorry for that, by the way. Yet, I am still happy that you can be honest with yourself about those desires. That you can think of Morty in that way- I can only assume he is having such a positive effect on your life is the reason why."

"Nnnnnnooooo. It's not like that," I moaned.

"Well it's not important if you don't admit it to me," Erika said. "As long as you admit it to yourself."

"Stop it! I hate sex! I don't want sex! It was just a moment of weakness. I swear! Boys are evil, why would I want to touch them?!"

"Stop playing the fool." She took me by the wrist, pulled me up, and led me back towards our room. I had to come chasing her up here after our encounter, you see. She had departed without a word or expression, just lilted away like a ghost- or someone who had seen a ghost.

"We're going to have The Talk."

"Talking about what? What?"

"The one you have Weedled your way out of for two months now. The Talk."

"I know how babies are made," I protested.

Erika shoved me into the cabin, down onto the bed. She took the lone chair, whirled it around, sat herself upon it, and crossed her arms and legs.

"What do you think about sex?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"It's evil," I replied.

"What do you REALLY think about sex?" she asked sternly.

I stuttered a few times and could not answer, so she elaborated.

"Let me give you a narrative, one that has been consistently fed to me for the past five years." She began impersonating: "I don't want a boyfriend. I don't want sex. I hate romance and everything to do it! It's annoying and vulgar and sinful! Don't get me involved in your relationship chatter, I'm not interested in that kind of stuff!" - "Does that sound familiar?"

"Don't tease me," was all I could say.

"Yet, despite the cold, love-forsaking persona we have all gotten to know and cherish, this little girl has secretly taken a liking to a boy. How unexpected! It's as if she were hiding her true self all along! Maybe she was so ashamed of her inner desires that she acted like a puritanistic prude to cover them up! But with the right enticement, her desires are getting the better of her."
"You're so brilliant," I sarcastically interjected.

"Now, while this kind of duplicity is not uncommon, here is the million pokedollar puzzle: why is she so ashamed of her sexuality that she must go to such lengths to fight against it?"

Her stare settled upon me and did not remove itself.

"Well?"

"I… I…" I stuttered to a halt.

"Jasmine, you've said before that sex itself is not the problem. Is that still true?"

I nodded.

"So, may I surmise, that your protests against sexuality all these years was, let's say, a 'side-effect' of some greater issue. Am I correct?"

I nodded again.

"Then, if that is the case, what are your true feelings about sex?"

I sighed. What kind of question is that? It's not like I've spent a lot of time trying to rationalize my thoughts on the subject. When I answer, it's just going to be a cobbled-together theory that doesn't make much sense.

"Sex is… sex," I said. "It's just a bodily sensation, although a nice one. You can do it alone or with someone else. It feels better with another person… I think…" my voice trailed off.

"Go on," Erika urged.

I took a deep breath before resuming.

"It's not a coincidence that you can't find arousal without the thought of another human. That's the way our brains are wired. Sex is just a biological process to encourage procreation, which requires two people."

"How clinical. Go back to 'I think'. What were you about to say?"

I huffed. She wouldn't take the obvious answer, she had to keep digging until she got to the bottom of me. How irritating!

"What more do you want from me? Do I have to spell it out? Yes, I like sex! You saw that for yourself, what more confirmation do you need?"

"How do you know you like sex? Are you not a virgin?" Erika asked with needle-like precision.

"Mrrmmmm." Inarticulate mumbling. Twiddling of fingers. Fidgeting of buttocks upon seat.

"Don't tell me…" she whispered, stunned.

"NO!" I shouted, loud enough the other cabins probably heard me. I didn't care. "No," I repeated more quietly, "that's not true. I am a virgin." My face knotted into a tight-lipped frown born of frustration. "Can't you see that's the problem?"

I collapsed into the bed, legs and arms splayed out.
"Don't you know that hurts me? That everyone else can talk so casually about sex and relationships and be cheery about it, while I'm the one stuck being a virgin, being a recluse, and saddled with horrible anxiety that prevents me from approaching the subject with even a shred of optimism or rationality? Do you know what Morty told me, before we left?"

"What did he tell you?" Erika asked.

"No one wants to eat an old Christmas Cake."

"What does that mean?"

"Women are like Christmas Cakes: they get stale after 25."

"You're not even 22 yet," Erika pointed out.

"It's not about exact dates, it's the general notion that he was referring to. Women who wait forever to lose their virginity become less desirable. They grow old, they get less attractive, they get more ornery, and most of all, men start to think there's a reason they're still a virgin.

That's what was going on at the summit—everyone thought something was wrong with me, because I'm 21 and still haven't gotten laid! But that's not fair! I was brought up to think virginity was precious, a golden wine that got better the longer it's kept corked. That isn't true, though, is it? That's something you think as a teen, because sex is sooo mysterious at that age. Then you grow up, and everyone's already over it, and mostly they just want to fuck whoever's available, and so a woman holding out is just being spiteful towards the males who want her."

"That's only true for the cruder segments of society. I, and Morty, and many others think nothing less of you if you want to keep your virginity."

I waved her off.

"It's useless. You don't even mean to be mean, but every time you bring it up casually and I have to hear about it, I feel left out."

She leaned back and nodded to herself.

"I'm terribly sorry. Do you feel pressured by us, then?"

"A little," I admitted.

I doubt I would have fantasized about Morty or returned to my daily schlicking habit if not for my humiliation at the Gym Leader Gala.

She shook her head in regret. "That's very wrong of us, and slightly wrong of you too. At the very least, you shouldn't want to lose your virginity just to fit in. You should only do so because you want it to happen."

"BUT I DO!"

I covered my face with a pillow, trying to hide the rose-red blush blossoming upon it.

"Oh, so you do want sex!"

"I didn't say!" came my muffled reply.

"Oh? Please speak up. I can't hear you through the pillow."
I clutched the pillow tighter, till I might have choked. Then my belly erupted into agitation. Ten pointy objects interrogated the vulnerable flesh, until it was too much to take. I burst out, flinging the pillow into Erika's face and laughing and crying as I did so.

"Hehehaha! Stop tickling-hehahahaha-me!"

The laughter felt good. It helped me lighten up.

"Tell me the truth! Do you really, truly want to experience sex?"

"I do, I do, I do!" I yelled. "I have urges like any other woman and want to act on them! Oh the humanity! What a twist! Jasmine is actually… oh my god, hold the presses, GASP! A normal human being!!! Save me!"

I let out another cathartic peel of laughter, which Erika joined.

Then I returned to seriousness.

"The problem is sex necessarily has to be between two different people. That's impossible for me. That's why I schlick so much. There's no danger when it's only me and my fantasies."

I curled into a ball at the head of the bed. Erika repositioned herself onto the foot of the bed. She began tenderly petting me on the ankle, since it was the only body part she could easily reach.

"Sex is something that you do with someone you like," I said in a lull. "What comes from that is physical pleasure, and children, I suppose."

"Only if you neglect birth control," Erika reminded me.

Birth control in this country is government subsidized. They don't want the population growing much larger, or else it would strain our natural resources.

"Nnn. Beside the point," I murmured. "The point is, I acted like I hated sex because it made things easier. People didn't ask me questions. They didn't bug me about it so much. They didn't make me feel abnormal for being a virgin, at least most people didn't." I glared at Erika. "As long as they could chalk up my attitude to being a prude, they didn't try to pry into my soul and have a look-see at what the real issue was."

"What is the real issue?"

"Didn't you just hear me? I don't want to share."

"I heard you, and I don't care. I want to know."

Argh!

"Isn't it obvious? Can't you guess by now?" I said in irritation.

"I can make many guesses, but then you would need to confirm those guesses. Do you see? You cannot get off the hook by forcing the conversation onto me. You must explain it in your own words. Now out with it."

I gulped and cringed.

Should I tell her?
How much can I let on?

Everything? Certainly not.

A little? Generalities? Vague hints? She characterized my lies heretofore as a "narrative". What if I gave her a new narrative, a more plausible one, with a kernel of truth to support it? Perhaps that will get her off my back.

"Sex is something you ought to only do with someone you love. That's what I always believed. I've never found someone I loved," I said.

Erika tilted her head.

"I thought I did, once. It… didn't turn out well."

"Was that person named Peter?" she asked innocently.

I froze, in terror.

How does she know that name? Where did she hear it from? What does she know?! DAMN IT!

"How- how- how- do you know who Peter is?" I asked in stuttered, unsure voice.

"You did not recognize him, but he recognized you. He calls himself Proton now."

Proton… was Peter.

I tried conjuring up an image.

Maybe- barely. It's been six years. I can't see his old face clearly. And this Proton fellow has dyed teal hair, and is so much older looking. It would be a stretch to call them the same person.

And yet Erika mentioned that name, in this context, which means that, without a doubt, the one who told her must be him. Proton was Peter.

My blood went cold. My hairs stood on end.

She's too close to the truth, I thought.

"He told me to give you a message. He is sorry, terribly sorry, for what happened. He has spent three years trying to atone for it. He did not elaborate on what his transgression was."

I lay silent.

"Jasmine."

No answer.

"Did Peter hurt you?"

"He didn't do anything to me. He tried, but he was stopped," I said quietly.

"He never touched you? But he tried? Were you scared by his attempt? Is that what caused all this ill-will towards men?"

"No, he never got close."
"He didn't hurt you," Erika said, looking for final confirmation.

I shook my head. Got up on one elbow. Looked Erika straight in the eye. "I was rescued."

"By whom?"

"By the young man who did hurt me."

Here they come. The memories, the pain, and the deepening feeling that I would never find happiness in this life or the next. My heart literally feels like it was gasping for blood, and might fail at any moment.

Erika paused. Unknowing and unsure how to proceed, she said nothing. The waves outside were getting choppier, rolling the cabin in greater pitch. Her posture hardened, as she resolved what she would do.

She inched in close, close enough I could feel her breath. Her eyes were wide, dread and resolve and love filling them. Her upper body was draped over me. She was almost laying on me. I could feel the folds of her dress on my arms and back. Very much like an older sister embracing her little sister when she wanted to cry.

"Let it out," she said.

"Please don't make me."

"Yes, Erika, I know this is the sacred treasure you've wanted to wrench from me- the key to everything, my deepest secret. 'Second deepest secret,' I reminded myself.

No matter what that boy did, it would not have been so enduringly painful if not for what happened immediately after.

"It's a burden, but you don't have to keep it in. It's like a mold- if you keep it hidden, it will only grow and fester, eating away your spirit until nothing is left. Let the sunshine in, and it'll shrivel to dust, and you'll feel better for it. I'll listen. I won't judge. I'll always care for you, no matter how dark it gets."

"Okay," I uttered. "But I'll only tell you a little- the insignificant parts, the most easily guessable narrative."

"That's fine," Erika acknowledged.

I took a deep breath.

"When I was fifteen," I started.

"Before I met you," she observed. I had to pause, re-gathering my emotional fortitude.

"I had only been Olivine's Gym Leader for a few months. Acting Gym Leader, technically. There was a… a guy."

Let's just call him 'a guy', 'kay?

"He came to Olivine for a gym match, but wanted to train first. I… developed a crush on him, after he did something very heroic. At first, it seemed like he had feelings for me too. We spent time
together, and got to know one another. He saved me from Peter's advances... bought me gifts... shared his life story with me, and I with him. I thought he was going to be my... But then... he got my gym badge, and left. Abandoned me. Betrayed me. Hurt me."

"Jasmine," Erika whimpered. Her voice is quivering too. Are those tears in her eyes? "Did he touch you?" As if to emphasize, she reached up her hand, almost grazing my shoulder, before realizing what she was doing and swiftly withdrawing.

I fell silent.

Let her think whatever she wants.

"If he touched you inappropriately, Jasmine, that's not something you should bury. The police need to know, and you need to find help- professional help. I know several people personally who can help."

I shook my head.

"No."

"Jasmine! Please!"

... I don't want to quote, verbatim, the fifty minute argument we had.

She wanted details, or at least a definitive answer, as to what exactly THAT BASTARD did to me. And I refused to tell her. Flat out refused. Her offers for help and advice, I also turned down.

I was so happy, Erika! Why did you have to bring this up? Why now? Why ruin today by unearthing this foul memory?

"Can you at least tell me who he was?" she implored.

I shook my head. "No. I hardly remember him. He left for Cianwood, and I think Hoenn, after that, and I never heard from him again."

Or, truthfully, I shut off most of the world specifically so I would not have to hear about him ever again. Six years of isolation, just to avoid one man.

"You can't even remember his name?"

I let out a deep sigh. Rolling over, I found Erika staring down upon me. A wisp of her bangs hung down and was tickling me in the nose. I brushed it away, and on instinct, brushed the whole offending clump of hair behind Erika's ear and out of the way.

Of course I remember his name.

How could I forget? I never forget a name.

But she doesn't know that.

"It was too long ago. I forget it. I think it was short, and started with a vowel," I said, somewhat truthfully. "Sorry. It's been too long."

"A ghost of the past," Erika murmured.
"He can stay there. He's caused too much grief for me."

"I'm sorry, Jasmine." Erika slumped down upon me and held me. I realized there was a wetness tracing its way around my cheekbones.

"I understand," she said. "If a man hurt me when I was young and impressionable, I might find it too easy to blame his whole gender and isolate myself from romance too. But that's not a healthy way to live. I wish you could see that."

"But I'm doing fine. I have Morty, don't I? I'm getting past it. Just don't bring it up anymore."

"And what if Morty betrays you too? What will you do?"

I stared into the ceiling.

"Morty won't betray me," I said without any confidence.

"There is no one on this earth who is infallible. Not you, not me, and certainly not Morty. He may still hurt you, without even meaning to. Can you imagine if he became impatient and decided your issues were too emotionally draining? Or if he met someone who was so perfect for him, that he felt like he needed to marry them, or else he himself should end up like you - a person who forsakes love? What if he abandons you then?"

"That's not going to happen! He loves me more than anything!" I claimed.

"Even still! What if he dies? What if he has an accident and falls into a coma?"

I had no answer for that.

"Do you see what I'm saying? You can't stake your entire soul on one person. Believe me, I've tried, and it hurts when something gets in the way of that love. If something happened to your relationship with Morty, could you survive it, as you are?"

I hate you, Erika. You like to bring up the things I fear most when trying to make a point.

"I don't know. I don't want to think about it. Why bring it up? Why hurt me like this? Why do you care so much?!"

"Because when I first met you, you said you were running away from something. You were so sad and burdened and pathetic. I felt pity for you. I took you in, even when my family and friends said you were a lost cause, and I would only waste my happiness trying to help you. They were wrong. I've never regretted becoming your friend, no matter how difficult it is. I've seen you when you're happy, and when you're angry, and sad, and confused, and lonely. I know you. I know you've been quietly suffering, and that suffering traces back to a loneliness that cannot be filled by me, or Whitney, or Ampharos, or Steelix, or your parents, or your friends."

She took a breath.

"I've been there before. I know that pain. The difference, I think, is that I've come to terms with it - and you keep running away."

"What else should I do?" I mumbled.

"Live for yourself."

"Impossible."
"Not impossible."

"I have no reason to live for myself. There's nothing I value in myself," I claimed.

"Then why are you alive?" Erika asked, forcefully.

"Because… Amphy. For Amphy's sake, I'll keep living."

Erika's voice softened.

"Because Amphanos needs you?"

"Yes. I'd do anything for his happiness."

"Jasmine… you are my Amphanos." She's going to cry now. "Your happiness is precious to me. I want to protect your smile."

She hugged me again, and didn't let go this time.

"I hope you and Morty work out. I worry about him. He's not been the most honest person I've met. There's a darkness in his past too, and you're involved in it, I think. I pray you don't get hurt by it."

I… Erika… did I mean so much to you? Why? Must you have a dark secret too? Did I enter your life at your lowest, and save you from some deep chasm of despair, like Amphy did for me?

"I'll be strong," I said, trying to reassure her of my well-being. "As long as I have friends I can trust. You. Whitney. Lyra. Morty. Amphanos. Steelix. Pryce. You're my real family. I would say don't worry about me, but…"

"We're your family, so we will always worry about you," Erika finished, wiping her eyes.

"Exactly."

We lay quiet for a minute longer, then Erika extricated herself from atop me and sat at the foot of the bed. Her belly rumbled audibly.

"Hey Erika."

"Hmm."

"What is sex like? With a man?"

She tipped her nose up in the air, thinking.

"I was seventeen when I first was deflowered. Since then, I have had, maybe, seven partners. Each one has been unique, and it's a new experience getting to know their bodies. Some turned out better than others, but in my estimation, the joy of sex was always in proportion to the joy I had in our overall relationship."

She frowned.

"I never met a man I truly connected with, so I don't think I've had the best sex of my life, yet, either."

"But how does it feel? Your first time?"
"Well, how much do you masturbate?" she countered.

"Nnn." Should I answer? After all that we've discussed, why the hell not. "There was a period when- not really at all. But recently, a lot. At least once a day," I grudgingly admitted.

"Then, physically speaking, you've probably had better sessions of self-love than you could hope to have with your first-time lover," she said.

I frowned at that news. Of all the things I expected of sex, for it to be disappointing was the least welcome.

"But," she continued, and pointed at my lower body. "even though it may not be the best down here, up here," and her finger rose until it was directed at my forehead, "it will be a feeling you've never imagined in your wildest dreams. There truly is something special about pleasuring and being pleased by the one you love."

I relaxed, melting into myself, a small wellspring of hope bubbling inside my chest.

That sounds awesome.

I wonder if it really will be like that for me.

I could have Morty any time I wanted. Why not try it?

NO!

I can't possibly do it this early. I'm still burdened, still reticent, and most of all, still nervous. Just because I yearn for sex doesn't mean that will banish elementary reluctances I still hold towards it.

December 31st.

Or sooner… but no sooner than the 11th. Probation ends that day. My romantic escapades still take absolute secondary priority to my all-important career. My job brings home cash. Cash brings freedom. Cash brings food, which is necessary for life, which is necessary for all other things, including romance. Therefore, nothing is more important than passing probation. The mere anticipation for Morty's body will be distracting enough, and I have no business diving headlong into debauchery when I should be focusing on my livelihood.

I squirmed.

30 days plus 10 days plus 1, I think, if my math is right. 41 days before I can see for myself what all this hoopla is about. Roughly six weeks until I lose my virginity.

I can't decide if it's much too soon, or not soon enough.

"Let's go get dinner," Erika suggested. "I'll pay, so get anything you want. You need some meat on those bones."

"Okay," I happily agreed.

We ate, I getting the seafood platter and she a vegetarian delight. We munched it down cheerful as can be. The food cabin having filled up and subsequently emptied of the dinner crowd while we had our talk, it was again a somewhat private space. I used the opportunity to ask Erika a number of furtive questions about the small details of sex. She answered politely, but was somewhat evasive.
"Oh, please, Jasmine, why not try it for yourself? It's more interesting to discover these things on your own. Besides, you seem to think I have no reservations about talking about these kinds of details, but I do. I am not that vulgar."

"Ah, fine, fine."

She must be looking at me with a kind of wonderment. Imagine the day: Erika Hikami telling Jasmine "The Bitchy-Shrewish-Prude" Mikan that she is being too forward. Yet, she did allow herself one small inquiry.

"So, when you met Morty on the balcony… did something nice happen?"

Cue goofy grin, evasive eyes, and flush-red cheekbones.

"Maybe…"

...

"Let's go out and catch some fresh air."

"I'd like to go grab a sweater."

"And hide such cuteness?"

"They'll think I'm a schoolgirl in this outfit," I said. The Sailor Kinyobi outfit was surprisingly comfortable, I had forgotten that I was even wearing it. Even the male passengers aboard the ferry were mostly older married fellows who didn't give my skirt and thigh-high stockings much notice. Still, the ocean wind is torture on the bare shoulders.

"See you in a minute," I told her.

I quickly returned to the cabin, picked up one of Erika's spare cardigans, and pulled it over. It was a little too big to look good on me, but should keep me warmer for the same reason.

On the way out to the upper deck my cellphone buzzed at me. A new text message appeared in the window, and I opened it without much interest.

Until I saw who sent it, and what it said.

Forget Morty's invasion into my orifice. Forget Erika's soul-searching interrogation. Forget my loss to Silver. I was having a good day.

That all came to a screeching halt.

**Come home as soon as possible. I need your help. Do not blow me off this time.**

My blood seething over, I sent a reply.

**Yes, Mother.**
The Progenitor

On the far eastern edge of Olivine, nestled between the Gold Sand River and forested hills, there is an ordinary neighborhood. All the houses are different, because they are old and were built long before cookie-cutter housing developments were conceived. After meandering through a maze of streets, one might come upon a cul-de-sac, at the end of which is a plain two-story house with a weeping willow tree in front. The siding on the house is grey, the windows have fake shutters, and the door says "Welcome", although the doorbell has not worked in a long time. Yellowing grass carpets the yard, and the walkways are lined by untended bushes. Mounds of dirt stand where annual flowers were planted, died, and not replanted. Everything looked tired and worn out. There was nothing happy about this place.

This is the house I grew up in.

"I'm home," I said with a sigh.

The foyer was empty of people, but full of boxes and other supplies. On the right was the staircase to the second floor bedrooms. On the left was the family room and study. Straight ahead was the hallway leading to the kitchen. I heard sounds of busywork coming from that direction. As always in this household, I walked with caution and care, and made my way to the kitchen entrance.

She passed by with a stack of boxes that seemed preposterously large compared to the female frame hefting them. There was no strain or exertion in her movements. The heavy boxes were deposited into an organized pile on the eating table. She immediately turned and passed before me again, returning to the unorganized pile at the kitchen counter.

"On the counter, unpackage the decorative pins. You will need them to put together the itinerary pamphlets. The supplies are in the box with the orange tape. There's one already done for you to use as a model. Once you're done, put them in the plastic bin and take out the trash."

She doesn't even look at me.

I stared at her. She passed me by, three times, before she stopped and turned.

"Well?"

"Hi, Mother. I'm doing fine. How are you?" I greeted her.

"That's good to hear, Jasmine. Now help," she said, nodding to the counter workstation.

Glumly, I threw my backpack and purse onto the bench, took my seat at the counter, and picked up the first package. Mother alternated between working beside me and carrying boxes to the table or out to the car. As I worked, I spied upon her out of the corner of my eye.

Elaina Mikan.

Forty-five years old, five-foot three inches tall, married. Sharp chin, small sharp nose, wide forehead, hazel eyes, pale brunette hair cut short to the cheek. Body of a steel spring- petite, wiry, tense, and strong.

"When did you ever have these spiky-tail things Elaina?" - "That's not me, that's my daughter." - such is the similarity between me and her. They like to joke that I'm a younger clone of her.
Technically, Doctor Mikan - PHD in Psychology. Before that, triple major and valedictorian of her college class. I.Q. - don't even ask. Had she decided earlier in life to enter Pokémon battling, Steven Stone would not have three world championships.

Currently runs a local catering company for the Olivine elite. It is neither glamorous nor well-paying. That fact is not lost on me, because she goes out of her way to remind me.

She was wearing a salmon-pink A-line skirt and plain white blouse, with an open cardigan sweater overtop and sandals on her feet. It's very much something I would wear. Looks were not the only thing I got from her: my sense of fashion also. Stubbornness too. And pride. And self-righteousness. And impatience. And wariness of men- speaking of which...

"Where is Father?" I asked.

"Visiting his parents," she answered.

I haven't seen my paternal grandparents for over a decade. It was practically forbidden by my mother. Why? I have no clue, other than the general disdain Mother holds towards my grandfather. I feel a little guilty about not visiting them even after managing to move out of the house. They don't live far away, only twenty miles.

"When will he be home?"

"I don't know and don't care."

She's being quietly difficult today. That's a dangerous sign. Her temper is like a volcano- tranquil and suppressed, until it explodes violently without warning. It's always guesswork to try to figure out what subject will set her off. Better to placate her before that happens.

"Like this?" I held up the first decorated pamphlet for her inspection.

"Yes. Now hurry and do all the rest."

She slammed a large paper-cutter down, cleaving a thick stack of sheets in half. Even as she spoke to me, she never lifted her eyes to look at me. Her focus was entirely on the work directly before her.

"Listen. I'm short on time and help. The event starts at 9:00 A.M. next Saturday, and I have fourteen days' worth of work and seven days to do it in, so I will need your help every day."

"I can't, I have work," I told her.

"Come after work."

"We're very busy and stressed, I don't even have time in the evening," I argued.

"If you have time enough for a boyfriend, you can spare some for me," she rebutted. I tried to hide my shock and failed miserably.

"Don't give me that face. You live seven miles away; that is not far enough away to hide your daily activities from me. I understand you want to have a social and romantic life, but taking weekday vacations tells me this "probation" is not as serious a threat to your job as you want to make it out to be."

Shoot. She's well-informed. I can't fathom how she knows about all of this, but I'm not surprised. Merely distraught.
"But it is serious. Even the party was not entirely leisure. I conducted gym battles and a Gym Leader meeting while there, and networked with people higher up in the association."

"What do you mean by higher up?" she asked sharply.

My mind scrambled for a proper answer.

"Tournament winners. Two world champions showed up."

"Are they your superiors in the League?"

"No…" Technically, no, if anyone could be called my "boss", it would be the Indigo Plateau Elite Four Leader, Lorelei. Great as they were, Tobias and Red were just participant trainers- mere customers, really.

"Are they your seniors in the organization?"

"No, they're not."

"Then what can they do for you? Do they have a job prospect they can help you with? Are they influential in the League?"

"Not really," I said limply. Another stack of sheets was guillotined in two. The counter shook under the force of the instrument.

"Why was the Gym Leader meeting held at the party? That sounds too informal."

"It wasn't, it was at Whitney's gym."

"But the Johto Gym Leaders went to the party as well."

"Only half of them were there, the younger ones."

"Would this meeting be your monthly teleconference?"

"Yes," I answered sheepishly.

"There's no particular reason you had to travel to Goldenrod to attend it, did you?"

"Correct."

"So the vacation was extraneous after all."

She let that observation hang in the air. I held my breath.

You can't lie to this woman, you can't even exaggerate. She'll pick you apart like a Magikarp at the Fish Shack. With my weak excuse becoming unraveled, she's either about to explode over my attempted deceit, or use it as leverage.

"Then you should enjoy this party. It's for the Pokémon Entrepreneurship Society. I thought your expertise would be helpful in catering to them."

Option two: leverage.

"Who are they?" I asked, and embarrassed that I had to.

"A collection of business owners operating in the Pokémon industries. I'm surprised you haven't
heard of them. Tomorrow I'll be deciding on accommodations for Pokémon activities they're conducting. You can help me make decisions on that."

For once in her life she actually needs my input? My heart jumped.

That actually sounds fun. Maybe they'll let me pitch ideas of my own, or I can integrate it into my gym activities. I wonder if…

**Stop.** This is too good to be true.

She's never respected my opinion on any subject, let alone Pokémon affairs. She just wants to bait me into caring about this job she's forcing me into. In the end I'm not going to have any real say in this.

"Fine, I can do that," I answered glumly. As if I had a choice.

Her nostrils are flaring, her chest is constrained, and she still won't look at me. She is angry—hopefully not at me.

"Thank you," she said in a measured tone.

I relaxed a little and reflected.

*She wouldn't hit me,* I have to remind myself. I'm an adult now, you can't treat a grown woman like that, even your own daughter. Besides, she's only ever struck me three times, and I deserved each one, and it's been nine years. So I know my fear of her wrath is irrational. But it is there.

We worked in silence for a long time. I had nearly finished the first batch of pamphlets.

"So who is he?" she asked, surprising me with an overture.

"Who?"

"Your boyfriend."


"The blond-haired kid who bullied you in school."

"That's him."

She frowned in disapproval.

"He's not like that anymore," I told her.

"I don't want you seeing him."

"He's not a little kid, he's very mature and likable now," I tried defending my love interest. She would have none of it.

"I've no doubt he's charming and wonderful; nonetheless, I don't want you seeing him."

I balled my fists.

"Why?" I asked, throat tightening.

"You know well why."
"No, I don't. I'm sorry but I don't understand it at all. Why do you have to take such an issue with me being in a relationship?"

"Because I won't have you destroying yourself over a boy- again."

A chill passed through my body.

"That was years ago. Morty is different."

"And how is he different?"

"He's honest about his intentions, and he's proven himself."

"And you can be so sure that makes him different?"

"Yes-" I began, but was cut off-

"-Because you were quite sure about that other boy, right up to the moment he rejected you."

"I was younger, I didn't know better."

"And now you are older, and that makes you wiser? Did you never think that boys grow up too? They become older, and cleverer, and better at deceiving you, but their baser instincts never change. This Morty will be no different. He will hurt you."

"You can't judge a person you've never met. You know nothing about him."

"I know that he is a Gym Leader with no other job prospects. Chht-" I was hushed silent before I could raise an objection. "-And no, Pokémon battling is a sport, not a career. When I hear you complaining about the low pay and long hours and the hopelessness of ever getting a raise or promotion, and then you expect me to believe an individual in the same position has the time or resources to support a relationship?"

"I know you don't think much of my job, but it's something I love."

"Sending wild creatures into an arena to fight one another is not civilized nor dignified."

"They're not wild creatures, and if you would ever listen to me I could explain Professor Hawthorn's thesis for why Pokémon battles are a vital part of our society."

"It's beside the point, I'm not here to have this argument with you again."

"No, you're starting a whole new argument," I murmured.

She continued unabated. "Even if it were gainful and dignified employment, it doesn't change the fact that it is a demanding field. You've admitted as much, don't pretend otherwise."

I bowed my head. She's right, I've spent countless evenings complaining about the difficulty of my job to her.

"So let's assume, by some miracle, you overcome probation and retain your job. Do you honestly believe you can balance that immense workload and have a meaningful relationship at the same time, especially given that this boy is also in the same pitiful position?"

"It's because we're both Gym Leaders that we can make it work!" I insisted. "Morty understands the pressure and knows how to manage time around it."
"How often do you get to see him?"

"Every few days," I lied.

"Don't lie to me. You live five hours away from each other."

"Fine, most weekends we can see each other."

"And you call that a relationship?"

"I don't care if we're long distance," I said.

"There is no such thing as a long distance marriage. Keep that in mind, if you want something more than a casual fling with this boy; one of you will have to quit your position."

"We could commute," I said wistfully.

My mother did not even reply to that, it was so unconvincing. She sighed instead.

"I feel like it's too late for me to condemn your career choice, and I'm ashamed I didn't intervene sooner." She paused a moment to stare out the window. Perhaps she's reflecting on what a crappy job she did raising me. "That said, I can at least stop you from compounding that mistake by getting caught up in an affair with another misguided youth."

"How can you say that about him?"

"Because I know men. They are proud, lustful, and arrogant. You can be sure he won't leave his position to move here and play house-husband for you. Which either means he expects you to give up your career for him, which I doubt, or more likely, he's using you for a fling and has no intention of having a steady relationship with you."

I frowned. My hands shook. I could barely keep a grip on the plastic package I was supposed to be cutting open.

"I trust him," I let out in a quiet voice.

"I don't."

I stared after her, and for a fraction of a second let out a flash of the anger that was consuming me. She caught the expression in the corner of her eye.

"It doesn't matter who he is or how good a human being he is, does it?" I said to her. "You don't like him because I chose him, and you don't trust me."

"Yes, Jasmine, that is right. When it comes to this subject, I have never made a mistake in doubting you. Too many times you've come home in tears, heartbroken, and begging to be consoled; and yet every time you refuse to heed my advice. Sometimes I think it can't be helped. You've inherited my terrible judgment in men. You're still young, I can't fault you for that. But now, this time, I am warning you in no uncertain terms, this man will hurt you."

"He will not hurt me," I asserted. "I don't care what he does, I'm not a little girl who can be broken so easily."

"You say that as if I haven't heard it before."

"I mean it this time. Morty is not going to betray me, and even if he does, I will not come back here
looking for a hug."

"Good, because I'm tired of coddling you," Mother said rather contemptuously.

You *bitch*. If you had bothered to coddle me in the first place instead of sending me to clean up the den, maybe I wouldn't have ended up a miserable wreck of a woman!

How is it that the only person who knows everything about me, right down to the core, even the deep dark secret that is at the root of all my misandry and misanthropy, can so utterly lack empathy and love for me? Me, her own daughter?! Is she even human? No Pokémon would ever act this callously towards its progeny!

I glanced at her, prepared to expend my fury upon her… and flinched.

Why is she so damned cruel to me? Why am I such a coward towards her? What is wrong with this world, that it would inflict such a broken familial relationship upon us?

"What do you want from me?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"To finish those pamphlets. And then, if you're willing to listen to me for once, set aside this Gym Leader hobby and enroll in college. Get out of your Pokémon bubble, learn about the real world. Earn a degree. You will never have to worry about your job hinging on a gladiatorial match if you have an education and a real job."

"A college degree doesn't guarantee me a good job. I mean, even with a PHD, all you could manage was a catering job," I said offhandedly.

*POUND!*

The paper cutter cleaved straight through a stack of fliers twice too large for the device. The counter shuddered under the force.

"Do I have to remind you that I took this job so I could raise you?" she said, voice quivering on the verge of rage.

"No, no, I know. I'm sorry, Mother, I didn't mean it that way."

Back-pedal back-peddle.

"I really appreciate what you've done for me, I know it was hard work," I said, trying to placate her.

"Then start showing it."

"I will. It's just… even if it's just a dream, you have to at least let them fall apart before you give up on them, right? That's something you and Father taught me. If I lose my job, I'll do anything you say."

"It'll be too late by then."

She took the stack of pages over to the dining table, where a hole punch and binders awaited. The task of sorting the pages into individual reports and binding them together went by very quickly. Work helps her calm down. She enjoys working. In fact, she recovered her nerves before I did.

"Tell me about Morty."

"Huh?" I raised my head in confusion.
"I know how infatuation works at your age; I won't be able to dissuade you from seeing him. At least I want to know about him."

I was a little taken aback, but also understood her thought process. She thinks it's better to know your adversary than to be willfully ignorant, purely out of spite. But it's not an unreasonable request, and perhaps she might change her attitude a little if she got to know him.

So I told her as much as I could about Morty. Throughout, she seemed to give off a vibe of 'You really don't know that much about him, do you?'

"He's not poor. He has good business sense, and probably makes more money from his gym than anyone else in the Johto League. Pretty highly ranked too. So it's not like he's dreaming about being a great Pokémon trainer, he really is successful at it. He's getting his college degree too."

"Night classes, I presume?" my Mother guessed.

"That's right."

"Hmm."

She's not impressed. Her opinion of Ecruteak's higher education is low, her opinion of part-time, non-traditional students even lower.

"What is he majoring in?"

"I don't remember," I said. Actually, I don't know, I don't think he told me. It's less shameful to say I forgot it, though. Even Mother seems to buy that excuse, because it's usually true. I have such a bad memory for a lot of things- like faces, and numbers, and things I'm supposed to do.

Some rambling on his kindness and the lengths he went just to get a single kiss out of me later-

"Are you sleeping with him?" she asked me point-blank.

"No!" I cried, startled.

"Good."

She smiled, as if that was the only answer I had given her all evening that mattered. We gathered the completed materials and carried them out to the car. I followed her.

"I'm almost twenty-two, Mother. It's getting to the point that my friends tease me about being a virgin. I'm trying not to get sucked into it, but it's hard."

"Has Morty pressured you to sleep with him?"

"No." I lied.

"I'm sure he has, you just didn't recognize or remember it," she asserted. "I would be wary if he didn't have such desires. That could indicate a mental deviancy."

"You're telling me not to have sex, but not to date a man who doesn't want it? Is that a catch-22? Or should I just be asexual?"

"Very funny, Jasmine. A healthy mind can suppress impulses in order to achieve long term goals. If you want my dating advice, look for a man with discipline first, ambition second. He should be able to control himself until marriage."
I curled my lips. She says that, but… grr. What a hypocrite.

We finished packing the car trunk.

"Hop in. We'll deliver this load to the center and then I'll drop you off at your place."

"Okay."

We mostly drove in silence. The Battle Tower was rather empty, and the adjoining convention center was downright abandoned. The party was being held in the same ballroom as the Gym Leader gala. I could already imagine the vast amount of time I was going to spend in here, setting up decorations and furniture. Our task finished, she gave me a quick run through of the plan. I nodded along, trying my best to memorize everything. She would give me hell if she had to explain this again later. That finished, we got back in the car and headed towards midtown.

"It's going to rain tomorrow," my Mother noted with a glance at the clouds.

"I'll be home to help, regardless," I reassured her.

Mother dropped me off at the curb of my apartment. Steelix could be seen in the back lot waiting for my return.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I told her.

"Alright. And Jasmine-" she leaned over in her seat. "Don't have sex with that boy. I mean it. If nothing else, please promise me you won't sleep with him. Sex makes everything difficult."

"I understand," I told her. "Not until the wedding."

"If you two make it that far," she said, and then drove off. Watching her disappear around the bend, I began muttering out loud.

"39 days, and then I'm doing it. I don't care what you say, Mother. I'm not under your thumb anymore."

…or so I told myself.
"I'm sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends."

I watched the proverbial knife dig deep, deep, deep into his heart, and my only emotion was anger. Anger at him, for forcing me into this situation. Anger at myself, for not dealing with it sooner. There are a great many things in this world that make me angry, and this nonsense is one of the worst. But I have a reputation to maintain, so I can't go ballistic on his ass like I so dearly want to. Instead I contorted my lips into a forced smile and said-

"On second thought, no, let's just be acquaintances. Is that alright?"

It's Warren, of course. The Cooltrainer has been stalking around my gym for the past two weeks, hanging in the background, sulking in the corners, sneaking around the street curbs, and generally making a creep of himself. If not for my careless attitude towards stalkers (I have a multi-ton living weapon at my side at all times, remember, please forgive my lack of concern) I would have noticed what he was up to by now and booted him off the premises.

"I'm sorry… is there someone else?" he asked, miffed.

Well, for once, the answer to that is…

"Yes. I'm seeing someone else. But even if I weren't, I hardly think you and I would get along." He reeled in shock, as if I had gravely insulted him by rejecting his direct offer of a relationship. Oversized, fragile male egos- utterly grotesque. He reached up and made to touch me upon the shoulder. I drew back and reached into my cardigan pocket. My fingers enclosed around Steelix's Pokeball.

"Come on. It's not like I disrespect you. You and me, we could make a great couple. I think we'd really jibe together. What's so bad about that?"

"Please don't make this more difficult," I told him.

Warren furled his eyebrow.

"Hey. Look. I've never fallen this hard for a woman. You're perfect. You're beautiful. Smart. An incredible trainer. Strong-willed. Feisty. You've got everything a man could want. Sure we got off to a rough start, but what's a first impression really worth? It'll be a funny story we can tell our kids. If you could just search your heart, and find a little bit of empathy, maybe, just maybe, you could give me a chance-"

I shook my head.

"Stop it. It's unbecoming."

I stepped past him and tried to exit through the gym's main entrance. A hand caught me by the wrist. Without a moment's hesitation, but with quite a bit of rage, I ripped my limb out of his grip, spun around, and raised my Pokeball-clutching fist.

"Get out," I said. It was every ounce of patience I had to not scream that command and attend it with a half dozen swear words.
"You're overreacting. Let's try to work this out, yeah?" he said, still grasping at straws. "Maybe if you got to know me, you'd warm up to the idea. Let's get out of this gym, get away from this Pokémon business. Maybe we could grab lunch, just have a chat."

"Out! Get out of my gym and never come back!" I shouted.

"You can't do that," Warren responded.

"I do not want to see you ever again!" I said vehemently.

"You can't. You're a Gym Leader. You have to take challengers, you can't discriminate," Warren argued.

"See if I can't. Out!"

I threw a pointed finger out the exit.

"I'll get the League on your case. I can get a permit forcing you to fight me in a gym battle."

"Then you go ahead and do that, but until I see a paper with Mr. Preston's signature, you are not to enter this building! Now go, before I call the cops!"

He wavered. Would he curse me? Attack me? Really, here, in my own gym? There was no one about. On the other hand, I had just curb-stomped his Pokémon team and he hadn't recovered them. I, on the other hand, had a healthy Steelix and Magnezone that could be unleashed in all of two seconds. He wouldn't dare lay a hand on me.

He advanced… and at the last second, the moment before I was about to chuck my Pokeball, he veered left and walked past me. As he did so, he muttered in a dire, malicious tone.

"-don't know what you're missing. You'll regret this."

I waited while he sulked off down the street and disappeared from sight, and then I waited another full fifteen minutes, before exiting the gym myself. Just in case, I skirted all the way around the gym building and headed in the opposite direction of his departure. This somewhat limited my choice of lunch, which irked me to no end. McBurger, the epitome of junky fast food, became my destination. At least it's cheap.

Erika caught me on the way back to the gym. We walked in tandem, and I noticed I was clinging unusually close to her.

"Call the police. File a harassment complaint."

"That would be too tedious. I'll do it if he bothers me again," I replied.

"Please, do it now. You can never tell which of these men are being sincere when they make threats like that. It's better to be safe about it," Erika lectured.

"The police aren't going to do anything, not without something concrete. It'll be a he-said she-said ordeal. They might give him a warning."
"Perhaps a talking to by an officer will be enough to scare him into behaving. How could it hurt?"

"It's too much trouble," I waved her off. "I don't have the time, Mother is running me into the ground."

What I didn't want to say: I didn't want to get the police involved because I was too proud. Men don't go whining to the badgers until it's absolutely necessary; they resolve their conflicts on their own. I don't want to lose respect by appearing to be a weak-willed, cowardly woman who's dependant on men to protect her.

"What's too much trouble?" Lyra asked.

"Going to the cops to report an idiot," I answered.

"WAHHH!"

I jumped, spun, and did a double-take. Lyra giggled.

"Don't sneak up on me! When did you get here? Why are you back here?!" I exclaimed.

"Just now," she said, as if it were no big deal. "Flew over on Gyarados this morning."

"But… but… I thought you were only here to intercept Red?! Didn't you want to stay in Goldenrod and fight him?"

"Already did," she said with a smile.

"Eh?"

Her demeanor is much too candid. Don't tell me… did she actually…?

"How did it go?" Erika was the first one brave enough to ask.

"I got my butt whupped."

My body deflated.

She shrugs. Like she doesn't even care. For gods' sake, how can she call herself a trainer and just treat a major loss with absolutely zero regret?! I can't comprehend her devil-may-care attitude at all!

"Well, was it close?" Erika asked.

"Nope." She clapped her hands together. "5-0."

"Not even Typhlosion helped?" I uttered, amazed.

"Hehe. Typher was the first down. He ate like, seven Fire Blasts from Charizard. It was incredible. We burned down the Autumn Black Festival Tower." Her face finally showed something akin to a sour look. "I've gotta pay them back for that. 400,000P." I gawked. That's more than double a month's salary for me. "So I figured since I have a nice win streak going at the Battle Tower, I can rack up the cash there to pay the fine. Guess I'm back in town for a little while. Which means we can hang out again, right? I can't wait to go shopping!"

I totally understand how Ethan and Silver feel now. How and why they put up with her on a daily basis, I can never understand. Hormones turning them into infinitely patient, lust-addled Mankeys, perhaps?
"This brings back memories."

Our trio arrived at my gym. How long has it been since Lyra stepped foot in here? Six years, I think? Right, of course, she arrived just before- or was it after?- all the trouble started.

"Do you think we could have a gym battle?" she suggested.

"You already have my gym badge," I told her.

"But I still want to see how I do against you now. You almost beat Silver; I've got an itch to measure myself up against you!"

"Fine, fine, fine. But you'll have to wait. I've got to take official challengers first."

Mondays are usually the busiest day of the week for me. A lot of travelers arrive over the weekend, and have to wait for the gym to open on Monday before they get their shot at a badge. They tend to accumulate, making the first challenge session of the day jam packed. On the other hand, most of the locals have school or work, so it usually balances out. Typically the evening session is slower, and I get to rest up. Unfortunately, I have a backlog of reservations to work through, since I took a couple days off last week.

True enough, about thirty trainers lounged around the gym lobby, waiting for my return. A careful scan of the crowd did not turn up any sign of Warren, which set me at ease.

"Back of the line for me, I got it." Lyra let Typhlosion out. "Hey there! Did you hear that? We're gonna battle Jasmine."

The Pokémon eyed me with something of a pitiful look. He remembers me… and he remembers what he did to my team the last time we fought.

Ouch. At least losing to Lyra won't affect my ratio.

"So tell me about your battle with Red," Erika asked her. "How did you manage to KO one of his Pokémon?"

"He tried to Baton Pass a couple Calm Minds, an Agility, and a Substitute from Espeon to his Pikachu. Golbat used Infiltrator Pursuit to sack the pretty Eeveelution before it could escape though. He wasn't very happy about that. Pikachu went way overboard on Golbat in revenge, overcharged Volt Tackle when Spark would have been enough." My friends situated themselves upon the stands, chatted, and watched me conduct gym business.

I quickly disposed of the formalities and chewed my way through the trainer list. Being in somewhat of a hurry, I managed to lose more matches than I would have if I had been more careful. Still, 14 wins, 14 losses, and 1 very bizarre tie (an enemy Skarmory notched a suicidal double-KO with a Struggle attack against Steelix), and I emerged from the afternoon session grateful to keep my win ratio from slipping. It was almost seven o'clock by this time. The sun had long set, and I was seriously considering closing down and going home.

"So I waited all this time, don't just leave me!" Lyra protested. She held her puff stool hat before her face, putting on a meek and pleading shy routine. I guess I do owe it to her.

"Okay, I guess."

I stared at the eight Pokeballs I had on hand.
They still hadn't released Skarmory to my PC box. They said they're trying an experimental medicinal regime, so that he might be able to grow back his pinions and fly again by next Monday. On the other hand, they'll have to keep him an extra few nights, which upset me. I hadn't gotten to console him since his unfair beating at the hands of Weavile.

That left me with Steelix, Magnezone, Magneton, Magcargo, Voltorb, Pineco, Choir, and Tyko.

Well, this match isn't going to be scored. Let's try something a little different.

The fluorescent flood lights bathed the arena in harsh light. The dirt floor was rough, every square foot cratered, depressed, or upheavened. I hadn't gotten a chance to run the terrain renewal system on the high setting yet. Geology was going to be a factor for this match.

Lyra situated herself on the ground level, as close to the arena as the shields let her. This was usual for her- she likes being in the thick of the action, and commanding her Pokémon upfront. I placed myself on the Gym Leader podium.

"Could you at least make this look like it was a close match and not send Typhlosion in first?" I begged her.

"Oops," Lyra responded. Typhlosion was already dashing out onto the field. "Mmmm, sorry. He's a little impatient."

I grumbled.

"Magnezone, you're up first."

I'll consider this a moral victory if I can even down Typhlosion. The badger stamped the ground and stared down Magnezone. He's sizing up my Pokémon. Probably thinking my Steel-type will be easy fodder for his Eruption attack. I'm counting on that.

"Begin," I announced.

"Flamethrower!"

"Thunder Wave!"

Wait, no, Typh's too far for Thunder Wave!

"Close in and T-wave!" I rectified my order.

Typhlosion spewed out a billowing streak of fire and smoke, encompassing Magnezone. Its steel plates glowed and radiated heat, but it didn't seem enough to stop my Pokémon from powering through.

"Sturdy!" Lyra exclaimed.

Yes, Sturdy. Magnezone will survive one Flamethrower, just enough for it to land a Thunder Wave—and Magnezone plopped to the ground, Typhlosion just barely out of Thunder Wave's range. From the still-glowing metal, I surmised that Magnezone had survived the initial Flamethrower only to succumb to a lingering Burn. Darn it.

"Okay, this is going to be difficult."

"Sorry!" Lyra shouted from the opposite side of the arena.
"Magneton."

Magneton doesn't have Sturdy. It can't survive a single Fire attack. If only I could use a long range Thunderbolt to nail the paralysis…

"Thunderbolt!"

"Fire Blast!"

Typhlosion was faster, and his attack had more range. Magneton tried to shoot off a Thunderbolt, but while it was a much faster projectile, the crackling tips of lightning came up three yards short of Typhlosion. Magneton would have to get closer… but the penta-armed fire bomb slammed into it a moment later and exploded into a magnificent ball of incandescence.

"Well, obviously, Steel-types weren't going to work against him," I said to myself. I wish I could just forfeit the match now.

"Who's next? Steelix?" Lyra asked.

"Choir."

"Who?"

She might not know I even keep this Pokémon.

"Oh a Corsola! How cute!"

Yes, cute, and doubly resistant to Fire attacks. And her defense isn't too shabby, either, in case Typhlosion thinks it can down her with a Thunder Punch.

"Rock Blast." Please, let me land one freakin blow…

"Sorry little one! Focus Blast."

She traded fire for chi, but the effect was the same: A whirring energy artillery-shell, an explosion, a cloud of dust, and a fainted Pokémon.

"Tyko, you're next," I said with a sigh. My Prinplup put up a fierce front. She wasn't around the last time Typhlosion rolled through the gym. She didn't witness Onix going down in a single Fire Blast—yes, straight through Rock's Fire-resistance and Sturdy, the difference in power was that bad. The chimney badger had only gotten stronger since then. Forget my Pokémon, I was afraid for my gym's structural integrity should he decide to go all out again. Yet, all this was lost on my rookie.

"Prin prin prin!"

"Alright, Aqua Jet, sidewash."

Lyra seemed confused, unsure whether Prinplup was a pure Water-type, or if it had acquired the Steel-Water typing its evolution was well known for. Just to be safe, she ordered a Thunder Punch.

Typhlosion dashed in on all fours. He'll have to go bipedal to use the Thunder Punch, which will slow him down…

Yep, I was right. Tyko managed to jet away using Aqua Jet, keeping herself out of melee range. Typhlosion chased her down, pounced, and tried a Tackle. Tyko reversed course and Aqua Jetted straight into his chin, flipping him upside down and sending her airborne.
"Bubble Beam."

"Ember."

Tyko's stream of bubbles were countered and popped by an equally voluminous, perfectly accurate stream of embers. My Pokémon landed and took up a defensive posture.

"Wait for him to close in," I cautioned her. "Then Water Gun." I subtly pointed to the ground. That was an indication she should aim for Typhlosion's feet, in the hopes it would slip him up.

It would have worked, too, I think. But Lyra likes being chaotic and unpredictable.

"Overheat!"

"But Tyko is pure Water, she'll resist it!" I exclaimed.

The solid sphere of heat energy flashed outward, enveloping Typhlosion, Tyko, and most of the arena. It was like trying to stare directly into the sun - impossible without blinding oneself. The Fire attack left behind naught but an ash-colored Prinplup in its wake.

"Didn't matter," Lyra answered. "Typhlosion is too strong."

"Well, let's be accurate. Typhlosion's special attack is incredibly high," I stated. Lyra nodded in agreement.

"Whitney's gym has a metric scanner, so we went ahead and measured his Special Attack stat. Wanna know how high it registered?"

"How high?"

"316."

/blankface.

That number might be meaningless to you, but to me, it was dumbfounding.

Magnezone, last time I checked (when he was still a Magneton, granted), had 160 in the Special Attack stat. I thought Magneton was quite exceptional, especially since the other trainers' Pokémon that day averaged under 100. Sabrina's Alakazam took the highest score at 189. That was my measuring stick for "stupidly high Special Attack stat scores".

You've got to keep in mind, these stat measurements aren't very accurate. The machines are just trying to approximate a Pokémon's ability to transform basic, reserve cellular energy into active, elemental energy. It relied on some formula that exceeds my mathematical acumen, and extrapolated data indirectly by observing the amount of damage a Pokémon could do with its special attacks against a target dummy, and applying standard controls based on species, experience, typing, and attack. The result was a concocted number that could be as much as 25% off the "real" power of the Pokémon.

Yet Typhlosion nearly doubled Magneton's power. That's no rounding error. That's strong. That's REALLY strong.

Overheat had charred straight through Tyko's good defenses and Fire resistance, taking her down in one shot. Evidence that 316 might have been too low an estimate. It's not insurmountable; tactics, smarts, and speed can overcome a brute force advantage... but it's not easy.
"Right."

I gathered myself.

"Steelix."

I'll not be keeping my team leader for last this time.

My enormous metal leviathan materialized before me. He rolled over and over, tired and achy from the load he had already had to bear so far today. His gaze went to Typhlosion, looking rather unconcerned by the Fire-type. For him, it must be like- "Just give me a break already."

"It's alright, big boy, this is the last battle for today."

"Rixrix," he replied, a sign of gratitude.

Now, how to survive even a single fiery blow from Typhlosion…

"Typher, Flame Wheel!"

Typhlosion somersaulted forward, curling into a living wheel of flame and rolling its way towards Steelix. She's not so stupid to think a Flame Wheel will bring down Steelix; she must just want to get close and engage in close-quarters-combat. Why?

"Dig," I ordered. This should protect Steelix from the flames.

Steelix dove into the earth. Typhlosion gunned for the massive hole left behind, but the crater and fissures from previous battles hindered his approach. By the time he reached the hole, it had collapsed. Just for good measure, he exhausted a blow-torch flame into the rubble, hoping to squeak some amount of fiery punishment through the cracks. It was useless, the dirt was too compacted and Steelix too deep underground.

"Huh."

Ah!

I just figured it out. Overheat drains a Pokémon's energy reserves. Typhlosion will need a lot of rest before he can use his special attacks at full power again. Lyra is trying to compensate by having him use melee combat… As if she even stands a chance in a contest of brawns.

"Steelix, carve a path. Hinder Street pattern!" I had to yell in the hopes Steelix would hear me underground. It had been awhile since I used this variation on Dig.

"Typhlosion, Dig!" Lyra said. To my shock, Typhlosion clawed his way into the ground, disappearing from sight.

Small and large tremors shook the earth, and occasionally small puffs of dust shot into the air like geysers.

"This is so cool! It's like submarine warfare!" Lyra exclaimed.

"So, subterranean warfare," I corrected snarkily.

"Steelix, I'm sure you've sensed it, but Typhlosion is down there with you! Change of plans, Route 111 Pattern!"
The rumbling increased in magnitude. Churned dirt began rising in giant mounds, being pushed out of the way by underground sculptors.

"If you've got any fire left, use it for jet-torch excavation!" Lyra advised her Pokémon. Shortly thereafter the dust geysers were imbued with smoke and ash.

We both looked on intensely, barely breathing, barely blinking, entire body held poised. Who would discover the other first?

It looks done, I think. I checked the video board. It showed me and Lyra and the status of our Pokémon. One active for Lyra, one active and four fainted for me, and the rest were question marks, as is customary for Pokémon not yet sent out. I was more interested in the bottom middle of the display, however. It slowly cycled through different camera angles of the field. They blipped by, pausing for five seconds on each.

Side angle, sweep angle, opponent shot, Gym Leader shot, come on, come on! Ah! Overhead view! Yes, that's it!

Lyra was too close to the field. She didn't notice the pattern of disturbed earth emerging from the arena.

"Arroooroah!"

A cry came from within the earth.

"Huh?"

"Arrobbooobboo" Typhlosion huffed and bellowed, speaking in a language I couldn't understand. Somehow Lyra comprehended the animalistic tone, though.

"Caves? Follow them!" she ordered.

No! Don't do that! Wait, maybe I can use this.

"Steelix, wait for my signal."

"If Steelix comes up to the surface, use Eruption! If he tries something underground, just Lava Plume!"

Eruption is way too powerful in close quarters, it'll incinerate Steelix no matter how tired Typhlosion is when using it. Lava Plume will be survivable in this state, but in the confines of the tunnels it could burn and disorient Steelix. Gotta trust Steelix's experience with subterranean movement will let him outmaneuver Typhlosion.

A cry and a puff of smoke burst from the center of the arena.

"Now! Earthquake!"

"AH! NO! Typhlosion, surface, surface!"

A great jet of blue pierced the surface, burning a path for Typhlosion to unearth himself. But that was all. No Pokémon emerged from the hole.

I would think the fact that the hole was quickly collapsing upon itself had something to do with that.

"It's a… Sandtomb?" Lyra uttered.
"It's no ordinary Sandtomb," I replied. Steelix has excavated a precise set of caverns beneath the gym floor, supported by narrow beams of dirt. The Earthquake was calibrated to split them in a precise, concentric pattern. The middle of the arena became a sinkhole, and the sides were falling in on top of it. It was acting like an enormous Trapinch sand trap, with Typhlosion caught in the center.

*I'll bury the creature and then Earthquake until he's fainted.*

Typhlosion and Lyra had different ideas.

"Rock Climb!"

I stared in disbelief as Typhlosion clawed his way out of the ground, rising inch by inch despite the continual sinking of the earth beneath him. The Sand Tomb wasn't going to work, I thought.

Strike that: the ground is starting to settle, and he didn't quite manage to free himself. He only got his head, shoulders, and one limb above the surface. The rest of his body was buried and immobilized. Steelix resurfaced and approached, perhaps thinking to take the initiative and bop Typhlosion in like a Whack-a-Diglett. The foe put that notion to rest by belting out Flamethrowers in Steelix's direction.

"Don't approach. Use Earthquake from a distance to finish him off."

Steelix complied. His tail hovered over the dirt, and then began a rapid, vibrating, thumping upon it. The ground shook, cracking in parts, dust rising from the shock of seismic waves. The rumbling reached Typhlosion.

"Eruption!" Lyra commanded.

Too late, too far. It won't be able to touch Steelix, I thought.

Yet, something funny happened to the earth around Typhlosion.

It's liquefying.

"Steelix, stop!" I cried, realizing my mistake.

The Earthquake is loosening the dirt around Typhlosion, allowing his Eruption to penetrate it. With one volcanic blast, the area exploded in a geyser of eye-searing lava. The Pokémon used the explosion to propel himself out of his earthly prison, flying high into the air.

"Stone Edge!"

"Ember!"

Typhlosion whirled around, kicking the remnants of the Eruption towards Steelix. The flecks of lava and ash blinded my Pokémon. He thrashed about, rending the earth into long walls of Stone Edges. He couldn't see the foe, but at least the stalagmite hedges he was unearthing were creating a defensive barrier. Typhlosion landed, attempting to rush in but finding no clear path.

"Focus Blast."

The chi sphere blew a hole in the first row of spikes, but could not penetrate farther. Typhlosion was running low on energy. I've got to take advantage of that, I've got to keep the thing from finishing Steelix. Stall, stall, STALL!

"Dig!"
"Bulldoze!"

Steelix attempted to dive back into the ground. Typhlosion plowed through the remaining spike walls, reached the rapidly vanishing Steelix, and pounced. He caught the tip of Steelix's tail between his claws, and heaved. My Pokémon was ripped from the earth and thrown across the room.

"Steelix, back up!"

"Keep pushing! Flamethrower!"

"Stone Edge, defensive, again!"

The incoming flames met cold stone and were abated. Typhlosion didn't lose time in rippling off the Flamethrowers, though; he was dashing sideways to get a better shot.

"Fissure, perpendicular!" My order, for Steelix, which he carried out. It took a massive, building-rattling slash with his tail, but he managed to crack open the arena floor from sideline to sideline. A chasm, ten feet wide and twenty feet deep, split the battlefield neatly in two.

"If he tries to jump that, nail him with Knock Down!" I told my Pokémon.

"Hmmm." Lyra paced from side to side, trying to get a better view of the gap. For the first time, she doesn't seem to know what to do right off the bat. Her hat had come off and was gripped tight in her hand.

"Steelix, fortress!"

Stone Edges and Rock Slides were combined and heaped atop one another. Steelix was building himself a nest of compact earth, impervious to ranged flame attacks.

"Sunny Day!" Lyra finally commanded. I wrinkled my brow.

That should power up his Fire attacks. Indeed, once the air became heavy with heat and the lights seemed like they were shining with thrice the intensity, Typhlosion's next round of Flamethrowers were not so easily blocked. Steelix was forced to bury himself in the back of the hastily constructed Stone Hedge for protection.

"Don't go purely defensive. Rock Throw!"

Steelix whipped his tail, sending bits of his cover flying at Typhlosion's location. The badger nimbly dodged.

"Great, air's perfect. Solar Beam!"

Solar-what?

"Solar-cuts-great-swaths-through-fortress-Deathray" I instantly renamed it. The stone spires were obliterated. The rock was vaporized, leaving nothing but a flat field of stalagmite stumps, and a cowering Steelix.

"Now jump over!"

Typhlosion grumbled, stepped back, and made a running leap.

He fell short.
The Pokémon disappeared beneath the lip of the chasm.

"Yes!" I cried.

I knew it. Typhlosion can't carry the load all by himself. Even if none of my Pokémon are a match for him, facing all of them consecutively was wearing his stamina ragged. The toil of battle finally caught up with him, he couldn't make the jump.

"Steelix, Rock Slide, bury him for good!"

"Schteeeee-

"Eruption!"

The ground all around Steelix melted. The erupting explosion caught him right beneath the torso, tossing and torturing him simultaneously.

"Overheat!"

If the Eruption wasn't good enough, the perfectly spherical wave of pure heat was more than enough for overkill. Steelix flopped to the arena floor, burnt, black, and knocked out.

"Recall!"

I brought him back to his Pokeball before he suffered much more pain.

"Whew!" Lyra exclaimed.

I eyed her Typhlosion. He was pulling himself from the ground, shivering and shaking, muddied, bloodied, with globs of lava still dripping off his backside.

My guess is that after he jumped and missed the chasm edge, he clung to the wall and dug from there to a point underneath Steelix. I should have had Steelix confirm his location before relaxing. Whoops.

"Pretty good of you, that sneak attack," I complimented.

"It was nothing," she replied. "Who's last?"

I half-smiled.

"Voltorb."

The Pokeball and the Pokémon could hardly be differentiated. Voltorb was all too happy to bounce around like a billiard ball upon being released.

It is rare I use it in battle. It's relishing the prospect. Even I'm looking forward to it… even though Steelix fell, the effort of fainting him really took a toll on Typhlosion. It looks like one or two Sparks might drop him. The Pokémon is heaving heavily, struggling for breath and dropped down on all fours.

"Voltorb, quick, before it tries anything else funny!"

"Typher, return!"

Voltorb chased Typhlosion all the length of the chasm, to the edge of the arena. Typhlosion went
parkour on the shields, using a wall-dash to make it over the gap it otherwise couldn't leap.

"Voltorb, bounce across."

Easy said, easier done. The living pokeball flitted across the gap.

"Now intercept it!"

Voltorb moved in to cut off Typhlosion from reaching the Pokeball's recall range, but the thin red beam reached out and snatched the tired Pokémon up anyways. Lyra herself had dashed across the sideline to reach her Pokémon faster. Voltorb found itself Wild Charging an Umbreon instead.

"Darn it! Okay, it's still essentially out of the game. Come on Voltorb, let's sweep Lyra's team together!"

"Torba torba torba!" my first Pokémon cried enthusiastically.

"Safeguard!" Lyra ordered first of her Dark type tank.

Umbreon began chanting in a low voice. "Umbra umbera omu ombra." The magic incantation materialized as shining runes in the air, which dissipated into sparkles. It was likely done to prevent Voltorb from paralyzing or confusing her team.

"Sonic Boom!" We can bypass the dark critter's considerable defenses with this.

"Foul Play!"

Umbreon weaved from side to side, advancing in the face of wave after wave of Sonic Boom. It got hit plenty of times, but not enough to halt its charge. It headbutted Voltorb, throwing it into the air, then smacked it with its paws. Shouldn't do too much damage, Foul Play relies on redirecting the opponent's offensive power back at it, using feints, throws, trips, and counters- kind of hard to do when the opponent is nothing more than an underpowered plastic ball.

"Charge Beam!"

Voltorb focused an electrical conduit on Umbreon. The electricity ran down the beam's length and into Umbreon, triggering the biochemical reactions in its cells, causing a completed circuit. The empowered current ran back up the beam and into Voltorb, powering up its special attack.

"Light Screen!"

"Buying time isn't in your best interest," I warned Lyra. "Charge Beam, again!"

"Moonlight!"

The more they stall, though, the higher Voltorb's special attack goes. In the meantime, their Safeguard and Light Screen gradually wear out. How long until Umbreon needs to renew them? Two minutes? Five? If I can guess the timing, Umbreon won't have time to reestablish them before Voltorb KO's it.

Several minutes later, Umbreon was still stalling.

"Charge Beam!"

"Toxic!"
Umbreon's no Poison-type, its aim and range with the poison bolts was atrocious. My Pokémon easily scooted out of the way.

Oh I see! Umbreon knows its limitations; it's just firing the blobs every which-way. They're not dissipating at all, but creating a poisonous minefield. If this keeps up, Voltorb is going to run out of room to dodge them.

Yet, I noticed a faint shimmer, like a light golden veil popping around Umbreon. Lyra hasn't seen that her Safeguard and Light Screen are gone. Good.

"Voltorb, Magic Coat the Toxic back at it!"

Lyra realized her oversight, but recovered and reacted before her Pokémon got itself poisoned.

"Umbreon, stop! Safe- nah, it's got too many stat ups, Light Screen!"

Shoot. Voltorb doesn't get the same practice time as my main team members. It doesn't know any of the code words, covert signals, or advanced tactics we've developed. I have to tell it what to do manually, which gave Lyra time enough to change her Pokémon's strategy. No matter. She still messed up.

"Thunder Wave!"

"Synchronize!" Lyra exclaimed, excited.

Voltorb was hedged in close to Umbreon by the Toxic patches, and so landing the paralysis was practically guaranteed. Indeed, the electrical sheen wrapped around and jolted Umbreon hard. A silver glow seemed to reflect the Thunder Wave right back at Voltorb, who stood oblivious of it.

"Electric-types are resistant to paralysis, you know. Synchronize won't work very well," I said with much smugness. Lyra took my smug smirk and threw it right back at me.

"Umbreon isn't much bothered by paralysis either, or any status attack for that matter. Heal Bell!"

Yet, Umbreon shivered in place and could not execute its orders right away. It doesn't help that you are able to cure the paralysis if you get fully paralyzed. Ha! This round is mine!

"Electro Ball!" I finally ordered.

Voltorb's only good attribute is speed, and here it put it on display. It raced around Umbreon in a wide arc, smashed into the shield wall, bounced, and came flying back towards the target with a vengeance. An electrical charge skittered across its shell.

"Fire!"

"Umbreon, Heal-"

Her command was lost in the deafening noise of Electro Ball screeching off. It was faster than a bullet- that is to say, no one actually saw it travel the thirty yards across the field; all that was visible were the shockwaves and the crackling explosion where it collided with Umbreon.

I held my breath…

The Dark-type Eevee gently knelt to the ground and fainted. A ghost of the Pokémon seemed to float off into the air, transient and surreal. I chalked it up to an afterimage of the electrical fireworks.
Voltorb bounced in glee. It's been a long time since it knocked a Pokémon out in battle. Figures that it would be really excited by the feat. Too excited… Voltorb won't stop bouncing. Okay, odd, it's stopped bouncing, but hasn't settled down yet. There's a glow surrounding it. Electromagnetic leakage from the stored electrical charge? No, it's too white, soft, and slow. Actually it's quite strange.

I was puzzled by the mysterious shroud of energy emanating from my Pokémon. At first I thought it was an attack Umbreon had unleashed before it fainted. Only when Voltorb became completely covered in a white sheen and began growing, did I comprehend.

Eleven years, eleven months, and three days. That's how long it's been since I received my first Pokémon. That's how long it's taken for me to evolve my first Pokémon. It's truly bittersweet.

"Finally," I whispered. "I'm so sorry, Volty. So sorry I made you wait this long."

Voltorb's body barely changed. The most noticeable effect was the size difference. Its size ballooned from basket-ball to wrecking-ball girth. Its halves switched colors as well, something I hadn't noticed before.

"E-Lec-Trode. Electrode."

I'm glad, but also tearful. After what I went through with Graveler, Voltorb easily could have gone the same route, despising me for my neglect. Instead, it never faltered in its boundless affection for me and always enjoyed every time I played or battled with it, no matter how long it had to wait. I always assumed it was because the doofus was so simple-minded and trusting. If that was the case, I hope this is sufficient reward for waiting so patiently.

I cracked an enormous smile.

"Electrode, are you tired, or can you finish this battle?"

"Troda!"

Affirmative. Electrode still has lots of energy to fight with. I suppose that's the benefit of storing evolution energy over the course of eleven years, as opposed to a few months.

"Umbreon is down. Typhlosion is pretty much KO'd by puffing on him. I have a brand new Electrode to battle with. I'm actually really interested in how this turns out!" I said. "Do you have a ground type?"

Lyra shook her head in the negative.

"No I don't. But don't you think you're being premature in celebrating?"

"Well, I'm not too confident Electrode can solo four of your team members, but it should be interesting to try! He does have a lot of Charge Beams stored up now."

Lyra sighed, acting like she wasn't the least bit impressed or interested.

"I thought this was going to be closer. You gave Silver such a hard time! Are you really not that good, or are you just not trying?"

"Hey, don't criticize me. What was I supposed to do? Typhlosion is still way too strong for me." The last time we fought, I fainted her first two Pokémon, before she released Typhlosion. Exactly six Fire attacks later, I had lost 0-4. "At least I managed to down him this time. That's an improvement."
"What makes you think you've downed him?" Lyra asked innocently.

"He's low on health and stamina, there's no way he'd be able to attack or take the slightest damage, so…"

"Typhlosion, please rejoin us," she said interrupting.

And to my utter astonishment, a roaring, angry, healthy Typhlosion reappeared on the battlefield. I took an unconscious step backwards, eyes going wide. Electrode retreated as far as it was able.

"It can't be… how?" I uttered.

"It wasn't Electro Ball that finished Umbreon off- it was Healing Wish."

Healing… Wish… really? I missed that?! That's depressing!

"Electro Ball!" I quickly commanded. If Electrode acts fast enough, it can finish off Typhlosion before he has a chance to react-

"Blast Burn."

The arena disappeared behind an endless wall of explosions. For one solid minute I stared in dazed shock as fiery explosive cloud after fiery explosive cloud blossomed to life, expanded, and then was overwhelmed by another. The shields whined, shimmered, and eventually turned completely opaque. The amount of destructive energy pounding every square millimeter of the arena had caused the shields to seal off the area completely. Not one iota of energy, nor one single air molecule went in or out. It was absolutely necessary: a single inch yielded, and a gout of flame capable of melting through the gym walls and setting the building on fire would burst out. Such was the power and fury being unleashed upon my Pokémon.

It officially took five minutes and twenty seconds more for the match to end. That was how long it took for the smoke to clear and the charred-black figure of Electrode to become visible. Typhlosion was hunkering down in a curled position, exhausted and singed by his own attack.

"That's how the festival tower got burned down," Lyra commented offhand. "Too bad Charizard flew out of range, or I would of got him."

I dared to step out onto the arena floor. The clay was too hot to step on, even with sandals.

"Volt- I mean Electrode, return." I collected my Pokémon, and then skirted the field until I was standing next to Lyra.

"He's a monster," I said with a sigh.

We watched Typhlosion uncurl, stretch, and slowly plod around the battlefield. He sniffed at various rock and ash formations, and then pranced his way over to us.

"Good boy! Nice job!"

Lyra poked her Pokémon on the nose. That was the most she could do to show her affection; his fur was glowing like embers.

"Typhlosion, well, good game." I curtsied before him to show respect. "You are truly the strongest Pokémon I have ever met."

Typhlosion happily growled in acknowledgment.
"Heh. Well, we can have a rematch sometime?" Lyra suggested.

"Sometime a long time from now," I responded. "Give me time to prepare next time. I'll need a strategy if I'm going to take on Volcano God here."

"Ah, right, sorry about that. I guess it wasn't fair of me to challenge you right after a regular work day."

"You're just now realizing that?"

"Sorry, I'm kind of a ditz!" she acknowledged, throwing her hands up.

"Not kind of, you are a major ditz. Come on." I yelled over my shoulder. "Hey Connie, close up shop!"

"I want to go home!"

"Then close up faster!"

"You're a dick, Jasmine!"

"I get dicked on by my mother, you get dicked on by me. Natural order of progression. Hand it off to the twerps."

"I know, I know, bitching goes up the chain of command, douchebaggery goes down it." Connie limped her way to the janitor closet. I myself headed to the lobby, stopping long enough to deposit my Pokémon in the healing machine.

Erika joined us at the door.

"That was a terrific performance by Typhlosion," she complimented.

"Were you watching the match? I didn't see you."

"I was in the office conducting a business call, but I watched on the video feed. It was a wonderful match, even if the results were one-sided."

I shrugged.

"I expected to lose, and it's not like it affects my probation ratio. No big deal."

"Hmm," Lyra is looking distant. "If Silver had such a rough time with you, does that mean he's not as good as I thought? Or am I just that strong?"

"Transitive fallacy. You can't compare the three of us on the basis of one match. I was prepared and had good matchups against Silver. You have a titan who happens to be my greatest weakness. If you want to measure yourself you ought to just fight him directly."

She shook her head.

"He refuses to battle me anymore. He says it's too humiliating to lose the same way every time."

"I can empathize."

The healing machine dinged. I took most of my Pokémon and deposited them into the PC, keeping only Steelix and Electrode. The former was released onto the street.
"Any plans for tonight? Can we go to downtown?" Lyra asked.

"Sorry, but my workload is just starting for today," I answered.

She looked at me funnily. I had already explained the situation to Erika, but repeated it for Lyra's sake.

"My mother has me enslaved. She's putting on a party this weekend at the Battle Tower and I have to help her."

"A party? I want to go!"

"Sorry, it's invitation only."

"Who is it for?"

"Some group of business people. They specialize in Pokémon products and use the group to promote their interests to local politicians. Just because their business is somewhat related to Pokémon battling my Mother thought it would be a great idea to draft me into the planning and preparations. Too bad it's invite only; I would have loved if you and Erika could come."

"I checked out their membership policy, but the process to join them is very expensive and takes several months," Erika said. "I'm sorry we can't keep you company."

"It'll be alright. Be glad you don't have to suffer the upper-crust snobs like me."

I bowed my head.

Sunday had been nine hours of crisscrossing Olivine, transporting one load of supplies after another. It wasn't enough that we had to pack, move, and unpack several metric tons of food, decorations, equipment, and merchandise; it all had to be carefully organized and documented. My mother is typically anal about details, but apparently this organization is adding its own layer of obtuseness in its demands.

"Here, hop on."

I gestured to Steelix. I took my seat at the front of his head, with Lyra and Erika clinging on behind me. There was just enough room for the three of us- well, it'd be more fair to say Steelix is so large he can carry three adult women atop his head alone. We set out all together, idly chatting as we went.

"Where to?"

"Lighthouse first, to take care of Amphy and Spectra. Then Erika's place. Then wherever you're staying," I said to Lyra.

"That's alright, she's staying with me again," Erika said.

"Really?"

"We've discussed certain ground rules this time," Erika said in a strict tone, warily eyeing Lyra. The latter couldn't help but crack a grin.

"It's alright. Ethan and Silver are bunking at the Pokecenter tonight."

"Why not with you?"
"Boys night!" was all he said.

"That sounds like fun," I said sarcastically.

"Perhaps they're up to dirty deeds," Erika suggested playfully. Lyra lit up at the suggestion.

"If only! They'd be the most beautiful yaoi couple ever!"

"Oh please."

"It's true! They're meant for each other! That time they kissed, it was like a picture of heaven!"

"You are too poetic, I think," Erika said.

"Why'd they kiss?"

"There was an LGBT festival in the National Park. I thought it would be funny if they pretended to be lovers, so I blackmailed them into kissing on stage."

"Eww."

"What did you use to extort them?"

"Well, Silver had constipation problems, something he ate in Goldenrod that morning, and he has this weird habit that he wears adult diapers when he gets diarrhea. So I just threatened to pull down his pants if he didn't go along."

"You're evil," I shot at her, but couldn't stifle my laughter.

"And Ethan?" Erika enquired.

"I just told him I'd-" she stopped herself mid-sentence. "Oh..."

"What? Tell us!"

"I can't. He's really sensitive about that fetish, he'd kill me if I told you."

"You can tell us. He'll never know."

She fidgeted, opened her mouth, but then fell silent. "He made me promise," she explained.

"Oh, fine."

"It's alright, I don't need to hear about whatever gross thing it is he's into," I said.

Ethan struck me as a perfectly normal, vanilla, un-vulgar kind of guy. It's hard to imagine him having any abnormal fetishes in the first place. What Lyra is saying makes me curious... but not enough to press her for details. It might be something I don't want to know.

Strange. Everybody hides those kinds of details from each other. I don't tell Erika or Lyra what makes me horny, because it would be too embarrassing. But I wonder what they would think of me if I did divulge those secrets? And what kinds of secret fetishes are they hiding from me?

It's unsettling, actually. All of humanity pretends sex doesn't exist, but it's there and almost everyone engages in it at some point in their lives. Why must it be such a secret, hidden affair? Why is it so embarrassing to share? I know there must be some psychological or genetic reason, but I've never
found an answer that satisfies me. Is it because we're a judgmental species? Or does it arise from jealousy? Either way, it feels repressive—the shaming, I mean.

"Are you curious?" Erika asked me, noticing my vacant, preoccupied look.

"Eh? Oh. No, it's not that."

"What is it then?"

How to organize my thoughts?

"I… never mind. Mmmm. That's not that…" I'm feeling frustrated trying to talk about this and it's showing. Grr. "I was wondering, you know, what it would be like if we didn't have shame. If we could all just share these things without being afraid of what others will think of us."

"It would be a strange world," Erika replied.

"Sounds pretty neat if you ask me," Lyra chimed in. "As far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter what others think of me. If they're going to judge me, that's more a reflection on them and their own bigotry. Something Silver taught me."

"So you're okay talking about sex openly?" I inquired.

"Of course. I don't have any qualms about it. But, I guess, I do respect others if they don't want to share. It's kind of a person by person decision."

"But if you talk about your own exploits, wouldn't that indirectly expose Ethan?" I asked.

"Ahaha! You're right, you're right. I guess I need to keep my trap shut. He is my boyfriend after all, wouldn't want to give him another reason to scold me."

"You're close to Ethan, aren't you?"

Lyra paused to think.

"I guess you could say that. We've been friends since we were babies."

"What about Silver? Has he never asked you out?" I asked.

"No, never. Really, he's a great guy, and I wouldn't turn him down if I were single. But he's so focused on his goals, I don't know if he has any room in his life for romance." Lyra was looking off into the distance, as if contemplating something meaningful. It's unusual to see her like this. "Ethan asked me out first. I like that, a guy with confidence."

Erika pressed her. "But if you had the choice, who would you really want to be dating? Ethan or Silver?"

"Mmmm."

She took a long time to answer. A very long time.

"Ethan. They're both great in their own way. Silver is just too… stand-offish. It makes him seem anti-social, even if he doesn't realize or want to be that way. It gets frustrating trying to be his friend. Ethan is easier to be around."

"What's it like, being in a relationship?" I asked.
"Exciting!" she declared. "It doesn't really matter if we're fighting or loving on each other, there's never really a dull moment. Being a part of someone else's life can be taxing, but it also means someone is always there who's willing to put up with you and have fun with you or cuddle with you. Ethan loves cuddling, that's a fetish he's more than willing to admit. He makes sure I always feel wanted."

My heart could melt.

What is this feeling? Envy? Yes, that's right.

When will Morty and I get to that stage? Where we're just in love and living and enjoying being a part of each other's lives? I think, more than anything in the world, I want that. Sex doesn't matter so much: it's the cherry on top of the ice cream, trite and transient by itself, but wonderful when used to flavor the overall relationship. Yet, I don't care that much for cherries, I want my ice cream. I want to be in love with, and loved by, someone who accepts me for who I am- not some lust-driven charade, like Warren, but real and meaningful love.

Yet, Morty is kind of standoffish, and secretive, and he lives too far away to see on a daily basis. It's depressing. I keep telling myself he'll make the effort to be with me, because he's head over heels for me, but every time we get close to each other, something thorny pushes us away.

I wonder if it's because he feels I'm still too reticent, that I don't want to commit to the physical part of the relationship, that he's holding back. It ought to be the other way around. We should become friends first, and then lovers. That's probably not how boys feel, though. He doesn't want to invest in a relationship that might never elevate to that level. What's the saying? "A relationship without physical intimacy is just an elaborate friendship" (something like that, although the actual quote was funnier).

I feel bad about it. I really don't want to sleep with Morty just yet. I'm flustered and anxious and ill-prepared, and worried about STD's and oh god oh god- pregnancy! How could I forget that?

My throat tightened.

My heart fluttered.

No, I don't think… I could handle… mothering a child by Morty… right now. Not at all.

Um…

I winced, and repressed the notion as deep down as I could.

I should be ready to face Morty by December 10th. I should know then whether I'll be able to keep my job, and with that, I can relax, evaluate my feelings, and make a definitive conclusion whether I want him to be my first. Should I decide to go ahead with it, I'll be triple-sure to use protection.

In the mean time, I want to gather all the advice and information I can. It's classic me- when faced with a great challenge, I feel sick and scared unless I've studied my butt off in preparation.

Here's someone who is my best chance to see what a functional sexual relationship is all about. Lyra and Ethan have been doing it regularly, and are monogamous, and she intuitively understands my shy feelings on the matter. Whitney is too careless, and Erika overly mature, so neither of them were really that good to poll. If there were anyone I could trust with this question, it would be Lyra.

Now, how to broach the subject?
"Hey, Lyra."

"Hmm?"

I had broken in to her and Erika's conversation, but they paused to allow me to speak. Nothing came out of my mouth, though.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing."

"It's never nothing with you, Jasmine." Erika looked worried.

"Is something bothering you?"

"Um, you could kind of sort of say that. Bothering is a really too strong a word, it makes it sound like I have a problem, and flustered might be slightly more accurate..." My rambling did not amuse Erika.

"Is this to do with our conversation on the boat?"

"No." I just said 'no' out of reflex. "Um, okay, I guess it's tangentially related."

"It's okay if it's too sensitive, let's just drop it and move on. I'd rather talk about shopping-"

"Do you guys have sex often?" I blurted.

"Hmm? Hey, wait, Jasmine did you really just ask that?"

Did I really just ask that? Really? The me-Me? As in, not me-possessed-by-Misdreavus-Me?

"Yes," I let out tentatively.

"What's wrong with you? I thought you were the token prude of our group."

"She's having a 'phase'" Erika explained. She looks rather pleased to see me bringing this taboo subject up. "Please indulge her."

"Okay..." Lyra eyed me suspiciously. "Yeah, fairly often. Couple times a week, and probably more if we bothered to settle down."

"Why not try that? Settling down?"

"Too boring. It's great but I wouldn't want to give up travelling. You can't experience Pokémon staying in one place forever."

"I wonder about that," I grumbled. Sure, she might find constant travel fun and exciting, but I think I would get annoyed not knowing where I was sleeping each night. "Is it really that much fun? Sex, I mean."

"Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?"

"I had the impression growing up that women just do it to please their man."

"Oh no way. What universe did you grow up in? Of course I love doing it for my own pleasure! I wouldn't do it otherwise. Heck, I think I like doing it more often than Ethan."
"Really?"
"Oye, of course! I usually jump him without warning, he seems to like that. Oh, but Erika, I'm sorry, we won't do that at your place anymore," she said in apology. "I just got carried away and forgot where we were."

"It's not so much that you were engaging in the act in my house, but that you were keeping me up at night, and you weren't even trying to clean up after yourselves."

"Oh! I see."
"Next time, if you must, be more discreet."

"Hahahaha! Thanks! We'll keep it under control. I suppose the chocolate milk was too much."

"Indeed."

?? That's weird, but also curiously funny. Chocolate milk and sex go together… how?

"Hehe." I couldn't help but giggle. "You're being so candid."

"Hmm? Still thinking about how sex is supposed to be taboo?"

I nodded.

"Don't worry about it. We're friends!"

"We Gym Leaders are quite a liberal bunch," Erika offered. "You don't have to feel like such things are forbidden topics. We won't judge you. Express yourself as freely as you want to."

"Sorry, I'm just not used to it."

"Did you parents raise you strictly?" she asked me.

...

My chest swelled and my fists tightened into hard little balls.

"No, not too much," I lied.

That sounds weak and unconvincing.

"I'm just a little squeamish by nature. You know me. I haven't opened up that much in the last month," I added.

"Well, if you ever feel uncomfortable about the subject, just tell us and we will tone it down."

"Thanks, but I think I'm getting over myself, slowly." I assured her. "It is kind of new to me, and a struggle. Things between me and Morty… I feel like it's going fast and I'm not sure if it's proper."

"You're having doubts?" Erika asked.

"Some."

"Then it is going too fast."

"Oh."
"The proper pace of a relationship isn't preset by some universal code. It is based on the feelings of the participants. If you feel like you're unsure and flustered, you should slow down."

"But, I feel pressured."

"By Morty?"

"Yes. No! Okay, a little by Morty, but mostly by my job. I'm in Olivine, he's in Ecruteak, we don't get to see each other too often. So when we do, I feel like I have to maximize my experience in that little frame of time. We don't have time to do the things regular couples do, like walks in the park, or cooking and sharing a dinner, or shared chores, or dates, really."

Almost every single time I've seen Morty, it was on the pretense of business. Of course, we're both Gym Leaders and so Pokémon is a love that we both share and something that brings us together. Recently, my inhibitions have loosened to the point of allowing me to kiss Morty, and so I've wanted to make out with him as much as possible when I see him. Pokémon affairs and kissing- by the time those two are out of the way, time's up and we have to leave each other again. It would be nice if we could just relax together.

Mother was right about one thing, this long-distance relationship thing was torture.

"I know how you feel," Lyra assured me. "Once me and Ethan officially hooked up, we kept trying the same old routine- going where we wanted, doing what we wanted, even if that meant splitting up for a time. We realized, though, you can't maintain a relationship like that. You've got to spend a lot of time together."

"Well, that depends on the strength of the bond, but generally is true," Erika added. "Sometimes, one partner has to make sacrifices in order to be close to the other."

"Mother warned me about that. I'm worried that I'll be the one that has to make all the sacrifices."

"Nonsense."

"But it's looking that way, right? If I fail probation, at least that frees me up to move to Ecruteak."

"Well, that could be your backup plan," Lyra said.

"That is my backup plan," I said frankly. "Although Morty was kind of evasive when I brought it up."

"He just didn't like the idea of you thinking about failing probation," Erika assured me. "He told me as much."

"Ugh. Annoying. I'm a realist, I like to have contingencies."

"But don't make your contingencies your goal," Erika warned.

"Unless you really do want to move to Ecruteak to be with Morty," Lyra said.

"I..." I lilted off into silence.

Unfortunately, they were willing to give me the time needed to answer. It felt awkward.

"I've been thinking about probation. I don't know how it's going to turn out. Hopefully I'll pass."
Maybe I won't. It depends on different things. But regardless, once it's over, I've told myself I was going to give some serious thought about what I want to do with my life, and my relationship with Morty….” I paused. They really were my best my friends, right? So I can be free and open here? Ah…. no, I can't possibly bring myself to… screw it. I divulged my thought in one quick rush: "I was thinking about taking him to bed after the 10th."

"Next week?"

"I mean December 10th, when probation ends."

"Oh, duh."

Having gotten over Lyra's initial clarification, the pair proceeded to exchange shocked, astounded faces. I know, right? The shiest, most innocent, most asexual virgin they'd ever known had just explicitly admitted wanting to have sex with someone. I hope they don't keep doing this all the way until the actual deed is done. It makes me feel like losing one's virginity really is that big a deal, and that makes me more nervous.

Erika recovered first and patted me on the shoulder.

"No wonder you've been so inquisitive lately. What made you feel this way?"

It wasn't that I was too embarrassed to give an answer, but that I couldn't pinpoint what exactly had brought me to this nymphatic state. There were reasons for any given circumstance leading up to it, but no underlying cause. It seemed the totality of the universe had formerly conspired to compel me towards misery, mysandry, and prudery, and was now bending backwards and reversing coarse.

Of course, it really began with Morty making fun of me at the gala. It could be that it was something small and insignificant, but started to snowball until it became the most pressing issue in my life.

"It might be that simple," I said to myself, eliciting puzzled looks from my passengers. "Remember on the boat, how I said I felt left out when Morty teased me for being a virgin?"

"Something to that effect," Erika acknowledged. "We had a girls chat on the ride home from Goldenrod," she explained to Lyra.

"Maybe I just got fed up with blaming others, and decided to do something about it myself." I lowered my voice. I wanted to add, so badly, what had bothered me into reading that romance novel, which led to my masturbation session, which Morty walked in on. But I can't. I just can't tell them.

Because while slut-shaming seems farcical to me, there's a deeper, deadlier shame in admitting that I still yearned for someone who betrayed me. Of course he wouldn't come back, and of course I would have to refuse him- out of pride, and spite, and self-respect, and my own well-being- but for a moment I had imagined what my life would have been like if that young man had simply said "I love you too". I think I could have been happy, and lived on happily, discovering sexual intimacy, enjoying romantic simplicity, no longer innocent but yet uncorrupted, and completely ignorant of the dark secret that underlies my entire existence. As I read the steamy chapter of the book, a chance of imagination altered that fantasy, swapping that boy with Morty. Although fleeting and suppressed, that fantasy has now become a dream and a goal, one I am striving for.

I do remember things…
"Mommy, Mommy, guess what!"
"What is it Jasmine?"
"I want sex!"
"What the? Where did you hear that from? What are you thinking?!"
"I want sex! I want it badly!"
"I… Jasmine, you're seven years old- do you even know what sex is?"
"Ellie told me! It feels good and it makes babies! I want a baby, so I want sex!"
"This is outrageous. Jasmine, stop, quiet down. This is absurd. No, sex is not good for you. It is wrong. Do you hear me? WRONG!"
"Huh? Why is it wrong?"
"It just is. It's too complicated for you, wait until you're older and I'll explain."
"How old?"
"Fifteen."
"Fifteen? But that's… fifteen to ten is five, five minus seven- no, seven minus five is two, ten minus two is eight…. EIGHT years from now?! That's too long! By then I'll be an old person!"
"Quiet! And don't say "sex", it's a dirty word, like the F-word and B-word, okay? It's a bad word, tell me you won't say it again!"
"I promise not to say it again."
"That Ellie would tell you such things… Mrs. Porter does not know how to raise her children."
"Honey, calm down."
"How can I be calm?!"
"Take a deep breath. Here. Okay, just have a word with Mrs. Porter, tell her she needs to mind her daughter's interaction with younger children."
"It's vulgar!"
"I know it is, but please don't antagonize Mrs. Porter. We can't afford another baby-sitter."

I was seven when I first decided I wanted to have sex. Mother quickly disabused me of that notion, but it didn't stop me from wondering. At that point, I didn't even know the faintest thing about it, not even that it required a boy. All I knew was that I liked playing House, with the Mommy and Daddy and Baby, and that this "sex" thing was the method for creating said baby. I was totally ignorant of
the implications of what I had told my Mother that day. That is, until I was 12…

A knock on the bathroom door:

"Jasmine, you've been in there too long. Hurry up and get to bed."

"Yes Father!"

I obediently climbed out of the shower, dried off, and attended to my nightly toiletries. It was a Thursday night, I remember, because tomorrow would be Friday and I was glad I only had to deal with that blond baka for one more day. On the other hand, Fridays meant I shared five of my six class periods with that same blond baka.

"Whhhhhyy?!" I flopped face-first onto my bed, naked and mostly dry.

He's such a pest. Yesterday he convinced all the guys to play Shadow Tag with my shadow; they were all stomping on it and counting points every time they landed on it. It looked stupid and was stupid but they thought it was hilarious, and the other girls thought the boys were hilarious and didn't help me. I ended up sweep-kicking Morty when he made his advance and tripping him on the hard gym floor. It was unfair that I was the one who got in trouble for it, but at least the sight of a yowling, bruised Morty scared off the other boys.

"He's stupid. Boys are all stupid. Where are the men? I wish Hatori would come and save me." But Hatori was from an anime, he wasn't real and he wasn't coming to save me. Even if someone like Hatori existed in my grade, he wouldn't date me. All the boys shy away from me- whether by Morty's machinations, or out of fear of my temper, they never approached me with genuine romantic interest.

"Grrr!"

I growled into one of my pillows, upset at the world.

My body tensed, scrunched up, and flexed. My thighs caught hold of another pillow between them and squeezed. That's when I noticed an odd, faint sensation coming from my pee-wee area.

"Hmmm."

Instinct told me to squeeze tighter, and then relax. The sensation came in clearer. It felt… good.

What's up with this? I've never felt this before.

I pushed with my toes, moving my body forward, rubbing my pelvic region against the pillow. There was no mistaking it, this feeling existed and felt good. It took a few minutes and a few repetitions to realize it was coming from the little bump above my pee-wee hole (I didn't know to call it a clitoris yet), and the harder I rubbed it, the better it felt.

I wanted more. I couldn't get more in the position I was in, so I leaned up, in a kneeling position.

Much better. I could rock my hips as much as I wanted, and I did, and the feeling got so intense I was quivering from head to toe. It was building up, like a hose under pressure, and I dearly wanted to see what happened when it was released.
"Ah!"

It came very suddenly, before I was expecting it. A jolt of spasms rippling outwards in concentric waves from my privates. My muscles clamped up, too stunned to keep me upright. I collapsed onto my hands and knees, eyes closed, concentrating wholly on the wonderful, exciting, and somewhat scary sensations gripping my body.

"Am I sick?" were the first words out of my mouth.

The next day during lunch, in the school library, I looked up anything I could on what just happened. It was difficult getting past the school filters, but eventually I found fruit in chat forums for teens. There I discovered the words "masturbation" and "orgasm", and found the link between what I had experienced and what had long been a mystery to me- specifically what action the word "sex" referred to, and its purpose.

"Sex feels good, and it's where babies come from," I whispered, remembering what Ellie had told us. I kept reading, summarizing what I discovered in whispered utterances.

"Sex happens between a boy and girl? No…"

This was meant to be done with a boy? No way!

It all became clear.

My desire for a kind, chivalrous man like Hatori, my fantasy of being a mommy, the sensations I felt while rubbing myself, sex and its role in reproduction, the mystery of how babies came about- all connected. This was my crash course in human existence, the seeming answer to why we were here. Learning it all at once at the age of twelve, it was an epiphany of universe-shattering proportions.

Discovering the truth about sex, my first menstruation, my first masturbation, and noticing boys for the first time- normal, everyday experiences all- planted the seed of desire in me, hidden deep down, nourishing itself with every new experience and every life lesson, waiting until the proper age and circumstances allowed it to blossom.

So of course, I was destined to be a nympho, perhaps even a slut, from an early age, despite the best efforts of Mother. I myself had stumbled into a world of enchantment, and without guidance, would have rushed headlong at the first attractive opportunity to indulge in it.

Then three years later she and that bastard found a way to bury that seed of desire under ten-thousand tons of concrete.

"I'm digging up a part of me that was buried long ago," I told my friends cryptically. I then laughed, thinking I had made a lame pun, considering my long-forgotten dreams of being an archeologist. Calming, I continued. "I made a decision to do that. To see if changing myself would make me happy, instead of waiting for the world to conform to my reticence. I felt like the world wouldn't change for me, it would just ignore me and forget me. I don't want to be abandoned. So I'm giving this romance thing a chance. It's been rough, but I think it's trending upwards. Here's hoping, right?"

"Here's hoping," Erika said with a half-smile.
"You're gonna love it. Sex is Arceus' natural, healthy drug for humans. It's great. It's incredible… It's making me horny. Garr! Why'd Ethan pick tonight to ditch me?!

Lyra fussed and fumed and clutched her hat to her chest.

"So should I go for it?" I asked.

"Yes!" Lyra cried.

"If you are comfortable and desire it, there's no reason not to," Erika said.

Tally the votes:

In favor of me getting laid:

Morty (of course), Whitney, Erika, Lyra.

Against:

Mother. Possibly Pryce.

But this isn't a democracy. It's the Grand Dictatorship of Jasmine Mikan. There is only one vote here, and it's still undecided.

No, not undecided. I've already decided, haven't I? It's just getting the courage to actually cast the vote.

December 10th. You still have time to prepare yourself. Time? It's too far away! No it isn't, it's too soon!

Ugh!

These two sides of my conscience could argue all day long, I'd never come to a conclusion.

I knocked myself over the head.


Probation=job=money=rent. I can't have sex if I don't have my own apartment to do it in. Probation comes first. Focus!

Glitter Lighthouse loomed in the distance.

"Do you want to come in and greet Amphy and Spectra?" I asked.

"Yes!" they both replied. Lyra followed- "I'd like to see how Spectra is doing since I last saw her. Are they taking a liking to each other?"

"Oh, you could say that. Although "like" might not be a strong enough word for it," I said teasingly.
"Do you always work this late?" Mother asked as soon as I walked into the ballroom.

"Mondays and Fridays, yes. And Amphy needs taking care of."

"Amphy Amphy Amphy. Always Amphy with you. Do they at least pay you for taking care of him?"

"Yes. Only enough for his upkeep, though," I said with a dour note. No use hiding that from her.

"Then perhaps you should quit."

"I can't! If I quit, I lose ownership of Amphy."

"Then you should petition the mayor for a salary. It's no longer volunteer work when it becomes obligatory."

"Not a bad idea," I conceded. "It's not right that I'm forced to work against my will for free. Technically, that's called slavery."

If she caught the jab at her own treatment of me, she didn't show it.

"Help me put up the banisters."

These were fifteen-foot-long solid pieces of artwork attached to a drape-like banister that required two people to heft up ladders and set on pre-arranged hooks. The ladders were free-standing and not incredibly stable, and the task was made worse by our short statures.

"Don't fall," Mother said unhelpfully. I wobbled in place, my feet planted on the second-to-last step of the ladder (a perilous position), and I had to use the banister as a counterweight. Our arms lifted, slowly, carefully, straining, until I could feel the tug of a hook, and gently set the heavy banister in place. A sigh of relief escaped my chest. It was short lived, as I spotted the next seven banisters still waiting to be put in place.

Ugh. If only I could use Steelix… well, wait, why not?

"Steelix, come-"

"Jasmine! No!" Mother shouted.

"What? Steelix would make this easy."

"And he'd just as easily rip up the flooring!"

"Not if he's careful."

"I'm not going to risk that. The damages would fall on us."

"He can control himself, he won't damage anything."

"It's not happening."

I clutched my Pokeball, contemplating whether to ignore her.
"If you insist, you'll be the one to pay for it. I won't have a repeat of Sergev Park."

My arm lowered. Resignation gripped my soul.

You can't go against her. She's always right, and she knows me better than anyone; and that includes all the embarrassing learning moments of my youth.

Sergev Park was the site of a Pokémon Trainer picnic outing I was invited to some years ago. Being a Gym Leader and guest speaker, it was natural I would let out Steelix for a demonstration. Unfortunately, his casual meanderings around the park ripped up the artificial turf, and I was billed for the repairs. Having no money at the time, guess who I went begging to for cash?

"Fine, fine. Just hope one of us doesn't fall and break our neck; THAT would be costly."

"Use your head and be careful. Next one," she said with a snap.

One by one, with great peril and care, the banisters were fixed to the ceiling. Each one bore an engraved motto of the group, generally some inane business saying, with appropriate embossment encircling the text. They were heavy, as heavy as a full length mirror, and as fragile. My arms strained from the effort and desperately wanted a break. It looked like Mother wasn't about to let me rest, though.

"I want this space cleared; move the tables to the back, there and there, and start setting up the chairs..."

I groaned, whined, and in the end, complied.


I could have spared you that diatribe, but I wanted you to share in my agony.

This slavery went on until the "silently curse" part was about to go very non-silent, when Mother's voice intruded upon my inner rage.

"What is today's date?"

"November fifth," I replied, thankful I could answer without resorting to my phone.

"What would you like for your birthday?"

"Huh?"

Mother repeated herself.

"It's coming up, isn't it? The 20th. What would you like for your birthday?" she asked simply.
"I want a Pokémon!"

"Really? A Pokémon?"

"Yes! A Cyndaquil!"

"Jasmine, I know you're turning ten, but a Pokémon is a huge responsibility. Do you think you could handle taking care of it all the time?"

"Of course! That's the fun part!"

"Even scooping up its poop?"

"Yup!"

"And cleaning up after it makes a mess?"

"I can do that!"

"And training it to behave? And feeding it, three times a day, every single day? And always rushing to it when it cries, even when you don't want to? And not getting mad when it throws a tantrum?"

"I'm a big girl. I can handle it."

"Are you sure? A Pokémon is just like a baby. You're stuck with it, no matter what, and you have to see to its every want and need."

"That's awesome! I'll love it and take care of it, just let me have one! A Cyndaquil, please!"

Mother backed away, shaking her head.

"I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into. Maybe we should do the whole pet rock thing as a warm up."

"I don't need a dumb rock. They said I could have a Pokémon when I'm ten years old, and now I'm turning ten. It's time! Please, Mother, can I have a Cyndaquil? It's what I always wanted!"

"It's not going to be easy."

"Please oh please oh please?! I promise I'll take care of it, and I'll do every chore you ask me, and get good grades, and I'll behave and never make you come to the principle's office because me and my Pokémon got in trouble, so can I please have a Pokémon for my birthday?!"

"Well, I'll see what I can do, but don't expect anything at all, okay?" Mother answered tepidly. That was as good as a "Your Cyndaquil will be here tomorrow," to my ears.

I could hardly contain my nine-year-almost-ten-year-old excitement. I fairly bounced around the house, not only cleaning my room, but every corner of every room I could get my hands on. The house had never looked so immaculate. We had dinner, and I dutifully washed all the dishes as well (even though I needed to stand on a bucket to reach into the sink).

Afterwards, on my way upstairs to an early bedtime, I passed the den. The door was cracked open, and I heard the voices of my parents coming through.
"She can't handle it."

"Well, maybe she can. Look at what she's done this week. Perfect grades. Done all her chores, and a nice job on them too. She's been looking forward to this since she learned to say 'Pokémon'."

"She is too young. She doesn't know how to control these creatures yet."

"She'll learn."

"At our expense. Is that what I need right now? Another monster running around the house, creating a mess, getting injured, gobbling up food?"

"Is it really such a pain, looking after her? She tries so hard- or is it the money? You're worried about the cost, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm worried about the cost! Did you see the registration fee? 7,500 alone!"

"I know, I know."

"We can't afford it. Especially with your company laying off."

"Hey, now, we don't need to worry about that."

"Of course I worry about it! Are you just willfully ignoring the signs? The maritime industry here is dying. Slateport is taking everything. How much longer is your group going to last?"

"We'll manage."

"On what?"

"On what work?"

Father tensed up, like there was something he didn't want to divulge.

"Don't keep secrets from me."

"I'm not blind, dear. The rejection notices on the contract bids- those get sent to my desk. I can see better than anyone what's happening to the industry in this city."

"Then what are you doing about it?"

"Hahhhh…" Father paused. "If push comes to shove and they close down the group, I've been setting up a contingency."

"What contingency?"

"I didn't want to tell you, because on the one hand it might fall apart and I didn't want you to be banking on it. On the other hand, if it works… I can get a job with HQ."

"HQ… in Ecruteak."

"Yes."

"We'd have to move to Ecruteak."

"And you would lose your catering job."
"Catering? that's…" Mother stuttered. "Screw the catering, I'd lose the tenure-track! Damn it, is that the best you can do?!"

"I'm sorry."

"Do you have any idea how hard it was just to get that position?"

"I know it was difficult."

"It was impossible! But I got it anyways! Now you're saying we have to move to Ecruteak- but there's no way I'm going to get another opportunity like this."

"Can't you apply to Danzo University there?"

"Do you have any idea how many research positions there are for Criminal Neurosis Studies? In the whole country?"

"Not many."

"Seven, total. Five of them are right here in Olivine, the other two are in Sinnoh. It's not like an opening in my field comes up even once a decade. I spent four years clawing up to where I am now- dealing with the bullshit bureaucracy, sucking up to Pidge-brained assholes, slaving on TA work, getting pittance for salary, for what?! The mere privilege to apply for one of those positions! If we leave, I can't get that work back. I can't get those years of my life back! My career is… done. Gone. Vanished."

"I know, I know, I understand. I'm so, so sorry. It's just…"

"Money."

Mother sneered in disgust.

"That's our curse."

"Ecruteak," she muttered.

"We still have time. At least, nothing's going to happen until we finish the OSM project."

"How long?"

"Six months, minimum. Probably a year, and I might be able to string it out longer."

"Six months."

"That's just the project. I'm sure Sugimori can keep us afloat longer. Maybe this is only temporary, we can weather it out."

"Don't count on it."

I curled into a ball beside the door.

They always do this. Always. Sometimes it's every night. They scream at each other, well, mostly Mother screams at Father. She's not even really mad at him, but she yells anyways. It's always about money. Other kids get allowances and they're happy as Togepis, and so they think money makes you happy. But in my house, I've learned growing up, money is evil. It's something you have to have, but when you can't get it, it makes you miserable.
"A house loan, two student loans, and a child. There's no way we can afford a Pokémon," Mother said.

"My parents sent a little gift money for Jasmine."

"Kkh." Mother made a flippant noise of irritation.

"It'll cover the registration fee."

"We still can't afford one. She wants a Cyndaquil. I looked, they're 150,000P, and that's a backyard breeder's price. Certified breeders can run double. Then the food and medical bills… It's ridiculous, way too much."

"You promised her," Father said.

"I know what I told her. But she was being a pest and lying to her was the only thing that would get her to shut up."

"She's your daughter, you shouldn't lie to her."

"And you are my husband and not being particularly helpful! Why don't you help me out and take some of that paternity leave?"

"I could, but… there's no chance for promotion that way. That backup job in Ecruteak- it doesn't exist if I don't give them fifty hours a week. Besides, without the overtime, we don't have enough…"

"Money, I know, I know, I know," Mother finished.

"Right…"

You could feel the atmosphere quiver under the frustration.

"We can't afford a Pokémon," Mother repeated.

"You're right."

My heart sank. I wasn't going to get a Pokémon after all.

It seemed like my parents sensed my disappointment, because they fell silent too. I started counting my breaths, trying to focus on something that was not another bitter disappointment in my life.

There was always Amphy, right? But they took Amphy. He has to work in the lighthouse now, and they won't let me up there except on special occasions. I really wanted a Pokémon I could smother in love and hold close and be near all the time. But now…

"One sec," Father spoke up.

"We can't afford it."

"Maybe…"

"We can't. Unless you have some hidden stash of money, in which case I can think of a dozen better uses for it."

"Elaina, give me a second. There might be a way. No, I'm not hiding anything from you."
"I could hear Father tapping away at the keyboard of the computer.

"Here."

"What is that?"

"Voltorbs. See, look. 2,500P."

"Must be a glitch, no Pokémon goes for that little."

"No, it's correct. Here: *Voltorbs are natural byproducts of the Pokeball production process. A small percentage of Pokeballs spontaneously mutate into Voltorb Pokemon, for reasons not fully understood. In order to recuperate costs, manufacturers sell off the Voltorbs en masse. Most go to power companies or munitions plants, but a select few go to secondary marketers who retail them to individuals. Prices range from 5,000P to as little as 1,500P, depending on area and supplies.* And here: *Voltorbs are simple Pokémon and limited in the activities they can participate in. Their effectiveness in Pokémon sports is low, regardless of amount of training. However, they balance these drawbacks by being low-care, low-maintenance, and with simple precautions can be made safe for even small children. Monthly upkeep typically costs around 600P.* 600P is nothing, we can pay that. Heck, have Jasmine set up a lemonade stand and she can pay it herself."

"Voltorbs explode," Mother argued.

"That's exaggerated. Untrained Voltorbs explode on provocation. Tamed ones should be fine."

"I still don't like this."

"Why?"

"Because. Just because."

"You're afraid of Jasmine getting hurt."

"Hurt, or distracted, or obsessed. What if she wants to be a trainer?"

"It's not like we're going to let her off on a Pokémon journey. This is something that would make her incredibly happy, and it'd get her out of your hair."

"Ugh."

"Come on. For our daughter. We never do anything nice for her."

"Fine!"

"It'll be alright."

"She'd better not become a trainer."

"Well, that's going to be hard to avoid. Kids get Pokémon, kids want to battle with Pokémon. If Voltorb really are weak, she'll have a rough time, won't win, won't have fun, and give up."

"I doubt it. She's stubborn."

"Like you?"

"Hey, don't tease me! And what's that grin for?! You need to start looking for a better job, something
that'll pay more, and keep us here."

"I'll try, but…"

"Try harder. You're too smart and too good to be slaving away at a dying company."

"Yes, dear."

"Happy Birthday!"

"Hurray! It's a … a Pokeball! Wow! It's a…"

"Voltorb."

The round ball Pokemon stared blankly at me, and I in turn stared blankly at Mother.

"This is my Pokémon?" I asked shyly.

"Yes, Jasmine, it's yours, all yours. Remember to take good care of it, and work hard."

"Um… Okay, I will."

I really wanted a Cyndaquil. I wanted a strong Pokémon, who could win Pokémon battles. Voltorb was cheap, in every way. It cost nothing, it could do nothing, it was weak and would always be weak, and had no personality.

"How do you like your Pokémon? Is it what you wanted?" Mother asked.

I swallowed.

"Yes, I like it very much," I said, smile on my lips.

-a fake smile.

The tears in my eyes were choked off. The lump in my chest was held down. Not a shred of disappointment could be allowed to escape. I could not show her weakness. I could never show her what I really felt inside. Never. That was not allowed in this household.

"Voltorb!"

I grabbed the Pokeball Pokémon in my arms and laughed bitterly.

Back in the present, I somehow choked down the memory associated with the question and tried forming an answer for my Mother.

"For my Birthday?" I echoed.
Money or free time would be nice, but those were useless things to ask from her. Money, because she would see that as crass and juvenile begging, and no amount she'd be willing to give would meaningfully impact my life anyways. Free time- well, she seems rather fond of taking that from me rather than giving it.

"I don't really want anything."

"That's too modest of you," Mother replied. "Tell me if you think of anything."

"Okay. You know, Voltorb evolved."

"Hmm?"

"My first Pokémon, the one you gave me on my tenth birthday. It evolved today."

"It's been twelve years, it's just now evolving?"

"Yes."

"A bit late, don't you think?"

"I know, and agree. I wasn't treating Voltorb with as much attention as it needed."

"Six Pokémon at once, I can't comprehend how trainers take care of them. Can you imagine taking care of six children? Sextuplets would have destroyed me, you were enough."

"Was I that bad?"

"A mischievous little rugrat," Mother retorted.

I tried thinking back, but for the majority of my adolescence I could only remember the oppressiveness permeating this household, and my meager attempts to placate this woman in the vain hope she'd accept me. Selective memory, I guess. There was the time I led the class rebellion, and the Dark Cave escapade, and the… well, I suppose she's right. I caused her trouble, which brought down her wrath, which eventually cowed me into submission.

But it seemed to me, I was never so bad as to deserve the amount of ire and scorn she heaped on me. Even when I tried to behave and please her, it was never enough, never ever enough.

"Come here."

She led me to the adjoining parlor. The ballroom was just that, a place for formal gatherings, parties, and social events. Being the Battle Tower, however, the architects thoughtfully added a side room where exhibition Pokémon battles could be waged by party guests.

"We'll use this for the Pokémon activities."

"Okay."

"Do you have any ideas for events?"

"I take it actual battles are out of the question."

Mother held her chin in her hand and murmured affirmative.

"These are businessmen and women, not trainers. Battling isn't their forte, and it would be too violent
for a formal party," she explained.

"So something less… physical," I said, picking the latter word with care.

"Right."

"Pokeathlon is out too."

"Too much exertion, too little space."

I joined her side and contemplated the space.

If battles and Pokeathlon were ruled out because they were too aggressive for these upper-class pansies, what did that leave? I want it to be competitive, not some idiocy like PokeMusical, but we're short on options. What would rich snobs enjoy doing with their Pokémon? Minigames? Operations? Too casual, and way too big, respectively.

"I was thinking Contests," Mother suggested.

"Oh."

I bet she was thinking Contests before I even showed up.

"They'd enjoy it. It's not too violent, and it would involve the crowd as judges. They would like that."

"It's a good idea," I said. Of course, I really wanted battles, but for the conditions she set, she did have the perfect answer.

"Could you organize it? I don't know as much as you do."

AND THAT'S WHAT SHE'S REALLY AFTER!

I smirked, or something that looked like a smirk but was really a hybrid of helpless grinning and detesting sneer. She could have hired help, or dragged other people from her social circle in to be manual labor, or even requisitioned bodies from the business group itself. No, she chose me to help her. And this was the reason why: to pickle my expertise on Pokémon affairs in order to stage a neat little round of Contests, and thus score brownie points with the client.

Alright, fine, whatever. As she so often reminds me, I owe this woman my upbringing. Let's just get this over with. It is Pokémon related, after all, I think I could enjoy anything that deals with my beloved fantastical creatures.

"We'll do this Kanto style. I started mentally marking out space around the arena. "Five sections for the five styles of contests. Each section has a test of skill. Pokémon and their Coordinators take turns attempting the test, and the audience votes on whoever completed the test with the most style."

"I follow," Mother said.

I began by fetching tape and marking off large square sections of the floor.

"For instance, I could bring in training dummies from my gym for the Tough Contest. Pokémon can take turns hitting it with any kind of attack, and then receiving a blow from the counterattacking dummy. Whoever attacks and defends best, and looks the toughest doing so, according to the crowd, would win. Hmm. There's a smartphone app we could use for scoring."
"That's a good idea; most of them will be carrying smartphones on them, and they enjoy technology."

It was curt and sidelong, but she actually congratulated me for an idea I had. I know it was meaningless and insignificant, but a small part of my heart fluttered a tiny bit.

"Electrode."

I let out my Pokémon, hoping Mother wouldn't give me a fit for the Pokémon's (vastly exaggerated) self-destructing habit. However, her phone rang, presumably the client, and she left me alone for a minute.

"Trode trode trode trode trode."

Electrode was taking in the sight. It had never been to the Battle Tower before.

"Electrode, listen up. We're going to set up Contest stations around this room. I need your help. Will you help me?"

"TRODA!"

"Thanks. And thank you, for being so stupidly loyal to me all these years." I gave the Pokémon a tight hug.

"Trode."

"Come on."

I did want Electrode to help out and feel useful and wanted, but now that I think of it- it has no hands. Or limbs, or any means of manipulating objects whatsoever. The best it could do is push things along. For a Pokémon that has seven different ways of moving itself, it really has no way of moving other stuff. I pursed my lips in frustration.

This was kind of representative of the way in which I had neglected Voltorb in the first place. It's not that I disliked the Pokémon; it simply wasn't useful or interactable. About the only thing going for it was its pure, unadulterated speed. It's hard to bond with a Pokémon when you can't play or talk or battle with it.

Well, actually, maybe, that's not all it's good for.

"Electrode, see this box?" I pointed out an empty cardboard box.

"Electrode."

"Consume it."

Electrode opened its mouth wide and sucked. Like a vacuum, it pulled the box into its cavity, where it promptly flashed and disappeared.

"Now, can you exhale the box?"

Electrode winced, bulged, and then barfed. A second flash emitted, and the cardboard flopped back out into the open.

"I knew it!"
I had heard that Voltorbs and Electrodes retain their functionality as Pokeball storage units. It seemed the rumors were true, to some extant. Electrode could gobble stuff up into its extra-dimensional space, and then spit it out at some later point. In other words, I have a high-speed delivery system at my beck and call!

I ought to be careful and test it thoroughly first. After all, this would be an economic godsend for logistics companies, and yet I've never heard of a business delivering goods via Electrode.

Mother returned just as I ascertained that Electrode's carry-limit was at least six times its volume and weight. It handled a standard table just fine, but was having trouble with a double-length table. Oh well, that's still pretty good.

"You'll never believe this," I told her excitedly. She did not look amused, even as I demonstrated Electrode's newfound utility.

"That would have been nice to have years ago," she remarked.

"Yeah, we could have used it to grab stuff we left behind."

"Like lunch money," she said.

"I was thinking cell phones," I said.

We both smirked.

It wasn't just a few times that we had forgotten the items in question and had to ask the other to go fetch them. Voltorb might have saved us a few days' worth of grief and bickering…

"TROBLAGHGHGIGHG." 

Electrode was convulsing and spitting out the contents of his interior, without prompting and apparently involuntarily.

"Electrode, what's wrong?"

"Troder…"

"It must be like holding a piece of toast in your mouth," Mother said.

"Huh?"

I spent the next few minutes further testing Electrode. It tried its hardest, but Mother was right: the Pokémon couldn't hold anything internally for longer than about sixty seconds. I was baffled.

"I don't get it."

"Here," Mother surprised me by forcing a snack cracker in between my lips. "Don't chew, just hold it," she ordered.

I tried obeying, and for forty seconds or so it was no problem. Then my mouth started filling with saliva, and my throat began agitating, compelling me to spit the cracker out or else take a bite.

"We had a game when I was a child, to try to take water from the water fountain, cross the playground with it in our mouths, and squirt it on the insect mounds. We had to run, or else our gag reflex would kick in and we would lose it. I don't know the physiology of this Pokémon, but I imagine the principle is the same."
Mother lay a hand on Electrode's exterior. The Pokémon was panting from the repeated attempts to swallow and spit up test objects.

"It's possible, if you set them in stasis, to use them as item capsules. Your father's work sometimes did that when they were in a pinch."

I looked over Electrode and the obvious exertion and discomfort the activity was exacting on it.

"I think we'll pass," I said warily.

Yet, Electrode saw my downcast look, shook itself, and bounced up to my side. It really does want to please me. How can I say no?

"Just for future reference. Also, they're locking the doors at midnight, we should try to get as much done as possible," Mother said.

"Okay."

I let Electrode rest, and then had it help me at its own pace. Under the time restrictions, I figured I would have the rest of tonight and four more nights to finish setting up the Contests. Then Mother informed me we were decorating the exterior on Thursday and buying and preparing food all day Friday, and suddenly I only had two and a quarter nights to finish everything.

"I don't know how I can do this all."

"Improvise," Mother told me dismissively.

"It's just too much work. I only have two hands."

"You are a Gym Leader, are you not? Use your Pokémon, that's what trainers are supposed to do."

"You won't even let me let out Steelix."

"Inside here." She motioned to the surrounding interior. "You like to brag you're one of the eight best trainers in Johto. Now show me what that position of yours is worth." She returned to her own work of scraping old tape from previous events off the wall.

Fine. I'll show her what we're capable of.

"Battle Tower is a Pokémon mecca, they'll have PCs everywhere," I reminded myself. I skiddled off and quickly located the nearest computer terminal. Left side of the hallway: Bingo!

"Steelix, can you hear me in there?"

I tapped the Pokeball's nob.

"Steelix?"

"Schteel."

"Alright, I'm sending you to the gym. Work with Tyko when she gets there and pack up everything into storage boxes."

"Schteel!"

"Magneton, Magnezone, front and center!"
The pair of living dynamos emerged, crisp and attentive.

"You're helping me here. Follow my lead and I'll explain specifics as we get equipment."

"Ton ton!" "Tonn."  
"Tyko"  
"Prin prin!"

"You're my number two in this, you'll be in command of the gym squad." I gave the blue bird a rundown of all the supplies I was going to require from the gym. This included some heavy duty stuff, like the erector sets, the training dummies, the obstacle course equipment, and the mini grav fields. Luckily, she only needed to coordinate things, Steelix would be there to do the brute work.

"Alright, Electrode."

"Troda!"

"You are the linchpin to all this. Here's your job. I can't send Tyko back to the gym through the PC, since no one is there to access the computer. You're going to physically carry her Pokeball and let her out at the gym. Tyko!"

I recalled my waiting Prinplup into her Pokeball, and used duct tape to secure it to Electrode's backside.

"On arrival, do as Tyko says. She and Steelix are going to load you up with stuff, and then put you in the PC. I'll bring you out here, unload, upload, and repeat the process as many times as we need. You ought to be able to hold the cargo long enough for the PC trip, right?"

Electrode nodded eagerly.

"We've got about half a ton of equipment, and I really want it all here by tonight." I checked the clock. Dang, it was already 10:50. "We need to hurry. The choke point is getting Tyko to the gym. Can you do that, as fast as possible?"

"TRODE!"

Electrode seemed more than up to the task- it was confident and proud. This was a test of its speed, the one thing it was awesome at. There was no way it would fail me.

"Alright. Don't let Tyko's Pokeball slip now. Ready?"

Electrode and I stood outside of the entrance doorway. It gave me a cocky glance, telling me- 'I will DO THIS, madam, and I will SHOCK you with how fast I do it.'

"If we get this done, I promise I'll get you into battles more regularly."

Electrode definitely liked the sound of that. It practically glowed. I could feel the hum of energy building up inside.

"Ready? Set? G-o"

The vowel of 'Go' had not left my lips before Electrode cleared the promenade. Oliviners like to speed down the coastal highway, typically 75+ MPH. One such cad was revving his engine and roaring down the highway, obviously much faster than the normal speedsters. I grinned as I watched
the hotrod driver break and pull up, momentarily panicking, because a tiny blip of red, white, and yellow sparks zipped by him.

"Fast."

I looked over my shoulder, finding my apprehensive Mother with her arms crossed.

"My fastest."

"Certainly faster than you. Come, let's not procrastinate. There's got to be something you can do while you wait for Electrode. If not, I can find something for you."

"You were listening?" I asked.

"To your plans? Of course."

Nosy micromanaging control freak.

"So, am I good at what I do or not?"

"I never doubted your abilities with Pokémon," she said, leading me back to the work space. "Only that I think they are misapplied."

"Pokémon aren't our slaves. At least battling gives them some sense of self-respect, unlike manual labor."

"At least 'manual labor', which by the way is a crude way to say 'useful work', dear, produces something tangible that can be shared with the Pokémon. I hardly see what beating each other up imparts to these creatures, except for bruises."

"It's the pride- never mind." There's no use arguing with her. "You win. What's next?"

"I want to repair some scrape marks on the walls. The maintenance at this facility is atrocious. Go grab the Plast-O and meet me at the north wall."

I sighed.

Electrode, now I'm REALLY counting on your speed. Please oh please hurry.
I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling. Familiar water stains stared back at me while familiar smells wafted into my nostrils. I breathed in, deeply. This is my room and my bed, and once again they served as my sanctuary.

"Jasmine, can I come in?"

I let out the breath. Oh Mother. Of all things, why must entering my room be the one thing you ask me permission for?

"Come in."

She burst inside and made a beeline for my closet, which had become an auxiliary storage space in my absence. For clarification, this is MY room, not the apartment bedroom I currently live in, but the room I had spent most of my childhood inhabiting. Even though it's been several years since I dwelled here, it still felt like it belonged to me, like nothing had really changed.

Mother got what she needed and was making her exit, but something about my appearance caught her eye and she paused.

"Were you planning on wearing that to the party?" she asked.

"Yes. What else am I supposed to wear?"

I was in Erika's black backless halter dress.

"The party isn't for us to enjoy, we're supposed to be professionals at work. Don't you have anything more suitable?"

"I didn't bring anything else."

"Neh." She let out a sound of disappointment. "Wait one second."

She disappeared, and a minute later reappeared. Pieces of apparel were thrown overtop me. "Put these on."

I tugged and fretted my way into a sitting position, and held the objects at arms length.

Plain grey tights, and a white long-sleeved turtle-neck shirt. They belonged to her, which basically meant they were guaranteed to fit me.

"What do I do, just keep the dress on?"

"The shirt goes under the dress, and the tights- well, you're a smart girl."

She actually waited outside in the hall while I changed. Once finished, I glumly slouched out to seek her appraisal.

"Good enough." She nodded, satisfied.

I returned to my room and looked myself over in the mirror.

Erika's dress had a light, airy, embarrassingly free feel to it. With Mother's additions, I felt
constrained, modest, and formal. Despite the color scheme and styles matching perfectly, the outfit did not look right for the occasion. More like, I was headed off to lead a church choir rather than frolic at a glam party. I guess it's Mother's not-so-subtle reminder that we weren't there to have fun.

"Are you ready?" she called out.

"Yes." I made one last adjustment to my spike tails and dashed downstairs.

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The week had gone by agonizingly slowly. Monday night, Electrode had done its duty and made it to the gym in four minutes flat. Tyko, on the other hand, had forgotten how to spell my password and spent twenty minutes trying various doomed-to-failure solutions. Our task of setting up the Contests had to run over into the next two days. To make time for it, I ended up pushing my gym battles early into the morning and leaving work around three o'clock in the afternoon. I was tired as a Snorlax while trying to order Pokémon at the crack of dawn; on the bright side, my challengers were even more tired, and I ended up boosting my ratio up by quite a bit.

The weatherman lied, and a massive rainstorm rolled in on Thursday, just as we began setting up the exterior area. Mother insisted the work had to get done, so I shivered and gritted my way through two evenings of soaked manual labor. During my suffering, I often looked over to Mother and stood in awe and envy of her mountainous fortitude. Even as the rain drenched her from hair to socks, she continued working on her tasks relentlessly, without pause or any apparent sign of discomfort. How can absolutely nothing faze her? She's got that mean face that makes it look like she thrives off of pure anger.

Come Saturday, and here we were, driving off early in the morning to make final preparations, and then play hostess for the rich business club. The sky was clouded, the whole surface world was slick and soggy, and the air was bitterly cold and windy. It was winter's opening salvo. Lovely day to hold a party, right?

"Now I hope I don't need to remind you to be on your best behavior."

"I know, I know. We're to act like professionals, formal but courteous, charitable and hospitable. And I direct anyone with questions or concerns to you."

"It's very important to make a good impression this time. This isn't some celebratory get-together. The Entrepreneurship Society is hosting business VIPs to try to persuade them to set up operations in Olivine. There are billions of pokedollars on the line and thousands of jobs."

"So we're to make them believe we're a hub for Pokéindustry. I understand," I said, exasperated. She doesn't need to impress upon me the importance here. As this city’s Gym Leader, I already know the intricacies linking Pokémon, tourism, and industry, and their importance to our local economy. Maybe she doesn't get that I'm the leading authority on ALL matters pertaining to Pokémon in this city, not just training and battling. Whenever there's a question or problem that isn't directly related to law enforcement, it's me they come to for help. So if it's necessary to convince a bunch of wealthy snobs that Olivine is a booming opportunity for Pokémon-centric businesses, I can absolutely be counted on to represent my hometown.

"The mayor will be there, as will Mr. Preston, and, I just learned this morning, the Vice President of Silph Co."
"I'll try my best."

"Trying isn't good enough," she warned. "Nor is your best. Always be the best. No one judges you against your potential, but their own expectations."

"I know that all too well," I said. And I say it not just referring to Mother's totalitarian expectations, but lessons learned from my own career. Probation has taught me that the Pokémon League values results, not effort. Like she says, the world is a harsh judge that cares little for me. It's up to me to make things happen.

"I wish Father would come home," I said absently, staring out the window.

Mother flared her nostrils but did not say a word.

"Alright. Three hours until guests arrive. Let's get to work."

What is there to say? We worked, my body ached, and then we kept working. The restaurant staff Mother contracted showed up, as well as organizers from the Society, so she was preoccupied coordinating them. The manual labor was left up to me. The last half hour before the start of the show saw me rushing to finish the Contests. For something that only a small portion of the guests were likely to spend a smaller portion of their time partaking in, this sure took a lot of effort on my part to put together. Finally, a minute past the official beginning of the event, I stood back, admiring my project.

Five areas had been cordoned off, each representing one of the five fundamental contest categories: Tough, Smart, Cool, Beauty, and Cute. Before each arena was a podium with a poster attached, announcing the contest type and the general rules. Brochures atop the podium explained in detail what was and wasn't allowed during contests. Arranged about the arenas was the equipment needed to carry out the contests, each set unique to its category.

For instance, the Beauty Contest had a 3D holorecorder, a projector, and an enormous projector screen, all linked by computer. Pokémon took turns showing off their abilities before the recorder, which would translate them into artistic representations and then display them on the projector screen. All the displays would overlap, so that you could choose to try to make the most beautiful composition with your Pokémon, or try to uglify your opponents' artwork. Any number of permutations and strategies were possible.

The other categories had similarly complex tests for Pokémon to compete in. None of the tests involved direct Pokémon-to-Pokémon fighting, as requested by Mother. The victor was decided by a vote of the audience, whoever accomplished the task in the most stylistic manner. I'll admit, it was really hard to come up with fair and interesting competitions, and I had to resort to the internet for ideas for three of the five contests.

Pleased that everything was ready, I turned my attention to the party itself. The upholstery, the decorations, the stage and its display and its adornments, the food and beverage table, the business exhibits, all the work we had spent the last week putting together, gave the whole place an air of regal glamour. Despite myself, I couldn't help but feel proud of what we had accomplished.

The guests began arriving, and I could immediately see why Mother went to such lengths to glamorize this party. Most of the people walking through the door looked like they either owned a home in Aerie Lane or were on their way to living there in the near future (remember that Aerie Lane houses typically cost more than my whole apartment complex). The ladies' dresses far out-classed mine in virtually every way, usually made of Silcoon-silk and embroidered with delicate specie patterns. The gentlemen were in similarly expensive suits and ties, although the colors were a little

less reserved, *suiting* the festive occasion (wait, was that a pun?). In any case, I allowed myself a few minutes to admire the fashion show, occasionally sighing when I spotted a dress I wanted but couldn't afford.

Even those who could not dress to the ridiculously high standards were at least important enough to be instantly recognizable in their own right. I quickly spotted Mr. Preston and his wife amongst the crowd. He had just been promoted to chief Pokémon League representative for the greater Olivine metropolitan area, which means he is the one responsible for overseeing my probation.

Mother rushed by, pausing for a moment- "There's not going to be enough cake. Jasmine, go to the kitchen and bake another two,"- and then she was gone again.

"Alright."

"Where is the kitchen here? I hope we have eggs.

More guests arrived. Mayor Adoch and his wife. The Silph Co. Vice President, recognizable for the Silph insignia on his lapel and the gaggle of solicitors and yes-men spawning around him. Tamatoya, owner of the SeaGallop ship line. Hemi, millionaire coach of the Olivine Mariners, our soccer team. Nettleway, maritime trade financier and richest person in the city. I thought it improbable that all these big names would be a part of the Pokémon Entrepreneurship Society, but as it turns out, most were specifically invited to woo the Silph Co. VP, something about trying to get a massive research and development lab built in Olivine. What shocked me more was the abundance of rich *young* people. Quite a few, around one-third, were around my age.

"Hi, are you the help here?"

"I am," I said, turning. "What can I help you with?"

A young lady pointed out the drinks table. "I just wanted to let you know this punch is fantastic! But it's running low already, can you get more?"

"Of course, I'll see to it."

Mother's own recipe, more margarita than punch, really. Alcoholic, of course, so no wonder this woman enjoyed it.

"Um, out of curiosity, is the Society open to young adult members?" I asked.

"Oh us? We're in the Future Entrepreneurs Development Program. The Society sponsors us for internships in major companies. It's really exciting, I'm currently understudying at Takcom Products, you know, the medical machinery for Pokecenters?"

"Very high-tech," I noted.

"And very lucrative. The industry had a 5% growth rate last year."

She spent a few minutes expounding on the great opportunity she had worked for and how likely it was for her to gain a (well-paying) managerial position. Someone began clanking the bottom of the punch bowl with the spoon, which gave me a pretense to escape the eager one-sided conversationalist.

Wafting around, fulfilling requests as best as possible, mainly looking helpful but bored, I gradually lost myself to the lull of the party and the hum of conversation. The older folks lost my interest, what caught my ear was the chatter from the twenty-somethings:

"Have you seen what Offland was wearing at the prava?"
"No, what, really? That's hideous!"

"Twenty-K a day. They actually pay that much for virtually no work. The only thing you need is a brain and confidence."

"Don't repeat this, but I think he's cheating on her with Michelle."

"You think so too? Do you mean going out, or…"

"No, all the way. Sleeping together. Count how many times he says West Branch needs him, and how many times West Branch asks for Dave or Mali. Doesn't add up."

"I hope he knows what he's doing."

"If my co-worker rats me out one more time, I'm going to get her fired."

"How?"

"I have dirt on her weed habit."

"But I thought you were pro-prop 49?"

"Sure, but that doesn't mean I won't use the drug policy against that Ratty-ass bitch."

"I'm going to start a charity when I'm older, for the inner-city kids."

"That's cool, that's cool. I hear it's a big write-off on taxes."

"Only so much, it doesn't really even out. I'm thinking the image boost would be worth it, though. Besides, this Doctor Oslonivja I've been listening to says altruism is great for your mental well-being."

"I have no idea what he's going to do. She doesn't want to give up the baby."

"Why won't she just get rid of it? Unless… I mean, if she cares about that moral crap, she could adopt it out."

"Too religious, too stupid, too sentimental."

"Damn. I hate those kinds of girls. High school relationship, right? Those need to be ditched the moment you go off to college."

"They brought me into the factory this week, showing me how our product is made."

"How was it?"

"LOUD."

"Moral of the story: just don't have sex. I don't think there's any coincidence there's a correlation between STD rates and poverty- they just don't know better."

"We really didn't need details about it, man."

"Do you see how fat she's gotten?"

"I think she deserved what she got. It's her decision if she wants to hang around cowboys and have one night stands, but she shouldn't drag him down with her."
"Her ta-ta's are just all out there. They're about to fall out of her dress! It's gross. She should just go home."

"I agree."

"You look tense."

I jumped.

Amongst all the soundbites this one was too loud, too close, and too directional, to be addressed to anyone but me. A lady all in green approached me from my blindside.

She was in her late twenties, I guessed. Her emerald, ankle-length dress was worn thinly on her frame, and her dark hair was tied up in a bun. Her lips were rose-red, as were her fingernails. Olive eyes, sharp chin. What really struck me was the air with which she carried herself: upright posture, assertive, confident, above-it-all. She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place her.

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"Are you new to the Society? I know being amongst strangers can be a little daunting. This crowd doesn't really suit you…" she said, eyeing my plebian-by-comparison fashion.

"Oh, I'm not," I struggled for an appropriate answer. "I'm part of the catering company, not the Society. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Oh, my apologies. I mistook you for someone else," the lady said, only slightly flustered. She made ready to go.

"Okay then," I said.

"It's merely, you resemble the Gym Leader of this city, Ms. Mikan, right down to the haircut. Is that a popular hair style in this city?"

"Oh…"

Well this was awkward.

"Jasmine, there you are!"

Mother's voice called out for me, soon followed by her physical presence. "What have you been doing? The Contests are supposed to be starting."

"So you ARE Ms. Mikan!" the stranger exclaimed, her demeanor changing from disappointed to excited.

"The Contests are fine, they were set up to run without me." I huffed at Mother, and then turned to the lady in emerald. "Yes, that is correct, I'm Jasmine Mikan."

"Hello! My name is Elaina Mikan, the head of catering here. You are?" Mother asked seeing my company and instantly feigning an air of cordiality. Like a Kecleon.

"Ms. Aokigahara, pleased to meet you."

Aokigahara… Aokigahara… where have I heard that name before? Aoki… forest… Ilex… Azalea Town… oh!
"You're Jade Aokigahara?" I wanted to confirm.

"That is right. I'm the new Gym Leader of Azalea Town. I suppose that makes us co-workers, two-of-a-feather."

"I guess it does."

"Ms. Aokigahara," my Mother butted in, "may I assume you are the Ms. Aokigahara, of Bespin Pharmaceuticals?"

"Formerly, yes. I left the CEO position just last month, to take the Gym Leader position."

"What would possess you to do that?"

"I know, it sounds ridiculous, right? Far less power, far less pay. But can you keep a secret?" She inched in close to my mother, who played along. "I have plans to enter politics," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Really? Regional?" my Mother inquired.

"National."

National- which probably meant Nihon's national parliament, the body that governed Johto, Kanto, Hoenn, Sinnoh, and all the minor regions in between. This woman must be very ambitious.

"This country needs more people with business credentials running it, but the populace seems enthralled by the DSP," Jade said.

"I agree," Mother nodded.

"I tried running for regional parliament several years ago, and lost to a socialist who had been a popular trainer in his day. I figured I might try the same strategy. The masses hold a great deal of respect for their Gym Leaders, and I admit, I'm quite an accomplished trainer in my own right."

"So this job will be a stepping stone for you, to raise your prestige in the eyes of the public."

"Yes. Brilliant, don't you think?"

I didn't want to open my mouth and let out the distaste building on the tip of my tongue, so I clenched my lips shut. How dare she! To twist our position into a tool for politics ticks me off, no matter what party she runs for! It's been two minutes and already I'm not very fond of this future co-worker. Mother, however, seems keenly interested in her.

"It is a clever way of going about it," she admitted. "Say. You'll be working with my daughter, right?"

"I believe so. It was surprising, to find her here as part of the catering service. I thought she would at least have been a guest of the Entrepreneurship Society."

"Unfortunately, no." Mother took a sidelong glance at me. "She's not very interested in commerce or finance, the Society would be a bad fit for her personality." Left unsaid, but understood: She doesn't want to get a real job. "Say, I've been informed that she's on probation. Could you explain that to me? She makes it sound like her job is at risk."

"Mother-" I started, but she waved me to silence. Apparently she wants a second-hand opinion.
"At risk? That's putting it mildly. If she's on probation, her job is already gone, essentially. It's up to her to win it back. The requirements are awful. I'm glad I won't have to face that kind of ordeal, my tenure should be over before I'm eligible for review. Not that I think I would fail my review in any case."

"That sounds disheartening."

Oh just spit it out Mother. You wish I would quit my job. If I quit, I have to find a new one on my own. If I'm fired, you're afraid I'll come home and be a burden to you.

"Is there any recourse she could take? Any authority she could go to?"

"None, Mother. I already checked, already tried. The League has the final say."

"Well that's not technically true," Jade countered. "Just because the League determines who can award official gym badges, it doesn't mean they have sole authority to name the Gym Leader."

I sighed.

Jade is referring to the 1955 merger. The Pokémon League used to be three different entities: 1) the government regulatory bodies that enforce Pokémon-related laws, 2) the Pokémon Battling Tournament Organization, and 3) the various independent Pokémon Gyms. Mother knows about this, but she doesn't know that when the gyms conceded to joining the Pokémon League, they never actually relinquished their ownership.

"It's the owners of the gym who have the final say in who is named the Gym Leader of a gym. If the League doesn't agree with their choice, they'll be forced to set up another gym of their own," Jade explained.

"But without the League's financial support, most independent gyms go bankrupt," I said. "And competition from official gyms makes it hard to operate in the same city."

"That is true. In the Kanto-Johto area, I think only Saffron has two gyms now, one official and one unofficial."

"But you're saying that if the owners of the gym wanted Jasmine to stay, no declaration by the League could oust her?" my Mother asked.

"Essentially, yes. Of course she wouldn't receive a salary from the League, or be able to award Gym Badges to Tournament hopefuls, but she would retain her position and the support of the owners and sponsors of the gym. Owners have a powerful, if informal, say in their facility's business. For example, the Dragon Tamers Clan of Blackthorn essentially run the city's gym as they see fit; the League would have to relocate to a different city altogether if they wished to oppose the clan's candidate, such is their influence in Blackthorn. To tell you the truth, my family owns Azalea Town's gym, that's how my candidacy was propelled to the forefront."

"Huh. We were originally going to go with another trainer, a Fire-type specialist," I said.

"Yes, that would be my second cousin, Blaiz."

"Ah."

I feel manipulated now. Did the Johto Gym Leader Association really have any say in the matter? Well, it's a balance. It's a decision where everybody tries to reach a mutual consensus, since it would
be a major pain for all involved if there's a disagreement: the League would have to set up a new
gym every time they opposed the owners, and the gyms don't want to lose the financial support of
the League.

Unfortunately, I can sense where this logic would lead my Mother…

"Jasmine, who exactly owns your gym? Can you petition them for an easement in your probation
requirements?"

"The City of Olivine, and no."

"Why not?"

"Because they're stooges of the Pokémon League. They'll follow whatever the League tells them to
do. Mayor Adoch is a suck-up who doesn't know anything about Pokémon battling, so he shirks off
all the gym-related matters to someone else. He won't stand up for me if the League tries to get rid of
me."

"You have such wonderful employers," Mother remarked dryly.

"As far as I'm concerned, the League owns my gym. There's no owner to fall back on when I get
into a tussle with them. Even in Johto, the League is making a push to purchase ownership of the
gyms for themselves- they've already got Goldenrod and Mahogany. So yes, they can be pricks. But
I can deal with them."

"Who decides if you pass or fail?"

"Mr. Preston."

"Preston? Was he promoted?" Mother was acquainted with Mr. Preston, but I suppose she hadn't
spoken with him since he left his post operating the Pokecenter.

"Recently, yes."

"Preston is your chief area manager?" Jade asked.

"That's right."

"Perhaps you should go meet him, ask him if there's anything he can do to help you," Mother
suggested.

"I don't think that's a good idea, and it's not necessary. I'm passing all requirements as-is," I objected.

"Suit yourself. I'm only trying to get you to explore more options; there's never any harm in hedging
your bets."

"I'll be fine."

"You're on probation, and passing?" Jade inquired. I nodded. "That would mean you're defeating
over half your challengers, correct?" I nodded again. "Then you must be an exceptional trainer."

I shrugged. "Everyone who takes a Gym Leadership is strong. I'm just working extra hard to actually
win, because, well, probation and all."

"Shouldn't you always apply yourself? Slacking off just because one can is such a waste."
"Believe me, you'll figure out it's not so easy. When you've just finished your 100th battle of the week and some fresh troll cruises in for number 101, you're going to have a hard time finding your best effort."

"This is very interesting," Mother interjected, "but Mr. Langstrom looks like he's ready to take the stage. Can you go check on the Contests? There's a crowd over there."

I craned my neck, and sure enough the side-hall where the contests were being held was overflowing. So much for being a niche diversion for these upper-crust folk.

"Got it," I said, ready to spring into action and already walking away- as much to get away from Mother as to go organize the contests.

"Wait, take Jade with you. She might be interested in seeing these contests."

"I'd be very interested- actually I think I would like to participate!"

"Okay…"

"And Jade, I'd like to talk to you again, later, particularly about your work at Bespin."

"I'd be happy to."

The older women departed with a smile and a shake, and then I was left alone with my new coworker.

"Come on, let me show you my part of the party," I said, trying to muster good cheer and hospitality. After all, I decided, seeing as she's going to join the Johto club, it would be easier for me to make a new friend than a new enemy out of her.

"Yes, do. Perhaps we could even have a Contest match between us?" Jade suggested playfully.

"Uh…"

Great…
"We should do the Smart contest."

"Why?"

"Because I think I would easily win the Cool category, and you would have an advantage in the Tough category, and neither of our Pokémon could be classified as Cute or Beautiful. Smart seems like it would be the most even competition."

"Okay."

I can't really argue against that logic, and it would be most interesting comparing our wits against one another. It had only been twenty minutes since I met this woman, so I still didn't have a really good handle on her personality. She had that air of formality you'd expect at a job interview- all superficially polite and friendly. I think a battle, even a neutered contest match, would help me get to know her.

So when she insisted we have a friendly contest match, I agreed. When the hall learned that two Johto Gym Leaders were to face off, they immediately dropped their own contests and scurried over to gawk.

That's how I found myself beside the Smart Contest arena, ordering Magneton to arrange things and explaining the rules to Jade.

"We're using Kanto rules."

"Not Hoenn? It's more popular."

"We were trying to avoid direct combat when we set this up. Most of our guests don't have battle-capable Pokémon; they would get injured too easily. Also, their masters don't know how to conduct a professional match. They aren't familiar with the basic rules of battle, let alone advanced tactics. It wouldn't be a fun or interesting exhibition even if it were safe."

"I understand, although I wish it were otherwise." Jade cracked a smile. "I'm no stranger to hardcore Pokémon battles."

"You were ranked very highly in the Johto region, within the top ten. It was one of the reasons we signed off on you," I noted. She took that as a compliment. "Competition, you could say, is my hobby and passion in life."

"Well, I hope I can measure up. I assume you'd like the maximum difficulty for the contest?"

"Of course."

"Magneton, please put the balls into the 'Omega' formation," I ordered my Pokémon. Magneton buzzed and set off.

"This is called "Bull's-eye". The object of the game is to place as many balls into the center circle as you can, within the round limit." I motioned to the arena.

It was a large circle outlined in white tape, about twenty yards across. A tiny circle marked by red tape, only two yards across, lay in the center. The small red circle was the "goal" area. All about the
large outer circle were balls of three different colors and sizes.

"So we knock the balls into the center for points?"

I nodded. "However, there are caveats. First, it's not enough to knock the balls into the red circle, they have to stay there to count towards your point total. Secondly, our Pokémon cannot enter the large circle. And since we're at the hardest difficulty setting, all the balls will start within the circle, meaning our Pokémon can't directly touch the balls."

"Everything will have to be indirect."

"Yes. Thirdly, the balls are worth different points: large gold balls are five points, silver balls are three points, and the little bronze balls are only one point. However, since this is a contest, the points don't actually determine who wins. The audience judges how 'Smart' we and our Pokémon are in putting balls into the center. The different colors are more for them to judge us."

"Why have different colors and sizes at all, then?" Jade asked.

"Because they also represent the difficulty level. The gold balls are filled with lead, the silvers are made of compacted leather, like baseballs, and the bronzes are dense rubber. Each present vastly different properties in trying to move them."

"The audience is aware of this difference?"

"Yep. Between the lead weight, and the 'official' five points awarded for them, that should mean the audience will be much more impressed if you land a gold ball into the goal area than one of the other two colors."

"I understand the game now."

"So, our Pokémon takes turns trying their best. One attack allowed per turn, although your Pokémon is allowed to permute that single attack as much as they want. Strict rotation between three chosen Pokémon. We can each take nine turns, or else we go until someone ends a round with fifteen points. Which do you prefer?"

"Fifteen points."

She is a speedster, if I recall correctly. If she's very skilled or lucky, she can end this within three turns, though I highly doubt it. The gold balls barely budge two feet, even when hit by Magnemite's Thunderbolt. Magneton has set up the Omega difficulty pattern too: the golds are surrounded by a ring of bronze, and the silvers are arranged in outward-pointing triangle patterns. Meaning, any attempt to hit them with a ranged attack would send them flying in every direction but the center, like billiard balls.

"It's a lot like curling," Jade remarked.

"It is curling- curling players developed it for times and places where an ice rink isn't available."

"I'm excited. May I go first?"

"By all means," I said.

We assumed positions on each side of the circle, three Pokéballs in hand each. The crowd gathered round, eager to see what action and intrigue might arise between two professional Pokémon trainers. The stage was set.
"Begin."

"Tentacruel!" she called out, letting out an all-too-familiar menace. On one hand, these blue jellyfish gross me out, especially when I see them slithering their way across land. On the other, sailors bring them to challenge my gym by the boatload, and become cannon fodder for Steelix and Magnezone, which makes for easy matches.

"Tentacruel, were you listening to the young lady's rules?"

"Tental."

"Good. We're aiming for the gold balls. Ready an Acid Spray."

She is ambitious.

Tentacruel began its work, and very soon I was tilting my head and widening my eyes in astonishment. Her strategy was deceptively simple, but I can't comprehend the precision needed by her Pokemon to pull it off.

The acid gushed in a solid fountain stream across the open-field zone, smacking a clump of one gold and several bronze balls. The flow was precisely modulated. At first it was a fine mist of poison, coating the balls and the area around them but barely rocking them. Tentacruel slowly increased the pressure and tightened the stream's accuracy. The balls began moving.

"No way," one spectator commented.

The bowling-ball-sized gold was moving. Slowly, granted, but it was moving, and in the direction of the goal zone. How was that possible? A wimpy stream of acid shouldn't move a fifteen pound ball!

Unless it's coating it?

My suspicions were confirmed by the behavior of the bronze balls. Even without any application of force, they were slowly sliding away from one another. Most moved out of the way of the big gold ball, but some were following it, and some were being pushed along by it.

Tentacruel never let up, continually spouting the same stream of acid across the floor. It modulated the pressure and angle to keep the end point on the gold, always nudging it, little by little, as it surely made its way to the inner circle.

With a gentle tapering, the stream slackened and the gold ball slid its way into the center, along with one bronze. Six points for Jade.

"Gotta be cheating. I tried doing the same thing with Water Gun, it didn't even move the yellow ball," one former contestant groused.

"I think it's because she used acid," a bystander opined.

I thought so too. The acid acted as a lubricant that made the gold ball near frictionless. Tentacruel was also an expert at directing its Acid Spray, surely using its experience with Water Gun to aid its aim. Perhaps it even mixed water into the Acid Spray for fluidity? It even kept a single stream going for over two minutes. Impressive.

I glanced around, trying to judge the audience, to see if they understood what Jade and Tentacruel had accomplished. No one else really seemed to get how technical and difficult that little feat had been, but they were thoroughly impressed by the six points it netted.
Keep that in mind. I might have to be a little flashy to impress the masses.

"That worked exactly as I expected. How good. Your turn," Jade said with a competitive grin on her face.

"Electrode, you're up,"

Six points. I can equal that.

"Electrode, how are you feeling? You've seen this before, right?" Electrode nodded. "I want you to use Electro Ball- like a ping pong. Got it?"

Electrode confirmed by turning around and immediately starting on the plan.

The Pokémon scooted forward at a moderate pace, and just at the edge of the ring it let loose an Electro Ball. The electrical projectile lazily made its way to a group of silver balls.

"They'll bounce all around."

I grinned.

Of course. That's the idea.

The Electro Ball hit the silvers, which promptly split apart in three different directions.

"Go!"

Electrode took off in a poof of air. The first silver was to hit the sideline 8 yards to my right. Electrode circled over and intercepted it, sending it back into the field. 1.1 seconds later another silver ball was about to cross out of bounds 12 yards to my left- Electrode was there, bouncing it back into play.

Electrodes' ping-pong antics continued. At three silver balls being juggled eyebrows began cocking. At six, mouths began dropping. At fifteen, people began stepping back. Electrode was a blur circling the arena, never standing still long enough to be made out clearly. The field began resembling a pinball machine with silver and bronze streaks criss-crossing the field and careening off Electrode and one another at crazy angles.

"And- stop!"

Electrode worked itself to a halt, only humming enough to keep a few of the more travel-happy balls from leaving the room altogether.

When all stood still, there were two silver and two additional bronzes in the center ring. Eight points for me!

"That was so cool!"

"It was like Rush Hour Rumble at the arcade."

"That's a fucking fast Electrode."

Jade gave me a curt nod for kudos, and stepped up.

"A set rotation of three, I believe? And I'm to assume using the same tactic twice is also invalid."
"Not invalid, but frowned upon. I don’t think the audience would appreciate an encore, not in the Smart category at any rate."

"Then I’ll have to get creative," she stated.

To tell you the truth, the pinball machine tactic only works when the balls are all initially clumped together. If they were all spread out, like they are now, the ricocheting balls tend to collide with the stationary ones and lose energy. Compare breaking up the initial billiard triangle, where everything goes crazy, and the later rounds where only one or two balls see any significant movement. So it’s okay by me if I’d lose credibility trying to repeat the tactic; it wouldn’t work as well the second time anyways. Jade, on the other hand, has a nice Acid Spray trick that can be repeated regardless of the state of the field. I’m glad the conventions of the contest prevent her from using it again.

"Spinner, come out," Jade called.

Her team leader, an Ariados. Not usually considered good for a team leader, because they’re kind of weak. Judging by the simple nickname, I’m guessing it was her first childhood Pokémon, so it’s probably had a lot more training than your typical Ariados.

"Very well. Spinner. Spider Web. Slingshot." She followed by pointing out three gold balls (five remained in the outer circle, none of which had budged in Electrode’s pinball ploy).

Ariados acknowledged with an insectoid cricketing. It began by sending two taught wires of web, almost simultaneously, at two different gold balls far across the arena. The Pokémon pulled the strings tight as a violin wire, then tighter, till the gold balls actually started rolling towards it. At last, it released, or shot, rather, the central portion towards a nearby gold ball.

One long string of web connected the three balls in a "V" formation. The tension placed on the string was high, almost stretched to its breaking point. As soon as it was released, the string tried to retract itself, like a bungee cord. The center of the string, affixed to the nearest gold ball, was drawn towards the two far balls, which were pulled slightly towards us. The result was that the "V" was constricted into a "U" and then a straight line: "___" (like so). The central gold ball in the formation landed in the goal zone, knocking one of my bronzes out in the process.

"Eleven points for me," Jade chimed.

Seven for me, I pouted.

"How’d she do that?"

"Like a slingshot, but without the ends anchored."

"That takes some pretty fine tuning on Ariados’ part. What if it had put too much tension on the string? The gold would have just been slung past the goal ring."

"Smart."

"You think she could've just had Ariados pull one of those golds into the center instead?"

"Yeah, but that wouldn't have been as interesting. It's like dominos, the more complicated the better."

"The Poison Gym Leader's got ten points already."

"Eleven, that bronze ball that got knocked out belonged to the other leader."
"I can't wait to see what the Electric Gym Leader does now."

I'm a Steel-type specialist! Grr!

And now Jade is one turn away from ending the match. I didn't think she could budge the golds so easily. If I give her another turn, she might end this before I have a chance to show off!

"Steelix."

I realized how small this room was when Steelix emerged. His head was stooped to avoid hitting the ceiling, and he could barely fit on the sidelines between the no-entry circle and the spectators. I waved for several people to move back to give him room to maneuver, which they were more than happy to oblige. Remembering Mother's hissy fit, I quickly checked the flooring, to see if Steelix was tearing up the carpet. A sigh of relief escaped me- I had set this contest in the middle of the battle field, where the surface had been prepared.

"Alright. Steelix! Are you ready?"

"Schteel."

"I've never seen one in person. Bigger than I imagined," Jade commented on my Pokémon.

"Ehe. Well, I don't want to end the game so soon, so sorry for this," I apologized ahead of time to Jade. "Steelix, Stone Edge, the center."

Steelix grimaced, roared a little, and then planted his tail into the ground and twisted.

This arena was made up of regulation hard clay surface, but it's not very deep. Nonetheless, Steelix managed to direct the seismic waves precise enough to cause a fat stalagmite to erupt from the center of the bull's-eye. It pushed away everything: all the balls Jade and I had accumulated in the goal zone so far, shoved anywhere from a few inches to a few yards away. Another twist of the tail by Steelix and the stalagmite crumbled to nothingness, in order to re-open the goal zone.

Jade's face twisted in surprise.

'So it's that kind of game', she seemed to be thinking. Her fingers curled, with her red nails sticking out like a Meowth's claws.

"Scolipede. Spikes."

I'm not familiar with this Pokémon, I think it's from a faraway nation. However, at the zoo they have an insect exhibit, and these things called centipedes were on display. Two-inches long, multi-segmented, with many many sharp legs and a disturbing gait, and the way they pounced and curled around their prey really put the goosebumps under my skin. So when I saw their seven-foot-long Pokemon cousin crawling along the floor not ten feet from me, I instinctively drew back.

This Scolipede living-nightmare-thing spiked up the arena with tall, stinger-like spines. It didn't move any of the balls, but as evidenced by the deliberate pattern of the spikes, Jade was setting herself up for future rounds.

"Magneton, Magnet Bomb. Not from here, from there."

Magneton tried magnetizing a gold ball and then letting its passive Magnet Pull ability bring the ball to the bull's-eye. However, the spikes got in the way. Magneton tried increasing the strength of its Magnet Pull, but that backfired, bouncing the gold over the impeding spikes and then clear across the
goal area, stopping a little outside of the red tape.

"Tentacruel, Acid Spray the lanes."

I and others thought Jade was trying to repeat her first tactic, but were quickly contradicted. Tentacruel wasn't aiming for the balls, but the lanes between her spike traps. The spray was less focused this time, but the acid was far more potent. The clay beneath the stream began dissolving. Tentacruel moved the spray deliberately across the field, in a swirling pattern.

"She's having it dig a trench."

"Why?"

"Maybe she's trying to stop the Electric Gym Leader from getting more balls into the goal."

"I hope they don't keep knocking each other's balls out, I want to see someone finish this before the party's over."

I'm wondering myself what Jade is up to. She isn't just trying to make it difficult for me, she's got a plan for winning and I've got to figure it out.

Electrode's turn.

"Sonic Boom. Loaded bases. Those three," I pointed out a trio of silver balls near each other.

Electrode understood, and shot out three sonic pulses. Its aim was on target, its power precise. The first silver ball was shot into the air, clearing the row of spikes standing between it and the bull's-eye. The second silver was shot skyward at an angle, striking the first mid-air and ricocheting off. The third ball likewise hit the second, bouncing off of it. The result was the first two balls made it over the spikes and were then batted down directly into the goal area. The third came bouncing down and almost landed inside the tape as well, before rolling away. Six points for me.

"Not bad. But you're playing for the short haul," Jade said. She had Ariados out and ordered it to clump a bunch of silver and bronzes into a group using its Poison Sting attack. It followed through perfectly, creating a pile worth some twenty points- but no where near the goal zone. I eyed the horde suspiciously.

Does she seriously plan on sending that entire pile into the goal using Scolipede next turn? That's impossible. I can't think of a single attack that would keep them all together while moving them ten yards through spike-and-pothole-infested terrain. Is she baiting me into using Stone Edge on them? Or is it a distraction? Or maybe the pile itself is key to moving gold balls into the center. I can't tell which is it!

"Calm down. Steelix is calm, look at him. Be like Steelix."

My leviathan was patiently awaiting orders. This game must not be very exciting for him, he loves nothing more than to show off his brute force. Yet, he's giving this the same focus and effort as any gym battle. What a good Pokémon. What did I ever do to deserve him?

"Steelix, Stone Edge- use them as a row of steps. Target that gold."

Steelix repeated his display of precision earth-upheaval. This time the stalagmites were flat headed. They burst up at a slant, the first right beneath the heavy gold ball. The ball rolled off the earthen spire- right onto the second stalagmite- and then the third, and fourth, and fifth. The Stone Edge acted like a set of steps, or maybe an escalator, finally plopping the gold ball firmly in the center of
the bull's-eye. I'm up to eleven points now, and Jade doesn't have a single ball inside.

The murmurs started rising in the crowd.

"No worries," she said aloud. "Scolipede, Spikes, again, but this time lock the gold balls down." She followed this command with a series of hand signals. Scolipede went to work.

A delaying tactic, I think. Indeed, by the time the bug finished four of the remaining five gold balls were pinned down by numerous cross-sparred spines. Their weight made them hard enough to move as-is, this would make it impossible. I could still win next turn with a combination of silvers and bronzes, but besides Jade's big pile on the perimeter, I didn't see any clump Magneton could knock inside.

There was one gold ball unhindered on the field, however…

"You missed one," I said cheerily.

Cheerily, I add, because the free gold ball was the one Magneton had last failed to get in the round before. It was in the ditch Tentacruel had dug and hidden from Jade's view by a row of spikes. She and Ariados must have missed it. Despite the obstacles, however, it was a mere two feet from the goal area. If I could surmount the trench and spikes, it would be child's play to bump it in and win this competition.

"Magneton, let's figure out how to get it inside the goal this time."

"Tonn."

The surest way to do this is Magnet Bomb, and then use Magnet Rise on it to make it float. It'd be easier to Magnet Pull it into position then. Except, that's two different attacks; it would be against the rules.

Could I afford to wait for Magneton's turn to come around again in order to execute that tactic? I don't know, Jade could finish her scheme. Or else she might decide to try to clear out the bull's-eye herself.

No, no, I need to get the ball in this turn, right now, while I have a chance.

But with Magneton's capabilities, that's looking really improbable…

Aha! I got it! A compromise!

"Magneton, come here." I circled the arena until I reached a particular angle. Jade was only four feet away, she eyed me amusedly as I lifted Magneton up in my arms.

"Wait, wait, wait, almost, here, okay! Fire a Magnet Bomb at that gold!"

I didn't let go, manually aiming Magneton's body. My Pokemon fired the near-invisible bullet… straight through Jade's stockpile. The little balls flew every which way, scattering out into a disorganized mess. Meanwhile, the Magnet Bomb continued straight into the gold ball. That should magnetize it for a good ten minutes, enough time for us to cycle back to Magneton. Blasting apart her precious stockpile should also slow her down.

"Double-dipping."

"Two birds with one stone."
"Offense and defense simultaneously."

"Well that's Jasmine Mikan for you. Our city doesn't hire idiots for its Gym Leader."

I smiled. They're not wowing, oohing, and awwing for this, but they understand and appreciate the effectiveness of it.

"That's not… that didn't work out like I expected," Jade could be heard muttering.

"Hmm? What was that? Did something not go according to plan?"

"You, my dear, you didn't act according to plan."

"Oh? How so?" I asked.

"I'll tell you when this contest is over," she replied.

"Fair is fair."

I stood back to allow her to take her turn. Tentacruel was up.

"Tentacruel, slight change of plans. Acid Spray. Look at me. Do it like this." More hand signals.

Tentacruel turned to the field and began spouting acid in a meandering stream, etching another ditch into the surface.

Some audience members groaned, others mumbled. Not only is she repeating Tentacruel's tactic from its last appearance, the tactic appeared to do nothing to change the ballscape. If this was intended to impede me, she's sorely mistaken and will rue her decision!

But… she's not that stupid, is she? What else could she be planning with all these spikes and trenches? Maybe she plans on using the lanes like bowling ball alleys?

No, never mind. The ditches are in all random patterns, with a lot of twists and curves. Trying to shoot a ball, even a bronze, through that maze would be futile; the ball would lose all momentum before it reached the center.

Still, I couldn't figure out what she had in mind.

Well, they say if you can't figure your opponent's strategy out for the life of you, keep doing whatever you're doing, but turn up the pressure. Force them to sweat and make mistakes.

Except it's poor Electrode's turn…

"Electrode, I'm not sure what you can do." If I could, I would just skip Electrode's turn. Except that wouldn't impress the audience, and it's their decision who wins the contest, not the actual points in the bull's-eye. Yet, I couldn't think of another way for Electrode to knock a ball into the goal except by repeating his previous Sonic Boom attack. Judging by their reaction to Tentacruel, the audience wouldn't like that either.

"Um. How about this. Electro Ball the spikes in front of the gold ball."

Scolipede's spikes formed lines all over the field in random patterns, but had been especially concentrated near the goal area. There was a veritable wall around 330° of the red-taped circle, including the space between it and the lone free gold ball.

Electrode revved up and let fly its attack. The electron particles nicked the top of the gold ball and
blasted through the spikes, cutting them in half.

"There." Now when Magneton's turn came up, it should be trivial to Magnet Rise that sucker and float it in. "Your turn."

Jade stood motionless, her eyes closed and arms crossed. Her pose reminded me of a Pokémon from the Afrakani Region, a skinny stick-bug kind of creature that remained perfectly still, its only movement a slight swaying to the breeze.

"Spinner, use Spider Web on the target, and the center," she said calmly and evenly.

This was a woman who tried very hard to keep a respectable public image, I thought. She wants to act like me or Whitney or Lyra, overreacting to every turn of momentum, but she suppresses that emotion and keeps an even temper. Or tries to, at any rate.

'She's concerned about how others see her. Kind of like you,' I thought.

Her Ariados moved forward to execute the Spider Web. Pre-formed ringlets of sticky silk splotched over the field. When it needed to cover the top of the goal area, it began hopping twenty feet into the air to get a good angle. By the time it was finished, the entire goal area looked like a cocoon. There wasn't a single opening anywhere.

"Now, may I assume balls must actually be touching the surface of the center ring for them to count as 'inside'?" Jade asked.

"More or less," I replied, truly having no idea if there were any rules for this situation. Just because a ball was held up off the ground by a foot or so, does that mean it isn't countable? What if it was only an inch? A millimeter? This could be very subjective.

I took a look at the arrangement of spikes and webs and made up a rule on the spot, one that should be fair.

"Well, I think, in order for a ball to count it must be at rest in the goal area. So technically, it must have its weight displaced upon the goal area surface. Since the spikes and webs that would be holding up this theoretical ball are all anchored outside of the goal area, none of the weight of a ball would be resting inside the goal. So it wouldn't count. Unless the ball sagged the web enough for the ensemble to touch the ground."

Jade nodded in understanding. She's taking my word for it. Awesome!

"Good, that will be sufficient."

"You should have asked that before Ariados tried webbing up the place."

"You should make up the rules before we begin playing," she countered.

Ack! She saw right through me!

My pride's hurt, but my chances of winning are unaffected.

So with all that in mind, it's Steelix's turn, and I'm in a conundrum.

"Try shifting the singular gold onto the net, in hopes that it will sag down or break through? Or erase the web first and then move the gold on your next turn? But wouldn't that waste Steelix's turn? And as long as the net stays in place, your eleven points' worth of balls are safe and I can't get a single ball
"in. So many things to consider," Jade postulated, repeating all the strategic points I was already analyzing in my head. She's trying to distract you, Jasmine.

"What would you do?" I asked.

"I would use Steelix to set up a way for Magneton to pound the ball straight through the web. A tunnel, or cannon, if it's capable of that."

Heh. That's actually a good answer, but, coming from the foe, is suspect. Either she knows my Pokémon aren't capable of those things, or else thinks she can win on her next turn. How does she plan on winning in one turn if the web is in her way? Is she counting on me to clear the web? Is it all a big distraction?

My mind is a scrambled mess trying to sort it all out.

Just stick to your plan, Jasmine. There is a way out of this.

"Steelix, I'm going to really need you to be precise here."

"Schteel."

He's ready.

"I need a single Rock Throw." I would prefer Stone Edge, but the audience might be getting tired of that attack. "And I need it to hit the web at the exact spot above that gold ball. Do you understand?"

Steelix nodded.

"No really, do you understand?" I asked for emphasis. "It has to be this big," I showed him with my hands, "and in exactly that spot. AND it has to be hard enough to puncture the web."

Steelix rumbled.

He's got this.

My Pokémon coughed up a rock from his gut. It wasn't the usual rough mineral mass that comes directly from his biology. This was a stone he had eaten from Crescent Bay quarry. A smooth one, with good weight. People were already giving the metallic leviathan a good berth; I motioned for them to stand even farther back.

With a deliberate flick the ball went into the air, like a self-served baseball, and then it was batted by the edge of Steelix's swinging tail. There was a crack, the stone flew fast and true, and impacted the goal area's surface with a \textit{whump}. The web had been no obstacle at all to the projectile. A hole the size of a basketball was left behind in the web, right where I needed it.

"Okay."

"Pretty obvious she wants that gold ball."

"Nice mechanics on the swing. Good enough for pro baseball."

"I don't think they would let a Steelix onto a baseball diamond, Rick."

"If Jade's smart, she'll put the ball into the hole herself."

My idea was that by creating one small hole in the web, I could still carry out my strategy while not
opening up the whole web for her to push balls into, or knock my own balls out.

Yet, she's looking indifferent to the whole process.

Hmm. Was that what she was aiming for after all? Stealing my hole and my gold ball? How do you think Scolipede plans on moving the ball? If it can't, might she Scolipede spike it down like the rest of the gold balls? That would be effective, but uncreative.

I'm one turn from winning this; there's nothing between me and victory but this six-legged freak. How's she planning on stopping me?

"They're good. Just need to get those positioned. Scolipede, Earthquake," Jade ordered.

Scolipede pounded the ground and let out a temblor. The thing was, this Bug-type didn't have the strength of Steelix, or the type-affinity, to make its Earthquake all that powerful. The only thing it accomplished was bouncing the lighter silver and bronze balls a bit, typically sending them into the Acid Spray-excavated trenches.

"Hmm."

She seems happy with the result.

Which is bad for me.

But it's my turn.

So no matter what she's planning, it's irrelevant if my plan works and I end the game here and now.

"Magneton," I called. Magneton didn't want to get hit by the Earthquake- weak enough even I withstood it, but Magneton's quadruple vulnerability meant it didn't want to even touch the ground- so it had been levitating itself and orbiting the field.

Wait a minute. Was that her plan? To indirectly attack Magneton? How dastardly! Even if it wouldn't seriously hurt my Pokémon, it was still an attack and could still shake up Magneton's focus.

Not fair!

I sent an evil look her way, before summoning Magneton to my side.

"How are you?" I asked.

Magneton hummed in answer. 'Doing okay'.

"Alright. You know what needs to be done.

Magneton buzzed.

It found the optimal position at the edge of the field, opposite the ball, and fired a wave of energy into the ground.

Magnet Rise, ranged. Magnet Rise is not an attack that can be shot around like a projectile or tractor beam. It usually works by attenuating the Pokémon's metallic body to the Earth's magnetosphere, vastly increasing the strength of their interaction. The result was a Pokémon that's literally repelled by the Earth into the air.

In this case, Magneton was doing the opposite. It's attenuating the earth to repel anything of like
charge away from it.

But Jasmine, didn't you just say Magneton couldn't aim the Magnet Rise?

Indeed, it can't be aimed. It's a bubble that expands outwards until it reaches a conductive material, or it reaches maximum range, about six yards, whichever comes first.

Wait, how does it attenuate the earth itself? You're standing on hardened clay.

Next question. Ask the other obvious question.

How does Magneton hit the gold ball, which is twelve yards away, with an attack that has a maximum range of six yards?

AHA! Both questions have the same answer!

Because, you see, with careful observation, you might spot a tiny sliver of an edge surrounding the clay battlefield. This is the metal casing that holds the clay field, like a swimming pool full of dirt. It's only three or four feet deep, I'm guessing. That is what Magneton was aiming for!

And since the underground casing is now attenuated to repel similarly charged objects- and what also happens to be charged?

Well, Magneton, of course, which is why my Pokémon is careening towards the ceiling at the moment.

But, yes, the gold ball!

It's levitating! Like I knew it would!

"Magneton! Good job! Now just use your ability and draw the ball into the hole in the web. Like golf! Sink her in!"

I know, I know, I'm terrible at sports lingo.

Magneton hummed.

The gold ball drifted towards the goal, inching towards it. Yes! It was aligned perfectly! It's going in! It's going in! It's going... in...

It's going nowhere.

It stopped.

It stopped?!

I kid you not. It stopped, in midair, for absolutely no reason.

"What the heck?!" I gurgled out, putting both palms to my mouth to stop myself from shouting.

"I'm surprised that you're surprised. Can't you see it?" Jade asked, not really a taunt but a tease.

"It's the web."

"She caught it."

"Huh?"
"It's fixed to the ceiling."

"Ariados managed to do that? I didn't notice."

The crowd erupted in murmurs.

What are they talking about?

"Come on, Magneton, harder! Pull harder!"

"Tsk tsk. I think I was being lenient allowing Magneton to use both an attack and its ability in a single round, but to keep forcing the issue goes against the spirit of the game, doesn't it?"

"But-"

"This is a Smart Contest, after all," Jade reminded me.

I sighed.

"Very well. But tell me how you stopped that ball!"

It was still hanging in mid-air. Even as Magneton floated to the floor, evidence of the arena-wide Magnet Rise wearing off, the gold ball floated freely, touching nothing.

"I wouldn't blame you if you couldn't spot it if you weren't looking for it. There's a strand of silk tethering the ball to the ceiling."

What?

I squinted as hard as I could, but couldn't make anything out. It was too fuzzy, beyond my acuity.

"Maybe you need new contact lenses," Jade said.

"I don't wear-"

"When Spinner used Spider Web to cover the goal area, I first had him connect the gold ball to the ceiling with a single strand of silk. It's much stronger than you give it credit for, the Rock Throw notwithstanding. You were very obvious about your intentions with that one ball."

"Of course, it was the one free ball. I could take a turn to knock the spikes off another, but that would be a waste of a turn," I countered.

"Did you think I had just overlooked a ball, however?" she said.

My arms dropped to my side.

"I left that one there deliberately, for you to play with, while I prepared the field. Judging by your Magneton's previous efforts, I doubted you would be able to move it back into the center in a single turn."

"But… then… all you've done is stopped me from winning this turn. What are you going to do? Wait till Ariados's turn comes and Poison Sting the thread? That would knock the ball down for you, but it's only five points."

"Indeed. That would be clever, wouldn't it? Take all your effort and subvert it, reaping the results for myself."
This devious woman!

"But no," she said while giving a small shake. "I'm going to win now."

"Impossible."

"Watch, and understand. Tentacruel! Acid Pump!"

Tentacruel let loose a fury of water and poison, pounding a spot in the field immediately before it.

It's not hitting a ball. Nor the web. Nor the center. It was aiming at nothing but a random spot on the ground.

"Keep it up!"

Tentacruel increased its pressure, pouring more and more liquid into the field.

It wasn't puddling, though. It wasn't gorging out a new hole either.

The water/acid mixture began pouring down the trenches Tentacruel had "wasted" two turns tracing into the arena.

Then it dawned on me.

It's a river.

The trenches are a river.

It wasn't a random pattern Tentacruel had doodled onto the field. It was a wobbly spiral pattern, winding its way through the spikes like a dry river bed through a mountain range. And now that dry river was filling up and flooding. All the little balls caught in its path were being pushed along, like floats.

My shock turned to disbelief, as one after another the silver and bronze balls began piling up, pushed along by the current. The pattern slowly filled up, circling, inevitably forging inwards, towards the goal. By the time they reached the inner loop, there were some twenty balls at the fore of the stream.

"There's no way. The web is in the way," I whispered, hoping.

And indeed, the mass of water and acid and balls sloshed against the web and stopped. Momentarily.

Then the acid bit into the silk and melted it away, a gaping chasm formed in the cocoon, and the pile of balls slipped inside. One and two and three and four, bronze after bronze after silver nudged into the gap signifying the goal area. I counted them. Everyone counted them.


Oh wait! Please don't! Ah! AH! AHA!

Not all the balls went inside. Some were pushed by the current to the outside edges of the stream. And two, a silver and a bronze, bobbled and came to a rest- right on the brink of the perimeter.

Jade stared intently at them.

As did I, and everyone else.
Yet Tentacruel had long ceased its Acid Spray/Hydro Pump combo and the upstream pressure dwindled to nothing. The balls remained where they were, inert and unscored.

"Electrode, Thunderbolt those in! Now!" I immediately ordered.

"TRODA!"

The crack of a middling Electric lightning bolt rang out and the silver and bronze balls were knocked inside.

The goal area now held one gold ball (1-0 mine), six silver balls (3-3 tied), and six bronze balls (5-1 Jade's). The total points were fourteen for her, and fifteen for me. The contest was over.

"So that's that."

The chatter around the arena grew to a fevered pitch. Some people were hooting and hollering, others clapping. I shied away from the crowd's accolades, mainly because some young men were using the occasion to catcall at me. Jade seemed unperturbed, bowing graciously and then throwing kisses to those rooting for her. Everywhere people had their smartphones out, tapping in their votes.

"Show the results!"

"Who won?"

"On the board please!"

I was too nervous. Jade was as well. Neither of us went for the remote that would bring the tally up on the video display. An eager socialite did the honor for us.

An hourglass appeared, with a countdown beneath it.

**Please enter your vote within the time provided. Thank you.**

I held my breath watching the seconds tick off. My heart thumped, and I swore I could hear it.

You like this, don't you, Jasmine? You like the adrenaline. You like the anticipation, the thrill.

Yeah, I guess I do. Life's a game to me. I like nothing better than to team up with my Pokémon and match wits against another team of Pokémon and their trainer. I feel like we're all alive and helping each other do something interesting and poignant when we compete.

That's what attracted me to Pokémon battles. Winning isn't the goal. Trying your best to win is the goal. If you allow winning at any cost to become your motto, you're defeating the purpose of competition. Wins become meaningless, it's the possibility of losing that comes to dominate your psyche, turning perfection into boring status quo and anything less into a disaster. That's bad. Winning should be savored, and enjoyed, and appreciated as something that has been earned.

I tell myself and repeat to myself this philosophy, because the clock has hit zero and the score is staring me in the face.

**Jasmine Mikan: 78**

**Jade Aokigahara: 89**

"Thank you! Everyone, thank you! I'm glad I could entertain you and enjoy your vote!"
Jade's first reaction was to turn to the crowd and string them along. They're loving it. She's smiling, they're smiling, everyone's happy. Except me.

"You'll make a good politician," I noted, a little sourly, as she came up to shake hands.

"Undoubtedly. But I want to be a good leader, too," she replied, taking my limp hand and grasping it tightly. "You had a chance to win, but you were too hasty to take advantage of Tentacruel's leftovers. Not very clever, as the audience sees it."

"Yeah," I replied, nodding my head in resignation. "I should have gone for the gold ball like I'd been gunning for."

"Still, it was a good match. I'd love to have a real battle against you, some time."

"Not any time soon. Probation and all," I explained. She's staring down on me. Physically speaking, I mean—she's taller than me. That and her choice of words makes it feel like she's condescending to me. I hate that, and what's more, I hate that I can't pinpoint why exactly she would be condescending. Because I'm shorter? Younger? Lost the contest? I'm merely part of the catering staff and not a socialite here? Without anything concrete to latch onto, my conscience fizzled and became frustrated, and I started questioning whether I was being unfair to this lady.

Maybe I'm just upset about losing. That's got to be it.

"Would you care to join me later? And your mother, as well. There's a private dinner table being reserved and I think you two might be welcome there."

"No, we couldn't, we have so much—" I started.

"I insist," she insisted. She's talking about the formal dinner, the second half of the party. Right now is just the informal party, where pretty much anyone from the Society or their invited friends can intermingle and have fun. If I had put in some effort I bet even I could have smuggled Lyra and Erika in here. For the formal dinner, however, most of the peripherals would be shooed out and the big wigs would settle down for serious discussion. Out on the veranda a cluster of tables had been set aside for the biggest names to gather round and chum each other up.

"Okay," I assented. Mother would want to join in, I'm sure, so I accepted the invitation.

"Jasmine!"

Speaking of the which…

"Jade wanted to challenge me," I tried explaining, as this little ball of barely-contained volcanic fury marched my way.

"She was a worthy opponent, you raised her to be very smart," Jade said.

"Yes, well, I also raised her to be disciplined," Mother said, and then dragged me aside. "What have you been doing? I told you to oversee the contest, not participate in them."

"It wasn't my idea," I tried to defend myself.
"You aren't a guest here, you're a host."

"The guests loved it."

I waved to the crowd, who were in high spirits and chattering lively amongst each other about our contest match.

Mother carefully considered the scene, evaluating the pros of satisfying our customers with a good display of Pokémon mastery with the cons of me goofing off.

"Fine, fine, " she said resignedly. "Just make sure to keep things in order."

"Jade invited us to dinner."

"She did? Tonight?"

"Yes."

"We have a job to do, we don't have time."

"It was one of the private tables, on the veranda."

That perked her interest.

You see, each one of those tables required a donation to the Entrepreneurship Society- on the order of 100,000 Pokedollars. Jade was no common guest, it seemed.

"Well, then, how can we refuse?" She began thinking. Probably tabulating all the work that needed doing and how to fit a sit-down dinner into that schedule. "We'll have to stay longer to clean up. Well, then, fine. Keep things running here. Clean up the place, for starters, it's starting to look like your gym."

"My gym never looks this bad," I protested, but she had already turned to leave.

I turned to the battle-hall, looking over the five contest sections. They were pretty disorganized after a couple hours of use and abuse.

"Steelix? Hey, Steelix! Could you level the battlefield? It's all torn up. Oh, and try to stay on the clay, I don't need Mother complaining about torn up carpets."

"Schteel."

"Thank you." I patted my leviathan on the head, and then he set to his work. "Magneton, Electrode, you're with me."

I resumed my hostess duties with as much fervor as I could muster, and that wasn't very much. Battles always tire me out, mentally. Especially tough ones.

As I shoved the Cool Contest equipment back into their proper place, heaving and huffing, I caught Jade staring at me out of the corner of my eye.

She's giving me a look of curiosity. Why? I waved to her and she waved back.

What's up with this woman? The contest match got me nothing! Frustrating!

"Find out at dinner," I told myself in a huff.
Dichotomy

Oh please make it stop.

"Jasmine do this, Jasmine do that."

Stop, I'm begging you.

"Clean the dishes, mop the floor,
wipe the table, clean it more!

Jackets, brackets,

Wallets, boards,

Mind the volume,

Hold the door!

Every speckle, every spot,

Every little dink and dot,

Scrub it, rub it, shine and shore,

Garbage garbage out the door.

Scurry, scurry, refill curry,

Watch yourself, hurry hurry!

Guests are yawning,

Games are bombing.

Get the booze, make it pour,

Check the pantry, call the store,

All of these are Jasmine's chores!"

Make it stoooooooopppppp!

I've lost count of the hours. My arms are aching. So is my back. And my ankles. And my head. Especially my head. How long until dinner? How many more hours before I get the sweet bliss of sitting down for ten whole seconds?!

I can't take this any more!

I lurched into the main ballroom, a bushel of trash bags hanging from my hands and shoulders like a post-apocalyptic Tropius sprouting Garbodors. It was to be expected that the bags would be heavy and stink, but there was a small hole in the bottom of one and someone's soda was leaking out of it. I was forced to hop-scotch around to save my tights from getting sticky and soaked.
My frustrations were about to boil over. 

"Someone save me!" I silently pleaded.

At that moment, it felt like the world tilted over.

Mother approached me. She seemed angry.

"Take the cake boxes with you!" I was ordered.

"I can't..." I whimpered, nearly broken.

"Don't argue, just do it!"

"Hold it right there, woman!"

A bang, and the ballroom doors burst open. The crowd of socialites parted, opening like the Hoenn Sea before Kyogre. Yet it was no sea monster surging towards us in majestic grandeur, but a man. My heart leapt.

"Morty!" I cried.

He was dressed in full formal suit- dress pants, button-down shirt, blazer jacket, and a purple tie with flame patterns to mimic his absent scarf. His hair was combed back, and his jaw was cleanly shaven. He looked handsome- breathtakingly so. I never imagined Morty dressing up, but seeing this instantly redefined my notion of what a male should look like. How can I describe it? It was like he had Tobias' aura, except he didn't project ominous power, but radiant hope and benign authority.

Mismagius and Luxray flanked him on either side. Together, they formed an imposing trio amidst the crowd of sniveling penny-pushers. The rest of the party goers, for all their fashion and pretentiousness, were put to shame.

"What is the meaning of this?" one Entrepreneur Society leader dared to exclaim. He was silenced by a silent glare from Luxray. Mother was the only one unaffected by his entrance, regarding the newcomer with a vitriolic sneer. She moved to interpose herself between me and my boyfriend. Morty, undeterred, marched upon us with unbridled confidence. His warpath ended before my enslaver.

I knew that Morty was tall, and my mother short, but seeing him stare down upon her drove home just how big a height difference there was between them.

"So you must be Morty," Mother said.

"I am," Morty replied.

"Then you're the one corrupting my daughter, filling her head with idiocies like love and sex," she accused.

"Ah, with an accusation like that, you must be the demon who hounds and persecutes my love!"

"You are not welcome here, get out before I call security and-"

"Don't bother lady, I'll be gone just as quickly as I came. But not without my dearest."

"Tcht. As if I'd allow that!"
"Jasmine, come," Morty commanded, holding a hand out to me.

"She is not going anywhere!" Mother slapped his arm away from me.

"Says who? You?"

"Yes, says me, the woman who brought her into this world!"

Morty bore down on my mother, practically shoving his infuriated visage into her face. "Through two decades of neglect and abuse you have lost the right to invoke that argument. Jasmine will be free of your tyranny, woman!"

"My right has nothing to do with it! I will protect her from your predation!"

"You call what you've done 'protecting her'? Do you even know your own daughter? She is suffering from years of neglect, loneliness, and depression. Her sensibilities regarding love have been egregiously damaged, her heart a fragile thing broken by the least little shock. She has suffered at the hands of male suitors, and your so-called 'protection' has done nothing to assuage her, to assure her it will be all right, to help sustain her and help her recover and nurture the courage within her to move on and hope anew! You reprehensible being! You have failed your duty as a parent!

"How dare you!" Mother retaliated. "You sick, perverted cretin spout nonsense, twisting the truth to fit your narrative, manipulating my child for the sole purpose of getting her to have sex with you! I will not have it!"

"How can you continue to be blind to your daughter's own desires?! I need no manipulation to unearth the holy feelings which are already within her! She herself desires to explore the fruit that is every woman's sacred right! It is you who have corrupted that desire into something that shames and diminishes her, causing her to reject those natural instincts and hate herself for harboring them! You, who brought her into this world, would deny her the same pleasure that you yourself partook of! You hypocrite! You monster!"

"YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO TALK OF SUCH THINGS!!" Mother erupted. She grew in proportion to her anger, dwarfing Morty. "You have no idea what you are talking about! Your perverted intentions will only unearth feelings within her that cause her pain and sorrow!"

"She is stronger than that! She is more beautiful than that! I say again, you do not know your own daughter!"

"I know her better than any of you!" Mother shouted.

I cringed.

I hate it, but it's the truth, the awful, awful truth.

Oh Morty, godly Morty, you are perfect and omnipotent now, but you are not omniscient. You really don't understand. She knows. She knows my darkest secret. The core of my suffering, my very soul, is in her hands. How can I fight her? It's impossible.

"You do not know her better than she knows herself!"

I perked up.

Mother sputtered.
"And you do not know what's best for her. Only she knows what is best for herself."

Morty, you…

"Shut up. Leave her alone. Leave us alone."

"I will never leave her."

"If you keep leading her down this path, she's liable to-"

"Lose her innocence? Become corrupted? Have sex? What is wrong with that? Why don't you trust her, if you know her so well, if you've raised her so properly, why don't you allow her to decide what she wants?"

"Because she's weak-willed and foolish," Mother answered.

"No, YOU are weak-willed and foolish! YOU are the pathetic woman burdening your child with the regrets and miseries of your life's failed ambitions!"

"Why you-" but Mother could do nothing but shrink in fear. Her legs gave out and she knelt to the floor, shaking.

Morty turned to me.

"You are twenty-one, going on twenty-two years of age. By any account, you are an adult, free to make your own decisions. I humbly ask you to come with me, for a night of romantic sojourn out on the bay. My yacht awaits, dear Jasmine."

He bowed slightly, and held his hand out, inviting me to take it.

"Will you join me?"

Morty, oh my perfect Morty, you're my savior! Of course I'll come!

I took his hand and we were off, to adventures unknown. My blond-haired angel smiled, a deep and genuine smile, and in his eyes was love, unblemished, unconditional, without regret or shame or secret falseness. I felt his embrace and was filled with joy.

"I love you, Morty, I love you!"

…

"Quit daydreaming."

Mother strode by me, a box of glasses under one arm and a case of silverware under the other. When I failed to move, she paused and turned back to address me.

"Did you forget where the garbage dump is?"

"Huh? No." I shook my head. The world fell back into place, as if it had been an unbalanced Balttoy spinning crazily round and round and had finally fallen over.

"Then hurry up. We've only rented this place through tonight, it has to be spotless by tomorrow morning. With Ms. Aokigahara's dinner, we're not going to have a lot of time. So hurry."

"Yes Mother."
I lilted along, trash bags in tow.

If only my knight in shining armor really did show up.

No, Jasmine, life is realistic. Morty is a hundred miles away, in Ecruteak, enjoying his weekend. Your misery is destined to continue until all the work is done and you're back in your apartment, free to flop into bed.

"The dinner is at eight-thirty."

"I'll have the contests wrapped up by then," I promised. Mother nodded and went on her way.

She should thank me. She should be proud of me. The contests had been a smashing success. Virtually every younger guest spent time in there, and a good number of older guests too, and by their chatter they seemed to have had a lot of fun. The matches were good, considering the amateur level of competition, and for sheer entertainment value a few of the Beauty and Cool matches even outstripped Jade and I's contest. For myself, I didn't really get to watch them. I was too busy trying to clean up messes as they were created, among many other miscellaneous chores.

"Hey, psst! PSST!"

I was in the middle of a dash to find window spray (Muk's Gunk Shot plus Beauty Contest video screen, don't ask) when someone hailed me from a doorway exit. My feet skidded to a halt. A big white floppy hat disappeared around the corner. I followed, curiosity piqued.

"Lyra! What are you doing here? You can't be here!"

"I wanted to say hi!" Lyra said. I took a peek back around the corner, scanning the side-hall. My slave-master was nowhere in sight.

"Hi! But you can't stay here, you'll get in trouble!" I whispered.

"I won't stay long. Just wanted to see how you were doing, how's the party? You're not getting worked too hard are you?"

I shook my head.

"It's awful, outright awful. But I'm a tough girl, I'll survive."

"Glad to hear it!" Lyra checked her Poketch. "I'm actually doing double battles here. Got a win-streak going, six more wins and I'll be able to pay back the fine. Waiting for my next match right now. It seemed like a good idea to stop by and check in on you."

"Thanks."

"Oh, and here."

Lyra reached into her bag and came out with a paper cup.

"Vanilla shake. Owed you one, didn't I?"

"Heh, heheheahaha!" I couldn't help but let out an extended chuckle. "Thanks number two, I guess." I took the shake and took a small sip. Plain old vanilla, just the flavor for me.

"Hope that helps! Well, I guess I'll see you soon. Up in... oh, wait, that's a secret."
"Hmm?"
"Can't tell you! Sorry!"
"Wait, where are you- what do you mean secret? Hey, wait, stop, come back here!"

But her Poketch was buzzing and she was already dashing off. She departed with a goofy grin and a wave, leaving me confused.

_Slurpslurpslurp._

At least I got a shake out of it.

---

"This is Mrs. Aliya Dokubutsu, my successor at Bespin, and Brenda, my close friend."

Jade finished introducing the seven guests at the dinner table. The other five were local businessmen and women who quickly ignored us to talk amongst themselves. From snippets of their conversation, it seemed they were deeply engrossed in a conversation about a possible banking regulation. The five of us on this end of the table weren't particularly eager to join in.

"How long have you been a Gym Leader?"
"Almost seven years." I had to count off the years in my head. It doesn't seem that long.

"But you look so young! You must've gotten the job very early; how old were you?"
"Fifteen."

"Amazing!"

Jade's friend Brenda was easily impressed.

Yet another person who likes to pick on my childish looks. I'll never get over that.

I looked to my mother, currently multi-tasking on her phone. She has the same quirk of genetics; she's 45 years old but could pass for Jade's older sister. I guess that's a good thing- no worries about losing my beauty too early in life. But why would that concern me? Beauty only attracts lecherous stalkers. Am I beautiful? Most men just call me cute.

"How could they let a high schooler run a gym? That's a lot of responsibility!"

"My predecessor was a family friend."

"Mr. Beret was an adult leader of my husband's Ranger Scouts troop," Mother added, still texting away business orders on her phone.

I continued. "I was a subordinate under Mr. Beret when he started having health problems. He made me his substitute Gym Leader, and eventually full-time Gym Leader, when he couldn't battle anymore. I got help from my father and Pryce with the financial and legal matters."

"Pryce is?"
"Mahogany Town's Gym Leader," Jade informed her friend.

"Oh, okay. It sounds like that could be a little overwhelming."

"It was a lot of work."

"It still is a lot of work. I hope you know what you're getting in to," Mother said to Jade.

"I'm not concerned. Running a business and a trainer academy is no easy task either. Time-wise, I think this might be a downshift for me."

"How do you plan on coping, financially?"

"The salary, of course. Why? You make it sound like it's a welfare-job." Jade gave us a bemused look. "They do pay us Gym Leaders, right?"

Mother and I exchanged glances.

"Not nearly enough," Mother answered.

"How much?"

"For a newcomer, 150k a month," I huffed.

How'd she miss that? One of the most important things to do when you take a job is ask about the compensation!

"That's appalling! Thank goodness I didn't take this job for the money!"

"Oh, quit condescending Jade," Aliya told her.

"Ah, you're right. Truthfully, I made quit a bit of money relinquishing my ownership stake in Bespin."

"That's good."

"I still wanted to be frugal and subsist off the Gym Leader salary, however. Running for office isn't cheap."

"More than you realize," Aliya cautioned. "If you're going to run for the 2014 elections you ought to start fundraising now. My offer still stands."

"Thanks but no thanks, Aliya. I'm starting to feel like I might have to postpone for 2016 instead. This new job is going to keep me busy, I feel." Jade turned her attention back to me. "I hope I'm welcome with the Johto leaders. I'm told it's a very tight-nit group."

"You'll be okay," I said without much enthusiasm.

"Are they hard on new-comers?"

"No, not really."

"But I'm told I replaced a likable person, Beauregard Naota. There won't be any shoes I'm expected to fill? You all won't resent me for replacing him?"

"No, no," I said, shaking my head. "And we all called him Bugsy, by the way. But no, you aren't
replacing someone we wished had stayed. Bugsy was put on probation like me, but he decided he wanted to leave on his own terms rather than suffer through the regime. Besides, last I heard of him he was having a good time in Kanto with his girlfriend. Of the crew, he got along best with Whitney and Chuck. Falkner hated his guts. As for myself- he and I didn't interact that much."

I hadn't talked much with any of the Johto leaders besides Pryce over the last three years. I had my reasons.

"I see. It sounds complicated."

"It's not really… I mean, we're not really all friends, but we're not strangers either. There's no office politics. Really, we're just eight trainers with different individual relationships."

Thinking on it, it might be kind of fun to do a relationship chart amidst all the Johto squad. There was only one (tentative) romantic connection, me and Morty, but plenty of platonic connections throughout. It'd look like a spider web.

"Well, it sounds like I'll have to work on my repertoire with each person, then. Starting with you."

"You sound like you're trying to get our endorsement for a campaign," I remarked dryly.

"Oh, no, that's not it at all!"

"Haha!" Brenda and Aliya both laughed in unison. Jade actually looked flustered.

"That's typical Aokigahara for you," Aliya said. I cocked an eyebrow. "She doesn't know any other way to do things. Politics, business, Pokémon, sports, romance, all the same to her."

"Oh don't mention romance to me," Jade interjected.

"Point is, don't think it's her being deceptive or superficial. She was raised that way, that's how she really is."

"Wait, go back, what about romance?" I asked.

Jade brushed me off in favor of explaining her upbringing.

"The Aokigahara are one of those very old-fashioned clans. We were all home-schooled, and the rest of our childhoods were strictly structured. The girls were taught etiquette by forcing us to train as shrine maidens every summer. Our interaction with strangers was limited, and controlled. Manners were instilled in us. 'To set us apart from the rabble', as my mother liked to say. While I didn't appreciate them trying to make a submissive housewife out of me, I think I learned some valuable lessons out of it that contributed to my successes today."

"Success at Bespin, the academy, and Pokémon battling?"

"Yes, and hopefully as Azalea's Gym Leader going forward. I feel it's best to take the most direct action to gain desired results. If I come off as a little disingenuous, please forgive me."

"But what about relationships?" I inquired again.

"Hm? What about them?"

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked innocently.

"Don't be ridiculous, why would I want a man in my life?"
"Oh, my apologies."

That was rather… rude.

Mother finally put away her phone, signaling she was ready to devote her full attention to the table.

"Ms. Aokigahara, I thought your name sounded familiar, and I've just remembered where from."

"It must be my tournament win a few years back."

Mother shook her head in the negative. "Your father is a researcher at Ecruteak University."

"Oh, yes! That's true, how did you know?"

Mother smirked. "I used some of his research to corroborate my doctoral thesis. He was studying neuro-chemical changes in the brain linked to impulsivity. As I recall, he discovered a few drugs, wrestled the patents from the university, and founded a small pharmaceutical outfit to market them. Maybe it was just a hunch, but now I'm willing to bet that outfit was named Bespin Pharma and he put you in charge."

"Close, very close!" Jade said. "But I wasn't 'put' in charge. Father was a great scientific genius and lawyer, but his failing was in business. The company fell into insolvency and was nearly snatched from us, before I rescued it."

"How did you do that?"

"Hard work," Aliya replied for her friend.

"And brains," Brenda chirped in. Jade glowed with the compliments.

"She had the bankruptcy process switched from FCA to FIEA control and then organized an in-force buyout by a federated investment group. Took her grandfather's estate and used it as collateral, without permission, to secure funding."

"It worked out," Jade said.

"Your grandfather was pissed to high hell. He stormed your office on top of a Gyarados."

"And that gave me an excuse to put a temporary restraining order on him and take control of his assets. Like I said, it worked out."

"That's all very well, but I'm more interested in your products," Mother said.

"Oh, well, I wasn't involved in the research aspect of the business," Jade claimed. Hearing that, Mother looked to Aliya instead.

"I was Chief Financial Officer before Jade left, so ditto."

"Well, you might know something about it anyways, so let me be specific. Your company was advertising breakthroughs on a substance named TDU-11D1, something your scientists claimed could drastically cut recidivism rates in sex offenders. But the drug never made it to the FDSA for testing, it was pulled out."

"I vaguely remember that. Brenda, do you remember?"

"Yep!" the friend replied enthusiastically. "That was one of the product batches we traded to Saliere
"in 2010."

"Ah, I see!"

"Saliere Pharma?"

"Sorry, yes. We were shifting priorities and trying to buy some of Saliere's patents. We had to offer research and rights to a lot of in-house products in exchange. I couldn't tell you why they failed to develop the drug once they got it."

"Damn it," Mother muttered under her breath.

"Why? Is there anything interesting about that drug?"

"Only that it was based off of my research," Mother said.

"Wait, are you a doctor?" Jade asked.

I smirked. Mother *loves* this subject (note: sarcasm meter spiking)

"In title only."

"Really? Should I be calling you Dr. Mikan? I'm sorry, this whole time I've…" Jade stuttered.

"No, don't. Mother's fists balled. "It's been a decade since I've been in that career field."

"Oh, I see. Did you know my father?"

"We met, once, but I wouldn't blame him if he's forgotten me."

"Hmm? Well, I'll ask about it."

"Don't bother."

"Why not? Maybe I could arrange a meeting of some sort."

"No," Mother said insistently.

The tension building under the skin of this woman was rising rapidly, but I was the only one who could sense it.

"Mother, just tell her," I said.

"Tell me what?" Jade asked.

Mother sighed.

"It's too long a story."

"Indulge me."

I halfway wished Mother would spare us her pent-up frustrations and tell Jade the truth already. The other half of me hoped she wouldn't detonate like a 20-megaton H-bomb of bitterness.

"Like I said, I used your father's research, among many others, to supplement my doctoral thesis. I graduated with my PhD, but…" Mother paused a moment. "To make a long story short, our family moved to Ecruteak and I applied for a staff position at Ecruteak University. However, the board took
issue with my thesis, they said it was too analysis-heavy, not enough original research. It lacked "hands-on experience", they said. My application was rejected."

The rest of the table could sense where this was going.

"My father was on that board, wasn't he?" Jade said.

Mother nodded.

"I'm terribly sorry. He took issue with your borrowing of his research, didn't he? He's very jealous of his work, and very stubborn."

"I would rather let it go. TDU-11D1 was based in part on some of the research I did while I was still an adjunct at Olivine University. I provided it to Ecruteak hoping it would boost my chances of getting hired there. They thanked me for it, but it wasn't enough to get the position. Now, I was hoping that at least my work wasn't completed wasted, but it seems like it went nowhere."

"Ah, I see. Aliya?"

"I'll look into it," Aliya promised. "I have friends at Saliere that might know something."

"I would be grateful," Mother said.

I know I've been quiet for a while, disconnected from the conversation. This wasn't my element. They were talking about medicine and business and academia politics. Not Pokémon. Mother could care less about Pokémon. Yet, Jade can relate to my mother and her interests, but she's now a Gym Leader and a lifelong competitor, so she can probably relate to me too. Maybe Jade can be a conduit to help bridge that enormous gap that's developed between me and Mother?

This little flicker of hope lit up in my heart. Just a little one- one that would be all too easy to snuff out.

Thinking along these lines, I wracked my brain for a question that would make it appear like I was interested in the topic at hand.

"You said you were refocusing your company on something else when you traded the patents. What was that?" I asked.

"Oh, glad you asked!" Jade said. "I, Aliya, and our CMO jointly decided we were going to send a message. Bespin became the first pharmaceutical company in Nihon solely dedicated to developing solutions for women's health needs. We work on a wide range of medical issues and products, everything from breast cancer to post-partum depression."

"You sound like a magazine ad," Brenda giggled.

"It's no less true," Jade countered. "Although, our most profitable products are oral contraceptives, something I'm not proud of."

"Why is that?"

"Twofold. They're so profitable because of the government subsidies, it's easier to swindle health care bureaucrats than to fight for customers on the open market. Anti-capitalistic, if you ask me, even if we are benefiting from it."

"You moan, but I'm not about to bite the hand that feeds us," Aliya interjected.
"Yes, yes, I know, but while you're taking care of my company, remember profit is not the ultimate goal."

"Can't advance women's causes without funding, Jade. You're smarter than your dad, but you still need help appreciating the importance of money."

Jade waved her off.

"Secondly," she said, returning to the subject, "it just strikes me as a degradation of society- for birth control to be in such high demand."

Mother and I both cocked our heads. Jade went on.

"Moral inhibition is simply not instilled into young people anymore. The media and all the celebrities push a relentless hedonistic message onto young adults, especially the men. Then men put pressure on the young women to have sex. Young women are taught that their only chance to advance in life is to use their bodies. It's deplorable."

"I agree," Mother said.

"That's taurosshit!" Brenda spat out. "Look at Jade, and Aliya. They rebuilt Bespin from the ground up, on their own. The greedy men in charge ruined the company, they didn't do anything to bring it back."

"Mr. Hibiku, Mr. Getsuo," Aliya said with a nod.

"They are?"

"The misogynistic asses who refused to hire female upper management. If Jade or I or even Terra or Niéce were listened to from the start Bespin never would have flirted with bankruptcy."

"Ah."

"It's 2012 and there's laws on the books, but even still we live under a repressive, patriarchal society. They find all sorts of underhanded ways to keep themselves in power and deny responsibility and resources to women at every turn," Aliya said.

Jade butted in. "In some ways, it's worse. Maybe in the old days it was even more repressive on women, but it served a nobler purpose. Society, shaped by the technology and culture they had available, it was important to ensure the survival of the species by mandating morals. They needed stable families to produce as many babies as possible, because the deaths rates were so high. Now, though? We've made so many advances in medicine! That's why I became interested in running Bespin- to help advance medical understanding. You see, if many more people survive into adulthood, there's less pressure on women to reproduce. In theory, that means women are given greater freedom, to marry who they want, divorce who they want, and have more say over their bodies."

"But it's not worked out that way," Mother noted dryly.

"No! Not at all. The only "freedom" we earned was the ability to pick which Mankey would get to use us as a humping bag. Nothing more. In the end, we're still repressed, but now it's for the purpose of satisfying the animalistic desires of males. How can they rationalize their legislation as a matter of morals when 624 laws were passed last year regulating women's bodies, but zero laws for men's?"

Jade crossed her arms, looking sour.
"I won't give in. Those women might be content to open their legs to any man with a buck, but I'm not going to become a prostitute."

"That's not true," I said. "Relationships are about love, not money."

"Oh dear, child, don't believe what they tell you on TV. Marriage, and especially the faux-marriage they call "dating" these days, is all about prostitution. The women trades her body for things— it doesn't have to be a wad of cash. It can be access to a bank account, or Valentine's gifts, or the tab at a restaurant. It's all the same in the end. If you think it's predicated on "love", remember that love is nothing more than a biological reaction to facilitate sex."

"I'd like to think we've evolved beyond primal urges," Mother said.

"We've not."

"We've made progress," Mother insisted.

"Not that I can see," said Jade.

"You're too young to notice the difference. Fifty years ago, this wouldn't be tolerated." She motioned to the five of us. "Women, at a privileged gathering, unescorted, talking seriously about social norms and economics, from the position of business ownership and community leadership… unthinkable. In my grandmother's day, this simply didn't happen. In my mother's day, it was looked down upon as strange and subversive. What you're seeing that makes you think nothing has changed is the patriarchal backlash against feminist progress. They're afraid, because women are doing more than protesting and challenging their notions of male supremacy. We're succeeding. We're taking their traditional roles, the ones they said we would never be able to fulfill, and we're excelling in them. So the weaker-minded men think that's a threat and they fight back."

"Yet-" Jade tried to butt in, but-

"I'd warn against using the internet or media as your source of information. They love to memeticize and spout sensationalism, because it grabs people's attention and incites their feelings. People rally around messages and ideologies that promise to assuage their inner insecurities. Don't fall into that trap."

"But you're on our side, still, aren't you? I feel like we agree with each other on a fundamental level." Jade sounded like she was afraid of losing my mother's respect, and didn't want to be caught on the wrong side of an argument with her.

"Yes, that's true," Mother answered. "I've come to my conclusions based on experience and education, though. You'll end up as someone else's pawn if you merely Chatot the bite-sized messages fed to you. The captioned pictures that are popular on the internet, for instance. I've seen that '624 vs 0 laws' image before, and in my opinion it is overly simplistic. It doesn't tell you the whole picture. Who wrote the laws? What level of government? What was the purpose? How many of those laws were revisions of previous laws? What counts as a law that affects one gender's body and not another? Is it even accurate? I'm sure some MRA proponent could find you a law that does affect men's use of their bodies, even if they have to stretch the definition a little. The point being, the statement is so utterly simplistic that it becomes cannon fodder for your critics to dissect. It's like many other convenient info-bites: they sound great, but their facts are almost always inaccurate, their logic is fallacious, and they lack actual information to formulate opinions or actions. What's the actual purpose of these things?"

"Um… to raise awareness, I thought."
"Awareness of what?" my mother pressed.

"I don't know. Injustices."

"Specific events, yes, they may be alluded to. But no one who reads and rereads and spreads these political memes is surprised by the contents, they don't learn anything new by them. They're only meant to reinforce ideological conceptions. They're inflammatory by nature. Those who would read them are already converted to the message. Those who don't read them, the people whose minds they're supposedly trying to sway, won't read them out of an aversion to the perceived extremism contained within them and espoused by the ones who share them. They're cancerous, literally, cancerous. Useful as tools by the ones in charge of the ideological agenda, politicians and talking heads, to lead the Mareep by the nose while swindling them of money."

Mother really should have been a college professor. She's too damn smart and too damn elitist to be toiling away as a party hostess. A snooty, self-righteous academia position would be a perfect pulpit for her eternally critical opinions.

"Since you've expressed an interest in political office, I've no doubt you're going to have to resort to these tactics- appealing to the lowest common dominator and such- in order to win election. After all, voters in general don't want to make the effort to actually do the research and make an informed decision to cast their ballot. Nothing you can do about that. But please, if you happen to win, please don't govern from that mindset. Rely on academic journals, not tabloids. Research your position, have clear and grounded arguments to back up your statements. Don't dumb yourself down for the masses, raise them up from their ignorance. Use your position to educate and empower the public, not the other way around."

"Elaina Mikan, was it?"

"Yes."

"I think I just might have to hire you for my election campaign when the time comes." Jade collapsed back into her chair.

I feel a certain kind of perverse pride, watching my mother school others into intellectual submission. Jade wasn't very old, and not incredibly well versed in political philosophy or debate, so she's making easy prey for Mother. I've seen Mother single-handedly talk the mayor into rescinding a city ordinance she didn't like. Heaven forbid you give her the chance to write her argument out, she'd use the opportunity to organize her thoughts, research the topic, find facts and sources for backing, and then dominate the opponent. She's got the intellectual depth, mental agility, and force of will to batter anyone into submission.

That makes me feel proud, not just that I'm directly descendent from her, but also that I've suffered the brunt of this intellectual juggernaut for the better part of two decades and managed to stand my ground.

"Dinner's here," Brenda called. The waiting staff brought in our orders and conversation lulled while we stuffed our mouths with delicious mini-Shellder. In between mouthfuls Jade was all too eager to share her life story, how hard it was growing up in such a strict family and how she eventually persevered, even rising to become the heir apparent to the family hierarch. I had the distinct impression she was trying to impress us.

Aliya was older than her, but deferential, advising but not commanding. Kind of analogous to Erika and I. Brenda was younger, a scientist, a clinger, and a possy.
We had been talking for an hour (I should say Jade talked, Brenda agreed, Aliya corrected, Mother interrogated, and I kept quiet) when the subject matter turned towards me.

"I've heard that being a Gym Leader tends to distance yourself from others, especially from non-trainers. Something like, 'It's hard to relate to people who don't have Pokémon after investing so much of your time and effort into raising Pokémon of your own'. And there's not much time to have a social life. While I won't miss the chance to date, I am a little worried about neglecting my friends and contacts. That'll have to be something I pay attention to, going forward," Jade said. "What do you think of it?" she asked me.

"It's true, there's not much time for being social. But it doesn't bother me. I have my Pokémon," I said.

"What about men? Are you dating?"

"No way," I said out of long-formed habit.

"Oh. That's fine, I wouldn't blame you, with the selection being what it is," Jade said.

Mother eyed me. I cringed and kept silent.

I know I said "no way" out of reflex, but why did I not correct myself? And why is Mother not ratting me out?

"To be frank, I personally don't think I could handle a relationship," Jade continued. "There's probably not one man in this region who would fulfill all the absolutely necessary traits I desire, and still be able to love a personality like mine."

"What traits would those be?" I asked.

"Well, to start with the most impossible, I should like that he not be interested in sex. It's simply not going to happen. I don't take joy in the act, and I certainly won't bed him until after the wedding."

"Can we just stop talking about this?" Brenda butted in.

Jade shook her head and sighed at her friend.

"I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable-"

"It does!"

"But keeping quiet about it doesn't help."

"I don't see how yapping about it to strangers helps either!"

"Brenda!" Jade scowled at her friend. "These are our table quests, not strangers."

"We can move to a different subject," I suggested, sincerely hoping we would move away from the topic. This conversation sounded like it could potentially cause a temperamental flare up- my bet was on Mother.

"No that's fine. We're fine," Jade assured me.

Brenda made an ugly face.

"Where were we? Oh, right. It's hard enough to find a man who would be willing to respect, value,
and love a woman for her personality. It seems to me, though, that men feign that attention to get what they really want. At best, they see it as a chore, a side-show, secondary in nature. Find me a man of honor and sincerity, with no animalistic urges—then I might consider listing my others wants and desires. As is, I have no hope. The number of stalkers and creeps I have to turn down is a real and persistent burden."

"Oh, mmmhmm," I murmured in agreement. Jade paused to allow me to elaborate. "Oh, um. I know how you feel. The worse ones are the guys who get mad because they expected you to reciprocate their crush."

"Oh, yes, those 'nice guys' who rant about the friend zone. It's fake, an excuse."

"It's a new phrase for a very old phenomenon," Mother said. "We used to call it 'unrequited love'. What's changed is we don't romanticize it anymore, we see it for what it is."

"Right! I'm shocked, though, really shocked at the extremes some of these men will go to to vent their sore feelings. I had a man sneak into my yard one night and litter it with torn up Valentines cards."

"That's awful," I said.

"Did you go the authorities?" Mother asked.

"Yes, of course. I don't know what they did with him but he hasn't bothered me again, so I'm thankful. Still, reprehensible. The language they use, and that attitude of entitlement. What's the worst you've seen?" Jade asked me.

I locked up.

"Um…"

I don't what to tell her. The choice of anecdotes I could share are legion. But to name my worst experience with rejectees… well, even the prime candidates for that dishonor hit a little too close to my heart.

No, not him.

Nor him, or that. I don't want to talk about that.

And Morty alone could provide a book's worth of incidents, but I don't want to put his antics into such a bad light, considering, you know, I'm now dating him.

There's that little incident.

"One guy I rejected didn't take it very well. For a month he seemed upset, but not overly so. When he talked about me to his friends, it would filter down, and he was just trash-talking, really nitpicking every little grievance he had with me. I didn't mind, as long as he kept away from me. It was only after that first month that he started to get obsessed, and started harassing me. He started spreading rumors. The first were true, if harmless, things he had learned about me when we were good acquaintances. I made a mistake in confirming those rumors, as a way to dismiss him. But then he started lying, making up things about me, and people believed him. It was very frustrating getting him to stop and getting my reputation back in order."

"How terrible," Jade commented. Mother nodded. She knew what I was talking about. "If I may ask, what was he saying about you?"
"Uhhh." There's not a word in my vocabulary to describe the face I'm making right now.

"Oh, sorry. It just constantly shocks me how low they will stoop. Even if it's disgusting and upsetting, I like to share the details with the public, in order to expose these men and bring light to their depravity."

"Public shaming is a powerful tool," Mother agreed. "But I'm not sure Jasmine would even want to to repeat what this man accused her of. It hurts her too much."

"Oh, then, I'll-"

"Bestiality," I blurted out. "He said I liked to screw my Pokémon, my Amphy." I pursed my lips. Amphy is my world, my joy, my literal beacon of light in this dim existence. To insinuate I would I treat my Pokémon like that to accuse of me of that kind of deviance?! There are very, VERY few ways to tick me off more than to say I fuck my Pokémon. If I ever saw this guy again, I should not be held accountable for his hospital bill.

"Oh goodness. I don't think I would want to share that if I were you," Jade said. "That's the absolute worst thing I've ever heard."

"It hurt, a lot. I love my Pokémon, I've always admitted that to anyway who asked, so it really sickened me for him to twist my words into something disgusting like that. It's not just an insult to me. It's very hurtful to Amphy too."

"Amphy as in Ampharos?"

"Yes."

"The Glitter Lighthouse Pokémon?"

"Yes, I'm his caretaker."

"Oh I see," Jade nodded. "You're like his parent. So this man not only accused you of bestiality, but incest too. Truly sickening."

The memory of it twisted my stomach in a knot.

"I…" stutter-stutter-silence.

"Jasmine is tough, she can stomach the casual sexism prevalent in her profession," Mother explained. "But some of the boys, the ones she knew for awhile and got to know, those are the ones who got close enough to know what makes her insecure. They used that to hurt her, when she turned down their flirtations."

"Mother, please, stop," I implored. Don't spill my whole ugly love life to these strangers. The corner of her mouth twitched, notifying she had heard and registered my utterance, and was deciding whether to heed it.

Jade, in her love of talking and lack of interest in listening, saved me.

"That's true, that's why I say good riddance to them all. Why even be nice to them? Why even be friends? The risk is all too high that they'll mistake common courtesy for sexual interest and then pile on the unwanted attention."

"They can only hurt you if you let them," Mother said.
"Exactly. I don't want to be another episode of Dr. Sopra."

"Oh hell no," Brenda said emphatically. "I actually had a friend of a friend go on that show."

"Oh really?"

"Yep. Her husband ditched her for another lady, screwed her over in the divorce. They were childhood sweethearts, and just like that, he decides she's not good enough for him."

Mother shook her head.

Jade moved in closer to take her friend's hand. "Terrible, terrible. If only men didn't have that damnable urge to procreate. So much drama could be avoided if they just didn't care so much about getting laid!"

"You think it's just the men? You come from where I come from, it's everyone! Mankeys and Lopunny's, all of them!"

"Where are you from?" Mother asked Brenda.

"Fairbanks. Tiny little fishing town north of Cerulean."

"Lower class?"

"You betcha. Took everything I got to earn a scholarship and get out of that cesspit."

"That's to be expected from the rural areas- underfunded educational institutions," Mother said with a sigh.

"Oh no no, it's not just the schools. It's the culture. It's free-for-all. Men think they can get whatever they want, and they do. The girls wise up and learn who to sleep with in order to get treated nicely- in Fairbanks, that's usually the boat mechanics."

"Well, you know what they say about mechanics," Aliya chipped in.

"They treat their women like they treat their cars- fix 'em nice during the day so they can ride 'em hard all night," Brenda disdainfully quoted. Jade and Aliya had a chuckle out of that. Mother wasn't laughing.

"They put up with it. I don't know why but they put up with it. It's like they don't want to know how they're being wronged. There's not four decent females in the whole town, that know they could do better; they could run that place if they just stuck up for themselves. Nope. The smart ones get out, like me. The rest just rely on kind of soft-whoring to get by. Religion's not really strong out there. No morals, no ethics, no code. Fishermen sleep around at other ports, cause they know their wives are sleeping around when they're gone."

Brenda relented, at last.

"It's not supposed to be our job to tell women what to do, we spend enough time lobbying against men trying to tell us how to behave," Aliya noted, "but personally, I think there's just too many plain old sluts in today's youth."

"Social pressure to become available for men's use; one's esteem and value is derived from men's attention- basic sociology. Remove conservative institutions- religion would usually suffice, although education is better- and you remove inhibitions. It's really a predictable outcome," Mother said.
"You know, I think it's the media," Jade said. "You were talking about how the public can be swayed so easily by simple captions. Well, what about the deluge of television shows, movies, blogs, video games, and the like? So many are made by men, overseen by male executives, catering to a male audience. That's what drives this sex-crazed society. Replacing family values with hedonistic, mass-entertainment values."

"You could make that case, somewhat."

"And what does it do to the women who buy into that culture? Just what Brenda described, it makes them sluts. Really, what do you think is the more ideal archetype for what the patriarchs want? Submissive, loyal women who stay in the kitchen, and exclusively available to their husband? Or the mistresses who provide their bodies for use to those same husbands, for money and attention, but the understanding they will be shunned from proper society? To me, both sound atrocious, and I believe any woman who tries to defend either lifestyle really ought to rethink herself before she speaks to me. What do you think?"

"Well, there's no such thing as a hierarchy of men dictating society, it's more fluid, a pervasive collective guided by male-dominated bias, but by patriarchs you mean older men-" Mother paused for thought. "I would think they prefer the housewife. They're under control, and don't incite jealousy between men. Younger men don't mind because they want to sleep around more, and put more emphasis on sexual conquest, less on building their prosperity. Older men have the foresight to shape society to benefit themselves as a collective, and they feel threatened by younger men. Women, to them, are something to be tamed, kept under control. It's regrettable, because those are generally the more intelligent women, the ones who could affect change if not for being burdened by house duties. I think there will always be women of lower character and lesser means, capitalizing on their sex. There's nothing you can do to help them without tackling the root causes of poverty, which is a whole other complex issue. We're better off trying to empower the women of means." Mother leaned back. "That's mere observation of how it is, not how it should be. In truth, neither stereotype is completely true, and certainly neither deserving of perpetuation. What do you believe?" she addressed Jade. The addressed took a moment to collect her thoughts.

"Well, you see, maybe it's just my upbringing, but I tend to think the opposite. Yes, they're both reprehensible, but to me, it's the sluts and whores who are more to blame. They degrade society, they ignore etiquette and civility, and they promulgate all the foul behavior that's run rampant amongst youth. They set an example which others follow. Lowering the bar, if you will, for what's acceptable. Then higher status women can act out, and they point to the worst of the sluts and compare their behavior, saying "Look what she's doing! Don't condemn my behavior!"."

"If women were so easily swayed to such behavior, what is the difference between a housewife and a slut? Nothing more than economic situation?" Mother put to her.

"It's the… culture. There's a difference of attitude towards change, towards propriety. I know I can talk to a repressed woman and convince her to stand up for herself, most merely need the the courage, to be told that they're not alone. You can't do anything for the fishnets on the street. They're lost to logic, decency."

"Many are either under the control of criminals, or suffer from mental disease," Mother explained.

"Doesn't excuse them, and it certainly doesn't fix the sinful culture they spread around. Think of all the young women who do what whores do, but don't even get paid! I don't even comprehend those kinds of women." Jade turned to me. "Here is where notions of 'love' lead women astray. It makes them lose sight of what is right and wrong, what is best for themselves and how they are being used. Emotions are a vital part of our being, but all too often women mistake animal instinct for genuine
emotion.”


"And I sincerely caution you against following flight feelings into doing whatever. You must always think of the consequences."

Mother jerked, as thrown for a loop, torn between two divergent arguments. Her eyes darted between disdain for Jade, and harsh concern for me. She finally decided to address me.

"Jade has a point. You should always think of the consequences of your actions. You know what can happen in the worst case scenario, you've gone down that road before."

I lurched.

Yes, I do know what could happen.

But… but… you all… you…

Am I just supposed to stay as I am? Am I just supposed to idle my life away, without ever taking the tiniest risk for the chance at happiness?

I don't like how this conversation has turned out.

I really don't like it. It's got an uncomfortable vibe and it feels like it's leading to something bad…

"Trusting a male too much, without getting to know him, or overlooking character flaws- big mistake," Jade warned.

"My mistake," Brenda added. "Went to a party in college, guy I was starting to like said it would be fine, everything would be cool. Then he goes and slips a drug in my drink. Who the hell knows what could of happened if Jade hadn't been there for me."

"Yes, Brenda, that's one terrible thing that could happen. Jasmine, you do know that most rapes are committed by men upon women they know?"

"No I didn't," I said tersely.

"It's true. Even when they're in a relationship, there can still be rape."

"Heh, and when's it's not rape, it's something else that goes awry," Aliya added.

"Yes, true, true. Pregnancy, for one. A child can ruin one's dreams. It's difficult to suffer a baby bump going through college, getting looked down upon by others, having to suffer their stares. And maternity leave can sink your career. Besides, kids are such a hassle, diapers and tantrums and whatnot."

"Eh," Mother muttered. An ugly sneer passed across her face, unnoticed by the others.

"Have you seen that television show?" Aliya asked.

"Which one?"

"Teenaged and Pregnant?"

"Oh, about high schoolers getting knocked up?"
"Yes. It's full of horror stories."

"Oh I know!" Jade agreed enthusiastically. "At least in college, there's a certain allowance for some young couples who want a head start in making a family. And there's the structure of the classes, spread out, informal, across a wide campus and huge student body. But in high-school? You can't hide from your classmates, and everyone knows it's because the girl was acting like a slut. A lot of people will even say the girl deserves what's coming to her."

"But it's a terrible burden she's placing on her parents. After all, they're the ones who have to raise the child. They're the ones who have to bear the physical burden of caring for it," Aliya said.

"Often enough, one or both parents are absent. The cycle of single-parenthood perpetuates itself. The upbringing isn't there to teach the young women they can say no to a persistent male," Mother argued.

"But that doesn't take away her responsibility!" Brenda exclaimed.

"Usually the best solution is to just get rid of it," Jade asserted. "There's some amount of shame and a little emotional trauma involved, which is unwarranted, I think. Our backwards society magnifies those negatives preposterously out of hand. Still, it's in the girl's best interest to just never put herself in the situation in the first place."

"So we need to stamp out promiscuity, is what you're saying."

"Yes! By all means necessary, yes! Even if that means demeaning and brow-beating women who engage in premarital sex, in the end if that criticism discourages them from contributing to the degradation of our gender into mere toys for men, I'm all for it. Even if our company offers birth control, I think it really ought to be used as a stop-gap, something that can bridge us over until societal change can be enacted. It will be hard, I know."

"That's an understatement," Mother said. "What's the meaning of the sexual revolution if you tell women they can't have sex with whoever they want? They'll see it as a restriction and an attack on their freedom. What would you say to them?"

"I would tell them they're just pandering into male's hands. They've got to learn to say 'No! We will not engage in this deviant perversion you have designed for us!'. Only then can women truly be free."

"And the women who can't say no? Who decide to give into pressure and have premarital sex?" Mother asked.

"For them… the women who fall into that trap- well, I've known a few and I've really lost patience with them. They're idiots, and stubborn, and stubbornness is one of my most hated traits. If they can't be convinced to keep their hormones under wraps, they deserve to be lumped in with the rest of the Mankeys," Jade said with a snort. "In college we had a name for these girls. Gardewhores. If you're going to have premarital sex, you've got to accept the fact that others are going to think of you as a cunt. Good thing your daughter seems to understand this. At least you don't have to worry about her."

"Well, Jasmine has her own issues… Jasmine? Where'd she go?"

Mother and the rest gawked at my empty seat, wondering how long it had been vacant.

SLAM!!!
A far-off doorway slammed shut, startling everyone on the patio.

The ground was still wet from last night's shower. So was the air. Splashes of dirty water exploded under my footsteps, drenching my shoes and tights and soaking them through. My toes grew cold, and had that scrunchy ill-feeling of having water-logged fabric wrapped around them. I didn't care.

Battle Tower receded into the distance. Its bright lights cast my shadow before me. My stare drilled the darkness of my shadow, nailing it to the ground, trying, in vain, to penetrate the veil there, to find some semblance of a human being in that wraith. Nothing came. And so, the storm of fury and hatred that had become of me swirled, writhed, and drove forth.

Damn them.

Damn her.

Now I know you, Jade.

You worthless, utterly worthless piece of shit.

No, I take that back. Shit has the useful purpose of excreting waste from my body. It carries out the refuse that is unneeded by the body for functioning, but even shit can be used for manure. Even shit has value.

To call Jade shit would be an insult to every plant, weed, and crop that ever grew from shit. To call her shit is to be far too kind.

To call her a bitch is benign, too ordinary an insult.

A cunt? Cunts have the distinction of being related to my organ of sexual pleasure. Even used as a slur, it still is based on something I can derive happiness from. No, Jade is not a cunt.

Jade is a Jade.

That's as much as I can intellectualize it. Her own name has become an epithet of ultimate insult, the only four letters capable of containing the whole of my vast, unimaginable rage towards that woman.

My footstep fell by an inch, and I stumbled. I thought that I had somehow bore a crater into the asphalt, such was the force I was exerting in each step. But no, the asphalt had given way to concrete. I was on a bridge.

BZZT. BZZT.

A message on my cellphone.

I ignored it.

In short order, the phone rang. And rang. And rang. And after that, it buzzed, about seven times in seven minutes. I took it out and looked at the first few text messages.

Where are you?
Where are you? Come back to the party.

We need to talk, NOW.

Why did you trash the kitchen?

ANSWER ME!@!

I clicked my cellphone shut, and then in a rage flung it across the road.

"HYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY
The sea.

Well, to be accurate, Bronze Sand River Estuary.

The ray of light on the horizon to my left would be Spectra. Amphy was with her. Her light was circling round, sweeping over the open ocean. Between me and her was all of Crescent Bay. Right here, where I was standing, was a small cove that cut into the mainland from the bay. This was where Bronze Sand River, coming down south from the mountains, emptied into the bay. The cliffs on either side of the inlet were fairly tall, and steep, but they had built a bridge from one side of the cove to the other, leading westward to Route 40. The water churned one-hundred and twenty feet below me. The only thing between me and the abyss was a waist-high railing. The drop was dizzying.

"Don't fall."

"Huh?" A familiar voice. A guy's voice.

I turned and found him at the end of the bridge, hands in jacket pockets, a beach towel tucked under one arm, alternately looking at me and over the brink. After a pause, a lilt, as if checking to see if I would flee if he came closer, he walked over and joined me at the rail.

"From this high up, the water's like concrete. It'll kill you instantly," he said.

"Ethan," I uttered. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Lyra," he said.

I couldn't bring myself to speak to him face to face, so I resumed my posture of resting arms and chin on the rail. He took the hint and did likewise.

"I know what you mean, about the water being hard as rock."

"Ah."

"The kids nickname this Bloodbay Bridge."

"Catchy."

"Urban rumor, there was a murder some twenty years ago. They found the body floating in the bay, stabbed, and they think they might have been thrown off this bridge. In any case, every few years there's a suicide here. They keep saying they'll install higher rails and nets, but they never find the money to do it."

"That's depressing."

"Yeah. But I'm not here to… I'm just getting fresh air," I declared, wondering if I had suggested something sinister. He shook it off, unconcerned.

"Not a bad place to get a breather," he noted wryly.

"Heh."

Of course. What kind of lie was that? I'm terrible at lying. But he didn't seem to care.

"Just- having an unexpectedly bad night. Well, it was a bad day, in a work sense, but something made it much worse. So. How about you?" I asked.
Ethan himself gave off an air of being dreary and tired. He moved slowly, with heavy steps, and kept sighing.

"Lyra's at Battle Tower with Silver. They're doing double battles. She and I were supposed to meet here, about twenty minutes ago. There's a spot on the far side of the bay, you probably know about it. Nightshine Point?"

"Oh, yeah, I do."

Nightshine is a small bit of land jutting out into the sea on Route 40. There were some rock formations that surrounded it. A Chinchou and Lanturn colony made its home there, and this particular family gave off a luminescent green glow at night. It made for a romantic dating spot for couples.

"Taking Lyra to a date?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged.

"I thought it would be nice. It's something out of the ordinary. She likes that kind of spontaneity. I'll bet she'll want to swim."

"Not a good idea. The water's too cold and the currents will rip her away," I warned.

"Figured. But well, we'll be okay." He indicated the beach towel. "It'll be nice just to lay and talk."

He went silent. So did I.

The minutes passed and I could think of nothing to say. Again.

My conversational skills suck.

A buzzing. My cellphone.

No wait, I had turned it off.

Ethan pulled his phone out, read the message. A tired smile came to his face.

"She's on her way. In ten minutes."

"Ah, good."

Even though he still looked tired, there was a subtle change to him. He relaxed a little, spoke up a little louder. Like a worry had been lifted.

"Hey Ethan."

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure."

"Are you happy?"

"What?"
"In general, are you happy?"

Ethan didn't answer that.

"Sorry I asked."

"Yeah, I'm happy," he let out.

"You and Lyra, you'll be okay together?"

"Yeah. I think it's just stress, from all the journeying. Someday, we'll be able to settle down, and have a relationship like normal."

"Do you like being in a relationship?"

Another pause.

"I don't know how to answer that. There's some good things to be said about having a relationship. It's enough to not want to let it go if you have one. What's this about?" he asked.

I hesitated a moment, and then went on.

"Do you think I need a boyfriend?"

"Do you want one?"

"No."

"Then no, you don't need one. Don't mind the others. Getting heckled is not fun- but wanting a relationship you can't have hurts so much worse."

"Mmm." My eyes drifted downwards.

"Sometimes I feel like feelings are a curse. We're better off without them."

"I can agree with that," I said.

"Do you love him?" he asked.

I was caught by surprise by the question and slumped. He was looking at me directly.

"Do you love Morty?"

"I… think… so."

"Ah."

Ethan returned his gaze to the sea. He relaxed a little- like even my unsure answer had made him sure of some conundrum in his head. I was curious, and wanted something to take my mind off this post-rage gloom.

"Morty and I… I don’t really know what a relationship is supposed to be like, what love is supposed to feel like. I get all sorts of advice about what it's like, but that's not helpful. 'Butterfreees in your stomach'? Couldn't that just be a crush? 'Can't bear to be without them'? I've felt that way towards Erika, my friend. 'Fantasizing about marrying them'? I did that with Mr. Stone when I was little."

"Well, I don't think I can help you define love any better than that," Ethan said.
"No. But, you're in love, with Lyra, right?"

"Eh? Yes."

"You've known each other a long time."

"Since we were babies."

"Then it's kind of the same with me and Morty. Kind of, at some point, you must've transitioned from "I've known this person all my life as a friend" to "I'm in love with this person". How did you figure that out?"

"Hmm."

His hair ruffled in the wind. He still wears it a little long and shaggy, but not as long, and I haven't seen him wear a cap since before meeting him at the gala.

"I didn't realize it for a long, long time. I never really imagined thinking of Lyra in that way. She was just there, a friend. Instead, I kind of just flirted with every other girl I met. I... had a lot of heartbreak that way. I was pretty stupid back then. I don't think I treated women with much respect, probably why I got all of those rejections. I don't know if Lyra was jealous or not, but she's pretty patient, and wouldn't say anything. But then, she won the Johto tournament; I kind of felt jealous towards her- in Pokémon battling. I started feeling lost and flustered, unable to figure out what exactly I was feeling, so I ran off to Kanto. Channeled all my frustrations into getting better, beating the gyms and training my Pokémon, and without intending to, I won the Kanto tournament."

He cracked a smile.

"That didn't last long. Couldn't beat Green."

"Who?"

"Emily Leaf. The standing champion."

"Oh. Because Kanto is like Johto, you have to win the tournament and then you have to win a title match with the reigning champion, to be regional champion, right?"

"Yeah, that's about how it goes. It was a good battle, not something to be ashamed of, but she still won pretty solidly."

Ethan took out a Pokéball, but didn't release its occupant.

"Azumarill. My first Pokémon. Managed to get it down to a 2v1, with one of her Pokémon a Golem that was half-injured. But her last was Jolteon. Azumarill couldn't take it down in one Aqua Jet, but Jolteon got the One-Hit KO with Thunderbolt." He shrugged and put the Pokéball back into his belt pouch.

"What I realized, after that match, was that I was missing someone. All through my Kanto tour, I felt hollow, empty, my only motivation was desperation and anger, trying to prove myself to I didn't know who and I didn't know why. When I lost, I figured it out."

"Hmm?"

"I was lonely. And that wasn't something I knew how to deal with, because it was the first time in my life that I was really lonely. I was missing the one person who had been by my side the whole
time, who coached me up when I was losing, cooled me down when I was getting too angry or excited, who let me vent when I needed to, who gave me someone to care about when I was feeling unmotivated."

Ethan turned around and leaned back against the rail, looking up to the lampposts.

"I needed the courage to tell her what I felt. Going up Mt. Silver with Lyra, Green, Blue, and Silver to fetch Red, getting through the wild Pokémon up there- and those are real monsters living there: Tyranitar, Ursaring, Manoswines, those kinds- the blizzard, the avalanche, and then fighting, even beating Red! And yeah, everyone lets me know I was the fourth person in a row to fight him- so what? I still won a match, against the guy who'd win the World freakin Championship the very next month!" Ethan cracked a grin, and then became serious again. "Doing all that gave me the confidence to ask Lyra out. You can't ask me "When did you fall in love?". I've always been in love with her, I think. When I asked her out, it was just formalizing something that had existed between us for a long, long time."

He finished.

I sort of stood there, hunched over, head tilted, frozen and agape.

"Hey Ethan."
"Huh?"
"That's really romantic," I said.
"Oh please!"
He lightly wacked me with the towel.
"I'm not that gushy."
"Yes you are."
"Why am I even telling you this?! What're you doing here anyways? You're kind of a creepy Gym Leader!"
"I told you I told you!"

The subject of Jade and her ideological tirade came back to my conscious. Damn it.

"Well, I told Lyra, so you might hear about it anyways," I gave in. I hope I'm making the right choice by confessing to him. I worry, so much, about divulging too much of myself to people I barely know. But Ethan is Ethan, right? He's dating Lyra, and Lyra's my good friend, right? He's part of my tiny inner circle, and everything I know about him is green lights. Ah, well.

"I'm told you two are pretty active in the bedroom."
"Wait, wahat?!!"

Ethan jumped to life.
"Did Lyra tell you?! Did she start blabbing things?!"
"Eh!!"
I tried to defend myself from his sudden outburst.

"Yes and no! Wait! She just said the fact, she didn't expand on anything!"

"She's not supposed to tell anyone! Damn it!"

"Cussing!"

"Sorry!"

Ethan calmed down.

"She's not supposed to be talking about our love life."

I eyed him suspiciously.

"It's embarrassing!" he exclaimed.

"I'm not really interested in outing you as a foot fetishist or something."

"I'm not a foot fetishist! Well maybe legs are kind of sexy but-" and at that he covered his mouth and I giggled.

"You're too funny."

He slumped into himself.

"No, what I wanted to get at, was that you two seem like a normal couple having normal sex lives and also kind of normal public lives too. You love each other. I mean, maybe it's my turn to be embarrassed, but... Oh Jasmine, you've come to far to be hesitant- "You two are my role model couple. I want Morty and I to be like you."

"Oh."

Ethan returned to normal.

"Lyra did mention that. You haven't decided whether you wanted to sleep with him or not."

"Well, it's not a matter of 'if', but 'when'. It could be one month, it could be five years. I don't know. I don't know if I'm ready."

"Ohhhhh." Ethan perked up. And then deflated again. And then he shuddered, steeled himself, and perked up for good.

"Well, I'm guessing you want to ask me how you'll know if you're ready- and maybe, as a boy, what Morty is thinking right now. Am I right?"

"On both accounts," I nodded. "You were so good diagnosing Amphy. He and Spectra are doing really well together."

"That's great to hear!"

"But with Morty..."

"Hmm." Ethan contemplated a moment. "Morty's different from me. He's got concerns that go beyond romance. I don't know what he's told you or what you've picked up, but there's kind of an
obsession to him that's, how to put it, it's philosophical in nature."

"But he's still human, a guy," I said.

"Okay. Well, I can't help much deciphering him. When I met him he was always distant and thinking about other things. He claimed it was him practicing his clairvoyance, but I feel like that was an excuse. On the other hand, we took him to a bar and he acted out on the karaoke stage and chatted up the dancing girls like any other jock."

"Mmhhmm. When was that?"

"Last year, about this time."

"How old are you?"

"Erm."

I think Ethan is one year younger than me. Which means he shouldn't have been drinking at that bar. You little maverick!

"It was Silver's idea, I swear."

"Sure. Like the park kiss."

"THAT WAS PURELY A PRODUCT OF LYRA'S TWISTED IMAGINATION!!!"

I tried, so very hard, to refrain from laughing. I almost succeeded. His creative wording put me over the edge though.

"Ahahahaha!"

"She did blab! She tattled everything to you!"

"No, I swear, no! Just that one thing. She said you had a fetish that she was under strict oath not to reveal and then she clammed tight as a Cloyster! I promise!"

Ethan's turn to eye me warily.

"Uh…"

"Fine." He shook it off. "She can give me a heart-attack with that lackadaisical brain of hers. Anyways," He righted himself and stared directly at me, "I can't prognosticate Morty with 100% certainty, but if he's like all the other boys, and you're like Lyra- well, your first time is going to be an accident, not really a decision. You both will happen to get horny at the same time, at a place with some privacy, and you'll end up doing it without realizing it, and it will be really awkward, and you'll be confused and flushed and a little concerned about it not going splendidly, then you'll look at each other and, for no apparent reason, you'll just start feeling really, really happy."

Then Ethan started laughing and scratching his back.

"At least that's how it was for me, and for my brother too."

"You have a brother?!"

"Oh? Oh yeah, but he's not a trainer, I doubt you've met. A sister too, but she's in Sinnoh."
"Oh, I see. I wish I could meet them."

"Ethan!"

Ethan checked his phone.

"She's five minutes late. It's gonna be midnight before we get there!" he grumbled. Lyra appeared out of the darkness, dashing up to us.

"Hi Jasmine!"

"Hi Lyra!"

She turned to her boyfriend and smirked.

"You took forever."

"We lost."

"You lost? What?! No way!"

"After thirty-two rounds!"

"Oh by what the flux?! Thirty-two! You said you only needed fifteen!"

"Well the prize kept increasing for each win, and we were on a roll!"

"So we're rich?"

"No, Silver wanted most of the leftover, he said he had to bribe someone in Saffron for some detective work or whatever."

"Lovely! Awesome! Money I never saw, so I won't begrudge it!"

"Doofus."

"Dimsy."

Lyra brought her puff stool hat down over her mouth. She eyed me sidelong, and, using the hat as a censor to my prying eyes, kissed Ethan. Ethan standing aghast and doing nothing, took it. She withdrew, fidgeting. Seeing Ethan dumbstruck, she flopped the hat on top of his head, admired him for a second, and then giggled. Ethan removed the hat from his head, took Lyra in a hug, and smothered her in kisses and nuzzles.

"Where's Silver now?"

"He's tired, went back to the Pokecenter. Why'd you want me to meet you way out here?"

"I've got a surprise for you. We're going on a date."

"Really? At this hour?"

"You always ask for a little surprise. I've got a neat place for us to visit."

"Okay… but I'd be really disappointed if it doesn't end with us-" and she whispered something into his ear.
"Let's just go," he said, exasperated. They set off together towards Route 40.

"Bye Jasmine! Hope your party went well! See you soon!"

Lyra bounced along, eager and precocious. She asked Ethan some question, and learning the answer, quickly took the lead, skipping forth and hauling her unfortunate boyfriend along with her.

I waved the couple off.

That's what a happy couple looks like.

That's not me and Morty.

Well, this is what me and Morty look like.

I hugged the thin air in front of me.

He's four hours away in Ecruteak. That's us. Long distance relationship.

I sighed and started back for my apartment.

Do you see this, Jasmine?

Look and compare.

All of those nascent, pretentious clowns at the party… those are the people who say 'No!' when sex is mentioned. They either forbid you from talking about it, or they spend all of their energy condemning it. Jade… that Jade woman could do nothing but slut-shame all night long. What I'm now willing to do with Morty would mortify her. It would draw down her ire and disdain. But so what. She's just full of superficiality, machinations, and negativity. And she hates me. She hates my existence. She doesn't even realize it, how much she insulted me right there.

I hope and pray she shoves off to her political campaign sooner than later, because I want a new co-worker. Someone who's not going to throw a judgment day parade over the fact that I'm about to get laid.

Because I will.

I don't know when. December 10\textsuperscript{th}? Probably around there. But I will.

More than ever, I know now, those who accept that sex is a natural human urge and embrace it and treasure it, those are the happiest people in life. Those are the people who I respect. All of my fellow Gym Leaders, my trainer friends, my subordinates, my mentors; they all have a level, common-sense approach to sex, and their main concern is finding joy and love and meaning in one's life. Those with the prudish views, the anti-sex views I myself have held for so many years, those are the unhappy naysayers who would deny me happiness. I won't listen to them. I will fight them.

And Morty… I will try, with all my might, and all my heart, to find out how to love you. Maybe, like Ethan said, I've loved you all along, and just didn't know it.

I bit my lip.

Mother will probably come demanding an explanation for what I did at the party.

I'll have to confront her, and tell her my intentions.
Somehow...
Cooltrainer Wants to Battle!

What the heck is going on?
I don't understand this.

My gym is shaking from the aftershocks of a tremor. While I can explain the immediate cause- that being Steelix hitting the arena floor at high velocity, fainting my Pokemon in the process- I cannot explain the reasoning for why this event is possible. Somehow, someway, my multi-ton leviathan was being thrown around like a stage prop in a pro-wrestling title match, and I could do nothing about it.

It's likely that the Scizor buzzing around the center of the arena has something to do with it. Yet, the displays of strength and agility it took to toss Steelix around like that reeks of high-order Mary Sueness reserved for wish-fulfilling super hero comic books. It boggles the mind trying to comprehend it.

My opponent, a teenaged guy dressed in street gang attire, celebrated. He was fist-pumping and raising victory signs to his posse in the stands. Forcing myself to maintain dignity and smile, I recalled Steelix to his Pokeball.

"You have trained an exceptional Pokémon there. Let's see how it fares against my final Pokémon," I said to the challenger. As a Gym Leader, it's customary to compliment and encourage your opponent, even if your job requirements tell you to beat them mercilessly. I envy tournament trainers and their ability to bicker and trash talk in the middle of matches. It's been a long time since I believed my own mid-battle spiels. "Please do your best to earn victory!" I finished, and then sent out Tyko.

"Oh, yeah, we're gonna win, don't worry about that," the guy told me. "Just get that badge nice and polished for me!"

A grumble lurched in my stomach. Perhaps I can make allowances for good men like Ethan and Pryce, and exceptions for lovable jerks like Morty. But for each one of those, there's five douchebags who don't deserve to stare at a picture of woman, let alone share company with our gender!

A big grin crossed his face. He was having fun and showed it: his body jiggled out a few hip-hop dance moves. His Pokémon, on the other hand, was dead serious. Scizor remained on the field, still and alert, awaiting orders.

"Tyko, do you have any ideas here?"

"Tyk tyk."

Tyko shook her head.

I sized up the enemy Pokémon, trying to make sense of its easy victory over my previous two entrants.

Something is off here.

Not just that there's an absurdly strong Scizor who just made mockery of both Steelix and Magnezone. It's to be expected that I'd meet these kinds of insanely strong Pokémon every once in a while- say, one per two months. They're the top 1% of all Pokémon, the elite fighters, destined for roles in regional championship matches.
Except, this is the tenth time this week I've faced an overpowered Scizor. All different trainers, all different tactics, but same result every time. Monday: Scizor wins, Tuesday: Scizor wins, Wednesday: Scizor wins, Thursday: Scizor wins. My weekly win ratio had been hovering around 70% for the past few weeks. This week it's dropped to under 40%. I've been struggling, and it seemed like it was the same three Pokémon species giving me trouble each time: Quagsire, Exeggutor, Scizor. Especially Scizor. What are the odds that I'd lose thirty-some matches in a week, and at least one of those three Pokémon were present on 90% of the teams that beat me? Low-to-none! Unless… Wait a minute, it couldn't be…

"Tyko, it'll try a Fighting-type attack. Be ready for close quarters combat."

"Prinplup!" Tyko squatted herself into a defensive position.

If I had dissected this opponent and this Pokémon right… yes, here it comes.

"Brick Break! Aim for the Steel's weakness!" the foe ordered his Pokémon. He's inexperienced, he assumes Prinplups are Steel-typed like their Empoleon evolution.

"Counter!" I ordered.

Tyko doesn't know Counter.

The trainer doesn't know that either. But I gave him enough warning time for him to change his command.

"Agh! U-Turn!"

"Water Gun!"

Scizor had been in the middle of a straight-line lunge at Tyko. It twisted in mid-air, bringing it feet-first into a kick, which landed square into Tyko's chest. She had been prepared for the blow and held up. Scizor instantly kicked away, like a swimmer bouncing off the wall of a pool. It paid for its retreat by taking a dousing from Water Gun.

Tyko huffed and backed up against the sideline. Scizor slowly drifted to a stop in the middle of the field, also breathing heavily.

I gasped, not in surprise, but anger. The red skin of Scizor peeled away, sloughing off like paint. Beneath, a bronze-colored sheen gleamed through.

A yellow Scizor.

"Warren!" I whispered.

"Almost outta stamina, gotta finish it. Quick Attack, Bug Bite!"

The Scizor darted to Tyko's left, then blink-stepped to her right flank before she could react. Scizor somersaulted over her, grabbing her head in its mouth and clamping down. It flipped over, tossing Tyko into the shield. My Prinplup tried to retaliate with Water Gun, which Scizor leapt over. An X-Scissor attack finished Tyko for good.

"That's Warren's Scizor!" I quietly cried, anger and indignation crawling through my skin and causing me to shiver.

I'm sure of it. Now that its paint-job disguise has been washed off, it looks exactly the same as
Warren's mustard-colored Bug. Come to think of it, its basic fighting style was the same as well. I had been too focused on the trainers' commands, not enough on Scizor actually executing them, to notice the similarities.

My memories raced through the previous week.

Yes, it's true. Not just Scizor. The Quagsires and Exeggutors I've been facing were all too similar in looks and tactics for it to be a coincidence. They were the same Pokémon. I assume they all belong to the same man, as well-Cooltrainer Warren Avery.

"Alright, I won! Yeah! Mineral Badge, here I come! Six more to go!" the challenger shouted in joy.

I took a glance at the video board. Derrick Hidachi, Cianwood.

"Challenger Derrick, I need to ask you something."

"Do I want a going-away kiss? You betcha!" he replied.

"That Scizor- I highly doubt you are its original trainer. Tell me who gave it to you," I demanded.

"Wah? Ah hell, yes I am its trainer! That's my Pokémon!"

My façade of cordiality broke down.

"Listen, street urchin, without that Scizor all you've got is a Mankey and Machop, and your next destination is Ecruteak to battle a world-class Ghost-type specialist. So if that Scizor really belongs to you, good, have fun, I'm sure you'll go far. But if some shady slink let you borrow it just to beat me, good luck in Ecruteak."

I grimaced. Derrick shrunk back.

"Uhhh… just give my badge, lady. I didn't do nothin wrong."

"There's nothing illegal about sharing Pokémon per se- but lying to a Gym Leader is grounds for disqualification." As I explained this to him I began marching up to him, until I was right in his face.

"So tell me the truth, I'll give you your badge, and we'll be done here, no problems. Got it?"

"Wow, chill girl, chill! Why you even gotta ask like that? Yeah, I'm caught, I borrowed the Scizor. It's this guy in the training yard- he says anyone wants, he can lend 'em a Pokémon for a day, 100% guarantee it can beat you. Get mad at him, not me!"

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, he calls himself 'buddy'."

"Describe him," I ordered.

"He's like, you know, a hotshot, a cooltrainer. Got a spike fro, tanned, has lightning tattoos down his arm. Can't miss him."

Yep, it's confirmed, the culprit is Warren.

I shoved my gym badge into the punk's chest, forcing him to bobble and lunge for it before it fell. I remembered to recite my post-defeat speech, but modified it a little:
"There's your Mineral Badge. Years and years hence when you're sitting outside a stadium, fresh off a 0-6, wondering how you got there and why you were so badly outclassed, look on it and remember that you cheated your way through the Gym Leader challenge and didn't deserve to be in that tournament in the first place. Good bye!"

I lurched off towards the exit, stopping only long enough to collect my purse and Pokémon.

"Rough day, wasn't it?"

I stopped, frozen.

The lobby was nearly empty. The voice had come from behind me; I slowly turned to face him.

Warren was leaning against the wall by the door, waiting there for me to walk past so he could blindside me. His hair and fashion had reverted to its original punk/swag style. His smarmy grin had also returned.

"What are you doing here? You're banned from the premise."

"I've come to challenge you to a Pokémon match. Duh."

"You have ten seconds to exit my gym before I call the police. One! Two!"

I began counting down, but Warren didn't seem to be in any hurry. Even as I reached zero and reached for my phone, he casually pulled out a slip of paper and held it up for me to read.

"Time's up." I dialed in 9-1-1.

"You better read this before you make an ass of yourself," Warren warned.

My thumb paused over the 'call' button.

"This permit hereby grants the undersigned Warren Avery the right to an unrestricted Pokémon match against Gym Leader Jasmine Mikan, Olivine City on terms to be set by the challenger, in accordance with Johto League regulations. This challenge is compulsory and not appealable. The Gym Leader may not decline and may not set conditions for challenge. This permit is issued under Regulation PLGC-1998-TD184086, Petition for Reprieve: Unfounded Denial of Challenge. This permit has been issued by the Western Johto Office of the Pokémon League, Johto League division. For confirmation, call 9-358-456-9898.

-signed Reginald Preston."

I mumbled my way through the notice, although it was clear from the first few words what it meant.

This bastard. He went and whined to the Pokémon League about being banned from my gym. It's disrespectful that they didn't contact me to get my side of the story! Instead they gave him an unrestricted license to demand a Pokémon battle against me, on his terms no less! Outrageous! If I were so inclined, I could call the police and get them involved- a criminal restraining order trumps any document from the Pokémon League- but that would end up wasting so much time, and since I can't afford a lawyer it would probably be dropped and I'd end up in the same situation anyways.

"Comprehend, miss? You and me, now. Hey!"

Derrick tried to scurry past us, but Warren caught him by the shoulder and stopped him dead in his tracks. There was a short tussle in the center of the lobby.
"Give me my Pokémon back. I'm going to need it."

"Ouch!"

Warren yanked the Pokeball out of the teenager's hands. The smaller guy yelped in shock. As soon as he was free he made a beeline for the door and disappeared.

I spun in place to confront Warren.

"You trained some of your Pokémon specifically to counter my team, and then loaned them out to any gym challenger willing to bend the rules for a gym badge, didn't you!" I accused.

"Bend, being the operative word," he replied. "I didn't do anything wrong- unlike you. Get all emotional and try running me out of your gym for personal reasons- that's pretty much the definition of a cunt. Kicking out legitimate challengers isn't very seemly under normal circumstances. But your job status isn't 'normal', is it?"

I twitched.

"Yeah, I know all about your probation. Picking and choosing who gets to battle you, now that just ain't allowed when you're in the League's doghouse. You could get into some real trouble for that. And your win ratio? It's gotta be pretty trashed after last week, huh?"

He closed the gap between us by two steps. His expression was one of contempt.

"So even if you stonewall me now, I'll just keep my special "trading service" going outside the front door and see if your precious ratio can survive till December 10th. That was my original plan, you know, but I decided to give you a fair chance, challenge you a few weeks early. Gives you enough time, you might just be able to salvage your ratio after I'm gone."

"Don't you even dare pretend you're concerned for me," I spat out.


"I was never going to go out with you!"

"See? That, that right there. Never even considered what I had to offer! From the very start you counted me out. You women like to pretend you're complicated and deep and sensitive, but in the end you're nothing but shallow creatures with puddle-deep opinions. Making snap judgments about men before you've even got to know them, and stick with that prejudice no matter how wrong you're proven! You've got a shitty, man-hating attitude, and I just don't jive with that. Makes me feel insulted, gutted, knowing I put my heart out for you and you didn't even give me a chance! Now, I'm not gonna put up with it anymore. I'm getting my damned Mineral Badge and you're getting a life lesson about treating men with disrespect."

He backed me up to the threshold of the doorway. Behind me, the gym opened up, and I felt like he wanted to physically force me towards the arena.

"You're deranged," I said.

"Yada yada yada, enough with the name-calling. We're gonna settle this with a battle."

"No."
"No?"

"No, I won't fight you."

"Don't be stupid."

"No means no," I insisted.

"You don't have a choice. How stubborn are you going to be? You gonna sit there and say no to the security when they come and haul you off the property because you've been fired for refusing a direct order? Because I'd be just as happy watching that and beating a scrub replacement for my gym badge," he said with a smirk.

"I don't have to fight you."

"Do I have to repeat myself? Yes, you do. This paper says your boss is ordering you to battle me!"

"There is one rule that is ironclad above all others in the Pokémon League Gym Leader Manual!" I slapped the wall beside me, and extended my finger. He followed to where I was pointing- the clock on the wall. His brow furled. "No one, absolutely no one, works off the clock! It's five P.M., this gym is closed!"

"Kkk!" Warren jerked, tensed, like he was ready to attack me in anger. "You little-" he closed his eyes, drew in a sharp breath, and collected himself. "Typical woman, twisting the rules to help yourself."

"Get out!" I shouted.

"Fine, I'll be back tomorrow."

"We're closed tomorrow. Olivine Gym is only open Monday through Friday!"

"Screw that, you made that up. I'm calling Preston."

"You call Preston and have him look it up. This gym hasn't taken challengers on weekends since it was built fifty years ago! Now it's after-hours and I'm locking the doors, and if you're still here I'll have you booked for trespassing!" I threatened.

Warren finally took a step back.

"Yeah, whatever. All you're doing is delaying by a couple days. It won't make a difference."

I snatched out a Pokeball, Magneton, and let it loose. My Pokémon hummed to my side.

"Magnetón, escort this man outside. I'm going to close down the gym," I said emphatically.

There was no absolute need to lock everything down. I usually kept the gym open for another few hours on Fridays- not to take challenges, but for trainers to use for training and socializing. The few stragglers expecting the same routine today were unfortunately forced out. They can thank Warren for that.

I saw the last of them out the door. Warren had evaded Magneton by insisting on a restroom trip, and then at last he too had no other choice but to exit. I personally held the door open for him.

"I hope you enjoy your weekend," he said as he passed.
"Good riddance!"

"Oh." Warren paused a few steps past the door. Magneton floated over to give him an insistent shove, which he resisted. The human rummaged in his pocket, pulled out what looked like a postcard, and casually flipped it in my direction. The piece of stationary twirled and floated to a landing at my feet.

"He says "Hi"," Warren mentioned, and then he left.

I knelt to the ground and picked up the card. The outside was blank, and the inside had only a single photograph inside it.

I saw the picture, and my blood ran cold.

There's no way. I don't want to deal with this right now. This November has been nothing but an endless train wreck since it started. I lost to Silver, I lost to Lyra, I got dragged into working for Mother, I lost to Jade and then found out she and I are fundamentally opposed to each other's existence, and Mother probably wants to skewer me for trashing the center's kitchen and ditching the party's cleanup work.

By the way, it's been six days and she hasn't called me yet or shown up at my apartment. What gives? It's impossible for her to just forgive and forget like that, but that just means something worse is afoot. I'm scared of the possibilities.

But back to my present trouble, this dick Warren wants to force me into a rematch after verbally and physically harassing me, and he's got the League's backing to do so. I've got one weekend to devise a strategy to counter his team: Scizor, Quagsire, Exeggutor, any one of which was usually enough to guarantee a victory when employed by complete novices; all of them together and directed by Warren's above-average skills would mean almost-certain defeat. Not to forget his other Pokémon- a Graveler, who was no threat, Magcargo, weak but sporting a type-advantage over my Steels, and Ludicolo, who was quite powerful in its own right. Nor to dismiss the possibility he had other Pokémon he was hiding.

This man was clearly out to avenge himself upon me. If I lose to him, not only does it put a loss into my ratio, it takes away a win as well. Even if I beat him, he might become so spiteful he may start a campaign to loan his Pokémon out and help others on the edge of beating me, pushing my ratio down even further.

But guess what? The weekend I should be using to prepare myself for this incoming disaster of a battle, and thinking of a long-term solution? I can't do it. I have to use this Saturday and Sunday to study. Because this Tuesday, I have to hoof it all the way to Mahogany Town for my Probation Written Exams!

Curses!

What anal-retentive League bureaucrat insisted exams had to be held at the Pokémon Center of the Gym Leader Association Representative's home town? I want to find him and I want to strangle him. It's a massive waste of time when every day spent away from my gym took a toll on my preparedness and ability to beat probation's other requirement, the battling win ratio.
The only reason I'm not sweating over the outcome of the written exams themselves is that I'm sure I can ace them- IF I study. If I don't grind through my notes and commit every little detail to short-term memory, I might seriously flunk out of one section or another and be forced to retake the test- and I only get two retries, and they take two weeks to schedule, and I have to pass the tests before the December 10th deadline. So, as devastating as losing to Warren would be to my ego, I can't afford to spend my weekend focused on him. I have to go all book-eye-glue.

Still, I don't want to lose. I've suffered too many major losses already this month, there's got to be something I can do to even the odds? Right? Arrgh!

…This all flew through my head in the two minutes I spent shutting down the gym and angrily seeing Warren on his way. Yet it all came to a screeching halt when I picked up the postcard Warren had dropped and saw the photo inside of it.

How does he know about this? How is it possible? Who else is connected here? Did Morty put him up to this? That's impossible, Morty would never stoop so low!

By the time I reached Glitter Lighthouse and noticed the erratic intensity of the beams shooting out of it, I had become a nervous wreck.

"Amphy! Spectra!"

The elevator doors clanged open (with everything else going on, my calves suddenly decided they wanted to stop working too).

"Amphy? Spectra? Are you up there?"

The motors were humming, so I couldn't quite hear what was happening upstairs. I mounted the steps into the small supply room.

"Amphy? Who's turn is it, yours or Spectra's? The light isn't going out very well, it keeps fading and clipping. Is there a mechanical problem?" Inside, the Pokémon's light was at full force, preventing direct observation of the illumination chamber. I donned a pair of tinted goggles and strolled in.

"Amphy, I'm back. Is everything alright? There's been a - ARCEUS'S SHIT, WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING?!?!

Instantly, and I do mean INSTANTLY, I dove back into the supply room, trying frantically to conjure every brain-bleach imagery in my imagination.

"Amphoo?" Amphy cried to me.

"Amphy! Spectra! Now I'm not one to judge or tell you what you two can or cannot do, but you've got to understand that behavior is NOT acceptable while on the job!"

"Aroooouou poo pha pha. Aroo. Aru."

Amphy, looking quite exhausted, plodded his way into the room, lowering his tailbulb's intensity as he entered. He motioned for Spectra to stay where she was and continue lighting up the ocean.

"What are you thinking?!" I yelled at him. "You're supposed to be guiding ships into Olivine's port! Not guiding your wing-wang into Spectra's port!"

"Phrraoo!" Amphy whined. I've never heard this phrase, but I'm guessing the human equivalent would be "cock-block".
"No whining! This is your job!"

"Pharraoo!" he repeated, a little more angrily.

"Hey! You think I wouldn't like to go to my boyfriend's and make lovey-dovey with him, instead of doing my job?" I slapped my hand on top of his head, and then rubbed it roughly, yanking it around and messing with his ears. His head really was fuzzy to the touch. "Fun times wait until after the morning horn, got it? And use your room! This is public indecency!"

"Amphoo. I'm sorry."

"Spectra, did you hear that?"

She bleated in the affirmative.

"Oh dear, where's alcohol when I need it," I muttered to myself. Amphy followed me down the stairs to the first landing floor. I found a couch and slumped into it.

This was a donut-shaped room at the top of the Lighthouse. One part was blocked off and served as a staff office and Amphy and Spectra's private quarters. The rest was full of knick-knack history pieces, furniture for resting, and bay windows for taking in the view. An open space could be used for small-scale Pokémon battles. Between us and the ground floor was two hundred feet of staircase and elevators, and that's about it. Above was the second story of the lighthouse suite, with nothing but the illumination chamber and supply room.

This place really felt like my second home. I spent enough time here to call it my permanent residence, and I half-wondered if they'd let me move in if I lost my apartment. The two Pokémon had certainly made it their abode; the back office reeked of their bodily odor. I entered, and it felt like I had hit a solid brick wall of miasma.

"Baths, both of you. Before AND after you fool around," I commanded. Amphy nodded. I took a deep breath and took another step inside the office. "And how's the patient?"

"Amph!" he cried, and quietly as can be tip-toed over to the bed.

Well, there's one good thing in my day.

Skarmory lay tucked in a tight ball on the mattress, except one wing was held stretched out. Bright-red feathers stuck out like a rake, gently arrayed upon a pillow.

"Ah, good."

At this point, it's precautionary only. I gently traced my finger over each feather, checking its strength and positioning. Everything was firm, nothing caused the slumbering Pokémon to flinch or wake up.

Feraligatr's blow had been severe. Skarm's remiges feathers had been snapped off completely, and his wing bone had developed fractures all up and down, as well as two broken ribs and internal bruising. One doctor claimed Skarmory would never fly again. Thankfully, he had been an obsessive pessimist, and his colleagues quickly corrected his doomsday prognosis. With the help of a new treatment, his remiges had grown back already and Skarmory could begin flying by tomorrow.

"Skarrr?" he croaked, reacting to my touch. His body stirred, threatening to wake up and greet me.

"Hush, just sleep, sleepy sleep. I need you to rest up, get as healthy as possible. I'm really sorry, but there's another strong opponent and I'm going to need you in top shape."
"Skrrlll."

"It's that Scizor, the one who toyed with you for the longest time before just quitting while it was ahead. Do you remember that? He's back, and he's got just as annoying friends with him too."

"Skraw! Skraw!" Skarmory let out an angry cry.

"Yep, we don't like him at all. So get better, and get rest, while you can, because the next three days you're going to have to work hard."

Skarmory made an exaggerated flop into the bed, curling into a very proper sleep position, or as proper as his tender wing allowed him.

"Oh, and," I whispered near his ear, "Tyko is doing great. She's growing up so fast. You should see her, she's getting arrogant again, because she's so good at commanding the other Pokémon. You'd be proud."

"Kar," Skarmory squawked appreciatively. I know he cares about the water-bird, and my little update on her status was precious to him.

I turned around to find Amphy diddling with his privates.

"Amphy! A room!"

"Ampharooa! Rao roa! You're in my room!"

"Then… get a towel, or just wait until I'm gone, or something! Eww! Don't act like a boy, Amphy, that's forbidden around here! All my Pokémon are either females or effeminate innocent virgins!"

"Phoo." Amphy snorted at that last line.

I can feel a headache coming on. Nonetheless, I have business and must force myself to stare at a computer monitor. I settled into the rudimentary desk and booted the office computer up. The system was thankfully modern, a necessity for running the complex mirror system. The desktop was up and running within seconds, and the internet connection didn't lag at all. I navigated to the Skype program.

"Come on, come on, pick up," I pleaded. No answer.

"Come on, lazy dork!" I tried a different number.

"Hello?"

"Morty, it's Jasmine."

"Hey Jazz!"

"I need help."

*Click*

The line went dead.

"Morty, god damn it!"

There was a ring, and Morty's number appeared beside an incoming call.
"I kid, I kid," he cried. The video feed was blank, so it was audio only. He must be on his cell phone somewhere. "I'm out eating, what's up? Haven't heard from you in a while, anything wrong?"

"Everything's wrong, Morty, absolutely everything."

"Are you breaking up with me?" he asked expectantly.

"Hell no! You're the last good thing I have going for me! When I break up with you, it won't be over Skype."

"Heh." The background was noisy, a lot of chatter and crowd bustle. A voice spoke up, asking Morty something.

"It's Jasmine," he replied. "Yeah, she's asking for help again. I'll take care of it."

"Am I bothering you?" I asked.

"Interrupting, yes, bothering, no. I'm glad to hear from you. I wish you wouldn't wait till you had an emergency before you called, though."


"Long story? Yeah, I'll take it. Hey Jazz, hold that thought a minute, we're paying the bill right now."

I patiently waited the five minutes it took for Morty to sort his business out, caressing Skarmory's backside to while away the time.

"David, Cody, Danielle, Flower, great dinner, but I've got to take this call. I'll meet you all up at the gym. Say, an hour and a half? Cool." The crowd noise faded and Morty returned to our conversation. "We're holding a battling exercise course at the gym tonight. I can hear you out while I walk over."

"You're actually working?"

"Of course! Sleeping in late, ghost hunting at nights, when do you think I get all my work done?"

"I thought you went out to bars and such during the evenings."

"Nope. Only on weekends. I think you overestimate my free time."

"Oh Morty." I shook my head. He keeps the weirdest hours. "So, now that I've got your attention, let me explain."

And I repeated everything I already went over in my head. He knew about Warren's little crush on me, but I hadn't yet filled him in on my recent rejection of him or his revenge threat. When I finished explaining everything Morty let out a whistle.

"That escalated. Has he ever threatened you? Personally?"

"No. He grabbed me, once, but it wasn't very forceful."

"Mmmm, that might fall into he-said she-said territory. You don't think you've got grounds to file a complaint against the Pokémon League?"

"Not really. But I'm scared if I don't deal with Warren appropriately, he'll react badly and then it'll be
too late to file a complaint."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. But you don't want to let him win and be rid of him, do you?"

"No way!"

"Well, I can try to help. I don't know if I can get him to back off, but I'll do my best. As for beating him, yeah, I know I can help you there."

"How so?"

Morty made a few utterances indicating mind-churning. "Okay. Here's what you need to do. Access your PC, and send over your Pokémon. I'm going to need Skarm, Tyko, Steelix, the Magne's, and… hmm. What format did he mention he wanted?"

"He didn't mention any format. I was assuming a 3v3 or 4v4, so he could use his new power-trio and his Ludicolo."

"Ludicolo, huh. In that case, Oddish."

"But Oddish can't fight at all! She'd faint to Not-Very-Effective attacks!"

"She only needs to do a few simple things, won't even have to take an attack if you play well. Won't even factor in if it's a 4v4. I just want options."

"What are you thinking?"

"Oddish can… eh, details, give me some time to organize everything. But in any case, let me worry about Warren. I'll train your team with a perfect counter-strategy, you worry about those exams."

"But I'm not allowed to receive external assistance!"

"You're not allowed to use other's Pokémon in a Gym Battle. That doesn't mean you can't loan your Pokémon out for special training."

"Oh." I thought back to my lessons. He's right, I guess I extrapolated too much when reading the rule about external aide.

"Send them over my PC account. Password is TinTower>506. Make sure to capitalize both 'T's. And also send all the recordings of your battles with Warren."

"You trust me with your password?"

"Yeah, you're my girl."

I paused. A faintness of feeling hit my heart, my lungs, and my head all at once. This must be what they call the Butterfrees- although they usually associate it with the stomach region. Odd.

"'Kay," I mumbled out.

I'm being horribly girlish right now.

"Thank you."

"No problem," Morty said. "So, what else is on your mind?"
I paused.

"Come on. You sound distracted. You didn't pick up my calls last weekend. Something else bothering you?"

"A lot, a lot of things," I said tentatively.

"Dish it out."

"No, don't worry about it."

*Butterfree vanished.*

I'm not exactly the kind of person who likes to expunge my bad feelings on others. It makes me feel weak. Besides, how could I possibly explain the meaning behind my feud with Mother? It's too personal, too painful, to be sharing so casually. This is not the kind of thing I would talk to him about if we were dating or even having sex. The only chance he would get to find out about it would be if we were old and married and staring down the slow coming of our mortal ends. Otherwise, no, never.

"You there?"

"I'm here."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I've been busy, very busy. I had to finish my probation paperwork this week, and Warren's little pain-in-the-ass stunt was causing me to lose a lot. I didn't figure it out until just today, either. It's been very stressful. And the week before that- well, Mother roped me into helping her cater. The preparation was brutal, and the party itself- well, you know how I normally act at parties, but this was full of snobs and puritans and stuck-ups. You can imagine how I handled it."

"Very poorly."

"Mmmmm."

"Well, the good news is that it's over with. Hang in there. In fact, let me spell out how your near-future is gonna go. First, I'm going to run your Pokémon through my Ace Regimen. It's the training program I use when I have a particular foe I really need to beat. They'll come back with all they need to beat the snot out of this Warren punk. I'll send you a report telling you everything you need to know about how to direct them. The short and skinny- you're going to win. I guarantee it.

Second, I will personally look into the legal system to see what I can do about a restraining order, or whatever else the authorities have to deal with stalkers.

Third, you're going to breeze through the exams. I know you, give you two days to study and it's triple Charge Beam Zapdos versus Magikarp.

Fourth, we've got a secret for you. It'll be a really cool secret, you'll love it."

"Huh? What secret?"

"It's secret."

Hey, wait a minute! Lyra mentioned there was something secret happening too! They're conspiring together! I bet Erika and Whitney are in on it too! I want to know!
But Morty is playing coy and continuing on with his speech.

"Fifth, you're going to cruise through your last couple weeks of probation, even if I have to personally round up the Johto Leaders to come act as your subordinates. We'll only let Rock and Ice-type trainers through to challenge you. If that's what it takes… Although I doubt it. You're strong. You could beat most challengers as-is. Warren's a lucky punk who happens to have too much time on his hands and got ahold of some cheap Pokémon to counter you while you're under stress.

The bottom line is this- it's tough, but you're tougher, and you have good friends. We'll get you through this. Christmas is six weeks away. We'll have the mother of all holidays waiting for you-Gym Leader Jasmine Elaine Hayate-Mikan of Olivine City.” He used my full name and title, as if to emphasize how sure he was he'd still be calling me that when Christmas did roll around.

"Morty, you're really good at talking," I told him.

"Oh, and… about our last meeting."

"Hmm?"

He meant our tryst on the Goldenrod Gym balcony.

"I think I'm sensing some momentum on your side. You're getting used to that kind of stuff."

"I… a little. It feels good, I'll give you that. Just, the emotional side…"

"Good enough. In that case, I'm sticking with my prediction. New Year's Day. We're going to get you laid."

Heh. Heh-heh. Oh Morty. You have no clue. It'll be sooner than that.

"Everything is going to be okay," he said, trying to reassure me.

"Thanks." Not really gratitude, because just telling me it's going to be okay isn't enough to settle me down. But if it makes him feel better knowing he's being helpful, well that's something I'm willing to white-lie about.

"Amphy for the love of deus, use the bathroom if you have to!" I suddenly shouted. The creature had tucked himself into his bed and was engaged in obvious humping motions.

"Jasmine, what's wrong?"

"I interrupted work-place shenanigans and now I've got a pair of horny Ampharos on my hands."

"Ewwww. Yuck, I'd throw him in his Pokeball."

"I don't want to do that, and I'm sure he wouldn't want that either," I said, raising my voice and glancing over to the Pokémon. "Unless I really have to!" I shouted. Amphy cowered deeper into his covers. Skarmory cawed in annoyance at the racket.

"Oh, yeah, Skarmory's still healing from Feraligatr, and my gym's closed, so I'll wait and send everyone over first thing tomorrow morning."

"Gotcha. Right, how about you tell me about Warren's team? Things you noticed, observations, quirks, habits, weaknesses."

"Okay."
The next five minutes was spent telling him about my encounters with Warren, and with the three Pokémon he loaned out to others.

Exeggutor was extremely unpredictable. Kinesis, Softboil, Fire Blast, Leech Seed, Hypnosis, Power Split, Thunderbolt, Rain Dance, Rock Wrecker, Acid Armor- this thing’s arsenal was enormous, and included a lot of attacks I was certain normal Exeggutors couldn't learn by any means.

Quagsire only used four attacks, total, but they were extremely effective: Earthquake, Scald, Recover, Yawn. It was a tough monster, and the only one of the three I was incapable of KOing at any point. The other two I had managed to down several times, although they inflicted fatal damage to my team in the process, giving their team mates ample advantage. The Quagsire, though, I could never inflict enough damage to prevent it from Recovering and then grilling me with nasty, burning Scalds, or super-effective Earthquakes.

And Scizor, of course, was my bane. It used a plethora of stat-boosting moves, and then a few extremely well-executed physical attacks to take down my Pokémon. My Pokémon's attacks couldn't hit it. It was like me trying to fight a wasp.

"Any weakness that you can spot?"

"Low stamina. It runs out of energy after ten to twelve minutes, although it's usually taken down most or all of my team by then."

"What's its ability?"

"Technician, I think. Oh, and it's got a weird coloration," I mentioned.

"Shiny gene?"

"No, shiny Scizors are bronze-green. This one is bronze-yellow. Very distinctly different. I know it's some additive to its Metal Coat."

"Additive?"

"Oh, yeah, I should tell you about that. Some Steel-types who use the Metal Coat to evolve, there's a special technique where the coat can be augmented by other metals, to create an alloy that changes the composition of the Pokémon's body after evolution. Steelix has depleted uranium enriching his hide, for example, it boosts his special defense, density, and resiliency. I think Warren's done the same thing for his Scizor, but I don't know what alloy they used."

"Oh, really! I wonder how it's done, maybe I can apply that to other evolution items. What technique is it? How do you use it?"

"It's very difficult to work with, you can't do it without special training and industrial equipment. I couldn't do it myself, I needed my Father's help…” I lilted off.

Damn it.

Why had I missed that.

"What is it? Jasmine?"

"There was something else."

Now it made sense. How Warren had that photograph, and their connection.
Warren’s a punk from Hoenn, Morty.

Yeah, okay.

Where’s he going to get a forge? What are the chances he has advanced knowledge of metallurgy? He’s a young guy on a Pokémon journey, that’s not a lifestyle conducive to picking up skill in smelting.

So you're saying if his Scizor has some rare element in its Metal Coat, he must’ve gotten help evolving it?

I’m saying he didn’t have a Scyther to begin with. When he first came to my gym, there was no sign of it. Scyther’s aren’t native to Hoenn… I don’t think he is Scizor's owner.

Where would Warren get the idea to loan Pokémon out to other trainers? His own imagination, or did someone first loan those Pokémon to Warren?!?!

Morty… someone gave Warren these Pokémon. They’re much stronger than anything Warren showed me beforehand.

Morty too fell quiet for a moment.

You think someone gave Warren those Pokémon in order to beat you?

Yes. And I know who it was, too.

Who?

I tensed up.

Let sleeping Granbulls lie? What if the Granbull wakes up and starts chasing you? How can I keep all my painful memories buried if they keep clawing out of the ground like zombies?

Should I get Morty involved?

Yes. He has the right. For this one, he has the responsibility.

Morty, Morty,” I said.

Who is it?” he asked.

I gulped. I took out the photo, looked down on it, remembered the horrible memories associated with it.

It was me. A picture of me.

Butt-naked, hand over one boob, another boob exposed, vagina showing as well. I had an expression of shock and dizziness, like a Ghastly had hit me with a Confuse Ray. In the background there appeared to be an outdoor hot spring.

There was only one place, and one person, this could have come from.

Morty, whatever happened to Ed?”

The phone went completely silent.
"Morty, answer me."

"Everything is going to be okay, Jazz. Do what I told you, okay?"

"Okay?"

"I'll take care of everything… including Ed."

He hung up.
Jasmine versus Warren

Mr. Preston stared grimly, first to me, and then to Warren.

We were ourselves staring grimly at each other.

"Let the battle begin," Mr. Preston declared.

"Scizor."

"Skarm-Skarm."

Two steel-clad Pokémon entered the field, likewise staring one another down.

Things started fast and never let up.

"Scizor, Sword Dance."

"Stealth Rocks!"

The yellow Scizor shuffled side-to-side, pumping blood through its veins and exercising its muscles until they bulged. Even as it danced, it used its motion to carry itself towards our side of the field, closing distance on Skarmory. Skarm-Skarm was busy scattering pointed rocks across the field.

"Knock Off."

"Drill Peck."

Enough setup. The pair of Pokémon clashed in a savage melee. Skarmory ducked low and used the ground to brace himself, drilling into Scizor's abdomen. Scizor used its buzzing wings to gain leverage on the air and bear down on Skarmory. Both attacks hit. Skarmory's superior defenses and position were negated by Scizor's boosted attack. Skarmory's weaker attack drilled through the slightly lesser defenses of the Bug. Both were hurt, neither backed down.

"Brick Break!"

"Steel Wing! Drill Peck!"

Skarmory circled underneath and slashed out with his wings. Scizor brought down its heavy claws one after another, beating into Skarmory's back and head.

Skarmory charged at Scizor's legs. The Bug was sent airborne but maintained balance using its wings. Skarmory whirled around and let loose another flurry of slashes. Scizor responded with Bullet Punches.

The pounding went on, nothing but a vicious melee devoid of strategy, merely moment-by-moment tactics reliant on reflexes, strength, and defense. I gave orders every once in a while, trying to urge Skarmory to favor certain attacks and advances, but I simply couldn't order his attacks one by one. The same was true for Warren and his Scizor. The battle was too fast for the humans to keep up.

A flurry of movement, and a critical sequence began: Scizor swung sideways with its claw, Skarmory faded sideways and forward, and also catching Scizor's wrist in his beak. Keeping a hold of it, Skarmory rolled into Scizor's body and the pair went tumbling. Repeated battering by Scizor's free claw did nothing to dislodge the bird. The pair landed upright, Scizor attempted to free itself, but
Skarmory dove right back down to the floor, twisting his prey in the process. The Bug flipped over and slammed into the ground.

"U-Turn!" Warren ordered.

Scizor used brute strength to punch itself across the floor, dragging Skarmory along with it. The Bug made a sharp, speedy U-Turn, throwing Skarmory off like a trebuchet sling. Skarmory fluttered in mid-air, catching himself and then landing for a Roost.

"Scizor, back up. Use Agility and Iron Defense."

He's come to a conclusion - Scizor can't win the brawl without more stat-boosting. Skarmory is using martial arts principles to get the better of Scizor: Stay low, minimize your profile, use the ground as leverage, grapple the foe's limbs, twist and turn around your center of gravity, keep the foe off-balance. It was like a combination of judo, sumo, and wrestling. Scizor is an arm's-length boxer, it doesn't want to get drawn into body-on-body melee.

Warren's Pokémon completed its combat enhancement rituals. It shook and resumed a battle stance, ready to take on Skarmory again.

"Skarmory, take this fight airborne."

"Don't let it fly. Pounce on it! Brick Break!"

Scizor leapt in upon Skarmory. Its style had shifted. It kept pouncing in from ten feet out, bringing down a powerful Brick Break smash. Whether it hit Skarmory or not, the foe immediately leapt backwards. Leap-in, leap-out, leap-in, leap-out, not giving Skarmory time to counter or grapple. When Skarmory charged, Scizor leapt to the side and backed off, until it had a favorable angle and distance and continued its pouncing maneuver.

"Skarm, fall back. Defensive posture."

Skarmory huddled into a ball, again Roosting off damage. Scizor capitalized on the situation by adding another Sword Dance to its stat sheet.

"Wait for it!"

"Change up again. Bullet Punch!"

Scizor abandoned pouncing in favor of straight-line flybys. Skarmory took the first hit in the head, the second on the wing. Scizor was striking fast enough that I had trouble seeing the exchange. After a successful third charge, it stopped at the field's edge and turned for a fourth pass.

"Sand Attack!"

Skarmory whipped dirt into the path of the oncoming Scizor. The latter blocked the dirt with one claw while tapping Skarmory on the wing with its other as it passed. A glancing hit, nothing to worry about.

"Screech!"

Scizor had lost momentum blocking the Sand Attack, it couldn't complete its pass and escape Skarmory's range in time. A bone-rattling vibration passed through its armor, undoing the Iron Defense reinforcement.
"Scizor, come back here. Bird's tougher than I remember, let's top out your power. Sword Dance."

Scizor shuffled and huffed, straining as hard as it could.

"Skarmory, Spikes."

Skarmory used the short reprieve to scatter spikes all across the field. Unlike the Stealth Rocks, these were visible. However, I doubt Scizor was going to care much whether it ran into them; its steel armor would protect it from damage. The field hazards were intended for… other uses.

"Alright. Combo that damn bird, open a weak point up," Warren ordered. Scizor, with muscles on fire and attack-power strained to the max, advanced. It has changed its attack pattern yet again, returning to the side-to-side wavering motion meant to put the opponent off-balance. I wasn't having any of that.

"Skarm, Air Cutter, right-to-left."

Skarmory ripped off vortex waves in rapid succession. Rather than aiming directly for Scizor, they launched in a wave that swept through a wide arc, firing from Skarm's left to his right.

As I thought, Scizor dodged. Skarmory's special attack was very low, and his skill in firing Air Cutters lower still. That made them slow and easy to avoid, so Scizor did so. It would have been better to push through them, however.

Scizor closed in right on top of Skarmory, but found itself faced with a simultaneous Drill Peck and Steel Wing. The two Pokémon became entangled, clawing and thrashing at each other until they fell apart again. Only for Skarmory to right himself first and launch his claws at Scizor, renewing their whirlwind of violence for another two minute session.

"Kkk. That's her strategy, is it?" Warren muttered. "Scizor, untangle yourself!"

Scizor used kicks and back-flips to dislodge itself from Skarmory and put distance between them.

"Roost."

On account of its monstrous power, Scizor had come out of the melee slightly better than Skarmory. In terms of damage to their vitality, I would say Skarmory's at 45%, and Scizor is still 70%. My Pokémon didn't have the strength to seriously injure the opponent. However, strong as it was, Scizor couldn't take Skarmory down all at once either- which is where Skarmory's critical advantage comes in: he can heal himself. I will win this war of attrition, and Warren knows that.

"Hey Scizor. Dig up chunks of the ground, toss it at them. Double Team, too, find a good direction to attack."

Warren is looking for a way Scizor can attack Skarmory without getting locked into hand-to-hand combat (can I say that when neither of them have "hands"?!). If the Bug were allowed to start wracking up a combo of consecutive hits, it might do enough damage to faint Skarmory without giving him time to Roost.

I'm not going to let that happen.

"Sandstorm."

Skarmory and Scizor clawed into the ground. My Pokémon ripped apart the clay into a fine particulate cloud, and then sent it skyward with a gust of wind from his wings. Scizor was content
with digging up large chunks and lobbing them in Skarmory's direction. Not even a proper Rock Throw attack, which would explain their poor accuracy. Even the closest hits just bounced along the ground before smacking into Skarmory, taking away much of their power.

Scizor's not trying to hurt Skarmory with the rocks, though, it's trying to distract him.

Right, there it goes. The Bug Pokémon was dashing around in a wide circle, continuously chucking earthen chunks at Skarmory along the way. At one point it stopped and suddenly changed direction, and after another dozen yards reversed itself yet again. It's getting faster too, an Agility woven in there somewhere.

"Skarmory, wait for it to get into the frontal quadrant and then execute."

"Double Team," Warren ordered.

Scizor looked like it was about to change the direction of its strafing again- but this time it kept going. No, it did change- no, never mind, it's the afterimage- aw crap!

Scizor was zipping around fast enough, and sending out so many afterimages, it was impossible to tell the true location of the enemy. Skarmory was surrounded on all sides by threatening mustard-colored monsters.

"Test, now!"

Three images from three different angles zipped in, and the only way I knew which one was real was the direction Skarmory went flying after getting hit. Scizor backed away and continued its Double Team strafing dance.

"Air Cutter, left to right!"

"Get around its left edge!" Warren shouted.

Skarmory tried the clockwise rotation of Air Cutters, but Scizor had whisked around the leading edge and struck Skarmory on his left flank. Skarmory bowled over, jumped into the air and fluttered away. Scizor followed, nailing another Bullet Punch before Skarmory got too high in the air to reach.

Dang it. Warren figured that tactic out already.

Skarmory is right-limbed dominant. Shooting off an arc of Air Cutters was intended to herd foes towards Skarmory's right flank, where he was better coordinated and able to mount a counterattack. Scizor used its enhanced speed to get around and attack Skarmory's left side, though.

Welp, that's a Pokemon battle, gotta keep evolving.

"Skarmory, strengthen that Sandstorm!"

"It'll do squat," Warren commented.

Skarmory used Air Cutter directly on the ground, kicking up even more dust and whipping it into a violent frenzy. Scizor, being cautious, slowly advanced, occasionally hitting out with probing Bullet Punches, just to keep some pressure on Skarmory.


"There's enough sand in the air," I said to myself. "Good." Scizor had again split into phantasmal
clones; however, this time, they were all bunched in front of Skarmory. "Tailwind!" I shouted.

"Mark!"

Scizor raced at Skarmory from three different angles, with no way of telling which yellow flash was the real one. Fortunately, I didn't have to.

Skarmory's great gust from Tailwind picked up the sandstorm and sent it in one single choking cloud straight at the Scizors. They were all drowned in dust, coming out the other side confused and dazed. Scizor couldn't maintain its motion and struggled to a halt. The Double Team clones faded away.

"Tailwind plus Sandstorm equals Massive Sand Attack," I said. Scizor was still struggling to clear its face of the mud mask caking it.

"Drill Peck!"

With the benefit of the Tailwind, Skarmory raced in and caught Scizor under the torso.

"Scizor, listen, fast! On mark, strike! Mark! Mark! Mark! Mark!"

Skarmory lashed out at the blinded Scizor. With Warren's prompting, Scizor thrashed out just as Skarmory dove in for an attack, fending off my Pokémon and preventing it from landing another solid blow. Failing to get in easy shots, Skarmory fluttered five feet away and unleashed virtually point blank Air Cutters. These sliced across Scizor, causing it to shudder slightly upon each blow.

"Brick Break, ground," Warren ordered. Compared to Skarmory's obscene defenses, even Scizor's peak attack power didn't seem so awesome. Everyone was reminded again that it had pulled off not one, but three Sword Dances when it hit the earth.

A crater blew open in the ground, big enough to situate a hot tub inside of. The jagged rim and other debris hit Skarmory and sent him flying. Skarmory squawked and roared angrily, not expecting an indirect attack. He went to the rafters and found a secluded place to Roost off the most recent damage.

"Got that muck out of your eyes? Good. Hit the beam."

Scizor crouched, and then launched itself towards the ceiling. It used one claw to smack the support beam, causing the entire structure to ring. The ceiling of the gym shivered, and I was extremely worried about its structural integrity. The clanging had the desired effect of unseating Skarmory and sending the bird tumbling earthward.

"Combo, now!"

Skarmory hit the ground.

Scizor landed right next to him.

"Steel Wing!" I called.

It was the right call.

Brick Break and Rock Smashes came in fast and hard. Scizor pounded away like a blacksmith, using Skarmory as its anvil. Flecks of red-hot steel exploded off of each impact, showering the contestants and lighting up the field in an eerie, molten glow. Skarmory did not have any room to run or charge, merely take the beating as best he could by slashing out with Steel Wing.
"Harder! Harder! Harder! Harder!" Warren kept shouting. Scizor clobbered Skarmory's wing with its left claw repeatedly, eight or ten times, and then suddenly switched to a right-clawed strike that finally broke through. For the briefest moment, Skarmory's guard broke and he couldn't hold up his wings.

"Super Power!" Warren yelled.

Scizor caught Skarmory by the neck with one claw and held him down; in the other claw an aura of sheer energy gathered. This fist of iron and raw power came down hard, blasting through Skarmory's backside and then into the ground, carving out a crater you could drop a small swimming pool into. A great plume of dust erupted into the air.

"Skarmory is unable to battle," Mr. Preston declared… right as Skarmory blasted Scizor with a point-blank Whirlwind. The Bug was flung skyward. In midair, my bird caught his prey in his talons and reeled several Drill Pecks into Scizor's weakened defenses. The victim's head bobbed wildly under the blows.

The fainted carcass dropped down in front of Warren.

"Excuse me, Scizor is unable to battle. Standings are 6 to 5, advantage Gym Leader," Preston announced lazily. Half of the stands erupted into cheers, the other half booed and taunted.

Erika, Lyra, and all my local acquaintances (none were really close enough to be called "friend") had gathered to cheer me on. A large contingent of trainers and challengers had also showed up to root for Warren. Delaying the battle by a weekend not only gave me and Warren additional time to prepare, it also gave time for word of our showdown to circle around town. Now the stands were packed and quite a large audience had gathered to watch this personal feud play out in Pokémon battle. Connie had the bright idea to charge them a small entrants fee (to be used for gym repairs), and so far it seemed like they were getting their money's worth.

"What a hard fought battle. Very physical," I distinctly heard from the sideline. Mr. Ajax, the local news reporter, was giving blow-by-blow commentary into a radio mic. "We've come to expect this from our Jasmine, but the challenger doesn't appear to be fazed. He's actually looking pretty happy about the loss. After the reputation he's gained at the local battle clubs, absolutely pummeling all competition in the past month, I say he's probably saved his best for last. This battle still has a long way to go."

It sure does. But now that I've removed Scizor from the field, I'm feeling much better.

"How are you doing Skarm Skarm? Feeling okay?"

Skarmory let out a weak growl.

Right right.

"I don't know how in hell Skarmory survived that Superpower. Doesn't matter, it's still an inch from fainting, I'll take care of it," Warren said offhandedly.

Skarmory was able to withstand the Superpower for two reasons: It was not the strongest Superpower Skarmory had taken- that honor belonged to Silver's Feraligatr- and second, the array of Steel Wings Skarmory had used to defend himself against Scizor's beat down had the side-effect of raising his Defense by several orders.

"Hey Jasmine, before you start bitching, keep in mind the rules," Warren told me with a smirk.
"Unrestricted 6v6, single-battles," I recited. "Nothing special."

"You're not too bright," he responded.

I let out a "Hmph!" and crossed my arms. My five Pokémon did likewise, showing their displeasure as they were able.

Tyko stood beside me, appearing hyper-active in her efforts to cheer her teammates on. She had spent Skarmory's entire fight dancing about in every kind of motion, squawking and making a fuss of herself. My other four Pokémon were arrayed behind me, watching the battle stoically: Steelix, Magneton, Magnezone, Oddish. Well, that last little pipsqueak had hardly ever been in a battle before- this would be her fifth gym match, ever. She was showing equal parts excitement and nervousness.

It was unusual for me to let out all of my Pokémon at once on the sideline. Keeping them in Pokeballs was usually more advantageous- effects like confusion and Taunt were erased when a Pokémon enters Pokeball stasis, and Pokémon can be retreated or deployed to the field faster, from farther away, than when they're on the sideline. With them being out, in order to switch my active Pokémon would have to come all the way over and cross the sideline before the replacement can go in. This'd give the opponent more time to line up a parting-shot, or greeting shot, depending on their whim.

Despite all these disadvantages, there was a specific reason I had them enjoying front-row seats to the battle. I just hope Warren doesn't figure it out before I have a chance to take full advantage of it.

"Next Pokémon," Preston said.

"Magcargo," Warren announced, sending out his Pokeball. The shower of sparkles turned into a shower of embers and slag, as Magcargo emerged. Too bad I didn't bring my own Magcargo to this battle, we could have had a mirror-match. Alas.

Magcargo winced as it materialized on the field. Stealth Rocks doing their job.

"Skarm, use the rafters to Roost again."

"Flamethrower," Warren called out.

I need Skarmory to last a bit longer. One of the moves he has is key to my victory.

Skarmory flapped from beam to beam, avoiding the gouts of flame aimed at its hiding place. Magcargo wasn't too aggressive in hitting Skarmory- it was content merely to keep Skarmory moving around. Eventually it would get a lucky hit, or Skarmory would tire out, or else it was stalling for time. None of these three possibilities are desirable to me, so I need to come up with a strategy to get Skarm some breathing room.

"Um…"

I thought long and hard, but came up blank. There was no way to extricate a good outcome from this. I glanced to my other Pokémon.

"Skarmory, come back."

Skarmory dodged as best he could, staying high and using the rafters for cover as long as possible. Seeing its opponent on the retreat, Magcargo pressed harder, eager to score a KO.
"Flame Shot!" Warren ordered.

Skarmory crossed the sideline just in the nick of time. The fiery orbs exploding on the shield right behind him. The next salvo splattered across the surface of Skarmory's replacement.

"Schteel!" Steelix didn't care much for the Flame Shots, and showed it with a great whack of his tail. The avalanche of earth washed out over the field, forcing Magcargo to back off.

"Switch, switch you brilliant coward," I whispered.

Warren did the calculations, and decided Magcargo's Flamethrower wasn't going to outgun Steelix's Earthquake.

"Get back. Exeggutor!"

Here it is, the pandora's box of nasty surprises. But at least I could be sure it wouldn't one-shot Skarmory. I think.

"Steelix, Dragon Tail," I called out.

"Protect, counter with Scald!" Warren shouted.

Yet, Steelix didn't go anywhere near Exeggutor. He slithered his way back across the sideline, and Skarmory charged back out onto the field.

"What the…" Warren mouthed.

"Skarmory! No! You're not supposed to go out! Come back here!" I yelled emphatically.

Skarmory did not comply with my order, but rather shot a few Air Cutters across the field. Exeggutor followed through on its orders, Protecting itself and attempting a long distance Scald, which fell short.

"Oh fine! Skarm, as long as you're out there you might as well use Spikes!"

The thicket of spikes littering the field grew even thicker. I noticed Exeggutor had stubbed its toe on one, and was having to be careful where it stepped. Skarmory's additions would make that even harder. One more layer, I just need one more layer…

"Exeggutor, Fire Blast!"

I jerked in shock.

The overgrown palm tree belched up a concentrated glob of fire and launched it in Skarmory's direction. The target was about twenty yards away and doing evasive loop-de-loops before the Fire Blast was even in the air. The pentagram slammed into the ground beneath him and exploded into a big ball of fire. Skarmory was clear of the main blast but got caught by a plume of hot ejecta, suffering harsh damage in the process.

"Fire Blast."

A second explosive was on its way.

Skarmory ripped off a combined Air Cutter and Whirlwind to intercept the bomb. They had the effect of inflaming the Fire Blast and increasing its strength, but at least diverted it a little, enough to avoid a direct hit on Skarmory.
"Skarm, Air Cutter! Whirlwind! Blow it off course!" I yelled amidst the roar of the explosion.

How does Exeggutor know a Fire-type attack? Some of the other improbable moves I could accept, but to have a Grass-type belching out combustible globs of flame was inconceivable! At any rate, Skarmory couldn't continue to dodge these fireballs. He's struggling to maintain flight as is.

"Skarmory come back."

Except Skarmory didn't come back. My exasperation reached critical levels. Skarmory cawed angrily at me and insistently jerked his head towards my sideline. I glanced to my right, saw, understood, and nodded.

"So you want to keep fighting, no matter what? How honorable!" I said to my Pokémon.

"Your Pokémon's much more honorable than you, but not much brighter," Warren taunted. "Exeggutor, if it heads to the rafters again, hit the whole place with Thunder. If it charges, Fire Blast. Keep Protecting long-range attacks, they're underpowered and won't hurt you if you keep your guard up."

"Skarm, um, Spikes?"

"Oh, and Taunt the thing- damn annoying Spikes."

Exeggutor's three heads made three different faces, triggering a berserk response within Skarmory's neurons. It turned out to be both a good and bad move- Skarmory abandoned his Spiking and immediately launched into an assault, cutting into close-range with tight dives and swerves. Warren had underestimated Skarmory's speed; he had closed the gap too fast for Exeggutor to aim a Fire Blast. With the bird clawing at it from every side, the Grass-type couldn't let off a bomb without getting caught in its own back-blast.

"Barrier!"

Exeggutor's eyes went white with psychic power. Oval-shaped force-fields began appearing around it, blocking Skarmory's claws from reaching it and extolling damage.

"Snap out of it," I muttered. There was no use issuing orders. With Skarmory not heeding any direction but direct assault, he was already doing the best he could with Wing Attack, Fury Attack, and Drill Peck. Wait, there were two other options-

"Brave Bird?"

No, never mind. To gain distance to accelerate for a Brave Bird would put Skarmory at risk of being targeted with Fire Blast.

"Keep the Barrier up! Try pushing it out! Use Psychic if you get a chance to hold the thing down for a Fire Blast!" Warren instructed.

Exactly, Skarmory was forced to remain in close-quarters.

On the other hand, there was always the move Skarm used to finish Violet's Heracross.

"Aerial Ace," I said to myself.

A moment later- "Aerial Ace!" I shouted. Skarmory, fluttering in front of Exeggutor's face, heard and complied. He suddenly folded his wings and dropped like a rock. Exeggutor blinked in surprise.
My bird's talon dug into the ground and dragged himself forward, while he used one wingtip to pivot and the other wing to flap.

Exeggutor turned and lay five Barriers down at once, trying to box my Pokémon against the ground—but Skarmory had wheeled back to eye-level and was again on Exeggutor's blindside. The foe popped another set of Barriers, and still Skarmory managed to push off of them and gain the uncovered flank of the Grass-Psychic Pokémon—and AGAIN a third Barrier shield covered the way—at which point Skarmory vanished.

Exeggutor spun and bent over, coughing in pain. A red bruise mark appeared across the right side of its abdomen. Skarmory had executed the Aerial Ace at the third turn, twisting around Exeggutor faster than the eye could follow and cutting across the only unprotected area of the opponent. Masterful!


Exeggutor refused. It stomped and lumbered away, while Skarmory heckled it some more with Fury Attacks.

"Come on, Fire Blast! Fire Blast you sissy!"

Exeggutor bellowed, unwilling to follow through on an attack that would surely knock out Skarmory, but just as surely would get itself blasted in the process.

"Fire Blast!" Warren insisted. "Just do it!"

"Skarmory, Whirlwind!"

Skarmory slashed, and a gust of wind kicked up right at Exeggutor's feet. It went sailing across the arena like a… well, honestly the closest simile I could think of was a potted plant launched by a catapult. The monster landed on the sidelines, dazed, and Warren was forced to recall it to its Pokeball (or else it would be disqualified).

"Fucking egghead," he said in disgust.

"Skarmory, got your senses back? Spikes, one last time.

When Magcargo reappeared, it yowled in pain. There was no way to avoid the multitude of sharp edges comprising the field's surface now. Even my own Pokémon entering from my side of the arena weren't going to be able to avoid the hazards.

"Magcargo, grit through it. Flamethrower."

Despite having to run over Spikes and Sneaky Pebbles in order to do so, Magcargo was determined to press its type advantage this time. Either it was going to get Skarmory for good now, or it would be sure to land a fatal blow on Steelix should he switch in.

"Skarmory, return!"

The fire slug advanced, never letting up on its geyser of napalm.

Magcargo was Warren's own Pokémon, not one of the dubious rentals. It was obvious, in the way that it was willing to endure pain in order to ensure victory for its master. Stupid Pokémon, your trainer isn't the kind of guy to deserve that loyalty! Unless you're every bit of an asshole and chauvinist as he is. In which case…
"Magnezone."

"ZONNN!"

Magnezone switched in, straight into the Flamethrower. Super-effective damage, yes, but not fatal.

"Thunderbolt."

"Return!"

Run, scaredy-Meowth! Run!

Magnezone's lightning strike hit true- and was completely ineffective.

"QUUUUUUAG!"

Quagsire. This simple but effective tank could take anything my team could throw at it. Even the spikes and rocks were less damaging than usual. Offensive coverage was good too, but from my previous encounters with it I knew its attack power wasn't spectacular. Which is why I could make this switch in:

"Yawn!"

"Oddi!"

Oddish plodded onto the field as Magnezone hovered out. The air around her quivered, and a deep, subhuman bellow sounded out. Almost immediately Oddish's eyes squinted and blinked. She would fall asleep in half a minute or so. Just stay awake for one attack, little one!

"Stun Spore!" I announced.

"Stun Spore? Quag, ignore it. Earthquake."

Oddish spewed out a thick, viscous sludge in Quagsire's direction. The overgrown salamander watched the foul-smelling substance fall short and splatter the ground in front of it.

"That's not a Stun Spore," Warren noted dryly.

"Oh Oddish, no!" I answered. "Use Stun Spore! Stop disobeying me!"

"Quagsire, be careful. I think that was Sludge or Acid. She might be trying to poison you."

"I might? No, that would be my Pokémon, she's acting on her own! I want her to paralyze Quagsire!" I explained.

"Oh sure, paralyze one of the slowest Pokémon in Johto. Like I'd fall for that Tauros-shit."

"You just don't understand," I said. Warren shook his head.

"Hey, Oddish, come back!"

But Oddish gave me a look, and then turned around and continued doing her thing, spewing poison this way and that. The force behind her shots was so underwhelming that even lazy Quagsire could waddle out of the way. As bad as it sounded, the battle devolved into a tiny sleep-walking shrub chasing a much larger amphibian around the court, chucking poorly aimed bolts of poison without ever hitting. Some of the onlookers started laughing at the comedy of the situation, others began
booming in disappointment.

"Odd! Od! Oi! Ooouuu...."

Practically everything on the field was coated with slime except for Quagsire. Oddish's skip slowed down to a trot, and stopped altogether. She slumped into a sit and leaned over, snoozing. Yawn had finally gotten to her after two minutes. Very good work.

"I don't know what she's trying to pull. Hey team, you hear me? Listen to the Gym Leader carefully. Take a note of her tone, not her words. I think she's lying about her commands- every attack she's ordering is actually a code word for something else. Pay attention!"

Drat! Warren noticed!

I nervously shuffled in place.

"That's not true at all!" I tried to excuse myself. "My Pokémon are rusty, I've haven't been able to attend to their training lately due to paperwork that's been keeping me very busy."

"You are such a pissant little liar," Warren threw at me. "If you're gonna do such an half-assed job of it, might as well not even try using mind-game crap. You'll pay for it. Like now. Quagsire, Earthquake the shrub. Make it hurt."

"No!"

I reached out and manually recalled Oddish to her Pokeball. The laser whisked her to safety, right as the ground where she had settled began shaking violently.

"Coward, too. Judge?"

Mr. Preston coughed. "That's a TKO, Miss Mikan," he informed me.

"I know that."

Extricating a Pokémon in order to avoid an attack, without sending in a replacement right away, constituted a violation of the rules and resulted in the Pokémon becoming disqualified for the rest of the match. Seeing as Oddish was asleep and liable to serious injury from even middling attacks, it was better to withdraw her now than wait for her to get hurt.

"Skarmory."

Skarmory appeared again. A burn from Scald was the only thing Quagsire could do to seriously injure my iron-sided raptor. Skarmory was absolutely powerless to knock out Quagsire, however, and they both knew recovery moves. If I let it, this would become a war of attrition, which Quagsire would eventually win. Good thing this isn't a duel battle.

"Okay, teamwork! Show me who else he has!" I commanded.

Skarmory flew over a Scald and then Whirlwinded the pond-dweller out of the ring. Warren shook his head in annoyance and sent out Magcargo.

"Stealth Rocks!" I declared with a laugh. Indeed, one piece of sneaky sediment found its way into Magcargo's gut, causing it to flinch.

"Damn it. Magcargo, get close. Whatever switches in, I want you to nail with Lava Plume. Burn the sucker before it has a chance to do anything. Make sure you burn it! You're not coming back this
Good, neither Pokemon nor trainer is noticing. Warren is busy cursing my Stealth Rocks, oblivious to the real threat. He thinks I want to force a switching war, with all the hazards littered across the field. Fine, let him think that, it's actually a good strategy and if he can't deal with it, I'll use it to win.

"Skarmory, Whirlwind!"

"It's an Air Cutter, ignore and Lava Plume!"

Indeed, Skarmory was lining up a pair of air-vacuum slashes. The Flying-type attacks ricocheted harmlessly off of Magcargo's rock shell. The foe happily used the respite to move forward and spew out a plume of ash that wrapped around Skarmory. My Pokémon came out of the cinder cloud charred and sputtering. He was hurt and needed to Roost, now.

"Whirlwind!"

"This one's real, Flamethrower!" Warren indicated to his monster. The flame and wind met in the center of the field and exploded into an incendiary vortex. The intensity of the heat drove both Pokémon back to their respective sides of the arena. Magcargo used the opportunity to use Amnesia, while Skarmory Roosted.

"Whirlwind!" I ordered for the next round.

"Flamethrower!" Magcargo reacted much quicker this time, and so the Whirlwind was intercepted much closer to Skarmory. The conflagration could not be dodged or escaped; the damage was enough to completely negate Skarmory's Roost and then some.

"Air Cutter!" I said.

"It's Whirlwind!" Warren warned. Magcargo hacked in pain, and then let out a third Flamethrower. The fiery vortex careened around the center, far more violent than the first two and yet less dangerous due to its position.

When the flames and smoke settled, though, Skarmory was nowhere in sight.


Good, good, got his line of thinking back under control.

I gripped Skarmory's Pokeball behind my back. I had switched Skarm out under the cover of the smoke, and Steelix had dove into the earth. Either by noting my suspicious hidden arm, or the disheveled ground near the sideline, Warren had deciphered my maneuver and was making preparations against it already. Too bad he figured it out, but in so doing, he's losing the bigger war.

"Magcargo, get back here."

"Steelix, um… Stone Edge."

Magcargo curled into its shell, just as the spires of stone popped out of the ground beneath it. Instead of fainting the target, though, they sent Magcargo flying into the air.

"Flame Jet, then Erupt!"

In mid-air Magcargo launched itself forward using a jet of flame from its mouth. It landed amidst churned up earth and began digging itself in.
"I thought you said to return?" I asked, annoyed.

"I thought I said Magcargo wasn't coming off the field, no matter what," Warren threw back. "Hey, might want to pay attention."

"What, huh?"

I flinched, realizing that Magcargo had burrowed itself into the field directly above Steelix's location.

"Oh no! Earthquake! Steelix, use Earthquake, quick!"

Except it's not very easy to use an Earthquake while underground to hit a target directly above oneself. Nevertheless, there was a rumble, but the seismic waves didn't seem directed at Magcargo. The dirt trembled in disorganized patterns, hardly the coherent oscillations characteristic of an Earthquake attack. In any case, it hardly mattered, as the foe was already unleashing its own attack.

And what an attack- Magcargo was sending gouts of lava and energy into the earth all around it. The pressure built to uncontainable levels, until the clay was glowing white. The pent-up energy released all at once, in one great violent plume of ash. The earth within which Steelix was hiding cracked apart, raging and raging like a washing machine of molten sediment. Anything caught in that blast above, below, or within a 15 yard radius would be incinerated.

"Eruption," I said to myself.

Then the earth split. Cracks began forming all around the arena, forming interlocking hexagonal patterns. Some segments ruptured upwards, others slid down. The playing field became a broken, uneven collection of geometric grids.

"Ah, there's Earthquake."

"Steelix survived? Damn. Tough nut."

You know, Warren is being assertive, cocky, and rude, as typical for him, but he isn't flipping out over minor setbacks like I expected. He's taking this whole battle in stride. Since he got here this morning, it's like he's forgotten that rage-filled feud he's been nursing against me. My optimistic side is hopeful that that means he's let things go and is fighting purely for fun and the chance to get a coveted gym badge. The realist in me says that he's merely calm because he has some sort of ace up his sleeve and knows how badly he's going to beat me.

What could his secret plan be?

Maybe it's his other two Pokémon, the ones he hasn't shown yet. I'm almost certain one is his Ludicolo- why combat me without his team leader? - but I'm worried about the sixth. Would he trade out his simple Graveler for someone just as formidable as his three borrowed Pokémon? I'm doing so well so far because he stupidly decided to test-run his Johto trio against me, giving me and Morty time to figure out a strategy. But if he has one more ace, I could be screwed.

"Grr. Okay, Steelix. If this Magcargo won't retreat, make it faint. Stone Edge."

"Same routine."

Warren pointed out a bulge in the hexagon grid, the likeliest position for Steelix.

Ah! I see- a little bit of insight. Warren doesn't rely on code words or pre-training, he just likes to direct his Pokémon verbally. This is slightly more evident when he's using his borrowed Pokémon,
he has to micromanage them more. For Magcargo, he's at least developed a few hand signals- for instance, a sideways thumb means "Ignore my command, do the opposite", I think, judging by the previous round. So I wonder what it means to hold the three inner fingers of his hand out? Because that's what he's showing Magcargo right now.

Magcargo tucked itself into its shell again. Stone Edges, both of the stalagnite and stalactite variety, pelted it. Apparently that curling move can suppress its Fire-type, or else gives a temporary resistance to Rock-type attacks. The hardened shell began rolling and bouncing across the field, heading for the area Steelix was burrowed under. Steelix somehow sensed the danger and began moving, but the shaking in the ground gave away his position and Magcargo followed.

"Wait, no, we don't want to stall," I said, soft enough so Warren couldn't hear me. "The Grass-types are much more dangerous."

"What's that? I can't hear you!" Warren called aloud. "If you're thinking of some strategy for Steelix to win here, give it up! Magcargo's immune to Earthquake!"

"Huh?" I eyed my other Pokémon, and Erika. They all shook their heads, puzzled as I was. "Oh, let's call his bluff," I said. "Steelix, stop and Earthquake!"

Warren wasn't bluffing. Magcargo in its rolled-up shell merely bounced into the air with each shock, not absorbing any of it. I'm reminded of a loose car tire, bouncing and rolling free as can be, unimpeded by the heaving of the surface beneath it.

"Now, almost! Get close enough and Eruption!"

In due course Magcargo unfurled over Steelix's subterranean hideout and erupted. The up-swell of lava and pumice was noticeably smaller than before.

"Magcargo, you taking damage on me?"

Eruption is such a powerful attack- but it requires a great amount of energy from the attacker's body. A Pokémon low on health isn't able to give as much 'oomph' to the explosion. Apparently Magcargo was hurt at some point between Eruptions.

"Maybe Magcargo is merely resistant to Earthquake, not immune," I ventured.

"Or maybe your groundwork has something to do with it," Warren countered.

I smirked.

Well, yes there's that. Hexagons are nature's own perfect stress-relief, as far as material pressure dynamics go. It's called columnar stress faulting, and can be found in nature where lava flows have rapidly cooled. With the ground split into thousands of six-sided pillars packed together, heat, stress, and seismic energy are passed through them much more efficiently, without causing much disruption or motion. Meaning an Earthquake will hit a surface target with maximal force- no energy lost in the transition- but with an Eruption, who's damage relies on overheating a section of ground, the heat is dispersed before it can build up to critical levels.

Ah, how brilliant. My attacks work, his do not. Bloody genius. Thank you, thank you, science.

"Magcargo, just overload yourself."

"Hmm? Steelix, Earthquake."
Magcargo turned the color of the sun on a cloudless summer day. That is to say, a white so blinding I couldn't begin to look at it. There was a flash, and Magcargo changed from lightest white to pitch black. The air and ground around it shimmered, and an invisible wave swept through the arena.

"Overheat," I said to myself.

Judging by the tremorous shaking underground, Steelix was feeling it.

"Magcargo is fainted," Preston solemnly declared.

"So how much damage did that do to your big worm?" Warren mused.

That wasn't a normal Overheat, it was a kamikaze version. I noticed that the clay in a seven yard radius around Magcargo's unconscious form had been thoroughly glassed, tapering off from there. The temperature must have been immense, a significant ways into four digits Fahrenheit.

"Well, let's see. Let's root 'im out."

Magcargo was recalled, Ludicolo replaced it. It flinched upon arrival, field hazards doing their job. With its soft underbelly and slow, lumbering gait, Ludicolo was probably the most vulnerable to Spikes and Stealth Rocks on Warren's team. Steelix might not be able to take its Grass and Water attacks, but he'll certainly have free range of movement while this silly macarena dancer sits pretty and still.

"It's a Ludicolo, Steelix. Don't come close, stall it out," I commanded.

Steelix replied by jutting his tail out of the ground and flinging a few rocks at Ludicolo. The target responded with Water Gun, intercepting each projectile and knocking them out of the air. Steelix's tail dove back beneath the surface.

"You know what to do," Warren said. He was making another hand signal, looked like an "O" with his thumb and pinky pressed together.

Ludicolo, being his team leader and his own Pokémon, probably has more training and needs the least instruction mid-battle of his six Pokémon. That'll make it difficult to deal with.

"Luda luda lucha lucha! Colio colio colio colio!" Ludicolo began shaking its hips back and forth, chanting an upbeat tune, before ending it with a great big stomp into the earth.

The ground shook. Simultaneously, Ludicolo belted out a Hydro Pump from its mouth and a ranged Mega Drain from its fist. Including the Earthquake, that was three attacks at once.

"Steelix, earth wall!"

Steelix countered with an Earthquake of his own. This was a more precise variant, less powerful. The two Earthquakes met and cancelled each other out. In addition, a row of hexagon pillars shot up, six feet high, blocking the Hydro Pump and Mega Drain from reaching Steelix's turf.

"Harder!" A renewed Hydro Pump broke through the pillars and began bombarding the ground above Steelix. The water would seep in and waterlog the sediment Steelix was burrowed in. Can't let that happen, it would horribly restrict his movements.

"Steelix, use the water to heal your burn!" I called.

"That's not gonna work," Warren said.
"Oh it will." I tapped the ground with my foot a dozen times, in a rapid drumming pattern. Warren took notice.

"Ludi, now try Energy Ball."

These Energy Balls arced, like mortars. They hit the ground from a vertical angle, cracking through the layers of dirt and puncturing holes in Steelix's cover.

"Come out, come out, you son of a bitch!' Warren yelled. Some of the audience members reeled at the foul language, even a few who had come to support Warren. He didn't seem to mind.

Meanwhile, more Energy Balls were flying in.

"Steelix, move."

"Hydro Pump."

"Defend yourself too!"

Hydro Pump followed wherever the shaking went. It softened the ground and prepared it for penetration by the Energy Balls. Steelix tried to retreat to the farthest corner of the arena, but Ludicolo only needed to waddle a few yards (stubbing itself on the Spikes) to bring him in range again.

"Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Come on, get some! Get some! Get out here so I can see you get some!"

"Wall it!" I said.

Steelix threw up wall after wall after wall of pillars. He was rapidly losing ground. As each hexagonal pillar was cut through, it became a pile of mud that was all but useless for further earth walls. Minutes passed, and Steelix punched the last set of pillars available to him. It wasn't even a full wall, there were gaps through which Hydro Pump would pour through.

Except the hose of water couldn't reach that far.

"Hey, Ludi, what's the matter? Running out of juice?"

"Colo!"

"No? Hey, wait, stick up man, don't lean over."

Ludicolo fell to one knee, and then flopped over. Fainted.

"Stall, success!" I excitedly whispered to myself.

"The hell?!" Warren yelled.

While he moaned and bellyached, Preston was busy watching his wrist watch. After some time he cleared his throat.

"Challenger, if you please."

"Okay, okay. Exeggutor, finish what my pal started."

Exeggutor returned to the field. Stealth Rocks continued being sharp stealthy rocks, and the
Pokémon hopped around in pain. In anger, its eyes lit up in psychic rage and scattered the offending pebbles- succeeding only in redistributing them across the field.

"Now how the heck did you faint Ludicolo?" Warren wanted to know.

"I could tell you, but I'm not going to," I said.

Three minutes, an Egg Bomb, a Seed Bomb, a Mirror Shot, several Power Whips, and one Bounce later (is there any attack this living coconut tree doesn't know?)…

"Exeggutor is unable to battle. Challenger, please send out a new Pokémon."

"How does she do it? Steelix doesn't launch one offensive attack and she faints my Pokémon? I don't get it. Quags. You're up."

Three minutes later…

"Quagsire is unable to-"

"Yeah, I get it, I get it. Deva, you're in."

Oh! It's a Swellow! That's his sixth Pokémon! Swellow is native to Hoenn, so I think this is genuinely Warren's own Pokémon. Well, bummer, my strategy won't work against a Flying-type.

"Swellow, fly up, see what you can. Try to figure this woman out. Stall for time."

"Steelix, if you still have it in you, Stone Edge!"

"Schtum schtum," came his cry from within the ground.

Yes, it's been hard. You've had to use so much energy on so many seismic attacks. But your job is almost finished. This is a Flying-type that can be brought down by your Rock-type attacks, easy peasy.

I'm happy. Morty's strategy worked. It worked better than I could have possibly hoped! I didn't even have to do anything, really. There were backup plans, but they were hardly needed…

"Schteel!"

Steelix's tail emerged and ripped off a Knock Down rock aimed at the swiftly dodging Swellow. The bird ducked three times, but was finally hit on the fourth try. The bird flapped and landed on the ground, hurting itself on the Spikes. It immediately recovered. Steelix finally unearthed himself, emerging wary and tired. He couldn't keep launching rocks and seismic waves from underground; it required too much strength and stamina to perform the motions needed to use those attacks while being surrounded and weighed down by tons of clay earth.

"Deva, can you eat your Veni Berry now?"

"Swoya! Swelloooow!"

"Huh? Why not? You're already? What?"

"Steelix, now! Finish it!"

"Eh, wait! Wait!" Warren pleaded.
Steelix raced forward, plowing himself head-first into Swellow's position. The bird skipped backwards, sideways, and backwards again to dodge. Steelix's tail whipped around. The bird jumped over and delivered a very powerful Façade attack to Steelix's midsection. It was resisted, though. Steelix didn't hesitate and rolled around, surrounding the foe with his bulk. Swellow tried gaining the air again-

Except its escape route was suddenly filled with a massive, unstoppable Iron Tail. The bird was flattened like a pancake- knocked out without a doubt.

"Dang, have to hand it to ya," Warren said with a smarmy grin. "I never imagined you could deploy Toxic Spikes to a battlefield without any Pokémon actually knowing Toxic Spikes."

"Oh, um… I dislike that you just spoiled my strategy to everyone," I said, trying to be meek. "That was a good one, wasn't it? I would have liked to use it in the future."

"Tsk tsk." Warren shook his head. "Underestimated that little shrub of yours."

I smiled from ear to ear.

Yes, despite my calling for Stun Spore, all Oddish had done was use Toxic. Chasing Quagsire around the field was only a pretext for bathing Skarmory's Spikes in the potent poison. Thereafter, any Pokémon who entered the field and got themselves stubbed by the Spikes became critically poisoned. From then on, it was only a matter of letting Steelix stall as hard as he could.

"Deva the Swellow is unable to battle," Preston droned out. "Challenger, please send out another Pokémon."

"Wait a minute…" I muttered.

Scizor was KO'd by Skarmory. Magcargo burned itself out. Ludicolo, Exeggutor, and Quagsire were dropped by poison. Swellow was just flat-out beaten by Steelix.

One, two, three, four, five, six…

"I win," I said dumbly.

I hadn't paid attention, but in finishing Swellow, I had won.

"Challenger, would you please hurry up and send out another Pokemon," Mr. Preston urged Warren.

"Wait, he has no more," I said aloud. "I won. It's over…"

Then my eyes went to the score board, and went wide, as the impossible confronted me.

The score was not 5-0. The score was 5-4. Warren still had FOUR healthy Pokémon left.

"No way… I saw them go down. I heard Mr. Preston declare them fainted… What's going on?!"

My mind raced. It reeled.

Dittos? Some crazy Healing Wish combo? A move I've never heard of, like Feign Death? Or a Berry?

What's going on?!?!

A flash of light, and a dull yellow creature stepped onto the field.
The same yellow Scizor Skarmory had definitely KO'd at the beginning of the fight. Now it looked far from defeated. It looked like it was at max strength, and ready for a fight.

"No way," I uttered. "It's over, I won, I knocked all six Pokémon out."

"Remember what I told you earlier?" Warren sneered. His serenity had vanished. His contempt was on show across his cheeks, lips, eyes, and brow; his posture and intense stare clearly said "I despise you!". "Remember what kind of match this is?"

"Six on six, singles, and…"

"Unrestricted," he finished for me.

"Unrestricted," I echoed.

"Meaning, no restrictions besides those absolutely necessary to the game. In other words, no timing requirements. No banned moves, no banned Pokémon. No banned abilities, or tactics, or strategies." Warren held out a Pokeball in one hand, and a small plastic object in the other. He put the two of them together, something discreet happened, and then he tossed the plastic object onto the field. Quagsire emerged from its Pokeball, whooping deeply in joy.

I gawked.

"No banned items," he finished.

My stare was hooked to the tiny little object he had thrown onto the field.

It was golden-colored, and diamond-shaped.

A Revive.

I looked up, aghast.

Warren slung a small backpack off his shoulder and onto the ground. It was filled to the brim, some items falling out.

Revives, X Attacks, Hyper Potions, Elixirs, Guard Specs, Smokeballs- a whole Pokemart's worth of supplies.

"You thought it was over?" Warren said. "No. This battle's just starting."
The air rang with the sound of steel greeting steel. Skarmory was not doing well. His chest was heaving heavily. He purposefully took every other blow, because raising his wing to defend himself was becoming too painful. His forelimb could only take so much punishment.

His opponent was emotionless and relentless. Scizor had taken enough damage to faint it five times over. Yet, on the verge of going down, it would dart to its sideline for a quick Hyper Potion pick-up. When it started tiring out, an Elixir would restore its stamina. Even Sand Attacks seemed ineffective against repeated doses of X Accuracy.

"Mr. Preston, are recovery items truly allowed under unrestricted rule sets?"

"Everything in the list, young miss," Preston replied, referring to the list of items allowed in general Pokémon battles. Of course, not everything was legal- wouldn't want Pokémon using things like, say, rocket launchers, in competition. However, most legal items were banned during official matches, otherwise outcomes would devolve into whoever was richer and better stocked. Warren's underhanded dealings had found a loophole around the ban.

"Skarmory, I need you to stall for me, I'll be back really quick."

"Skraw!"

Gotta trust in them.

I gave a last glance at Skarmory and Scizor clashing before darting off into the office. Seconds counted down in my mind like the clock on a time bomb. My desk was cluttered with the relics of my study session.

"Come on, where are you? Where where where where where?!!"

Papers and trash went flying in all directions. The seconds hand on the clock had ticked off fifty times and I still hadn't found what I wanted. Fifty seconds in battling time is an eternity- I can beat some challengers in fifty seconds!

"Oh wait!" I bopped myself on the head. The items are in the first aid kit. I dashed to the wall, yanked it open and looked over the contents.

Three Super Potions, an Ether, and a Full Heal. That's it.

Cue dejected sigh.

I grabbed the collection of medicine and rushed back out to the arena. I was away for one minute, twenty-five seconds.

"Please oh please oh please," I pleaded, followed shortly by: "No, no no no!" Skarmory lay flat on his back, unmoving.

On the other side of the field, Scizor was crumpled up in a pile at Warren's feet.

"Erika, what happened?"

"Skarmory used Counter, it was a mutual KO," Erika shouted from the stands. I raised a hand in thanks for the answer.
Skarm, you've done so much already this fight. It's completely unfair what I asked of you, especially since you just got back from that terrible injury, and yet you went above and beyond for me. Regardless of the outcome, I'm going to treat you to something special.

I retreated my brave warrior via Pokeball laser.

"Tyko, status!"

"Prinploooop!"

Magnezone was a little hurt, Magneton was fresh, Tyko was fresh, and Steelix needed all the help he could get.

Quagsire waddled onto the battlefield, sticking close to its own sideline.

"Warren's going to go defense until he can recover Scizor," I told my Pokémon. "Let's make him pay for that."

Magnezone was best suited for dealing with Quagsire at the moment. Steelix was preferable, but I needed to buy time myself to apply the potions.

Magnezone ventured onto the field, and immediately used Magnet Rise to safeguard itself from Earthquakes. It should be relatively safe from attack now, but it needed a way to hurt Quagsire.

"Prin! Prin!"

"Ah, yes." I cleared my throat. "Magnezone, Sonic Boom Burst!"

"Yawn," Warren commanded.

Quagsire let off a yawn, trying to lull Magnezone to sleep. It wouldn't work. Magnezone was busy directing Supersonic at itself, discombobulating its body and brains- too confused to become drowsy, you see.

"Fire!"

The downside of confusing oneself in order to power up your Sonic Boom- well, you're confused. Magnezone spazzed out trying to initiate the sound-based attack and flipped itself over midair.

"Dang it."

I didn't have time to get mad at the misfortune. I needed to attend to Steelix.

I emptied the contents of one Super Potion along the length of Steelix's dented body. I chucked the other into his mouth, which he slowly chewed up. The final medicine administered was the Ether, which puffed out in a cool mist that was to be inhaled by Steelix.

The Ground-Steel leviathan reared up and shook himself. His head craned to each side, stretching his joints and muscles until they felt loose again. He wouldn't be perfectly healthy, but at least he was action-ready.

"Sorry, guys. I had to make a choice, save Skarmory or Steelix. Someone had to go down to give me time to find the potions. This is my fault. I should have realized what Warren meant by "unrestricted" battle."

My Pokémon didn't give me any fuss about it. This wasn't a usual situation for any of us. Steelix
showed us who the real culprit was by staring to the other side of the field and letting off a low
rumble.

"Scald! Arc it high!" came a loud command.

I looked to see how Magnezone was faring. Not too bad. My Pokémon wouldn't come close to
Quagsire, preferring to hover out of range of the foe's limited movepool. Sadly, Quagsire had still
achieved its aim of buying Warren time to revive Scizor. The trainer was currently directing Quagsire
while administering a Hyper Potion to the Bug.

"If only there was a way to stop him from healing… grr… I'd kill for a Psychic-type right now."
There were some Psychic-type moves that prevented these kinds of cheap tactics, like Heal Block,
but my Pokémon didn't possess any of them. The only way to win is to run Warren out of inventory.
That means getting a ton of KOs without losing Pokémon of my own. Damn it, how was I supposed
to do that?!

"Prin!"

A fin smacked me in the shin.

"Eh?"

Tyko was giving me a disapproving look, telling me to quit worrying and trust in them, my
Pokémon.

"Alright. I get it. Magnezone! Are you okay yet? Sonic Boom if you can!"

"Zonn!"

Magnezone had a better idea. It used Supersonic on Quagsire itself. It took a few tries, but eventually
the loafing Pokémon was hit. The pair of combatants proceeded to take turns hurting themselves.

"Quagsire, come back, time for a Full Heal," Warren called. Yes, yes, there were the Toxic Spikes
still in effect. Warren was making sure to use Full Heals before the toxin built up too much.

"You could use Antidotes, they're cheaper," I advised my opponent.

"Shut up," was all Warren had to say.

It did lead me to wonder, exactly how rich is Warren? He didn't seem like the kind of guy who could
afford to clear out a Pokemart; there's not enough prize money in beating random scrubs around
town. He must have a backer- oops, wasn't paying attention, here comes Quagsire.

"Stockpile!"

Quagsire's maw opened much wider than I thought possible, and gulped in an enormous amount of
air. It repeated this gesture several times, with each gulp bloating its belly more and more. When the
Pokémon began to resemble a water balloon and appeared about to burst, its belly suddenly deflated,
sending a shiver through its body and skin.

Oh great.

"That's new."

I hadn't seen this Quagsire use Stockpile before. It probably has Swallow and Spit Up as well. Hmm.
Spit Up is rather harmless, Swallow is redundant with Warren's Hyper Potions and Quagsire's own Recover. Deduction: Stockpile is being used primarily for the defense boost it provides.

"Magnezone, try… oh Magnezone." Neither Pokémon were over their confusion. Magnezone was busy shocking the ceiling, while Quagsire danced around like a ballerina. This is no good. Perhaps trying for a Sonic Boom Burst had been a mistake. When Magnezone was a Magneton, this tactic had been more reliable. Not anymore, something in Magnezone's physiology made it less resistant to confusion.

"Better come back," I thought. I checked my partners. "Or not. Stay out there Magnezone, for a little longer!"

"Quagsire, try for another Stockpile!"

Quagsire shook off its befuddlement and complied. With so much investment into its survivability, Quagsire was certainly setting up for the long haul. Warren didn't want to retreat it… ah!

"Hey, team, psst!" I whispered. "We're gonna aim for status!"

Warren doesn't want to get caught in a switching war. That might mean he doesn't want to switch in his Pokémon too much, on account of getting them poisoned from the Spikes. If he wanted to avoid that, then perhaps that means he's low on Full Heals. I can exploit that.

"Magnezone, Flash!"

"Yawn!"

Light versus sound: both won. Magnezone started drooping, threatening to float to the floor and become vulnerable to Quagsire's Earthquake. Quagsire was blinking rapidly, trying to fend off the sunspots obstructing its vision.

"Magnezone, return!"

I drew Magnezone back with the Pokeball laser. That should prevent the Yawn from completing and get rid of the confusion too.

"Tyk tyk! Prin!"

"Shut up Tyko, I know what I'm doing."

Steelix, returned from the brink of collapse, came slithering onto the floor.

"Ah, this guy. Stronger, but more vulnerable. Earthquake, Scald when he gets closer," Warren instructed his fighter.

"Steelix, Dig! Special maneuver five! Counter! And then you can take it from there!" I called out.

Steelix hurled himself into the ground once again, vanishing from sight. Quagsire dropped to all fours and bench-pressed the ground, sending out a tremor that reached all sides of the field. A similar shaking originated from Steelix's position. Once the seismic activity stopped, there was no indication whether Steelix had been hurt or not. Not any Warren could sense, at any rate. I knew perfectly well Steelix had avoided all damage.

"Quagsire, Earthquake again."

I let the opponent initiate four rumbles in a row, to no effect. The video board displaying our
Pokémon's status was unchanged. Of course, the status detection units can only estimate Pokémon strength and vitality; it's not like they're exact indicators. If a Pokémon burrowed itself underground, for instance, the machines would have just as hard a time as a human at reading their health signature. Yet, Warren seemed to trust the display enough that he continued to call for Earthquakes mixed with various other attacks, trying to do something to the burrowed Steelix.

After Quagsire became exhausted, the result of two dozen assaults upon the surface, it flopped backward. In that time period, Steelix's health bar had fallen from 82% to 80%. Even with Elixirs (such as the one Warren is currently giving Quagsire), they have no hope of defeating Steelix without some new tactic.

"Hey, Jasmine, you know you can't stall out forever here. You have to continue the battle," Warren told me in an aggravated tone.

"Yes, actually, I can. You asked for unrestricted rules. There's no time limit here, I can sit pretty for as long as the battle takes. Actually, as long as Steelix remains in the field of play, I can go vacation in the Safari Zone for a week, the battle won't end. You should try a new tactic if you think it'll work."

"I could go fetch some more stuff from the PokeMart, by that logic," Warren said with a guffaw.

"Oh no, you totally could!" I said in mock surprise.

"But you'll just use my absence to beat my Pokémon," Warren added sourly.

I remained silent, mulling over the implications.

I've never been in a situation where a trainer can leave an ongoing battle and the battle can still continue, as long as one healthy Pokémon remains on the field. This is very interesting.

"Well, it looks like this will become a stalemate. Are you sure you don't want to call it a draw?" I asked, hopeful.

"Shit, a draw? Don't make me laugh! Only wins get me a gym badge, draws are worthless!"

"Oh, well, then I'll just keep going with this strategy, it doesn't seem to be hurting me," I said. In other words, take the bait you damned fodder, get that obnoxious amphibian off of my court already!

Yet Warren was refusing to give up his defensive advantage.

"Stockpile!"

More, more! Try my patience more!

"What are we doing? Oh, ah, cool, that'll work. Steelix, Stone Edge! Pattern 3!" I waved my hands all around.

"Watch it, she's trying something," Warren warned, noting my hand signals. I continued counting random digits off my fingers as Stone Edges began bursting from the ground like so many fossilized tree sprouts. The spires were getting closer and closer to Quagsire; the Pokémon kept careful watch of the incoming threat.

"Ten yards, eight yards, six yar-" Warren counted off the increments Stone Edge was advancing by.

Thwack!
The Stone Edges suddenly jumped forward by eight yards and rocketed into Quagsire's gut. Quagsire cried in anger, shook its head, and then cracked the Stone Edge spire in half with an Aqua Tail.

Hmm. There's another new move it's shown me. I wonder if it was holding back before, or if it just learned these moves. Ah well, Stone Edge did little damage and only served to annoy the opponent. At least I knew how Quagsire would react.

"Steelix, that didn't work, you've got to push it back more," I said.

"You're…" Warren started.

I'm what? Devising something? Yes, of course. Now the question is, are you going to figure it out? Warren looked like he was mulling the situation over in his head.

"Steelix, this time was emphasis!"

I signaled three, then two, then five fingers.

Warren looked at the video board, and then to the stands.

Steelix repeated the Stone Edges. This time the protrusions circled Quagsire before homing in on its backside. Quagsire responded with a bellow and an Aqua Tail, splitting the offending spire down the middle.

"Quagsire, try Earthquake, and then Yawn."

"Steelix, once more! Fast!"

Quagsire was tired of using Earthquakes. It did obey, but only slowly and reluctantly. The shaking was enough to disfigure the incoming Stone Edges, cracking their bases apart before they had a chance to poke out of the ground.

"Again!"

One finger, then two fingers. Steelix switched from the stalagmite-formation to the stalactite formation- volleying the Stone Edge projectiles through the air at a ballistic angle instead of ripping them up through the ground. Quagsire wacked some aside with its tail and let the others burst apart on its toughened hide. I checked the monitor, and confirmed the hits were doing virtually no damage.

"Get a move on with it!" came the shout of one impatient spectator. Another dozen yelled at us in unison. Apparently the public doesn't like strategic stall wars. I would have expected Warren to share their sentiment, but he declined to be aggressive.

Quagsire put its neck against the ground, gulped in air, and then rumbled.

"Steelix, this time, backwards!"

Yet the Stone Edges didn't come out this time.

"He's asleep," Warren said.

Oh. Yawn. Quagsire's last Earthquake was to shift the clay, make it more conducive to carrying the Yawn vibrations into the ground.
I waited as Warren coaxed Quagsire around the field, prodding different spots, sending shallow Earthquakes into the terrain.

"It can't be that deep," Warren said off-handed. What does he mean by that? Steelix? Steelix is most likely at the bottom of the subterranean pool.

"Steelix, we're waiting on you. Please wake up."

At length, a low rumbling filtered up from underground.

"Yawn!"

"Quake! Delta!"

Steelix reshaped the bedrock. Because of all the seismic activity, the hexagon pattern had slowly sifted away into nothingness. Steelix's most recent attack brought it back. A grid of perfect six-sided cracks spread across the field. Between the tremors and the grid, Quagsire's Yawn was dispersed enough to not affect Steelix.

"Is it…" Warren wondered.

I tapped the ground and pointed out a series of random hand signals behind my back. The human foe took note of my subterfuge.

"Stone Edge!"

"Quagsire, on my mark, counter!"

Steelix's Stone Edge burst from the ground, returning to stalagmite form.

"Mark!" Warren immediately cried.

The Stone Edge hadn't given any forewarning this time. Only one formation sprang from the earth, directly beneath Quagsire's feet. Yet, with Warren's prompting, the Pokémon was able to step back, dodge, and then pound the spire back into the ground with an incredibly heavy tail blow.

"Scald!" This was followed by Quagsire pouring piping-hot steam into the leftover hole. A few moments later, there was a cry, a rumble, and Steelix's health bar dropped by 5%.

"Heck yeah, finally." Warren smirked.

"Steelix, you've got to put more power into it!"

"BRUM BRUM!" came a faint echo of a cry from deep underground.

"On mark, repeat, with Yawn follow-up," Warren ordered.

I started counting off digits with my fingers. Warren watched me intensely.

Four fingers-

A Stone Edge burst from the ground twenty yards away.

Three fingers-

The next cluster of spires came up fifteen yards away.
Five fingers-
Ten yards away.
And then I dropped my hand entirely.
In fact, my whole body went limp.

Warren was staring so intently at me, he was startled to find that the next rock spire had cracked through the earth directly beside Quagsire.

"Counter!" he yelled in a panic.

Quagsire whacked out with its tail- only to meet a living spire of metal, moving towards it at high speed.

There was a loud 'Thwack!' The foe went sailing through the air, hit the turf, and began rolling end over end, until it flopped awkwardly over the sideline boundary. It managed to crawl up, but looked dazed and bruised.

"The hell was THAT?!"

"It was something that seemed to work," I replied. "I'm terribly sorry, but I don't want to cheapen this contest by giving a genius such as yourself hints."

"Oh piss off!" Warren shouted at me. "That fake shy routine is so sickening! Drop it already! That's not you!"

He's sort of right, it's not usual for me to fall back into my meek and modest persona. I had once been like that, a long time ago, for a certain period of my life. There's a sort of nostalgia for me: life had been simpler, and I happier, when I was a shy and innocent girl.

"I'm not trying to offend you," I said, lying out my teeth, "I just want a fair contest. Perhaps, if you tell me what you're guessing, I could affirm or deny your line of thinking?"

"Rectify this, little miss," Warren said with a sneer. "How the hell do you tell Steelix what to do with hand signals when he's got no way to see you?"

ACK! SHOOT!

"So tell me, firstly, how the hell Steelix is being ordered about. Secondly, when the hell did you teach Steelix Dragon Tail?!"

I broke out into a nervous shuffle that was at least half-sincere.

"You caught me. Steelix knows what to do already. He's been pre-trained."

"Liar!" Warren yelled. "No Pokémon is that smart! And Steelix can't see me or my Pokémon, so how does it know what's going on on the surface?! You're directing him all around without using words, but sound should be the only way to communicate with him while he's buried!"

I pulled my lips tight and bobbed my head. "He's tri-typed, part Psychic, and is using his instinctual clairvoyance."

Warren's mouth gaped open a little.
Do let me explain the situation to you all as best I can.

Warren hadn't been looking for a way to injure Steelix- he was trying to ascertain what method I was using to communicate with Steelix, and then use that against me. Counter-attacking, such as sending the Scald through the cracks created by Steelix's Stone Edge, was the only way to locate and deal enough damage to faint my leviathan. To capitalize on the counter-attacking opportunities, he needed to know when and how my own attacks were coming.

Yet, for all the reasons he pointed out, it should be impossible for me to communicate with Steelix. I had been using hand signals this whole time, which led him to believe Steelix somehow had a way to see my signals while buried, and was acting on them: E.G. it let Steelix know when to vary up his Stone Edge pattern. Yet, on the final exchange, I had stopped and went motionless- and Steelix somehow knew that meant to forego Stone Edge and try for a Dragon Tail. Warren was too focused on me, leaving Quagsire to mistake Steelix's tail for a Stone Edge stalagmite and attempt to counter, which resulted in Quagsire being batted over to the sideline and out of the battle.

Oh, and it landed on some Toxic Spikes as well, which ought to at least waste another of Warren's Full Heals.

"He's got radio receptors or something," Warren mused.

"He's just that well-trained," I said. "Accept it."


The tropical plant Pokémon lumbered right back to its temporary trainer upon being released. Warren quickly administered a Full Heal to it and then smacked it back on its way to the combat zone.

"Mind the Spikes, don't get poisoned again!"

Exeggutor took extra attention where it placed its steps. The nearer my side of the field, the less dense the poisoned tic-tacks got, so that the Pokémon gained confidence in its steps as it came forward.

"Hyper Tri!" Warren called.

"Steelix, wall in!" I countered.

Steelix let off a round of Earthquakes, putting a wall of dirt up that completely surrounded Exeggutor.

Unfortunately, it lasted all of three seconds. I discovered that "Hyper Tri" was code-name for a kind of Tri-Attack: Hyper Beam, Ice Beam, and Solarbeam fired all at the same time. The dirt was vaporized, both that in the wall boxing the foe in, and the layer of clay covering Steelix. His head was exposed for a few seconds before he sensed his vulnerability and burrowed to a different section of the court.

"Defog, and then Sunny Day," Warren said.

Exeggutor cleared the dust from the air with a wave of its leaves. With the particulate matter out of the way, the lights grew brighter, and then brighter still, until the air became hot and unbearable.

"Instant Solar Beams… Steelix, start making your way back here."

The light-powered deathrays began sweeping across the arena, melting enormous, ten-foot deep
gashes into the ground. Steelix would get caught with his midriff or tail showing for the briefest of seconds, before he whisked away back into hiding.

"Steelix, rest!" I ordered.

Rest as in retreat, not Rest the move. I was hoping to confuse Warren, but it didn't seem to work.

"Let Steelix go, hit the incoming 'mon!" Warren instructed Exeggutor.

Magnezone floated in as replacement, and was promptly hit by Solar Beam. My Pokémon shrugged off the damage and advanced.

"I meant hit it with Fire Blast! Are you dumb? They're Steel-types! Steel! Weak to Fire, use Fire Blast!" Warren yelled at the Pokémon. Exeggutor returned his fury with a flippant tongue-waggling. It's like, 'Bugger off! You're not my real trainer! I'm going to side with the Pokémon on this one; Warren is just not a good trainer: strategically smart, but doesn't work well with his Pokémon. He treats them like minions, not partners. He doesn't have the respect of the Pokémon he borrowed, and that's making it tough for him to command them and get the best effort out of them.

Their inability to get along gave Magnezone time to Magnet Rise and set up a Light Screen (little good it would do against a Sunny-Day boosted Fire Blast, though).

At last the opponents got their act together and prepared an attack.

"Exeggutor, Fire Blast!"

"Flash!"

Magnezone was slightly faster, and got off the dazzling ray first. Exeggutor's Fire Blast would probably have been good for a one-shot, had it not veered wildly off-course.

"Keep trying 'til you hit it."

"Magnezone, Thunder!"

Thunder isn't very effective against Grass-typed Exeggutor. However, to use Thunder Magnezone had to levitate directly above the opponent. Exeggutor could not elevate its aim high enough to hit Magnezone, and so the next Fire Blast also went errant. The rain of lightning came down in waves. Despite the type resistance, their impact was not insubstantial.

"Words, words," Warren muttered. "You're getting good at the mind games." He shook his head.

I could've just ordered Magnezone to float overhead, but that wouldn't have made Warren pause a second to consider if Thunder was a ploy or a threat. This way I confused him and got my Pokémon into position with minimal verbiage.

"Fire Blast."

"Follow!"

We were treated to the amusing sight of Exeggutor doing the cancan across the spike-strewn battlefield, trying and failing to bend backwards enough to get a shot off at Magnezone. The saucer kept pace, sticking to the small dead zone directly above Exeggutor's heads. Every minute or so it built up enough charge for a Thunder, which it promptly and happily unleashed on the egghead.

"Thunder!"
A crackling cloud built up around Magnezone. A bolt of electricity crashed through both Pokémon in a shimmering column. This Thunder wasn't initiated by my Pokémon.

"Thunder, Fire Blast, anything else?" I said to myself, exasperated.

Magnezone wobbled under the effects of the attack, and then began falling.

No, not falling, being dragged down. Exeggutor was using Psychic to bring Magnezone down to stovetop level, to be burnt to a cinder. The victim let off sparks, trying desperately to fight the pull with Magnet Rise at max power.

"Come on, come on, don't you have a strategy?" I said.

"Prin!"

Magnezone put a Light Screen between it and its foe. The effect was nil. Psychic is non-directional, it manifests at the point of the target.

"That didn't work."

Just a few more yards.

Magnezone threw up two more Light Screens, layering them. Still no impediment to the Psychic.

"Why do you keep doing that?"

Magnezone was brought down into the kill zone. The Psychic was released so Exeggutor could wind up a Fire Blast. Magnezone immediately tried flying away, but was too slow- the fire bomb was on its way.

The Blast chewed through the first and second shields, and then exploded on the third. The flames damaged Magnezone, badly, but the Screens saved it.

"It's low, finish it with Solar Beam!" Warren said.

"Thunderbolt!"

Beams of light criss-crossed through the smoke and dust.

"I can't see anything," I said.

"Blizzard!"

I expected a flurry of cold air and snowflakes, but the battlefield remained unchanged. The dust cleared up, exposing a fainted Exeggutor.

"Fainted? From Thunderbolt?" someone said.

They're right, that's really unusual. What happened? Maybe Warren hadn't healed it back to full after its last KO/revivification? How's he taking it?

Warren was gritting his teeth, so I gather he's frustrated. His Pokémon was returned to its Pokeball. Ludicolo came out.

I stood silently by, attempting to read Warren's state of mind. He seemed angry, but was calming down quickly. His mood was improved by a quick application of Revive on Exeggutor's Pokeball. I
let him do so without using the opportunity to take a potshot at Ludicolo.

Ludicolo and Magnezone: they were facing one another with a certain intensity lacking in the other matchups.

"This is getting clichéd," Warren said, running a hand through his hair. "Isn't this how our battles usually end?"

"This is neither your last Pokémon, nor mine, so the battle won't end here," I said.

"I just feel like there's something special to this. Nostalgic, you could say. Are you going to retreat?"

"No, Magnezone is my best matchup."

"Then this should be fun. Maybe I am being cheap and all, reviving all my Pokémon one after another."

"'Cheap' is hardly the word I would use. 'Desperate' would be more applicable," I said interrupting him.

"Whatever. Let's just call it respect- I respect you. As far as your Pokémon battling goes, anyways. You've got a really good team, I underestimated you when I first walked in. Not anymore. If I have to pull this shit to make sure I beat you this time, so be it. At least, this once, this matchup, Ludicolo against your spark plug, I want to prove I can win the old fashioned way. These," and he shook the backpack full of healing items, "they're not really necessary. Just redundancy. You've fainted my Pokémon a lot, but that's only because I've been playing it safe, wearing you down. I'm not a coward and not a weakling. Just a pragmatist. I don't want to waste any more time in this stinking port. Sick of the place. So I'm doing whatever it takes to make sure this is my last battle here. But before I go, I gotta prove something. This next round will be for my ego, and to show them," he waved at the audience, "what I'm really about."

"Why? To what end?" I questioned. "If you were only concerned about winning, why even bother with this petty duel? Send out Quagsire, it's much more suited to countering Magnezone. Or if you were so sure you had the skill to win fairly, why bother cheating? I can't believe it's purely out of impatience. Why do you want out of this town so badly? Is it because of me?"

"Why the hell should I answer that? Don't try picking my actions apart. I just am," Warren said.

"You..." I felt like I almost had a revelation about Warren's motives, right on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't pull my thought processes together in time.

I say 'in time', because:

"Ludicolo, Hydro Pump!"

The powerful jet of water shot straight towards Magnezone.

"Thunderbolt!" I yelled, too late.

Magnezone reacted before my call, sending a streak of electricity to vaporize the incoming stream. The attacks collided and cancelled out.

"What should we do?" I said, panicking. My focus darted between my Pokémon, Warren, and my sideline. "Um, okay. Magnezone, Flash Cannon!"
"Hydro Pump."

Both attacks fired and intercepted each other.

This isn't like our first match, it's a replay of our second match. Oh Arceus that one was unnerving, do we have to go through that aga-

"Flash Cannon!" I yelled.

The incoming Energy Ball was cut through, weakening it so that it didn't do much damage when it collided with Magnezone.

I had trouble calling out attacks in time. Magnezone seemed slower, and Ludicolo seemed faster, in responding to their respective trainer's commands.

Keep your head straight, Jasmine, pay attention to your Pokémon, and call your attacks properly.

Remember, the outcome of each barrage is dependant on who fires first, and what types the projectiles are.

For attacking:

Flash Cannon is stopped by Hydro Pump.

Thunderbolt is stopped by Energy Ball or Mud Bomb.

Tri Attack is stopped by Mud Bomb.

Sonic Boom is stopped by… actually, it isn't stopped by anything, but it doesn't do much damage without the risky Supersonic tactic.

For defending:

Hydro Pump is stopped by Thunderbolt.

Mud Bomb is stopped by Sonic Boom.

Energy Ball is stopped by… Thunderbolt? I had trouble recalling how I had dealt with this attack the first time around.

"Tri Attack!"

"Mud Bomb!"

The Ice-type prong of Tri Attack served to freeze the Mud Bomb in mid-air, although the mud absorbed the Fire and Electric prongs easily enough.

"Energy Ball!"

Magnezone attempted to use Light Screen, instead of intercepting it. Why? Would it be better than using Flash Cannon? What do my Pokémon know that I don't?

"Oh, of course."

Steel resists Grass, and I remembered that Warren had never attempted to use Energy Ball offensively during our previous battle. It was only there to absorb Thunderbolts. Today he was using
it to actually try to hurt Magnezone. It wasn't working. Type resistance plus disrupting tactics meant it had a meager impact on Magnezone's health. Still, it was preemptively stopping my Pokémon from using Thunderbolt.

"Mud Bomb!"
"Sonic Boom!"
"Hydro Pump!"
"Thunderbolt!"
"Energy Ball!"
"Flash Cannon!"
"Hydro Pump!"
"Thunderbolt!"
"Mud Bomb!"

The battle turned into a sci-fi video game, a dazzling show of beam spam that mostly ended in rainbow-colored explosions in the middle of the arena.

One poorly called attack, one misguess… what if Warren has a code word? What if he's just waiting to spring it on me? What if I get confused? What if I screw up and call the wrong attack and tip Warren off to my strategy?

"Ahh!"
"Hydro Bomb!"
"Thunder- I mean Tri Attack!"

I was unlucky.

I had guessed what trick he was going to use two seconds before he actually did it, not enough time for me to realize it and react appropriately.

Ludicolo used a Hydro Pump to expel a ball of clay and dirt at high velocity towards Magnezone. Magnezone started to respond with Thunderbolt, heard the new order and switched to charging up a Tri Attack. The initial Thunderbolt, so weak it was more of a Thunder Shock, was absorbed by the Mud Bomb. The Bomb flew in and hit Magnezone for severe damage (quad-weak!), just a moment before Magnezone launched a delayed Tri Attack. My Pokémon had flinched from getting hit, which messed up its aim enough that two of the three elemental prongs missed Ludicolo, and the third only hit its foot. It was the Fire prong, though, causing Ludicolo to hop around madly and stub itself on the poisoned spikes.

"Mud Pump!"

Magnezone had taken worse damage in terms of vitality, but Ludicolo's wounds were more painful, so it took a minute to settle down and resume attacking.

"Mud Pump!" Warren called again.
That can't be good.

My fears piqued as I realized what Mud Pump meant.

Muddy Water, Mud Bomb, and Hydro Pump, combined into one attack. Nothing Magnezone had could block that. Yet, Ludicolo is having a tough time spitting it. The viscous mixture must be heavy, it can't be pumped out at high velocity.

The arc of mud became more pronounced, sending the substance higher. Magnezone dodged as best it could. I can't find an easy simile to describe the situation. Perhaps, if I were playing in the backyard amid a pouring rainstorm, and then was magically shrunk to the size of an ant, and the rain drops were kicking up splatters of mud that were boulder-sized compared to my ant-sized self, that's what it would be like to be Magnezone at the moment.

"Tri Attack!" It was our only hope. Magnezone began firing the whorling energies off in rapid fire. By luck or fate the individual prongs found their marks: the Electric projectiles zapped the water, the Ice projectiles froze and shattered the clay, and the Fire projectiles were consumed without effect. It wasn't a perfect counter, but it kept Magnezone alive.

"Incoming!"

The rain of mud slacked off, right as a barrage of Leech Seeds came in.

Magnezone was ready, and struck every last pellet down with a shotgun-like Mirror Shot.

"Your Pokémon is acting pretty good on its own…" Warren remarked. "Hydro Pump!"

"Thunderbolt! It's not too hard to teach them basic elemental counters. I used the weekend to have Magnezone practice reacting to Ludicolo's ranged attacks."

"Did you? Mud Bomb!"

"Sonic Boom!"

"Energy Ball!"

"Flash Cannon!"

"Hydro Pump!"

"Thunderbolt!"

Commands were shouted in such rapid succession that our Pokémon hadn't even fired the first before the second was already coming out of our mouths.

Grr!

I was hoping I could banter with him some more, in order to slow the pace down, but now he's clammed up and focused solely on orchestrating the artillery match.

"Prin!"

"Magne!"

Okay…
I took a deep breath, and then let loose.

"FlashBoltFlashBoltBoltBoltTriFlashTriTriFlashBoltBoom-"

"Energy Ball! Hydro Pump! Energy Ball! Mud Bomb!"

Warren can't keep up with me. He's struggling to match me word for word, even though all I'm doing is belting out random commands.

"Thunder!"

"Energy Ball!"

A flash of light erupted in the midst of the battle, blinding all humans present. When it cleared, Ludicolo was slumped forward, panting heavily.

"That wasn't a Thunder," Warren called. "Ludi, get over here."

Ludicolo walked backwards, agonizingly slow, to its sideline. It was forced to shoot Energy Balls, with great exertion, to intercept further Thunderbolts from Magnezone.

"Here."

Warren sprayed a Full Restore across Ludicolo's back, and then whispered something to his Pokémon.

"It's gonna run out of juice at some point. Keep pushing it," Warren said aloud. "Hydro Bomb."

Magnezone fired off a defensive Tri Attack.

"Leech Seed," the opponent ordered.

Mirror Shot intercepted.

"Hydro, cancel, Energy Ball, cancel, Hydro, cancel, Bomb!" he shouted as fast as he could.

I didn't have time to respond. Nonetheless, Magnezone let loose a Sonic Boom that tore the Mud bomb apart.

"This is- the- what… I don't…"

Warren looks like he's at his wits' end.

"Tyko, please," I said quietly.

Magnezone unleashed a multi-colored ray of light that tore into Ludicolo, literally blowing off glittery sparkles wherever it touched. The ray was continuous and unstoppable. Several Energy Balls, Hydro Pumps, and Mud bombs failed to squash it. Grass, Water, and Ground types were failing to interact with it. Ludicolo took two steps back- onto a Stealth Rock. The Pokémon fainted.

"SHIT!" Warren yelled. He's beside himself now.

"Quagsire, get out there and Earthquake! Don't let that damn machine get to you!"

Magnezone silently retreated and was relieved by Steelix. The metal snake burrowed underground and set about using minimal defensive maneuvers to keep itself safe.
Warren hurried to administer a Revive to Ludicolo. I noticed that he always took them out of the front pocket of the backpack (probably easier to reach mid-battle), and that this pocket was starting to look a little depleted. How many does he have in there? Nine? Twelve? Fifteen? Somewhere in that range. I'll need about fifteen more knock-outs before I can start downing some of his Pokémon for good. Darn it.

"You were hoping to prove yourself by winning that matchup, but you lost. You're not able to beat me on a level playing field. You're not as good as me. Your Pokémon aren't as strong as mine," I said.

"Shut up."

"Can't you see how pointless this battle is? Even if you succeed, it will be a hollow victory. There are stronger Leaders than me, and beyond them is the Elite Four, who completely outclass us Gym Leaders. Then there's the professional tournament trainers, they are worlds above you and I! The girl in the toadstool hat over there?" Lyra waved when she saw me pointing her out. "She's the Champion. She can sweep my entire team with one Pokémon. That's the kind of competition that awaits you. In League play, you can't use two dozen Revives, nor, I think, will you be able to keep Scizor, Quagsire, and Exeggutor. Without putting in the legitimate effort to improve yourself and your team, what hope do you have of succeeding?"

"SHUT UP!"

"You're doing all of this, why? Because you had a crush on me and I turned you down? So now you want to trash my life to make me feel as miserable as you do?" I don't want to be so emotional and start crying, but I can feel the bitterness welling up in my chest. "Why couldn't you see that it wouldn't work out? We're nothing alike! Does it take that much effort, are you so impatient that you won't wait a single day to get to know a woman, before you decide to pledge your heart to her?! I'm trying to see things from your perspective but everything you've done and said sounds completely unreasonable."

"Shut her up! Quag!"

Quagsire used Aqua Tail to hit the ground, sending a wave of water and mud towards Steelix. Steelix protected himself by opening a fissure in the ground. The wall of water safely drained into the crack before it could reach my side of the field.

"I could ignore every misdeed and ill word you've directed my way, and it still doesn't make sense to me. There's Bar Louie's not three blocks down the street. It's full of women with big breasts, tattoos, piercings, smokers, drinkers, feisty trouble-makers. Mega's PokeClub has tough women who could send either one of us packing, whether it be a fistfight or a Pokémon battle. They hold beach parties with blonds and ditzes who will sleep with any guy who buys them a beer. The Poet's Grave, it's a coffee shop on the other side of town. Girls with metal coming out of their nose and chin and they probably smoke pot on the side, but they're smart and hipster-ish, they write smartphone aps and read slam poetry.-"

I huffed.

"Literally ANY of these women would be a better fit for a guy like you! Why, of all the females in this city, in this world, did you pick ME to fall in love with? I'm sorry to say but that has got to be one of dumbest ideas ever conceived! I am a shrew! And a prude! And a conservative! Not just politics, but look at me! I wear sundresses and I don't even have ear piercings, I hate parties and cussing and drinking, I'm shy and insecure, and I've got a terribly anti-social, unforgiving, boring, stubborn personality that by all rights should disgust a guy like you! So why did you pick me?!!"
"Oh spare me your prattle bitch! Quagsire, Earthquake!"

Steelix acted first, sending a wide, flat-headed Stone Edge that lifted Quagsire into the air. The latter's Earthquake annihilated the pillar but did not reach further. The fat salamander Pokémon slid down the mound it had just helped create.

"Why pick on me?!!"

"Because you were cute and you beat me and I wanted to fuck you, and that's it!" Warren shouted.

The crowd gasped.

All throughout the battle, he had been losing support from the crowd, even the ones who had initially come to cheer him on. His foul language and bad attitude was turning them away. This last outburst caused the crowd's empathy for him to completely evaporate. Not even a few of the whooping, cat-calling males could stomach such an unabashed, misogynistic remark.

Warren looked around in bewilderment. The eyes of the crowd were upon him, with looks ranging from pity to disgust.

"Don't you judge me!" he said sneering. "Don't you dare judge me, you fucking hypocrites! Like any one of you have never pulled a flirt hoping to get laid!"

And now he is deliberately doing the opposite of garnering sympathy.

"Quagsire, Aqua tail a hole over Steelix's position and Scald into it!"

The ground rumbled, and Quagsire fell into a pit that had been stealthily dug out underneath it. Dig and Sand Tomb, which didn't faint the Pokémon but forced a hasty withdrawal anyways (otherwise Quagsire would asphyxiate while buried under).

"Exeggutor! Sunny Day Solar Beam!"

"Magnezone."

Steelix sprang out of the ground like a jack-in-a-box, while Magnezone floated in. The light saturation and temperature of the place cranked up, and a Solar Beam impacted on Magnezone, leaving it dangerously close to fainting. Magnezone responded with the same ray of light that had finished Ludicolo. Exeggutor went down instantly.

"Signal Beam! I knew it! You scum of the earth, you taught it Signal Beam!" Warren yelled.

Technically, I didn't teach it Signal Beam. I didn't even realize Magnezone had Signal Beam in its repertoire until it used the attack to finish Ludicolo. That was Morty's doing, he has a professional move tutor working for him at his gym- but that's not the point here.

"Would you please listen to me? I'm trying to tell you to let it go. Unchecked lust screws with your mind, it makes you do things you'll later regret and can only hurt yourself and the person you're lusting after. I'm sorry if you think a woman being attractive is the only criteria for deciding if you'll pursue her, and you do have the right to decide who you think is attractive and who you might want to inquire if there's any reciprocal interest- BUT- that doesn't mean you can treat a woman so rudely! When a girl tells you she's not interested, don't act like your manhood's been insulted and swear vendetta! That's as unmanly as it gets! You're fighting a girl, for Arceus' sake!"

"Yap yap yap, all you women ever do is talk about that femmi-shit!"
"I don't want to suffer the obscenities of male suitors anymore! It's nerve-wracking and offensive and brings up memories of a bad experience that I very much want to forget."

I took a step towards Warren, hands held out in pleading gesture.

"Please! Let's end this battle. Draw it. I'll even give you my badge, if you just apologize and leave me alone."

"Hell. No."

He fished out Revives for all of his fainted Pokémon while Magcargo held Magnezone at bay.

"I've figured out your trick. I'm gonna win. Fuck drawing, you're mocking me. Magcargo, here!"

Warren tossed over a whole handful of items for the lava slug to consume. I recognized them as X Speed, X Special Attacks, and Guard Specs. After letting the power-boosts take effect, Magcargo unleashed an Eruption as a test.

A circle twenty-five yards in radius went up in volcanic cataclysm.

"Tyko's a Water-type. Why doesn't she come out and play? She'll be so much better than your Steel-types at defending against Fire-type attacks," Warren said mockingly.

He knows. He really knows. My cover is blown.

"Tyko, do not go out there."

"Prinplup! Pup pup! Prin!"

"That's an order," I asserted.

My little blue bird danced in agitation.

She had been dancing this entire time. From the very beginning of the battle, she had made a concerted effort to cheer our team on. Her cries had been loud and incessant, although it was easy to ignore them with all the explosions ringing out.

"Come out and fight, weak-beak!"

Tyko charged for the sideline.

"I'm overriding Morty's strategy. You cannot go out there!" I said.

Even as Magcargo slowly incinerated more and more of the arena, I would not assent to my lone Water-type entering the fray.

"You've got a job to do! Now finish it!" I commanded sternly. Tyko whined.

"Hey, I gotta say, brilliant, but cheap. Cheaper than anything I've done!" Warren was making a pest of himself. "I'm supposed to be playing a Gym Leader, not a bowling pin! Hey, Mr. Official, if the Gym Leader ain't actually directing the battle, is it still a gym battle? Wouldn't that disqualify her?"

"What are you saying?" Mr. Preston asked.

Warren pointed to Tyko.
"I'm saying Jasmine ain't even the so-called "trainer" here. That bird is. That Pokémon has been giving every order in the battle so far. It's the one directing Jasmine's crew, not her! That's against the rules, isn't it?"

Mr. Preston paused.

"Mmm, normally, yes, there's a rule like that. But it doesn't apply to unrestricted battles."

"Fuck. Oh well. Hey, squirt, gonna be a coward and lead from behind? Be brave! Come out and show 'em how it's done! Or are ya- chikkin?"

I had to use both arms to restrain Tyko from leaping onto the field.

"You're my proxy, you can't go out there!" I said to her.

"Come on!"

"Tyk. Prinplup."

I clung tight to my Pokémon.

It was true-

-Every time my Pokémon seemed to disobey me: Steelix retreating when told to attack, Skarmory attacking when told to retreat.

-When I was using random hand signals and shifty, suspicious signs in order to draw Warren's attention.

-Steelix knew what attacks to use, when, and how, even when I didn't say anything out loud and he had no way of seeing visual cues when buried.

-Magnezone winning the shoot out, using the right moves to attack and defend despite my increasingly nonsensical command input.

-Magnezone unleashing Signal Beam without me even knowing it was capable of using that attack.

-Having my entire Pokémon team lined up on the sideline, rather than in their Pokeballs, so that they could be ordered in and out without my command.

All of this was due to the fact that I had not given virtually any real orders from the beginning of the battle to the present moment. I suspect Warren finally caught on because he noticed I was constantly glancing to my sideline, looking at my Prinplup, seeing what she was doing, and then pretending to give an order that my fielded Pokémon appeared to carry out- most of the time. Until they did something else, which caught Warren by surprise and created openings.

This was our grand strategy.

I didn't have time to prepare for such a big, complex battle. I spent every waking hour of my weekend cramming information about gym regulations into my cranium. I knew more about the classifications of mobile machinery safety mechanisms than I did about our strategy for this battle!

Morty had taught my six team members some new tactics, a few new moves, and an overall strategy. But without a skilled mind to deploy them, organize them, someone who could follow his complex flow chart of progressions and contingencies, someone who would have to devote up to ten hours memorizing decision point lists, the plan would fall apart. That someone turned out to not be human.
Tyko, clever and expressive and spirited as she was, was fully capable of learning the game plan. She took it upon herself to learn everything, and then find a way to communicate what had to be done to her team mates. She was the real trainer here, I was just the custodian, the one who benefited from her hard work.

Warren gave me a condescending sneer as I hugged my Pokémon. Magcargo had glassed two-quarters of the field and was working on the third. I knew the situation was desperate and could only get worse. My Pokémon didn't have the stamina to get another twelve KOs. I had four left and losing any one of them would make it exponentially harder to counter Warren's switches. Something had to be done. Something crazy.

"Tyko, you've done a great job so far, but I need you to go beyond. You've got to hold him off for ten minutes. Alone," I whispered.

"Prin?"

"I'm leaving. I'll be back."

"Prin! Prinploo! PRINPLOO!" Tyko began shaking and squawking. She did not like the sound of this. She was scared.

"Stall, stall hard, don't get yourself hurt. If you go down, the others don't know enough, they won't keep in the ring and I'll be disqualified. Stay calm. Do your best." With that, I rushed off.

"Where are you going?" This was Mr. Preston.

"I'm making a trip. The battle keeps going even if I'm not here, right? As long as one of my Pokémon is on the field?"

"Yes, yes, correct, unrestricted rules allow it. What exactly are you doing?"

"Evening the playing field," I yelled back over my shoulder as I exited the gym.

It took three minutes to run to my destination.

Sonny's Grocer.

Not a Pokemart. Not ideal. But it was close, and I didn't have much money on me anyways. I flew past customers, shoving carts full of others' groceries out of the way, frantically searching for the Pokeproducts section.

"Aisle twelve," one clerk said.

"Huh?"

"I've been listening on the radio," the employee said. "Pokémon stuff is on aisle twelve. Good luck."

"Thanks!"

I took a gander at my budget- 3,900 ρ- and picked out what I thought I could afford. Sales tax better not screw me over.

"Hello there! Oh, a Pokémon trainer!" the check-out clerk greeted me.

"I'm in a hurry, please!"
"Oh, you've got an Elixir! You know we have a 'Buy 2, Get 1 Free!' discount going for those?"

"Not interested!"

"Oh, you've only got to sign up for our customer card. It's easy, takes two minutes."

"No thanks!"

"Are you sure? I could let you use mine. Why not? Maybe some of this other stuff is on sale, let's see if there's any other deals going on. Where'd I put it? Maybe in my pants pocket."

I hopped around on my tippy-toes, panic far exceeding my temper meter.

"No? How about the trash can? I can't believe I lost it! Let's see here."

Patience threshold exceeded.

I grabbed all the items in a bag and slammed all the cash I had onto the counter.

"Keep the change!" I yelled to the bumbling clerk-lady as I dashed away.

My mind was racing as I sprinted down the sidewalk. It was hard enough to think properly as-is, but the running on top of that was killing the oxygen flow to my brain. It hurt.

"I do not need a headache!" I huffed.

Could Tyko really hold out? My team was really beat up when I left. With me out of the picture and all the attention on the real conductor of our strategy, I doubt Warren would continue playing safe and holding back. He'd attack viciously, with everything's he's got.

Who should I give these items to? It's not a lot, just an Elixir, a Super Potion, a Revive, and one more little bottle (fufufu). The Revive should be used for Skarmory, I think.

What about the plan? Morty had sent Tyko home last night with a twenty-page binder full of notes and diagrams that we were both supposed to read. However, I had decided a second pass on the facilities regulations chapter was desperately needed and ignored the playbook. My knowledge of our strategy was limited to a very quick perusal right before I opened the gym.

Jeez, it's hard to run long distance. I never had the lung power for this. Even way back in elementary school they called me Jolty, because I was very fast, but petered out quickly, like a Jolteon.

Why did Mother never call me? I really expected her to chew me out by now. Where's Father? I haven't heard from him. Why am I worried about my family at a time like this?

Please please please please Tyko keep the battle going. I'm bringing help.

I took the front entrance at full speed, contorting my body to get around the doors and bewildered bystanders. The clock indicated twelve minutes had passed.

"She's back!" someone yelled. My first instinct was to check the scoreboard, and what I saw made me cringe.

**Remaining Pokemon**

**Gym Leader: 2 - 5 :Challenger**
"Tyko!"

She had disobeyed me, since she was currently Aqua Jetting around the outskirts of the playing field, desperately attempting to avoid volleys of Energy Balls. Three orbs of Grass energy hit behind and beside her, and a fourth one almost nailed her except for an emergency hard-right pivot. Yet that maneuver brought her into contact with a Mega Drain bulb nestled in the ground like a landmine. The bulb exploded, sucking life and sending it over to the enemy Ludicolo.

"Tyko, what happened? Why are you out there?"

I checked to see who else survived my absence- Magneton, and it wasn't doing too well. Asleep and hurt- the board estimated a third of its health knocked out. Looks like Tyko didn't have a choice about fighting.

Warren was excited to see me.

"You came just in time! Suck it! Suck it!"

"Boooooo!"

"Shut the hell up!" he yelled at the crowd, which was currently dissing him. Alternatively, Tyko was receiving massive support. There were "OOH!"s and "AWWWW!"s each time she narrowly avoided getting hit.

"Tyko, Bubble, Bubble, Bubble," I said, pointing.

"Don't listen to her crap, it's a lie, focus!" Warren instructed his Pokémon.

Tyko did use Bubble, though. Good, strong bubbles too, larger than beach balls and more substantial than balloons. These three were positioned in a vertical column.

"Three more, delta, clear! Mist!"

Ludicolo's mouth was bulging, swelling up for a Hydro Pump. Tyko spewed out another three bubbles in a triangle formation around her. The blast of water hit one bubble and erupted like a water fountain. The area was surrounded by a thick, impenetrable mist.

"Ludicolo, come back here."

Ludicolo waddled back and received a Full Heal, apparently to fend off the latest round of Toxic Spikes poisoning. Warren grimaced. There were two unused Full Heals in his hand, which he quickly stuffed into his backpack. I'm guessing those were his last two. It didn't mean I was two poisonings away from poisoning his team to death (I say death, but I mean fainting- you understand, right?), because he still had some Revives and a lot of Hyper Potions. Speaking of which, he sprayed one of those potions over Ludicolo on top of the Full Heal.

"Now, Energy Ball!"

Tyko had gotten the hint and had set everything up. It would be harder, because of the weight she's gained since she was a Piplup.

"Pip! Prin! Emp! Pol!" With each cry she skipped, bounced, and then flung herself at the topmost bubble in the column.

Her body slid right into the bubble and weighed it down. It pressed down into the middle bubble,
and thence into the lowest bubble, squashing it. The lowest bubble popped, violently, sending the upper two skyward. Tyko reached down and manually popped the second bubble, giving her own bubble a midair boost. It was enough to lift the Pokémon all the way to the ceiling.

"And safe!"

Energy Balls fell short, unable to attain the height needed to hit her. Tyko's bubble popped on a light fixture, freeing her to hop onto a rafter support beam.

Hmm. I think I need to check the facilities rules. Since I use the rafters so much in my fights, I think there's a structural code that needs attending to. Anyways, Tyko was hopping amidst the steel beams, comfortably out of reach of any of Ludicolo's attacks.

"Get down here! Coward!"

Tyko stuck her tongue out.

Excellent. I had caught Tyko watching the Science Channel one day, a piece on modern space travel, and noticed her fascination with multi-staged rockets. This clued me in to her method of how she kept getting into the rafters: multi-staged bubble boosters. Turns out, it's a useful tactic in battle too.

"Ludicolo… if the brat's going to stay up there, let's try to do something about these Toxic Spikes."

"Ludo!"

"Maybe Surf? Muddy Water! That's it. Here, on our side."

Ludicolo turned and started churning into the ground with Water Gun. With sufficient amount of liquid and clay mixed together it became Muddy Water, which Ludicolo scooped up in its hands and mouth and began spreading. The effect was to coat a small area near Warren in a foot-high mire.

"We could bake it with Magcargo, but that'd poison him. Mmmm, ah. Ludicolo, Overgrowth," he commanded.

Ludicolo shot its hands into the mud. Plants sprouted from the improvised soil. A tangle of vines and ferns covered the ground in a thick matt. Ludicolo tested it out, walking onto the surface freely.

"There! Got us a safe place for entering, no more getting you guys Toxic'd right out of the ball. What's she up to?"

Tyko was acting like a kid in a playground. I was busy furiously administering healing items to my Pokeballs- and yes, I had reverted all my Pokémon into their Pokeballs. Tyko's role as commander was kind of over now, so it was no use keeping my Pokémon out on the sideline. It was time for me to take charge.

I set the last of my potions into a pile, and then slung my cardigan over top them. Let's not have Warren seeing exactly what items I just used.

"Alrighty, Exeggutor, come on out."

One vegetable replaced another. In some ways, this one was more dangerous. It certainly had the attacks to hit Tyko, even from this range.

"Exeggutor, Gravity!"
Gravity too?!?!

Tyko was caught hopping between two beams, suddenly getting sucked earthward. She barely managed to catch a grip on the beam. Her legs peddled on air. She was struggling to climb up, but her hold was weakening in the face of the relentless gravitational crush.

"Air Cutter."

Whah?

Exeggutor whipped its fronds around, sending out slices of wind that caught Tyko across the back. She yelped and let go.

"Aqua Jet!"

Tyko streaked in like a cobalt meteorite, nailing Exeggutor inbetween the heads. The concussion sent both Pokémon reeling, confused.

"Air Cutter?! That's impossible! Your Exeggutor is impossible!"

"Wait till you see this. Bolt Strike!"

Exeggutor called lightning down upon itself. It was cloaked in the stuff, a terrifying aura that threatened to blast anything it touched to smithereens.

"Tyko, outrun it!"

The Prinplup is faster. She can avoid the lightning tackle by running away.

No, she's confused.

But so is Exeggutor?

"Psychic!"

Exeggutor's eyes glowed purple, it became a kind of living will-o-wisp, a ball of electricity with two pricks of violet light gazing out. The Psychic took Tyko in its grip and began dragging her towards Exeggutor. She struggled all the way.

"Secret Attack!"

Tyko ceased fighting the pull and let herself go. Her body was lifted off the ground and began flying towards Exeggutor. She spun around and ripped off a bolt of her own.

"It's an Ice Beam."

Exeggutor is slow but bulky. Could a super-effective Ice Beam really stop it?

Exeggutor shrugged off the damage and refocused on its Psychic assault. Or tried to, anyways.

"Tyko, Aqua Jet, then another Beam!"

There was something wrong with Exeggutor's eyes on its middle head. They were glowing, but not the iridescent violet associated with Psychic emanations. Instead, it was glowing a subdued amethyst shade of light, as if it was being filtered through something. I rejoiced.
Tyko's Ice Beam had hit with pinpoint accuracy, causing a small sheen of ice to cover the foe's eyes. Unable to keep Tyko in its focus, the middle head's Psychic became erratic and ineffective. It was enough to allow Tyko some maneuverability, which she took advantage of by darting sideways and repeating the process on Exeggutor's left head. With four of its six eyes put out of commission, and probably some severe brain freeze to go along with it, Exeggutor's Psychic weakened to the point that it stopped dragging Tyko forward.

"Sand Tomb!"

Warren's already figured out what Tyko has done and is switching tactics, making use of yet another impossible move.

"I would really like to know how Exeggutor knows all of these moves that it really shouldn't!" I said. "Tyko, Bubble!"

The ground beneath the Prinplup was disintegrating, collapsing in upon itself. If Tyko tried to run she would only cause the dirt to collapse further, sinking her into the ground and leaving her a sitting target. Instead, as ordered, she spat out an enormous bubble and hopped inside. The bubble acted like a boat, riding the sea of quicksand with ease.

"Get clear! Propeller!"

Tyko saw the lumbering threat of Exeggutor approaching. Its body was still cloaked in the Bolt Strike, and a single tackle might well be able to knock my Water-type out. Fortunately, the foe was poking about and unsure as it walked, and more than once stubbed its toe on Stealth Rocks. Looks like a single head isn't enough to coordinate effective movement for the entire creature. I wonder what it would do if Tyko frosted its last pair of eyeballs…

"Light Screen!"

"Ice Beam!"

Warren guessed my move ahead of time, and devised a counter.

"Tyko, get out of there!"

Tyko spat an Aqua Jet out the side of her bubble, turning her improvised lifeboat into a high-speed motorboat.

"Seed Bomb."

She cleared the Sand Tomb and was trying to race off to another corner of the field. Coconut-sized plant pods began landing all around her, blowing up into millions of tiny slivers upon impact. One proximal explosion popped her bubble and sent her flying head-over-heels. She recovered mid-spin and managed to hopscotch around a thicket of Toxic Spikes.

"Earth Trap."

Exeggutor paused, maybe listening for Tyko's footsteps, and then stomped. The ground surrounding Tyko convulsed. It looked like it was supposed to rise and clap shut on Tyko, like a bear-trap, but the configuration of the ground disrupted it. Instead, hexagonal pillars shot out and tumbled on top of Tyko. She was trapped, but not injured.

"Metal Claw!" Tyko slashed her way out of the predicament before Exeggutor could reach her.
Ha, so, Steelix's morphing of the battlefield into hexagonal columns is still in play. Ah, yes! I see now, I see!

I had been weighing a plan in my mind for a while now, and the last piece of it finally clicked into place. This could either win me the match, or backfire spectacularly. But first, I need Tyko to beat this coconut tree.

"How the heck does Exeggutor use all of these attacks?" I asked Warren.

"Tailwind!" he ordered, and Exeggutor promptly filled the room with a high velocity air current. The Pokémon went from lumbering to awkwardly stumbling forward at 20 MPH (does that sound slow to you? keep in mind, a typical Exeggutor runs at 2.5 MPH). "Why should I tell you?"

"Because I can't comprehend how Exeggutor could use Fire, Electric, Flying, and Ground-type attacks, even attacks I've never heard of. At least, not without some heavy genetic engineering, which is illegal in any League match, period."

"Don't worry your pretty little head, I'll tell you soon as I take that birdy out," Warren said dismissively. I huffed in response.

As if I'd give him the chance!

"Burn Beam! Ahaha! Why didn't I think of that before?" Warren said. "Burn Beam, Exeggutor!"

Exeggutor let off its uncanny, low-pitched roar, which sounded to me like a bunch of blockheads laughing with stones caught in their mouths. Then rays of laser light shot out of its eyes, singing the shields. The Ice Beam-induced frost blindfolds were vaporized instantly.

"Don't get hit by that, Tyko! Mud Slap!"

Wait a minute.

EYE-FRICKIN-LASER BEAMS.


"Guess you never heard of Ultranzee."

"No," I said shaking my head.

"It's a Pokémon from the Truembach region. Exeggutor had the privilege of getting knocked out by one. Fairy-Cosmic-type, they're like, mmm, cross a Pansage with a superhero, and you got an Ultranzee."

"Cosmic type? Fairy type? I've never heard of those. What's a Pansage?"

"Boy, for a Gym Leader you sure are ignorant, aren't you?" Warren mocked. "Go look it up later. What matters, is that Ultranzees' signature attack is Burn Beam, which Exeggutor is now going to use-"

Exeggutor fired a laser ray across Tyko's path, searing her beak and stopping her dead in her tracks.

"-to disable Prinplup and make her sit still for once."

I rummaged through my vast well of Pokémon knowledge and tried to apply basic logic to the unknown, even while directing Tyko to ever more desperate measures for buying just a little more
time.

There are about 480, give or take a dozen, Pokémon native to Nihon - between 100 and 150 per region. Beyond my own country, there's, I guess, another 8,000 or so Pokémon, and I don't have a clue about the overwhelming majority of them. There are whole elemental types I'm unaware of. Truembach is one of those regions I only dimly recall exists (it's in the same country as Kalos, I think?), let alone have intimate knowledge of their Pokedex.

But Warren's right, it doesn't matter. What matters is Exeggutor, and how it managed to learn an exotic attack from a foreign Pokémon.

What are the ways a Pokémon can learn a move?

1) By instinct - most moves are innate to a Pokémon species, they learn it through growth and training.

2) By TM's and HM's.

3) By being taught, usually by expert trainers colloquially known as Move Tutors.

4) Breeding; exotic parenting chains can mix DNA so that other species' natural moveset is passed on to its progeny (though it's becoming controversial to breed two different species together).

5) … anything else?

Think!

What other ways can a Pokémon acquire moves? Transform, but Exeggutor isn't changing shape. Mimic, but moves that are mimicked are quickly forgotten, usually. Mirror Move, Me First, but those only work when used right before.

"Metronome?" I mused.

"Nope. Too random. Try Mimic," Warren said, right before he ordered a Frenzy Plant.

"Ice Beam the plants, stop them from spreading!" I counter-ordered. "How can Mimic work? That only stores the impression of the attack into short term memory, it's forgotten after the battle! Or at best, a day! You didn't have Exeggutor go out and Mimic all these attacks this morning, that's impossible!"

"There's one move that does do that," Warren said. "But only one Pokémon knows it."

My neurons spazzed into electrochemical fireworks.

"Sketch. Smeargle."

"BINGO! The young lady finally gets it!"

"Exeggutors learn Mimic from a rare TM. Teach it that, and then Mimic a Smeargle using Sketch. Then use Sketch right away before Exeggutor forgets it. The Sketched move becomes permanent," I conjectured.

"Right! You're right! You're also not paying attention!"

"What oh crap!"
Exeggutor landed on top of Tyko. She took damage from the Body Slam and the Bolt Strike, although the latter wasn't so bad because it had petered to a slight cloak of static.

"Got it! Solar Beam, point blank, take it down!"

What kind of person would orchestrate such a battle, that it could pull off this complicated combo, not once, but a seemingly endless number of times? Not only would Exeggutor need to fight a Smeargle to get Sketch, it would also need a Pokémon present using the attack Exeggutor wanted to Sketch.

"Tyko! No!"

There were no more tricks, no more tactics left in my brain. My Prinplup was held under Exeggutor's foot and could no longer fight back. She couldn't even aim her Ice Beam at anything but the fronds on Exeggutor's head. The tips of the leaves were iced over, but the damage was undone by the fronds' warming. They began glowing, feeding photosynthetic power to Exeggutor's gut. The raw energy was collected and let out as one blinding ray of destruction.

Exeggutor backed off. Tyko wasn't moving.

"Tyko the Prinplup is fainted. Gym Leader, next Pokémon, quickly," Mr. Preston said.

"Oh no."

Tyko was retreated. I stared down on my two remaining Pokeballs.

"I don't know how to get around this Pokémon."

I needed Warren to switch out to any of his other Pokémon. Any would do. And only for a minute. But how?

"Magneton," I decided, sending it out.

"Tonnn tonnn tonnn," the collection of dynamos hummed out.

"I thought I put you to sleep," Warren said. "Did she get you a Full Heal from the Pokemart? Generous girl. Too bad she's so stingy with boys, or else I wouldn't have to have you melted."

Warren, I'll kill you! "!" Never mind. My mind clicked- Skarmory's Spikes. Warren hadn't seen my match against Silver. I can recycle tactics. Wonderful. This might work.

"Magneton, Mirror Shot."

"Exeggutor, Flame Shot."

The enemy's attack was stronger and had type-advantage. It overpowered Magneton's attack and continued its trajectory, aiming for Magneton. My Pokémon dodged out of the way.

"Signal Beam!"

"Light Screen, max power, max duration!" Warren yelled.

I waved at Magneton, to do something, anything. When it did, it wasn't a Signal Beam- my junior Magneton knew it and could use it ever since I caught it, but had always shown an irrational dislike for that attack (possibly related to its hatred for odd numbers, I'm guessing). It opted for Thunderbolt instead, which crackled completely ineffectually across the powerful Light Screen the egghead had
just erected.

"Magnet Pull. Like this!" I gestured.

"Ingrain! Fire Blast!"

Exeggutor rooted itself in place, as a guard against being pulled in by Magnezone's ability. But that was a ruse. I had no secret way to magnetize Exeggutor on such short notice. Certainly not with that Light Screen up.

But Magnezone could push around the Spikes, because they contained traces of metal from Skarmory's armor. The same Spikes that happened to be poisoned with Toxic…

Magnezon ducked beneath the next Fire Blast, and pounded the ground. A magnetic shockwave burst outwards, carrying all the Spikes along with it. They flew at the opponent like shrapnel, and it wasn't one or three or ten, but dozens and dozens of hits that tore into the trunk-like body and delivered their poisoned coating.

"Um, so what, you poisoned Exeggutor again." Warrens shrugged. "Let's finish this and then I'll get you healed."

"Magnezon, um Super Sonic."

"Flame Charge."

Exeggutor used its Tailwind to close in on Magnezon. Magnezon smoothly dodged aside and unleashed an ear-piercing wave into Exeggutor's head as it sped by. The confusion's effect was immediate, Exeggutor couldn't stop itself and crashed into the shield wall.

"Nope, nah-ah, no way. Get back here, Ex." Warren pulled out one of his last two Full Heals, as well as some other items.

Alright. This was my chance.

"Return, Magnezon!"

Magnezon hovered over, and Steelix went out onto the field.

"This is my last item," I told my great big metallic leviathan. "Please use it well. We're depending on you, Sir Knight."

"Schteel."

"The big one comes out. And it's not hiding this time?"

Exeggutor was ready to return to the field.

"Steelix, Earthquake."


Exeggutor lumbered towards Steelix's position, charging up as it went.

"Stone Edge."
The rocks glanced off Exeggutor's side, pushing it around but not doing much damage. At a distance of fifteen yards it stopped and prepared to fire.

"Hey Warren, please, just listen."

"Say goodbye to Steelix, cunt," Warren said, dismissing my overture.

Fine. It's his fault.

"When you first came to my gym, there was a big crowd. They all wanted to battle me."

"And sayonara, Steel-boy!" Warren said. Exeggutor fired.

The ray of solar energy shot through the air, sizzling and burning much like a laser, or a particle cannon.

It missed.

It hit the shield behind and a tiny bit above Steelix but did not hit Steelix. It missed.

Warren jerked. The crowd gasped.

Had Exeggutor failed to execute?

All part of the plan.

"Warren, do you remember how I got rid of all those trainers?"

"No, and I don't care… I want you to shut up and Exeggutor to charge up again so he can fucking hit this damned shit earthworm!"

I let them complete the ritual, and watched, again, unsurprised, as the Solar Beam sailed harmlessly over Steelix's head.

"Two in a row." Warren let out a long string of swear words under his breath.

"I could let you try for a third," I said, "but I hate baseball. You only get two strikes. Steelix!"

"AWRGH!"

"You did something…"

"Look at Exeggutor's feet."

Warren, despite his obvious reluctance to do so, took a look.

Hexagons. Like a honeycomb, except made of earth.

"Columnar jointing. It happens when thermal stress is applied to rock formations. Basically, when a plane of sediment is rapidly heated and cooled, the thermal energy wants to escape into the air. This applies pressure and tension. The rock fractures into tessellated shapes, usually hexagons, as it's the most compact and efficient pattern. You'll find that hexagonal tessellation fractures have a way of directing seismic energy in peculiar ways."

I lowered my hand. Steelix roared and cracked the ground with his tail.

Exeggutor suddenly toppled to the side.
"Steelix has gotten really, REALLY good with his Earthquake attack. He can vibrate the earth in precise motions, creating friction along an infinite number of planes, heating the ground up on an atomic scale, and then letting the heat disperse to create these hexagonal faults."

"What is all this techno babble for? Ex, why are you dropped down? Get up! Solar Beam!"

"He can induce this pattern in any number of directions and intensities, and when shaped properly, they can do astounding things. Like, say, redirect an Eruption attack’s heat away from a particular spot underground, where Steelix might be hiding. They can prevent Earth Power and other Eruption attacks completely, if well positioned, since those attacks rely on shoving enough heat into the ground to build critical pressure. Instead, the heat just gets whisked away."

"Exeggutor!"

"Steelix!"

Steelix slammed the ground again, and Exeggutor, who had almost gotten back up, fell over backwards.

"When shaped a different way, this hexagonal pattern can also transfer Earthquake really well, so that it hits an opposing Pokémon on the surface at max force. Or, it can be used for precise Stone Edge bursts, either in close combat or at range, whether you want the stalactite or stalagmite variety of Stone Edge."

"EXEGGUTOR!"

"It allows Steelix to basically manipulate the ground any way he wants, within a fifty yard radius. Steelix, take it down, please."

Steelix demonstrated his mastery over the terrain by cracking the surface with his head. Seismic waves reached out in coalescing waves, converging at the exact point Exeggutor was thrashing about. The columns of earth beneath the foe suddenly dropped by three feet. Exeggutor was trapped in a pit from which it couldn't escape.

Steelix had forced it to miss with Solar Beam by subtly shifting the columns underneath its feet by an inch, right as it fired, to throw off its balance and thence its aim. What it was doing now was the same principle, just a larger magnitude. As Exeggutor was using Vine Whip to pull itself up, the columns around the perimeter of its hole shot up by a foot, while the ones in the pit sank another foot. Exeggutor fell back in.

"It's nothing, just like those walls from earlier. They can be broken. Hyper Beam!"

Exeggutor abandoned Solar Beam in favor of the much stronger, pure-energy destro-ray. It did manage to blow a gaping hole in the ground from which Exeggutor could escape the pit. Sadly (for it), the attack left it too exhausted to move. Steelix took the brunt of the blast and chuckled; Normal-type versus Depleted-Uranium-Steel-Alloy-type, you see.

"Finally, the faults have one last extremely useful function. They can be used to guide fault lines."

"Wah?"

I held up the empty bottle of the booster medicine I had used on Steelix before the current engagement began. The one thing I risked leaving the gym and the battle to go buy. The crux of my plan.
"Do you recognize this?" I asked.

"That's an X Accuracy!" the radio announcer exclaimed, because Warren was too mad to answer such a question. Instead he snarled out one of his own.

"What the hell do you think you can do with that? I've got twelve Revives left!"

"Steelix has twenty Fissures," I said softly.

Warren reaped what he sowed.

With the aid of X Accuracy and using the faults to guide them, the Fissures struck infallibly. The earth opened beneath Exeggutor, and all the other Pokémon Warren sent out, and sent them to oblivion. At that depth, with the weight of hundreds of tons about to bear down on them, there was no escaping fainting. In fact, there was a real possibility of death, such that the automatic retrieval systems of the gym activated- lasers sprouted from the ceiling, tapping Warren's Pokémon on the head, and digitizing the exact moment between their fainting and their getting crushed to death by the closing wall of rock. The lasers spat the Pokémon back out, depositing them directly into their Pokeballs.

Warren, in increasingly frantic and desperate motions, revived them. But as soon as he had one Pokémon back up, another went down. Steelix happily cornered every opponent using Stone Edges, Earthquakes, pits and walls and depression. Once cornered, they were hopeless to dodge away. Even Scizor could not escape its fate. Its best chance to survive was using Metal Claw to grapple the side of the cliff and haul itself up and out- only for Steelix to redirect the Fissure to follow Scizor and eventually catch it.

There is a reason Fissure is included in that infamous group of moves called "One-Hit-Knock-Out Attacks." Quite simply, there was very little one could do as a combatant to survive falling into a deep crevice and then having that continental amount of earth come crushing down on you. If it weren't for its notoriously unpredictable direction and tendency to miss twice as often as it hit, I'm sure Fissure would be banned for being so dangerous and uncompetitive. If only the rule-makers had anticipated that a Gym Leader would use an X Accuracy and geological know-how to make it a 100% guaranteed hit and banned the move, Warren might have won this.

Ludicolo cried right before the ground closed. A ray of light zipped from the crack, to the ceiling, and down to a Pokeball in Warren's hand. He grimaced.

"Un-fucking-believable."

His last Revive fell empty to the floor and his last Pokémon came out. The trainer looked as far from happy as a human being could get. I couldn't tell if it was anger or dejection or just shock at how this battle had turned out.

"Deva, please. Fly high."

Oh, Swellow. This one's immune to Fissure! But we established earlier in the battle, Swellow can't do diddly to Steelix. Iron Tail or Rock Throw will be enough.

"Hey, Warren, now will you listen? I don't like you in that way. I'm sorry, but I don't. Accept it. You can't force someone to love you, and if you try, it's called rape. Are you a rapist? Are you a criminal?"

"You're the one in the wrong here, not me," Warren said.
"How can I be? I did nothing. I never promised you anything. I never flirted. I don't wear skanky clothes. I didn't hang out with you. I never gave you my contact info. There's absolutely nothing for you to stand by and say "You deceived me!".

"You never gave me a chance!"

"Your chance passed by a long, long time ago!"

"How can-"

"Shush! This chance I'm talking about, it's the decisions you made over your entire life, to be the kind of person you were when you walked into my gym. Your style, your looks, your language, and your public personality all rubbed me the wrong way. Some call that shallow of me, I call it my human right. I get to decide who I find attractive. So do you. If you think I'm pretty, thanks for the compliment- but that's as far as it goes. Because in romance, nothing starts without both guy and girl deciding they like each other. If one balks at the flirtations-"

I closed my eyes, letting the shiver of memory and nightmare run through me, purging it.

"...it's common courtesy for the other to take their leave and move on. That's called respect. The basic respect you should hold for every human being."

"DEVA! Façade this fucker!"

"Stop it. It's over. Stop harassing me. Stop cursing in my gym. Go away. I'll give you my gym badge if you just promise to leave me alone."

"No. Hell no. Hell no! I'm not going to prostrate myself before a fucking bitch! A shallow little cunt who clings to rhymes and dimes invented by feminist fucks for all you to hide your shitty, shallow, selfish reasoning. I AM GOING TO BEAT YOU! I AM BETTER THAN YOU! I AM A MAN!"

The Swellow circled in the air, looking for an opening. Steelix flipped rocks in its direction, just to keep it busy dodging.

"Deva, move in, kill!" Warren shouted.

That's it.

I have proof now, a recording.

Maybe he doesn't really mean it, and I'm sure Swellow would never consider it, but you can't even pretend to order your Pokémon to use lethal force. Shouting "Kill!" may be Warren's last mistake. Every gym battle is recorded on video for circumstances like these. I'll take this evidence to the Pokémon League and have him barred from my gym forever. They might even revoke his Pokémon license.

But that's later. Right now, right here, I'll finish it like how it's supposed to be done.

"Iron Tail."

Swellow swooped around Steelix's tail and plowed into his side with a fierce Façade. Steelix rolled over, causing Swellow to flip upwards.

"Stone Edge!"

"Quick Attack!"
There was a scuffle, a flurry of motion that was untraceable by the human eye, but in the end the bird fell to the floor and Steelix rose victorious.

"That's it."

I checked the video board to be sure.

"Ugh."

I thought he was out of Revives, but one last Pokeball under his name was lit up. His yellow Scizor. Warren wiped his hands off on his pants. A vegetable smear clung to the denim, evidence of a herb.

"Revival Herb. Didn't think I'd need it, good thing I took that merchant up on his offer."

Scizor entered the field, giving its so-called "team mate" Swellow an emotionless glance as it trod by.

Swellow really was Warren's own Pokémon. Poor thing. This Scizor was not his Pokémon. It was evident in its every appearance, that it held little respect for its current trainer- its only loyalty was to its mission. That mission was to beat me. To humiliate me. To bring me down. That was the duty assigned to it by its real master.

"I guess it's fitting. Beating you with this thing," Warren said with a sneer. Scizor spat out the remnants of the Revival Herb at the word "thing". The Pokémon and human refused to look at one another. "After all," Warren continued, "I'm not the first guy you've wronged. Or had it the worst. I feel good now, giving him the chance to humiliate you the way you humiliated him."

"That's not your business. That's between me and him. And I'm not going to stand here and justify myself to the likes of you. He knows it was his fault. I don't understand why he didn't come here himself, but it's a sad and sick idea you'd agree to be his proxy."

"I've had enough of that sick mouth of yours."

It came without warning. Things didn't start moving, more like they were in motion before I even realized it, and by the time I shouted "Fissure!" it was already too late.

Scizor was flitting around Steelix's body, dancing around it like a martial arts movie star. It twisted and turned, using every little convolution of body parts to its advantage. When Steelix twisted around in an impossible direction and got joint-locked, Scizor landed and pulled off a Sword Dance in three seconds flat. Steelix untwisted and slammed down with his tail. The yellow-colored streak flashed backwards, and then set up an Agility and another Sword Dance. Steelix tried Earthquake, to drop the agile foe into a deep pit, thrice its height. Scizor wall-jumped out. It charged up Steelix's flank, shelling Brick Breaks into every joint it could reach. My Pokémon roared in pain. These were precision strikes, ones that bypassed his thick metal armor. A violent thrashing forced Scizor to back off.

"Fissure!" I called for. We couldn't box it in, but with X Accuracy, perhaps we can get lucky?

"Double Team."

Scizor broke into clones that swarmed over the battlefield. Steelix ripped open the earth, not once, but thrice, and then ceased. He was heaving hard.

No more stamina, no more Fissures I guess.
Scizor rushed in, grabbed Steelix by the face, and forced upon his jaws. I marveled at it. Steelix's strongest muscles were in his jaw; they were needed to crush the boulders that comprised his diet. But this Bug was jacking them apart like it was a happy meal bag.

"Screech!"

Scizor let go and ducked out of the way, unwilling to take the defense drop. It rolled around, jumped over an Iron Tail, and then caught the tail from behind. Scizor tensed, and then heaved. We, all of us, were treated to the spectacle of Steelix, a 7-ton, 32-foot living creature, flying through the air, head banging against the ceiling, and landing with an earth-shaking thud into the far side of the arena.

"Steelix is…" Warren began.

Steelix shivered. Scizor flitted over and clonked it over the head and middle with enough Brick Breaks to faint Skarmory twice over, let alone Steelix. My leviathan was at last granted mercy when he lay completely still, unmoving except for labored breathing.

"Steelix is knocked out. Gym Leader, please send out your last Pokémon."

I gazed in sorrow at my Pokeballs, and thought of the victims inside.

Oddish. Sweet dreams, at least you didn't have to get hurt.

Skarmory. You took how many beatings from that Scizor, when it had three Sword Dances up? You're such a trooper.

Magnezone. I didn't even get to see how you fainted. I'm sorry.

Tyko. You were smart. So smart. You should have been born a human, you would have made an excellent trainer.

Steelix. My leader. My pal. My pride and protector. Who else but fateful heroes persecuted by gods can say they fainted twenty opponents in a single match and yet still could not secure victory? I don't know if my gratitude will ever be enough to compensate you.

And Magneton.

"Oh, Magneton," I whispered.

I released Magneton onto the field.

It's your turn.

"Now, trainers, if I may assume you are finished with your item stocks and have no remaining revival medicines," Mr. Preston said with an eye towards Warren, "this will be the deciding match of this battle. Please keep it civil, and fight fairly. Begin." The judge let his hand down.

"Double Team," was Warren's first command.

I don't want to lose this. Not to Warren. Lyra was different. Silver was different. Jade was different. The first two were likable people. The latter wasn't a proper Pokémon battle. None of the three counted towards my ratio. I can't say the same thing here. This was it. This mattered. This might be the difference between being able to provide for myself and my Pokémon, and getting thrown out on the streets. I have to win.

No, I want to win.
To allow Warren, this sexist, insulting man, to come in here and claim my badge, would be the highest insult I've ever suffered in my professional career. For all the hardships and miseries I've suffered at the hands of males in my lifetime, and some have been very, very harsh indeed, far more painful than what happened here- yet I can say none have ventured to cross that boundary from the private to the professional, and attack me where my pride holds me highest- in my gym, as a Gym Leader. Until today.

Warren, you bastard. I do not want to lose to you at all. My pride is too great to yield my badge and let you claim the satisfaction of beating me.

I sighed, deeply.

I just don't see how I can win.

"Thunderbolt," I said.

Magneton fired bolts of electricity at the many clones buzzing about it. Perhaps out of luck, it caught the real Scizor early, zapping it. It didn't seem like it was enough. When it was found out, Scizor ducked behind a Light Screen left behind by Exeggutor. The next Thunderbolt hit true, but it seemed like Scizor was grabbing the Light Screen and redirecting the electrical current from the point of impact, through its armor, and into the Light Screen.

"Roost."

Scizor ducked down and restored health.

"It was a good idea to rely on the Hyper Potions instead of Roost. I was worried about this thing's stamina. Sure, Roost restores its vitality, but it makes it tire out too quickly. I didn't want to constantly feed it Elixirs, they're pretty valuable, sell well, ya know. Good thing, he's got enough in the tank to finish it, so I figure I've played it safe so far, might as well go the whole distance."

"Why is it yellow?" I asked.

I've been staring at it the whole time, every time it's emerged, and constantly trying to guess the reason for its odd coloration.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Warren answered. "Bullet Punch."

"Thunderbolt!"

Scizor leapt aside, letting the Light Screen absorb the Thunderbolt, and raced in. It dodged a second Thunderbolt, slid under Magneton, and sent a Bullet Punch up its gut. Magnezone whined in pain. Scizor launched itself upwards, flipped, and brought down a Brick Break. Magneton threw up a Mirror Shot in self-defense- and that's when I saw it.

"The claw."

The Brick-Break delivering claw wobbled, just a little, enough to cause it to glance off Magneton's shell instead of hitting full-on. My Pokémon spun wildly out of control.

"Spark!"

Magneton shooed the foe off temporarily with a hasty spherical wave of static electricity. But this wouldn't be like Silver's Weavile. Scizor's Bullet Punch let it close in much faster than Magneton could recharge.
Sweat dribbled down my brow. From my jaw to my fists to my toes, my nerves and muscles were clenched tight.

How to win, how to win, how to win, how how how how how HOW?!?!

"Why did it wobble? Why is it yellow?"

"This is it. Ready girl? It'll all be over soon," Warren said with a smarmy grin.

"Wait!"

"No. Scizor, take the shot when you see it."

"Wait! Magneton, defend yourself!"

The mustard-colored foe coiled into itself. It was staring Magneton down, like a baseball pitcher, mentally preparing itself for the pitch that would determine the game. My heart pounded, BOOM BOOM, BOOM BOOM, in binary beats, reminder of the work it was doing to keep blood rushing to my overtaxed brain, while said brain frantically tried to sort through long-dormant memories and forgotten facts.

"Scizor is yellow because when it was evolved the Metal Coat used was infused with a special metal alloy. It couldn’t have been you who did that because you don’t know anything about metallurgy. But he does. It's his Scizor. He used his Metal Coat to evolve a Scyther while I used mine on Onix. Which means… what?! What did he use in the metal?"

"Wait for it," Warren commanded.

Scizor feinted in. Magneton let loose a Spark and Thunderbolt combo, one that crackled across the gap between the opponents. Scizor remained calm and immobile, just out of reach of the lightning.

At any moment now, it's going to launch a Bullet Punch at Magneton.

Magneton's low on health. A single punch will faint it.

Scizor is yellow. Scizor is using a special alloy.

What does that alloy do?

It…. what is this Scizor good for?

Is it titanium?

Titanium is good for aircraft because it's relatively strong for being so light. But it's very expensive. No, never mind, this Scizor isn't very fast or light-weight. It's actually quite heavy. It needed an Agility boost before it could attain the high speeds it was displaying.

It's not speedy.

But it is strong.

Why is it strong?

It's powerful.

No it's not. It's skilled and disciplined, but it needed Sword Dance to do real damage.
But once it had Sword Dance, it was really, really powerful. Brick Break shouldn't have done any
damage to Skarmory, but this Scizor proved perfectly able to bludgeon him into submission.

Crater in the floor. How could Brick Break punch hot-tub-sized craters in the floor so casually?

Think!

Warren's items. He's got so many of them. That's more than my whole month's salary in that
backpack. To buy that, you'd have to be rich.

Scizor's real master had parents who were rich, I remember. What if that guy was bankrolling
Warren as well as loaning him his Pokémon?

"Think!"

"Magnetron, oh Magnetron! I see what you're doing. You've got yourself a static field. You've got it
all set up so if Scizor comes within five yards of you, he'll trigger the capacitance and you'll instantly
fry him with a high-powered Thunder!" Warren said cheerily.

'That's right," I said automatically. It was one of Morty's inventions. But…

"That ain't gonna work, you know. You have to keep the static field going, and that takes
concentration, and endurance. Magnetron's gonna run out of juice soon. Scizor, wait for that moment.
Don't worry about Spark or Thunderbolt, Thunder is the only thing that can down you."

"Huh?"

THINK!

A metal that is magnetic, that is heavy, that costs a lot, and has some resistance to electrical attacks.

There's no metal like that.

Wait. Electrical resistance is different than Electric-type resistance. Electricity does damage to organs
within a Pokémon because it is resisted by the molecules within the organs. They slow down the
flow of electrons, which forces the electrical energy into the system with no outlet and converts it
into thermal energy, and the thermal energy causes electrical burns that cause damage. That's how
Electric attacks work.

So a metal that has a resistance to Electric-type attacks actually has very low resistance to electricity.
The lightning flows freely through the metal armor and into the ground, instead of rerouting through
the much more vulnerable internal organs.

A metal that is heavy- for hitting hard; and a conductor- to give it an edge over Electric attacks- and
durable, and probably really expensive- and a dull yellow color.

"Gold."

Oh my god.

"Scizor's made of gold."

A tug of the lips appeared at the corner of Warren's smarmy grin.

"Neat, huh? He's got some loaded parents. Three whole pounds of AU mixed in! Such an awesome
metal. Rare, prestigious- Scizor, keep an eye on that static field, don't wait for my command!- as I
was saying, prestigious, resilient. Doesn't tarnish, which means it's actually not too shabby taking Water-type attacks either. And that weight! Sucker's Brick Break oughta be renamed Iron Break! Like lead, without the low melting point. Gold has basically been the symbol of elite status since civilization was born. There's no better metal. Your steel shit is second-rate in comparison. Gold is harder, heavier, tougher, rarer, pricier, simply **better**. Gotta love the color, too. NOW!"

A spark flicked off of Magneton's magnets. Its static field had run out of energy; the capacitance Thunder trap had defused. Scizor leapt up from its crouch and gunned directly for Magneton.

Time dilated.

I stood with legs apart, eyes forward, clutching my hands into fists, like I was ready to brawl.

Warren was upright, with one arm down by his side and the other, his right with the lightning tattoo tracing down to his wrist, was stretched out and pointing at Magneton.

Our eyes were fixed on each other, and in that split moment, because we were both high-level, intellectual Pokémon trainers, I felt like we could read each other's thoughts.

Warren: *It's over.*

Me: *No it's not.*

Warren: *Magneton can't hurt Scizor. Scizor will one-shot Magneton.*

Me: *Sure it can.*

Warren: *Magneton can't hurt Scizor with Electric attacks. They won't do enough damage in time.*

Me: *True. But Magneton isn't limited to Electric attacks.*

Warren: *It doesn't matter if it's Flash Cannon or Signal Beam. Scizor can eat them all and keep going for the kill. Thunderwave isn't going to stop a Bullet Punch. Unless it has Hidden Power Fire?*

Me: *It does not.*

Warren: *Then it's over.*

Me: *Do you know I've got three and half seconds before Scizor gets close enough to launch Bullet Punch?*

Warren: *No time at all.*

Me: *Time enough for one command.*

Warren: *Nothing you say will matter. Nothing Magneton does will matter.*

Me: *No. It will. Because I figured out what Scizor is made of.*

Warren: *A gold and steel alloy, to give him special resistances and a hell of a lot of weight behind his punches.*

Me: *Yes, gold is good for those reasons. But it also has one little property that often gets overlooked by RPG noobs.*

Warren: *What?*
Me: Gold is soft.

Warren: No it isn't...

Me: Gold is a soft metal, easily bendable, susceptible to blunt trauma. Scizor didn't want to take a Screech from Steelix. It knows what you don't. It knows its physical defense sucks.

Warren: So what? You think a Magneton is gonna bring a Scizor down with a physical attack? Even if Scizor's defenses are below-average, what move do you think Magneton can use? Tackle?!

Me: Scizor has an Agility boost. And it's about to use a supersonic Bullet Punch. I wonder how fast it's going?

Warren: Faster than you can react, that's for sure!

Me: Fast enough, for, let's say...

"Gyro Ball!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

"Bullet Punch!" Warren ordered.

The Pokémon were five yards apart.

Warren: Gyro Ball? GYRO BALL?!?!? Do you realize Magneton dies with even the tiniest hit from Bullet Punch?!?!? It'll never get to use a Gyro Ball! It'll die first! THANKS FOR GIVING ME THIS WIN, CUNT!

Me: Magnet Pull.

…

From three yards out Scizor launched himself into the air, straight at Magneton. Its clawed fist was held back.

At one yard's distance, the claw came forward, in a punch that would break the sound barrier.

At a distance of one and a half feet, it noticed something was wrong. Its claw had been aimed at Magneton's upper sphere, dead center. If it dropped a little due to gravity, then it would surely hit somewhere in the middle of the Magneton formation and that would still be alright.

But it wasn't. Its fist was off-aim. It was traveling to the right, for no explicable reason.

At a distance of seven inches, Scizor's eyes widened and mouth opened in a gritting grimace. It saw Magneton passing by it on its left. It expected to keep going in a straight line. Its momentum would carry it out about five to seven yards, at which point it could catch itself, pivot, and try a second Bullet Punch.

Except it wasn't going straight. It felt itself being tugged sideways, towards Magneton, then behind Magneton, then beside Magneton, then above Magneton. Magneton was rotating, and Scizor felt like it was rotating along with it. Then everything became an intense blur due to double-digit G-Forces. Its conscious began slipping before suddenly going black.
Scizor's body was whirled around and slammed against the ground with a *thud* that could be clearly heard all the way out to the lobby doors. Not one person in the whole room was breathing. The silence was absolute, a testament to the spell of shock and awe the human population was currently under.

Stillness reigned over the gym.

The patter of footsteps, one at a time, sounded out over the eerie quietude. I was making my way across the arena, disregarding the Pokémon, Preston, and everything else, to stand tall over my opponent. He was crouching, bent double, staring at the ground.

"How?"

The question was uttered in the most pathetic voice I've ever heard from a male. It made me almost want to pity the boy.

And he truly was a boy, not a man, like he claimed.

"Magneton used its ability Magnet Pull in conjunction with Gyro Ball and a slight dodge to its right. Scizor was captured, like a comet passing a planet, and slung around following the principles of orbital mechanics. By pulling it into tight circles its velocity was increased. Magneton then released its Magnet Pull when Scizor was on a vector into a hard surface, namely, the ground. Because of its high speed, Gyro Ball's damage was increased. Because of its low defenses due to using a relatively weak gold-steel alloy, it could not withstand the impact and was fainted in one blow. Scizor never got to touch Magneton."

"You're..." Warren's expression devolved into that state of subtle shock characteristic of people suffering disillusionment.

"Let me be crystal clear: I reject your love. Now get out of my gym."

Warren slowly got up, shakily, and retrieved Scizor to its Pokeball.

"I..." he turned.

I stared him down, unwavering.

"Hey, Warren."

My heart jumped, surprise turning to joy.

Morty! Morty!

Morty appeared in the doorway of the lobby. He jogged over, and it was clear he had business with my defeated challenger. He acknowledged me with a nod of the head, and then threw an arm around Warren.

"Who are you?"

"I'm the guy who would've beat the fuckin pulp out of you if you had gone and upset my dear girl
over there."

Warren reacted to this comment with sudden panic and violence, throwing off Morty's arm. Morty took it in stride and wrapped the guy up in a head-lock that looked very much like a brotherly half-hug.

"But you lost the battle, so I'm gonna go easy on you. Actually I'm gonna be really nice to you. Did you know there's a way to get into the tournaments without beating all eight Gym Leaders?"

"You're fucking kidding."

"I'm a Gym Leader, I would know. It's not easy, hell no, but it's not impossible either. And it means you can play with the big boys without ever having to come back here and bother poor Jasmine."

"Okay," Warren said dumbly.

"Trust me, I know what I'm talking about, and I'm doing you a favor. You wouldn't want Jasmine for a girlfriend anyways. She's violent. I said I'd beat you to a pulp? She'd feed your carcass to a chipper machine, turn you into human fertilizer. You're lucky."

"You're her boyfriend?"

"Oh, yeah, I guess some people would call us boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Uh."

Warren was looking over Morty. Morty was in an Olivine logo T-shirt and corduroys, but still had his indigo headband on and trademark flame-patterned scarf wrapped around his neck.

"You're a Gym Leader."

"Yeah, I said that. Now, who are you?"

"I'm Warren Avery."

"Yeah, yeah, I know that. I mean, where are you from? What's your goals? How've you been doing in life?"

"Uhhh…"

"Oh, we'll have time to chit-chat later. Right now, let's just get your Pokémon fixed. Then we'll talk about GTLE."

"What does that stand for?"

"General Trainer Laddering Exception. It's how we're going to get you into the tournaments, well, if you do the work and all that jazz."

"Thanks, I guess."

"No problem!"

Morty looked back to me, giving me a wink.

"Eh! Well, I just remembered. This info's not free. They like to keep GTLE secret, so people don't abuse it too much. Would throw the whole system off balance."
"What do you want? Why are you doing this? I just got humiliated out there, I don't feel like being scammed on top of that."

"There's no scam. But trust me," and here Morty got right up into Warren's face and his voice went low and threatening. "You will tell me what I want to know."

"Uhhhh..."

"So let's start by talking about the guy you got that Scizor from, okay? Okay. Let's find some privacy."

The two men ducked out the back door and out of sight.

"So?"

"He won't bother you ever again," Morty promised.

"What did you ask him? What did you find out?"

Morty waved me off.

"I want to know."

"Not now. Just enjoy your victory."

It was hard to. As Mr. Preston so kindly informed me, this victory did squat to help my win ratio. I'd already beaten Warren, another win over him just meant I didn't lose and erase that win. I had nothing to gain by battling him again.

"No. I went through too much trouble because of that guy, I demand to know the truth."

Morty reached over and put his hand around my head, forcing me closer to him. He planted a big kiss on my cheek and then resumed his position.

We were on the highest seat of the stands, watching other trainers battle down on the arena floor. My Pokémon were scattered about, resting from the hard combat. Some of the ones who hadn't participated were playing with little kids. Preston was gone. Lyra was talking with Erika, and Ethan and Silver were having a practice battle (Azumarill versus Poliwrath). Morty was acting unusually upbeat, but he didn't seem in the mood for lovey-dovey kissy-kissy antics. It seemed like he was more interested in humming aimless ditties and light chit-chat.

"Tomorrow's your exams, right?"

"Yes."

"Did you study?"

"Hard."

"Good. They're in Mahogany, right?"
"Yes."

"Cool, cool. I'm going to be your personal escort, stay with you every step of the way. I've got our train tickets right here, and Erika has packed you a travel bag. Even stopped by the convenience store, got you instant-make coffee and granola bars. Everything's going to be peachy."

"You're coming with me?"

"Of course! How could I leave you alone with the mean, scary old Mr. Pryce!"

"Please don't disrespect my mentor."

"Sorry, I'm sorry."

"And I don't drink coffee."

"Then I'll drink it myself."

I sighed and gazed sidelong at him. He's got a sliver of a curl over his forehead and it's agitating my OCD. My hand came up to brush it aside, but before it could reach Morty had already reached up to fix it himself. I sighed again.

"So you're not going to tell me about what you got from Warren?"

"Not until after your exams," Morty answered. "I don't want it weighing on you while you're taking them."

"Good point," I said, and slid sideways. My head came to a rest on Morty's shoulder. "I'm tired."

"Course you are. Had a long day."

"I'm tired of being picked on by guys. I hate it. Just because they think I'm cute, they fall in love, and then they think I'm obligated to return their love, and they get mad when I don't. It's the same tired story."

"It'll get better, once you get older."

"Because I'll be old and ugly."

"Nah. That's not the reason."

He grinned but did not explain further. I didn't really care, my thoughts were lilting elsewhere.

"I'm scared," I said. "This time it was a Pokémon battle. What about the next? Will it keep escalating? What if, if?"

"Jasmine," and this time he shut me up with a kiss on the lips. I took it passively, enjoying it even though it wasn't helping my mood.

"It'll be alright. I'll protect you. That's why I'm here."

"Here in Olivine," I echoed thoughtlessly.

"Here on Earth," he corrected.

"Don't be so melodramatic."
Mentor

Essay Section

Select two of the following five essay questions and answer them.

2) Explain the prevalence of monotype specialists in Pokémon League Gym Leader positions.

Monotype specialization has been the predominant team-building strategy since humans first began taming Pokémon. In eras before long-distance travel became common human trainers were limited to the types available in the local environment. Different types favor certain habitats over others— for example, Ground-type species are suited to desert environments while Bug and Grass-types are adapted to forests. The practice of training Pokémon was not as well understood, so that it required more work and skill to achieve a level of mastery similar to today's standards. By focusing on one type, ancient trainers reduced the amount of knowledge and experience needed to train a full team of Pokémon. Naturally, when Pokémon gyms began arising from informal fight clubs in the 1850s, the Gym Leaders were also monotype specialists. The trend towards diversely-typed teams did not manifest until the late 1940s, by which time the Gym Leader system was fully established and monotyping practices were well entrenched.

Common knowledge would have it that Gym Leaders remain monotype specialists because of tradition, or to demonstrate to challengers the weakness and strengths of the various types. This not true.

The true question should be: Explain why monotype specialization remains predominant amongst Gym Leaders when diversely-typed teams have become predominant in all other levels of competition.

Beginning in 1956 Pokémon League CEO Mikhael Kloch put into place practices and policies, both formal and informal, to maintain monotype specialization predominance within the Gym Leader system. Applications for employment and certification are biased towards specialists, and financial incentives are instilled by way of ad revenue and event promotion, with rules of inclusion that restrict the diversity of a Gym Leader's team. An example of one rule would be that in an advertisement photo-op, a Gym Leader must have a full six-Pokémon team with matching coloration, for "photogenic appeal and consistency", taking advantage of the fact that similarly typed Pokémon tend to have similarly colored hides. According to notable academic Professor Azak Hawthorn's research "Inquiry into Evolution of Modern Pokémon Battling Competition Structure", Kloch's prime motivation was to deliberately weaken the Gym Leader system's competitive edge, lest it challenge and eventually usurp Kloch's newly-fledged rival Tournament system. The effort succeeded, reducing the effectiveness of Gym Leaders in serious competition, and forcing them into an ancillary role to the overall Tournament system.

In addition to the formalized policies of the Pokémon League, inertia of public opinion prevents the challenging of the assumption of monotype Gym Leaders, whereby Gym Leaders are put under peer pressure, particularly by their sponsors, to remain monotype in order to appeal to continuity and tradition. Gym Leaders who challenge this assumption and push for competitive advantage using diversely-typed Pokémon teams will face loss of revenue from their sponsors and the League. Representatives of the League and other interests will persuade a competitively successful Gym Leader to resign and enter into the Tournament circuits with promises of better money and public recognition. If all else fails, the League may resort to firing the individual based on "bad faith representation of the League's core values", as exemplified by the Sashibi case (Ashiwao Sashibi v.
In sum, the vast majority of Gym Leaders remain monotype specialist despite the competitive disadvantage because of biased hiring methods and financial incentives, the cause of which is deeply ingrained institutional bias against the Gym Leader System.

5) Consult the charts in this link: Pokémon Trainer Demographic Data. Provide critical analysis of the data, explain what it represents, provide reasons as such, and describe possible impacts on the Gym Leader organization.

The data demonstrates a youthening trend amongst all categories of Pokémon Trainers. The average age of general Pokémon Trainers is 20 and has remained steady since 1950, when data began being collected. Youth generally have more free time and less responsibilities, as well as greater energy and interest in action-oriented activities, pre-disposing them to the sport of Pokémon battling. However, the youthening trend is also present among Gym Leaders: the average age has dropped from 34 in 1990 to 25 in 2011. Given that Gym Leaders 1) are professional employees of the League, with salary, duties, legal responsibilities, and organizational leadership requirements in addition to their Pokémon battling acumen, 2) benefit from experience and training time in building their battling expertise, 3) have a minimum age requirement of 18 (15 under supervision, unclear if age-provisional leaders were included in data), and 4) typically retain their position for the duration of their careers, it would seem that there should be an aging trend among Gym Leaders, or else have a significantly older demographic median. The data indicating the opposite would reflect a reality created by a confluence of factors.

Chief Surgeon Anari Kenko’s study on the long-term effects of Pokémon battles on Pokémon concluded that accumulated injury sustained during Pokémon battles likely resulted in increased health complications that reduced the expected lifespan of the Pokémon as well as their quality of life. Dr. Kenko’s report precipitated voluntary action, and in many nations outright regulation, that limited the intensity and length of a Pokémon’s battling career, dependant on species and individual status as determined by bi-yearly checkups. This deterioration is exacerbated by the strenuous nature of a Gym Pokémon’s career. An average Gym Pokémon may participate in over 90 battles per week, 49 weeks per year, compared to 15 battles per week, 30 weeks per year, for an average Tournament Pokémon. The accumulated stress on a Gym Pokémon’s body is commensurate with the increased battle participation (Gym Leaders’ Pokémon Lifetime Health Study, 2009, Dr. Malardus Lacrimitus et al of Uni. of Ringtown).

Pokémon lifespans vary wildly but are generally shorter than humans, often shorter than a human's career as a trainer, and therefore already limit the time range within which a trainer may capture, train, and battle with a given team of Pokémon. The rigors of training, especially that of bringing a Pokémon to an elite level that can effectively compete in Gym Battles and higher circuits, are difficult to sustain with age.

These two factors combine to limit the timeframe in which a Pokémon Trainer can effectively raise a team of competitive Pokémon and employ it in Pokémon battling. The span of years during which a Trainer’s initial batch of Pokémon reach their prime, if caught and raised by the trainer when the trainer was in their early teens, is the age range of 19 to 26, closely correlating with the average age of all trainers. As a trainer ages, her original and most powerful Pokémon also age and are forced to retire; the trainer’s retirement soon follows if they are unable to continually train new generations of battlers- which may happen for any number of financial or personal reasons.

This would be the primary reason for the demographic trend amongst not only Gym Leaders, but Tournament participants, Facility Leaders, Frontier Brains, and Operatives as well. Indeed, the data shows averages of 23, younger than Gym Leaders, for Tournament and Operation participants- these
fields generally being regarded as the highest level of competition and requiring the most exhaustive training regimens and peak Pokémon species.

A significant contributing factor would be the turnover of the demographic gap created by socio-economic forces within the past ten years. The data shows a slight aging trend amongst Gym Leaders from 2001 to 2009, although not enough to counterbalance the overall youthening trend. Several factors, including 1) the 2003 and 2006 economic downturns, 2) the 2004 Castelia Pokémon World Championship tragedy and its fallout, 3) lack of competitive salaries and support for new Gym Leaders, 4) generous benefits for senior Gym Leaders, and 5) animosity towards the Pokémon League's leadership, combined to dissuade young trainers from entering Gym Leader positions. With the economic upturn in 2008, and CEO Stone's restructuring of Gym Leader policy in 2009, which included increased pensions combined with decreased benefits to encourage elderly Leaders to retire, as well as training and signing bonuses for young Leaders, the age gap experienced a dramatic turnover, resulting in a 3.5 year drop (30.1 to 26.6) in the average age of Gym Leaders in the year 2010 alone.

The youthening trend over time can be explained by the confluence of all of these forces: the impact of the Kenko report limiting Pokémons' careers, the increasing competitiveness of the sport demanding a greater toll on the human body and psyche, and the turnover of the demographic gap in 2009 and 2010. The average age of Gym Leaders is predicted to continue to drop, reaching a bottom of about 24 years old in 2015 and holding steady from there.

I bit the tip of my thumb, and then clicked "Submit".

This turned out to be a lot more vexing than I thought it would be. Either I was imagining things, or the written exams underwent a drastic increase in difficulty between now and two months ago at the Gym Leader Summit. The part I thought I would struggle with the most, Facility Regulations and Maintenance, ended up being an easy-breezy multiple-choice section. The short-essay and long-essay sections were almost a complete disaster- I wasn't informed of the long-essay format until yesterday, right before I boarded the train. Luckily, Question #2 was something I had been studying since Morty and Volkner's battle, and Question #5 was on a topic that has been dear to my heart ever since I was little - Pokémon health. Having the weekend to study certainly made a difference.

**Thank you for submitting your Probational Certification Written Exam. Results should be graded and returned to you within three (3) business days. Please be patient and direct any inquiries to the Office of Certification, link here.**

Haaaaaa!

I let out a huge sigh of relief.

That was supposed to be the easy part. Now comes the hard part: the battle results requirement. I'm well above 50% now, it would take a total collapse for me to fall below the threshold for failure. I can eat six losses a day, every day, and still eke out a pass. Of course I mustn't lose focus, but now that the end is in sight, my expectations have upgraded from "hopeful" to "confident".

As I let out a big sigh, a hand fell on my shoulder. It was a gnarled and wrinkled hand, and felt warm and reassuring. I allowed it to give me a massage until the tension in my back melted away and all that was left was pleasurable relief.
"You did well," Pryce said. His voice was low and had a slight croaking to it, but, as always, it carried a grandfatherly strum within its tone that never failed to cheer me up. It was like the chicken noodle soup of voices.

I slowly lifted myself out of the seat. There was no help from my back, stiff and sore as it was from four straight hours of shifting from one bad posture to another. Pryce reached over and helped me to my feet, for which I gave him a faint smile and grasp on the arm.

"Do you think I passed?"

"I'm certain of it," he said, and I felt better. Pryce wasn't a man to hand out white lies or false hopes, and he had been monitoring my exam all the way through, so I could count on his assessment with full trust.

"I thought those essay questions would doom me."

"Unlikely. You gave them a bit more detail than they required for full marks, actually. Although, you included references. They may take the time to track those down and check them for factuality, so your scores may come a little late."

"How late?" I asked.

"Eh, a week, at most, probably less."

"Will that hurt my grade?"

"It depends on whether they are good sources and back up your statements. If they do, it will be a bonus to your grade. If they do not, then your grade will suffer."

"Oh."

"The graders prefer test-takers do without external sources altogether. It is an added burden on them."

"I wish I had known that ahead of time."

"I wish I had thought to tell you. Ah well, I'm sure it will work out to your advantage. You have a sharp mind, my dear, I have the utmost confidence in your work."

"Thank you."

"Now, you must be starving."

"A little," I said with indifference.

A growl from my gut said otherwise.

"Let's go to The Deck and grab lunch. Your guest may join us."

Pryce took a gander across the room. On the other side of the glass wall, Morty smirked and waved.

Because of League rules, I had to take my probation written exam (it's actually on a computer) at the Pokecenter of the city of the Gym Leader Association Head. They were under some paranoid assumption that Gym Leaders and the managers of their local Pokecenter had some undue special relationship which would compromise the security of their tests. Therefore, last night Morty and I boarded a train and hoofed it all the way out to Mahogany Town. That was six wretched hours of
bumpiness, and I didn't even get to enjoy Morty's company because I had to use the extra time to study. We stayed at the Pokécenter in order to save money, which made the commute to the computer room this morning a simple matter of walking downstairs.

Pryce led me out of the computer room, and immediately Morty bounded over to us. He would have grabbed me up in a hug, but Pryce playfully blocked his way. The younger man attempted to dodge, but was confounded at every turn by the surprisingly agile older man. Then Pryce coughed and Morty had his opening. He snuck around and readied himself to pounce… only to find I had retreated around Pryce's other side.

"Save me, Pryce! Save me! There's a ghoul right there and it wants to eat me!" I cried.

"Not if I can help it! The only eating that shall be done is by us, upon burgers and fries!"

"But this a very persistent ghoul!"

"Oh it is, is it? Then it must learn patience, or else it will find itself on thin ice!" Pryce declared, playing along with my skit. He unleashed a Pokémon, a Swinub, which blew Powder Snow in Morty's direction. The cretin giggled helplessly and ran away. Swinub gave chase.

"Oh no! I'm freezing! I'm freeeeeezing!"

He slowed to a jittery halt, before locking in place like a human popsicle. Swinub hopped onto his back and began roughing around atop him.

"Ouch! Ooooooo, geffoff!"

It was on his head now.

"Aahahaha!" Pryce and I showed our mirth at Morty's misery.

Morty got a hold of the creature and held it at arm's length. Swinub struggled to break free so that it could continue smothering Morty's face in wet, slobbery kisses.

"Alright Swinub, that's not your job to kiss Morty, that's mine."

Swinub was set on the floor. It scampered in circles and then headed my way, sniffed and licked my stockings, and then returned to Pryce.

"We're going to The Deck," I said to Morty.

"Cool. Can I come, or…" Morty looked to Pryce for confirmation.

"Yes, you must. I have something to talk to you two about," Pryce said.

The Deck was a neat strip mall at the edge of town. It consisted of a row of restaurants and curiosity shops fronted by a promenade deck. The deck overlooked Noctowl Valley, a heavily forested canyon that gave way to beautiful views of central Johto. Even in the dead of winter it was popular with tourists and locals alike. Pryce made a habit of taking me here every time I visited, mainly because he liked the burgers from one particular steakhouse.

"Ah, Mr. Pryce, you've got friends today!"

"Yes, Carly, these are my fellow Gym Leaders, Morty of Ecruteak and Jasmine of Olivine."

"Awesome! Do you want the usual seating?"
"Yes please." Pryce leaned in to us. "I despise crowds while eating. How can you burp in strangers' company? Or fart? It just feels unseemly."

Imagine my face upon hearing *that* confessional.

The waitress Carly led us upstairs to a quiet rooftop dining area. There was only one other guest, an old man who nodded to Pryce like an old and familiar acquaintance. The view was upgraded from 'beautiful' to 'gorgeous', as the little extra height gave us a look over the next ridge and out to the silvery mountains beyond. Snow was already starting to accumulate on the peaks. They reminded me of a line of Snovers holding hands.

I had trouble ordering, on account of my preoccupation with the ants that were actually people swarming around the bottom of the valley. Eventually I ended up with the same order as Morty and Pryce: burgers, chips, and soda, and Carly left us to our privacy.

Pryce took a moment to gaze at the two of us, me and Morty, sitting side-by-side. His expression betrayed no judgment or conclusion.

"How long have the two of you been dating?" he asked.

Morty and I exchanged uncertain looks.

"Errm, what would you say?"

"I wouldn't say the lighthouse incident."

"Which one?"

"Both, neither."

"So, then, the gym balcony?"

"No. Probably the night before that. Our first real kiss."

"Okay. That's a good point."

We returned our attention to Pryce.

"Halloween night. About two weeks ago."

"That's not very long ago at all."

"It's really just our official starting point," I said.

"And how long ago did you realize you might have feelings for Morty?" Pryce asked.

"Um…"

That's a really hard question. I've known him for ages, but at what point did I start thinking of him in a romantic light? Was there a time when I considered dating him back in middle school or high school? Maybe there was, but after what happened at Indigo any such notion would have been obliterated. So that sort of limited the question to my current round of infatuation. Which I would probably say…

"Two months ago, I guess. The last night of the Gym Leader Summit."
"I don't know what she's talking about. First day I met her, I thought she was cute," Morty said. "I guess I really got to liking her when she blew up the gym. The whole place was collapsing into a sink hole, and we were rushing for our lives and I just barely managed to drag her out of there in time. There was dirt and dust everywhere and of course we were covered in it, but hey, we were alive! At least that was my line of reasoning. She doesn't thank me, though, or break down crying, no, she pats herself down all over, makes sure she looks pretty, and then throws a tantrum over me because I borrowed her pokeball to catch Haunter."

"You still owe me a Pokeball," I butted in.

Morty continued. "That's when I started liking her. I admired her, but also thought she was pretty hot-headed and stupid. She needed someone to look out for her, keep her calm. I wanted to be that person."

"All your teenaged antics sure did a fine job of keeping me calm."

"It's not like I had an older brother to be a role model for how to treat women! Or even a… a little sister… to teach me. I was doing my best."

"Oh, making perverted jokes at my expense was your best idea for how to "protect" me."

"I'm sorry for the general idiocy of my middle school self."

"You say that like you're a different person today."

"I really am," Morty said emphatically.

"Ah, this is more like it," Pryce said.

We paused fighting. I was puzzled by that remark. Pryce went on.

"You two arguing and sniping at each other. But you're still sharing chips."

I hadn't even noticed it, consciously. Morty had started taking my cool ranch Dorangos chips absent-mindedly, so I had stolen his cheese-blast Dorangos in return. Neither of us were making a fuss about it, or even thought about it until Pryce pointed it out.

"You fight and fight and then fight some more, then you get tired and make up. At the end of the day you genuinely care for each other. That's the two young ones I'm used to. Not these moping, world-weary pessimists I've had to deal with for the past few years."

Morty and I sat in silence, feeling scolded.

"Ha! I didn't mean to put you down, I'm just happier seeing you two happy as opposed to depressed. Joy is a fundamental requisite to living, you should remember that."

"Erm…"

"I'm curious about what brought you two together. Morty, you were on the right track, please continue."

"Mmm, okay." Morty had to sit and think for a long moment. "What do I like about Jasmine?"

"What do you like about her. How did you end up in a relationship. What do you think your future is going to be like. Things like that."
Morty choked and made funny faces. He stared at me, pleading, but I wasn't about to go first. He sputtered to a start, and measured out his words very slowly and awkwardly.

"So, I like Jasmine because she is cute and pretty and good looking. She is very feisty at times and I like that about her too. She's also quiet and timid at other times and that makes her cute too. I guess it's because she's so complicated. It's a ride being around her. But not a wild ride. She prides herself on being cool and collected and serious and stubborn, but she can blow up and throw epic fits if provoked. She hates being seen like that though so she works all the harder to stay calm. It's the effort she puts into her persona that I like. That makes her endearing. I want to cuddle and protect her and make her happy so that she doesn't have a reason to blow up or melt down or get sad, so that all her effort to be a mature person doesn't go to waste."

Morty steadied his voice.

"I want to help her be the person she wants to be."

I gawked a little. How am I supposed to follow that?!

The answer came to mind very quickly.

"I fell in love with a dork who can fart out poetry," I said succinctly.

Morty bowed in appreciation.

"Seriously, I like Morty because he is reliable. He's reliably funny, reliably perverted, reliably helpful, reliably infuriating, reliably comforting, reliably caring. All the good and bad and great and god awful that is in him, stays the same and can be counted on no matter what the external circumstances. He is consistent. I know what to expect in a given situation, and that makes me feel like I can trust him. I know him."

My voice went soft.

"I know him."

"Do you now." Pryce leaned back.

Now he's staring at me like he's expecting me to explain what I meant, even when I don't want to. Can't he be satisfied with a poignant phrase and be done with it? Judging by his stare, I guess not.

"Well, I don't know everything about him. But I'm hoping that's something for me to discover as we go on. At least, I'm confident I know what kind of person he is, so I doubt I'll be shocked by whatever secrets he decides to share with me."

Morty rolled his eyes.

"So you trust him. Is she right, Morty? Are you a trustworthy individual?"

"No, not at all," Morty replied. I fumed. Of course he'd say that! Flipping around words and constantly subverting the mood of things, that's also something I can count on Morty to do!

He went on. "I'm too discombobulated to be trusted. Can't get my head straight, you see. Well, you can be sure I have the right priorities, but my instincts and habits lead me elsewhere. There's a difference between what I know I should do and what I do on spur of the moment decisions."

"You make it sound like you are susceptible to straying on Jasmine."
"I… uh…"

"Be truthful."

It was Morty's turn to fall under the cold, hard gaze that could not be deceived or lied to.

"I don't feel like it's appropriate to be sharing my love life here."

"Boy," Pryce growled, and I jumped in my skin because it was so uncharacteristic to hear Pryce talk meanly upon someone, "don't you think you can keep secrets from a man who's taken more deathbed confessions than you've had warm pussies to fuck. Out with the truth now. Have you been faithful to Jasmine?"

"No, not entirely."

My fingers dug into the burger I was holding. Morty wouldn't face me, his focus was chained to Pryce's intense stare.

"Well go on!"

"The last time I slept with a girl… was the night after the summit."

That was two and a half months ago. Before our kiss. Before even I gave him the three tasks he needed to complete to earn that kiss. Maybe this isn't a big deal?

"Who was it?" I asked.

"My assistant, Danielle."

The girl who helped him orchestrate the Halloween hoax. He's told me they've slept together before, but he claimed it was a long time ago. Two months is kind of stretching the definition of "long time ago", though.

"If you loved Jasmine, why did you cheat on her?" Pryce asked.

Morty covered his face with his palm and rubbed his temples.

"I wasn't… I didn't know then. I was pretty convinced Jasmine was going to shut me out. We'd met the night before at Olivine's lighthouse and had a talk, and it didn't end all that well. She wouldn't even give me a goodbye hug. So I was feeling dejected and rejected, like I had been given a chance to win her over and blew it, again. It hurt. I'm weak-willed and let lust get the better of me. Danielle and I have a complicated history. We don't love each other, but it's easy to convince her to get into bed with me. I used her as an outlet because I didn't know any other way to deal with my stress."

"Are you the kind of man who finds himself sexually frustrated often?"

"Easily."

"Can you control yourself when overcome with those feelings?"

"I know what I just said hurts my credibility, but I feel like I can control myself now. I'm different from how I was two months ago. Things are clearer to me."

Morty at last turned to me directly.

"Jasmine, I'm so sorry. I had no idea I was going to get another shot. It wasn't until we went to
Blackthorn. When you left your Pokeballs at the diner I thought it was my chance to just make up for all the retarded things I've done to you. But when you got them back and you hugged me, I realized that I loved that feeling of being able to make you happy. I realized I had to stop doing these idiot things like screwing other women, if I wanted to be with you and keep being able to give you the joy you deserve."

"Does that mean you've stopped messing around with women since Blackthorn?"

"Yeah."

"Even Danielle?"

"Yeah."

"How can I be sure? What kind of history do you two have that you can hate each other and then screw each other?"

"It's... ah, I can't really explain it all. But you'll get to meet her tonight. You'll understand then. There's nothing going on between us anymore. I put an end to it."

Strangely, I don't feel betrayed. It's not like this is unexpected from Morty. Of course, that was an uncertain time, before we were really progressing towards a relationship. He had manly urges he needed to fulfill, that was all. Soon, he won't have to go straying to fulfill them. If that's the only thing keeping him from being completely faithful, then it will be a non-issue in less than three weeks. As long as he remembers what's most important to me: that he keeps loving me. I really, truly, desperately need that love.

"I think I can forgive you, if you keep your word," I said.

Morty heard me and tilted his head, as if remembering something important. Then he suddenly burst into a cocky grin that wasn't remotely endearing.

"What's there to forgive? We weren't exclusive back then, I had the right to satisfy my needs."

"Damn it Morty!"

"I'm not kidding! You knew coming in, I'm this kind of guy. You should get used to it!"

"It's not about who you are... it's about how you choose to display it! Don't be so... so... BRAZEN about it!"

"Hahahaha!" He had a good laugh at my consternation.

"It's not a laughing matter young man."

Morty halted his merry-making.

"I'm going to want some guarantees that you will cease trapezing around town if you desire to continue relations with this young woman," Pryce demanded.

"What are you, her dad?"

Pryce motioned for Morty to come closer with his finger. Morty leaned in, expecting Pryce to lecture him. The old man smacked him across the cheek. The young man reeled backwards, more from shock than pain.
"You'll have to learn to control that insolence of yours. She deserves better."

"Geez. It's all about her. I think, after all I've done, I could at least share what I want without getting hit or shouted at."

"Jasmine is not some rank vixen you are entitled to. As a man of honor, it is your responsibility to live up to her expectations if you want her love."

"What do you want?" I asked Morty. The boy glared sidelong at my mentor.

"Can I really say with chivalry-pants here?"

"Anything you say to me will get relayed to Pryce anyways. I trust him more than you. He is my mentor after all."

"Well, if I'm being honest, I want sex. Is it that big a deal? It's been awhile since I got some and I'm getting impatient."

"Wrong answer," I said.

"Very wrong answer," Pryce echoed.

"What?! What am I supposed to say, 'I want you to be happy no matter how much I have to sacrifice for it'? That doesn't leave anything for me."

What is up with Morty? He's suddenly changed into a real selfish snob. How on Earth can he be so lovable and touching one moment, and then completely debauched and offensive the next? And I was just praising him for being reliable!

He went on, sounding indignant. "I think you've got to understand what you're getting into if we're going to be a couple. Sure, I'll wait to have sex with you, and I realize we've got some important personal issues to work out first, but I'm working under the assumption that we'll get to screwing eventually. And then... I just don't want to put all this effort and find out you're pure vanilla in the sack, or worse, you figure out you hate it and go back to being a total prude."

"That's not something you have the privilege to worry about at this point!" I said.

"That's not something you should ever worry about," Pryce added. "Do not make your love contingent upon something as banal as sexual ability. It's shallow, unbecoming, and unimportant."

"Mr. Pryce, I respect you, but I'm going to have to disagree with you. I believe sexual compatibility is important in a long-term relationship."

"Morty, Morty, Morty! You should have shut up a long time ago! Grr!" I wasn't enjoying this open talk about sexual inclinations. "There's nothing stopping you and I from breaking up if we're not compatible in that way. But that's something to decide when we get there, and right now you're sounding like you're in way too much of a hurry to get there! Be patient!"

"What kind of man do you want me to be? A guy more interested in long walks on the beach than fun times in the sack? To me, that's boring. Talking and feeling close? Spilling our souls out to each other? That's wonderful, I approve, but that's something I do with my friends and family. What makes us lovers ought to be, you know, the fact we're regularly making love to one another. Physical intimacy. For me, that's going to include a lot of humor and raunchiness and lack of shame, because that's my personality. That's my tickle spot. I hope you'll accept that about me. If not, I know a lot of other vanilla guys who'd ask you out."
"Why would I want another guy!" I exclaimed. Morty reeled at this, as if struck by a bullet. "I just
want you to act with a bit of restraint, that's all! 30% tsun, 70% dere, not the inverse! Consider my
feelings!"

"Am I not considerate enough?" he asked.

"No!"

Morty fell silent.

"Say something!" I demanded.

"You ever consider my feelings?" he asked.

"All the time!"

"Really? Or do you just consider what you think is best for me?"

It was my turn to be taken aback.

Is… is he right? All this time, and I had stupidly assumed… what? That Morty was a shameless perv
with a mile-long rap sheet who happened to be desperately in love with me? Which meant I could
twist and turn him any way I pleased; so long as he wanted me to reciprocate his feelings he'd have
to play along. Then, hopefully, I could bring out the upstanding young man I knew he was inside
and make that his default persona. If he didn't like that, we could end this tango and be rid of each
other, and I was sure his ego wouldn't suffer in the slightest.

Yet, was I wrong? Did I completely ignore the fact that I might hurt him?

The same way that bastard hurt me?

I try so hard but I'm not perfect.

Don't kid yourself. "I'm not perfect" is just an excuse people use to avoid confronting their faults.

"Morty," Pryce said as he stood up.

"Yes sir?"

"That was a reprehensible thing to say to Jasmine. As if your feelings could possibly be hurt by any
of Jasmine's actions. That is not who you are."

"But…"

"No buts. You forget I know your parents and I know what haunts you. Do you want me to tell
Jasmine?"

"NO!" Morty exclaimed.

"Then tell me what's really going on in that mind of yours."

"Um…" My boyfriend glanced at me warily. "Can we talk in private?"

"Yes. Jasmine, if you would excuse us."

I feel like I was dumped.
The men left me alone for ten minutes, in which time I finished my meal and enjoyed the view some more. I took to Pokémon watching to wile away the time. At the moment, that was mainly Spearow, Pidgey, Sentret, and an occasional Ledyba.

"Jasmine."

Pryce and Morty reemerged from the interior doorway. The latter was looking like he was returning from a funeral. He came up to me, gave me a kiss on the cheek, and whispered to me:

"I'll see you downstairs."

Then he left. The veranda was empty of other customers. I was alone with Pryce. He motioned for me to take a seat, which I did, but not before rushing to help him into his own seat.

"Ah. There. Thank you."

"You're shaking. Are you okay?"

"I'm an old man, this is what age does to you. I'll be alright, for now."

He put on a brave face for my sake, so I tried putting away my worry and giving him the cheeriest front possible. With both of us seated and facing the skyline, the atmosphere settled into a calm.

Pryce began talking, slowly, steadily, from memory.

"Beret once visited my gym. He told me he was having trouble reaching his quota of challengers battled for the week. I asked why, and he claimed it was because not enough trainers were able to defeat his subordinates. Apparently, his gym had just accepted a new staff member, a tiny little upstart in command of a rock leviathan thirty times her size. She was vanquishing challengers left and right, leaving nothing for Mr. Beret to actually fight himself. There was a real danger that his win ratio would drop below the acceptable threshold, because only the strongest trainers, the ones who were certain to defeat him, were making it through. I was aghast. Here was a man who had captained a ship through a minefield to deliver humanitarian aid to an active war zone, and he was scared to the bone of being upstaged by a pint-sized brat!"

Pryce chuckled.

"He told me- "If this kid doesn't have a Silver Moltres by the time she's our age, hang me. I've failed my job." He would never let her know it, but he had high hopes for her, very high. The man never, not once in all my memory, oversold a thing. He was an eternal pessimist and poo-pooing put-downer, never gave enough credit where it was due. To hear him heap such high praise on another trainer, it sent my own expectations sky-high. In the end, they weren't high enough. I think Beret was happiest in his final years, because he knew he had found someone special to entrust his gym to."

I blushed.

"There's no way I could win the Silver Moltres. I'm not even a tournament trainer," I said.

The Silver Moltres was the trophy given to the winner of the Johto League Regional Championship. The Kanto champion was given the Golden Moltres.

Pryce placed a hand on my shoulder, squeezing lightly.

"The first time I saw you, I ignored you. I thought you were Beret's granddaughter, the way you were hiding behind him all shy and cute-like. You hardly looked twelve. Imagine how embarrassed I
was when Beret trotted you out as the prodigy he had been bragging about for months and months!"

"I can't imagine."

"It was great. I could hardly contain myself. You were a precious little flower. With thorns, though. Do you remember our battle?"

"Vaguely," I said.

"Did you know Beret asked me to go all out when I only wanted to test you a little?"

"No, but I could guess that. It sounds like something he would've done."

"It was a good effort you put up, and even though I won in a sweep, I admired the way you composed yourself after the match. You didn't throw a fit, but devoted all of your attention to tending to Onix. It was a remarkably mature reaction for one your age. That loss didn't affect your spirit, it only made you want to try harder, I remember."

"You do? It's fuzzy to me."

"Aye," he nodded.

"Um, honestly, I only remember being upset that I couldn't get a knock-out, but I didn't want to show it. And Onix was so cold. I was hugging him and he was like a lamp post in winter." Memory is such a strange thing, in what it chooses to remember and what to forget.

"Hmmm. Well, you were young. Old folk notice these subtle things."

"Nnn."

"Once you got the courage, you had no compunction in facing me and telling me you would be a better Gym Leader than me someday. After yesterday, I think you've reached that mark."

"The match against Warren?"

"I was listening on the radio. What was it? Twenty-eight knock outs?"

"Thirty," I corrected.

"Thirty! That's twenty-four Revives he used. An average trainer with twenty-four Revives would terrify me. A nationally ranked trainer like Warren with twenty-four nulligans, I don't think any of us would stand a chance. Yet you found a way. Your command of your Pokémon almost rivals your incredible love for them. You've lived up to every hope Beret and I invested in you- as far as Pokémon go."

So this was what this chat was leading to.

"You've not fulfilled all of our expectations."

I slumped into my seat, bracing for a lecture.

"We had hoped you would grow and mature as a member of society as well as a Gym Leader. Things like being active in the community, getting along with your fellow Gym Leaders, living your life outside of your work, connecting with humans and Pokémon beyond the scope of your job, and learning to be kind and respectful to others. That aspect of your development has not kept up."
"I'm not disrespectful to others!"

"Do you know the expression "the tongue that wags behind teeth"?"

"No."

"It means you keep up a mask of respectfulness, while inwardly you are bitter towards others."

"Only to a point! Only those who deserve it."

"But Jasmine, in your eyes, almost everyone deserves scorn."

"It's not like I'm going out of my way to make people miserable."

"No, no. That isn't you. But such bitterness causes you to fear interacting with others. You would rather avoid people that you take issue with than try to talk with them and resolve those issues. When no one lived up to your unrealistic standards, you shut yourself off from everyone - for three whole years! Even to me! We did not talk for ten months at a point."

"I'm sorry," I said grumpily.

"That hurt my feelings, I'll have you know."

"I wasn't trying to hurt anyone's feelings. I don't like being on the wrong side of society all the time. Besides, that's not the reason I went hikikomori-mode."

"You're saying I'm wrong? Then what was it that caused you to closet yourself?"

"I'm was going through personal issues. I still am."

"And the fact that you chose to deal with those personal issues by bottling them up and closing yourself off from everyone, especially the ones who most wanted to help you, do you think you can explain that?"

"No. Not in any way that's going to satisfy you."

"I want to hear it anyways."

I clamped up tight.

"Why won't you tell me?"

No response.

"Where did we go wrong?"

"It's nothing you all did."

"Then what?"

No response.

"Jasmine, this is frustrating. Morty had the courage to spill his guts to me. I will not divulge what he told me, and so I promise I will not share your troubles with anyone else."

"What makes you think I'm troubled? Why does everyone keep bothering me about problems I supposedly have?!!"
"Because I'm not convinced you are happy with your life."

"I'm perfectly happy, just stressed. There's a lot of stress in my life right now, but it'll be over soon. So don't worry about me."

I can't fathom what they see that makes them so worried for my well being. All of them- Erika, Pryce, Morty. Aren't I working hard at being the best Gym Leader I can be? Aren't I opening myself up enough to engage in society, even starting a relationship? Isn't that good enough for them?

"Are you happy being a Gym Leader?" Pryce asked.

"Of course!" I answered.

"And do you love Morty?"

"Well… I guess… I do."

'Love' is such a strong word. At what point do I call these growing feelings of mine 'love'? Pryce seemed to take my wavering confession at face value.

"If you want Morty and you want your position, how will you reconcile the fact that they are in two different cities?"

"I don't know. We'll figure it out. A long distance relationship, I guess."

"Would you be satisfied with that?"

"Sure," I said none too convincingly.

"Erika is staying in Olivine, yes?"

"That's right."

Random change of subject…

"How long will she be there?"

"A few months, I think?" Erika hadn't told me directly, but in our conversations she implied I would be visiting her in Celadon this coming spring.

"Who else do you know lives in Olivine?"

"Connie. Janina. Ted." My first thoughts were of my gym subordinates.

"Are you close to them?"

"Not really." We never hooked up outside of work.

"Anyone else?"

"Lyra and Ethan, and Silver are in town, but I don't know how long they'll stay." They're trainers, sitting still in one place is antithetical to them.

"That's it?"

"Yep. Just them, and my Pokémon."
"Ah, Amphy, you mean."

"Amphy, Steelix, and everyone else." Although if he's checking down a list of who I have available to me to be social with, Amphy would be the most immediate and important.

"What about your parents?"

"No," I said.

"No?"

"They're out of the picture."

Pryce tilted his head. I shook mine, showing him I would most definitely not address that question.

"And what about Edward?"

I tensed up.

"He… left. Years ago."

"I see."

Pryce nodded to himself.

"Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"I don't have a lot of friends?"

"You have many friends. The problem is that none of them live in Olivine. Given the choice, and it's been evident these last three years, you prefer to be a shut in, rarely traveling, not making any friends within your own city. We worry what that kind of loneliness can do to you, and what that antisocial nature indicates about your emotional health."

"I'm fine, I promise! I went to Goldenrod for Halloween, and Blackthorn a month before that. I'm here now. Morty's taking me out for dinner tonight. It's all thanks to him. He's done so much for me, taken it upon himself to fix all these issues you think I'm struggling with, and he's doing a great job! Did you know it was Morty who prepped my team for Warren?"

"I did not know that."

"He did it so I could study for the exam. And look how that turned out- I beat Warren and I probably passed the exam. He even made sure Warren would stop bothering me."

"Your challenger was bothering you?"

"Stalking me, and being a creep about it."

"That's terrible."

"But I think Morty found some dirt on him and warned him off. If he can do that, I'm sure he can help with all the other things I'm stressed over."

"He is useful for solving problems, that is true. Yet, does that alone make him someone you can fall in love with?" Pryce asked.
"Why wouldn't it? Everyone seems so shocked that I'm 21-years old and just now getting a boyfriend, and others are shocked that I'm getting a boyfriend at all, but it doesn't seem strange to me. All this time, I was simply waiting to meet a guy I could absolutely trust. I just didn't expect that guy to be Morty. He was a pest in middle school and an idiot in high school, but people change, and he convinced me to give him a third chance, and every step of the way he's proven himself deserving of that extra chance. Sure, he has his annoying quirks, but so do I, and I don't think they're so infuriating as they used to be, and when it comes to things that really matter- being a guy who unconditionally loves me and would do anything for me- he's passed with top marks!"

I relented in my gushing confession long enough to take a breath.

"So unless Morty told you something that would completely overturn everything he's done for me these past three months, then I'm standing by him, and trusting him with my happiness. If you think there's something wrong with me, take it up with Morty first."

"Oh dear."

Pryce shook his head.

"Well? Did he tell you something? It'd better be bigger than him screwing Danielle a few months ago, because I've already decided I'm willing to let that pass."

"It's not even remotely like that," Pryce said. "Through all your speech, you've only focused on yourself and what Morty is doing in relation to you."

"Huh?"

"I'm by no means trying to break you two up. It would delight me to see the both of you dating, as long as it made you happy." His voice lowered. "But you must be cautious in handing your heart to that boy."

"I don't get it. You want us to be together but you don't? Is he not trustworthy? Is there something I need to know?"

"There is, but I'm not going to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because you are being stubborn and sensitive and will not share with me the root of your depression."

"What do you want to know?"

"What caused you to hole yourself up for the past three years? And before that, why did you change from Rock-type specialization to Steel-type?"

"Huh?! Um... I don't know what you mean by that."

"All the time I've known you, Jasmine, since you were fourteen, you have been in a downward spiral. You've always been a volatile mix of shy and feisty, lively at times and reticent at others. It's as if you were truly meant to be an outspoken optimist, an extrovert, but something was holding you back and beating you down, until at last it beat your spirit into submission. I have as my evidence the fact that you aspired to become a great geologist, and when you took over as the Gym Leader of Olivine you schemed to turn it into a museum. Then you threw all your dreams away. You became cold. You evolved Onix to Steelix and focused solely on Steel-type Pokémon, and in your attitude
you became a Steel-type yourself. Stubborn, unwilling to socialize, unwilling to take advice. I heard you had a healthy interest in romance as a teenager, but then that went out the window as well. They called you The Shrew, such was your prudish reputation among bachelors. Everything, everything about you points to something turning you from a happy young girl to an unhappy young woman. I don't know whether it was a person or an event or society did something to you, whether you were bullied or betrayed, or maybe it's all chemicals in your brain. But I feel like if I just knew, I could help."

"I can't tell you," I said.

"And there's that stubbornness in you. We aren't going to make any progress on it, are we?"

I shook my head.

"Then with you being that way, I can't justify telling you Morty's secret."

"I'm leaving."

I've grown tired of this lecture.

"Jasmine, do not be a child!"

I stopped midway through getting out of my seat.

"Sit down, please. I realize this feels like I am being too harsh on you, but it's important that you hear what I have to say. Don't run away, for Arceus' sake!"

I slowly lowered myself back into my seat, and then wrenched it around so that I was facing Pryce. He did the same.

I don't remember an instance of Pryce being this critical of me. Ever. It hurt my feelings and pricked my pride, but it was enough to make me understand the gravity of the conversation. Pryce began speaking, and I listened intently.

"I cannot betray the trust Morty has placed in me. It is not my place to bare the soul of another to his lover. The very act of being lovers, falling in love I mean, encompasses the process of discovery, not merely of one another's bodies, history, and personality, but also their innermost humanity. So it is I implore you, before you entrust you soul to Morty, learn from him what it is that keeps him awake at night."

"Awake?"

"I will tell you this much. Your troubles are evident in the way you treat other humans. Morty hides his better, but he is not free of his demons. The reason he stays up so late is because he suffers from insomnia, and that is a side-effect of his troubles."

Pryce took my hands in his.

"I beg of you. I pray for you and Morty. You two have been like children to me. I hope that you find joy in each other, not sorrow. I am afraid, deathly afraid, that you will entrust your entirety to one another, before truly learning who the other is."

"Oh… Oh Mr. Pryce…"

I understand, finally, and because I understand I'm breaking down in shame. My cheeks tickle with
the faint touch of tears.

"You don't want me and Morty to end like you and Glacia."

Pryce, also holding back tears, nodded and grasped my hands tight.

"Is that..." I started, but couldn't think of a way to ask the question I had in mind.

"Someday, someday, I will tell you about it. Like you, I'm not quite ready to share. But I'm old. I've lived a long life. There's not much left for me to do on this planet, and more than anything, I think of what must come and just feel tired, so very tired."

"Don't say that!" I exclaimed. His words hurt. I don't want to think of those things.

"You are young, and have a long life ahead of you. It would make me feel at peace, if I could see you smile again."

I complied, as best I could, pulling the corners of my mouth upwards in a sort of mock smile that struggled to hide the fact that it was really a frown born of grief.

"Ah! Well, good effort. And tomorrow, smile again. And the day after that. Every day, remember to smile, find something worth smiling about."

"I'll try."

"And remember," he said, pulling me to the balcony's edge. Morty's blonde-haired head and scarf could be seen below, leaning over a cobblestone wall. "He needs someone to care for him as much as you do."

"I will do that," I said with confidence.

Everything Morty has done for me, and I had not really considered how I could return the favor. I had stupidly assumed it was all about sex, and sex alone would satisfy him. Pryce has done me a great favor. I knew there was something to Morty beyond his lustful need for sex, and now, thanks to Pryce, I know that I ought to be doing something about it. I don't know what yet. If I'm the model of stubbornness, then going by that, just badgering Morty to tell me isn't going to be enough. I'll have to address his needs, one by one, and keep working on the little things, to continue to build trust between us.

The boy in question was now checking his phone and shifting about, probably anxious to get going. It was time to wrap up my chat with Pryce.

"Pryce, are you going to be all right?" I asked.

"Oh? Oh, don't worry yourself about me. I'm not about to croak any day now, that's still a long ways into the future. Why, you could be double your age before my winter's come."

I chuckled. He does love to play up his Ice-type specialization, especially in his puns.

"Okay. I want a lot of warning time before I lose my mentor, you understand?" I said haughtily. "Don't you belly-up and croak on me like the last guy!"

We both laughed out loud, before the cheer died out of our voice and we fell back into somber silence.

The wind wasn't blowing. The sun was bright and cheery today; it was fairly warm for this time of
year, 66 degrees. It wasn't the air that caused my chest to shiver ever so slightly, and there was no cloud to cast the shadow that fell upon my brow.

"I miss him," I said softly.

"So do I," Pryce replied.
"Seriously?" Morty was staring at his phone, appalled. A whistle sounded out, and the guy frantically leapt up from his seat and pressed his face against the window.

A bullet train passed us. With our train going over 120 MPH and that train doing the same in the opposite direction, it was only a matter of seconds before it shot by and was gone.

"What is it?"

"He's on that train," Morty said.

"Who?"

"Red." He handed me his phone. A message from a contact named McIntry was highlighted.

**Red was here. He got angry that you weren't. He's taking the rail to challenge Pryce, said he'll be back.**

Oh goodness.

"He should've just battled Danielle. He's an idiot if he expects me to put up a fight. I'm not going to risk my Pokémon getting injured by his freak-shows." Morty returned to his seat, slightly shaken.

"Hey, do you have Pryce's number?"

"Yes," I said.

"Call him, let him know the champ is on his way."

"Good idea."

I did so, and we related the news to him.

"I am under no illusion I will be able to defeat him, but I will try my best and relay what I can learn back to you."

"Thank you Mister Pryce," Morty and I said together over the speaker.

"And thank you for the advance notice."

The line went dead.

We exchanged worried looks.

"He's getting closer," I said.

"I'll try to keep him off your butt until the 11th," Morty promised. "How's your ratio? Will it make a difference?"

"Right now I'm pretty good. I racked up a lot of wins the last two weeks, even with Warren's meddling. I think I'll be able to eat a loss from the champ."
"That's good."

"What's your plan?"

"Plan for what? Beating Red?"

"Yeah."

"I won't. I'll put up three Ghastly, let him get the easy KOs, and see him on his way. I suggest you do the same."

"Isn't that kind of cowardly?"

"Yes," Morty said matter-of-factly, "but if you can afford the loss, it's way better than risk getting your Pokémon sent to an early retirement."

"I just thought you were the kind of guy who would put up a fight, find some clever tactic that might surprise Red and eke out a win."

"Sure, against any other challenger, I'd do that. World Champion gets special respect from me."

"I see."

I wasn't willing to bow down so easily as my boyfriend, though. It was fine for Morty to give up, but I might not have that luxury. I'll need to devise a gimmick to give me some kind of advantage. After pondering out loud and at length, Morty had this to say:

"Just give up. I'm telling you, he put a clinic on Whitney and that was him being lazy as hell. Don't provoke him. He takes competition seriously, and you're not going to like what happens when his Pokémon go all out."

"You're too pessimistic. That's supposed to be my gig."

"I always thought of myself as a positivistic realist," he said.

"No one knows what's realistic until they try. I want to beat him."

"You won't win."

"So? I want to try. And trying will make me a better a trainer."

"You think your Pokémon are fine with getting their cans kicked?"

"Steelix is okay with it. I don't honestly know about the others."

"And you call yourself a Pokémon lover."

"And you call yourself a man. You're lazy! That's what it is, isn't it? You're too lazy to put in the work to take a guy like Red on."

"I am not! Look, I busted my butt to train your Pokémon for Warren."

"Oh sure, it's different when a girl is involved."

"That's unfair, you can't say that when you're the girl in question."

"Pah! Pryce doesn't need that sort of excuse to give it his best. And that reminds me, about Pryce."
"What about him?"

"Him and Glacia."

Morty's face contorted.

"Did you ever manage to confront her over what she did?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The only thing I managed to do was email her, and she gave me back a nasty reply telling me to drop it. Said those things were in the past and ought to stay there. That's it."

"And then what? Are you not going to break ties with her?"

Morty tumbled his options through his washing-machine of a brain.

"We're both going to the Johto Tournament this spring. I got invited by Karen, and she's overseeing the ethics committee, so there's no avoiding her."

"Ha! a woman like that in charge of ethics."

"I'll talk to her there and make a decision. Maybe you should come too. We'll get the full truth of what happened in that cave."

"What if she doesn't talk or tell us the truth?"

"Then I'll lose more respect for her than if she confesses and what you're saying really did happen."

"You think dishonesty is more vile than negligent homicide of a Pokémon?! No Morty, I won't accept a 'sorry' from her."

"You're all 'guilty until proven innocent', aren't you?"

"It's already proven, the rangers said."

We argued like that for the rest of the train ride. Our bickering was interrupted before it could get out of control when someone's Wooper got loose and landed in my lap. I yelled in surprise while Morty kept poking my breasts in a vain attempt to capture the creature, the pain of which caused further yelling. A gentleman with a grey mustache and little girl in tow stumbled down the aisle, and together we managed to get the runaway under control.

"I'm terribly sorry, we lost her Pokeball."

"Take mine."

I gave the man one of my spares, the Wooper was safely stowed away, the grandfather and granddaughter thanked us profusely, and peace and quiet was restored.

"What are you grinning about?" I said to Morty. "Don't think I didn't notice you groping my boobs in that fiasco.

"It was an honest mistake."
I pulled him close by the collar and, eye to eye, whispered, "If you want to cop a feel, you wait until we have some privacy!"

"But it's more fun to get away with it in public."

I released him, exasperated.

"I've got a better idea for tonight," he said apologetically. "Wait until we get to my place."

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Ecruteak's gym looked like any other gym on the outside. It was a little more worn down and decrepit looking, but with careful observation you could see the signs of artificial damage. Morty probably desecrates the gym's exterior on purpose to give it a spooky, abandoned feeling. It's like those kids who wear their school uniform wrong because they aren't allowed to wear their usual punk attire.

"Come on in," he said. "I don't think you've ever been here since I became Gym Leader."

"You're right."

Inside was much worse. The walls were cracked and the paint job was atrocious. The PC and healing machine had cobwebs all around them. The lights were bent at weird angles and did a poor job of illuminating the place. A tattered drape hung over the entrance to the main battle hall.

"I get it, you're going for a haunted house theme."

"It's not supposed to be this bad. They dressed the place up for a Halloween bash, but no one's had time to clean it all up yet."

"Do you want help with that?" I asked.

"No, no, please don't."

"I'll do it." It's for my own sensibilities as much as an offer of generosity.

"Not tonight."

He begged me off, then walked into the next room. I was caught wrinkling my nose at the dust on the counter and almost got left behind.

"Wait up."

I dashed into the main hall, only to realize the lights hadn't been turned on. Morty's back was illuminated by the light coming from the door. He seemed like he was walking on nothing but darkness. Everything else was completely black.

"Morty…"

"Don't fall," he said- a second before he himself dropped right where he stood, as if the ground beneath him had poofed out of existence. The boy disappeared from sight entirely.

Then everything vanished, because the door slammed shut behind me. There was no light to see by.
"Morty?!

I took a step forward, and another, and nearly toppled over, because where I expected to find terra firma I found nothing.

"Morty!" I yelled again.

I got down on my hands and knees and probed.

I can't see a thing, but it feels like I'm on a walkway with no rails. Beneath me there was a pit with no visible bottom. Scared, but undaunted, I crawled along, feeling the edge for guidance and making forward progress a little bit at a time. Morty never answered me.

"This is what I can expect from dating him. Endless heart attacks," I muttered. "Morty, where are you?"

I reached what felt like a dead end. Sheer drops surrounded me on all sides.

"Morty! I swear, if this another prank I'm going to have Steelix open a sinkhole right under your gym!"

"Over here," his voice called out. It sounded close, ten feet, and right behind me. I instinctively leapt up and ran towards it- and right off the edge.

"AHHHHH!"

I screamed and fell and and tensed up expecting to break every bone in my body upon landing.

The impact never came.

It felt like diving into water, but I wasn't wet. A force surrounded me and cushioned my fall, and I alighted on the ground with less impact than a feather.

A flash. I was blinded. The world went from pitch black to broad daylight in an instant. I threw up my arms to shield my sensitive eyes.

Dozens of voices cried out in unison:

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY JASMINE!!"

I'd forgotten completely.

Today is November 20th, 2012.

Twenty-two years ago on this day I was born to Elaina Mikan and David Hayate. In celebration of the twenty-second anniversary of my existence, some twenty friends and acquaintances had gathered together and sprung a surprise party on me. The emotion I'm feeling is completely overwhelming:

"I HATE EVERY ONE OF YOU SO MUCH!"

My scream was drowned out by applause and laughter.
I felt myself being lifted up by the shoulders into the air, born aloft by two familiar hands. Morty hefted me until he was carrying me in his arms, while practically everyone I ever knew gathered around to greet us.

"I guess this is our official coming out party," Morty whispered.

"Happy birthday to you! You live in a zoo! You smell like an Aipom! And you look like one too!" Morty’s friend Dexter and a bunch of gym trainers sung in raucous cheer.

"Happy birthday! We have cake! Cakes, actually! Do you like cheesecake or lemon cake?" Lyra bounded up to me and Morty.

"You little Sneasel! You knew this was coming and you didn't warn me!" I accused her.

"We've got pictures too! Infrared camera!" I was treated to a smart phone with a picture of me, falling, flailing, and with a face to die laughing for.

"I'm surrounded by evil people!" I shouted. Everyone laughed, and caught up in the moment, I laughed too. It was funny.

Morty deposited me at a table. It was overflowing with food, decorations, and wrapped presents. Two of the decorations, a pair of large plants, were getting in the way and I reached out to bat them aside. They shivered under my touch, and I jumped.

"Bellossom!"

"Vileplume!"

Pokémon!

"All for you," a female said behind me.

"Erika!" She greeted me with a hug around my chest; her Pokémon joined in too.

Looking around, I took in the spectacle.

Morty and a dozen of his friends and subordinates lounged around. Lyra, followed by her two boys Ethan and Silver, took seats close by. Erika was right by my side. Pokémon littered the room, free to roam and play with each other. Even Connie and Janina were here.

"Who’s looking after the gym?" I asked.

"My dad," Janina explained. He was a regular visitor and could be trusted, so I sighed in relief. A smartly dressed young man strode up and took Connie by the hand. Her boyfriend Seth, I presume.

Whitney, of course, who wanted to make sure I heard her "Happy Birthday" well wishes before she dove mouth-first into the desserts.

Good grief, even Chuck and Clair made it out!

"Hey, shrimp, got booze?"

"I'll take care of you Ms. Clair," Jeff said, and escorted her to a table of glasses and liquor.

"Glad you're doing okay," Chuck said.
"It's been awhile since you came to the mainland."

"I know, I know. Heh, it's worth it to see your pretty face. You don't smile much on the telecon, I miss it."

I blushed.

"Oh, and congrats on your engagement."

My blush inflamed by several shades.

"We… um… we just got together… we aren't thinking of… m-m-m-marrying anytime soon…," I stuttered and bumbled along.

"Oh! Ah I'm sorry. Guess news doesn't get out to Cianwood in one piece."

"Oh, it's okay, I don't blame you."

It took awhile to get through all of the guests, greeting them, thanking them, catching up with ones I hadn't spoken to in years. It was uplifting. I didn't know there were this many people willing to show up to a birthday party just for me (free drinks notwithstanding).

I gazed around at all the happy faces.

_This is what life is supposed to be like, _I thought.

My gaze went upward.

The main battle hall of Morty's gym was deep. We were currently three stories below ground level. There were flickers of light tracing random paths across the air. Morty had once explained his gym's gimmick- challengers had to navigate a maze of invisible paths created by force fields suspended above a pit. He had duped me into walking out onto that path with all the lights turned off. When we fell, the safety systems used tractor beams to catch us and set us on the basement floor safe and sound.

Clever, Morty, very clever way to spring a surprise on me.

My gaze went even further upwards, to the edge near the entrance. A lady stood there, staring down at us. She was red-headed, hair tied in a ponytail, in tight jeans and blouse, and gave off an air of disdain for the merriment going on down below.

She spotted me looking at her and yelled out.

"Matsuba! Get your ass up here, we've got challengers."

"Tell 'em the gym's closed!"

"We are not closed, and I don't care if you're having a patty-cake party down there, you are not shrugging off your job again! Get the hell up here!"

"Is that any way to talk to your boss?"

"Don't cheek me, I run this joint."

"Wanna settle that with a battle?"
"Any day, try me. You can come on up and show me the what for, I'll kick your ass and put you to brooming the sidewalk."

"Oh I do hate chores, I think I'll pass."

"Matsuba, I ain't warning you again!"

"Fine!"

Morty leaned down towards me. "I got to go take care of this, keep everyone entertained will you?"

"Kay."

Morty paused and leaned down again.

"That's Danielle, by the way."

I tried turning but only caught a glimpse of an auburn ponytail swinging around. The woman had disappeared.

So that's my rival?

Morty may have a thing for tsunderes, but if he's willing to screw that fireball, he must be an outright masochist. She's ten times more belligerent than me!

"Cake time?" Lyra asked hopefully.

They sang me a proper Happy Birthday, had me blow out candles, and then insistently asked what I had wished for (money). The cakes vanished into their bellies and I wondered if I didn't have a pack of Lickitungs masquerading as friends. Presents came next.

"Here's my present."

Lips met my cheek.

"Eh? EHHH?!"

Volkner!

"No really, here's mine."

"What are you doing here?"

"Ask the big shot, it was his idea," he shrugged, and then handed me a small package.

"Oh, thanks."

"Open it."

I did, and gasped. A Devon xPhone. Model 4, the newest and most advanced.

"Welcome to the twenty-first century."

"This is really expensive!" I cried.

"I get discounts," Volkner shrugged.
"I mean really expensive! Why would you spend that much on me?!

"Uh, duh, I like you- as a friend," he hastily added.

"You're not-

"Seriously, don't make a fuss about the price. I have a contract with Devon Corp doing technical work, and one of my bonuses is 75% off on new products. It didn't cost much at all."

"Oh… Well, I guess, thanks a lot." My current phone is eight years old, one of those old flip phones that can do talk, text, time, and that's it. This truly was a huge upgrade to my mobile capabilities.

"How did you know I preferred Devon?"

"When I came into your gym, I noticed Devon's logo on everything."

"Ah, of course. I'm dumb, it would be obvious wouldn't it?"

"Yeah. By the way, are you and Morty, you know, doing okay?"

"Yes," I answered tepidly. Where is this going?

"Ah, cool. You remember what I told you, if he ever gives you a hard time you come to me and I'll straighten him out. Got it?"

"Got it." Phew!

I guess Volkner will never really get over his crush- but unlike all the others he knows how to handle himself properly. The poor guy, he deserves someone to love him. Didn't Morty say they were trying to hook him up with a girl? I wonder how that's coming along.

"So, um, I've never had a smart phone. Can you teach me how to set it up?"

"Sure. Except-" and he nodded to the dozen other guests waiting their turn to unload presents on me.

"Ah, I get it. Later?"

"Later," he nodded.

We gave each other smiles.

In a perfect world, maybe this kind of relationship between us could work. If all that soured me to the idea of dating Volkner was my apprehension towards men and their sexual advances, and if what Volkner was really after was not my virginity but my company, then maybe we could settle for being close friends. We have things in common- affinity for Electric-types (his primary type, my secondary), fascination with science and gadgets, common geekery, and we both love our seaside cities.

Huh. In another universe, if I was merely shy and not pretending to be shy to cover up my anti-socialness, I wonder if we could've been a couple?

Eh… I don't know. I guess I'll never know. In this universe I am a bitter drama queen and only one man has proven patient and capable enough to handle my myriad of emotional issues. He alone has my heart. Alas, I am monogamous. Sorry, Volkner.

"Here you go."
"A scarf! How beautiful!"

This gift courtesy of Jeff and the rest of the Ecruteak gym squad.

The scarf featured the same flame pattern as Morty's, but with the colors swapped from crimson and purple to olivine-yellow and parched-brown.

"It'll look perfect for the autumn!"

"Here! Ethan, hurry up!"

Ethan handed over a rather large box at Lyra's urging.

"Open it up!"

I did so, and gawked.

"It's a… dress? I think?"

I lifted the item out of the box and let it unfurl. It was a dress, but not your typical sundress piece. The fabric was heavier, richer. It was a pale color, not quite cotton-white but the softer shade of a lily flower. Ribbons crisscrossed the bust, waist, and back in intricate patterns. At the bottom of the box were more wrappings, which revealed to be a pair of opera-length satin gloves and mary jane shoes with cute bow-ties, all matching the dress in color.

"You looked pretty good in your sailor scout outfit when you battled Silver, so we thought we'd get you something similar, you know, as a stage costume for gym battles," Ethan explained.

"Isn't it a little too much?" I asked hesitantly.

"Well, Clair has her dragon-tamer outfit. Erika goes for the traditional kimono, Janine dresses up in full ninja-garb, so why not an elegant dress for you? It's not too lewd, is it?"

"Oh no, not at all!" I looked over the outfit again and tried imagining myself in it. It would certainly be a spectacle for the males to gawk at, but at the same time it did project power and grace in a way my Sunday dresses didn't.

"I like it, I do. I just think maybe it's too nice for everyday wear? Maybe I'll save it for big battles, or regional events. It would look great at the next Gym Leader Gala." If I could get Morty to dress up in a fancy tux or something, we'd make for quite a sight at the parties.

"Oh. Yeah, that's cool."

"Try it on! Right now!" Lyra insisted. I refused. "Ah, I want to see you in it! We spent forever picking it out! You'll look so sexy!"

"No, definitely not," I retorted.

Erika's turn.

"Um…” I cocked my head. Her gift unfurled into yet another long piece of fabric. "I guess this year's theme is fashion."

This time it was a wintery-patterned yukata, with some modern construction underneath to make it easy to wear and warm in cold weather. Like the dress, my main concern was how beautiful and ornate the yukata was, and worried that I wouldn't get to wear it very often.
"We took a peep into your apartment and decided that your wardrobe needed to be upgraded. Seven dresses, one pair of jeans, one pair of shorts, three T-shirts, one blouse, one cardigan, two sweaters, and pajamas." Erika finished itemizing my wardrobe and frowned. "The styles indicate fashion trends that went out of favor three years ago. All worn out, poorly kept, wrinkled. And to think you believe that's acceptable wear for your position. Ridiculous. Utter nonsense."

"It's just how I dress, who I am."

"That's not who you are. I think you're afraid of drawing attention to yourself, but as a Gym Leader that is quite impossible. They gossip about you, you know."

"Who? What do they say?" I asked.

"According to the media, you've earned a reputation as being the most boring and unentertaining of all the nation's Gym Leaders."

"Me? Really? Even below Norman?"

"Norman's kinda cool," Lyra chimed in. "You're too innocent-looking."

"You could stand to liven up your presence. Announce yourself! Impose your style! You always complain of men hitting on you, but that's because they see you as a meek and easy target. Break their confidence by flaunting your own, and the rabble will never trouble you."

"But I don't know how to feel about cosplaying out in public," I grumbled.

"Feel confident! You're a Gym Leader! Be proud of standing out!"

I shrugged, sighed, gave in, and chuckled.

"Any more dresses for me?"

"Ha!" Whitney paused from her feast long enough to toss over another package. This one was smaller than the previous two.

"This is lingerie, isn't it?" I stared down the shifty-eyed vixen.

"Open it up," she answered in glee.

I nervously undid the wrapping and pried apart the box, pulling out a- well what do you know, it's a two-piece bikini.

"I was close!"

"Put it on," Whitney ordered.

"What? No! The dress was one thing, but a bikini is completely out of place here!"

A voice surprised me from behind.

"It's now or later, but you are putting it on." I jumped and caught Morty by the collar. Perhaps out of instinct, upon feeling my touch he reached down and pecked me on the lips.

"A gym is no place for a bikini-" I started angrily.

"No, but a hot spring is."
He pulled out a pamphlet.
"Tin Tower Hot Springs" it read.
"I reserved a night at the place."
"Really?"
I couldn't help but hide my blush.
"Morty, you know what happened last time."
"All the more reason to go, to give you a better memory than the last time," he said. "And I know you enjoy long baths."
"I do." It was true. "But I can't stay overnight, I've got to get back to my gym!"
"It's one night. Come on."
"No, I can't screw my job up. Probation lasts twenty more days."
"Fine, fine." He looked grumpy and disappointed. "I've got your train ticket back to Olivine. It leaves at eleven, so you can still enjoy the evening."
"Okay," I said with a huff.
"Happy birthday," he said.
"Thank you." I reached up and hugged him. As we embraced, I could hear the muted squeals of joy coming from various girls.
"All right, hot spring vacation!" Whitney cried.
"And you're all invited!" Morty yelled to a cheering audience. "Hey, Volks," he added.
"Yeah?"
"Follow me. Hey Jazz, why don't you and your friends go to the spectator lounge? I've got to finish some gym battles, then we'll get going."
"How long will that take?"
He looked over his shoulder. "An hour? Depends on how fast I can beat this group. They reserved a time slot for challenges and I forgot. Sorry."
"What do you need me for?" Volkner asked.
"Six of them want to do double battles, in pairs. They're all from Mossdeep Gym. Psychic twins tag teams, I gather. Mind being my partner?"
"Good luck! Beat them quick!" I shouted after.
"Ha, those two? They won't need luck," a new voice rang out. I looked to my right and was confronted by a newly familiar red-head.
"My name's Danielle McIntry, I'm second-in-command here," she said. "Let's get this cleaned up. Bring any food you want to finish up to the lounge. Hey, you," she addressed me specifically. "You're her."

"Excuse me?"

"Follow me."

"What?"

"We're gonna talk. Follow."

"I'm coming too," Erika said in a huff. We hurriedly gathered up the presents and food and jogged after her. She led us to an empty upper-level lounge and waited at the bay window while we settled in. Below Morty and Volkner were exorcising Raichu and Gengar in preparation for their tag-team battle.

"Does she seriously have to be here?" the woman asked without turning.

Erika answered for herself.

"I won't leave Jasmine's side."

"Suit yourself Ms. Hikami."

She turned around, and I was confronted with the face of a beauty queen. It was perfect in every way: from the crest of the hairline, the arch of her brow, the proportions of her nose and chin and mouth. The spotless skin, the rich auburn hair, even her expression was captivating to behold. It was the kind of beauty that was self-evident to every envious schoolgirl and office secretary it passed by, the kind you could only find in movies.

No wonder Morty liked her. What man wouldn't?

I… I'm jealous.

"What are you staring at?"

"You're so pretty," I said.

"You're pretty plain," she retorted.

I flinched.

"Morty's into that." Danielle took a seat and began drumming the table with her black-polish fingernails. I caught myself focusing on them, unwilling to look this supermodel eye to eye.

"So you're Mikan."

"Jasmine," I said.

"I'm going to be blunt, I don't go by first names with people I don't respect."

"Or like, by your tone," Erika snipped in.

"Yeah, but that's not as relevant. I say 'respect' with purpose here, because I want you to earn my respect. And you're going to do that by ending your relationship with Matsuba."
"What?!" Erika was the one to cry out. Although silent, my reaction was the same - one of shock and indignation.

"Dump him. Tonight. Understand me?"

"Why would I?" I uttered.

"You're treading thin ice, and had better explain yourself," Erika warned.

I spoke up. "But why even say such a thing? Is it because you and Morty are-"

"-dead and buried," Danielle finished my sentence. "Don't go mistaking my intentions. I'm not some jealous rival. I'm telling you this for your own good."

"How could it be for my own good?"

"Tell me, little girl, do you know him? Do you really know him?"

"Of course. I've known him since middle school."

"Really. Have you slept with him?"

I paused before slowly shaking my head.

"Then you know jack squat."

"What are you insinuating?" I asked.

"Danielle… Ms. McIntyre," Erika said, "I know we haven't known each other very long, but I strongly caution you about getting into the private affairs of a couple."

"She ought to know the truth," Danielle retorted.

"Wait, what about sleeping with Morty? Did he tell you something because you had sex with him?"

"It's not your place to interfere. Or do you think you have a stake in this?" Erika asked.

"No more than you," Danielle answered Erika but not me. "Call my rude, call me any damn thing you want, but I'm doing what's best for everyone."

"Are you upset because he left you for me?" I ventured.

"HELL NO!" she shouted emphatically. "I wouldn't date him again for the fucking league."

"But are you willing to sell him out for a chance to oust him and take his position as Gym Leader?" Erika all but accused.

"If only I could," Danielle replied with a snort.

"Well, what's stopping you?" Erika said, eyes narrowing in on Danielle, as if daring her. Danielle paused, and then let out a dry laugh.

"You people are idiots. But I'll say this-" she lowered her voice and leaned towards me. "Morty is a black hole. He draws everyone around him in, attracting them with his mysterious-guy act, but there's nothing in there but darkness. He'll crush your heart, lady. Like he did mine. Don't take the bait. Ditch him now, while you still can."
"I don't think you know her," Erika said.

"I won't," I said with conviction. "I'm staying with him, no matter what."

"See, I told you."

"Your loss," Danielle said. "I've had my say, I tried warning you, it's up to you if you heed it. Matsuba arranged this meet'n'greet to try to convince you I'm no threat, and I'll say he's damn right about that. I sure as hell don't have his love, and I don't want it."

"But what about his body?" I asked.

"Ha! As if."

"But you've done it with him, haven't you?"

"Every once in a while. There's no shame in saying I miss it. He's a god in bed." Her hand tightened into a claw that scratched at the table surface. She's remembering un-pretty memories. "But if that's what you're after, look elsewhere. It's not worth it."

I gathered my courage and spoke up.

"I'll admit, I'm jealous of you. You've gotten to know Morty in a way that I haven't. Clearly there's something inside him that he wants to be kept secret, I've known that for awhile now. Perhaps sexual intimacy is the only way to gain his trust. That's a step I'm willing to take. I want to know all of him, everything, and in the end, I want the chance to decide for myself if I love him, faults and all. So I would appreciate it if you didn't impose yourself into our personal relationship."

"Well said," Erika chirped. "While I understand your intentions, the way you go about it is rude. If that's all you have to say, I suggest you go about your own business and leave us alone."


"Bitch, leave," Erika spat out.

Oh my!

Apparently Erika using profanity was a momentous-enough occasion to shake even this fireball's resolve, and so she hastily got up and left.

"I'll be seeing you at the hot springs," she called out over her shoulder. The lounge door slammed shut behind her.

"Please forgive me for my language, that was utterly vulgar of me, I shouldn't have said that," Erika began apologizing profusely.

"It's okay, it was called for," I tried reassuring the zealously proper woman.

"She just made me so mad! And what a blabber mouth! It's completely uncalled for."

"Do you really think she has dirt on Morty?" I asked.

"I wouldn't bet against it. They are former lovers."

"Do you know her?" I asked. It sounded like they had previously met.
"I just met her today, but we did chat for awhile before you arrived. I didn't expect her to be so spiteful."

"That's an understatement. I just wonder if she's really trying to badmouth Morty or if she's trying to scare me off in order to hook back up with him."

"Good point. Perhaps you should ask Morty."

"Mmhmm."

Speaking of which, I took a glance out the window. It looked like our conversation had lasted the majority of his first battle, and they were just about to finish it. Raichu and Gengar made surprising good partners- they were two Pokémon who genuinely had fun battling. The mouse was practically laughing as it zipped around a flummoxed Grumpig, while the spook cleverly led his Gallade foe into the Grumpig's errant Psybeams. When the foes looked like they had just about figured out the dodge pattern of their opponents, the Ghost/Electric pair suddenly swapped targets and finished the opposite foe with powerful special attacks.

"One down," I hummed out. Two more pairs to go, plus their leader, a girl with blue hair in a sparkling leotard.

"Do I really look plain?"

"Plainly beautiful," Erika answered.

"He wouldn't go for that woman in the leotard, would he? Look at her breasts. They're huge. He likes petite, doesn't he?"

"I don't know."

"Who do you think is more attractive to Morty, me or Danielle?"

"Obviously you. Now quit this line of worrying, it's making me lose respect for you, and that's depressing."

"Aww."

"Don't worry about Danielle. It's evident to me that she's just bitter that Morty dumped her. I very much doubt she's a threat to your relationship. The only thing that will stand between you and Morty are your feelings for each other, or lack thereof. You put it perfectly in your speech, it's up to you if you decide you love Morty or not."

"But she did have sex with him," I said with a whimper.

"So will you, in good time."

"I don't like it. It makes me feel like a prude the way I keep putting him off. I don't want to be a prude anymore. But, at the same time, I'm so... scared."

"You have nothing to be scared about, and nothing to be pressured for. Proceed at your own pace. Please, more than anything, go with what feels best for you. Follow your own urges, not those foisted upon you by others. Listen to your own doubts, not the ones you think others expect of you."

"Be myself, be myself," I repeated. It's the absolute best advice in the world, and also the most generic, vague, and difficult to apply.
"She says she's going to the hot springs with us."

"We'll be surrounded by company, including Morty. I think she'll behave," Erika said.

I hope so.

We discussed our options for dealing with Danielle for the next hour, while Morty and Volkner took down one foe after another. Unfortunately, while the twins posed no great problem, the leader was an actual psychic and commanded her Pokémon silently via telepathy. The battle became protracted and difficult; Morty even resorted to sitting cross-legged and focusing his mind on his preternatural clairvoyance skills. It was to no avail. A Lunatone and Solrock pair were using Psychic to sling each other around in wild, untraceable circular patterns. When they started firing Psybeams, it was over for Gengar and then Haunter. Raichu managed to line up a lucky Thunderbolt that caught both meteorite Pokémon in one shot. Unfortunately their backup was a Claydol whose Earth Power made short work of Raichu and Luxray.

Volkner slumped down in defeat, Morty made an exaggerated show of despair. In the throes of sorrow, waving his hands in the air and howling to the ceiling, he caught sight of me looking down on him.

"Tsk tsk," I signaled towards him.

He took the hint and composed himself. With the solemnity expected of a Gym Leader, he congratulated the challenger and awarded her the Fog Badge.

"Time to go," Erika hummed.

"Come on, the water's great."

"No!"

I shook my head vehemently.

"Aww, we want to see you in your bikini!"

"No way!"

"Why you're being a baby? Huh? C'mon!"

I refused.

Our party had dwindled to a total of ten. Clair and Chuck had led the rest away to the larger pool to play volleyball, leaving us to take up the smaller, more private hot spring. Everyone was in their bathing suits and lounging in the onsen, enjoying the searing hot water—except me.

"I picked that bikini out just for you, I wanna see how you look in it!" Whitney exclaimed.

"I ate too much!" I tried giving an excuse.
To clarify, I was sitting at the edge of the onsen, feet dipped in, but otherwise not entering. I had my bathrobe wrapped tightly around and would not budge an inch towards entering the water.

"Just let me sit for now. I'll get in later," I answered definitively. Their protests died off until other subjects surpassed them in public interest.

"How is your pursuit of Brawley coming?" Erika inquired.

"He's done with Maylene, that's for sure now. But I think he's in bachelor mode. I got him on a date but he didn't want to go back to a relationship so soon. So we're friends with benefits for the moment."

I covered my face in embarrassment. I wasn't the only one: all the boys were averting and/or rolling their eyes at her immodest comment.

"You're okay saying that?" Lyra asked tentatively.

"Oh of course! Maybe it's not ideal, but just to get him in bed again was so great!"

"That's not what I- oh never mind."

Jade would have a field day with Whitney. I almost wished I could be there when the two meet, it'll be fireworks galore.

"You really are a guy's kind of girl," Erika said.

"And proud of it! Bunch of uptight prudes we got here tonight. Hope that doesn't exclude you, Morty."

"I take no offense at anything you've said thus far," Morty said.

"Course not, Matsuba's just as bad," Danielle said. The way she keeps using his surname is kind of weird given the setting, but Morty took it in stride and no one else questioned it. He must be used to this from his subordinate.

"If it weren't for the ladies present, I think I would be pretty bad indeed," Morty said.

"Oh what ladies do you mean? Maybe-" and Danielle flicked a little spray of water my way. "Because that looks more like a little girl to me."

"Danielle, be nice."

"Call me McIntry."

"I'll call you drunk is what I'll call you."

"I only had two glasses."

"Three."

"Four."

"Five."

"Six."
"Why are we counting?"

"Because I messed up the joke."

"What joke was there to mess up?"

"I was supposed to say two, and you go to four, and then I say one, and we bargain on it like a bunch of hagglers."

"That was rhetorical, you never explain the joke."

"Yes, oh wise gravekeeper."

"Gravekeeper?" I let out.

"A nickname."

"Has anyone seen Suicune here?"

"Get the hell out Eusine!" Danielle threw a plastic cup at the interloper, who promptly darted back around the fence.

"It was a joke! A joke! Why wasn't I invited?"

"Because this is Jazz's birthday party and she doesn't like you, so I didn't want to muck up the atmosphere with your nonsense!" Morty called out.

"Fair's fair! I'm sorry about the Halloween prank, I'll never do that again!"

"I'll never give you the chance! You'll be dead first!" I shouted.

"Suicune is beyond the rainbow! Away! Away!"

We all exchanged knowing looks.

That was completely random.

"Lyra, are you sure about these people?" Ethan asked quietly. She giggled in response. Silver rolled his eyes.

"Anyways!"

Danielle bent her head to the sky.

"I could use a joint," she said casually.

"Heh, sounds good," Morty added.

"Eww, really?" I let out.

"What? You don't approve?"

"No!"

"You told me she was just a prude, not a square," Danielle said to Morty.

"She's vanilla as the north pole."
"Morty, you don't really smoke pot do you?"

"Not anymore. I miss it though."

"You did smoke!"

"In college. Can't anymore. I'm a Gym Leader. Got to uphold the League's reputation, you know, they'd fire me if I got caught."

"But you don't see anything wrong with it?" I exclaimed, shaken.

"Uh, it's harmless enough. Not really addictive, so ya don't chain smoke it like cigarettes. That's what causes cancer, the day-in day-out habitual use."

"It's bad for you no matter what!" I declared. "And it's disgusting."

"Personally, I don't use pot myself, but I don't see why it should be illegal," Erika said. "It does have medical uses, and I could see my business making a good profit growing and selling the plant."

"Erika, you too?"

I'm surrounded by heathens!

"Agreed on the legalization part," Jeff added. "Banning the stuff is causing more crime than it's stopping."

"Is there anyone who thinks it's flat out wrong?" I asked to a vacant-eyed crowd.

"I agree with you," one voice said.

Volkner glided over to a spot near me in the pool.

"Pot might be harmless, might not be. But from some acquaintances I've known who use it, it's not good for your life. It makes you feel okay with being a useless sack that'll never accomplish anything. I don't hang out with them anymore."

"Drugs are bad, mkay? Bunch of kids," Danielle said mockingly.

"They are bad. They ruin lives and drag down society. Marijuana included."

"What, as opposed to alcohol? Beer's done way worse to human civilization, more than any other drug," Morty argued.

"Beer can be moderated," Volkner countered.

"Alcohol is a drink, pot and tobacco are smoked. The very act of smoking puts particulate matter into your lungs, destroying the hairs along the trachea and the oxygen receptors on the lung walls. That's what causes disease. AND, smoke is shared with everyone in your company, whether they want to inhale it or not." I furled my brow. It seemed like Volkner and maybe Ethan and Lyra were the only ones buying my rant. The rest were unimpressed.

"You're dating a real moral high-horse. Sure you wanna subject yourself to her 24/7 judgment?" Danielle asked Morty.

"I could use someone to keep me in line."
"What does she think about you getting a tattoo?" Danielle traced a circle on the skin of Morty's exposed shoulder. My gut twisted into a knot.

"Morty, no tattoos."

"Why not? Tattoos are cool."

"They're ugly."

"They are cool," he insisted. "Why do you think it's important to keep your body so pristine?"

"It's... it's..." I struggled to find an explanation, but couldn't find a rationalization that would sway him, and stuttered to silence. I can't exactly tell them that it's just my own personal bias, no better than Jade's vendetta against sex. I don't like drugs, I don't like tattoos, I don't like piercings, and that's that. There's no good reason for it, that's just the way I grew up to be.

"I would prefer if you kept a clean and simple aesthetic," I tried conveying my sentiments diplomatically. Maybe if I framed it in a way where it wasn't a judgment but a preference linked to what I find attractive? "I think an untainted body is the most handsome look for a man."

"Bah, that's boring! I don't want to."

Grr! Morty!

"I won't judge you," Danielle said to him. And to me: "I underestimated you. You're like, a militant innocent. Why not go date Captain Clean over there instead? I want my fuckbuddy back."

"We're not fuckbuddies. I'm taken, Danny."

"Oh, you bastard, you can't use that nickname and then say we're done for. It's not fair." Danielle slid into a resting position in Morty's lap, and he did nothing to stop her. He doesn't look like he's enjoying it either, though.

"Hey, Mortimer, that's not your girlfriend," Volkner warned.

"I know, but she won't come in the water. So I guess I'll make do with this," Morty said.

"You ass."

"Of course I am. It's fun. Spices up life."

"Fine, whatever. I'm getting pruned," Volkner said. He lifted himself out of the pool, and let the water dribble all the way down his back.

_He's got nice shoulders_, I caught myself thinking. I looked over to Morty.

Morty's got the abs.

_Nnnnnnnnnnng._

I crossed my legs.

"Hey, Jasmine, if you don't feel like dealing with this prick, you could come check out the ping pong tables with me," Volkner offered. "And then we could set up your phone."

"Really? But, Morty?" I looked to my boyfriend, who was busy batting away Danielle's drunken
advances.

"I don't mind," Morty said vacantly.

I suddenly found myself at the epicenter of attention. It felt like I was now at a crossroads, caught between two stark choices, and everyone was holding their breath to see with whose company I would pass the remainder of the night.

"So?" Volkner asked.

"I…"

"Danielle, quit it," Morty said, throwing the red-head off him completely.

"I'll stay here," I said.

Volkner's shoulders drooped, not a lot, a few millimeters, but I noticed it.

"Well, see ya round. Happy Birthday."

Volkner plodded off.

Without Volkner, the group felt a lot smaller and dominated by the slim female majority. Topics went from the serious to idle gossip and never really picked up from there. Morty was the only guy contributing to the conversation, with Danielle and Whitney competing for the center of attention.

That feeling of time lapse set in, where everyone is getting tired and the talking is slowing down to an aimless lull, and one could physically feel the night growing older. We were merely waiting for something to break our inertia and set us on the path to saying goodbye.

As if on cue, a cell phone began buzzing. It was Silver's, who had remained his usual quiet self throughout the evening.

"What the hell?!" he whispered, followed by several inaudible curses.

"What's the matter?" Lyra asked.

"Proton. Celadon. I've got to go," he answered, and then quickly jumped out of the bath and scurried off.

"Hey, Silver! Wait up! Tell me what happened!"

"No time," he shouted.

"Wait! I'm coming!"

"Lyra!"

Lyra exited the pool and ran after him. Ethan also rose out of the pool, calling after his girlfriend. She hesitated.

"Please, let him go, for once," Ethan pleaded. "He can handle himself."

"But I'm worried! You know what kind of stuff he gets himself into."

"It'll be alright. He's gotten this far, he'll be okay without you. Can it just be us, for one night?" Ethan
Lyra gazed between Ethan and the direction of the disappeared Silver. There was a sense of déjà vu about the situation. The girl waivered for a moment, caught in a tumult of emotion and unsure of herself. Ethan stumbled closer, trying to catch her gaze, but she couldn't meet him eye to eye.

"I'm sorry," she said, and then darted off.

"Lyra? Lyra! Good grief, woman!"

Ethan shook his head and ran out as well.

"Well," said Jeff. He looked around. "Volkner's right, I'm getting pruned. I'll see you tomorrow, boss."

"See ya."

"Oops. I forgot, my train's leaving early." Whitney got out and gave me a hug. "Come visit Goldenrod again! We'll go shopping next time. And let me at least have a peek at your bikini bod-" she dug her fingers into my bath robe, but I pulled away before she could see anything.

"Awww, poor sport. I love ya."

"I love you too, Whitney, no matter how embarrassing it is to be your friend."

She knuckled me in the head and sprinted off.

With that, it was just me, Erika, Danielle, and Morty.

After a minute passed and no one appeared to budge, Morty spoke up.

"Danielle, could you excuse us?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I need to protect the innocent."

"There are no innocents here, just babies and ladies. Which one are you going to be?"

"A rabid Pokémon."

"You're terrible when you're drunk."

"I'm drunk because of you."

"No you're not."

"That's what I came up with and I'm sticking to it," said she.

"Seriously. Please."

"Can I be Gym Leader?"

"For tomorrow, sure."
"For all time."

"No, you can't. I'm the Gym Leader."

"That's not fair. I can't have you, I can't have the gym, I can't have anything I want."

"Life's not fair. Some get lucky, some don't. Count your blessings and run with them."

"I want your blessings."

"You don't want my life," Morty said, pushing Danielle up and into a sitting position. The pool sloshed around her. Her hair fell in soaked clumps across her face, and rivulets of water traced down her cheeks.

I took a closer look, and realized that she was crying.

"You're right. I don't want anything to do with it." She slowly picked herself up and got out of the bath.

"I've made a lot of mistakes. Telling you about some of the worst was another one. I apologize."

"Don't waste your breath," the woman muttered.

She lurched away.

"Did you love her?" I asked once she was out of earshot.

Morty kept his gaze at the retreating wreck of a woman.

"No. Never. She loved me though. I regret using her like I did." She disappeared, and Morty turned to me. "Do you think it would be the right thing to do to let her go from the gym? Keeping her around, it feels like I'm abusing her feelings. But I don't want to kick her to the curb."

"I think, in the long run, you should. It'll only get worse."

"You could make an effort to help her find a good position elsewhere," Erika suggested.

"Yeah, I guess. I doubt she'll accept it, though." Morty contemplated his navel.

"What you said about abusing her feelings- you're not doing that to Jasmine, are you?" Erika asked.

"No," Morty said right away. "I want what's best for you, Jazz. I wouldn't intentionally hurt your feelings like that."

"Intentionally," I echoed.

"I'm afraid of what I do unintentionally," he admitted.

"It's okay. I'll suffer through it."

Erika floated across the pool, placing a hand on Morty's shoulder, a signal of some sort. She exited and came round to me, also touching me on the shoulder, with her eyes meeting mine. In them, there was a kind of forlorn acknowledgment.

"I'll see you in Olivine. Happy Birthday," she said. We parted with a hug.
"I think you've been waiting for this," Morty said.

We were all alone.

Steam lifted off the hot spring water, rising to the sky where it swirled around the bright moon. The air was thick with the moisture, and warm, warmer than it had a right to be on this November night. I rose to a standing position. Morty was splayed out in front of me, resting his back against the rock embankment. He grinned.

"Jasmine Mikan, swimsuit edition," he said, with a slight lick of the lips.

I undid the belt of the bathrobe and grasped the fabric around me tightly.

"You're to understand, there will be no touching," I warned.

He nodded in assent.

I let down my robe.

Morty inhaled, sharply.

"My birthday present, for you," I said as calm as I could.

Morty took it in, eyes wide, hardly believing the sight of me standing before him.

Nothing stood between me and him. From my toes to my hair, and all in between, nothing but air. Twenty-two years ago I arrived into this world, with nothing more to clothe me than what is now on display for Morty to see.

My ankles, my thighs, my forearm and belly-button, my neck, my face, my hips, my hands… my breasts… my womanhood… everything bared for him.

"My god," Morty exhaled. "You're beautiful."


"I'm not going to be the only one like this. Take those off."

Morty lurched, incompliant.

"Off!"

His head drooped, his nose flaring. With great reluctance he reached down to pull his swim trunks off. He stepped out of the legs and let the article float away. Pulling himself up to a stand, I, for the first time in my life, saw a fully naked man.

His familiar face was not graced with his familiar, relaxed smirk. Bangs, darkened by wetness, drooped over eyes tinted with shame. His neck was bent downwards.

His body was picturesque. It was athletic without being encumbered by conspicuous muscle. His abs were a two-pack, not four or six-pack, but that was perfectly fine by me. He looked like he had enough meat on him to pick me up and move me about at whim, which was enough. Looking closely, I could just barely detect the mat of body hair growing upon various parts of his skin. It was
a lot of hair, but not so much to be displeasing, and because it was very light in shade and soft in texture, it did not mar his silky appearance from afar.

Tall, lanky, lean, and fit are the best words to describe Morty's physical appearance. I don't believe I have a 'type' of guy I go for, looks-wise, but if I did Morty would certainly fit the bill. That is to say, I find him attractive. To see him on full display without veil, that attraction became a conflagration of lust.

I forced myself to peruse every dripping inch of him, taking in the curves of muscle and angles of bone, his every anatomical feature, before focusing on the one that was most sacred to man's self.

*Oh… So that's what it looks like.*

Morty gave off an air of embarrassment and reluctance, although he was betrayed by his penis, which was standing erect.

Hairy, to the point one could not ignore it. The fibers flared out in an unkempt bush all around his groin. His balls hung limp, fleshy bags just as I imagined them, looking extraneous and so very, very vulnerable. The shaft curved upward, slightly darker, or redder really, than the rest of the skin, with blood veins evident under the surface. A ridge, the male analog to the female clit I think, ran from the base of the shaft to the foreskin. He's uncut, I noted. The glans encircling the head was thicker than I expected, like a pouch. The head itself was smooth, and tapered to an oval end. A slit, no larger than my own urethra, opened right at the tip.

It's such a curious, gangly object. I can see why some women call it a man's joystick, it's a metaphor that works on so many levels. In a non-sexual context, it would actually look out of place and unwieldy, a dangling protrusion to the otherwise ascetic human anatomy. Like a woman's boobs, really, quite an unsightly burden when not being put to use. Yet, in the moment of passion, especially with it erect, and imagining what that organ was for, what it does for Morty, where it goes inside me-the thought of putting his penis to its purpose was making me faint with anticipation.

I squirmed, shivered, and prayed to myself that I would have the fortitude to keep true to my intention. This was not the night I would lose my virginity. We were not to touch, we were not to take part in mutual physical stimulation. I wanted to wait a little longer, and be sure of myself, and be content with the sight that's now before me. Tonight was the preview, I swore, a commercial to increase the excitement for the matinee.

I continued taking in Morty's body, especially focusing on the newly discovered parts, as I slowly stepped down into the hot spring. The water rose around my legs, up my thighs, and across my vagina. It was weird, but stimulating, to feel the heat and fluidity of the liquid encompass my privates and enter my vaginal canal. Out of reflex I tucked my thighs together, suppressing the sensation.

Now standing on the bottom, the surface of the water came up to my hipline, but for Morty it lapped at the bottom of his scrotum. He let out a slight whimper, robbed of the unobstructed sight of my flower.

"Turn," I told him. He did so, quickly and awkwardly, barely giving me time to take in his broad back, the curve of his spine, and the masculine tuck of his buttocks.

"Hey," I said, trying to grab his attention because he was still averting his eyes. "Look at me."

He brought his gaze to the fore. I stood still and silent for a long time, two minutes at least.

"You once saw me like this before, but I don't imagine it was more than a glimpse. So take it in
His eyes were on me and my body, and in them I saw lust, and for once, I was glad. Having suffered the unwanted gaze of thousands of men through my lifetime, I was wary of how I would feel standing before Morty and taking in his reaction. Yet it did not feel unnatural or hypocritical at all to enjoy finding that same ravenous lust being directed at me now. Because it was Morty, the man I wanted to want me.

"Do you think I am pretty?" I asked. "Now that there's nothing in the way, do you still honestly call me beautiful?"

I needn't have asked- his answer came in the involuntary twitching of his cock. Nonetheless, he nodded.

"You are beautiful, I said it before and I'll say it a hundred times more," he said.

"Do you think me as pretty as Danielle?"

"Superior to," he answered.

"But she is incredibly pretty, even stunning, supermodel material. Do you still think I'm prettier? Be honest."

"You've no idea what I find attractive, even though it'd be so easy to show you. Just look in a mirror and you'll find the epitome of beauty, in my opinion."

"Do you want to have this?" I slid a hand down my hip and towards my crotch.

"You said we weren't going to touch."

"It's not an invitation, it's purely a question. Do you want to? Would you fuck me if I allowed you?"

Morty stared blankly.

"Yes," came his serious, contemplated answer.

"Would you be patient and wait to fuck me?" I asked.

"Yes," came his much more prompt reply.

"How long?"

"However long you felt you needed."

"Ten years."

"I'll put myself into cryo-genesis."

"That's cheating."

"A decade of celibacy is unrealistic."

"Two months."

"Two months is nothing," he said.

"Nineteen days," I ventured.
He tensed up.

"...that's the end of your probation."


I let that sink in, for him and for myself.

In three weeks I will lose my virginity. I will feel Morty inside me. I will drape my body all over him, entangle our limbs and tongues and genitals, and pass onto one another the sensations that excite our physical passions and signify our emotional bond.

But not yet.

"This is hard on me. Usually, when I see a naked lady I can't touch, she's on the other side of a computer screen."

"Bear with it." I began walking around the pool, trailing my fingers just below the surface of the water, feeling the current of the water and hoping it would impart upon me knowledge of the current of fate. Morty followed my every move with his craving gaze.

"Not yet," I said. I took a position right beside him, close enough to wrap my arms around him. His arms were wound tight and his breathing halted. Would he do it? I'm right here, inches, mere inches away, a naked woman he has been yearning for since puberty. Would he give in to instinct and take me? Would I allow it?

But against all logic, all instinct, he backed away.

"I didn't say you could sit."

He ignored me and sat anyway. His stare was lost to me.

Having no other choice, I submerged myself fully in the hot spring, momentarily forgetting the situation and enjoying the warmth of the bath infusing into my being.

"You're cruel," Morty said. "All this time you've made me believe you're a submissive, but you're actually a dom in disguise. Beware the shy ones, indeed.

"I think of myself as a switch," I stated.

"I didn't think you were aware of the term."

"The internet corrupts."

"Mmm."

"I said there would be no touching. I did not clarify that there would be no touching between us."

"Meaning, what?"

"I want to see you masturbate," I said.

"That's such a perverted demand."

"Not really. I think it's only fair. I want repayment for your peeping at the lighthouse."
"Eh, point taken."

He raised his hips up, enough to lift his penis out of the water, and gripped it. His two fingers kneaded the foreskin between them. As I watched, his erection stiffened, and Morty began speeding up the motion of his hands. It was unnaturally fast; I didn't expect a man masturbating to go at it at the literal pace of a jack-hammer. After a minute Morty was clenching his jaw and neck muscles and holding his breath, but nothing came.

"Do you need help?" I asked.

"No. Maybe. Something visual."

"Here."

Morty's legs were propped up on a submerged rock. I took a stand on this makeshift footrest, lifting myself out of the water a little. My nether regions were once again exposed to the air. Morty lay flat between my legs. I used one hand to draw my hair back, and the other glided down my midsection. With two fingers, I spread the lips of my labia apart, giving my would-be lover an uninterrupted view into my vagina.

"How is this?"

"Sublime," he whispered.

He went at it harder. His focus was on my privates and mine was on his. I could see how his index finger wasn't touching the glans directly, but rubbing the foreskin up and over it. The motion was repeated over and over, and more than any such feeling as repulsion or excitement, I was curiously entranced. It's not an act I as a female get to see in everyday life.

He was straining himself now. Just a little more. I thought to help him by bringing both hands down and spreading my vagina as wide open as possible. There was only the briefest moment of worry that his semen might spurt across the gap and reach my vagina- but that worry instantly and instinctually turned to arousal. My nether regions trembled.

Morty grunted. This is it.

"You can come," I said softly.

Yet, for all the attention and effort, the caressing and jerking, no ejaculation came. With Morty tiring out and slowing, his erection actually deflated, and would not come back.

"Ugh."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not… Jasmine, I can't."

He shook his head.

A lump formed in my throat.

It takes so little, two words, to dismantle the highest state of arousal.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

He motioned for me to take a seat. The air was starting to dry me off and make me shiver, so I
complied. He glided over, taking a seat beside me, close but not touching.

"You are very beautiful. And sexy. Sexy as fuck. But I don't think I can do this kind of stuff with you. Not with how things are. Not without…" and he drifted off without finishing his sentence.

"Without what? What are you getting at?" I was starting to get upset.

"I've been coming at this all wrong," he said. "We've been getting close to each other based on friendship and lust, but not as soul mates. I don't want a relationship based entirely on sex. We ought to be more open before we get into it."

"I agree, but haven't we been making progress towards that? Aren't we, little by little, building up the staircase of trust? And what's wrong with doing the same sexually? I thought you'd dive headlong into anything! Shouldn't these little steps be easy for you?"

Morty shook his head.

"Any other person, Jazz. Any other woman, I'd screw right off and worry about relationship potential later. Not with you."

"Why me?"

"The past we shared. The place you have in my life," he answered vaguely. It frustrated me that he wouldn't get to the point.

"Do you mean the secrets we have that we absolutely cannot share until we trust each other totally?"

I asked.

"If you want to put it that way, yeah."

"Do we have to have sex before we can trust each other in that way?"

"I don't know if even that would be enough. Sex is just sex. I'm starting to think it feels hollow. I need something more out of it than the sensations."

"You're saying sex isn't enough?" I asked, worried.

"For my feelings towards you, yeah."

"Morty," I said, exasperated, "tell me what I need to do already! I'm tired of playing games and dancing around in the dark."

"Jazz…"

Morty sighed again.

"What happened to us in the last three years?"

"We became adults," I answered.

"Is that it? You don't think something else happened that got us to be this way?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

Morty leaned back, head arced towards the sky.
"Since that day, I've been ghosting from one thing to another. Tried college, dropped out. Became a Gym Leader, now I'm close to shirking it off to Danny because of all the stress. Can't talk to my own folks because it's a funeral every time I go home. Can't find love, can't find joy, not even in sex. I tried going on vacation round Nihon. Sinnoh was overwhelming, Kanto was soulless. Hoenn, I found some peace... a little. Mt. Pyre. I felt close to the spirits there. For awhile I felt like I understood life and my place in it, like the universe was a reflection of my inner turmoil, and I only needed to conquer myself and the world would fall in line. The people I met there, like Glacia, they helped me sort it all out. I was feeling good, cured, had purpose, and came home- and then all the same shit came back, and worse than ever. What's your favorite saying? 'Reality is realistic'? No fucking duh, truest thing I ever heard."

"Morty, what the hell are you getting at it?"

"Jasmine."

He grabbed me by the wrist. I froze.

What is he doing?

He tugged at me, forcefully, bringing me round until I was under him, staring straight up into his face. He had both arms resting on the pool's edge on either side of me. Our chests rose and fell together, mere inches apart. His penis would be nudging my vagina if it were erect. He still would not look at me.

"Morty, what are you doing?"

He didn't answer right away.

"Morty, I'm scared."

He started talking in a slow, deliberate, earnest manner, as if in a confessional.

"Three years ago, a man did something awful to a woman, and I let him do it. It was the most idiotic thing I've ever done, and it's come back to haunt me time and time again."

Wait, he is confessing.

Oh god. Oh Arceus.

"How the hell am I supposed to ask you to have sex with me, if the reason you're so reluctant to have sex is because of me?"

"Morty, what are you talking about? This doesn't make sense!"

Morty's eyes raised, until I could see right into the black of his pupils. Within, I saw... nothing.

"Jasmine-"

"What?"

"Did Ed rape you?"

Chapter End Notes
Boy am I terrible at writing smut. I guess this is why Jasmine will never get laid :P
"Hey Ed, come on. Beret wants to talk to us."

The teenager looked up from his reading, a magazine on famous Gym Leaders.


"What does he want?" Ed asked sharply.

Personality-wise- nothing like Dad.

"It's important," I said grimly, and then walked away.

Ed reluctantly picked himself up and followed after me. Beth met us at the office door. There was a collective rush of air as we each took a deep breath. We entered.

Mr. Beret was waiting with his back turned to us, facing out the window. Three stools sat in a row before his desk. Like pre-school. The three of us instinctively took our places and settled down. If there was an ounce of impatience, no one dared show it. I had an inkling about what was to come, but the other two seemed ignorant and nervous. Beth was fidgeting on her butt. Ed was sitting up stiff as a Sudowoodo. Mr. Beret kept us waiting for three minutes. That is a long time to be sitting in silence, at attention, and not breathing. It felt like an end-term exam.

"Kurosawa. Hayate. Murasaki." He called out our surnames one by one.

"Yes sir?" Ed ventured aloud.

"I want you to listen to me very carefully. Do not flinch. Do not back down."

Beret wheeled around in his chair, finally facing us. He had the face of a man who's given twenty years of his life to the sea, and another twenty to the city. He rose to his feet, stood firm, and eyed us straight on.

"I am dying."

"Oh my gosh!"

"What?"

Beth and Edward's reaction. I stared onward, blank and empty-feeling.

"Compose yourselves."

My two co-gym-trainers hushed and cowered back into their seats.

"I don't know how much longer I've got. One doctor says a month. Another says three years. It
doesn't really matter. What matters is that I can't hold this ship down like I used to. I want you to remember this."

Mr. Beret slid his captain's jacket off, and it struck me very suddenly and deeply at how frail and sickly my mentor was. He's as skinny as I am, for Arceus sake! It's appalling.

"I helmed a 9,000 ton vessel through combat operations in three oceans, had the respect and obedience of 200 sailors, held my post as Gym Leader of this city for eighteen years. Look what I am now. A skeleton."

As if the mere effort of standing at attention had sapped him of all his energy, Beret slumped back into his chair. His bony hands gripped the armrests. His stare never left us, or maybe, it never wavered from that distant point in the past it was trying to pierce.

"Time takes everything. Humans get old. The strong become weak. Never get so full of yourself that you forget that. Open the boxes underneath you."

We found packages that had been set beneath our seats. I took mine apart and found inside a heavy, circular chunk of metal. It was without feature or any other indication as to its purpose. I glanced to either side to check on the others. Ed had gotten the exact same thing. Beth was holding what I recognized as a Water Stone.

"Murasaki, that'll help evolve Staryu. Carefully consider when you're going to use it. Starmie are notoriously hard to train, they don't take to learning new attacks very easily."

"Thank you Mr. Beret," Beth said, wiping her eyes.

"You two, pretty much the same. Metal Coats. Kurosawa, that's for Scyther. Hayate, that's for Onix. You'll get a Scizor and Steelix out of their use. Don't rush it, there's a lot of opportunities and challenges in evolving those two species."

"I'll research it," Ed promised.

I held the Metal Coat in both hands. A little drop hit the surface, creating a tiny damp spot.

"Hayate. What do you say?" I was asked in a gruff voice.

"This is a farewell present," I said.

Mr. Beret regarded me for a moment.

"You are right," he said.

The drop turned to a drip.

"Hayate, I don't want to see you crying. You're not allowed to anymore. You're going to be Gym Leader from now on."

My head jerked.

So did Ed's.

"But sir, I'm-" the boy was silenced by a hand signal.

"No complaining, Kurosawa."
"Sir, I don't get it? Why?"

"I don't have to explain myself. She earned the job, you came up short. Take your seat or take yourself out of here."

Ed grumbled. "What was it?" he uttered. "Am I not good enough in battles? Do you think I mistreat my Pokémon?"

"Shut up," Beret ordered none-too-kindly. Ed got the hint and clamped down on his tongue.

"I'm honored, sir," I said, barely able to avoid stuttering. "I will try to do my best."

"You're gonna need better than your best, kid. I've talked to Pryce over in Mahogany, he's going to take care of you."

I nodded.

"You had better treat my gym right, you got it?"

"I got it."

"That doesn't sound very convincing. You treat my gym and my city right, got it?"

"I got it!" I cried.

"And never forget what we stand for."

I bowed.

Ed glanced over at me.

Please don't hate me. Don't stare at me with those bitter eyes. I mentally pleaded for the boy to take his jealous gaze off of me. He didn't. It remained fixated upon me, vexing me. Yet, in the moments that passed there was a change in his expression. His lips and brow relaxed ever so slightly, and there was a tiny tilt of his head. Something like acceptance came over him, but also something more that I couldn't place.

Beth broke the silence.

"Are you going to be alright, sir? Are you feeling okay?"

"Murasaki, we are not going to discuss this."

"But I don't want to lose you!" she cried.

I felt the same way, but knew enough not to voice it. Beret is not the kind of man to entertain such sentiments.

"Enough of this talk. Get out of here."

He waved us away.

As I was about to exit, a deliberate cough caught my attention and made me pause.

"Hayate," Mr. Beret called. "I'll arrange a meeting later this week, between me, you, your father, and Pryce. We'll break down the details of your leadership then. Since you're under-aged, you'll have to
be supervised by Pryce until you can take the qualification exam."
"I understand."

I turned to leave again, but was again stopped.
"Jasmine."
"Huh?"

Mr. Beret's eternal scowl had faded.
"I'm very proud of you," my mentor said.

March 26th, 2009
Olivine General Hospital

"How is he?"

I gently let the door close, getting one last glimpse of Mrs. Beret through the vanishing crack. Ed stepped up, right on top of me. I think he was just trying to look inside the door before it shut, but in my current emotional state I reached out and took him in a shameless hug. My head was buried in his chest. This way I wouldn't have to show the young man my tears.

"That bad?" Ed muttered.

My body felt like a sack of lead casings. I crumpled to the ground, taking a seat with my back to the wall and head bowed. Ed joined me on the floor. We remained there for awhile. A hospital orderly brushed by, leaving a box of tissues on the ground as they passed. I began snapping them up by the handful.

The evening wore on. How much time passed? An hour? I still didn't feel like getting up- or doing anything, really. Ed was less devastated, and shifted to a crouch.

"Come on. He wouldn't want to see you this way," he said.

"He can't want anything now! He couldn't even hear me!" I hissed out.

"Don't say that. He's not gone yet. No, never mind that. That's not the important thing. Who he was, what he meant to us, that's never going away. That's meaningful. Don't disrespect him by ignoring his will."

"I can't think of it that way," I said.

It was very clear to me.

Alive is alive and dead is dead, and nothing else mattered.

Ed understood that about me.
"Well fine, throw him and everything he stood for under the bus. At least admit you're being selfish about it. Pretty self-serving to mope and cry doom about the way the universe is. Doesn't mean it's over for you yet."

"But it'll get there, no matter what."

"Yeah, so what? Let's put it another way, you're gonna get there no matter what, so what're you going to do while you wait? Cry and do nothing, or have some fun, do something interesting?"

"Shut up."

"You're just saying that because you're too stubborn to admit I'm right."

"Shut up, please?"

I'm not in the mood to be consoled, cheered up, or reasoned with. I just want to wallow in nihilism for the moment.

"Fine, mope if you want. You can be Miss Gloombot here or on the plane, it's all the same to me. But I'd rather not waste my reservation. See ya."

"...wait up."

I crawled to my feet and chased after Ed.

"You know the last thing he told me?" Ed said.

"What?"

"If you don't pass the exam, I can have the Gym Leader job."

"That's not true."

"It is. Well, it wasn't exactly the last thing he said to me, but he did say it. But I don't think he was telling me this for my benefit. It was his way of saying, 'Jasmine had better pass the test'. He loved you, Jas. You make a big fuss about being unwanted, but there's people who love you more than you know."

"They keep leaving me," I huffed.

"Not all of them."

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March 27\textsuperscript{th} 2009

Indigo Plateau

Pokémon League Regional HQ

Match four of five. I needed four wins to pass, only one screw-up allowed. The Pokemon League is pretty harsh on its Gym Leader candidates. With the first three challenges out of the way, the official had pulled out all the stops in this last round. He was using a Fire-type team, something specifically
meant to take advantage of my Steel-types' weakness.

"Magmar, Flamethrower."

Down went Magnemite.

"I'll use Magneton next," I announced. The official wrote something in his notebook. I wondered if I was being graded. It didn't matter, though, I just need to win.

"Thunder Wave."

"Flamethrower."

At Magmar's range, Thunder Wave couldn't reach in its most-accurate, spherical form. Magneton adjusted the current into a more Thunderbolt-like shape, decreasing potency and accuracy in exchange for more range. The paralyzing shock arced across the field and struck Magmar, despite the target's attempt to jump away. The creature responded by billowing flames at my Pokémon. Likewise, the Flamethrower was begging for range and only grazed Magneton. The Steel-type weathered the heat with only moderate damage.

More scratch-scratching as the official jotted into his notebook. "Pokémon trained to fine-tune their attacks to the current situation without overt input. Very good," he said to himself.

With Magmar paralyzed, it became easy for Magneton to stay at long range and hover out of the way of Flamethrower. I expected the Magmar to switch to Flame Shot for the extra range and projectile speed, but either the foe didn't know that move, or wasn't allowed to use it.

"Thunderbolt, stay at range."

"Magmar, attempt to close in and continue using Flamethrower," the official commanded.

Magmar jittered forward in spasmic, irregular steps. Magneton kept as far away as it could, which limited how many Thunderbolts it could fire off at the slowly advancing opponent. My Pokémon was trapped in a corner, with no way to maneuver around the flame-belcher. In the end it was very close- Magmar was in KO range and inhaling air in preparation for a full-force Flamethrower. A last ditch Thunderbolt blasted the thing and finally knocked it silly.

"Not great, no finesse, overly reliant on power differential," the official noted. "Alright. Last matchup. I'm obligated to tell you that I'm under no tactical restrictions for this one. I'll be deploying a Tier 1-B Pokémon, one that is judged to be competitive at the Regional Tournament level of competition. You're allowed to make a free switch beforehand."

"I will," I said. I had Magneton retreat to the side, petting it before recalling it to its Pokeball. In its place, I released Steelix.

"Arcanine."

Oh boy.

I don't see too many of these in our gym. I know they have across-the-board impressive attributes and can function well in a number of roles. The ones I've faced were typically used as blitzing physical attackers, but they can utilize special attacks and certain tanking tactics as well. I'm a little nervous about that latter possibility, because I don't know what utility moves Arcanine are capable of learning.
"Let's assume the worst, that this is a mixed close-range/long-range attacker," I said to myself and Steelix. On the far side, the official was taking glances between me and his notepad. He was whispering to himself as he wrote.

"...opted to switch for a-" and then lifted his eyes up to my Pokémon. "-Steelix... damn, it is a big one." I don't think the official has gotten over the sight of my leviathan. Steelix is a good seven or eight feet longer than normal for his species, and much heavier. A fairly intimidating sight to behold.

Steelix rumbled happily. He had scored fourteen KOs in the past three matches and was eager to earn one more. My own nerves settled down once my giant metal worm was beside me. The official shook his head.

"Alright, let's start."

Focus! It's show time. This guy's going to drop the act and play serious now, so I've got to pull out all the stops as well.

"Steelix!"

"Flamethrower!"

"Dragon Breath!"

Steelix let loose his only special attack. It met the Flamethrower midway, erupting into a magnificent fireball. Steelix's attack was weaker and gave way, but it served its purpose of slowing the Flamethrower down.

Yet Arcanine was not prepared to just stand at range and upchuck fire all day. It was dashing in at a slant, attempting to gain Steelix's flank. A second Flamethrower was fired on the run.

"Fissure!"

"Extreme Speed!"

The Flamethrower caught Steelix across his tail section. The metal coating glowed, and the cave leviathan thrashed in pain. The subsequent Fissure had no chance of catching the zigzagging canine. It veered off in the wrong direction.

"Dive in!"

Steelix ducked into the fissure, right as Arcanine Flare Blitzed overhead.

"Uses terrain and combos effectively. Pokémon shows above-average resistance to type-weak attacks." He's still grading my performance, even while directing the battle. These League officials sure are tight. "Arcanine, dodge."

A Stone Edge volley burst from the ground where Arcanine had been crouching a moment before.

"Earthquake!"

"Extreme Speed."

Arcanine was using Extreme Speed not to attack, but to run away. The seismic shockwaves couldn't travel fast enough to reach the retreating canine. I'll have to make sure the next Earthquake is centered right beneath the opponent.
"Arcanine, follow the epicenter of the quake, Dig, and Flamethrower."

"Steelix, Dig! Excavate Kanto!"

I hope Steelix understood that. This plan won't work if the official catches a hint of what I want Steelix to do. An off-pitch rumble told me Steelix wasn't quite sure what I meant. "Like Kanto! Let's go to Saffron!" I said. I had showed him a map of Kanto recently, he ought to understand.

Steelix began tunneling through the dirt at max power. There was no hiding his location, the surface bulged wherever Steelix went. Arcanine followed as best it could. There were times when it was aggressive, almost right on top of the mound, and other times it was afraid of Steelix popping out of the ground and so jumped away.

"Dig."

He's too aggressive, I thought.

"Earthquake!" I called out.

Arcanine leapt on top of one of the loosened piles of dirt. The Earthquake's oscillations were less severe when having to travel through the berm, weak enough that Arcanine was able to heal the damage off with a Morning Sun.

Meh, that didn't work.

"Keep going," I ordered.

"Dodge and counter-Dig!"

The bulge of earth wove across the battlefield, back and forth. The building itself was shaking from Steelix's subterranean doodling. I took the lay of the field and gritted my teeth.

"Now! Dig attack!"

"There!"

A hole opened up in the earth. Arcanine dashed over in the blink of an eye and let loose a searing stream of fire and smoke into the crevice.

Nothing, no reaction.

Then the ground in a ten yard radius around Arcanine collapsed. A sinkhole rapidly encompassed the foe and buried it up to its shoulders.

"Quake!"

"Get free!"

BRUMBRUMBRUMBRUMBRUM!

The ground and building and my body and everything shook under the sheer force of a Pokémon-induced tremor. Arcanine didn't stand a chance this time, not with it half-buried and at the very center of the attack. The big dog fainted, head resting on the ground.

"Wow. Not only a trap, but meta-level deception." For once, the official set down his notepad and stood agap.
"That's that," he said. "You passed."

"HURRAY!!!"

That would be my friends and coworkers: Edward, Whitney, Beth, Maurine, Akiko, Aron, Connie, Seth, Aura, all cheering for my victory and rushing onto the field. I myself was overcome by emotion. I sort of forgot what I was even doing here. The last two hours had been so utterly focused on doing what it took to win the battles, that I lost perspective on why winning them mattered so much. It all came back to me as I was hoisted into the air.

"Go Jazzy! Go Jazzy! You're a Gym Leader! Have a party!" they chanted repeatedly.

"Alright! Okay! Off to the lunch lounge!" I cried, and began steering my human showboat towards the exit.

"Ehem!" The official caught my notice.

"Ah! Beep beep back it up!"

I was carried all the way back to the official and deposited before him. We shook hands and I thanked him for being my proctor. He in turn congratulated me for my accomplishment and filled me in on the next steps.

Once that was finished, the girls mobbed me and shook me down.

"I can't believe it! It's official, you're a Gym Leader! At eighteen! Who could imagine!"

"I could! I could! Jasmine was always the best at Pokémon battles!" Whitney shouted.

"Calm down! It's not official yet, I still have paperwork to do. Hey, um, guys, please calm down, we need to leave."

I paused a moment before exiting the battle hall. Something caught my eye in the second-story viewing port. A pair of figures who, the moment I spotted them, drifted out of sight. Someone had been watching my battle. Huh. Weird.

The crowd launched itself down the hallway, only vaguely knowing where it was going and what an acceptable noise level was. I drifted behind them, in a daze and feeling quite aglow. One of the boys gradually fell behind until he was walking beside me.

"He'd probably snort and say 'good for her!' at a time like this, wouldn't he?" Ed said to me. I nodded in agreement. "I think he knew you would breeze through the exams. That's why he never tried to encourage you, he was afraid of Jynxing it."

"He was superstitious," I said fondly.

"So, now the gym really is all yours. No 'Acting Gym Leader' anymore, it's all on you. Make him proud."

"I will try."

Ed gave me a rub on the shoulder.

"I just hope I make it back in time to tell him."

"Oh, it's been one day. You'll see him tomorrow. He wasn't, you know, on death's door when we
left. He'll get better. You'll be able to tell him all about the exam. Just wait, and remember to be happy. He'll reel you if you show up grumpy and depressed."

"But…"

"Don't worry. You'll see him again."

"I hope so."

"You hoped you'd see me again? Aw, that's so nice of you Jazz."

Morty jumped back as if expecting to defend himself from a beating. However, my arms were limp at my side. I barely even turned to face him.

"You're an asshole."

"Woah! Eh, hehe, sorry?" The blondie tried catching up and walking beside me, but I tip-toed around to put Ed between the two of us. "Hey, at least say hi? It's been almost a year."

"Hey, who are you? Leave her alone."

"I'm a dear old friend of the lady," Morty answered.

"Ignore him," I told Ed.

I grabbed Ed's hand and dragged him onwards, hoping to outrun the irksome intruder. That was impossible.

"Wait up!"

The creep was utterly determined to be a part of our group, whether I liked it or not. We rejoined the others.

"Morty!"

"Whitney girl! Holy cow, you've grown a pair!"

"Don't mess with me, you've never been about the boing boing! DFC pedo!"

"Hahahaha!"

"So that must make you Mr. Matsuba," Ed said warily.

"I see my reputation proceeds me."

"Disreputation," Ed corrected.

"Even better."

Morty danced around, greeting people, chatting with them, ingratiating his way into their good graces. Ed seemed overly suspicious of the interloper, which was a good thing as far as I was concerned. He shadowed Morty from behind, following his path and keeping tabs on everything he said. It wasn't an easy task, on account of Morty's erratic movement and tendency to run his mouth. I in turn spotted something suspicious shadowing Ed. His shadow, in fact.

I quietly let out Magnemite and ordered a Thunder Shock upon the quivering silhouette. A Gengar
jumped out in surprise.

"GARA!"

"Hey what the hell?!" Ed flinched, spooked by the Ghost Pokémon landing on his back.

"Aw, Gengar, what are you doing? You were suppose to tail him!"

"You knew I was tailing you?" Ed asked in disbelief.

"You've got a long way to go before you're ready for undercover work, mister detective."

"I want to know what you're doing here."

"Work-study. I'm thinking of entering the Gym Leader apprenticeship program."

"I mean what you're doing here, now, bugging our group."

"Oh that..." Morty skipped around until I suddenly found him leaning down before me, head held face-to-face with mine. It was unnerving. I drew back a little. "I heard my long lost middle school friend was taking her Gym Leader exam, and while I was in the building I thought I'd check up and see how she was doing. Congratulations, by the way. Didn't think they'd let a volcano like you run a gym, but you did it."

I furrowed my eyebrows and said nothing. The only response I felt I could muster was a frown, before distancing myself from Morty.

"Huh. That's unexpected."

Morty tried chasing me, but Ed blocked his way.

"What's your deal?"

"That's my line," Ed insisted.

"I'm trying to say hi to her. It's been awhile since we've talked. Could you let me through?"

"She doesn't want to talk to a pervert like you."

"Oh so I'm a pervert? Is that what she told you?"

"Among other things," Ed added.

"Well, knowing her, everything she told you is true, and then some, because she's too stuffy to relay the nastier tidbits."

"You're not helping your cause here. Back off."

"Listen, buddy, I'm not going to hurt her, it's all in good fun. We used to do this all the time."

"She doesn't seem to want to talk to you. Come back later."

"Why don't we let her talk for herself? Jazz, hey, would you mind informing this guy that it's okay for us to talk? It's not like we have a restraining order in place."

"Morty, go away," I called over my shoulder.
"You heard her." Ed dared to shove Morty in the chest. Instead of blowing his fuse, Morty took it in stride. He dodged around the meddling boy and wormed his way in front of me again. I scowled.

"Mm mm oo oo," he hummed, cupping his hands on top of his head to resemble Buneary ears.

I couldn't help but crack a smile. A giggle escaped my lips.

Ed jogged up, the look of anger and worry on his face giving way to confusion upon seeing me.

"Come on," Morty implored.

"Mmm mm now we are here carameldansen," I quietly sang and tepidly mimicked Morty. Our hips bounced side-to-side and hands flapped about. This dance routine only lasted a few seconds, but it was enough to break my resolve.

"Hey, are you trying to molest her?" Ed asked.

"It's alright Ed, he can join us."

"Fun times," Morty said.

Ed's bewilderment grew, to the point where he looked like a lost Mareep.

"How've you been?" Morty asked, and it seemed he had finally dropped the clown act.

"It's been crazy," I said.

"Gym Leader Jasmine. I like the sound of that. Must've been hard work to get the title."

"Very hard, but it's over and I'm glad for it."

"But now the real work starts. You've got to go home and start taking challengers."

"I've been the acting Gym Leader for three years, it won't be any different for me."

"Oh is that so? Mr. Beret on vacation?"

Ah, all the tumultuous, painful emotions are bubbling up again. Thanks, Morty.

"Mr. Beret has cancer," Ed said flatly, answering for me.

Morty didn't know how to respond to that.

"You have the worst timing," I told him.

"Oh is that what you were… I'm really sorry," Morty said.

"Sorry is just a word."

"You're right. But I do mean it. Let me make it up to you somehow." He looked around. "You're probably stressed and tired, right?"

"Extremely," I said with a nod.

"Why don't we go to an onsen? There's a nice one just north of town."

"An onsen?" That sounded dubious.
"Yeah, sure. This work-study program I'm in puts my Pokes through the grinder, so I take them there to detox. The water feels great, they say the minerals in it help loosen your muscles up."

"A hot spring with Haunter- Gengar, I mean. That sounds like a bad idea."

Morty ran a hand through his hair, thinking of a way to reassure me his intentions were noble.

"Gengar won't bug you, I promise. I'll keep him in his Pokeball, if it'll make you feel better."

"Please."

"Done."

Gengar yelped in shock as he was forcibly dragged into his Pokeball. It was nice to see the ghost on the receiving end for once.

"So, I don't have a swimsuit," I said.

"Oh, no problem, it's a nude bath."

"Um…" that was supposed to reassure me… how?

Morty realized the problem and backpedaled.

"Oh! No, no no no! It's not like that, the springs aren't co-ed. There's boys, girls, and mixed."

"Oh I see. You'll get me into the girls bath and then peep over the wall."

Morty gagged. I sighed.

"Let's just go, I'm hungry. Do they have food there? I don't want to eat at the cafeteria here."

"Yeah, a nice sushi bar right there in the inn. I can get us rooms if you want."

"No, don't," I protested, even though I knew Morty had already made up his mind.

"Whitney, are you coming?"

"Sure!"

"What about the rest of you?"

Most of my friends weren't here just to cheer me on, they were attending a trainers convention this weekend. They all wanted an early start on the line for World Champion Tobias' autograph and so declined. It was just the four of us as we headed outside to find a taxi.

We stood before a majestic old inn.

"This used to be Indigo Plateau Gym, before it was moved to Pewter," Morty explained. "Come on, let me show you around."

Inside there was an exceptionally large lobby, mostly occupied by a kabuki theatre stage. Paper
lanterns were strung across the room, providing most of the dim lighting. I assumed this space was the battle arena back in the day. Various hallways led off to the other components of the inn: the restaurant, bar, gift shop, gym rooms, hotel rooms, and onsen bath. Morty reserved a pair of rooms for us and treated us to the sushi bar, all on his dime ("scholarship money" he claimed).

"Pokémon are only allowed in the mixed bath."

"Choir is my only Pokémon who can swim."

"Choir?"

"Corsola."

"Didn't know you had one of those. Catch her out of the sea?"

"Yes."

"Like being back home in Olivine?"

"Very much so."

"You don't miss Ecruteak even a little bit?"

"Not at all."

"Aww. That stings."

"It has nothing to do with you Morty. I didn't want to be there in the first place."

"That's why you were such a party-pooper all middle school?"

"You're just now figuring it out? Come on." I was more than ready to get into the hot water. Morty held us up with a wave. A devilish grin came over him.

"I'll be right back. Hey Ed, come with me, I'm gonna need help."

Whitney and I were left in the dark, blinking.

"That was sudden."

"Hey Whitney."

"Hmm?"

"You went to high school with Morty. Has he grown up any?"

"Nope. Pretty much the same goofball you knew in middle school."

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Oh lighten up. He wasn't really that bad, was he? Why don't you kiss him? He'll treat ya nice then."

"No!"

"Oh… is it because you've got a thing for Edward?" She snuggled in close.

"No! Of course not!"
”Oh come on! You've never had a boyfriend, it's weird. He's your type, he's available, he works with you on a daily basis. Haven't you at least tried dating him?"

”Why would I? He's just a guy I know, it doesn't mean we have to date. I don't want a relationship. I'm not interested. Drop the topic.”

”Tsk tsk. Eighteen years old, way too old to be playing innocent." Whitney pushed me towards the hall marked "Hot springs". "Haven't even been kissed. We've got to fix that."

”But I… never mind. No, I don't want to kiss a guy!"

Whitney paused.

”Do you like girls?"

”What?! No! That's perverted!"

Whitney soured.

”Are you a homophobe?"

”What?! No! That's rude!"

”Are you a prude?"

”What?! No! That's mean!"

”Are you a-"

”Stop with the questions already!"

Whitney steered me into the changing room. Her garments were flicked off in a heartbeat; mine came off after much trepidation and not a little help from Whitney's eager hands.

”Pancakes," Whitney noted smugly.

I clutched my white sundress to my chest, trying to hide my breasts from Whitney's stare. Hers were easily C-cups, mine had trouble filling out A-cups.

”Yours are too large for your body," I said.

”Don't be jealous. The boys like them."

”What?! You've… have you done it already?"

Whitney went coy, a slip of a grin peeking out of the corner of her mouth.

”No- not all the way. Not yet," she fessed up. "Maybe tonight? Maybe Morty?"

”You wouldn't!" I exclaimed.

”I wouldn't? Really? Well, only if you claim him first."

”Eww! Stop being a pervert, Whitney!"

”Come on, out we go."
She urged me through the door.

The hot spring was one large rock pool, divided into three parts by a wood fence. I climbed up on a stool to look over, and found myself looking at the mixed section. On second thought, I probably shouldn't have risked soiling my eyes, but I lucked out. Only a few Pokémon and one young couple, in swim suits, occupied the bath. I guess there's not much business here in late winter. There was no sign of the boys. The air was freezing to my bare skin, a fact reinforced by a gust of wind. I scurried and hopped into the girl's pool, which was also a mistake.

"HOT! HOT HOT HOT!"

I went from Dante's Hell to Edward's Hell in an instant.

"Hoy, what's the racket? Piper down."

Morty's voice.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

It came from the other side of the fence. I daintily made my way to the divide in the water and put my ear against the wood.

"Morty?"

"Over here."

His voice led me further down the fence.

"Grab this," he ordered.

I was confused, until I looked down. There was a hole in the fence, under the water, and a bottle was sticking through. I took it and read the label.

"Jinkokusei Malt, Rice Wine." I nearly dropped the thing in surprise. "It's sake! You can't have alcohol in here!"

"True and not true. Alcohol is allowed in the baths, but not for us under-aged young adults."

"Then why did you bring it? Where did you get it?"

"I made some friends at the bar. Here, grab the cups. Are you going to turn me in?"

"I ought to."

"You know, on the continent the drinking age is eighteen. I think we're old enough to handle ourselves. We're not driving, we're not on the streets. What's the harm? Besides, it's a one-time deal; we're celebrating you earning your Gym Leader title."

"I… fine. Whatever. You can do whatever, I'm not drinking."

"I will," Whitney said, grabbing both the bottle and the cups from me and pouring herself a shot. She gulped the first one down whole.

"Woah! Strong!"
"You're going to get drunk," I complained.

"Not drunk, just tipsy," Whitney said. From the sounds of it, Morty and Ed were also taking their shots.

"You're going to be the only one left out."

"I'm fine, I really am."

"How's the view, Whitney?"

"Whadya mean?"

"Well, I reckon you're lucky enough to behold Miss Jasmine there completely naked. Must be a pretty sight."

"Eh, I don't bat that way. Much rather come join you."

"By all means."

"Whitney, don't joke like that!" I said.

"I'm drunk, like you said."

"You can't possibly be impaired yet."

"Weee!" She twirled in circles in the water. I myself was growing cold and self-conscious and so gradually slipped my upper body under. Once my blood vessels grew accustomed to the heat it actually felt pretty good. Mother never lets me take long baths, so this a rare guilty pleasure for me.

After playing in the pool for a bit, the four of us settled in and relaxed. We rested with our backs to the fence so that we could talk. For awhile it was just idle chit-chat, Whitney and Morty catching up and Ed introducing his life story.

"Rich kid, aren't ya?"

"I don't like being called rich. I don't see any of it, it's all tied up in their investments."

"Still, they treat you nicely."

"Not really. It's really embarrassing, actually. I have to go to these societies, basically where rich people send their kids to learn how to "create success"- it's a load of crock, all they're doing is strengthening the buddy network, getting us personal contacts early. And I suck at it."

"Not your cup of tea, huh?"

"Well, I feel sabotaged by my folks. They want me to be a rich snob, but they don't understand you have to have the perks to show off to other snobs that you belong. So you get kids showing off their premium breeder Pokémon- Charmeleons, Bayleefs, Marshtomps- and here I am with nothing but the Pokémon I caught in my backyard."

"Tough to be you."

Etc etc…

"I'm going to be Goldenrod's Gym Leader," Whitney asserted.
"Pretty confident, are we?"

"I have the inside track. Mallory is being promoted to a Pokémon League position, and she's having a competition to decide who to replace her. I got intel that it's going to be Pokeathlon sports, which basically means she's rigging the contest in my favor."

"How so?"

"My Pokémon are the best in city at Pokeathlon! It's not even close."

"Lucky ducky."

"Right on! What about you, Morty? You're in this apprenticeship program, you said?"

"Aye, that's right. Although, it's only a precursor. My parents really want me to go to college, so I'm still figuring out which way I want to go."

"Hey, Ed, do you want to be a Gym Leader?"

"Yes, but obviously, the position was just occupied."

"Well sure, but why not try for another city? Are you good enough?"

"I think I'm good enough, or at least, I am confident I can become good enough. But I don't want to," Ed answered.

"Why's that?"

"It would mean moving out of Olivine."

"Any particular reason to stay? I heard it's become a dump."

"There are things in Olivine worth staying for," Ed answered.

"Oh. I see."


The peace and platitude would not last forever, however.

"Hey, Whitney, how much of that sake you've got left?"

"Most of it."

"Good. We've got a bottle over here. Let's play truth or dare."

"Okay."

"Jasmine, no complaining. You're playing this."

"Why should I?"

"Why should we hang out with you?" came Morty's pointed remark.

"Because…"

"If you hate who we are, why bother sticking around?"
"It's just you, Morty, you're the source of the idiocy around here," I tried arguing.

"Actually, I agree with him. You're too stuffy sometimes," Whitney said. I fumed. To think, the only other woman would side with the pervert over me.

"You'll have more fun if you go along," Ed said. "Why not give it a try? Tomorrow you've got a lot of work to do when you get back, so let's have fun while we still can."

I huffed.

"Fine. As long as I don't have to do anything sexual, you got it!"

"It's alright, the rules of the game will help you with that."

"What is the game?"

"Truth or dare, college edition."

"How does that go?"

"Easy. I give you the choice between truth or dare. You pick, then I ask a question. If you don't want to answer the truth or do the dare, then you have to take a sip. We all take turns."

"Okay."

I only agreed because I thought I could simply ask for a truth each time it came to my turn. There's nothing in my life they could think to ask about that would embarrass me. This will be easy.

And so we began.

"Dare," Whitney said.

"I dare you to flash the couple in the other bath," Morty said.

Whitney, with no hesitation, hopped up the fence and jiggled her chest around. She splashed back into the pool.

"I don't think they saw me. But a Squirtle did. It tried to Bubble-bath me!"

The boys laughed and Morty said that was enough.

"Truth," Ed said for his turn.

"Who was the first girl you jacked off to?"

"Ew, Whitney!"

There was silence.

"Well?"

"He just took a shot, Whitney," Morty replied. Ed could be heard letting out a hefty exhalation.

"Dare. Jasmine, you have to come up with it," Morty insisted.

"I dare you to have Gengar fart in your face," I said in complete seriousness.
"What kind of dare is that?"

"It's exactly what you had Haunter do to me in sixth grade. No complaining!"

"Fine, fine. Gengar, come out."

We were soon treated to the gastrous noise of Gengar flatulating. Edward gave us a detailed description, confirming that indeed Morty had suffered the dare.


"Truth."

A moment's pause.

"Who was the last guy you had a crush on?"

My mind sank.

How could I possibly… no. Impossible. I can't tell him.

I tipped the cup over and emptied a mouthful of the liquid into my throat.

It tastes bad.

Oh shoot, what is this? My stomach feels like it just got hit by a sack of ice.

"She drank," Whitney informed the boys.

"Oh really? Huh, interesting."

You just got lucky. Ask me something more in line with your reputation, Morty! Like "Who do you want to sleep with?" Then I can truthfully answer "No one!"

And yet, each time my turn came up:

"Have you ever gotten a present from a boy because he liked you?"

Bottom's up.

"What's the greatest compliment a guy has given you?"

Bottom's up.

"Who do you think has a crush on you right now?"

Bottom's up.

"Who's the cutest guy you've ever met?"

Bottom's up.

"Have you ever masturbated? What were you thinking of when you were doing it?"

Bottom's up.

"Who do you hate most in the world?"
Bottom's up.

It was that last one that caught Morty's attention.

"Huh. Didn't expect that."

"What is it?" Ed asked.

"Well I coulda swore she'd say I was the one she hated most in the world. Who else could it be? Jasmine, who is it?"

"I jwust dwank- I jwust- jwust- dwammit! I just drank a shot so I would not have to answer that!"

Morty's questions have been hitting too close to home. I've consumed too much alcohol and could probably be arrested for public intoxication (as if my under-aged drinking wasn't bad enough). Now I'm glad Morty booked those rooms for us.

"Last one," Morty said.

"Dare!" I yelled out in frustration, unwilling to take another one of his laser-guided interrogations.

"Oh. Haha. Okay, I dare you to go ask the counter guy out on a date."

"Um, okay."

"Right now."

"But I'm naked."

"That's part of the dare."

I shivered, despite being saturated in steaming hot water.

My gaze fell to the cup. There was nothing left. Whitney saw my conundrum and offered me the bottle helpfully.

The effect of alcohol on the brain's higher functions is truly a destructive one. At this moment, the repercussions, both social and psychological, of what Morty was asking me to do were dimmed to my comprehension. The physical effect of the sake on my stomach was much more immediate. I was absolutely sure that a single gulp of the liquid poison would be the end of me, or at least tip me from "drunk" to "woefully sick". Between the choice of embarrassment and biological suffering, I chose to humiliate myself.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Really?!"

I stepped out of the pool, wobbling a bit.

"Here I go."

I tip-toed along, finding every hiding place I could, staying in the shadows as best I could, and darting from one safe haven to the next. The air was dry and colder than an hour ago, causing me to shiver violently.

"Just do it, just do it, just do it."
I tried calculating my move, how I could get away with the dare while exposing myself as little as possible. The lobby was just around the corner now.

"Okay."

I took a deep breath, and began sprinting.

I ran around the corner, around a couch, darted from one pillar to the next, leapt across the gap, found a corner where I wasn't totally exposed, and presented myself before the receptionist.

I made a deep bow, the better to hide my nudity.

"I know this is sudden and strange and perverted but would you please excuse my appearance and go out on a date with me?" I huffed out all at once.

No answer.
Is he speechless?
I squirmed where I stood.

After ten seconds and no reaction, I dared looking up from my bow.

The guy at the counter had his head in his arms, eyes closed.

He's napping.

Oh gosh I am the luckiest woman to take 'Dare' in the history of the game of 'Truth or Dare?'. With my dignity still barely intact I dashed out of the lobby and back towards the hot spring.

"Smile!"
A flash. I was dazed.
I blinked, and came to.

Morty was crouched in a side-hallway, looking directly at me. He had a camera held at ready in his hand. Ed was standing behind him. They had an expression of shocked triumph, not entirely believing they had managed to accomplish their plan.

"Wah?" I uttered.

"Um, one more?" Morty said, and then raised the camera and took another.

"Um…"
Panic-mode.

The next thing I registered was water splashing in my face. Apparently I had cannon-balled directly into the bath. How I got from the hallway to the onsen was not stored in my short-term memory.

"How'd it go?" Whitney asked.

"They-they-they-they-they-they-they-they-" I repeated this one nonsensical pronoun over and over, ad nauseam.

"What? Jasmine, calm down. Hey!"
"They-they-they took a- a - oohh-" I let out a soft, pitiful moan.

I'm doomed.

Morty is dead, that's a given.

But now that I have to murder him, my life is over. They'll lock me up forever. It's over. Damn it. Damn it so much.

How does damnation work? I know "damn it" is supposed to be a request to God to send the perpetrator to Hell, but whoever put it into humanity's head that God would do such a thing for individuals? It's a weird curse now that I think about it.

Oh dear Jasmine, put your head on straight.

Morty has a physical record that captured your nude self in photographic form.

"I've got to destroy it. His camera," I said.

"What?" Whitney exclaimed.

I climbed out of the pool and began looking for the bath towels.

"Jasmine, for the love Pokémon, that's a 30,000 Pokedollar camera, please, please don't break it."

I held the offending instrument up above my head.

"Is that so?" I said with a level of calmness and reasonability that belied my current actions. I lowered the camera back to my waist line. Morty looked visibly relieved.

"These new models store everything on an SD card, don't they?" I flipped the camera over, located the hatch, and popped the memory card out.

"Woah, Jasmine-" Morty lunged. I casually tossed the camera to him, forcing him to stop and catch the thing before it fell to the concrete. As for the SD card- I tossed it up into the air, whereupon Magneton promptly fried it with a Thunderbolt.

"Good Pokémon!"

Morty stared aghast.

"Jasmine…"

"Perhaps you should think twice, before taking nude pics of women without their permission!" I yelled at him with rising vehemence.

"I'm sorry. It was…"

"Don't bother apologizing. Grr! I knew you would try something evil!"

"Oh lighten up," Morty said, irked.
"Lighten up-

LIGHTEN UP?!

"I'LL LIGHT UP YOUR SORRY ASS!

"Oh dear, that's the Jazz I remember." Morty began dashing away with nothing but a towel wrapped around his butt. On account of being a girl with precious little curvature, I had to hold my towel up to my chest with both hands. It was enough to slow me down and prevent me from pulverizing the miserable miscreant into dust.

"Get back here!"

"You're too scary!" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Magneton! Thunder Shock!"

Morty let out his Ghastly.

"Smokescreen!"

Magneton unleashed a half-dozen jolts of electricity into the haze, but it seemed none found their mark. Morty made it safely to the inn and disappeared into the maze of hallways. One late-night guest stared bewilderedly, another scowled.

"Hey kids, behave yourselves! I'll tell management on you!"

Thus scolded, I cowered my way back to the changing room. My clothes were gone.

"Whitney? Where are you?"

My friend had disappeared.

I lilted about the inn, half looking for Whitney, half wandering aimlessly. On instinct I jumped up every staircase I came across. Perhaps I was succumbing to the urge to escape into the starry sky. My vertical adventure ended at a rooftop landing. Indigo Plateau lay before me, a collection of bright boxes nestled within the towering blackness of the mountains. Even Pokémon League HQ, a twenty-story skyscraper, looked like a lunch pail compared to the peaks. Off to my right, a great shadow practically blotted out the sky and made the other mountains look like toddlers in comparison: Mt. Silver.

Nature is sublime. Overpowering. We're nothing but specks against the cosmic backdrop.

I sighed.

Natural instinct is quite overpowering as well. I had promised to myself I would steel my heart and never get drawn into this kind of situation ever again. It was for naught. The brain is a slave to the genetic blueprints it was constructed by. It bows to peer pressure in order to maintain social harmony. Put alcohol in it, and inhibitions are lowered. Throw an opportunity to perpetuate its genes, and it will trigger arousal throughout the body, forcing behavior that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable, even hazardous to one's social standing.

I can't figure out if I'm angry with Morty and Ed for acting on their base instincts and making creeps out of themselves, or with myself for enabling them with my idiotic actions.

"Jasmine."
My introspection was interrupted by Ed's voice. He climbed up the stairs, slowly and non-threateningly.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I want to apologize."

"What good is that? Why didn't you think beforehand? You could have stopped Morty."

"It seemed innocent. Like a joke."

"I was naked! It didn't occur to you that that was wrong?"

"Well, you agreed to the dare, so it didn't seem like you were too concerned about being caught naked. We just wanted to photograph the clerk's reaction. Catching you was an accident, a stupid spur of the moment thing. I'll make sure Morty deletes the pics."

"I already took care of that."

Ed hung his head. He reached out, offering me a bundle of clothing—my sundress and underwear. I took it without comment.

"I'll give you some privacy."

He walked back down the stairs.

"Wait."

I don't know what I was thinking, but it felt like there was something unsaid between us. I got dressed while the young man waited patiently.

"Come up here."

I took a seat at the edge, while Ed stood beside me.

"Well?" I said.

"Jasmine, I've—we've known each other for four years now."

"Yeah."

"But do you really think we've gotten to know each other?"

"What do you mean?"

"I feel like, ever since that day, you've been a different person. Shy. Hurt. Reticent. I don't understand why. Because of that, it's made me feel like I ought to be helping you. But I can't. I don't know why and I don't know how. That makes me angry with myself."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

He tensed up.

"I like you," he said.

My stomach curled.
"I'm so sorry. I like you, everything about you. I told Morty to ask you that dare. I wanted to see you without clothes on. It was lust, plain and simple. It was stupid and immature of me. I hope you understand and forgive me, because I want to make it up to you. I want… I want for us to be a couple. I love you."

I think I'm about to cry. Again.

"We've been friends for a long time, and I've had these feelings from the start. I wished we could be more than friends all along. I just didn't have the courage to confess, until now."

He kneeled beside me, and tried to get my attention.

"I don't know how you really feel about me. I think you like me too. But I want to be sure. I'll understand if you hate me because of this fiasco, but either way, I'd like to know how you feel."

My answer came by rote.

"I'm sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends," I recited.

Ed's grief upon hearing those words was palpable. His breathing became convulsed, his eyes grew watery, his hands began shaking. He was struggling to maintain his composure- and failing.

"But... why? Is it because of what I did? I'm so sorry."

"It's not that. I don't know how my head works, I just have no romantic feelings towards you. Or anyone. I can't feel love." I turned to face him eye-to-eye. "I'm sorry, but it was doomed from the start. I just can't bring myself to return your feelings."

Ed wordlessly ran off, as fast as he could.

_____________________________________________________________

I had trouble sleeping. That's why I was conscious enough to hear my cellphone buzz off at 12:46 A.M. I struggled with the disheveled covers before reaching for the device.

"Hello?"

…Oh hi Erika.

…It's kind of late to be congratulating me.

…I passed my exam, there's nothing left but some paperwork. Hold on, you're talking too fast.

…What does that mean?

…SAY WHAT??!!"

The phone dropped to the floor.
"Morty!" I burst into his room. "Morty!!!" I yelled, upon discovering the boy in question draped over a certain redhead. The two were stripped down to their undergarments and lip-locked.

"Get off!!" They were oblivious to my shouting at first. He was not so oblivious when I manually lifted him off of her and rolled him off the bed.

"Ouch! What the fuck! Jasmine, fuck off!" I slapped him across the head, hard. Out of instinct he swung a fist at me, but I was faster and meaner and caught him by the balls with my foot. The boy lurched to a crouch.

"FUUUUCK!"

"How dare you!"

"Jasmine, we were just kissing! Don't throw a damn hissy fit!"

I spotted Morty's laptop on the desk and rushed over to it.

"Don't smash it!" Morty cried. Luckily for him, that was not my intention. Unluckily for him, what I intended was far worse.

"What is the meaning of this!" I shouted, flipping the open computer round and showing him the contents of the screen.

A web browser window was opened to PalPark, the most popular social media site for Pokémon Trainers. Right at the top of my personal page, a picture was posted for all the world to see: me, completely nude, standing like a Deerling in the headlights, with the onsen bath in the background. The caption listed 'Mortimer Matsuba' as the uploader.

"I didn't do that!" Morty exclaimed.

"You filthy liar!"

I opened up another half-dozen websites. All social media pages, all with the damning photo of myself spread across them.

"What is the meaning of this? How the hell did this happen? You better explain to me right now!" I shouted.

"Calm down, don't hurt anyone!" Whitney urged. I was heaving, my hands clawed and nose snarling.

"I honestly don't know what the hell happened," Morty said pleadingly.

"Magneton fried your memory chip! How did this photo even get here? What did you do? Tell me!"

"I… my camera has wifi, it can upload things to my personal storage. It must've transferred automatically. But Jasmine, I have no clue how it got from my comp to the internet. Honestly."

"You're lying! You put it there!"

"Stop yelling! They'll call the cops!"

I followed his advice, but still wasn't calm or relaxed.

"You have ten seconds to give me a proper explanation, or else I'm reporting you to the cops."
"I need more than ten," Morty said. He put his hands together in a begging fashion, before carefully extricating the computer from my grip.

Whitney placated me while Morty went to work. His eyes frantically danced across the screen, searching for some answer that would save his butt.

"This is all my fault. It's because I took that picture."

"Of course it is!"

"But I… oh. Shit."

Morty leaned back.

"What is it?"

He didn't answer. His gaze was focused on the ceiling.

"Um… I was… hacked. Fuck."

"Hacked?!"

"The security on this place's network blows. It's two years out of date. I should've known better."

"What do you mean you got hacked?" I demanded.

"Some turd somewhere else in the world hacked into my computer, found your nudie, and started uploading it everywhere using my account."

"I don't believe you," I said.

"It's the truth!"

He started logging in to his accounts one by one, deleting the pictures as he got access to them.

"Fuck! Shit! People are downloading it."

A search for the pic showed it had already migrated to three other websites.

"You bastard! you did this on purpose!"

"No, I swear! It's my fault, but it was negligence, not on purpose! Let me focus on fixing it, then you can beat me till I'm a bloody pulp. But please wait."

I paced around the room, dashed out, and returned with my cellphone.

"Erika?"

"I'm here," my best friend said over the loudspeaker.

"Who is that? Erika? From Celadon?"

"Yeah."

"What's going on? Can I help?"

"Hey Erika, are you any good with computers?"
"Not in the least."

"Crap."

"Explain the situation to me anyways."

"I think my computer got hacked. Jasmine's pic is starting to go viral. If we don't head it off, it'll spread all over the internet. She can't afford a pic like that getting loose, she might get fired from her job," Morty explained.

"I just earned that job, I don't want to lose it!" I cried.

"How did that photo come to be taken in the first place?"

"Long story, tell you later," I said. "Morty, what can you do?"

"Jasmine, I may be useless, but I have friends who are excellent with technology. Let me get ahold of them," Erika said over the phone. "Where is Proton's number?" she muttered to herself, and then the line went silent.

I stared at Morty, who stared at me, while Whitney stared at both of us. We all held our breath.

It took an hour, but when Erika returned she urged us to sweep the internet. Morty did, running all the forms of image search he could think of, but no trace of the incriminating photograph could be found. Morty went to his personal documents, found a dozen displaced copies, and deleted all of them as well. He then ran every virus scan and firewall update known to geekdom, before flopping on the bed.

"That was close," he uttered.

I made to leave.

"Jasmine, wait. If you want to rag on me, by all means. I'll take any punishment you want. Please forgive me."

"Leave me alone," I muttered.

"Jazz! I'm sorry!"

"I'm tired. Say that again in the morning, I'll decide what to do with you then."

Men are so stupid.

My heart is a wreck. It can barely handle the stress of this constant Tauros-shit wrecking havoc on my life. How in the world could the organ also bear the weight of a relationship? There's no room in there for love.

Not for Ed, and certainly not for Morty.

Ed is… dumb. If he had half a brain, he'd be able to tell all of my overtures to him were nothing more than ordinary gestures of politeness. There was never any intention to invite his affection to
As for Morty, he is a liar. He's just covering his tracks with this claim of a hacker. He probably thought it would be funny to show off my bare body for all my friends, coworkers, and family to see. "Hey all! This is what your dear daughter looks like without underwear on! Look! Look! Make fun of her! Laugh at her itty bitty titties! She's just like a child! You're a pedo for looking at her! Hahahaha!" That boy has no compunction, no morals, whatsoever. He goes with whatever Aipom-brained idea occurs to him and stumbles his way through the consequences after the fact. What a creep! An idiot! Tomorrow I'm going to smack him! It's time I taught him a lesson, a good one! Maybe hurting him isn't enough. Maybe I really do need to denounce him before the police and the Pokémon League.

I lurched around in the covers.

I was assuming I could even get enough sleep tonight to be rested and capable enough to do anything but drag myself to the airport tomorrow. This sucks. That's not a phrase I like using but it's the most apt and succinct way to relay my current feelings.

Boys!

UGH!

I rolled over, face stuffed into the pillow, and let out a scream.

I hate them all!

Why me? Why does life always have to rag on me? Why do they all do this to me?!

...

There was a knock at my door.

I raised myself.

"Whitney, I thought you were sleeping with Morty."

"It's me."

"Edward?"

No no no. I don't want to rehash his broken heart. Please not this.

"Go away. Come back tomorrow."

I thought I had locked the door. I was wrong.

The handle turned, the door opened, and Ed stepped inside.

I rose to a sitting position.

"Ed?" I whispered.
"Why would you ask that?" I cried.

Morty continued to hold me in his gaze. I couldn't bear it. I dropped my eyes.

"I need to know."

"Nothing happened."

"Jasmine, for once, for once, please be honest with me. It's more important to me than you could possibly imagine."

"How can I… I don't want…" I stuttered about.

"Did Ed rape you?" he asked again.

I was silent. I sunk into the water further.

Morty backed off a little, settling himself into a crouch before me.

"I can understand if you're reluctant to tell me. So I'll go first. I'll tell you what really happened that night."
March 27th 2009

Indigo Plateau

Pokémon League Regional HQ

"Hey mom. Sorry I couldn't make it.

…Yeah.

…I'm sure it was really beautiful.

…Sorry.

…No.

…Because it didn't feel right.

…We were never all that close to begin with.

…Listen, if I was wanted there, she would have called me before she-

…How am I suppose to care about that-

…I've got class, got to go."

I hung up the phone, and then exited the class that had just wrapped up. A free and open evening beckoned.

My name is Morty, by the way. I'm eighteen, six-foot-two, devilishly good looking, bachelor, and most pertinently, one very put-upon momma's boy. The woman seriously has it out for me. Nag nag nag nag, everything great and small. I love her, but good god, I have my own life now and she needs to respect that.

Except, for once, she's right, I should have gone. But I didn't want to, because the very thought of being in that parlor, surrounded by a bunch of strangers and no actual family members, invited feelings I've tried so very hard to suppress. Mom ought to understand where I'm coming from, but it seems like she's gone the opposite route to dealing with all the crap we've been through. Clings to people, wears her heart on a sleeve, keeps nothing private. I prefer clamming up and cracking out a joke- keeps people around me unsuspecting and light-hearted, which keeps me sane.

"Let's see what's out there tonight."

I booted up the laptop and brought up Palpark.

"Jeff's not funny, as usual. Eusine is funny in the worst way possible. Courtney needs a butt-tuck. Whitney is visiting Indigo- woah, she's here?"

I scanned through Whitney's page and discovered one hell of a shock.
"Jasmine is in town?!" I muttered excitedly.

That's a name I haven't heard in a long time! It's been, what, ten months since we spoke? Even then it was literally thirty seconds before she shied away. When was the last time we really hung out?

I leaned back, closed my eyes, and browsed memory bookshelf.

Three years, I think. My folks brought me to Olivine for a beach vacation and we found each other and spent some time. It was actually pretty fun, she was a lot less snippety than usual. Must be the fact she was back in her home town.

What is she doing here?

Ah?

AH?!?! Gym Leader?! She's gonna be a frickin Gym Leader!

"Wah wah woah!" I cried out in the middle of the dining hall. Some people at the neighboring table stared at me like I was being weird.

"Hey, look, my friend's going to be a Gym Leader!" I pointed at the computer screen. They shrugged and returned to their business. I continued my unabashed mirth while reading the rest of Whitney's posts.

"Mmm. Huh, what time is it?" I asked myself. 4:20. Oh shoot, she ought to be done by now. They hold the qualification exams over in the competition wing, don't they? If I scoot, I might just catch her.

Found her.

She's walking along Penitence Lobby with a gaggle of other trainers. Well, to be accurate, the crowd is ahead of her and she's lagging behind, along with some other guy. I wonder who he is. Let's sneak up and listen in.

"Don't worry. You'll see him again."

"I hope so."

'Him'? That could be any number of guys, but let's take a gamble that she's referring to me. Who knows? Maybe Whitney told her I was here in Indigo for the spring.

"You hoped you'd see me again? Aw, that's so nice of you Jazz."

I leapt backwards.

This is where she usually says "Morty you creep!" and tries to judo chop me. I froze. She didn't take the bait. She's didn't even flinch or turn around.

"You're an asshole."

The accusation hit me in the gut.
Holy...

Is this the girl I knew in middle school?

"Woah! Eh, hehe, sorry?" I stuttered out, sounding like both the asshole she accused me of being and the idiot I accused myself of being.

Maybe she's just surprised. Or in a bad mood. Let's give her a moment. Not that I have much choice, seeing as I'm now fending off her companion's intervention. Besides, there's Whitney. I couldn't help but snicker, her Palpark pics don't do those lovable love-buns justice. She sure has grown into a real woman since we were in school together.

"Whitney girl! Holy cow, you've grown a pair!"

"Don't mess with me, you've never been about the boing boing! DFC pedo!"

The guy with Jazz started trailing me around. He did a good job of staying out of eyesight, but that just meant he was suspiciously never in my sight, and it became obvious what he was doing. I quietly let Gengar out and focused on the image of the kid in my mind. Gengar picked up the hint and dipped into the shadows.

Let's see, if I focus some more…

Mmm. A flash, a sparkle, a round ball… Jazz's Pokémon, Magnemite. In about twenty seconds.

"Zzzt!"

A Thunder Shock jolted Gengar out of the guy's shadow.

That's more like the Jasmine I knew. She's acting funny, bitter and grumpy, but I still sense that comically serious attitude underneath. Let's try a bit of nostalgia, see if that'll loosen her up.

She took the bait, reluctantly, and for a few seconds we relived a cherished middle school memory, shaking our hips and humming the catchy tune. Soon enough I had her loosened up and agreeing to a little celebration party. I know just the place- The Indigo Gym onsen baths. Awesome. Judging from the beach episode, Jazz likes being in the water, right? Cool.

There was a line for the taxis. League HQ was crowded, with a lot of employees getting off work and heading home, or to the arena. We were in the middle of tournament season and so the place was overrun by trainers and visitors. Across the block the stadium complex was already lit up and decorated with banners advertising the coming nighttime matches.

How about a detour to watch them?

Nah. Jasmine looks like crap. Her hair's on the fritz, even her normally neat spike-tails are in disarray. She should take those hair pins off. I don't care for the color, orange doesn't suit her.

She and Whitney tip-toed up the sidewalk, craning their necks to search for an incoming cab. While they were away, the guy took a formalized stand right beside me.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Make Jasmine laugh."
"It was easy."

"No it isn't! I've tried for years, could barely get a chuckle. You stroll in here and flip her funny bone like a light switch. What did you do? What was that?"

"Caramellldansen. It was a just a stupid internet meme, but it got really popular in our middle school. We stormed the stage at graduation and danced off to it, got our tech geek to put it on the intercom. Even Jasmine joined in. The principle was pissed. Fun times."

"Seriously? Jasmine would never do something like that."

"Oh yes she did. She loved defying authority! Even better, though, she loved getting away with it. The teachers always thought she was their little pet, when half the pranks in the school only ever got off the ground with her permission. She ever told you about the Head Scarf Mafia?"

The guy shook his head in the negative.

"Should get her to tell you about it."

"What was it about?"

"No no, she needs to tell it, she's the only one with the passion to tell the story properly."

"Oh…"

"I'm sensing something in that "Oh…". What's your name?"

"Kurosawa, Edward."

"You her friend?"

"Coworker. Well, subordinate now."

"Ohh, so you're her rival. Tough luck my friend, but I would not wager my career against beating her."

"No, it's not that."

This guy's a cake: "No, it's not that." "You've got it all wrong." "No-" Just get to the point already! …Oh wait, I know what's going on here. Should've put two and two together sooner.

"Are you two dating?" I asked.

His entire body deflated.

"I wish," he muttered.

"You've got a crush on her."

"It's more than a crush." He turned his face away so I couldn't see whatever embarrassing expression he thought he was wearing. "You can't work with a girl like her for three years, day after day, and not fall in love."

"Well she is one of a kind," I said.

"She's beautiful. And strong. Strong-willed, definitely. She's got a lightning-bolt temper but it's
awfully easy to see what's going to set her off, and you know she's that way because she cares. Then look at how she treats her Pokémon, like a tender mother. How can any guy see that and not wish to be on the receiving end of that kind of affection? It's-

"Spare me, I spent my own three years with her," I said, patting him on the shoulder. "She's got her pros and cons like any other girl. Probably a bit extreme on both sides, actually. If you can look past the prudery, the bitchiness, the nagging, the domineering, the argumentative, the judgmental- okay, I should probably cut the list short, you're giving me a scary look there- sure, she's generous with her affection. Why do you think it ought to be you?"

"Because I care, and I can stand her faults a lot more patiently than others, when a lot of other guys have ditched her. And I'm not so interested in her body like a lot of other sleaze-balls who asked for her panties before they even asked for her name. I think I can be everything she wants in a guy, but if I can't get her to notice me…"

I put my arm around the poor guy's shoulders.

"That's good enough for me. Let's see what we can do about Jazz being a shrew."

What the hell was I thinking?

I don't think I was thinking that much.

My main line of reasoning at the moment was that Jasmine had been a little skittish about sex when in middle school. Extrapolate that out to the present day, and she's probably gone full-on puritanical. It's only been four months since I lost my virginity, but it already seems like no big deal to me. The whole affair was way overhyped. Maybe if Jasmine realizes that, she'll calm down and be open to a boyfriend.

Would she be open to dating?

It's not like she's a man-hater, she always expressed- let's call it a "healthy interest" in romance. There was just a lot of bad luck with the boys who asked her out.

Well, Morty boy, you were part of the reason for that bad luck.

That's because you kept screwing over the guys who expressed interest in Jasmine.

Well, that's because I secretly coveted her.

Then why the hell did you never ask her out yourself?

Because…

Well, I don't think I was ready at that point. Probably if we had gone to high school together. Probably.

But, at the time, I was fine with our relationship. It wasn't dating, it wasn't romantic, but it was… close. Like very good friends. Or closer.

Why not try it now?

I sighed.

I could.
But I see it in this guy's face and voice. He loves her. He's right beside her. I had my chance and procrastinated. Now we're four hours apart in different cities. I love Ecruteak, even this spring work-study program is making me feel homesick. She loves Olivine, obviously. We couldn't be close.

It wouldn't work out. I made an ass of myself while we were teens, and that's probably the permanent image she has of me- a class clown.

Damn it.

Damn you, Morty. You know exactly why it could never work out.

So, fine. Let's give this guy a chance. See what he does with it. Genuinely try to net him Jasmine's affections.

How about alcohol?

Sounds like a great idea.

Djorne works the bar tonight, he'll give me a couple bottles under the counter, right?

"Follow my lead," I said to Ed.

The girls finally waved a cab down, and we took off.

They seem sufficiently impressed by my choice of locale. The old gym was a pretty spectacular venue in its heyday. Too bad the political nannies took issue with it being favored by the Pokémon League. They said a city should never share the regional HQ and a gym; the gym is bound to get preference. Well, it was true, this place got a lot of money funneled to it, and it shows. The kabuki stage was modeled around the former arena, reminiscent of an elaborate noble's court, and the exterior is more castle than modern sporting venue.

So they moved the gym to Pewter and made this place an onsen bath.

"Dinner?"

"You said they had a sushi bar."

"The best in the city."

"I don't have money."


After we filled our stomachs it was time for the good stuff.

"I'll be right back. Hey Ed, come with me. I'm gonna need help."

I led the guy around back to the kitchen.

"Hey, Djorne, you in tonight?"

"Only as long as I have to be," one pudge-bellied man gushed. "What're you up to sport?"
"We have lady company tonight, and I'm looking for some loosey-goosy juice. Care to share?"

Djorne eyed me and Ed with daring eyes.

"Aye I got plenty of stock. Question is what you plan on doing with it."

"Consuming it."

"How old are the ladies?"

"Um…" I scratched my head. "Whitney turned eighteen a month ago. Jasmine's was sometime late last year, I think?" I queried Ed.

"November 20th last year," he answered.

Djorne waddled into the kitchen and returned with a pair of bottles.

"Got cash?"

I handed over a stack of bills probably twice what the sake was worth.

"These don't leave the baths, you got it? And I swear, if I hear you did something wrong and it comes back to me, I will plead guilty just to get to the same prison as you and murder you."

"Well said!" I beamed. The bottles were handed over, along with a bag of plastic cups. "I don't ever touch a woman without invitation. How about you, Ed?"

"That's completely beneath me," Ed replied.

"Tsk. You'd do everything but touch," Djorne said in parting. The goods in tow, I took Ed to the changing room. We undressed and washed down. Towels were provided, and I noticed Ed was making use of one to protect his modesty.

"Don't be a wimp."

He shot me an angry look.

"Do you really think Jasmine is the kind of girl who'd admire a sissy? We're two big men with heterosexual orientations, there's no need for that." I pointed at the cloth wrapped around Ed's buttocks. "I'm not going to make fun of it."

Ed hesitated, before quickly flinging the towel away.

"That was easy, wasn't it?"

"Is this where we make crude 'no-homo' jokes?" Ed asked.

"Nope. I've got homo friends, and they've taught me how condescending those kinds of jokes are, so I try avoiding them."

"Okay."

I couldn't help but take a glance at his privates, reaffirmed it looked just as average as my own, and shrugged it off. We emerged from the showers out into the open air.

"Brrr."
"Yeah, jump in."

We splashed into the water.

"Hey girls?" I called out. No answer.

"They're taking their time washing."

"Mmm."

I nodded to myself.

"Good." I crouched over, facing Ed as he situated himself. "So here's the plan."

"Wait, what plan?"

"Where I set you up with Jasmine."

"You're actually going to do that?"

"Do I seem like the kind of guy who would go back on his word?"

"Yes," Ed said deadpan.

"Well, I'm actually the kind of guy who looks like he would screw you over, but actually has a soft, squishy, honest heart underneath it all."

"Yeah, I'll believe that when Jasmine and I are hitched. What are you thinking?"

"It's simple. We slip the sake over, get her to play a drinking game, and then when she's drunk we'll get her to open up and fess up her romantic secrets."

"That sounds too easy. You'll never get her to drink and you'll absolutely never learn anything from her."

"Ah-ah-ah," I said wagging a finger. "On the first count, you underestimate Whitney. On the second account, you're right in that it will be hard, but not impossible. We'll have to improvise once we learn her answers, but I think we can do it."

"And then?"

"I'll coach you how to put those things we learn to use in a confession."

"It's so simple, why didn't I think of it?" Ed asked sarcastically.

"Don't be a pessimist."

"HOT HOT HOT HOT!" We heard a familiar voice screaming from the other side of the fence.

"Hoy, what's the racket? Piper down!" I hollered.

"Where are you?"

"Here."

"Morty?"
"Over here."
-the sound of water sloshing.

"Grab this."

I shoved one of the sake bottles through a small underwater gap in the planks, and then a pair of cups.

We played and swam a little, drank a little, and talked a lot. This Edward kid has a pretty interesting family. His ancestors were once a super-important noble family that controlled a lot of territory in the central mountains. They were defeated by the warlord Nobunaga and spent most of the last two centuries eking out a living. His parents returned to the wealthy status of their ancestors via the stock market, but they didn't exactly know how to act rich. They kept foisting their weird ideas of affluence onto their son, who like any good teenager is rebelling and doing something completely opposite- being a Gym Trainer. Ergo, you've got a rich kid who hates being rich. Imagine that.

"Tough to be you."

"It is tough to be me. If I were like any of those other spoon-fed slobs, sure, I could lay back and enjoy being pampered and spoiled, but I'm not. I care. I don't want them wasting money on new game systems or overblown colleges for me. I wish I was in control of the money. I could actually make a difference."

Hmm. So if I were characterizing this guy:

High and mighty.

Hard-headed.

Obsessed with formality, propriety, and morality.

Good heart, noble intentions, but has a stubborn, go-it-alone attitude.

Okay, I can sort of see him and Jasmine together.

They can be the ultra-proper couple that devotes all of their energy to the greater good. Maybe he can be a strong and level-headed political leader, a mayor or governor perhaps, and she the strict Gym Leader. To the world they're all business, but for each other, in private, they can show a quiet, gentle affection.

Nice fantasy.

Just got to get the ball rolling.

"Let's play truth or dare."

The game started just as planned, having Gengar expel his bowel gasses into my face notwithstanding. However, the way it unfolded was not going according to expectations.

"Who was the last guy you had a crush on?" I asked Jazz.

A moment later, without answer from Jasmine, we received a notice from Whitney instead.

"She drank."
"Oh really? Huh, interesting." Ed and I exchanged glances.

The fact that Jasmine would rather take a shot than divulge something as simple as a recent crush—not a shocking revelation in general, but a little surprising on Jasmine's part.

Yet, as I kept pressing, trying every variation of innocuous romantic curiosity I could relate to her, she always chose to drink rather than answer. It got frustrating, believe me. Meanwhile, Whitney was mostly interested in answering or doing dirty stuff, and she pressed us for the same.

"I dare you two to kiss."

"We're boys!" Ed said.

"Exactly."

"Hey, I didn't agree to a dare."

"Just go along," Whitney pleaded.

"Heck no." Ed tipped his cup up.

"Aww, party-pooper."

Other notable challenges: the truth about my mommy complex (I was fifteen the last time I asked to sleep in my parent's bed), acting out like a Machoke, and filming Ed and I doing the macarena with nothing but towels over our johns.

"Can I see it?" Whitney asked, referring to the video.

"Sure. Let me just get the wifi working, it'll post to my computer. I'll show you after."

"Okay."

"Alright, Jazz, your turn."

"Truth," came the glum answer.

I scratched my brain.

Every single question we'd put to her had been answered with a gulp of sake.

Maybe we weren't getting anywhere because we kept polling her for her positive opinion of boys. Maybe she had no positive opinions whatsoever. Let's try a slightly different approach. This should be easy, I'm 97% sure the answer will be "Morty".

"Who do you hate most in the world?"

She took much longer than usual for this one. The response was the same, though. A gulp, an exhalation, and the little *tink* of plastic being set down on stone.

"Huh. Didn't expect that."

"What is it?" Ed asked.

I briefly explained my reasoning to him.

Jasmine defended herself in a stuttering, inebriated manner, as if she didn't have full control over her
tongue. Poor girl. Must be the first time she's ever drunk alcohol.

Ed swam in close and began whispering to me.

"This isn't working."

I held him off with a wave while we worked through Whitney's dare.

"We'll just ask something so specific, that if she drinks she'll be giving herself away anyways," I said.

"Okay."

I took a truth from Whitney (how do you clean up after you wank off? - toilet paper).

"Last one."

"Dare!" Jasmine cried.

Ed inched in, and we had a hurried, whispered conversation.

"What now?" he asked.

"Let's just go for a long-shot. Get her naked."

"What? She'll never go for that."

"Of course not," I snorted. "Let's hope she's drunk enough, maybe we can pry something out of her later."

"Fine."

"Got any ideas?"

Ed wracked his brain.

"You know the reception guy? He kinda looks like me. Have her ask him out on a date."

"Okay."

His line of thinking must be: "If she reacts even the slightest bit positively towards that guy, maybe there's hope for me."

"Oh. Haha." I chuckled to myself. "Okay, I dare you to go ask the counter guy out on a date," I said aloud.

"Um, okay."

"Right now."

"But I'm naked."

"That's part of the dare."

A long pause. She's probably drinking.

"Okay, I'll do it."
"Really?!!"

Ed and I's eyes went wide and wild.

She's actually going to do it?!

Our mouths fell open.

To our utter astonishment, we heard the splash of water and a dainty female body exiting the bath. The patter of wet feet slapped across the concrete and then was gone.

"She left?" I asked.

"Yep!" Whitney said.

I got up and began running.

"What are you doing?" Ed asked.

"I want to catch this on camera. Imagine the guy's face!"

"But… she's nude," Ed protested.

"Yeah, so? Don't you want to see that?" I asked.

Ed's face contorted.

"Yeah," he confessed.

I took my camera, wrapped a towel around my butt, and scooted off. Ed followed suit.

Jasmine was backed into a nook beside the counter that partially hid her from the rest of the lobby. Not that it mattered: there was no one here but her, the counter guy, me, and Ed. I couldn't get a decent view of the young woman, but I did see the receptionist. He had his head in his arms and wasn't moving.

"Sleeping. Shoot."

Jasmine realized the same and began skittering back our way. I grabbed Ed and pulled him into a side hallway. We crouched.

A streak of pink passed us by.

Out of reflex, I raised the camera and snapped off a picture. "Smile!" I said. The auto-lighting flashed, audibly, and the woman came to a startled halt. She turned.

"Wah?"

Oh lord above and devil below. I am going to hell for this, and it will have been worth it. She is beautiful.

How can a female be so slim, so petite, so devoid of fat, and yet still look like a woman? Not a child, not an anorexic, just a young woman with a perfectly skinny figure. You know how fighter jets are sleek and small compared to other aircraft? They're completely optimized for cutting through the air, granting them an efficient and graceful beauty all of their own. Jasmine's beauty is like that, except it's not air she cuts through, but men's hearts.
The fact that she was soaking wet, from her long hair to her pretty toes, with the perkiest little tits, and no unnatural distractions, was all bonus. Unfortunately, the frontal angle sort of hid the most delicious part underneath and away from view.

"Um, one more?" I said. How could I waste this opportunity? Hell no! I took another photograph, and wanted a third, but the girl regained her senses and darted off towards the baths.

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Ed stared me down.

"Well, was it everything you imagined?"

"That was fucking stupid," he replied.

"Fucking? Oh no no, my friend, that was supremely stupid. That was the kind of stupidity that gets guys like you and me ass-raped by our jail mates. We are screwed."

"Damn it."

"But by golly it was worth it."

I leaned back, taking in the majesty of the memory of a naked Jasmine Mikan. She is quite perfect to my tastes. Everything about her was beautifully crafted. The feminine form whittled down to perfection. Even those silly hair spikes had been rendered into smooth nothingness with the weight of the water.

"Why did you do that, Morty?" I asked myself aloud.

"That's what I'd like to know. What got into us?" Ed asked.

"It was a bit of fun."

"Fun for us! She's probably freaking out."

"She agreed to the dare. She knew the risk of being seen naked by a guy was basically 100%. So what if it was us, instead of some stranger?"

"But we took a picture."

"Bah, we can delete it for her."

"You don't get it, you moron." Ed reached up and shook me by the shoulders. "How the hell is this supposed to get her to fall in love with me? It's not! It'll sink me! You ruined what little chance I had!"

"Calm down!"

I shook myself free of the boy.

Somewhere along the way I had lost sight of what we were trying to do and just went with what seemed coolest at the time.
Damn, it must've been the sake. I shouldn't drink when I'm carrying out match-making duties.

"Okay, okay. Here's what you do. Approach her. Be earnest. Blame the alcohol, and then blame me. Ask for forgiveness, and say you never meant for this to happen. She's a sucker for apologies."

"Kk! I think I'll do it my own way, thank you very much."

"What are you going to say?" I blurted out.

"I'm going to be honest. I'll tell her how I feel and what I want. I'll take blame."

"No, don't do that!"

Ed shrugged me off. I meant to physically stop him, but discovered I had lost feeling in my legs. I can't be that drunk, can I? Maybe it was the hot-water soaking.

"Whatever you do, don't offend her!" I shouted after him.

*Don't offend her?* What kind of advice is that? When is it a good idea to offend someone while you're confessing to them?

It looked like Jasmine found me before Ed could find her. More accurately, she found my camera sitting next to me and was within milliseconds from cracking the damn expensive thing on the concrete. Luckily, she settled for the relatively more expendable memory chip. I took my camera and bolted away.

I was hoping that would be the end of the chaos tonight. The universe had other plans, it seemed.

"Hey Morty."

"Hey Whitney."

"Did you see Jasmine?"

"You could say that."

I lifted up the fried remains of my SD card.

"Oh boy."

"It's 1700p. I can replace it."

"So what happened?"

I explained the story to her, leaving out Edward's part.

"Mmm, so that's the rundown."

"Sure is."

I plopped back into the hotel bed and then sighed. Whitney sat on the opposite bed.
"Whitney."

"Hmm?"

"How's Jasmine been?"

"Recently? Stressed."

"I mean these past three years. What's going on in her life?"

"Um... same answer. Stress. She's been acting Gym Leader of Olivine Gym for most of that. She's trying to juggle that and school, and it's not been easy on her."

"What about her family?"

"She doesn't talk about them at all."

"Really?"

"I tried. She just goes silent or avoids the subject."

"What about guys?"

"Same deal, but with more anger."

"Huh."

"I'm not trying to paint her as a wreck. You know her, she's tough. She's managed to handle it. I think once she's settled in and graduates school she'll be able to focus on her job, and that should make it easier for her. She's really good at it. And she's still very devoted to her Pokémon."

"Hmm."

"What are you thinking? Do you still like her?"

Whitney could have plunged a knife into my gut, it would have been less jarring than her question. I groaned in consternation.

"Do you?"

"Who said I liked her in the first place?"

"Oh don't be coy. It was obvious. Especially after she left."

"That's not true."

"You ran off three girlfriends because they got sick of being compared to that "other woman". Don't deny she set your standard for female companionship."

"She was just a friend, like a.. sister," I said, and then regretted my word choice.

"She was your childhood sweetheart," Whitney retorted. Somewhat angrily, no less.

I leaned up.

Whitney isn't looking too composed herself.
"It was never gonna work," I mumbled. Whitney looked up.

"If that was the case, why didn't you realize it sooner? Why did you give other girls the cold shoulder?"

"I don't know," I said, lying.

"I liked you," Whitney said, voice cracking.

"You-

She's looking away.

"Mind you, I said 'liked'. Past tense. I would have loved to date you. You could have been my first boyfriend. I would schlick to the thought of it, at night. But I never confessed, because I knew who you liked, and I didn't want to interfere. That's why it really frustrated me when you never confessed to her. I gave up my shot for you and her's sake, and you two blew it."

"Oh god, I can't stop fucking up," I muttered to myself. "I just keep finding new ways to screw over everyone I know." I leaned back into the bed. "Whitney, I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"Do you still have any feelings for me?"

"Morty, the hell?"

"I just want to know."

"Romantic feelings? No. I've grown up. Moved on. Had my heart broken for real. Got over that. Fell in love again. Life goes on, and we deal with it."

The bed shuddered, because Whitney had jumped onto it beside me. She maneuvered until she was straddling me. She lifted her shirt off, revealing a pink bra and two juggernauts that bounced around way too much for being both natural and confined.

"I thought you said you didn't like me anymore?"

"Oh hush. I said I've grown up. You're drunk, I'm drunk, and there's nobody to say we can't indulge our bodies a little- with or without feelings."

She brushed a lock of my hair aside.

"This is just something adults are allowed to do, right?"

"You're right."

She bent down and put her mouth on mine. The kiss lasted a moment, before she pulled away. I grinned, bent my head up and renewed the kiss, much longer this time. We smothered each other's faces with our salt-lined lips. Our passion progressed from there.

The sound of the door opening reached my ears, but I ignored it.

"What the fuck are you two doing?"

Ed's voice. I raised a middle finger to the stooge and continued tasting the interior of Whitney's
"Sick," he muttered. The boy stood staring at us, obviously incensed and jealous, before retiring to the desk.

After maybe twenty minutes he slammed my computer shut and left. Whitney was stealthily creeping her hand into my boxers.

"Shhh."

"Hmm?"

"I don't have a condom."

"Shitmonkeys. You're useless."

"Yes I am. Let's keep enjoying this."

"Okay," she said contentedly.

We were eighteen, not far removed from that age where teens were happy to spend hours upon hours making out with each other, without ever progressing. Our oral adventure drifted into mindless, endless pleasure.

…

She's available and willing.

Just a friend with benefits.

Truly, that's all this is.

It's not ideal, but it's better than the alternative: no one to be physically intimate with at all.

Internally, I sighed.

It was unfair, what she said. And untrue.

All those girls I dated, the two I had sex with, all gone from my life. I kept saying they weren't as good as the one girl I pined for in my youth. But that was only partially true. In truth, I used it as a way to scare them away. None of them, not one of them, understood me. I couldn't share my past or my private life with them. They'd hate me. Or pity me. Or be disgusted. Most likely, they just wouldn't be able to connect.

So maybe it wasn't the fact that I loved Jasmine and Jasmine only. Maybe it was the hope that Jasmine, that wonderful, complex girl of my middle school years, could be the one woman who could relate to me. Unravel the mystery of misery choking me.

But that's impossible.

That ship has sailed.

And… and… and…
I wouldn't want to burden her with my troubles.

... 

And yet, my idiot, hormone-driven actions had their own way of burdening her with trouble I never imagined. I found this out very abruptly, when I was yanked off of Whitney and violently thrown off the bed.

"Ouch! What the fuck Jasmine, fuck off!" I yelled in pain turning to anger.

In short order both my cheek and balls were on the receiving end of her fury.

The hell?!

"Jasmine, we were just kissing! Don't throw a hissy fit!" Whitney yelled.

Damn it! Shit! This fucking hurts!

Why'd she do that?

She can't be such a militant prude she'd burst in here to punish me and Whitney for making out!

So she's jealous? Screw that! I already resigned myself to never having her. There's no reason a prude like her should be jealous! Me and Whitney are consenting adults!

What the hell is wrong with her then?!

She's going for your laptop. Crap.

"Don't smash it!"

"What is the meaning of this?" she cried.

To my horror, my utter horror, I gazed upon the computer screen, and found a social media nightmare staring me in the face.

A half-dozen websites, all showing off a nude and frightened Jasmine staring into the camera. That beautiful body and pretty face was suddenly not so enthralling with the knowledge that it could be drooled over by thousands of anonymous neckbeards, or scowled at by snide adults.

I pleaded and begged with her, afraid she might crack the computer and remove any chance of salvaging this mess.

"You have ten seconds to give me a proper explanation, or else I'm reporting you to the cops!"

"I need more than ten," I said. I put my hands together in a begging posture. Her grip on my machine relented. Her temper never receded an inch, but her actions were thankfully held in check by the cooing of Whitney. I started darting through the internet files, trying to figure out what had happened.

It has to be a hacker. Shit. That's the only way. And the fact that they chose this night to strike must mean they were actively monitoring my computer. I can't believe I let my machine get infected. The virus scanners should have caught this. Damn-

"This is all my fault. It's because I took that picture."
"Of course it is!"

"But I" a neuron snapped into place.

My mind went blank.

My blood felt like lead pumping through my heart.

"Oh shit."

There's no way a hacker could beat my security. And no way they would pick this particular night to hit me.

And no reason they would waste the opportunity to steal my passwords and credit card info, and only troll me by posting one single photo.

My mind flew back to the middle of my make-out session with Whitney.

He had come in and left.

And before that? What had I sent him off to do?

I stared at Jasmine. She returned a puzzled expression of her own.

"Um… I was… hacked. Fuck."

It was pure improv, but she bought it. Sort of.

Jasmine's friend Erika called. The Gym Leader of Celadon, I recalled. A real down-to-earth lady, but somehow she had a high-tech wizard for a friend. An hour later, the offending nudie disappeared from the internet. Just like that. It was later explained that a potent virus, one usually tailored for finding and destroying incriminating evidence, had been unleashed on the net, instantly vaporizing any trace of the picture from any device that had touched it. Jasmine's honor had been saved by literal deus ex machina.

My honor, however, had evaporated into dust.

"Jasmine, wait. If you want to rag on me, by all means. I'll take any punishment you want. Please forgive me."

"Leave me alone," she muttered.

"Jazz! I'm sorry!"

"I'm tired. Say that again in the morning, I'll decide what to do with you then."

Why the fuck did I just do that?

I lied to her.

I lied to the only girl in the universe that I respected. I lied to her face. I lied about something that deeply affected her reputation and emotional well-being.
And I lied for the benefit of a guy I barely knew.

I let out a whoosh.

Ed never came back.

Whitney dozed on the bed Ed would have been sleeping in.

Where is he? What is he doing? Should I be looking for him?

Jasmine had left about 2:00 A.M. It was 4:00 A.M. now. It would be hell trying to get to class tomorrow. Maybe I should just skip.

I'm an idiot.

In every conceivable way. An idiot.

I keep doing things that I know are stupid, but the consequences don't seem like a big deal and the fun to be had far outweighed the negatives. But then everything blows up, in ways I can't predict, and I'm quickly shown just how bad things can really get.

Will talked to me about this. He told me I have the power to avoid this. My gift, my clairvoyance. It's not even remotely perfect, but he said I could hone it, and at least use it to figure out if what I was about to do would have good or bad results. But I don't trust it. I see fuzzy pictures, gargled messages, and the one time I relied on it, I interpreted it wrong and fucked up in a way that pretty much beats even this night's fuck up in sheer magnitude.

I don't want to go through life without any spontaneity. I don't want a cheat code for figuring out what decisions to make. And I don't want to make a blundering translation error that could make everything worse. So even though I have this half-assed psychic "gift", I don't want to use it.

If you're going to do things the hard way, then, why don't you put in the effort to make it work?

Why would you cover for that guy and hurt that girl in the process? Shouldn't you tell her the truth?

I shook my head.

"Men have to stick together," I said to myself.

There was a knock at my door.

Who is it?

Is it Ed?

Jasmine again?

I quietly tip-toed to the entry and peeped through the spy hole.

These things are too damn hard to see through, you can't get any kind of focus. Yet, I did catch sight of hair, sand-colored, and knew it was Jasmine.

"Hey." I opened the door.

She was bowing her head. Silent. Shaking.
"What's wrong? Are you still made at me?"

I puffed out my chest.

"Take you best shot. I deserve it."

She's not just shaking. She's shivering. Violently. Is she cold?

"Come in," I urged. She refused. Seeing that, I came out. I led her to a nook in the hallway, with a little cushioned bench sitting in front of a window. She barely moved, so I guided her to a seat with my hands on her waist. I tried brushing her hair aside. It kept falling back into place.

"What's the matter?"

"Morty," she whispered out.

"What is it?"

"Morty," she said again.

"I'm here."

"Morty."

"You can keep saying my name all night long, if that's what you need to do."

Her shivering halted.

"I want you to kill Ed."

My nerves lit up and down my arms, my chest, my lungs, my heart- I swear my heart dropped a beat or two.

"Jazz… that's not a joking matter."

"He deserves it," she said.

"Jasmine, what happened?"

Here I am inside screaming my brains out, wondering if she found out, if she knew who the culprit was.

"He… Edward is not a decent person. He doesn't deserve to live. Please help me."

"Okay." I tried placing my hands on her bare shoulders. She's friggin cold! I checked her dress, praying that I wouldn't find rips or blood. There was none as far as I could see. "Let's calm down. And tell me everything. I'll help you, but not with murder."

"But he… I…"

She buried her head in my chest.

"Do I need to go to the police?"

She shook her head.

"What did Ed do?"
I know what Ed did, but does she?

"He… he…" she couldn't spit it out. "I don't know. I don't know what to do," she cried out.

"Listen, Jazz."

"Don't call me that."

"Jazz."

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!"

"Jasmine," I corrected myself. "I'll do anything I can, but you've got to have a little courage and tell me what to do. Something that's reasonable."

"I told you, kill Ed."

"No, I cannot do that."

"Then what the hell do I do?! What the hell do I do? Isn't that what people do with crap they don't want?!?!

She's starting to scream.

"You don't want a person in your life? No? Then fucking kill them! Get rid of them! Easy peasy! Made a mistake, and now you're on the hook? Just murder the person who's giving you trouble! Poison them! Dice them up! Isn't that how the world works?"

"Stop it. Don't talk like that."

She wouldn't.

"Isn't it?! Who the hell cares? Do you? Do you care about me?"

"I do."

"Then do something about Ed! Get rid of him! Anything, I don't want to deal with it anymore! I don't want anything to do with this life anymore!"

I hugged her tight as I could.

"It'll be alright. Ed's just a fool. Stupid, like me. He'll learn."

"No he won't!"

"Jasmine, you've got to forgive him, whatever he's done. He's full of emotion the same as you, and this is just a poor way of letting out those feelings. But nothing will come of it."

"Baka! You don't understand."

"I understand all too well," I said.

I understand what it's like, knowing there's someone perfect for you, but not being able to have them. I had my own idiot way of dealing with it. I played coy, and treated you like crap. Then once I realized what effect my teasing was having on you, I ran away. You wanted nothing to do with me and I made zero effort to change your mind.
Ed... he did something stupid, trying to get back at you. I'll talk with him. I'll straighten him out.

"You know nothing," she gasped.

"I know what Ed did was wrong, but it wasn't worth killing him for. It wasn't worth turning him into the police for. Don't think harshly of him. Just wait, I'll get him to apologize and make it up to you."

"Y-y-y-you-" she stuttered.

"He really loves you, Jazz. You should give him a second chance to show it, without me getting in the way. I'm sure you'll forgive him."

She pushed me away.

There I beheld disgust, loathing.

"You would... you'd seriously...."

She grit her teeth in anger.

"You're siding with him?!

"I'm not siding with anyone," I tried to placate her. "I'm trying to be calm, and rationale. Let's let tonight end. Sleep on it. Come back tomorrow, we'll all have a fresh start."

"No."

She shook her head.

"No?"

"NO!" she snarled.

Okay, my patience has run out.

"Fine. I can't deal with you anymore. Good night."

I got up. Her hand shot out and grasped my wrist.

"What the hell are you doing?" she whispered out.

"Good night."

"You're leaving? You're going to leave, and let Ed off free? Just like that??"

I didn't turn to face her eye-to-eye. I glanced back, catching her hair in my peripheral vision.

"Quite frankly, Jasmine, I just don't give a damn anymore."

---

I left her because she was being too difficult and unreasonable.

What little logic was left in my brain told me I could come back to her in the morning, after we all
had a little rest and some time to let our nerves calm down.

I could explain how Ed had logged onto my computer and began posting her nude pic to the internet. It was wrong of him, but then again, Jasmine had probably just rejected him, and he wasn't in the sanest state of mind. It was the typical action of a spurned man. I was the enabler. It was more my fault than his; if I hadn't coaxed him into going along with the dare, he wouldn't be in this situation, he might not have even been rejected. If I hadn't set my camera to auto-upload and then left my laptop unguarded, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to make such a boneheaded move. Instead, he'd probably simmer, stew, and blow off steam in the hot spring, and then we'd all hash this out tomorrow and over the coming weeks, trying to find some semblance of understanding and forgiveness.

I can take all her hate, all her blame. That's my role. I can become the boogie man who shoulders all of her negative feelings, and then vanish. Maybe it wouldn't be enough to reconcile those two, but it should at least give both of them the chance to start fresh, and live on and find happiness elsewhere.

Edward doesn't deserve to have his life ruined because of one juvenile mistake. A police record will dog him for the rest of his life. It's not fair. I could have easily been in his place, if my gross antics had been carried over into high school.

I breathed out.

We'll deal with this tomorrow.

Present Day

…

I listened silently, abysmally, as Morty relayed his story to me.

"There was no tomorrow," he said. "You vanished. I didn't hear from you again for three years. Not even the teleconferences. Your screen was blank. It was awkward, when you talked and everyone else was listening but I couldn't hear you, and had to get Whitney to tell me what you were saying."

His chest is quivering.

"And because we never talked, I never learned what happened that night. And so I kept assuming my version of the story was the right one. That you were upset because Ed posted the pictures online." He gritted his teeth. "Until the night my grandma died. I got to questioning the universe, and everything in it. I realized there was a great yawning hole in my chest, where my soul ought to be. And part of it, I realized, was left behind at that onsen. I made a mistake."

Morty knelt to his knees in the spring and hung his head in shame. Drivels of water ran off his hair and down his forehead and cheeks.

"I swear, all this time, it never, ever occurred to me that Ed visited you a second time. So, please, please, tell me what happened- what really happened."

He raised his eyes to mine, pleading.
So, basically, next chapter will be important. Very important.
Sex

I feel numb. Like your leg when you've sat on it for too long and cut off the blood flow, but all over. Even my chest, and head. Everywhere. Physically pained. Yet, it was completely inadequate in conveying the excruciating emotional pain gripping my heart and my mind, like shackles of thorned vines.

No one has ever gotten so close to the truth. No one but that bastard Ed.

I lifted myself out of the water, onto the lip of the bath, the smooth stones still finding a way to dig into the skin of my butt. The November air was chilling, but I welcomed it. The haze of emotion was banished, and all that was left was the cold, crystalline recollection of that terrible night.

March 28th, 2009

Indigo Plateau

Indigo Gym Onsen Hot Spring

There was a knock at my door.

I raised myself.

"Whitney, I thought you were sleeping with Morty."

"It's me."

"Edward?"

'No no no', I thought to myself. I don't want to rehash his broken heart. Please not this.

"Go away. Come back tomorrow."

I thought I had locked the door. I was wrong.

The handle turned, the door opened, and Ed stepped inside.

I rose to a sitting position.

"Ed?" I whispered.

I've never seen this boy before. This was not the overly-formal, overly-polite, overly-apologetic coworker I had known the past four years. This was a man- a grim man with unknown intent. He frightened me.
I rose to my feet. He stepped forward, closing the space between us. His eyes never left me, although they strayed up and down my figure. A shiver ran through my body, and I found myself wishing I had more than a flimsy sundress to cover me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Be quiet," he said, low, dire, and commanding.

"Ed, it's really late. We need to sleep. Our plane leaves tomorrow morning."

His expression is telling me to shut up, but I pressed on, hoping and praying we could approach this rationally, like the adults we had recently become.

"I'm tired, and you're upset, and we need sleep if we're going to get to the airport on time. I know you want to talk about things, and we can, on the plane. But not tonight, please?"

I wasn't convincing him.

"Look, I'm sorry," I said.

"You've never once been sorry for a single thing you've done, so shut that lying mouth up," he said.

I flinched in shock.

Is this really Edward?

"What was it you said? Say it again. Say it!"

"I don't-" I stuttered.

"I'm sorry if I misled you." Your exact words. Lying words. You don't give a fuck about me. You don't give a fuck about anyone around you, how you screw with them, their feelings, their generosity."

"I don't know what I've done to make you this upset, but please don't take out your anger-"

"I told you to shut up!" he screamed, cutting me off. "You never listen. It's all about you, isn't it?"

"You're wrong."

"How am I wrong? Even when the whole world gives you everything you ever wanted, and yet you bitched non-stop for years about being unwanted, disrespected, hated, and criticized. 'I've got no friends', ignoring the dozen others that showed up just to cheer you on! Whined about your poverty when everyone knows your dad is a senior manager with a fat paycheck. You've even got your own personal piggy bank from your substitute Gym Leader stipend. And yet you still cry poor every time someone asks you to chip in money for a party! You still act like you can't afford to come on class trips with us!"

"No, that's-" He pounded down on the nightstand with his palm, silencing me. His diatribe wasn't nearly finished.

"Three years now, constant, constant bitching about how the world hates you. If the world was so damn stingy, how do you still have two parents and a roof over your head? Grades that could get you into any college in the region? There's not one girl in school who wouldn't defer to you, not one teacher who wouldn't praise you, not one guy who wouldn't date you! You not only have Pokémon that are strong, but they put up with your Tauros-shit training and unreasonable demands and still
love you! Beret picked YOU to succeed him. YOU got the Gym Leader job. And yet, all you've done is complain about the so-called 'stress' you're under! As if you were forced to take the job. As if you hate it."

He's shaking. So am I.

"You're the most blessed girl in the whole city. And the most ungrateful."

I didn't want to speak, out of fear he would lash out at me again. Instead, I slowly took a step back. My calf hit the bedside. There was nowhere to retreat. Ed continued.

"'Misled' me? Hell no! As if there was anything in your actions that ever made me believe you had the remotest inkling of interest. I didn't care."

His voice calmed a little bit.

"What I saw when I first looked at you was a frail little girl needing help. Over time I got to know you better- the good and bad, and let's not kid ourselves, there was a lot of bad. Yet, no matter how much you complained, how annoying and hopeless your attitude got, how violent you became, how much you mistreated me, your friends, and everyone else, I took all that negativity and didn't flinch, because I liked you. I looked past your faults and found everything I wanted in a woman. I convinced myself I could be your bastion of hope, the one thing you could count on. For your sake, I would suffer anything.

I didn't need you to fall head over heels for me. I never expected you to find me attractive or laugh at my jokes. I'm not like every other shallow, self-absorbed cad who butted into your personal space asking for a date based solely on your looks. I wouldn't care if you were a pile of bones or a land whale. I never wanted to fuck you. None of that mattered to me.

The only thing I ever hoped for, the only thing, was that you would stop and consider the three years of friendship and affection I've given to you, and all the things I've sacrificed for your sake, and then give me the barest chance to prove I could love you better than any man in the world!"

He paused. His mouth gasped, dry from the long speech. He showed no signs of moving, either towards or away from me. Does he expect me to answer? I don't even know what to say. My head is a mess, trying to digest everything he's accused me of.

"I could forgive you if you gave me a single date and then decided I was worth discarding. I could even forgive you if you had turned me down because of my behavior tonight. But I know exactly why you rejected me, and knowing how unfair, sickly selfish, self-absorbed, self-pitying, self-serving your reason is, it makes me want to explode. Infuriated! That's how it makes me feel!"

"I did not lie," I said. "There was no deeper reason. I just don't feel anything for you. There's no chemistry. That's all it is."

"LIAR!"

He suddenly rushed me, so quickly and violently that, even without him touching me, I fell back onto the bed. I caught my self with my hands, managing to retain a seated position while Ed stood over me.

"Am I ugly?" he asked.

"No," I cried.
"Am I rude?"

"No."

"Do I have a bad personality? Am I mean?"

"You are right now."

"Am I a mean person?!" he demanded.

"No!" I cried. "Not usually."

"Then what is it? Am I pervert? No? How about my relationship with my Pokémon? That seems to be important to you. Scyther was and is my best friend. You can't say I don't have just as much love for my Pokémon as you do for yours. I'm not a failure, a bum, or a creep. I have done nothing to earn your disrespect. Am I wrong?"

"No, you're right," I said, not caring if I believed my own answer and only wanting to placate him.

"So there was nothing, no reason for you to turn me down. The only thing you can stand on is that flimsy excuse- that we lack "chemistry"." I nodded.

"Because I didn't flutter your Butterfree, is that it?"

Again, I nodded.

"And you're nothing but a human animal, slave to your feelings, letting your affection be dictated by hormones."

"That's not true," I said.

"Oh, then what is it?" he demanded.

"I'm not cut out for a relationship. I guess you could say, um, that I'm asexual. Not because I want to be, but from inside. I don't know how my brain works. Maybe it's the stress. Or the sour attitude you mentioned. I feel angry and sad all the time. I worry a lot, and having a boyfriend worries me that I'll be going through the motions, when there's no emotional drive there. None of it leads to me being able to fall in love. I don't think I'm capable of it."

"What pretty little lies," Ed said with a sneer.

"It's not lies. There's nothing in here," I said, tapping my chest. "What if I had said yes? What if we started dating, and married, but all along I never felt anything special for you, whatsoever, would you still want that kind of relationship?"

His stare bore down on me, vindictive and dire.

"It wouldn't be enough for you, would it? I know you, Ed. You're desperate for something meaningful, a deep and loving relationship with someone you can totally trust and be intimate with, something you never found in your own home. But with me being the way I am, that sort of relationship would be impossible."

"You're still lying."
"Why do you keep saying that?" I asked, on the verge of tears.

"You ask that like I don't know what happened three years ago."

*heartbeat*

My heretofore throbbing chest froze up completely. My breathing stopped.

"It wasn't bad chemistry between you and me. It wasn't anything to do with me. It's you and your irrational self-pity that's keeping you from finding happiness, with me or any other guy. Because you're still fucking crying over a guy who dumped you."

No. No no no. Don't bring that up. Don't say it.

"What was his name? I forget. Started with a vowel, right? Like E, or A, or something. Maybe that's it! You're lumping me with him because our names are similar!"

No, they're not that similar, Ed. And that's not why I spurned you. Not at all…

"It's pathetic. I hoped, honest-to-god I hoped, that you would get over yourself someday and start living again. I really, truly thought it would be today. You have the Gym Leader job, you're an adult, you're graduating high school. It's been three years. You're not tied to one dipshit you barely knew for a month."

"Please stop."

"But if you keep pissing away your life because of one childish crush gone wrong, you're going to find yourself living a very unhappy, miserable, and short life."

My mind raced.

"You're right," I said in a panic. "I don't want to be burdened by a silly thing that happened so long ago. Let's stop talking about it and forget it and go to sleep. That way we can be well-rested for tomorrow! In fact, I think I can understand where you're coming from. I guess I could learn to like you. I know, let's cancel the plane and go home on a train! It's romantic, we can stop in Ecruteak for a date, I know just the place!"

"What an incredibly arrogant liar you are," Ed said with an incredulous smirk.

"No, please, I'll do anything. Just don't remind me."

"Haha! Ah, no. It's time we talked about this. After all, it's only the entire reason you're a Gym Leader in the first place!"

I squeaked.

"Ed, if you want my body, take it. Right here. Please. Just, stop."

Ed had a good merry laugh at my offer.

"That's how far you'd go, just to shut me up? Can't handle the truth? Glorious! The Shrew of Olivine, willing to be raped just for the sake of hiding her one great shame!"

He suddenly roared in my face. I flinched. He drew back and smiled.

I was hoping someone, anyone, would hear the shouting match, burst in, and save me. No one was
coming, though. It was too late at night, the inn was too big, with too few people, and we were in the most remote wing. Or worse, they did hear us, but decided not to get involved.

"The little bitch thinks she can wallow in her self-made misery for the rest of her life, all-but-asking desperately for people to care about her. But lo and behold, when one tries, they get suckered in and trapped, and it's only too late they realize the bitch is only using them."

"That's false!"

"It's because her obsession with one guy and what he did to her has become her entire identity. She's afraid that without it, she'll lose her victim status and crumble apart."

Ed suddenly dropped down, close enough I could smell his breath.

"What happened at the lighthouse, Jazz? Did he take your virginity? Was it rape? Or was it the sort of sex you like to pretend you didn't agree to after the fact?"


"It's not my business?! Oh boy!" Ed leapt up. "I've only wasted three years of my life trying to be everything that boy failed to be, trying to fill the void he left in your heart, doing my damndest to be the best man I could be! Only to find out it's not enough for you, because I'm not that guy! I'd say it was my business alright! Mine, and everyone who has ever felt sorry for your bleary-eyed lying face!"

"I'm sorry!" I cried.

"No you're not! You're sorry for yourself, not for your behavior! You're sorry I'm telling you the things you need to hear, even if you don't want to hear them!"

"It's not helping when you start treading on things you don't understand!"

"What don't I understand? You had a crush, the bastard played along, and then when he was tired he dumped you and left."

"That's not it! That's not-"

Ed continued unabated.

"Then you went running home, and got told off by your mommy, who told your daddy, who told Mr. Beret, who felt sorry for you and let you have the Gym Leader position permanently. Am I- ACK!"

Ed reeled. He clutched his throat.

My fist throbbed, overcome by the pain of smashing Ed's Adam's apple.

"Shut the fuck up," I warned him in a low voice.

Ed gagged, and then managed to choke out a few words.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

I was in coils, tense as a tectonic fault line. My fingers were claws. Eyes were wide open. Sweat dripped off my forehead.
Ed cocked an eyebrow, amused by my temper. He cleared his throat and spoke up.

"So I hit it on the head there, huh? Tell me, are you more mad that he raped you and dumped you? Or that your mommy didn't care? Or is it because the one guy who would put up with your shit is now on his deathb-"

And he stopped talking, because my foot caught him by the jaw and sent him staggering backwards.

The next kick hit him in the balls, causing him to bunch over. The third landed squarely in his stomach, sending him lurching backwards towards the door. His body crumpled in the entry hall. He gasped out, not in pain but in actual injury.

It was now I, in wrath, who stood over Ed.

"You know nothing," I whispered. "Get out, before I kill you."

Ed took one last look at me, saw the fury born of three years of bitter anguish and repression, and he drew away. His hands went up in surrender. The young man literally crawled out on his hands and knees without another word.

"He never touched me," I said softly, and honestly.

Morty stared at me, stunned.

…Present Day

"I was immature, and emotional. I overreacted to something mean he said."

"Are you serious?" Morty asked wide-eyed.

"I'm not lying. We had an argument, and then he left. The things I said to you was just a childish overreaction. You know me, how I can get. It's one of my faults."

Morty's gaze was, to put it mildly, dumbfounded.

"It hurt, at the time, that you wouldn't take my side against Ed. He touched a nerve in me. I can't tell you what it was about, but I hope you trust me that it was very important, and at the same time, very hurtful to me. I needed someone who would comfort me, and validate me, and at least disparage Ed's behavior, without question. I was desperate for someone to stand by me, unconditionally. You didn't. You abandoned me."

"That's it?" Morty uttered.

I nodded.

"You left me. That's why I had hated you these last three years."
"I don't believe you. Jazz- I mean Jasmine- are you saying, honestly, on your honor, on your life, that Edward never molested you in any way?"

"Ed never lay a hand on me," I reaffirmed.

Morty flopped backwards into the water. His broad, bare back slapped the surface, creating a splash that sprinkled droplets over my face. The boy floated there for what seemed like enough time to call a lifeguard. I ventured to reach out and tickle his feet. His response was to begin talking aloud to the stars.

"I have a hard time believing this. It's nothing like I expected."

"What did you expect?"

He turned over, face first into the water. He used his arms and legs to lift himself up, letting the liquid rinse down his back, butt, and thighs and stream back into the pool.

"Here," he said. He slowly got up and waded over to the side of the bath. He picked up a towel, turned himself around, and sat on the edge. The towel went over his privates. A pat of the hand indicated I was to join him. I did so, taking a towel and covering my sensitive areas. To be honest, it still felt like I was naked sitting right next to him. His eyes were held sidelong and downwards, so that it seemed like he was staring at my barely-covered breasts. Yet, his mood and tone betrayed absolutely no perverted motive in his thoughts.

"I was sure Ed had molested you," Morty admitted.

"Why would you think that?"

"Because he is in jail."

My mouth dropped open a little. I was stunned.

"After you told me that Warren kid had your picture, I started doing research, calling in old contacts. It took a lot of favors to trace it backwards, and even then, I couldn't confirm everything until I got the chance to talk to Warren myself. You beating him was fortunate, he was pretty willing to spill the beans."

"And?" I said, not knowing if I really wanted to hear the rest.

"Warren got himself in trouble while he was hanging out in Olivine. He picked fights with trainers who didn't want to battle him. Got to the point someone called the cops and they came and arrested him, charged him with a misdemeanor. The local jail was down for maintenance, so they put him in the prison overnight. That's where he met Edward."

"Edward's in prison?"

Morty nodded.

"He raped a woman."

My gut clenched up on me.

I knew Edward for four years. It's hard, almost unbelievable, to think of someone like him committing a felony. He had far too much going for him. Never mind that- what I find really shocking is that it was simply not in Ed's character to do that. He is an asshole in so many ways, but
he had a code of honor that he adhered to religiously, and assaulting a woman was an outrageous violation of that code.

I shook my head.

"I can't believe it."

"That's what I've been saying about your story. It doesn't match what I found."

"He really raped a woman?"

"It's true, I looked up the court case. He's guilty as hell. They had witnesses, DNA, bruise-marks. Blatant, undeniable sexual assault. So if he were a guy capable of doing that to a woman— and to think, he was alone with you, after suffering a rejection, in a bad mood, and inebriated— I just don't see how he could have controlled himself in that situation and left you unharmed."

I bit my lip.

"He wasn't… he wasn't like that. He wasn't concerned about my body that night."

He didn't even take me up on my offer to fuck me. I was scared and willing to do anything to avoid confronting the issue he was pressing. Except Ed had laughed it off and plowed on with his tirade.

"It was something else."

"Are you sure?" Morty pressed.

"Of course! You're not getting a different answer, no matter how many times you ask!"

"Then how do you explain everything? Your hatred of men? Your disdain towards sex? You're skittishness whenever we bring up the subject of relationships? Your depression and anger issues? If it's not because of Ed attacking you, I can't think of what else could have caused all of that!"

I calmed Morty down with a touch of the hand on his thigh.

"I told you, so many times, but you still haven't listened. It was nothing Ed did. It was nothing you did that night, as far as I'm concerned. I came to Indigo broken. I've been hurting for…" I lilted off into silence.

I was about to say six years.

But, really, let's not kid yourself, Jasmine.

It's been twenty-two.

"What?" Morty asked, urging me to go on.

"Something that happened awhile ago."

"Was it a guy?" Morty asked.

I shut my eyes.

Yes, there was a guy involved.

I shook my head, clearing the image of the boy.
Morty took that shake as a negative.

"Then what was it?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"What? Tell me!"

"Forget about it."

Morty growled and put his hands to his temples in frustration.

"So damn close! Come on!"

"No."

Morty, please understand!

This is probably something I will never, ever tell you about.

There is an algebra equation, I forget how it goes (I'm so terrible at math!), but when graphed it basically shows the closer x approaches 1, then y becomes infinite. That's how my secret works. The closer I get to divulging everything, the worse my fear gets, to the point where it's impossible to overcome.

"Go on. Tell me the rest about Ed," I urged him.

He sighed in resignation.

"Fine, for now. Well, Warren and Ed shared a lunch break together. You came up and became a favorite topic. Warren didn't get too much into the details, but it seems he managed to coordinate with Ed to some degree after he was released. Ed had three of his Pokémon transferred to him, as well as some tactical knowledge on your battling style. Warren was supposed to use that to beat you and help others beat you, in order to make you fail your win ratio quota and get you fired. For Ed, it was purely a scheme to take revenge on you. Warren wanted revenge, but also his Gym Badge. He's young, and pretty easy to manipulate. Ed knew what he was doing and played him like a fiddle."

I nodded along.

"People change," I reminded myself.

"What's that?"

"That's not the Edward I knew. He was a good guy, in his own way. But the last time I heard from him, he seemed like he was taking a turn for the worse. He started rumors about me, saying I was into bestiality, and tried turning my friends against me." I grumbled at that last part. He succeeded; a lot of the local trainers did shun me for years afterwards. "I couldn't foresee it then, but now it's easy-how his life could develop to the point where he would do such an ugly act and end up in jail."

"You think he took your rejection to heart?" Morty asked.

"Yes," I answered. "It wasn't a little passing crush. He was nursing it for years. He probably invested too much emotion into it."

"He worked with you for how long?"
"Um, about three years, or four? Summer 2005 to March 2009."

"Almost four years," Morty noted. "Yeah. If you let a love go that long without confessing it, it'll consume you. I had no idea it was that deep, though. Had I known, I would've been way more careful that night. I wouldn't have done anything so stupid as 'Truth or Dare', that's for sure. Four years." Morty shook his head in disbelief.

"It doesn't take years and years to develop those kinds of deep-rooted feelings," I argued.

"How long would you say, then?"

"A month."

Morty clucked in disappointment.

"That's nothing. Still a crush."

"But…"

Aw shoot. Memories, memories. Better change the subject back to Ed.

"Morty, you're a guy."

"Obviously."

"Do you think Ed was always a bad person? Or did he turn into a bad person because I rejected him?"

Morty paused. He's thinking, or he doesn't want to tell me the honest answer. I nudged him.

"I think that his crush for you had an affect on his life, yeah," he answered. "I don't think it was just the rejection that tipped him over. It was the whole process, from the beginning to the end. He made an unrealistic expectation about his chances for wooing you and then built his life and emotional stability around that expectation. It wasn't your fault. Even if you had accepted his love, I think something else would have happened. A divorce, maybe."

"Nnn. I think you're right."

"I'm glad you rejected him." Morty brushed my hand, which was still laying on his leg.

"No touching," he reminded me. I pulled my hand away. "I'm glad that I got the chance to be with you again. It brought me back to happier days. When life wasn't so bleak."

"You too, huh?"

"Yep. That's our sad lot."

"I won't ask what's up with you," I stated.

"Good."

"That's not going to stop me from wondering, though. And I expect the same is true for you."

"Correct."

"Do you ever think we'll get to the point where we can share?"
"I hope so," he answered.

"When will that be?"

"When we trust each other."

"What does it mean, to trust?"

"It means when you can fart," and Morty promptly let loose a toot, "and the other person laughs instead of complains."

I let out a giggle.

"Trust means having the absolute knowledge that the other person will still love you, no matter what you do or what you say. Another name for it is... unconditional love."

"I see," I said.

"Do you?" he asked.

"Trusting someone with your heart is harder than the common kind of trust we put into our everyday relationships."

"That's true."

"It requires something special to cement it."

"You're getting at?"

"Love."

I waved my hand over his crotch area. There was a noticeable bump in the towel. I couldn't help but think of what lay underneath.

"This kind of love."

"That's what I've been trying to teach you, since the gala."

"I know that."

"Well?" he said, expectantly.

"Do you really think I'm ready to take that kind of step?" I put to him.

"Obviously not."

"Not so obviously as you may think. What were we just doing?"

Morty thought back.

"Oh I see. These sideshows aren't for the titillation, are they? They're acclimation."

"Yes."

I had purposefully strung out our physical romance over the course of many sessions, in incremental steps. It was for the sake of my shyness, so that I would gradually come to accept my sexuality and be comfortable with it. Despite many years of fantasy and self-loving, to actually engage in such an
act with a real boy was still a dicey, unsettling proposition to me. Hopefully that trepidation will end soon. I have a good feeling it will.

"Are you ready?" Morty asked.

"I don't know."

"What more do you need?" I gave him a sour look. "I'm not trying to push you, I just want to be open and honest about it. Communication is the key to a good relationship."

"Then… I guess, I'm not sure," I said.

"Do you think we need to get to the point where we spill our guts out, and then you're ready for sex? Or is it the other way around?"

I shrugged.

Morty went on. "I've made too many mistakes because I made assumptions. So let's be clear, and I'll be as up front as possible. What do you want to know?"

I inhaled.

That's a really open-ended question.

"Two things," I said.

"Okay."

"Why did you abandon me when I came to you for help with Ed that night?"

Morty closed his eyes. He's having to remember it first.

"I put my loyalty to my gender above my respect for you."

Morty got up, stood firm beside the pool, and then kneeled down. All the way down. He was bowing to me. His face was mashed against the ground.

"For that, I am truly ashamed. I am at your mercy. There is no way I can excuse myself. I told you absolutely everything about that night, to the best of my memory, honestly. Please forgive me."

"I forgive you," I said.

"You do?"

He looked up.

"I've done some terrible and inexcusable things to men, just because they were men. Including Ed. And you. Forgive me of that, and I will forgive you for this."

"You don't even need to ask for forgiveness. If there was something else in your past, if another guy hurt you, you have every right to judge us all."

"No, that's wrong of me. But let's not talk about it."

"Okay. And the other question?"

"Who was Katrina?"
He walked away.

"Morty?"

That was extremely awkward.

"Morty?!" I followed him to the men's dressing room. He disappeared inside for a minute, reemerged in boxers, and still without a word strode off. His gait was long and powerful; I was forced to run to keep up.

We ended up on a patio before a door. This was apparently the inn room Morty had rented to spend the night in. He unlocked the door with an old-fashioned key and stepped inside. It was a luxury suite, with a lounge, kitchen, and two bedrooms. He made his way to one of the bedroom doors and opened it. He did not enter.

"What is it?"

The man stood tall in front of the open entrance. A king-sized bed beckoned within.

"If you want to know the answer to your question, have sex with me," Morty said.

I held my hands over my eyes

This is it.

I shook my head.

"No. No."

"No?"

"No," I repeated.

"Then be content with your ignorance, and I will be happy with what we have so far." Morty shut the bedroom door without entering. He leaned on the wood, facing towards me.

"That's that?" I asked.

"We've reached the point, Jasmine, where we do or don't. Sex means trust. Trust means no secrets. It's that simple."

"I… you're making me feel like if I don't fuck you, it means I don't trust you."

"I'm sorry if that's how you want to think about it. I wish you didn't think of it that way. I want you to know that I am here for you. I can tell you about the stars, about a thousand different Pokémon, about the top ten most embarrassing moments in my life. I will tell you all the dirty secrets of the two dozen women I've slept with, and honestly, my own dirty secrets as well."

He stood forward until he could hold me at arm's length.

"But, I cannot tell you what that name means to me."

"Why?"
"Because… if you knew the truth, and decided you were disgusted by it… you could break me. Body, soul, and spirit. The only way I could even begin to trust you, is if you showed me yourself at your most vulnerable. If your virginity is your last, most sacred bastion, that's what I want from you."

I backed away.

"Not like this. Not now."

"…I thought so."

Morty sighed, a deep exhalation of sadness.

He deposited himself into the beckoning couch.

"Wine?" he offered. I declined. He poured a glass for himself and slowly sipped it away.

"It's not that important," I said.

"What's not?"

"Our secrets."

"So…?"

"Our feelings are more important," I decided. "I'm not ready. Not yet."

"Take your time," Morty said.

I closed my eyes and recited the date to myself.


The day after probation ends. When my life gets back on track.

I feel that, by affixing that date to that purpose, that I will force myself to be mentally ready to have sex by then. It's creating within my psyche an expectation, and I am the kind of woman who will not turn back on her word. I will do what is expected of me, even if it means doing something as frightening as spreading my legs open and taking in Morty's penis.

He's right here.

The thought of that future day has my heart skipping.

This feeling is arousal, I realized.

Enjoy it. This is a good feeling. It is both natural and positive. It is not shameful. This is why you would consider doing such a strange and foreign feat as copulating with a male, despite all of your fears.

But fight it. Wait a little longer.

"Morty?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you know why you succeeded, even though Ed failed?"
"Hmm? No, I don't. Tell me."

I giggled in answer. That perplexed him. He gawked, made funny faces, stuttered, and finally gave up.

I decided to indulge him.

"Because you were there, all along."

"Wah?"

That's all I said, because it would be too annoying to tell him the full meaning.

He was there when I was young, and naïve: two years of middle school.

He was there when I was still trying to form my identity: sporadic appearances during high school.

He was there during my moment of crisis: the night in Indigo.

He was there in the depths of my misery: at the Gym Leader summit.

He was there when I was ready to take one last leap of faith: the lighthouse, and ever since.

But most importantly- he was NOT there during the worst day of my life.

And that means he has no attachment to the worst memory of my life.

He is free of that terrible taint. When I'm around him, I don't have to recall the cruel reality that underlies my existence. When I'm yelling at him for his crude sexual innuendo, it's so much less worrisome than the existential danger I live with constantly.

So long as Morty promises to stay by my side and love me, I have no fears.

I smile at him, and he drops his jaw at weird angles because he doesn't know what to make of my smile. He'll never know my secrets, and he'll never know how much he means to me- and I'm okay with that.

My eyes drifted to the clock.

"I ought to go," I said.

"Your train?"

"Yes. That's why we can't have sex now. I would miss my ride home."

"Oh shucks, that sucks," Morty said sarcastically.

"Hey Morty."

"Hmm?"

I leaned down and gave him a kiss. It was good, and pleasing, so much so that I got tired leaning down and fell into his lap. He managed to hold me up by the chest, which incidentally caused him to grope me by the boobs.

"Sorry."
"It's okay." I slid the towel down off of one breast. The nipple was perked up. "See? It's okay this time. We have privacy."

He whined.

"I still don't get to touch."

"That order is rescinded."

He slowly, shyly reached his open hand out. It was like a game- as if my boob would suddenly disappear, or jump out of reach, if he lunged too quickly. The back and forth teasing lasted a few long seconds. His fingers darted out, landed on my bare skin, and squeezed lightly.

I felt nothing, really.

Then his fingertips traced inwards, forming a net that closed in on my nipple. They coalesced, pinching, ever so slightly, on the lump of flesh. A jolt ran through my body.

"Okay, that's enough," Morty exclaimed, drawing back his hand suddenly. It was my turn to whine. "I'm not going to let this evolve and make you go back on your word," he explained. I huffed, and then resigned myself. We both stood.

"Where are your clothes?"

"Back in the changing room."

"Here, have my t-shirt." He threw me a plain white t-shirt. "Use that until you get dressed."

"Thanks."

As one last favor, I dropped the towel and twirled around. He duly took it in with lust-filled eyes.

"That's a sight I could get used to."

"Mmm, it's not as good as the one I get," I said, eying his bare chest. "Turn sideways." He complied. I squirmed in delight. I don't know about other girls, but I love shoulders and backs. Something about the shape, I guess. Morty is so very scrumcious in that regard. I dreamed of draping myself over that back, massaging it or hugging it tight.

The t-shirt went over my head. It was large enough to come down below my hips, hiding everything taboo.

"A farewell kiss?" he inquired.

"Of course."

The farewell kiss lasted for three minutes and was more of a tongue-on-tongue massage session. I finished by slurping his upper lip, scooping it out like clam meat. Ahhhhh…

I was about to go, but Morty stopped me one last time.

"Hey Jazz."

"Hmm?"

"Do you still hate men?"
I paused for thought.

"Not anymore. I think I can bring myself to just hate particular men, the ones who have wronged me. Not all men. Not you."

"That's good. So, does that mean you like me?"

"Yes. I might even go so far as to say I love you."

"Haaaaa."

"Morty."

"Hmm?"

"Do you love me too?"

Morty blinked, staring placidly. He bent down to one knee and took my hands in his.

"Jazz- I-" He breathed deeply. "If there's anything in the world I can do to make you happy, just ask. I am at your beck and call. I want you to enjoy life. I want you to live. I want you."

"Right," I said, nodding and holding back tears.

It was impossible to hold back my feminine gushing any longer, so I rushed away. The last I saw of Morty was a glimpse of him in the doorway of the hotel suite.

The lust-driven procrastination had not cost me too much time. I still had time to collect my things, dress, and walk to the train station at a leisurely pace. Ecruteak passed me by. Familiar landmarks peeped out in between the development of new constructions. The night was starting to cloud over. It would be darker, but the street lamps gave me ample lighting to find my way.

I thought about taking my Pokémon out, perhaps even Steelix, to transport me to the station, then decided against it. I wanted to be alone for this walk, in order to think.

Morty, oh Morty.

Mortimer Matsuba.

My first memory of him was receiving a wet-willie down my ear.

My second was wrestling with him, trying to get back my Pokéball with which he had just caught Haunter. We were covered in dust, on account of the collapsed gymnasium behind us. Students and teachers were rushing around in a panic, and all I could think about was how much of a creep this one guy was.

Middle school passed by so slowly. It was not the happiest time of my life, not by a long-shot, but it was leaps and bounds better than what my life would become. It was certainly an interesting, and exciting period, thanks to the miscreant who continually found new and interesting ways to pick on me.

For a guy who bullied me all the time, I sure seemed to hang out with him and his friends a lot. It didn't make sense, and I swore there must be something wrong with my head for having tolerated him so much. Then I remembered that Whitney was our mutual friend. She went out of her way to find ways to bring us together.
Hah. Whitney was probably trying to ship us all along. What an eccentric, lovable friend.

Morty and I shared meals. I got spit-balled in the face, he got a stomp on the foot. It was our way of saying "What's up?".

P.E. was our chance to show the other who was better. Things really fired up when they allowed Pokémon in our sporting games. Boys versus girls matches basically devolved into Haunter versus Onix.

There was the graduation ball- Morty did ask me out to that. It was in such a dirty, off-handed manner that I completely ignored him. He ended up going with… Cecilia? was her name? instead. They didn't have much fun. I spent the dance pouting, because of some stupid thing involving the guest speakers. They had promised me Steven Stone would be there, but that was a lie, I guess. Morty cheered me up on the way home by showing me an ordinary rock. He cracked it open on an iron fence pike, and inside was an iridescent array of aqua-blue geodes. He told me it was from a small quarry Stone himself had excavated in the nearby mountains (I never found out if that was true).

During graduation, we rushed the stage and all performed that stupid dance-song, while the teachers stood aghast. Basically, it was Morty's idea and I organized it. My homeroom teacher Mrs. Leyton was shell-shocked because she spotted me leading the charge. Until that very moment, the faculty never suspected me of being a trouble-maker. Oh little did they know. I guess, in a kind of combative game of one-upmanship, me and Morty dictated all the underground dealings of the school.

He was also the only one who figured out that I acted the way I did because I was secretly trying to get myself expelled. I didn't want to be in Ecruteak. I wanted back home. In my own house. Close to the sea, to feel the salt water lapping around my feet. And most of all, I missed the overgrown lamb and his funny antics and lovable personality. I wanted to cuddle with him again. Morty knew, and yet he also knew what would happen to me at home if I ever ran afoul of the system. So he covered for me, and took all the blame, attention, and, to my chagrin, all the credit for the outlandish misdeeds that wracked Ecruteak North.

How could I be so stupid to not see it then?

He loved me.

He loved me, at a point when I was still able to fall in love with men normally.

I don't know what would have happened if I had realized it.

There's a good chance I would have rejected him anyways.

There's also the matter of my town of residence being dictated by my dad's job. Of course I was happy to move back to Olivine, but that also meant splitting up with the friends I had made in Ecruteak. Any relationship we might have started would not have been able to develop. They let fourteen year olds travel across the region for their Pokémon journey, but that was only during the summer, when school is out. Once autumn began, we would be stuck in our own cities, miles apart.

I sighed.

If I had fallen for Morty then- do you think I could have also had my first heartbreak when we separated? Then I would know the pain of a breakup beforehand. Then I would not have reacted to that bastard in the same way, I think. And none of the terrible crap would have happened, because I would be wise enough to handle it better.
If only.
If only…

But that's not how life turned out.
You're supposed to accept what is and what isn't, Jasmine.

That doesn't mean I'm not bitterly disappointed with my childhood. Reality may be realistic, but that's not shorthand for acceptance. I still, to this day, regret everything that happened.

At least, at the very least, I was given a way forward, to move on and enjoy life once again. I can go back to those middle school years, much wiser now, and able to create happiness out of the chaos.

Yes. That's what I'll do.

Morty is the center of this change.

Now that I know the purpose of his antics, I can tolerate them better.
He has also gotten a little more mature and considerate in his actions too, so that's good.

Look at everything he's done since we met again at the gala: saved me from my stupidity. Helped me with my career. Brought happiness to my Pokémon. Cheered me up with parties organized just for me. Pleasured me, taught me that I don't have to be ashamed of the urges in my body.

Now that I've come to terms with my sexuality, and decided which half of the prudish/perverted divide to embrace (the perverts), I can take Morty's sexual idiosyncrasies and enjoy them, rather than become confused and disgusted by them.

He is someone who can stand my personality, and indeed, seems to thrive off of it. He won't abandon me.

He will be my happiness.

He wants me.

Oh my God, he wants me!

How can one little word mean so much, like a treasure to my ears? A siren's call, that one word. I think he meant to say he 'loves' me, but he has trouble spitting out the "L"-word. Yet, he doesn't understand that his substitute struck a chord so much deeper than the word "Love", a word bandied about so much by so many it's become meaningless.

He wants me, and he wants to make me happy.

What can I do to ensure that continues?

No, that's being too selfish.

What can I do to make Morty happy?

Hmmmmmm. That's tough.

It's not that I don't care about others. I simply don't know how to care about others. I'm slow on figuring out what to do, what's appropriate when I'm put into a situation where someone is in need. I
have trouble figuring out what I can do to help others. For Pokémon, their needs are simple and
easily executed. For people, it's so much harder, and more time contingent, and often the moment to
be a hero has passed by the time I figure it out.

For a boyfriend, though? How do I become a good girlfriend?

Jasmine, don't worry too much about it. I think Morty is the kind of guy who has the patience to let
you figure it out. As long as you show that you're trying, he'll appreciate it.

Yet there is one thing he wants, that I know about and can give-

-Sex.

It's as simple as physical pleasure, driven by lust, which is a natural instinct. Men feel this urge quite
strongly and regularly, I am made to understand. They also have less inhibitions in pursuing it.
Denying Morty the chance to copulate is probably my most annoying trait as a girlfriend. I can't
imagine the frustration he must be going through, the loads of sperm he must be ejaculating in nightly
sessions of masturbation. It's enough for me to pity the man.

So why then must he wait?

Because I am reticent.

Why are you reticent?

It's in my nature, and my upbringing.

I was taught, in a very vigorous and commanding manner, to avoid sex at all costs. From my father:
pre-marital sex would damn me to Hell. From my mother: sex would bring the condemnation of
society down upon my head. All the adults persistently lectured me about the dangers of sex, and
sought to conceal its advantages. Well, now that I have discovered they are all wrong, there's
precious little by way of social pressure to stop me from partaking.

What is left is a primordial fear, instilled deep inside my female genes, to prevent me from mating
haphazardly. Even that should be taken care of by modern advances. Alcohol is for decreasing
inhibitions. Morty must have condoms, to prevent STD's.

Oh…

Yes, that's the root of it all. And it's a baseless fear, isn't it?

Then… there's nothing left.

The only reason I've waited so long is to make sure Morty is the right guy to take my virginity.

Yes. He is the right man.

Then what now?

I wait. The 11th of December is right around the corner. Nineteen days. That's all. So little time.

Why must you wait until then?

Because if I have sex, and like it, then I'll want more, and it will become a distraction. If I have sex
and hate it, it will create emotional turmoil that will become a distraction. Either way, it can only end
up impeding the thing that really ought to be the most important priority in my life- money! Money
makes everything go round. Money pays for food and water, electricity for heat, light, computers, and appliances, the apartment you inhabit, the food and medicine for your Pokémon, so on and so forth. There's no way to carry on a relationship, much less a sexual liaison, without the money to facilitate one's existence.

I need to make sure I pass probation.

But… is it that big an imposition?

I mean, my ratio is far above normal. Despite Warren's best efforts and Mother's interruption, I managed a really stellar record the past two weeks. I relaxed the requirement that trainers had to beat two of my subordinates, which meant I was facing more weak trainers, giving me easy wins. Also, I played more matches throughout the day, especially in the morning, which put sleep-deprived challengers at a disadvantage. This culminated in a record that would safely stay above 50% if I forfeited half of all my matches from now through the 10th.

So, if that's the only real thing on my probation docket, and it's not so dire anymore, why can't I slack off for a little play time? It doesn't seem like a few vacation days to Ecruteak would be an imposition.

Besides, when Morty tickled your nipple you cringed- in a good way. You're going to go home and schlick to the memory of that millisecond of pleasure. Multiple times.

If you don't have sex, you're probably going to be bothered and horny for the next three weeks, and that might make it difficult to focus on your job.

I stopped on the train platform. My train was on time and ready to be boarded. A few travelers were pushing past me, on their way to get on or getting off.

"What do I really want?" I asked myself.

I want to be loved.

That's all I have ever wanted.

Now I have that chance.

"Morty…"

The darkness within.

The void in his soul.

I don't care. He might tell me, he might not. I might not want to know anyways. It might not matter.

I don't know if sexual intimacy will give me the trust and courage to speak about myself, honestly, truthfully, and openly. It is certain, however, that if I cannot open my body up to Morty, I will never be able to open up my soul.

That's it.

It's decided.

I'm ready.

Ecruteak flashed by. I was running, sprinting. I didn't care what others thought of me, or that I might be too out of breath to actually commit the act. I knew what I wanted, and the idea caught fire in my
mind that I should have it now.

The inn came into sight. Steam drifted above the onsen baths. I spotted the wing that Morty's room was in. Across the lawn I went, overcome and excited. I lost my sandals in the process.

There's the door.

Wait!

There was one last thing.

I gulped. And then panted, because I had run a mile and a half.

I took my time to catch my breath. I didn't want to be out of sorts when I entered. It also gave me time to ponder my last, final objection.

Would that…

Could that?...

But it should be moot, right?

Morty is a sexually active and responsible young man, right? He'll have protection…

Right?

I prayed, and then made to knock.

My fist paused. An evil grin came to my lips.

What if I jumped him?

He'll never see it coming.

So I checked the door knob. It was unlocked. I quietly turned it open, and cursed when the door made a slight squeaking noise. I looked around.

No sign of human life. Morty must be in the bedroom.

My gut began fluttering.

My vagina and related organs tingled. The tiny bump at the forefront of my genitals swelled. It itched against the cloth of my panties, as if it knew what was coming and was more excited than its owner.

Tip-toe across the lounge. Here's the bedroom door, closed.

I turned the knob, and slid it open. This one made no noise.

Morty, it's time.

I want you to-

…

"Oh. Ohhh. Oh. Oh. Oh."

Morty lay naked on the bed.
Atop him, bouncing wildly, was a lithe, tanned young woman with pink flowers in her short hair.

His dick was up, erect, and embedded in her. She took it easily, riding him with fervor. His hands lifted her hips up and down. They moved together, rocking. It's like they were familiar with each other's rhythm. Like they belonged to each other.

Damn it.

Damn it all.

I snapped.

Or broke.

Or imploded.

The verb doesn't matter.

The superlative doesn't matter.

It happened.

My knees gave out. I dropped to the floor, and then, before they could see me, crawled behind the doorway. The sounds of their love-making reached me.

Slaps of skin upon skin.

Her moans.

Morty's grunts.

I reached down, unable to control myself, and furiously rubbed my clit until it spasmed painfully.

...

Twenty-two years ago, on this day, I was born.

I have never cried harder.

Part 3 - End
Misshapen shadows passed before my eyes and I could not tell if they were cataracts or clouds painted upon the night sky. Flights of fancy took my soul to the ends of the earth, where gremlins of abstract philosophy assaulted my sensibilities with hollow laughter and inane wisdom. The touch of mortality impaled my liver and it was unbearably painless.

My hand rested beside me, palm down, and felt a cold, hard, smooth surface, the one sure thing I had ever known.

The charade I had been perpetrating for six years of the figure with iron resolve and unbendable will was not a lie, but an ideal I kept locked in a miniature universe and called out at will to act as my proxy. Even now, I could do nothing but rely on that borrowed reputation to carry me home.

"Am I worth anything to you?" I asked aloud.

A convoy of cars roared by, drowning out my voice, and so I assumed he did not hear me and that is why he did not answer. The moment passed, I could not bring myself to ask again.

A hue of black less absolute than the rest of the domed sky lurked on the horizon by the time we reached a cluster of neighborhoods. The first hint of dawn and the first trace of Olivine City appeared simultaneously. By the time I was gently deposited on the front steps of my apartment, tendrils of fire were wavering tentatively above the urban ramparts.

"Schteel."

My Pokémon raised his head to nudge me. I took his chin in my arms, and embraced him.

"Schteellon." Steelix's tail slithered out and swatted at my purse. The move knocked it loose and emptied its contents onto the balcony, including five of my Pokeballs. One by one, the behemoth used precise taps of his tail to trigger the balls' buttons. Tyko, Magneton, Magnezone, Skarmory, and Magcargo emerged.

The lot stared at me, placidly, expecting orders. None came.

"Steel. Steelix. Staaw."

Steelix motioned for all of the Pokémon to gather round. When none complied, the snake wrapped around and forcefully brought us all together.

"Tyk? Prinny! Prinny?"

Tyko, the smartest, was the first to get it. She hopped up on one of Steelix's spikes in order to face me at eye level.

"Prinploy! Proop! Prinp?"
I shook my head.

I have no idea what she's asking. Though, the gist must be that they all understood I was not myself, that I was sad, and that I needed comfort. They wanted to know what was wrong, and what I expected them to do about it.

'Expect them do'.

Expect.

Yes, that is a word that could be used to encapsulate my relationship with my Pokémon, and also why they were useless to comfort me.

"Do you know what love is?"

Tyko shook her head.

"Morty… he hurt me."

Tyko thought she understood, and pantomimed herself getting slapped across the cheek.

"Not there," I said. I pointed to Tyko's heart. "Here."

Tyko made a show of getting stabbed through the heart.

"Yes-"

-then she keeled over, as if dead.

"No, not like that."

Tyko tilted her head.

"It's, it's… he betrayed me."

"Tyk?"

How do you explain to a Pokémon the concept of abandonment?

I crawled away, out of Steelix's circle, and began walking away.

Even out to the curb, and across the street, my Pokémon didn't follow, merely stared.

I hid behind the corner of the next apartment building. Still no reaction. When I grew tired of waiting, I walked back to them.

"Didn't you want to follow me?"

"Zzzt."

"Weren't any of you anxious because I walked away?"

The ones with heads tilted them. Confusion. Concern, born from lack of understanding.

"Okay. Then let's put it this way. If I were to leave, leave town and never come back, what would you do?"
My Pokémon stared at me as if I were speaking Martian.

"Fine. If I were to hurt you, and scream at you, and shove you in your Pokeball, how would you feel? What would you think of me?" I put on the angriest face I could muster, and held out a Pokeball in a threatening gesture.

Tyko cowered in fear. Magneton and Magnezone floated in place, doing nothing. Skarmory clucked. Magcargo also shrank back. Steelix lowered his head.

Expect.

They don't get it. Or maybe, I don't get them.

"Morty treated me badly, okay? He was mean to me in the worst possible way and now I feel bad!"

Tyko recovered, shrugged, and gave me a slap on the wrist.

I stared incredulously at the gesture.

Oh god.

"Is that what you think?" I asked. "Don't you get it? You can be hurt by the ones you love! You can be perfect, absolutely perfect, do nothing wrong, and they still hurt you! Why can't you get that?"

Because you've never given them any reason to doubt you, Jasmine.

A Pokémon in a good home with a loving trainer can't conceive of betrayal. To them, being hurt, receiving negative reactions from the one they trust means they're at fault. They did something wrong. The trainer is never at fault. We're the ones who feed them, bathe them, train them, order them around, take care of them when they're sick. We may not always be perfect, but our intentions are always pure.

"How do I get you guys to understand?"

They don't know what love is, the special kind of love, and the pain that can come from breaking it. They only know that I am upset and need comforting. So they gathered around and hugged me tight.

I felt nothing. No comfort, no warmth. None of it assuaged me in the least.

"Back off," I said.

They only gave me an inch.

"Get off me!" I yelled, thrashing wildly.

That threw them back a yard. Tyko, undeterred, hopped closer.

"What the hell do you know? What can you do? You're a dumb monster who knows nothing!" Tyko still came closer. "Go away!" I screamed, flailing my arms, unable to bear their dumb attempts at consolation. Tyko skittered away in fright. The rest followed, except Steelix.

The metal leviathan stood back, watching over me. I slid into a crouch, hugging my knees tightly.

Fresh tears welled on the cusp of my lower eyelid.

"Dumb brute," I whispered. "Do I mean anything to you?"
"Schteel." Steelix picked up his own Pokeball and dropped it at my feet.

"Besides that!"

No matter how much I shouted, no matter how much I cried, and screamed, raged, berated, moaned... always the same reaction.

Steelix's loyalty isn't out of love. It's out of obedience. Our bond isn't based on trust- it's based on submission. How can a Pokémon who's only personality trait is slavish obedience understand me?

It's impossible!

Steelix's eyes stared intently at me. It felt like they were expecting me to say something, do something, give Steelix a command that he could carry out. What would he do if I didn't say anything?

For minutes, and then much longer, till the sun had cleared the horizon, I sat there and waited for Steelix to grow tired and impatient.

He never did.

"Damn it! Fine, get in your ball!"

He let out a half-baked roar before the zap of the Pokeball laser struck him and the metal bulk disappeared. I was alone.

My anger subsided, giving me time to think, which was a mistake.

I had just scolded my Pokémon, for no reason at all, for no fault of their own.

How can they possibly understand me?

None of them even understand what a relationship is.

Steelix are solitary, mating consists of a brief, passionless exchange.

Magcargo are polygamous and colonial, a single female might bear the children of dozens of fathers in a single batch of eggs.

Magnezone and Magneton, obviously not.

Tyko is much too young.

Skarmory has an inkling, but he never got to attract a female from the skraw. For his species, winning over a mate was a matter of social status, not affection. Love, as far as the birds are capable of understanding it, only comes after the pairings are done. Skarm Skarm never made it that far.

They're such simple creatures, and blessed for it. Their love life, if it even exists, is straight-forward, devoid of complexity, of depth, of capability for disastrous betrayal and subsequent emotional turmoil. It's in no way comparable to a human's. I blamed them for not being able to empathize with me, when it was physiologically impossible for them to do so.

I crushed my head against my kneecaps and let out what must have been the seventh flood of tears.

Oh god. Oh god.
I'm all messed up.

My Pokémon, who I thought meant everything to me- they can't help me.

But… maybe…

There might be one who I could confide in.

He knew love.

His species was known for their profound emotional depth and their capability to empathize with even the most abstract human sorrows.

"Amphy," I whispered with a wistful touch of hope.

I found them asleep curled up against one another, tails wrapped around each other's haunches. With the sun crisping the morning air it was well past time for them to retire from their nightly duties. I tried recalling who had been scheduled to work tonight and couldn't. Regardless, they both looked completely conked out. I ought to follow their lead and collapse into sleep myself, but my mind was not following my weary body's lead.

I lay down beside Amphy, leaning over him.

"Hey." I brushed my hand along his neck and head. It took a second before he blinked himself awake. His groggy, befuddled gaze greeted me, probably not alert enough to comprehend who he was looking at. That's okay. I scooped him up in my arms and hugged him tight.

"Amphy. Oh Amphy."

He lay limp in my arms. The fuzz of his fur prickled against my bare skin. Except for his annoyed whimper, he acted no different than an oversized plush toy.

"At least I'll always have you," I said, stuffing my cheek into his shoulder.

"Phoo?"

"Morty, he…" I swallowed away a sob. It felt like a fresh wave of tears was coming, but it seemed wrong to spill them onto Amphy's hide. I tried, quite hard, to suppress them.

"Amphy, please say you'll never leave me. Please don't throw me away. Like he did."

My sometime Pokémon whimpered, flustered and worried.

"You won't, will you?"

"Amphar."

"Amphar? What does that mean?" My clutch became tighter and tighter, to the point that Amphy struggled to break free. He wrested himself away from my grasp, leaving me to kneel on the floor. He leaned over me as I finally let loose the tears.
"I don't know anything about anyone anymore."

What a stupid thing to say.

"It isn't fair, why does the world have to be like this?"

Another stupid thing to say.

"Men! I hate them! They're sick and corrupt to the core!"

The stupidity continues unabated.

I spouted whatever nonsense made the least sense, whatever seemed most poetic and self-serving and tragic, in order to continually stir the potluck of emotions I had been brewing. As long as I couldn't focus, I would not have to come to terms with what had transpired, and could find comfort in hopeless, mindless despair. I know this about myself, that this is how I react to overwhelming feelings, and I know it's bad for my psyche. So I do what I have trained myself to do at times like these, and that's seek out Amphy.

The creature understood. He's got that look- 'Here we go again': A sympathetic droop of the eyes, a heaving sigh, and a pat of the paw on my shoulder.

When I was little and led the elementary school riot, Mother chastised me in the cruelest way possible. Before then, I had sensed something wrong in my household, a tension that was kept hidden from me. I never saw it, never heard it, only felt it, like a ghoul hiding behind the locked door of the my parents' bedroom. When Mother smacked me, and worse, told me those terrible things, the wrongness burst out and flooded the household. It was never the same after that. I don't think there was much of a change in how Mother and Father treated me. More like I was no longer naïve, and much more aware of their treatment, and grew to resent it.

My life had become very cold and very dim.

Then, in the depths of my woe, Amphy happened upon me. Perhaps chance, perhaps fate, who can tell, but he was exactly what I needed to save myself. He tapped me on the shoulder, until I noticed him. I remember looking up to see this funny-looking yellow creature staring at me, looking curious and sympathetic. When I didn't respond he sat down beside me. Out of idle curiosity I reached out to touch his tail bulb. He yelped in surprise. That made me laugh.

He didn't really have to do anything at all. Just the fact that he was there, innocent and endearing, and didn't hate me, gave me hope that there was one living being in this world who cared about me.

Without his reassuring cooing, his comforting touch, his antics, his gentle joking, his story-telling, his patience, his platonic love- the thousands of moments of joy we've shared- I don't know where I would be today. Dead, maybe. Institutionalized, more likely.

For me, Amphy is a presence in my life that has only ever brought me positive feelings. Even the fights, arguments, stress, and worry were all born out of a sense of love between us. I cared for him, because he cared for me, and vice versa. This bond that we share is fundamental and unbreakable.

It seemed so simple, this concept of mutual love and mutual faith.

Why couldn't I have that with anyone else?

Why must humans make such an excruciating endeavor of such a simple thing?
"Amphy."

"Amphy," he repeated.

"Do you remember that time six years ago?"

"Amph." He nodded.

"It's like that again."

"Aaaaoo."

Amphy's throat seized up.

"I think this is the last time. I'll never find love."

"Phoo."

Amphy's head slumped down. He glanced over.

Spectra was stirring. She must have sensed the commotion and was starting to wake. Amphy was staring at her.

"You're lucky. Blessed," I corrected myself. "You have her. I don't have anyone."

"Amph." Amphy muttered something, a hesitant inquiry of some sort. I couldn't make sense of it. The Pokémon made a weak attempt at a pantomime, holding both paws in the air and waving his body.


He has Spectra, and I should have Morty, he's saying. But I don't have Morty.

I shook my head.

"Ampharos?"

"Morty is…” I choked. "He's with another woman."

"Ampha?"

"I don't know. They were having sex. That's all I know."

That's really all I did know.

But that should be enough to know he and I were finished.

Really? Is that true?

"What's his deal, anyways?" I asked aloud. Amphy tilted his head. "One minute, he's asking me to have sex with him, he tells me he'll unload all his secrets if I do, and I walk out saying "Not yet!". What does that tell me? He's done so much for me, he's said so many things, he's acted serious and vulnerable and by all accounts he loved me and was serious about starting a long term relationship with me."

"Ampha."
Now I've done it. Amphy brings me down to earth, he makes me focus, he causes me to start reasoning things out. This is usually good for me.

"So how do we go from "I love you and want you and we can have sex and romance and happily ever after" to screwing another woman in, what, forty minutes?"

It hadn't even taken me an hour to get to the train station and run back. In that brief time Morty had managed to woo a woman over to his room and start humping.

"Why would he do that? How could he even do that? It's not possible. It doesn't make any sense."

I crossed my arms and started thinking out loud.

"It was late at night. The partiers had all gone home. And I never saw that woman at my birthday party. Morty's got some suave, but he's not so good he can convince a random passer-byer to waltz into his room for a hookup. Not in forty minutes. Which means, what?"

Amphy patted Spectra.

"He was already seeing her?"

Amphy nodded.

I tried thinking back.

"Why would Morty go through so much trouble to try to win me over if he was already in a relationship?"

Amphy slumped, stumped for an answer. As was I.

"I could understand if he was unhappy with his relationship and wanted to pursue me. But they sure didn't seem unhappy to me."

I couldn't get the vile, lust-inducing image of the two of them fucking out of my head.

"Men are basically polygamous, they want to have sex with as many women as possible. So did Morty go through all of that effort just to have sex with me, because he wanted me? Why? Because of our history? Because I tickle his fancy? He thinks I'm cute? Was he lying to me about all the lovey-dovey stuff?"

Well, wait… It wasn't just words. He did a lot of work, real work, to try to win me over. Spectra here is proof enough. And when I lost my Pokeballs, he made four plane trips on short notice. That cost him a lot of money… a LOT of money. That much money is not something a Gym Leader can blow on the off-chance it leads to a hookup. A hooker would be cheaper…"

My neurons lit up.

"A hooker!"

"Amph! Ampha?"

"Of course! He did want a serious relationship with me. There's no way to deny that, he bent over backwards to try to win me over. But he's a man, a perverted asshole at that, and he wanted sex. I wasn't giving him sex, so he decided to get it from wherever. I leave for Olivine, he's flustered because he got so close but was denied, so he calls over that woman for a booty call."
"Ampharara."

"I don't know. Maybe she's a hooker, maybe she's just someone Morty knows, a friends-with-benefits kind of deal. I'm thinking a hooker is more likely though, he had Danielle available. Or well, that doesn't really have a bearing on things, I got the feeling there was personal baggage between them, he might not use her for sex if it came with strings attached.

Ahhh! He didn't want to screw up his long-term chances with me by shagging some girl who might develop feelings for him, or vice versa."

I frowned.

"This is so stupid. So damn stupid. If all he wanted was sex he could have waited forty minutes. Forty minutes! I was on my way back, just so I could lay him! If only…"

I kept parsing it and folding it over, afraid that this reasoning was too simple, too optimistic, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made. Which, by my further reasoning above (forty minutes!) made me angrier.

"Grr! What do you think?" I asked my companion.

Amphy was looking lost.

"Ah, blah. You're lucky. You've never gotten rejected, or had to reject someone. We got it right on your first try. Lucky."

Amphy frowned. Spectra was yawning, turning over, and stretching.

"But you can understand, right?" I implored. "How would you feel if Spectra ditched you for another Ampharos?"

"Phar phar!"

He seemed indignant at the very proposition. As if Spectra cheating on him was unthinkable, that to hypothesize such a scenario was a deep insult to their relationship.

"Oh come on! I didn't think Morty would betray me, right up to the point I found a little brown bitch bouncing on top of him!"

Amphy shrank back.

"That's what men do. Don't you see? They lie and steal to get what they want, and to hell with the consequences, and others' feelings, as long as their dick gets wet!

Why must we women put up with all that crap just to get to that inkling of goodness inside men? It's not fair. Men are so stupid!"

My anger boiled over.

"Dumb, idiot, brainless, perverted, dimwit, morons! The whole lot of them can just… go to hell!"

My attention went from the ceiling where it had been directing its irate tirade to Amphy. He was cowering by Spectra, who was now awake and cognizant.

"I'm sorry, Amphy! I didn't mean you, you're not a man."
Amphy whimpered.

"I didn't mean it like that. I meant, you're not a human guy. You're not any of those things. You don't think with your dick-"

I should just shut up.

Judging by Spectra's fierce glare, that would be exceptionally good advice right now. She stood up to her full height and shoved her way between me and Amphy. Somehow, in my bitter anger, I took offense to her gesture.

"Amphy was mine way before you ever got in the picture. Don't get in between us," I snapped at her while shoving her aside.

She launched herself at me.

I was so taken aback by her Tackle that I fell backwards onto my hands and tush.

"What?"

"Ampharos!" she cried.

Did she seriously try to Tackle me?

"Don't go assuming things because you woke up in the middle of a conversation and heard things out of context!" I argued.

She wouldn't let up.

"Amphy, tell her to back down."

Yet, to my amazement, my Pokémon sheepishly backed away. He parked himself behind Spectra.

"What is it with you two?"

"Aaph."

"Amphy," I said, throat catching. "What's the matter?"

He shook his head.

"You're supposed to be siding with me. You're supposed to be helping me. How can I-"

"Ampharos," he said, cutting me off.

In which he meant-

'I'm sorry.'

I gawked.

My heart plummeted.

Amphy waddled over, tapped me on the nose, and then returned to Spectra's side. He hugged her tight and brought her back to the bedding. His gaze returned to me, even as the pair snuggled into the covers.
"Amphy," I said, trying very hard to hold my voice in check. "You'd best remember who arranged for you and Spectra to meet."

Amphy made a sign- hands up in the air, body waving, the spooky gesture.

Morty was the one who brought him Spectra.

Not me.

"Don't split hairs with me, boy," I warned, voice becoming increasingly strained.

"Amph." Whatever.

My temper began popping like fireworks.

"For all the things I've done for you. For all the years we've spent together. You owe me this. Don't shrug me off," I growled.

"Amphaarraraw! Aphoo! Pharrara! Rourara! Amphoo, phara!" He started jabbering non-stop, every sound in his Poké-vocabulary pelting me in a sudden deluge of cries. I couldn't make sense of any of it. Far more telling than his language was the way he held Spectra, and cowered under my glare, and seemed comforted by her glance and her embrace more than mine.

"What the hell?! You too! You too would dump me for another girl?! You bastard! You sheepish coward!"

"Amphra!" Spectra cried angrily at me.

"You're just a damn Pokémon! You laze around up here living like a princess and you forget that you're just a monster!" I sprinted over to the counter and grabbed his Pokeball. "Just a monster! My monster! See?!" and I zapped him. Amphy disappeared in a shimmer of energy.

Spectra cracked a Thundershock towards me. It hit my abdomen, feeling like a kick in the stomach. I took another electrocution in the back as I scurried away. She didn't get off a third, because I found her Pokeball and trapped her too.

The pair of plastic balls were flung through the air, towards the trash can, although neither landed in the bin.

I collapsed on the floor, shivering, enraged.

I can't rely on anyone.

Not even my Pokémon.

Oh god, oh god.

God?

How funny, I can't count how many times I use His name in vain, even though I'm not really sure I believe He exists. Dad wishes I would. Mother tells me not to.

Whether God exists or doesn't exist, though, it doesn't matter to me. Even if there is an Almighty, He clearly has a hands-off policy towards us mortals and our personal affairs. We're free to visit our miseries upon others and let the burden of selfish needs and wants cause conflict with one another.

Sure, go ahead, blame everyone but yourself. I hope it makes you feel better, Jasmine.

Why does it have to be this way?

Pokémon were supposed to be the one thing I loved more than anything in the world.

What went wrong?

I thought Amphy was my buddy, my pal, my best friend, my confidante, my familiar. If the littlest thing I said wrong turned him away, who can I rely on? Isn't there anyone who, anything, in the whole world, that will just accept me for who I am and love me?

A whimper came out of me.

I'm being selfish.

…I'm being stupid.

Amphy is not my lover. We established that fact when I adamantly refuted Edward's insinuations of bestiality. Our love was never romantic, never even approached that kind of relationship. It couldn't be. I was a human and he was an Ampharos. It's grotesque and unnatural to ever consider that sort of thing. And yet, I was treating him with the kind of possessiveness that was only ever truly earned by entering into a monogamous, sexual relationship.

If we weren't lovers, then what were we? How would you characterize our relationship? What is Amphy to me?

Of course, of course.

My Pokémon are my children.

All this time, I'd never really realized it.

I am their mother.

Not their commander, like Morty pointed out. Not their friend, since I have authority over them. Not their boss, our bond runs too deep, too intimate for that. Not their significant other, our bond doesn't go that deep.

So to say, "They are my children, and I am their mother," would be the most accurate characterization of our relationship.

And that is why I could not, can not, rely on them for comfort.

A mother cannot rely on her children for emotional support. She has to be their blanket, their steady rock, their shelter in the storm, because if they can't rely on her, they have no one else they can fall back on. Their bastion seems faulty and unreliable if it breaks so easily; it seems weak and unable to support them if it comes crawling to them for support. A friend, a lover, a companion, yes, it's mutual. But a parent, no, never: a parent must always stand above their children and be infallible to them.

Unconditional love.

In practice, it means I, the mother-figure to my Pokémon, must take their burdens, because they have
no one else who will take their burdens no matter what. *No. Matter. What.* If I force them to shoulder my pain, it breaks the trust. It tells them "This love is not unconditional. It is predicated on you comforting *me* when the time comes."

They could never be more than a pillow to me. They don’t understand the full range of human emotions, and it would undermine their trust in me to even make them try.

I might have lost their trust already.

I realized this, and broke down crying. Again.

Some time later, after emptying my tear ducts and soul into the bed linen, I slowly pulled myself up. My phone had buzzed.

There was a text message. Of course, it was sent by the bastard.

**Hey there. Can we talk?**

I took a deep breath.

The logical, rational part of me still alive after the night’s trauma told me the best course of action would be to ascertain the facts and make a decision based on them. After hearing his case, I could better make a decision whether cheating on me for easy sex was something worth dumping his ass for- or murdering him.

What I really want to do is throw the phone in the toilet and go to sleep.

Instead, I sent him a one-word reply.

**Skype.**
I want to see his face.

No texting, no phone calls. I need that intimacy. When he learns that I know, I want to study his expression, to really see if his lies and deception had been written there all along. His words are suspect, devoid of any modicum of trustworthiness, but his face will betray him one way or another. He himself had told me this—unless that too was a lie.

The undersized computer monitor blipped to life. The operating system came online quick enough, as did the Skype face-time program. I beat him to the startup; it took a minute longer for Morty's online icon to appear. With the brief interval I tried wiping my eyes dry.

"Hey."

His face appeared online. I clamped down on myself, trying to suppress a shudder of revulsion after looking him eye to eye for the first time since the incident. I know, I know, it feels like forever and a day since then, but in fact it's been less than twelve hours.

His hair was unusually slick, dark, and straight. Looks like he had just gotten out of the shower. He broke out into a slight grin on seeing me, acquitting himself like a person who had far too little sleep and was wrecked because of it, but the fun of the previous night made up for it.

"Hey there."

"Hi," I replied.

"How are you feeling?" he asked casually.

"Good," I said, feigning ordinary cheer.

"Glad to hear that. I was a little worried, after all the heavy stuff last night. Did you make it home okay?"

"Yes."

"Ah, cool. I guess you're on your break, then, from Pokémon battles."

"Kind of."

"Figured the way you had to leave so early, you had morning shift. I won't keep you long then."

"It's alright. Actually, I haven't started battles yet. I've been busy with other things."

"Gotcha."

He seems so light-hearted, so cheerful, like nothing at all is wrong.

"So you can chat for a little?"

"Yes."

"Cool. Well, first point of order is, I don't know if you noticed or not, but you left your presents at the inn. Don't worry, I got them all rounded up, just want to know how I should send them back to
"Oh. Thanks. I didn't notice." I really did forget them. "It would probably be best if you held onto them for now. I can pick them up later."

He perked up, beaming at the suggestion.

Oh, yes, if I say I'm going to pick them up that means another chance for him to see me.

"So when do you think that will be?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe next week."

"Did you like your presents?"

"The best I've ever gotten."

"You're just saying that."

"No, they really were. Compared to my other birthdays…"

"Hmm?" Morty leaned in towards the screen, curious.

"Never mind."

"Really? What were your other birthdays like?"

"Uneventful."

"That's all?" he asked.

"What?"

"You sound bitter."

"I'm not."

"You do."

"I said I'm not. Why won't you believe me?" I growled.

"Because you can't hide your real feelings from me," he said, practically boasting.

"Then what am I feeling right now?"

"You're annoyed and insecure because you don't want to talk about all the disappointing birthdays in your past nor admit how lonely you were without anyone to celebrate them with."

"Wrong," I said deadpan.

"If I'm wrong, please correct me."

"You're thinking too much into this. It's more literal than any 'I'm so lonely and insecure' psycho-analysis crap. My parents were cheap and unimaginative. The best gift I ever got was Voltorb. Just based on volume and collective price-tag, yesterday was the biggest haul I've ever taken in on a birthday."
"Oh."

Now he looks stupid. Really, that just means he wants me to see him looking stupid, so he puts on a stupid face. It's all an act.

"I guess if that's the way you look at it," he said recovering. "Never pegged you for a worldly lady."

"I'm not. It doesn't matter to me one way or the other how many presents I get."

"Really?"

"Really," I answered.

"Really?" he asked again, this time in a deeper, more prodding tone. I responded with a frown. "You don't care at all about what everyone got you?"

"No."

"Haaahhh." He exhaled, deeply and exaggeratedly. "Here I was, worried and embarrassed my gift couldn't match all these expensive dresses and gadgets everyone else bought. Felt like I had shortchanged you, and me being your… date."

"As if."

"As if what?"

I waved off his inquiry.

"Hmm? Tell me!" he insisted.

"As if I cared about that. I got more than enough, from you and everyone else."

"That's not exactly comforting to my ego," he groused. "I really could have done better. Could've planned ahead more, gotten a better venue, made sure you had a full night to vacation." He paused a moment. "I would have liked to go further than we did."

I pursed my lips.

"That's not me conning you for my own needs. I really think you would have enjoyed it," he said.

"Maybe," I said.

"And maybe I ruined that possibility by dredging up the past."

"Maaaybe," I responded with more a little bit of playfulness. He laughed.

"I guess that's my fault. Too bad. Missed opportunity. But seriously, I'm glad I got that off my chest. It makes things clearer, going forward. I feel better. Hopefully, next time…"

"And what did I tell you?" I asked.

"December 10th," he replied glumly. "But I'll hold you to it."

"Whatever."

His expression slowly broke into a giddy, excitable grin. His head bopped from side to side and he
wouldn't take his eyes off of me. Even though we were separated by hundreds of miles and a pair of computer screens, I still felt flustered by his presence.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said.

"What is it?"

"I can't stop thinking about it."

"About what?"

"About making you happy."

"You're too sweet."

"No really. Enough of this dark secrets stuff. I want you to experience pleasure. Plain and simple."

"I've already done it on my own."

"It's different with another person. It's better, by magnitudes. Not just because it's another living being, but because it's strange and new and unfamiliar. Having another person doing it with you is like a box of surprises- like a pile of birthday presents. You don't know what you're getting but you know you'll like it."

"I don't like surprises all that much."

"You don't like shocks that abuse your sensibilities," Morty countered. "It won't be like that. You have an idea of what to expect, I just want to introduce you to the reality- and the reality is so much better than the imagination."

"Whatever. We'll see."

"I promise."

"You're just trying to get me into bed with you sooner."

"No! Well, that would be cool, but what I'm really, honestly doing is trying to get you to feel good about it, so you enjoy yourself and don't have regrets- which incidentally increases the likelihood you won't back out and I get to have you- not just once but forever."

My heart thumped for a beat.

"So you are a pervert," I said.

"I admit, I am. But, I think of myself as a chivalrous pervert. Life should be enjoyed, Jazz. If sex wasn't meant to be enjoyed, it wouldn't be a part of our life cycle."

"You're insufferable. A deviant."

"Pot."

"What?"

"That called the kettle black."
"I don't… oh that old saying. I'm not a deviant."

"Sure, sure, after prancing around naked in front of me, you're the prude," he said sarcastically.

I grimaced.

Morty went on.

"I wouldn't be doing this if I felt like you weren't responding positively to it. But you have. In fact, with the way you were shuddering by the tiniest little touch- and I'm trying not to brag here- I think I could have gotten you into bed last night if I tried."

"You would have liked that, wouldn't you?"

"And so would've you. Are you going to deny that?"

"I'm not going to answer a hypothetical."

"So you might."

"I might."

He grinned and nodded knowingly.

"Stubborn to the end. You're never going to admit it with words, are you?"

"That I crave sex?"

"Not the wording I would use or expected you to use, but yes, along those lines."

"I don't want to be crude." I said.

"Buuut…" he lead on.

"Why do you keep trying to make me confess? It's like you just want to hear me talk dirty. We've already established my desires."

"Yes we have. And although you're loathe to actually talk about it, your behavior last night leads me to believe those desires are pretty strong. Which makes me think we need to get you under the sheets. Sooner rather than later."

"So you want to fuck me."

He covered his face and burst out laughing.

"Fine, fine, let's stop splitting hairs. Yes, I want to fuck you, Jasmine."

"That's okay." I shrugged.

"Is it?"

"You're a man, you want sex, your purpose in life is to have sex with women."

"Not just any woman. With the woman we love," Morty argued.

"You're just saying that."
"Alright, I guess I'm not one to talk. You've got to understand, finding that special someone can sometimes feel like it's impossible; certainly much harder than finding a woman who's just down for a one-night shag. Before I knew what would become of us, I was adrift, and weak-willed. I had urges, and gave in to them whenever I could. As a man, it's hard to turn down a woman who's throwing herself at you, even if you know you don't love them."

"Like Danielle."

"Yes her. I don't love her, never did and never will. Like all the others. They were just friends, acquaintances, gals that I knew. We were just using each other for pleasure. I was never satisfied with just that, I wanted more, someday, someone special... but, and please forgive me, at the time, I needed the release."

"Oh I see. Is that why you fucked the little brown bitch last night? For release?"

"No she was-" Morty halted mid-sentence. He sort of hung in space for a moment, like a video clip in the middle of buffering: eyes wide, pupils unfocused, mouth hung slightly open, not breathing. His brain was in lockdown. It was too much a shock contained in one little innocent sentence- although, honestly, he should have been preparing a come-back for this exact occasion. I'm disappointed. His snarky imperviousness has, for once, failed him. Then the video buffered, his neurons unjammed, and he reanimated. He bowed his head and held his brow in both hands, silently mouthing out an emphatic 'fuck'. His fingers ran down his cheeks, coming together in a gesture of prayer.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What for?" I asked, keeping calm.

Curiously, he couldn't answer right away and instead was visibly shaking.

"No hurry, I'm listening. What are you sorry for?"

"For cheating," he said weakly.

"Oh, is that all? I thought you made a good argument. You men are under a natural imperative to find release for your sexual tension. I wasn't giving you that release, so you found it elsewhere."

His shocked expression morphed into what I could only assume was amazement. He was finally looking the screen straight on- or rather, looking at me, eye-to-eye.

"You're not angry?"

"Why should I be angry?" I asked innocently.

"Because… I had sex with another…” he drifted off into silence.

"And?"

He must not know what to make of my reply, much less my demeanor. His mouth was hanging agape.

"…and I'm sorry and how did you find out anyways?"

"Answer the question!" I asked sternly.

He grimaced under my sudden reversal of tone.
"You should be angry because I cheated on you and slept with another woman… that's not good enough. Um… Because I broke the trust you placed in me. Because I manipulated your feelings. Because I fucked up. I don't know what you want me to say. I give up."

"You're an idiot."

"Yes, I am, and I'm sorry for it. Could you please explain to an idiot like me exactly how I screwed up? Besides the obvious fact that I cheated on you."

"If you can't even figure out what you should be saying, then we're done here." I reached over to turn off the computer.

"Wait! Please! Don't go! Not like this."

I paused, giving him a moment to answer.

Whether it was the way his eyelids drooped low or the poor resolution of the screen, I could not make out his eyes. It then occurred to me that trying to divine someone's thoughts through pupil gazing was probably foolish. All along I thought I could make out something of his soul in them, when in reality they just reflected my face, and reflected whatever wishes I was projecting onto him. Right now, it seemed like he was trying to look me in the eye, but subconsciously didn't want to, and so kept glancing aside or downwards. At last, he simply closed them, took a deep breath, and collected his thoughts.

_You've got one chance, Morty._

"You said we men can't control our sexual urges, and when our significant other isn't obliging us, we go looking elsewhere. It's natural, instinctual. That's why we men stray, and that's why I cheated… That's a load of Muk. I slept with that woman because I wanted to."

My chest grew cold. Morty continued.

"It has nothing to do with my gender, my sex, my upbringing, our friends, society, or anything else. Just me. My personal choice. My decision to indulge in the carnal with someone besides you. I could give you a dozen excuses for why I did it, but they all sound hollow and unjustifiable, and it doesn't matter anyways. What matters is that I still care about your happiness."

My chest began shaking. Morty continued.

"Hate me. Curse me. Denounce me. Dump me, please. But whatever you do, do it to _me._"

My chest began pounding. Morty continued.

"Understand this: no matter what you decide to do, I will still care about you, and I will not forgive myself if you blame anyone but me for this transgression. No one else should have to pay for my sin. Not you. Not those who care for you. Not other men. Your wrath belongs to me, and I'm ready to take it."

My chest began freezing up. Morty continued.

"I'm begging you. Be happy. Forget me and be happy."

I stared wide-eyed.

"What are you talking about?"
"Your future-" Morty said, confused.

"What the fuck are you talking about?!" I yelled.

"Okay, good, bring the hammer down, take it all out on me-

"Shut up! What the hell?! What is this drivel you're going on and on and on and on and on and on about? Where did that come from?! Are you seriously insulting my intelligence here? Do you have any fucking clue what's going on here?"

My chest and all the rest of my body writhed in fury.

"You cheated! You bastard! You cheated on me! Me! You had sex with another woman! After all that, after all that- you were THIS close to having sex with me," and I held my thumb and forefinger up to show him how close he was, and the gap between the two fingertips was non-existent. "I walked in. I saw you and her humping with my own eyes. I was there because I wanted to fuck you! Because I wanted you! Because all the talk and all the gestures and everything you were trying to do to win me over worked! Because I not only trusted you, but I believed in you! Sex was not an issue anymore! I told you that! I told you the 10th, and if you had waited a single hour that would have been the last hour of abstinence you would have had to suffer for the rest of your life!"

I gasped for breath. My mouth was running dry.

"Even then… Even then… Even now! Even to this very fucking moment, you still have that chance! I knew coming in what an idiot you are. You're a pervert and a deviant and a bastard and lust-driven idjit! But so what? So am I! I'm all those things too! I understand, I get it, you were impatient, you were wanting some, you went and got it. I hate it and I hate you for cheating on me and I feel rage and jealousy like any woman ought to feel when being cheated on, but I could live and look past it and maybe one day forgive you for it…

But what I cannot understand and cannot forgive is this retched, sinking suspicion that I got just now from listening to you babble on and on, and when I try to figure it out, no matter how I twist and turn the facts it doesn't make sense. So tell me, answer me, please and for fucking once in your life honestly tell me why you're giving up so damn easily!"

"Huh?!" Morty was taken aback.

"After you've done so much to try to win my heart, and you were succeeding- it was working, I would have slept with you, I would have dated you, who knows, I might have even married you and had-" I caught myself in the nick of time, and choked down that final suggestion without daring to give it breath, "-if you truly wanted me, and absolutely everything you did tells me you wanted me, why are you backing away now?"

"I'm not," Morty said dumbly.

"If you wanted me, but you made the dumb mistake of cheating on me, why aren't you apologizing and trying to win me back? Why aren't you making up excuses? Why aren't you denouncing the little whore and promising you'll love me and only me? Why aren't you begging for forgiveness? Even if it's lip service, even if it's lies, why aren't you making the tiniest effort to win me back?... Do you even want me back?"

The tirade that began in anger ended in rasped voice and on the verge of tears.

"It's not…" Morty muttered and mumbled to himself. "You're misunderstanding things."
"You're not going to answer?" I whispered in disbelief.

Morty steeled himself.

"I am answering. It's not an easy, one-word or one-sentence answer. There is an explanation for everything that has been going on, and I mean everything… but the way you are now, I think it will do more harm to tell you and we should wait until you've calmed down."

"Idiot. Idiot! It's a yes or no question. Do you-"

"Whether I want you back or not is not the right question to be asking, damn it!" he yelled in frustration. "If you only knew me, what's been going on these past three months…"

My mind raced.

Oh no.

No no no no.


"Yes, that's when you entered the story, but-"

I cut him off…

"Erika called. She called about Sabrina, and Maylene, the girls you won the bet with. She mentioned a girl with flowers in her hair, talking to you during the after-party. Even then?!"

Morty suddenly sat up straight, looking very dire.

His face, his expression knocked more volumes off the bookshelf of memory. My mind raced.

"The train station in Ecruteak. That woman was there, with Glacia… The phone call where you said you were with Eusine, but I never heard Eusine… The time you disappeared during the Halloween hoax, hiding in the booth with Danielle. You yourself admitted you slept with Danielle even after you told me you liked me at the lighthouse."

The truth was dawning on me.

"No," Morty said sternly. "That's not all correct. You're getting the wrong idea."

"Am I?" I said. "How many women have you fucked since the lighthouse?"

He wouldn't answer.

"How many women have you seduced?"

His lips were pressed tight.

"Is this your life? Your game? Any girl who strikes your fancy, you woo and coddle and romance? Is it even sex you're after?"

He shook his head, but it didn't resemble a signal of denial, but a gesture of reproach, as if I was doing something wrong.

"One woman isn't enough for you? You've got me, Danielle, and then that whore? Three girlfriends?"
More? What are you after Mr. Matsuba? Sex? Power—over people, over women? Toying with our emotions, sadistic pleasure? Ego? Tell me!"

"Don't call her a whore," Morty growled.

"What, flower bitch?"

"Don't call her a bitch either. I wouldn't let her call you—"

"If she's not a bitch and not a whore, then what is she? Some poor ditz who doesn't know she's getting played? Does she even know about me?"

"She knows who you are and—"

"She does?! And she's still fucking you? How is she not a whore?!"

Morty's demeanor was deteriorating, he was looking as stressed, frayed, and upset as I was.

"I will not allow you to use such disrespectful language towards her," Morty warned in a low voice.

The nerve of him, that he would be willing to defend this whore!

"Who is she?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Her name is Phoebe, she is a member of Hoenn's Elite Four."

"I don't care about that! I'm asking WHO IS SHE TO YOU?!

Morty went limp.

His shoulders slumped. His hands fell to his lap. His blond bangs fluttered over his brow. His eyes faded away, unfocused and directed elsewhere.

The distance between us suddenly felt much, much further away than even the mere two hundred miles between our cities.

He sighed. His eyes rose to meet mine. His voice came softly.

"She is my muse, my solace, my hope. The girl of my dreams, and the woman I love, and intend to marry."

"Marry?" I gasped out.

"We are engaged," Morty answered with a nod.

"You're kidding."

He shook his head.

"No way."

"It's the truth."

"No." I shook my head, feverishly. "No!"

Morty stared at me, saddened, full of regret.
"F-f-from the start, from m-m-middle school," I stuttered. "You picked me. You tricked me into the gym basement. You teased me. You flirted with me."

What I had heretofore called shaking was really more of a shiver, akin to being cold, like in winter. What gripped my body now was real shaking, akin to having the cold, the disease.

"I was the one you approached at the gala. I was the one you said you liked at the lighthouse. You said you thought of me as an angel."

"I did," Morty acknowledged.

"For my sake, m-my affection, you spent a fortune, you spent your valuable time, your emotions, you suffered for my sake, to make me happy."

"Yes."

"You promised me everything. You wanted to make me happy."

"Listen. Jasmine. Calm down. I can explain everything. If you'll just listen."

"Me! I was the one you wanted. You wanted me!"

My voice raised.

"I was your future! I was your bride! The one you wanted to sleep with! The one you wanted to die with!"

"Jasmine!"

I broke into a scream.

"You said you wanted me! YOU SAID YOU WANTED ME!"

I bent forward, choked up, sobbing, clutching the sides of the computer screen.

"You loved me!" I choked out.

Morty's image flickered on the screen.

He stared at me.

"...I never said I loved you."

"LIAR!"

The monitor went flying across the room, cracking in two as it hit the far wall.
This chapter is closely related to the side-story "Things I Can Never Say", which can be found in the Olivine Canon Series Page. I strongly advise reading both. The order does not matter, as both come to the same revelation- the difference being, the side-story shows the history, and this chapter reveals the outcome.

**KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!!!**

Please please please! Open! Please! Please be home! Come on!

**KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!!!**

“Hello? Jasmine?! What are you… WOAH!”

I threw myself on her, gripping her tight as a newborn infant. She kept her hands up and away, afraid to consummate the hug. Her face and mind were in shock, though not to same level as mine.

“Erika!”

“What is wrong?”

“He… oh god he-” and I broke down into a fresh bout of sobbing.

“Here.” Without me letting go, she guided the two of us to the living room couch. She sat down and drew me into her lap. I buried my tear-drenched face into the folds of her morning yukata. Her hands ran through my hair and along my shoulder, softly rubbing me, vainly attempting to reassure and calm me. It didn’t work.

The sight of a human, the touch of a female friend, did little but to revive my conscious and drag back to waking all the emotions that had been put to sleep out of sheer exhaustion.

I hadn’t had any real sleep for thirty hours now. I had tried. A futile thirty-minute nap in Amphy’s bed did nothing but summon nightmares and dark memories. I thought I could ride out the emotional storm alone, but in the end I proved too weak and too scared. The lonesome lighthouse was not a place of refuge. Within each shadow lurked a monster: fragments of memories, the shattered remnants of a promised life so cruelly taken from me. I panicked, and felt the primal need for the comfort of another living being. My Pokemon could not fulfill that need, and after my transgressions, I doubt they would even oblige. So I ran to the one friend I knew I still had close at hand.

And so here I was, bawling into her lap, and releasing once again the torrent of endless tears.

“There there,” Erika cooed, stroking me along the head. “There there.”

I don’t know why, but her touch did help, eventually. It was not calming and did not halt the tears, but it brought my turmoil to a plateau, allowing it to stabilize. My shock and anguish faded into grief and sorrow.
Erika waited until my wretched sobs quieted to soft sniffles.

“It will be okay. You are safe. You are going to be okay. I am here. You are going to be fine,” she said softly at intervals.

At one point she leaned over and hugged me tightly. Her embrace finally brought a calm to the ceaseless, thoughtless tumult gripping me. I was whole, and thinking. My emotions, all of them: grief, anger, despair, jealousy, rage, sadness, longing, hatred, they were all still there. Now I was in the eye of the hurricane, staring blankly at the raging emotions and at liberty to pick and choose which to entertain and address.

That it was Erika who could bring me to this semi-lucid state of being was an unsurprising miracle. Of course it would be her.

Of all my friends, she was my best. It felt strange, though. Our friendship was not equal. I was a burden to her; I habitually let my negativity out on her, but she never complained and never abandoned me. We’ve known each other for so long and I’ve snapped at her so many times without consequence, I’ve come to take her friendship for granted. This might be what they call “unconditional love”- a bond between lovers, or parent and child, or as our case may be, platonic friends- that is not predicated on reciprocation, mutual respect, or expected reward. I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve Erika’s friendship, but right now I’m really glad to have it.

“There there. What’s wrong? What happened?” she asked.

My chest was still heaving. It was hard to think and speak words.

“Morty,” I whispered.

“Hmm? Morty, did you say?”

“He-” I choked up.

“Are you okay? Jasmine? Wait, did Morty hurt you? What did he do?”

“He cheated,” I said.

“Cheated? In what way? Ah wait, settle down a little.”

The mention of his name and the remembrance of his deed brought to fore another emotional upheaval. Erika patiently held me and soothed me, taking her time. I gulped and pulled myself together.

“He cheated on me with another woman.”

“Oh dear.”

“I was leaving the hot spring to get on the train, but decided to go back and see him again, and he was screwing another woman.”

“That is horrible.”

“Not just that. He called me on skype this morning. We talked. He told me… he wasn’t cheating on me. He was cheating with me… that the other woman was his fiancé. I wasn’t even the one he loved. I was his toy, a fling, a… a… a slut he had dancing in his palms.”

I held up my palms and stared into them, imagining a little figurine of myself, happily stripping
herself naked and disposing herself to her “lover”.

I clasped my hands and brought them to my chest, squeezing tightly.

“What is wrong with them?” I uttered.

“With Morty?” Erika asked.

“With men!” I cried.

Erika sighed. Her fingers traced a line across my forehead, lifting my bangs off my brow and behind my ear.

“Oh Jasmine, there is nothing wrong with men. It is one singular man who has wronged you. Please do not judge their entire gender by the actions of a single fool.”

“A fool?” I could almost laugh. Almost. “He’s a bastard.”

“Is that not going too far? I do not think he meant to hurt you.”

“He was using me!”

“As far as I can tell, he was using the other woman. Did he not profess his love to you?”

“Didn’t you hear me?” I cringed, recollecting the whole, god-awful conversation. “He never loved me. He told me that. He told me he never loved me. To my face. He loves the other woman. Phoebe, that’s her name. She’s from Hoenn. They’re engaged. She’s his fiancé. He called her his “muse”. A muse? What does that mean?”

I shook my head.

“He never told me what he wanted from me. I thought it was sex, that’s all he needed, that’s what he led me to believe. I was going to give it to him. Right there. But no. He needed something else. Something deeper that he never bothered to tell me about. How was I supposed to win his heart if I didn’t even know about that crap?”

“I think,” Erika said, hesitating, “that perhaps that means he is not the man for you.”

“Why not?!” I cried. “I would still go to him! Oh God, why am I saying that? What is wrong with me?”

I knew what I was saying and why I was saying it. If things had been slightly different- if Morty told me the woman was a whore he called out of desperation, or if he said she was a flirt that seduced him and he gave in to temptation, I would gladly run back to him. I would beat him up first, and then demand an apology, but after that, I would cling to him all the tighter. But to tell me she was his fiancé? I can’t even comprehend what is going through his head, or why he would involve himself in my life at all, let alone seduce me to this extent, when he has a woman he has promised his life to! The one thing that would make sense to me is if he was unhappy with her, and wanted me on the side, or liked her but wanted me as well. And STILL I would accept that, in some meager way, and entertain him, just to hold onto his affection for a little bit longer. What meager hope that explanation offered me… the fact that I grasped at it like grasping at cobwebs to keep from falling off a cliff showed just how pathetic I had become. It’s a shitty, shameful thing to admit, but if he so much as said “Jasmine, I love her, but I still like you, please be my fuck-buddy” I would say “Okay”.

Yet the way he talked about her, calling her his muse and solace, and the way they meshed so well
together in their sexual orgy, banished all doubt from my mind. She was his everything, and I was nothing. He didn’t want me.

“He didn’t want me,” I moaned.

“Want you?” Erika echoed.

“Muse, solace… What did he mean by that?”

“I don’t follow,” Erika said.

“Why was I not good enough? What does she have that I don’t? What does Morty want in a woman?”

I thought back to the conversations with Will at the party, with Pryce at the veranda, with Erika on the boat, and with Danielle at the gym. They all warned me about the darkness in Morty. No one could tell me what that darkness was. So I blithely ignored their warnings while waiting for the opportunity to find out for myself. I thought I could handle myself and had faith in my own judgment. Yet, when Morty gave me the chance to learn his secrets, I blew it. I saw in my mind Morty open the door to that same bedroom I would find him in later fucking Phoebe. It could have been me in her place. If I had not hesitated at that moment, it would have been me enjoying his body and enjoying myself. I could have gotten him to open up and divulge his secrets afterwards. But I ran away.

He knew I would run away. He never seriously expected me to enter inside. It was not in my character to accept that kind of tit-for-tat, sex-for-secrets proposition. If I was going to bed him, it would be on my terms, for the sole sake of pleasure and physical bonding. It was a bluff on his part. Why would he make that kind of proposition, if he was so sure I would turn it down?

It’s because he was deliberately showing me the flaw in our relationship. He told me, flat out told me, that he would not open up emotionally before I opened up physically. That he wanted sex wasn’t the point. That I would not have sex with him was the point. He desired a woman who would recognize what was being offered and agree to it without hesitation. I’m sure, at one point, he told Phoebe the same thing, and she jumped on the opportunity.

Which means I completely underestimated Morty.

What did they say about him? “Morty rarely has sex with women he seduces. He can’t keep a girlfriend.”

So, in the end, he was looking for something else in his significant other. He wanted a woman who was willing to trust him and wanted his trust too, to the point of debasing herself through sex, if so required.

Was he searching for someone with whom he could share his soul?

Well apparently he found that person in Phoebe.

That’s all well and fine, but it begs the question- if he had Phoebe all along, WHY THE HELL DID HE SEDUCE ME?!

What was the purpose of screwing with me?

I peeked up. Erika was staring down at me, looking very worried. Her lips were pressed together, and the folds around her eyes were wrinkled. I should tell her everything and ask her opinion. Maybe
she understands men better. How do I explain these thoughts to her?

“Morty chose her because she gets him.” I shook my head. “Never mind. I don’t know how far they go back, but I think they’ve been engaged since before the Gym Leader summit. So that means… he already decided he loved her and wanted to marry her, because of who she is and what she can do for him, even before we met again at the gala. Erika?”

“Hmm?”

“Why would he come on to me if he already had the love of his life?”

“I do not know,” she answered without emotion.

“I don’t either. I keep hacking at it from every angle, and I can’t figure it out. All I can think of is lust, or ego. He just wanted to sleep with me, or he was having fun flirting with me and leading me about by the nose.”

“Hmm.”

Erika tightened her lips and hunkered down into thought. While she thought, I rolled over and rested the back of my head on her lap. She nodded and spoke.

“Have you ever considered that he may have simply been doing what you expected him to do?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you seem to be thinking about his actions in the context of him trying to gain your love. In that case, his only concern was receiving your love and affection; the means to achieving that end would not concern him.”

“But that’s obvious.”

“Well, what if receiving your love was not his goal?”

“Huh?!?”

“If he did not want you, as you have claimed, then he did not want your affection and would not be concerned if he acquired it or not. So why would he do the things that might induce you to give him your love, if he did not want it?”

I tried, really hard, to think of an answer, but all I could come up with was:

“Because he’s a playboy.”

“No, I do not think so. Here, turn the question about- why would you give him your love?”

“Um…” Weird question, I needed a moment to answer.

“Just tell me the obvious.”

“Because I like him?”

“Why would you like him?”

“Because of all the things he’s done for me, and how well we get along, and everything else.”
“Why would those things make you like him?”

“Huh? I don’t know. Because they make me feel good about him? How does—”

“Eh!” She put a finger to my lip, interrupting me. “There! That’s it.”

“Erika, just explain it to me already! I’m a baby right now, I need kindergarten answers!”

“Those things he’s doing for you make you happy. His goal, regardless of whether it results in your affections, is to make you happy.”

“Why would he want to make me happy if he doesn’t love me, if he doesn’t want my love?”

“Because he cares for you,” Erika answered.

“No!”

I jerked out of her lap.

“No way!” I shouted. “NO WAY!”

“Calm, calm, please.”

I whirled around onto my hands and knees, facing Erika.

“I can’t believe that! After everything he’s done to me? No sane person would call that ‘caring’. If he cared for me, he wouldn’t feign a romance with me while hiding his true relationship! He wouldn’t deceive me like he did, he wouldn’t turn me away in a such despicable manner like he did! That’s not caring!”

Erika held up her hands defensively against my outburst.

“Please, Jasmine! I am only guessing at his motivations, not endorsing his actions! I told you I think he is a fool, a well-meaning fool, but an idiot and a fool nonetheless.”

I bowed over, feeling scolded.

“I can’t accept that. He should have known better. There are ways to make a person happy without manipulating them and seducing them.”

“Yes, you are right.”

I knew Erika’s explanation was the most plausible, but it still didn’t make sense.

“Why would Morty care for me that much? And why would he engage in such stupid, stupid behavior to cheer me up?” I asked aloud.

“Perhaps he thought that was the only way he could reach you,” Erika replied.

“Well it’s not! It’s the worst possible way to make me happy! Look at me! Am I happy?”

“No, clearly not.”

“There are better ways to engage me! Look at… look at Volkner! He may be a shy, awkward sap but he’s honest! Everything nice he does for me is just because of his feelings for me, but he knows I just want to be friends and he respects that. He knows how to acquit himself and stays in the
boundaries. With him it’s like, “Hey, even though you won’t return my affection, I still like you and want you to be happy, so here’s something nice and I hope it helps.” Or Whitney, or Pryce, or even you, Erika! You all know how to treat a friend without risk her feelings and twisting her heart around! Why should Morty think he has to resort to these underhanded tactics to make me happy? You know, that burns me up! That’s like saying “You’re WAY too stubborn, Jasmine!” I’m not that far gone, I swear!”

“Well…” Erika lead on. I locked eyes with her, daring her to argue. Instead, she took a different tact.

“Perhaps that is the only way Morty knew how.”

“No,” I shook my head. “Someone as smart as Morty ought to know that a fake romance would just leave me worse in the end. He knew what he was doing was wrong, but he did it anyways. Hmph!” I rolled back onto my rear and crossed my arms. “I’m liking my original hypothesis more and more. I think he just wanted to fuck me.”

Erika reached over and smacked her palm directly down on top of my head. Her strike was hard enough to disorient my brain for a moment.

“If he had wanted to have sex with you, he would have lied about the nature of his relationship with Phoebe.”

“How do I know he’s not still lying about her?” I groused. “How do I know they’re actually engaged?”

“That does not matter. He told you what he wanted you to hear. So quite obviously, once you found out about Phoebe, he wanted to end any prospect of the two of you sleeping together. Which means, as far as he is concerned, regardless of what happened or why, the two of you are over.”

“No duh! But it would help me a lot if I could understand why.”

“Is it that important to you?”

“Yes!”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because it feels like getting stabbed in the back, and I don’t think I can move forward with a big damn knife between my shoulder blades!” My voice grew insistent. “I need some kind of excuse to think it wasn’t my fault. I can not blame myself. I still feel like I need to know Morty’s secret, if only for my own mental health. I need closure!”

Erika settled back and waited until I was ready to listen. She took a deep breath.

“I cannot speak for Morty or read his mind. I do not know why he cares for you so much that he would go to such lengths to make you happy. I do not know why he thought it was a good idea to seduce you in the process. In fact, I know next to nothing about that boy. I only first met him at the gala. Who I do know, is you. And knowing you, I am afraid of how you will handle this violation of trust in the long term. So listen, Jasmine. Are you listening?”

“Hmm? Yeah.”

Erika drilled me with the gravest of expressions.

“You must move on. You must let Morty go.”
“Right.”

Let Morty go.

Let the man of my dreams walk away with his bride, while I’m left with nothing.

I shook my head.

“How could I?” I cried. “He isn’t some stranger I can toss out of my life and forget. He’s not—” I choked. “He’s not that guy from six years ago. He isn’t going to board a boat and disappear forever. Morty is my friend. We’ve known each other since middle school. We’re coworkers. Is Morty going to quit his job? Is he going to move overseas?”

“Not likely, but still—”

“How can I get past this if every time I show up for a Gym Leader meeting and he’s there and I have to remember the time he fondled my privates!” I cried. Erika pulled back, her cheeks red. “And then I’ll think, “Oh, wow, I wish I could do that again!”, but then I’ll remember “I never said I loved you”, and that he’s copping feels off another woman and I’m still fucking alone!”

The tears are coming back. These look to be about 30% grief, 70% anger.

“I hate him. This is going to be ten times worse than the other guy. At least he’s gone. Morty’s never going to be gone. I wish he would just die!”

“Don’t say that,” Erika warned. “You don’t really want that.”

“I do!”

“Jasmine please, don’t say such things. You are better than that.”

“I’m not! I swear I’m not! I’m a mean, vengeful, hateful bitch! Because of them! Because of him, and him, and her!”

Erika drew back in shock, then paused, gathered her courage, and came forward again. I was heaving.

The memories are returning. Oh gods, no. No.

Not again.

The terrifying night.

The miraculous joy.

The month of bliss.

The evening at the lighthouse. The sunset of hope.

The pain of rejection and abandonment.

The shame.

Watching him leave. Watching his ship sail away.

And then… and then… and the worst of it…
After that, everything changed.

Everything made sense. Once I knew the truth, why he left me, why they all leave me, why no one cares for me, why everyone abandons me, I could no longer believe that joy would be a permanent fixture in my existence. My Pokemon, my Gym, my friends, Morty… they were all illusions, transient distractions from the truth. Every one of them would fall away, leaving me nothing but the misery of my own existence. Somehow, someway, I will lose everything. That is my reality.

“I’m not wanted,” I uttered.

“No,” Erika said, quickly and fiercely rebutting me.

I ignored her.

“I’m not wanted,” I moaned again.

“Yes you are. Stop saying that!” Erika warned sharply.

“I’m not.”

“And I say you are! I beg of you, listen! You have no inkling of your own worth, how wonderful and intelligent and caring a human being you are. There are a multitude of people who care deeply for you and do not want to see you waste your life away.”

“So? Like I need any more so-called “friends”! Don’t you get it? I need someone closer, someone I can trust, someone I can bond with, someone that can give me what I really need- love. That kind of love. I need a boyfriend. Of course you get that, you’ve been trying to hitch me up forever!”

“Yes! And-”

“But it’s impossible!” I cried. “My best chance, my last chance, is gone! Off with another woman!”

“Why are you so obsessed with Morty’s love? Move on!” Erika angrily commanded. “He cheated on you! He is not interested in you. And furthermore, I never thought you two made a good couple!”

She huffed and heaved, taking a moment to catch her breath.

“This world is full of men, and among them there are good men who will not abandon you, cheat on you, or mistreat you. I am sure there is someone out there who is right for you, if you are just willing to open your heart again. He may be hard to find, because you are picky, but I am confident you will find him, and I am certain you will have no trouble seducing him when you do find him. You have every advantage, no good man could resist you. Only fools would reject you! But I am terrified that you will close your heart in the false belief that every worthwhile partner will abandon you! Please do not shut yourself off again!”

“No! You’re wrong! If not Morty… there’s no one left. No guy I can trust…”

I broke down.

Crying. Tears.

I shouldn’t have any left.

My tear ducts must be draining what little life essence I have left. I’m going to die, my innards are going to drivel out of my eyes until nothing is left but a dry husk.
“Jasmine, please, get a hold of yourself!”

“I’m nothing! NOTHING!”

I started shaking. When Erika put her hands on my shoulders, I tried tearing away, but couldn’t. So I started bawling uncontrollably.

“I’m just a little ball of hatred. I hate boys. I don’t want anything to do with boys ever again! I wish sex didn’t exist! I wish boys didn’t exist! I wish parents didn’t exist! Pelipper! I wish babies were delivered by Pelipper, like in the fairy tales! Then no one would have to be hurt by heart break! I don’t want to be hurt by love anymore! Love ruins everything! I HATE LOVE! I HATE ROMANCE! I HATE MEN!!!”

“Stop it! Jasmine!”

I struggled, so Erika pulled me tighter to her.

I no longer had the strength to fight, so I fell limp.

The memory of that horrible day kept replaying over and over and over in my mind.

Opening the cabinet.

Rifling through the papers.

Finding the manila folder.

Opening it.

Reading what was inside.

Realizing what it meant.

Looking left, into the foyer.

Watching as the gaping black hole of my existence opened before me.

“I’m not wanted,” I repeated.

More wetness.

My tears?

No, mine are barely there, they’re so dry.

Hers. Now she’s crying, and burying her face in my shoulder.

“Why’re you?” I whispered. Then I caught myself and sighed. No, even Erika.

She’ll leave me too.

I closed my eyes tight.

They all hate me. No one wants me. Everyone will leave me, one way or another. They will tire of my selfishness. They’ll get sick of my issues. They will resent my petty criticisms.

Most of all, they will begrudge the time I take from them.
And so they will leave.
Because I am a burden.
That’s what I am.
No one wants a burden.
“No one loves me,” I cried.
An ocean of despair washed over me.
And then it was gone.
I felt something… soft. A touch.
It was nice. Familiar. Pleasing.
I sat still and wondered what was happening.
A kiss.
I am being kissed.
It’s a nice kiss, too. A very gentle one, from lips softer than I’ve thus far experienced. I received the kiss passively, complacently.
Ahhhh…
I opened my eyes.
Erika is kissing me.
Huh?
Erika pulled back, slowly, shaking. Tears adorned her cheek. Her eyes were staring straight into mine. They were watery.
Just like that, all my misery and self-loathing was washed away by a simple touch.
Six years of friendship, of selfless, tireless love devoted to me, condensed into a single moment. Expectant eyes met mine.
She’s waiting for me.
I sobbed, and shook my head. I clenched my eyes shut and shook my head harder.
No. No. No.
I opened my eyes. Erika was shaken, but not broken. There was little to indicate the shattering of six years’ worth of forlorn desire: A very small nod. A gulp of the throat. A twitch at the corner of her mouth. She raised her hand to her face and wiped the tears off.
The silence was unbearable.
She looked like she wanted to say something, but couldn’t.
I wanted to cry. I wanted a whole new set of tears, just to cry for her, and us. This world is too cruel. My feelings came out, voice deadened and barely above a whisper as I spoke.

“If only you were a guy,” I said softly.

She nodded again, scrunching her eyes shut in agony.

“I understand,” came her voice. It was a strong voice, far firmer and far, far more composed than I could ever hope to mimic in such circumstances. She stood and made her way to the back door.

“If you will excuse me, I think I need a moment alone,” she explained.

“Go ahead,” I urged.

Erika paused at the doorway, turned to say something, did not, and then exited into the backyard.

…

So that’s how I lose her.

Damn it.

I wish it didn’t have to be this way. If only I were born that way, or if she was born a guy, or if I was born a guy, or… but this reality, isn’t it? Hopeless.

Erika and I… it would have been beautiful. And perhaps it would have been better for me, mentally and emotionally. But I just can’t bring myself to love her in that way. She can’t be what I need most...

The truth of the matter is…

I only hate men so much because they hurt me. And they can only hurt me so badly because I love them.

_Haaa._

I exhaled. No relief came of it. Only indignation and sadness.

So, God, what’s next? What more can you do to me?

…

Erika was outside for a long time.

I grew restless and bored and could not stand my own thoughts. Erika’s bedroom was open and I noticed her computer tablet lying on the bed, powered on. I picked myself up to go fetch it, thinking to bury myself in music or the internet, and did not realize I was heading right into reality’s next salvo.
Erika’s bedroom was pretty much the same as I had last seen it: a fashionista’s junkyard, with the addition of a few empty sake bottles. The only nod to respectability was the made-up bed, but otherwise the floor, furniture, shelves, and walls were all littered with the remnants of numerous fashion projects. I slunk up onto the bed, sat cross-legged, and looked around. It dawned on me there was a strict organization to the clutter. In one corner lay all her undergarments, in another was a series of half-sewn winter-wear she was working on. Away in the bathroom looked to be her perfume laboratory. If not for the aromatic scents emanating from it, an officer might mistake it for a meth lab.

There was her costume from the Halloween party disassembled into six pieces. I absently picked up the corset piece, imagined what it would look like on me, and then placed it back.

My eyes drooped a little. If the bed comforter had been thicker and fluffier, I would probably have flopped back and fallen asleep. However, Erika likes her bedding thin and mattress hard, so it wasn’t too comfortable to me. I stuck with my original plan and picked up her computer tablet. I made a face upon seeing the brand logo.

“Oh. Fruity loop brand,” I muttered with distaste.

‘Please enter Password’ the device prompted.

Great. Password after waking from sleep mode, one of many UI features that turned me away from this company. Why can’t everyone just use Devontech?

“Password, password, what would Erika use as a password?” I asked myself. The question brought to fore my friend and our situation. The shock and emotion of the moment had so far prevented me from contemplating the meaning of it all, but now I was a little calmer and had my mind clear.

We’ve known each other for six years. I always thought of her exactly as she presented herself- a kind and caring friend, sometimes bossy and motherly, but mainly affectionate and mature. I think if I had had an older sister, Erika is what she would be like. A much older sister mind you- a slightly older sister and we’d just end up fighting all the time, I think.

She was the one who approached me first, and that’s how our friendship has always been. I took it for granted. I never questioned why she carried the entire burden of keeping the friendship alive. It was usually, or almost always, Erika who suggested meetings, arranged for vacations, and dialed up my phone number. Because of my introverted nature, I only reached out when there was something blatantly obvious I could think of to share with her. It made me happy to know I had such an extroverted, dedicated friend. It made me feel wanted. Why did she shoulder that load? I always assumed she did it “just because”. She never complained, so I never suspected anything, and didn’t ask any questions. I didn’t even ask myself ‘why?’.

Now I know why.

She loves me.

I rested my forehead against the tablet, sighing.

It’s the kind of love that one usually associates between a man and a woman: romantic, physical, sexual.
So Erika likes girls.

I’m an idiot for not realizing it sooner. It explains so much: she loved gossiping about relationships, but never mentioned a boyfriend or even a passing fancy for a man. Her trouble with her parents—they’re strict and traditional, I can’t imagine it was easy for them to accept a homosexual daughter. Her gym assistants were entirely female, her gym doubled as a perfume shop, botanical garden, and fashion warehouse. She chose her Gym Badge, the Rainbow Badge. Ha, wow. I really missed that one. Her whole lifestyle was extremely feminized. Maybe I always associated female homosexuals with the butch stereotype, and that’s how I remained ignorant.

Of course, the main reason is because of Erika’s actions. She kept it secret. She lied to me.

A pang of anger slipped through my mind. I suppressed it.

She lied, yes, but how can you fault her for that? Look at what some bigots in society do to gays—never mind the bullies, Erika has a prestigious position that could be taken from her because of her sexual orientation. No sane person would openly invite that kind of judgment down upon themselves.

But Jasmine, it’s not that she lied about her sexual orientation. It’s that she kept her feelings towards me a secret from me. Can you forgive her for that? Maybe, I don’t know if I can, but I know I’m obligated to try. Look at how this turned out; this was probably what she most feared—rejection. If you could avert the pain of heartbreak by simply avoiding confronting it, wouldn’t you? If you had the choice, wouldn’t you go back and board the train, remain ignorant, and keep up the charade of romance with Morty as long as possible? Yes, I think so. Then, with Erika, who must have feared my answer and treasured the faint hope of not knowing for sure, can you fault her for never revealing her true feelings? No, I can’t.

Six years, and all this time, all those moments we’ve shared, and she was in love with me. It’s hard to accept. There’s a little nausea in me, thinking all of her kindness was motivated by lust. If she had been a guy, I wouldn’t have tolerated it.

Are you so sure of that?

Erika was the best person you’ve ever known. If she had been a boy, and in every other way the same, and assuming you got past your misandry long enough to get to know him, would you have rejected him?

I smiled faintly.

No. If Erika was a male, I think we would be engaged by now. I love her. In every sense of the word except the sexual, I love her.

My smile widened to an embarrassed, blushing grin.

Hahaha. Hey, when you think about, I don’t even think my sexuality is that much of an issue. What’s wrong with making love to another woman? Are you that enamored of the male body? Eh—it’s not like it’s that important to me. Maybe, if I really tried, I could get turned on by Erika’s figure and enjoy her caresses.

My smile at last broke open and chuckles came out of it. I’m so perverted. To think I could trick myself into becoming a lesbian, it’s so absurd and yet so tempting.

My smile disappeared.
That’s not the reason I said no to her.

The truth is, there’s something I absolutely need in a romantic relationship, and Erika simply cannot provide it. She can’t be what I need her to be. Only a man can fulfill that role.

I rolled my eyes.

I’ve little hope any man on the planet can fulfill that need either. So basically I’m bereft.

I hope she can forgive me. I forgive her. I want to stay friends with her. Despite having a crush on me, she conducted herself very well in our friendship, very modestly, in a way that all these male suitors could really take note of. I value our friendship, it means a lot to me. If she’s worried that, because of either my prejudices towards her sexuality or because of my uneasiness with her lust towards me, that I will shun her, it’s okay. I won’t. I was raised in a very apolitical house. I wasn’t told what to think about all the various social issues of our time; it was expected I would form my own opinion. With no reason to do so, I simply abstained from the arguments and avoided taking a position. It seemed like the best way to stay out of trouble and make the most people like me. Now that I’m forced to take a position because my best friend is gay, I think I will say, “Well, her being gay is okay by me”… and then procrastinate on deciding whether I will accept all the other gay people until a future date. Haa. Copout.

So my last worry, and probably her big worry going forward, is how we handle this crush of hers. Unlike all the men who have developed crushes on me, I can’t get rid of Erika- indeed, I don’t want to. I actually like her, something I can’t say the same for all the other male dingdongs. It might get difficult, especially on her, for me to try to continue being her friend while still denying her the relationship she wants so badly. I honestly don’t know how I would act towards her over the long term.

After mulling it over for what seemed like forever but was actually just a few minutes, I decided the best thing to do was ask the internet.

“How to cope with a gay friend’s crush?”

Hmm, but to do that, I need her password.

I stared at the screen.

Erika is not a big technology expert. She wouldn’t come up with a complicated password.

Wait a minute. She couldn’t have… oh she probably is that dumb.

J-A-S-M-I-N-E.

Password accepted. Welcome back.

Oh she is that dumb. Yare yare, I’ve got to give her a lecture about cyber security. Passwords ought to be much harder to guess, using random words, letters, numbers, and signs. Oy.

“Howmm?”

Her Skype was open. There was an active messenger dialogue open. I scrolled up, and found it to be a fairly long conversation. Different dates appeared, so I knew it was strung out over the course of multiple days.

Who was she talking to? I scrolled to the very top.
Then my heart stopped.

Contact: Morty Matsuba (256-822-1073)

“What?”

Why was… Erika… talking to… Morty…?

I knew, instantly, that nothing good would come of reading this, but I started reading anyways.

9-13-2012

8:37 P.M.

Erika: Hello?

Is this working?

How does this work?

Morty: Hi!

Erika: Hello! I'm not terribly good with technology.

Morty: It's easy. Look, you got it working.

Erika: Right.

Morty: Any luck finding Jasmine?

Erika: No. Can't find her. I'm worried about her.

Morty: She'll be alright. She's handled worse.

Erika: I suppose. It would make me feel better if I could see her.

Morty: Let's go find her then.

Erika: Very well.

Morty: I'll check the lighthouse. Do you know where she lives?

Erika: Her apartment is in the New Residential District.

Morty: I don't know where that is. Can you go check there?

Erika: Yes.

9:05 P.M.
Morty: No luck.

Erika: She is not at her apartment.

Morty: Well, she has her Pokemon with her, right?

Erika: Yes, I think so.

Morty: Then she’ll be okay. She’s too stubborn to hurt herself, and no one is going to mess with Steelix.

Erika: Well, it’s not her physical health I’m worried about. Her mental health...

Morty: I understand.

Erika: I’m going to check the Gym.

Morty: Okay.

9:29 P.M.

Morty: Well?

Erika: Empty.

Morty: Have you tried her cell phone?

Erika: Eight times. She isn’t picking up.

Morty: I guess we’ll have to wait it out. She’ll show up for the battle exams, she has to be there.

Erika: Right. Maybe it is for the best. I got the feeling she was just as upset with me as she was with you.

Morty: Why would she be upset with you? Or me? I didn’t do anything that bad.

Erika: Well, that was fairly mean of you, your little boast.

Morty: Really? I just spoke my feelings. What’s wrong with wanting a good friend to be happy?

Erika: By announcing your intention to sleep with her? How do you not see what is wrong with that?!

Morty: Hey! I never meant it would be me!

Erika: You want to have sex with her, don’t you? That’s what you implied.

Morty: No! Why would I say something like that out loud? That would be creepy.

Erika: You were being a creep.

Morty: Sorry! But, I got carried away. I didn’t mean I wanted to be the one, just someone,
anyone. I think she would enjoy sex, if it’s with the right guy.

Erika: Wait, are you saying you are not the right guy for her? You do not want to sleep with her?

Morty: I mean, it’s not a matter whether I do or don’t. I can’t.

Erika: Why?

Morty: I’m engaged.

Erika: Oh! Congratulations.

Morty: Thanks.

Erika: To whom? Would I know her?

Morty: You would have heard of her. Phoebe, Hoenn Elite Four.

Erika: Oh wow! She is beautiful, and a strong trainer. You are lucky.

Morty: Yeah…

Erika: “Yeah…”? That sounds like hesitation.

Morty: No, not that.

Erika: Do you not love her?

Morty: No, no, I love her. I worship her.

Erika: Then why would you flirt with Jasmine and make a boast like that?

9:40 P.M.

Erika: Are you still there?

Morty: Oh, yeah. My fiancé called.

Erika: What about your answer?

Morty: Huh? Oh that. Me and Jasmine have a complicated past.

Erika: How so?

Morty: Well… We shared a couple years in middle school together. Ended up hanging out together a lot because we were both friends with Whitney. She acted really tough and tsundere, and I started liking her. She didn’t return my feelings. Actually, with everything going on in my family at the time, I think I messed up and put her off. Or something. Never understood her. But after a while, I started to feel kind of a bond develop between us, kind of like… never mind.

Erika: What?
Morty: Nothing.

Erika: What ?????

Morty: Well, nothing came of it. She moved away. I got to see her a few more times, but after a year she stopped talking to me.

Erika: A year after she moved back to Olivine. Hmm. That sounds like about the time I met her.

Morty: Ah. Did you steal her from me?

Erika: Oh no, not at all. She barely talked about you. I was not aware of you two being close. She only ever referred to you as that “pervert from seventh grade”.

Morty: Awww. She really didn’t care about me.

Erika: And then?

Morty: Did she ever tell you what happened at Indigo?

Erika: No. You mean when she took her Gym Leader certification exam?

Morty: Yeah.

Erika: I really wanted to be there with her but I had something important to attend to at the time. She said the exams were easy.

Morty: I mean what happened afterwards. The drama.

Erika: You mean the naked picture fiasco? Jasmine never told me how that came about.

Morty: Well, to make a long story short, I screwed up, big time. She had a trainer friend, Ed, and I made the dumb mistake of trying to hook him up with her.

Erika: I’ve met Ed. Oh! OHHHHHH! I think I get it!

Morty: Right, right. We took her to the hot springs, got her drunk, and she agreed to a dare, something like run through the building naked. I took the picture then.

Erika: Wow, you are a pervert.

Morty: Hey! Let me finish. So after that Jasmine went ballistic on us. I deserved it, but I think she unfairly blamed Ed for his involvement and rejected him when he confessed to her. Then Ed took out his anger on her by uploading the photo to the internet. I don’t think she knows that part though. You know the rest.

Erika: Right.

Morty: Still amazed that you had such a badass hacker for a friend.

Erika: I would not call him a friend, just a… business partner.
Morty: Oh.

Erika: I may be able to introduce you to him one day, if you like. Anyways, continue.

Morty: Ah. Well, since Indigo she’s completely ignored me. I think she blames me for the photo being on the web. I’m fine with taking the blame, I just wish there was something I could do to get her forgiveness. Kinda impossible right now. Can’t call her, can’t visit her. Even during our Gym Leader teleconferences, she’s blocked me. Do you know what it’s like trying to hold official business and not being able to hear or speak to one of the other Gym Leaders? Pretty rough. And you saw what happens when I try talking to her in person.

Erika: No I did not see.

Morty: She slapped me. Twice.

Erika: I see I see. That is not unusual of her.

Morty: Hey can I ask you something?

Erika: What?

Morty: What happened between her and Ed? I know he worked at her Gym. Did he stay there? Are they still friends?

Erika: You don’t know, do you.

Morty: I mean, I was hoping she would forgive him. That’s why I covered for him, to give him a second chance.

Erika: You covered for him?

Morty: I told a little lie so she wouldn’t find out about him uploading the photo. I mean, with the other stuff going on in my life, I knew I wasn’t going to be her boyfriend. But I thought it would be nice to see her dating, and I felt sorry for Ed getting wrapped up in my mistakes.

Erika: You are an ass.

Morty: What?!

Erika: Do you not realize how much you hurt Jasmine because of your “little” lie?

Morty: I don’t get it.

Erika: Edward went on a rampage against Jasmine. He spread rumors, absolutely disgusting rumors about her. He turned half the school against her, and froze her out of good job opportunities. She was a wreck for a year. It was miserable watching her fall apart. And it really exacerbated her depression.

Morty: She’s depressed?

Erika: You could not tell? Severely depressed.

Morty: I didn’t think it was that bad.
Erika: It is very bad. I keep urging her to see a psychiatrist, but she refuses, too stubborn and proud. It’s getting worse, too.

Morty: I’m sorry? Damn. I’m really sorry!

Erika: Say that to her.

Morty: She won’t accept it. Hell, I’d be surprised if she’ll even talk to me right now.

Erika: Do not run away. You are a man, act like one. Engage her, beg her for forgiveness.

Morty: Right. So… I guess I’ll figure a way to get her to talk to me again. How is she doing, in general?

Erika: Poorly.

Morty: Meaning?

Erika: She is depressed. You can guess how that affects the rest of her life. Her high school grades were not the greatest, and she did not take the college entrance exams, so her chances of getting into a decent college now are slim. Between that and Ed’s machinations, she cannot find a decent job. She enjoys being a Gym Leader, but at the same time she is basically stuck being a Gym Leader; she has no other income or opportunity for employment. Except her mother’s business, but she has intimated that she would rather go homeless than work for her.

Morty: Have you ever met her mother?

Erika: No, I have not.

Morty: You’re better off.

Erika: I suspected as much.

Morty: So, I’m guessing, work stressed?

Erika: That too.

Morty: And family stress.

Erika: Not as much. She lives in her own apartment now, remember.

Morty: Oh right.

Erika: But that only seems to make her confrontations with her mother more explosive on the occasion she does go home. I kind of know when that happens because she refuses to answer her phone for a week after.

Morty: So it’s still an issue. And then, to top it all off, boy stress.

Erika: Plenty of that.

Morty: Does she have a boyfriend?
Erika: No.

Morty: A guy she likes?

Erika: Not at all.

Morty: Has she ever expressed interest in a guy?

Erika: Not that I can tell.


Erika: She has been inundated with male affection since she became a Gym Leader. The boys seem to think she’s a prize to be won, like a gym badge. She has not taken their advances kindly. I have tried setting her up on dates with young men I thought would suit her, but she has categorically rejected them too. Then there are the perverts, boors, and misogynists that have been harassing her constantly. I am afraid these lowlifes have poisoned her to the idea of a romantic relationship.

Morty: Yeah, that sounds about right.

Erika: Where are you going with this?

Morty: She always had a low opinion of boys. Whenever she met a new guy she was definitely looking for reasons to dislike him right off the bat. He had to prove himself to be a good, wholesome guy before she was willing to consider him minimally human. I thought she would get over it as she got older, but it looks like the opposite’s happened. She’s become a total prude. You met Volkner, Sunyshore Leader right?

Erika: Briefly.

Morty: He’s my pal. He’s had a big crush on Jasmine since he met her last year. He confessed today and got rejected.

Erika: Oh is that what happened! I was wondering the details of that little affair.

Morty: Volkner took it hard (he cried like a girl, lol). We had a long talk about it before the gala. I was a little shocked. Volkner is like the greatest guy I know. Employed. Geeky. Serious, funny when called for. Completely vanilla. Not a virgin, but he acts like one, or really, he knows how to act like a complete gentleman to women. I couldn’t believe Jasmine would turn him down, just for the vile sin of being born a male. I knew she had something against men, but that really floored me.

Erika: Knowing now what I told you with Ed and the rest, does that really shock you?

Morty: No, not anymore. Getting back to the point, why I made that kind of bet, do you understand now?

Erika: Not really. Were you annoyed with her attitude and wanted to change it?

Morty: Nope, you’re missing the point. I think she’s unhappy because she can’t deal with sex. Or, sex and everything surrounding it.
Erika: It cannot possibly be that simple.

Morty: Why not? You saw how she reacted when I brought the subject up. She can’t deal with the fact that most people her age are losing their virginity, and she’s being left behind. That makes her feel lonely and isolated. If she were to get past her squeamishness with boys and sex, she wouldn’t have to feel like the third wheel. Not to mention all the positives of being in a relationship. And I do think she would enjoy sex itself.

Erika: That is being very arrogant of you. Not everyone needs to be in a relationship or engage in intercourse to be happy.

Morty: Yeah, there are people like that. She’s not one of them.

Erika: How would you know?

Morty: You have to read between the lines. She’ll never give you an honest answer, but if you pay attention when she goes silent or gets angry, you know you’re on to something.

Erika: You are right about that particular point. I just always believed it unwise to assume things from her nonverbal answers.

Morty: Well… Do you agree with the premise though?

Erika: Yes yes *sigh*. You are lecturing the choir. I have spent a great deal of time trying to tease out her feelings on relationships. Nothing so rude as your declaration, but subtler methods. Encouraging her to attend a Pokemon Fan Club meeting with a cute boy, for example. It never ends well. I think it is hopeless.

Morty: Really?

Erika: She will have nothing to do with men. Period.

Morty: I think we should try.

Erika: We?

Morty: Well, I guess, if you’re willing.

Erika: How do you propose doing that?

Morty: Huh… I didn’t think far ahead.

Erika: You made a bet that you would get a young woman to lose her virginity. You put quite a lot of thought into why such a bet was necessary. And yet you do not have a clue on how to act on that bet.

Morty: Hehe.

Erika: Tell me, are you lying about all this?

Morty: No.

Erika: Is this not some plot of yours just to get in bed with her?
Morty: No. I mean, I told you, even if I wanted to, I can’t.

Erika: Would you?

Morty: Would I what?

Erika: Would you have sex with her if given the opportunity?

Morty: I don’t want to answer that.

Erika: If you ever deceive me and hurt her, I will hold you to task for it.

Morty: Okay, I hear you Miss Momma Ursaring.

Erika: Let me think about this. I will talk to you tomorrow.

Morty: Alright, see you then.

9-14-2012
5:00 P.M.

Morty: Yo. You there?

Erika: Here.

Morty: Did you manage to find her?

Erika: I talked with her on the phone this morning, but she was still very angry with me. Lyra said she found her, but she was in a bad mood and nearly late for sign-ups. I am still worried for her. Lyra said she was sent to K-Block.


Erika: Exactly.

Morty: Well, I hope she passed.

Erika: Me too. I suppose we will have to wait and see. Tomorrow, I hope, she will be calm enough to talk to again.

Morty: Yeah, hopefully. So how’d your battles go?

Erika: Not too difficult. Yours?

Morty: Easy. Did you meet Volkner? I heard he was put in the same block as you.

Erika: Yes.
Morty: And?

Erika: We talked for a good bit. He is a wonderful person. I agree, if Jasmine were to date someone, he would be the best for her.

Morty: So do you think we can do it?

Erika: No.

Morty: No?

Erika: He is a good person, but he is no charmer. I do not see Jasmine giving him any more of a chance than any of the other men who have asked her out. She has already rejected him, remember.

Morty: Bah, bummer. Alright. I'll talk again later. Gotta study for the written exams, those are always hell on me.


9-15-2012

7:03 P.M.

Morty: Hi.

Erika: Hello.

Morty: Did you find her?

Erika: No, I still can’t find her. She is here somewhere. Whitney told me Pryce managed to find her yesterday and talked to her.

Morty: Oh, okay! That’s great, stop worrying. If Pryce got ahold of her, she’s definitely fine. She’ll turn up soon enough.

Erika: Sooner than later, I hope. I saw you in line for the Gym Leader Tournament, are you participating?

Morty: Yeah! Oh boy, have I got a surprise for them! Aw, you won’t believe it! Me and my buddy Eusine, we borrowed a- well, you’ll see! It’s gonna blow your minds.

Erika: Well you sound happy with yourself.

Morty: Are you joining?

Erika: No, I’m afraid I will pass.
Morty: Hehehe. Well, you’re better off. With what I’m toting, I’m pretty confident I’m going to win it.

Erika: Hmm.

9-16-2012
10:36 P.M.

Erika: Hello.

Morty: Hey again.

Erika: Did you find her?

Morty: Yeah. At the lighthouse, like you said.

Erika: And?

Morty: We talked a little.

Erika: What did she say?

Morty: Things I swore I couldn’t repeat to anyone.

Erika: Oh those are the sorts of things I most love to hear! Tell me!

Morty: Right… no. Can’t.

Erika: You are killing me.

Morty: It’s not happening.

Erika: Please! It would help!

Morty: Let’s just say Jasmine isn’t entirely a prude.

Erika: Well, she said as much to me. “Sex is not the issue”, her words. But she told you more?

Morty: No.

Erika: Hmm? You’re holding something back.

Morty: Give it a rest!

Erika: Fine fine. Was she okay? Was she feeling well?

Morty: She was a little upset with me. We got into our past, it brought up bad memories. That’s about it.
Erika: I see.

11:07 P.M.

Erika: Following on our conversation from earlier.

Morty: Yeah?

Erika: I have an idea. And I believe you will like this idea.

Morty: Okay, tell me.

Erika: Well, to be thorough, let me explain my reasoning. Jasmine has an issue with relationships and males, correct?

Morty: Well established, well-vetted fact at this point.

Erika: Her issue in this area is having cascading consequences throughout the rest of her life: anti-socialness, isolation, depression, frustration with society, and so forth.

Morty: Agreed.

Erika: So we understand the basic problem, and the consequences. If Jasmine is allowed to continue on this path, she will never find happiness.

Morty: In my opinion, I think she’ll self-destruct if left alone.

Erika: That is what I am most afraid of.

Morty: So?

Erika: The remaining question, the last piece we need before we can enact a solution, is the ‘why?’ What caused her to become like this?

Morty: One too many bad run-ins with perverts, I think. I don’t think it’s a big deal to find out, let’s just come up with a plan and work it.

Erika: No you fool. It is vital we understand Jasmine’s issues. Without knowing what caused her to focus her hatred on men, we will never get her to accept a man in her life. Look at your own efforts throwing Ed at her- complete and spectacular failure. Did you even try to get to know Jasmine’s feelings towards Ed beforehand?

Morty: Sort of.

Erika: You didn’t.

Morty: Meh. No I didn’t.

Erika: I know because of my failures. I have tried many different approaches, but never got her to open up about her feelings, so all my efforts were doomed before she ever laid eyes on the candidate. We need to know what is causing her misandry.

Morty: Sheesh, fine, even if I accept that, how are we going to do it?
Erika: She is rather tight-lipped, isn’t she?

Morty: No, I mean, I don’t think it’s possible. She’s a black hole. Info goes in, it doesn’t come out.

Erika: Yes, yes, and that’s where my plan comes in.

Morty: Eh?

Erika: But first, I need to know something.

Morty: What’s that?

Erika: From you.

Morty: Huh?

Erika: I must know whether you love her or not.

Morty: What?!

Erika: It is absolutely vital that you tell me the truth. There are two versions of this plan, the difference is entirely dependent on your answer, and we can only commit to one. So tell me honestly, DO YOU HAVE FEELINGS FOR JASMINE?

11:38 PM.

Erika: Are you there?

If you will not tell me, I am dropping the entire matter.

Morty: …

Erika: Well?

Morty: I love Phoebe. I promised to marry her. I do not want anything to mess with that.

Erika: Answer me directly! Do you love Jasmine?

Morty: I can’t answer that.

Erika: Of all the… fine.

Morty: What was your plan?

Erika: Never mind.

Morty: What do my feelings have to do with your plan?

Erika: Everything.

Morty: Vague.

Erika: Do you not see how she reacts to you? How upset she was when you ignored her? How
excited she was for your victory?

Morty: That all is meaningless.

Erika: Did you think no one saw you pull her aside on the way to the finals?

Morty: You saw that?

Erika: You almost took her first kiss.

Morty: I wasn’t going to kiss her.

Erika: Why are you flirting with her then?

Morty: It’s not flirting.

Erika: And you’re not lying.

Morty: Damn it! Stop butting in. It’s none of your business.

Erika: …

Morty: What?

Erika: If I said I could get her to fall in love with you, what would you say?

Morty: I would say no thanks.

Erika: So it’s decided.

Morty: What’s that?

Erika: Plan 2.

Morty: What is Plan 2?

Erika: Have you ever heard of a “tank”?


Erika: Not the military vehicle. Or the container. The romantic tank.

Morty: Don’t know what you mean.

Erika: In matters of romance, a “tank” is a professional lady-charmer. This is a man with exceptional charisma and ability. He is able to seduce women at will. His target is women already in relationships, he convinces them to cheat. Does this sound familiar?

Morty: Uhh…

Erika: Upon luring the girlfriend out on a date, the man abruptly changes face, becoming mean, rude, gregarious, and creepy.

Morty: Why would he do that? Because he’s shallow?
Erika: Because he is being paid to act just like that.

Morty: Wait, what?

Erika: A tank’s job is to take a wayward girlfriend out on a lousy date, so that the girlfriend will appreciate her boyfriend anew.

Morty: So the tank guy was hired by the boyfriend?

Erika: Yes. That is correct. The woman is shown that the grass is not always greener, and that yearning for a typically “alpha” male will likely net an arrogant snob underneath the charm. Once she has had her fill of this “adventure”, she will run back to her boyfriend and their relationship troubles are fixed- for a while, anyways.

Morty: Does that actually work?

Erika: I have seen it work, but less than half the times it has been attempted. Admittedly, twice out of a total five attempts, not a large sample size.

Morty: I don’t quite follow. So this tank fellow acts like a jerk to get girls who are already in a relationship to miss their old boyfriends. I don’t know if you’ve been paying attention, but Jasmine ain’t got no boyfriend to run back to.

Erika: So?

Morty: Wait a minute. You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking, are you?

Erika: I propose we set Jasmine up with Volkner. I propose we do that by using you as bait.

You will seduce Jasmine, draw her out of her shell, and unearth her secrets. Through your intimacy, we will learn the root cause of her hatred towards men. Using what we learn, we will counsel her and cure her of her melancholy. When the time is ripe, you will demean yourself in her eyes and convince her to dump you. Simultaneously, we will raise up Volkner and showcase his virtues. If all goes well, the two will end up together, happily ever after.

Morty: And you thought I was audacious?! Me, seduce Jasmine? And then hand her off to Volksy? It’ll never work!

Erika: The best laid plans of mice and men, I know, I know. Yet, I have tried EVERYTHING in my power to help her. You cannot fathom how exasperated I am with her condition, her stubbornness!

Blind dates and subtle dates and group dates. Arranging in every which way all the best men I know to meet her, parading before her all the cutest boys. Not once has she ever expressed the slightest bit of interest in a relationship. At best, she tolerates their presence for a while and then pushes them away. At worst, screaming, yelling, violent fits.

Yet when I feel she would be better off single and try leaving her alone, I am met with: long bouts of anti-socialness. Ignoring my calls, ignoring calls from her family, her coworkers, her bosses. Self-inflicted starvation, she does not cook and will not feed herself properly. Obsession with computer games. Obsession with her Pokemon- to a point her love for her creatures is
endearing, but not sixteen hours a day! Wild mood swings, emotional tantrums, bouts of depression. She has never threatened to hurt herself, but I am afraid because she shows all the known signs.

I have tried so hard to let her be herself and encourage her. Instead of a boyfriend, I thought she could make do with a group of close friends and a supportive community. Yet none of us can be there for her on a regular basis. The people of Olivine do not care for her as much as she needs them to. Her family is a complete loss.

The harder she throws herself into her job, the more stressed she gets and the more hollow she feels.

She is too stubborn to seek help. I cannot get the health systems to intervene for me.

Her Pokemon may suffice for now- but is that healthy? Can a human rely solely on monsters for emotional support? And even if so- what is the life expectancy of a Steelix? Of a Magnemite? I looked it up. 34 years and 18 years, respectively. What then? That is not a permanent solution.

Morty: Woah, wait, that’s a lot to take in. You’re making her sound a lot worse than she really is. She’s tougher than that. And why do I have to be the bait?

Erika: Listen to me.

When we visited Sevii Islands for Spring Break, Jasmine was carried away by a riptide.

Morty: Okay.

Erika: She almost died. If not for Misty, she would have drowned.

Morty: Wait what?!

Erika: She was a hundred yards from shore. When we got her back, she was out for three minutes, not breathing, and then she coughed up water. It was one of the scariest moments of my life.

Morty: Holy Fuck! She never told me about this!

Erika: Don’t you get it?! She never tells anyone anything about herself. She never, ever, ever tells us anything! She keeps it all locked inside. She insists we treat her like she wants to be treated, but we are supposed to read her mind to figure out what that treatment consists of! So you tell me what you think about the one time she was recovering from near death, delirious, and she blurts out:

“So what if I died? I’m not wanted here.”

Morty: Um. Excuse me a minute.

Erika: I’ll wait.
Morty: She almost drowned?

Erika: She almost died.

Morty: You mean by drowning?

Erika: That is correct.

Morty: And you’re sure she said those exact words? “So what if I died”?

Erika: Yes. Absolutely sure.

Morty: If you’re telling the truth… if she really said that- I’m in.

Erika: You’re in?

Morty: I don’t give a damn what I have to do. I don’t want to lose her. Count me in.

Erika: Thank you.

Morty: I’m on the train to Ecruteak, almost home. Phoebe went to Hoenn first, but she’s coming back to Ecruteak in a few days. I’ll need to talk to her about this.

Erika: This plan may require you to get close to Jasmine. Will Phoebe be alright with that?

Morty: I don’t know. I’ll get back to you.

Erika: Very well. Message me when you are ready.


Erika: Bye.

9-19-2015
9:50 A.M.

Morty: I’m in.

Erika: There you are. You are agreeing to help me?

Morty: Yeah. I had a long talk with Phoebe. She says this is something that’s weighing on my conscience and I should settle it before we get married. She’s even given me the okay to be
hanky panky with Jasmine, even up to coitus- haha.

Erika: Are you lying?

Morty: God, no. I’m an honest guy, I swear.

Erika: I can’t imagine a fiancé giving permission for her future husband to sleep with other women.

Morty: Well, Phoebe’s very open sexually. It’s one of the things I love about her. We’ve had a foursome before.

Erika: Too much info.

Morty: You’re just as squeamish as Jasmine.

Erika: I am starting to see why she is so annoyed by you.

Morty: Hey. It’s not like I’m actually going to fuck her. Only if that’s what needs to happen for the plan to work. It’s not a goal. That is my own personal decision.

Erika: Yes, the plan is paramount. Remember that.

Morty: Roger. What’s step 1?

Erika: Still working on it. We’ll need to figure out opportunities to get you two together. I cannot fathom why, but you are the only young man she is willing to entertain. That is why I chose you for the role of the tank. You will have to figure out, on your own (I’m of no help here), how to get her to like you and open up to you.

Morty: That’s a lot of pressure.

Erika: May the spirits bless you.

Morty: Hahaha, funny.

Erika: It wasn’t a joke.

Morty: Oh, you’re Shindo?

Erika: Yes.

Morty: Sorry.

I think part 2 of the plan will be easy. If there’s any guy she could be happy with, it would be Volkner. And if there’s a master of breaking up with girls, it’s me.

Erika: You can’t just break up with her.

Morty: Mmm. You’re about to make it complicated.

Erika: You have to do so in a way that makes her think she is too good for you and she is the one ditching you. It has to be done so that she does not blame all men for your actions. If she
reflects your actions onto all other men, Volkner will not stand a chance.

Morty: Oh boy. That’s going to be tough.

Erika: Can you do it?

Morty: Yeah. I think so.

Erika: Are you willing to take that burden?

Morty: I’ll tell you what I told Jasmine at the lighthouse. If it will make her happy, I’ll gladly disappear from her life, or bear her hatred, or suffer at her hands. I owe her that much. She deserves that much.

Erika: Very well. I will contact you when an opportunity arises. Do you have the means to get to Olivine?

Morty: The train. I have a car, but it’s kind of a clunker, I don’t trust it for long trips.

Erika: How is the train service there?

Morty: Under booked, usually. Tickets are affordable.

Erika: If I messaged you, how fast could you come?

Morty: Not that fast. The ride is a few hours, and the trains don’t have regular schedules. Depending on the schedule, I might not be able to make it that day.

Erika: Oh bother. I will keep that in mind.

Morty: Alright.

Erika: But we are agreed. Let us get Jasmine a boyfriend.

Morty: A fake boyfriend and then a real boyfriend. Wow. What did I get myself into? Fine, let’s do it.

9-26-2015

6:45 P.M.

Erika: Morty.

Morty: Here. Something going on?

Erika: I had a question about the Johto League.

Morty: Fire away.
Erika: How well off are you, financially?

Morty: Hmm? I don’t follow the budgeting department news.

Erika: I mean personally, the Gym Leaders.

Morty: We get paid the same salary as everyone else.

Erika: Do you have control over your fees and such?

Morty: For like trainees and classes?

Erika: Yes.

Morty: Yeah.

Erika: Do you make use of them?

Morty: We’re allowed to. I do. I work with the Kimono Girls downtown, we host some of their bigger events, I make a nice profit off that. And then I run a program on advanced battle tactics for a premium.

Erika: The League does not take anything?

Morty: No, it’s all ours.

Erika: What about external employment?

Morty: No. None of us have secondary jobs.

Erika: Not allowed?

Morty: Not possible. Johto laws hold us accountable for any legal infractions going on at the gym, whether we’re there or not. Basically forces us to supervise every last second of Gym operation. With that and all the other rules, we don’t have room for another job. I’m working fifty-plus hours a week, and I have a lot of helpers. I’m on the lighter side. I have no idea how Clair runs the Gym and her clan at the same time.

Erika: Jasmine works sixty.

Morty: Yeah. Of us eight, she spends the most time doing gym work.

Erika: Do you know why?

Morty: Yes. She refuses to charge.

Erika: For?

Morty: Everything she does for the community is free of charge.

Erika: Like?

Morty: Day care. Trainer classes. Conservation work. Um, there’s more, but I can’t think of it
at the moment.

Erika: Ah. I see now.

Morty: If you’re worried about her finances- you probably should be.

Erika: Got it. I will look into it.

9-27-2012

8:12 P.M.

Erika: Heads up.

Morty: What’s up?

Erika: Jasmine is taking a trip to Blackthorn. She’s going on a Pokemon hunt.

Morty: Really? Blackthorn?

Erika: We are going by train. We have a change-over at Ecruteak. I want you to meet us.

Morty: Perfect!

Erika: There is a diner that I liked when I last visited, a little hole in the wall. Treyarch’s, do you know the place?

Morty: Oh haha you’re kidding. Me, Jasmine, and Whitney went there all the time. It’s super popular now.

Erika: I see. Could you show up there around 12:30 tomorrow?

Morty: Yep.

Erika: Could you take the weekend off as well?

Morty: I’m free.

Erika: Good. Please come with your best attitude. This is the phase where you charm her. No need to dig up secrets right now. I think you have a lot of work to do to ingratiate yourself to her. She still is complaining about you. Just yesterday she told me about some lewd antics of yours during middle school gym class.

Morty: Really? She still upset about that Shadow Tag joke?

Erika: Apparently.

Morty: It was worth it. She threw the funniest hissy fit.
Erika: Not amusing.

Morty: I’ve been thinking how to approach this. Leave it up to me.

Erika: Alright. See you tomorrow.

Morty: Looking forward to it.

9-27-2012
8:33 A.M.

Erika: Hi. We are about to leave. Could you get me your phone number?

Morty: My skype and phone are connected. You can just keep messaging me here.

Erika: But what about my side?

Morty: Here. Go to Options, select Forward Messaging, and insert your phone into the field.

Erika: I’m having trouble.

Never mind, I figured it out.

Got it.

8:51 A.M.

Erika: This?

Morty: Hi again.

Erika: Oh finally, got it to work.

Alright, we are leaving in ten minutes.

Morty: See ya soon!

Erika: And remember, Jasmine does not know you are going to show up. Act surprised.

Morty: Easy.

6:29 P.M.

Erika: We have a problem.

Morty: What happened?

Erika: Jasmine is going crazy. She jumped off the train.
Morty: The hell? Is she okay?

Erika: Unharmed, yes, but okay? No, not at all. She lost her Pokeballs.

Morty: Where?

Erika: At Treyarch’s, she left them there.

Morty: Crap. Uh, that’s not good. She’ll explode if she loses them.

Erika: She did explode.

Morty: Great.

Erika: Can you do something? Contact one of your friends? Have them sent over the PC?

Morty: No. If she loses her Pokemon, she’s gone. We’ll never get her back.

Erika: So…?

Morty: I’ll go back and get them myself.

Erika: Really? How?

Morty: I’ve got cash. I can book express flights back to Ecruteak and then back to Blackthorn. It’s a short flight. I’ll make it.

Erika: Oh you can do that? Thank goodness!

Morty: I’ll be back.

11:10 P.M.

Erika: Thank you for that. That meant a lot to her.

Morty: It was nothing.

Erika: And I think it really helped our cause. She hugged you.

Morty: Yep.

Erika: Let us build on that.

Morty: Alright.

Erika: ?

Morty: *Alright*. Typos. I’m really tired.

Erika: I see. Very well. See you in the morning.

9-30-2012
1:45 P.M.

Erika: Take care of her.

Morty: Will do.

10-3-2012
6:18 P.M.

Morty: Hey.

Erika: Hello.

Morty: Everything been alright? I haven’t heard from you.

Erika: It’s only been a few days.

Morty: I thought you might want to check in, see how the train went.

Erika: And how did it go?

Morty: Better than expected. I’m pretty sure I can get her to fall in love with me. She’s pretty open to a relationship, actually, she’s just really demanding. She’s chucking all these conditions at me, but I get the feeling she expects me to meet them, not her trying to evade or push me away.

Erika: That would be her erecting barriers to protect herself. She does not want to give in so easily and she wants to be absolutely certain you will not hurt her. Still, I think that is proof that her underlying desire is for love.

Morty: Mmhmm. So I’m trying to figure out how to disengage.

Erika: No need to worry about that yet.

Morty: I mean, if she’s ready to date me, she’ll be ready to date Volkner.

Erika: No, I think you are still the only one she feels comfortable with right now. Just getting her feeling romantic or even aroused is not enough. We need to get her secret. We need to fix her. What happens if we foist her on Volkner and Volkner runs afoul of a trigger? Or if she unfairly faults him for something within herself? We need to make her well, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, before we think of handing her to Volkner. Oh…

Morty: What?
Erika: I forgot to ask, but you did tell Volkner about our plan, didn’t you?

Morty: Uh... no.

Erika: You did not?!?!

Morty: I kind of forgot.

Erika: Fix that! Immediately!

Morty: Ah. Fine. I’ll try. He doesn’t like these games, he might not cooperate at first.

Erika: You are a master at manipulation, see to it.

Morty: Fine, yes ma’am. Hey, can you talk to Jasmine for me?

Erika: No, not at the moment.

Morty: I’m not in a hurry.

Erika: I am not in Olivine. I am staying in Blackthorn for a little while.

Morty: Why?

Erika: I am having fun with Violet. We are enjoying a festival for the rest of the week.

Morty: Bah! Hmm. You two hit it off pretty quickly.

Erika: We share common experiences with men.

Morty: Ew, touchy, I don’t want to know. Hey, but if you get a chance soon, can you ask Jasmine if she remembers our stop at Ecruteak?

Erika: Why is that?

Morty: I kissed her on the forehead while she was sleeping. I was wondering if she remembers it.

Erika: How sweet.

Morty: And also ask her if she’s been kissed before.

Erika: I would assume not, given her history.

Morty: Just want to triple-check. I want to try the next time I see her.

Erika: Why a kiss?

Morty: Because, if you haven’t noticed, I haven’t quite sorted out my feelings for her yet. I think a little physical intimacy would help me decide once and for all. More importantly, I’ve concluded that she needs to be kissed. It’s the first step towards sex.

Erika: We are not here to sort out your feelings. Figure those out on your own, and hurry about it. We are concerned for Jasmine. And I am not concerned about her readiness for sex.
at the moment, that is very low on the priority list.

Morty: I disagree. I think sex might be at the root of her problems.

Erika: I do not think so.

Morty: I'll tell you why later, in person if possible. For now, though, I don’t think it’s a bad idea to start looking ahead; just about any boy we hook her up with is going to want to get some eventually. Volks is patient, but even he has needs. If she says no sex till marriage, she’ll never find a good guy, not in this day and age.

Erika: It is too risky. Demanding she open up her body will more than likely make her distrust you.

Morty: This is my department. I think she’s responding well to physical flirting, so that’s how I’m going to go about it. Now are you going to help me help your plan, or not?

Erika: Yare yare.

Morty: I take it that’s an ‘okay’.

Erika: IF I get around to it, I will ask. I am busy right now. Maybe in the future. Jasmine has promised to have The Talk with me, but she keeps procrastinating. I will see what I can do.

Morty: Thanks. Talk later.

10-4-2012
10:23 A.M.

Morty: Did she tell you she’s having trouble with Graveler?

Erika: Yes, of course.

Morty: She’s thinking of trading her away.

Erika: I wasn’t aware.

Morty: Oh. Okay.

Erika: What?

Morty: We’re having our teleconference right now. I’m talking to her.

Erika: I see. What is going on?

Morty: I’m going to meet her on Sunday. Looks like she made up her mind.

Erika: Which way?
Morty: Can’t tell. I’ll find out.

Erika: I think she should keep Graveler. For her own health. Her ego is too brittle to let go of a Pokemon she has had for so long.

Morty: Meh.

10-7-2012
8:14 P.M.

Morty: Lot happening.

Erika: What is going on?

Morty: Just got home from a picnic date with Jasmine.

Erika: Yes, yes, and?

Morty: She traded Graveler away.

Erika: Really?! She brought herself to let go of her?

Morty: Traded for a Piplup; she’s calling it Tyko.

Erika: Boy or girl Piplup?

Morty: Girl. She’s god-damned adorable. Skarmory is acting like a big brother and won’t let anyone touch her. It’s like a freaking bird family there.

Erika: Sounds cute. I look forward to meeting Tyko. How is she handling the loss of Graveler?

Morty: Pretty good, I think. She’s a little emotional still and misses the Poke, but I don’t think she regrets it.

Erika: Do you think it was the right thing to do?

Morty: It was her decision. I’ve got no say in the matter.

Oh, also, she spotted Phoebe. Gave me a scare.

Erika: You ruined the plan already?!

Morty: No, relax. I passed her off as an old flame. Jasmine was fixated on Glacia.

Erika: From the Elite Four?

Morty: Yeah. When I took a tour down south, I challenged the Elite Four. Got to Glacia and then got my butt handed to me. Begged her to teach me how to battle. She was a pretty evil
sensei, but I didn’t think she was actually evil.

Erika: What now?

Morty: Oh. Jasmine believes Glacia was responsible for the death of Pryce’s first Mamoswine. Something like a bad accident that got out of hand. I’m gonna check the details later. Did you know Pryce used to be married to Glacia?

Erika: I do not know the man personally.

Morty: I’ve known him for years and didn’t know that.

Erika: I have known Jasmine for years and did not hear anything from her about it.

Morty: Right. Now for the big news.

Erika: Oh?

Morty: Progress! I got her to agree to a kiss.

Erika: OH REALLY?!!?

Morty: EH! Not so fast. I’ve got three things to do first. You know, like the old myth, tasks the hero has to complete before winning the maiden. Betcha can’t guess the first task.

Erika: Catch a Mantine for her.

Morty: Lol, no.

Erika: She always wanted one.

Morty: She needs her shield generators fixed.

Erika: Boring.

Morty: Guess who I got coming to fix them?

Erika: … Volkner.

Morty: Bingo!

Erika: Oh you clever man. This is wonderful. Can you do it, can you keep her developing while playing up Volkner?

Morty: I’m going to try.

Erika: Have you told Volkner our plan?

Morty: Yeah...

Erika: And how did he respond?

Morty: Dubious.
Erika: What does that mean? Does he want to date Jasmine?

Morty: I think he does. I didn’t hear him say he didn’t want to. Mostly he just bitched about how our plan would never work.

Erika: Will he play along?

Morty: I can make him.

Erika: How?

Morty: He owes me. I can guilt him into doing just about anything. No, I can’t tell you what kind of debt, in case you were wondering, it’s pretty touchy. I’m honor-bound to silence.

Erika: I was not going to ask.

Morty: Just being clear.

Erika: If it’s a secret that might corrupt the chances of their relationship working out, I would like to know it.

Morty: Doubtful. It’s behind him.

Erika: What kind of man is Volkner? He seemed nice when I met him, but a little reserved. I don’t think I got a good handle on his personality, and nothing of his history. Can you tell me that much?

Morty: Sure. He’s shy with young women, is why. He knows how to open up to everyone else. He’s kind of like me, without the perviness and rudeness. Total geek, technological genius, hard worker. Adores his Pokemon. Competitive. Fun. Easy-going. Light drinker. Pretty straight-arrow, no drugs or body mods to speak of.

Erika: Patient?

Morty: Yeah, pretty patient.

Erika: Accepting? Loving?

Morty: Don’t know. He’s never had a long term relationship.

Erika: Siblings?

Morty: Don’t know. Maybe? His family doesn’t live in Sunyshore. Parents are divorced. I know I’ve heard of a step-brother that he doesn’t like.


Morty: No siblings is no good?

Erika: No, I was referring to the divorce. Jasmine already has so much family trouble, I’m not sure adding a man with his own family issues to her life would be a good idea. She needs someone stable.
Morty: It’ll be fine. He isn’t broken or anything. He’s really independent from his family, doesn’t let them interfere in his personal life, and he’s gotten over the hard feelings.

Besides, can you fault him for something he had no say in? He’s a good guy. I believe in him.

Erika: And what if he and Jasmine don’t like each other after all this?

Morty: Well I’m 100% positive it would not end with Jasmine worse off than she is now. Volkner wouldn’t do that to her. They’ll split on good terms. But it’s important to get Jasmine to the point where she can have a normal relationship, and if it comes to it, a normal breakup. Going through the experience will make it easier the next time a good guy shows up in her life.

Erika: Well, it is not like we have any other choice. You are right.

Morty: I know I’m right.

10-10-2012
12:18 A.M.

Erika: I’m back in Olivine.

Morty: Kay. Don’t forget to ask Jasmine stuff. Oh, and coddle her bout Graveler.

Erika: Tired?

Morty: tiiiiirrrrd.

Erika: Me too. Long trip, busy trip, stowaways, yawning. Good night.

12:45 A.M.

Morty: HEEEEY.

Wake up.

ERIKA!

Kimono girl!

Hey hey hey.

Erika!

Erika!

Erika!

Erika!
Erika!

Air-wreckah!

Erika!

Erika: WHAT?!

Morty: I forgot. Volkner called and said Jasmine will probably be going to the park tomorrow. Today. Technically today.

Erika: Go to bed!

10-11-2012

5:48 P.M.

Morty: Help me.

Erika: I am not in the mood.

Morty: I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing.

Erika: You messed up, didn’t you.

Morty: He was just supposed to fix the generator but then he challenged Jasmine to a battle and they got all serious and I started like three different plans and none of them worked together so- damn it can I come see you while I’m here? We need to hash this plan out in person, not over chat.

Erika: Fine.

Morty: Address?

Erika: Let me look it up.

1062 Cresswell Place

North of the beachfront park.

Morty: Ok, see you soon.

Erika: On my great great great grandmother’s grave I swear you will be the bane of this plan.
Morty: Hey.

Erika: I don’t want to talk.

Morty: What’s wrong?

Erika: Go away.

Morty: Seriously? What’s wrong?

Erika: Just- everything. Shut up. I’m not in the mood. Trot off.

Morty: Okay…

Hope it works out for you.

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Erika: Excuse my behavior yesterday. It was inappropriate.

Morty: No need to apologize.

Erika: No. I insist.

Morty: What was that all about?

Erika: I am-

Well-

I do not want to say.

Morty: …

Erika: There are different things weighing on my mind. One of them is what is happening in my home city.

Morty: That being?

Erika: It’s hard to say.

Morty: I promise to keep it a secret.

Erika: Still…
Morty: Hey. We’re working so hard to dig up Jasmine’s secrets. How’re we gonna justify that if we try keeping our own secrets?

Erika: Hypocrite. You have your own issues. Care to share first?

Morty: I don’t have issues. I had them. I’ve gotten past them. You, on the other hand, are letting your problems affect our plan.

Erika: Morty, you wretch. I will not let my trouble harm Jasmine. In fact, I must keep them to myself or else she will be harmed!

Morty: Well then she doesn’t need to know, but I do.

Erika: You do not need to know.

Morty: I want to know.

Erika: I do not feel comfortable sharing with you.

Morty: Does it have to do with Team Rocket?

Erika: How would you know that?!

Morty: Intuition. Now what’s the deal? Why were you upset? Are they threatening you?

Erika?

Come on, tell me.

Erika: Fine.

I’ll share.

But you had better keep this a secret from Jasmine.

There is a turf war going on between the old and new factions of Team Rocket. My gym has gotten dragged into the middle of it.

Morty: If you’re in trouble, I can help.

Erika: No, I do not want you involved.

Morty: No seriously, you think any of us Gym Leaders are going to accept that old BS?

Erika: It’s not a matter of danger to you all- it’s about your status as free, law-abiding citizens.

Morty: What the hell does that mean? Wait. Are you a Rocket yourself?

Erika: Let me explain, Morty.

Celadon Gym has historically been a mediator between the police and the mafia in my city. The Gym Leader arranges for information, bribes, meetings, and policy decisions to be shared between the two. There is a delicate balance in play, they both hate each other but cannot
maintain control over their respective institutions without the other’s consent. The whole system is corrupt, unstable, and without the mediator both city hall and the criminals would fall into violent chaos. This three-way relationship goes back decades. It was a job I did not want, but was forced to take, or else, consequences would ensue, for me and for those I care for. As part of that job, I sometimes had to do the Rocket’s bidding.


Erika: I have lived these past years in fear- fear that I will be jailed by hard liners in the federal police for my unwilling involvement, fear that I will be killed or tortured by the Rockets for trying to forestall them. There was some sense of stability for the past few years, but now that is coming undone.

You met Silver, did you not?

Morty: Red head kid at the Blackthorn tavern?

Erika: Correct. He is the son of Giovanni.

Morty: THE Giovanni?

Erika: Yes.

Morty: That’s crazy. Hard to believe.

Erika: I am telling the truth. Silver is trying to wrestle control of the organization from his father. He has an ally, Proton, who is organizing an uprising in Celadon. The local Rocket admin of Celadon is Petrel. Petrel is a horrible, evil man, one of the most morally defunct and reprehensible human beings I have ever known. He is the one I answered to when I did work for the Rockets.

Morty: What kind of work?

Erika: I do not want to talk about it.

The situation is now tenuous. Petrel has sensed his end coming, and he has promised to use every means available to him to take down everyone who had any remote connection to Team Rocket. Primarily, he is threatening to turn over evidence, some of it real, some fabricated, to federal authorities. Police captains, businessmen, clergymen, politicians, trainers- and me.

Morty: I had no idea you were in this deep. Is there anything I can do to help?

Erika: Not really, not without exposing yourself to the Justice Department.

Morty: Crap.

Erika: Except, I do want you to take care of Jasmine should anything happen to me. I think I am safe by staying here in Olivine, but I cannot be sure.

Morty: Ok. I don’t think I can pull off the plan without you though.

Erika: Oh forget the plan, if something happened to me my greatest fear is Jasmine’s reaction.
Make sure she does not do something rash.

Morty: Like storm Team Rocket’s hideout.

Erika: That is one rash thing she might do, yes. Take care of her.

Morty: I can do that. I promise.

Erika: Thank you.

10-20-2012
8:19 P.M.

Morty: Are you alright?

Erika: Yes, for now. I feel better. Jasmine visited me again.

Morty: Okay. I’m on my way down tomorrow. Me and Lyra and Ethan negotiated for a girl Ampharos for Jasmine’s Ampharos. I’ll be bringing her down. Hoping they like each other.

Erika: That would be really cute.

Morty: Um, I am guessing I will not have time to see you.

Erika: Just call or text me here. I am getting used to this program.

Morty: KK.

10-23-2012
2:40 P.M.

Morty: ERIKA.

Erika: What?

Morty: BIG PROBLEM.

Erika: What?

Morty: Huge problem.

Erika: WHAT?
Morty: I know what’s wrong with Jasmine.

Erika: What?!

Morty: Someone hurt her. A guy.

Erika: That was just a theory.

Morty: It’s a fact. From her own mouth.

Erika: Huh? What happened? What did you do?

Morty: I got her to kiss me. I did what she asked of me and she agreed to a kiss, so we kissed, and I thought she was enjoying it, but then she instantly broke down and ran off. She locked herself inside the lighthouse office. I couldn’t get her to answer or come out, she just stayed there crying all night long. I’ve never seen her this bad.

Erika: That is no proof!

Morty: She said one thing to me- I was NOT her first kiss. She’s been kissed before.

Erika: Seriously?! But you can’t conclude something based on just that.

Morty: Ok, maybe it’s not a screaming confession, but that sure as hell sounds like some guy took her first kiss and maybe more and it has caused her hell. I would put more than money on that bet.

Erika: Was she raped?

Morty: That is something, I think, we need to find out. You were right. If this is what’s been bothering her, we need to fix it.

Erika: By all means, of course! Who do you think could have done it?

Morty: I actually have a good idea- and this is going to suck.

Erika: Who?

Morty: Ed.

Erika: That Ed? From her gym?

Morty: Yeah. It was probably that night in Indigo. I am a complete- FUCKING ASS. I swear I never imagined Ed did anything to her. I feel god-awful right now. Excuse me while I vomit my heart and soul out.

Erika: Wait! Don’t go!

Are you there?

Morty?
Erika: Morty?

Morty: Here. Unfortunately.

Erika: How is Jasmine? How are you?

Morty: I'm doing okay.

I didn’t talk to Jasmine, I had to go back to Ecruteak.

She left a message on my phone saying she needed to be alone for a while. I called her, but the other side hung up, so I know she’s at least alive.

I can’t believe how stupid I was back then. I might have ruined everything for her. You were so right. There’s no chance in hell Jasmine could have a normal relationship if she’s suffering PTSD.

Erika: Can you tell me what happened that night? Besides what you told me. Is there anything more you haven’t told me?

Morty: I didn’t lie or hold back. I’ve been trying to remember that night, it’s hazy. I remember the last time I saw Jasmine, it was really late at night, she came bawling to me. She was really upset, and wanted me to confront Ed. I thought she was upset because she found out about the photo upload, or because Ed said something mean to her after she rejected him. I never, ever, in my walnut of a brain imagined he had actually forced himself on her.

Erika: I hope you have learned your lesson since then.

Morty: I’m scared I haven’t. Sure I know NOW to take women seriously when they’re distraught and there’s the possibility of rape, but I don’t know what else I might screw up in the future.

Erika: Then every time you catch yourself making assumptions, stop, think, figure out the worst possible outcomes, and then eliminate them through factual discovery.


Erika: My mother taught me that lesson. It has served me well over the years. Now what are we going to do about this?

Morty: Well, she’s going to that Halloween Party in Goldenrod, right?

Erika: Maybe. She promised to go, but that was before you upset her.
Morty: Eh- never mind.

Erika: I am going to see her, right now.

Morty: Tell me how she is doing.

Erika: I will. Bye for now.

Morty: Bye.

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10-28-2012

6:20 P.M.

Morty: Hey.

Erika: Hello.

Morty: You never called.

Erika: My apologies. Jasmine was well. She was acting strange, but not overly upset. She did reaffirm her willingness to go to Whitney’s party. I think she will be okay.

Morty: I figured. Just had a chat with her over video skype.

Erika: Oh? She was willing to talk with you?

Morty: Yeah. Basically, she wanted me to ignore her freak-out. Seems like she wants to be closer to me.

Erika: That could be good.

Morty: So, I’ve got her open enough she kissed me, and wanting another kiss. I think she might be falling for me. Might be time to start thinking about what we want to do next.

Erika: I am not entirely convinced that it was a rape that caused her to be this way.

Morty: Why not?

Erika: Just little clues here and there that something bigger might be at issue. Still, I cannot discount rape as the cause either, the consequences of ignoring that possibility are too grave. So, we should work on several fronts. We should probably split duties.

Morty: Alright. I still want to get her used to the idea of sex. I feel like that might be doubly important if she was assaulted. She needs positive reinforcement. You know, good experiences with physical intimacy to replace the bad ones.

Erika: That is fine. Mind yourself and remember to pair your sexual advances with
appropriate emotional gestures.

Morty: Yeah, I understand.

Erika: But not too much! We do not want her becoming emotionally dependent on you. You are not her end game.

Morty: I understand that too. It’s a balancing act.

Erika: Have you thought about how you are going to disengage?

Morty: Not much. Sort of. If it’s Volkner we want her with, I thought it would be best to show him off as much as possible, instead of me doing anything. Kind of like, he can subtly show devotion to her while I’m flirty with other women, I can bug her but he can make her feel good with compliments- or something. I don’t know. Volkner is really terrible at the mushy lovey-dovey serious talk that women gobble up. I’ve been trying to teach him, but he’s too damned left-brained.

Erika: Then perhaps you should leave that up to me. I will get in touch with Volkner during the party and debrief him. You keep working on Jasmine. Keep her interested in romance and keep her ego stabilized. If you can, find out if she was hurt by a man and who it was. If it was Ed, we may have a little head start, we at least know all about him.

Morty: Roger. And you?

Erika: If you can. If it feels risky, do not prod her. Concentrate on your job. I will be the point-woman in finding out the truth.

Morty: I don’t know about that- this is my fault. I should be the one doing the interrogation. Besides, if this all falls apart, I need to be the one she blames. You’re her friend, I’m just a horny chump in her eyes. Don’t jeopardize your relationship with her, let me take all the risk.

Erika: Heh. You’ve no clue.

Morty: Anyways, see you at the party.

Erika: See you soon.

10-31-2012

9:15 A.M.

Morty: On my way down.

Erika: Getting ready. We will be taking the boat.

Morty: So, um, this party is kind of big.
Erika: How big?

Morty: Hundreds? Whitney invited everyone in the country. She rented out part of the convention center.

Erika: My my.

Morty: That’s really expensive. I think she has someone bankrolling her.

Erika: Who?

Morty: Eusine, definitely. He’s been busy talking with her, and his folks are rich. But I don’t think he’s alone. Something fishy going on here. We’ll see.

Erika: No matter. See you soon.

11-1-2012
1:35 A.M.

Erika: So?

Morty: I’m with Phoebe.

Erika: Remember what I told you at the club?

Morty: Don’t worry about it.

Erika: You should be worrying about it.

Morty: Hey, it’s late, and Phoebe still wants to get frisky. Can we chat tomorrow?

Erika: Fine.

3:11 P.M.

Erika: Where are you?

Morty: Outside. By the steps.

11:58 P.M.

Erika: Well, we had The Talk.

11-2-2012
Morty: Anything juicy?

Erika: Nothing concrete, but some things of interest.

Morty: Do share.

Erika: First, Proton.

Morty: That guy with Silver? Didn’t you say he was part of the rebel Rocket faction?

Erika: Yes. I know him from my dealings with them. He was one of their senior administrators. Hard to pin down, very shifty personality. I know he’s committed a number of crimes, particularly towards women. When we worked together, he would insinuate he would rape me if he ever got the chance, and only Giovanni’s orders prevented him. A few years ago he betrayed Giovanni and joined Silver’s cause. I think he is doing this as a kind of atonement; something happened and he had a change of heart.

Morty: Real upstanding guy */sarcasm*/.

Erika: Yes. Well. There is no evidence that could be used to bring him to justice, and he seems too cowardly to turn himself in. Still, he seems genuinely sorry and is approachable now.

Anyways, I learned that Proton’s real name is Peter Phaeton. He was born and raised in Olivine City.

Morty: Oh wow.

Erika: I think he and Jasmine may have gone to the same high school. This would be about six years ago, before he joined the Rockets and I knew him or her. Jasmine said he harassed her. However, before anything serious could happen, another young man intervened.

Morty: Really? That guy?

Erika: Yes, that guy. Wait, what do you mean?

Morty: When I was with her, she blurted out about a guy in her past, someone who hurt her.

Erika: She said the same to me. I do not think it was Ed. It was before that.

Morty: I don’t think so either, but I’m not going to discount Ed being the primary villain here.

Erika: Considering Ed, Peter, and this mystery boy, Jasmine’s issue could be far more complicated than we imagined.

Morty: Did she say anything about this guy? Any hints about who he is?

Erika: Yes, she did. She said he was a Pokemon trainer who challenged her gym. She became infatuated with him, but he did not return her feelings, hurt her and left her.

Morty: Hurt her? Rape?
Erika: Jasmine was vague, ‘hurt’ could mean anything.

Morty: Mmm. No way to know.

Erika: And she almost gave me a name! Short, starts with a vowel. Otherwise claims she cannot remember more than that. I think she is lying though. The way she spoke about the incident, it seemed like she had no trouble remembering every detail. It was too impactful upon her psyche.

Morty: So that’s it. A guy she fell for in- eighth grade?- rejected her. Nah. There’s got to be more.

Erika: Surely, right? Even a very bitter breakup would not cause this kind of emotional damage. Not years later.

Morty: Anything else? Anything?

Erika: About the boy? No. Nor anything that could explain her continued hatred of men, or depression. We talked a bit about her sexuality, and I think I understand her reticence in that area a little more.

Morty: Ooo. Details? Pwetty pwease?

Erika: You want to sleep with her, don’t you?

Morty: No.

Erika: Just admit it already.

Morty: I promise not.

Erika: I am not saying you can’t, but at least be honest about your desires!

Morty: Meh meh. Details!

Erika: I feel like I should not be telling you this.

Morty: I’m going to have to hear it regardless.

Erika: Considering… you are right. The truth is, underneath her façade, she is very sexually active and sexually frustrated. I do not think she has any reluctance whatsoever about the act of sex itself. No moral reservations, no personal revulsion.

Morty: Hmmm.

Erika: Her objections are all psychological in nature; derivative of her interpersonal anxiety.

Morty: So we’re back to boys and her not liking us.

Erika: Basically, yes. She does not trust men and is afraid of opening herself up or exposing herself to another person. Probably because of her experiences with the mystery boy, Ed, Peter, and the rest.
Maybe it was not one incident, but the accumulation. It seems as if she is a magnet for perverts and creeps. So many unwanted advances, perhaps that is what got to her. The sheer number.

Morty: I can sort of see it that way. But also, if that one guy was the only one she loved, the only one she trusted, and he didn’t return her love, then that could poison the rest of the lot.

Erika: Are you saying that she turned many of her suitors into creeps through her jadedness? That seems too much.

Morty: No. My theory is that one crush made her anti-social. None of the decent guys wanted to approach her, and she didn’t want to approach them. So the only interaction she got with men after that were the arrogant assholes who creeped on her. That made her hate men more, and it snowballed from there.

Erika: So she is part of the problem.

Morty: Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m saying.

Erika: That is rude of you to assert. She is not at fault.

Morty: I don’t want to accuse her, but that’s what the reality is.

Erika: Reality is fickle. I refuse to believe she caused her own problems.

Morty: Getting a little defensive there.

Erika: I don’t care. Come up with a theory that does not place the blame on Jasmine.

Morty: Okay. Jasmine is incredibly unlucky and attracted a ton of unwanted attention. If she couldn’t have her crush, then she wanted someone like him, so she kept waiting and turning guys down. That’s her choice, but it did leave her lonely. Then she had the bad fortune of attracting Ed. Ed got the same rejection as every other guy, but unlike them, he took it too far and raped her.

Erika: Now you are being vulgar. Besides, Jasmine said she was a virgin.

Morty: Wouldn’t you say you were a virgin if your only experience was forced on you?

Erika: My first time WAS forced on me. I never pretended otherwise. Jasmine is not lying.

12:47 A.M.

Erika: Morty.

Morty: What.

Erika: Where did you go.

Morty: Sorry. After you said that, I thought you didn’t want to talk.

Erika: Nonsense.

Morty: Should I avoid the topic?
Erika: Why should I hide it? I was at a party, I agreed to meet a guy I knew, he took me upstairs and forced himself on me, and I let him because I was scared. I am not ashamed. It was a horrible ordeal to go through, but it taught me valuable lessons and I am a stronger woman because of it. There, does that settle your curiosity?

Morty: Have you been drinking?

Erika: Yes.

Morty: Ah.

Erika: So if a coward like me can honestly admit to being raped, a tough girl like Jasmine would not lie about it herself.

Morty: I’m not so sure of that.

Erika: I am sure of it.

Morty: This is not a joke. I’m sorry if you had to go through that experience, and I respect that you can talk about it, but that doesn’t mean Jasmine is going to be able to do the same.

Erika: Why do you doubt her?

Morty: Because if Ed did touch her I AM RESPONSIBLE.

Erika: Feeling guilty?

Morty: Hell yes!

Erika: Get over it. Stop mixing up your shame with the truth.

Morty: It’s too much to ignore. I need to find out.

Erika: Well, that will be your business. Do it on your own, at your own risk.

Morty: I will.

Erika: Heh.

Ah, there’s that. Jasmine seems like she’s grown attached to you. I even hear you may have done something naughty with her on the Gym balcony. You had better back off a bit.

Morty: I am close. A little more, I can accomplish what we’ve been trying for.

Erika: She expressed disbelief when I said you would cheat on her. What happens if she finds out about Phoebe? She will find out, you know, eventually.

Morty: She’ll be long settled with Volkner by then; I'll just be that sleaze she once had a fling with. It’ll make her feel better about being with Volkner instead.

Erika: You had better keep it secret until then.

Morty: I will.
Erika: Do not reveal your engagement with Phoebe as a way to push her towards Volkner, it will only make her hate all men.

Morty: I said I will keep it secret. I wouldn’t do something that stupid.

Erika: Sorry if I cannot trust you.

Morty: Erika, I don’t think we would be friends if it weren’t for Jasmine.

Erika: Indeed.


Erika: Her birthday is coming up this month. I want to do something special for her.

Morty: I’ll think about it. Bye.

11-9-2012
7:18 P.M.

Morty: Have you talked to Jasmine lately? She won’t pick up her phone.

Erika: Not much.

Morty: What’s happened?

Erika: She’s very busy doing something for her mother.

Morty: Oh. Got it. They don’t get along, do they?

Erika: No, not at all.

Morty: Is her mother, like, a control-freak?

Erika: I’m not sure. Jasmine never characterized her like that.

Morty: Oh. Huh.

11-11-2012
7:27 P.M.

Morty: Hey.
Erika: Hello again.

Morty: She finally called me back.

Erika: What is going on?

Morty: Her mother made her help cater a party for rich people.

Erika: Mmhmm.

Morty: She had a run-in with our new Gym Leader. Jade Aokigahara. She’s already not liking her.

Erika: Unfortunate.

Morty: And she was afraid of her mother, because of the way she left the party.

Erika: Ah.

Morty: Anyways, we talked for a little.

Erika: That’s good.

Morty: You sound distracted.

Erika: It's nothing.

Morty: Really? Nothing going on in Celadon to worry about?

Erika: Nothing out of the ordinary.

Morty: So?

Erika: Just not feeling well.

Morty: I see. Alright.

11-14-2012
6:53 P.M.

Erika: Hello.

Morty: Hey.

Erika: The girls and I went shopping, we all picked out gifts for Jasmine’s birthday. What about you?

Morty: I was going to get her some clothing.
Erika: Hahaha! You too?
Morty: What?
Erika: We all ended up getting her some nice outfits. I would recommend against buying her clothes.
Morty: You don’t trust my fashion sense? I was going to get Phoebe to help.
Erika: Eh. Even if you can rely on Phoebe, you do not have her measurements.
Morty: And you do? How?
Erika: We snuck into her house and borrowed her clothes.
Morty: Oh really. In some corners of the world, that is called trespassing.
Erika: It was for a greater cause. Do you still want to get her clothing?
Morty: No. Actually, I just thought of a better present.
Erika: That is?
Morty: Hot springs! I’ll treat her to the hot spring resort here.
Erika: Oh my.
Morty: Yeah. We’ll have a party in Ecruteak. How does that sound?
Erika: It sounds wonderful. I will invite everyone available.
Morty: Okay.
Erika: I’m curious. What does Phoebe have to say about this plan?
Phoebe: Hi there! I think it’s a wonderful plan!
Erika: Um, hello?
Morty: Phoebe, what are you doing?
Phoebe: I rigged your skype so I could join in.
Morty: How’d you do that?
Phoebe: It was easy.
Erika: Hello! I’m sorry I have never met you. My name is Erika Hikami.
Phoebe: Phoebe Fuyo. I’ve been wanting to meet you. Sorry I couldn’t meet you at the Halloween party, Morty made hide in the tech booth the whole time. (no fun!)
Morty: Sorry, sorry, we couldn’t risk Jasmine seeing you.
Erika: You seem very supportive of this operation. You do realize your fiancé is romancing another woman, right?

Phoebe: Yes.

Erika: Even sexually touching her. Is that acceptable to you?

Phoebe: Of course.

Erika: If I may ask, how can you be so tolerant of this behavior?

Phoebe: It’s not like we’re in an open relationship, but I’m making an exception this one time. For Morty’s sake.

Morty: Now Phebes, don’t go blabbing everything about me.

Phoebe: I know the boundaries, little boy.

Erika: May I ask why?

Phoebe: Well, if I can’t tell you the details-

Morty: You’d better not.

Phoebe: Morty has suffered a lot of pain in his childhood.

Morty: Honey, please, too much.

Phoebe: But she ought to know, if you’re working together.

Morty: Don’t do this to me.

Erika: I told you about the Rockets, why won’t you share your past with me?

Morty: Because, just because.

Phoebe: Fine. Morty blames himself for Jasmine’s misery, and because of his issues he feels obligated to help her. I know him, I know what she means to him, and I respect those feelings. This is a way to help him sort out those feelings and ultimately let her go.

Morty: You’re really on the edge there.

Erika: Do you love Jasmine? Is that it?

Morty: I can’t say.

Phoebe: He does.

Morty: No. It’s more complicated than that.

Phoebe: You make such a big deal about it. It’s simple, really, not nearly as bad as your childhood. Just tell her.

Morty: No.
Phoebe: Oh well.

Erika: I am so very confused.

Phoebe: To answer your question, I love Morty, and I can see he has to settle this thing with Jasmine before he can find peace within himself. I want him to make amends with his past before we commit to marriage. If that means having sex with Miss Jasmine, so be it. I’m feeling pretty secure about our relationship.

Morty: She says things like that and that’s why I love her.

Erika: I see. I suppose it is up to you. It just surprises me for someone to be so forward-thinking about a relationship, and that Morty of all people attracted a woman like you.

Phoebe: Morty is special. He has his moments.

Morty: Hey! I have a lot of moments, thank you very much.

Phoebe: But he needs someone like me to guide him. I’m fine with the plan, it is okay with me as long as he keeps to Jasmine. Right? RIGHT?!

Morty: Ugh.

Erika: ???

Morty: She’s still upset about the Gym Leader tournament bet.

Phoebe: Don’t ever do something like that again. Women’s bodies are not to be used as collateral.

Morty: I got it.


Morty: Sorry, sorry!

Phoebe: Jasmine is cute and kind, have fun with her all you want, I’m okay with that. On the other hand, I don’t like being left in the dark. So please keep me informed about your progress, okay?

Erika: Yes, that’s not unreasonable.

Morty: Yes Flower.

Phoebe: What have I told you about that nickname?

Morty: That you adore it?

Phoebe: Only in private, silly.

Morty: That can be arranged.

Erika: I’ll just leave now.
Morty: Got it all arranged. November 20th, right?

Erika: Correct. I am glad you remembered.

Morty: Cheated, checked her Pokenav.

Erika: I,m disappointed in you.

Morty: I’ve got my coworkers on board. There might be a problem.

Erika: What now?

Morty: My main assistant, Danielle. She knows about me and Phoebe.

Erika: And what’s the problem? Oh! Will she tattle on us?

Morty: Yes. Yes she will.

Erika: Oh dear.

Morty: I am trying hard to bribe her into silence. She is being stubborn.

Erika: Why would she tell on us?

Morty: She wants the Gym Leader position for herself. I’m about to tell her she can have it if she keeps her mouth shut.

Erika: Dicey. Will you actually do it? Give up your position to make this work?

Morty: Hell no. I like my job. I’m not leaving it.

Erika: What will you do with this Danielle, then?

Morty: She won’t figure out I’m bluffing until this is all over. She’s really good at her job but it’s kind of poisonous keeping her around. We have a history.

Erika: Sexual?

Morty: Mmhmm. She was my first. And we sort of dated… I sort of promised to marry her, before I got cold feet and ran off across Nihon.

Erika: Morty. If I was not acquainted with the scum of Team Rocket… I would not be able to tolerate such a reprehensible character such as yourself. Compared to Petrel and Proton, you do not stand very much higher in esteem.
Morty: I was a dumbass in my youth; I swear I am trying to make amends and be a better person.

Erika: I hope you succeed.

Morty: I hope so too.

Erika: I also hope you get a handle on Danielle. We cannot afford to let her sabotage this. Perhaps we should relocate the party.

Morty: No, let’s not. I’ve booked the reservation, paid the deposit. And even if we changed venues, I’m sure Danielle would find a way to get in touch with Jasmine. She’s being very vindictive. I’ll try to convince her. No promises.

Erika: Then I would like to have a word with her myself.

Morty: Be my guest. Just be ready for a fireball.

Erika: I am the Grass-type specialist, I have plenty of experience with handling “fire”.

7:30 P.M.

Morty: Quick question about Jasmine.

Erika: Yes?

Morty: How does she feel about drug use?

Erika: Despises it.

Morty: Even soft stuff like marijuana?

Erika: Abhors it. Quite frankly, it’s beyond any reasonable health concern, she thinks drug use is a moral abomination. She has a lower opinion of pot smokers than she does of men.

Morty: Wow. That’s saying something. What about beer? I saw her drinking at the Halloween party.

Erika: She has less qualms about drinkers. It is odd. According to her, imbibement is fine, ingestion is iffy, injection is nasty, but inhalation is the absolute bane of humanity. You should see the faces she makes when we pass by smokers in public: funny, but extremely rude faces.

Morty: Weird. Maybe it’s because she’s forced to take part when it’s all over the air. I’m guessing crack and meth warrant capital punishment in her eyes?

Erika: She has explicitly said that, actually. “We could fix the budget if we just sent all of them to the chair,” were her words.

Morty: Harsh, but not surprising. Sometimes she goes overboard with her rhetoric. Drugs don’t merit a death sentence.

Erika: Do you indulge?
Morty: No. I used to do pot, but had to quit. League and their damn drug-testing.

Erika: I can empathize, but such is life. Why do you ask, anyways?

Morty: I was just thinking it’s something I can use in the future to help phase 2. Volkner’s clean as a microchip factory; this is one more thing they share in common.

Erika: You know Volkner better than I. What else do they have in common?

Morty: They’re both nerdy, I guess. Maybe video games? Volkner’s into sci-fi stuff, like spaceship shooters and Galactic Conquest. Not sure if that’s a common interest.

Erika: Jasmine only plays one game, Sim Kingdom.

Morty: That’s really freaking old.

Erika: I know. She may technically be a nerd, but she’s not ‘into it’ if you understand my meaning. For her, it’s more of a distraction or stress relief. Her Pokemon are far more important to her.

Morty: Mm. Kay. Volkner also loves his Pokemon. He really likes working beside them, having them help him with his techno-industrial work. He says they make the work more like playtime. Jasmine does the same with her Pokemon, from what I remember.

They both enjoy the beach, swimming, and long walks. Volkner’s no good at putting deep thoughts together, but he’s a great listener. I think Jasmine will be comfortable unburdening on him. I can see them as a quiet, introverted couple that keeps to themselves and enjoys each other’s presence, even if they aren’t actively engaging each other.

Erika: I see. We can make this work. So long as physical attraction is not an issue, their personalities and interests seem compatible enough.

Morty: I’m worried about getting Jasmine to like him. That’s going to be a tough sell, she’s so stubborn. Looks-wise, I think Volkner is in the clear, but I can’t tell for sure. Women are so hard to figure out in that area. Personality-wise, though, she still hasn’t gotten over this “men are evil” shtick.

Erika: We will find a way. She should know by now, by your example, that men and romance can be a positive experience.

Morty: I don’t feel like her attitude has changed, just that she’s made an exception for me.

Erika: Then we will force her to make an exception for Volkner too.

Morty: How?

Erika: That is the point of finding out her secret. There is a reason she made an exception for you, and we should be able to find that out when we solve the riddle of her troubles. Then we can duplicate it.

Erika: Good night.

11-16-2012
2:45 P.M.

Erika: Everything is set up. I have Whitney, Connie, and a few others coming.

Morty: Cool. I managed to convince the other Johto leaders to come.

Erika: Even Falkner and Jade?

Morty: No, not them. I know Jasmine dislikes them. Pryce won’t make it. He’s under the weather. He’ll get to see her anyways, though, she has to travel up to Mahogany first for the written exams.

Erika: Okay.

Morty: Bring everyone to my gym about 12:00. Jeff is in charge of setting up the party, he’ll take care of you.

Erika: What about you?

Morty: I’m going to take Jasmine to Mahogany and back.

Erika: Okay.

10:45 P.M.

Morty: Shit.

Erika. Shit, come on, I need you.

Erika: Now what?!

Morty: Ed.

Erika: Ed who? That Ed?

Morty: He's back.

Erika: What?!?!?!

Morty: I don’t know how, I don’t why, I don’t know diddly except what Jasmine told me.

Erika: I wasn’t aware, I haven’t seen him at all.

Morty: Jasmine called me.
Phoebe: What are you two talking about?

Erika: Hello.

Morty: We’re in sort of a crisis here.

Phoebe: Hmm?

Erika: What did Jasmine say?

Phoebe: What’s the matter?

Morty: That punk that’s been harassing Jasmine for the last month, Warren, right?

Erika: Yes, I know of him. Jasmine refuses to go to the cops, even though I’ve begged her.

Morty: He came at her with an ultimatum. Little shit got the League’s permission to an unrestricted battle.

Phoebe: How dare he!

Erika: That is not good.

Morty: Jasmine managed to postpone the battle until Monday, but she still doesn’t have time to train. I’m going to train her Pokemon for her. That’s not the problem, though.

Erika: Ed is the problem.

Morty: Apparently this Warren shit has a connection to Ed: he has Ed’s Pokemon and has been loaning them out to random Gym challengers to help them beat her; they’re doing a number on Jasmine’s team. And the worst part- he has the nude picture of Jasmine.

Erika: HE WHAT?!

Phoebe: A nude picture?

Morty: Phebes, I really need to address this with Erika right now. I’ll tell you the whole story later.

Phoebe: I want to stay and listen.

Morty: Okay, honey, that’s fine.

Erika: How did he get the picture? Proton’s program annihilated it from the internet.

Morty: I can only think of one way. Ed sent himself a personal copy and stored it onto a thumb drive.

Erika: So is Ed back? What is he trying to do?

Morty: I can guess his plan. They know about Jasmine’s probation and are trying to sink her career by dragging down her win ratio. Motivation is pretty obvious too, revenge for her rejecting them. The only thing I don’t know is why Ed is using this Warren fellow as proxy.
Erika: He may be using Warren as a scapegoat, to harass Jasmine without risking prosecution.

Morty: Sounds possible.

Erika: This is terrible. What are we going to do? And it’s right before her birthday.

Morty: I’m going to put in some serious hours. Train her Pokemon, Jeff will help there. And also research, gotta find everything I can on those two trainers.

Erika: I would like to help.

Morty: Could you check around Olivine, see if you can get any information on the streets about Warren? He’s been there for a couple months now, there must be trainers who’ve come in contact with him.

Erika: I can do that.

Morty: Alright.

Erika: Talk to me as soon as anything develops.

Morty: Bye.

Erika: Bye.

Phoebe: So who is Ed?

Morty: Get out of the bathroom, you’ve been soaking in the tub for hours! And how are you on skype? Did you bring your phone into the tub? You’re gonna zap yourself!

Phoebe: Teeheehee, you caught me.

Oh fine fine, no need to shout, I'll be out in a minute.

Morty: I'll tell you everything once you’re dry.

Phoebe: Alrighty!

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11-17-2012

8:18 P.M.

Erika: I found something on both Warren and Ed.

Morty: Yeah?

Erika: Ed was pressured by a group of business owners to leave Olivine after he started a bully campaign against Jasmine, apparently old friends of Mr. Beret. He left for Violet City.
Morty: Okay.

Erika: There were rumors he came back about a year ago; however he hasn’t been seen in public for a while and never returned to Olivine Gym.

Morty: Got it.

Erika: Warren was active in the local battling community. He was arrested a few weeks ago for harassing trainers who didn’t want to battle him. He spent three days in jail. Shortly after he got out, he had three new Pokemon which were much more powerful than the ones he was using before.

Morty: Quagsire, Exeggutor, Scizor.

Erika: Right. At first he was just using them to win street battles for a little cash, but then he started renting them to gym challengers to guarantee victory against Jasmine. Apparently yesterday he had his fill and wanted his badge.

Morty: Anything on the connection between the two?

Erika: No, nothing.

Morty: Okay. I’ll see what I can find out on my own.

11-18-2012
6:24 P.M.

Morty: That fucker!

Erika: Excuse me?

Morty: That shitstain fucker!

Erika: Have I ever told you I am uncomfortable with profanity? Petrel would verbally assault me.

Morty: Sorry, but not sorry. You’d cuss at this guy too.

Erika: What is it? Who?

Morty: Ed’s in jail.

Erika: For?

Morty: Rape.

Erika: Oh dear. Who did he rape?
Morty: Two girls. One was underage. No names, they won’t release victim’s names. I got this from the Olivine City court records website.

Erika: That is awful! If Ed is in jail, do you think Warren could have met him there?

Morty: Probably. Ed’s locked up for good, but if he somehow got chummy with Warren, he could be using him to carry out revenge against Jasmine.

Erika: The fiends. No wonder Jasmine hates men so much. At the very least, Ed is where he ought to be. He should pose no threat, if we can neutralize Warren.

Morty: Yeah. That’s what I’m working on now.

Erika: I do not think it will be enough for Jasmine to beat him. He will come back as many times as it takes to win the Mineral Badge.

Morty: I am not going to ask Jasmine to throw a match for this little shit. I’m working on a diplomatic solution.

Erika: I see. Alright. Let us hope it works.

Morty: Yeah.

Erika: I have been keeping Jasmine company today.

Morty: How is she?

Erika: Hard at work studying. It looks like she will pass the exams, easily.

Morty: I wouldn’t bet against her.

Erika: You are coming to pick Jasmine up after the battle, correct?

Morty: Correct.

Erika: I will see you tomorrow then.

Morty: I’ll be there at 9:00.

Erika: Very well.

11-19-2012

1:47 P.M.

Morty: Wow. Just wow. Jasmine is incredible.

Erika: I feel the same. That was an astonishing victory.
Morty: Props to Magneton for taking down the Scizor, but really, Steelix did all the heavy lifting.

Erika: I knew Steelix was strong, but 20 KOs? TWENTY?! I cannot think of a stronger Pokemon among all the Gym Leaders.

Morty: Clair’s Kingdra, that’s the only Pokemon I would say is stronger. Maybe. I think Jasmine could beat me at this point.

Erika: Easily.

Morty: I gotta wonder why so many guys like Warren gun for her.

Erika: What do you mean?

Morty: Well what do you think those blowhards are after?

Erika: Easy pickings?

Morty: Shy, innocent, naïve, easily manipulated, low-hanging fruit. Sound like someone we know?

Erika: Lyra?

Morty: Lol.

Erika: I get what you are saying. Jasmine may appear to be like that, but in reality she is-

Morty: -a badass.

Erika: Just a little bit. She could never date a man with an inflated ego.

Morty: I talked with Warren. It’s basically exactly what we thought. He met Ed in jail, Ed gave Warren everything he needed to take down Jasmine. All for revenge. Looks like Ed was keeping close tabs on Jazz the whole time.

Erika: Disgusting. Did you manage to warn Warren off?

Morty: I think losing to Jasmine that badly knocked the crush out of him. I gave him a way to skip around the Gym Badge requirement. Doubt he’ll pull it off, but it should occupy him.

Erika: Will he be upset and come back for revenge?

Morty: I mean, he wasn’t that good of a trainer. Without Ed’s Pokemon, he’d never make it past me or Jasmine or Pryce, let alone Clair. I think he’ll get the hint and give up.

Erika: I hope so.

Morty: And Jasmine told me he threatened a Pokemon during the match. She says she can bring legal suit against him for that. So that’s a backup.

Erika: Good. I would actually like to see her rely on the legal system for once. It would help her trust issues to see the police work for her and not against her, and also humble herself a
little to rely on authorities.

Morty: Mm.

Erika: Well, that is all behind us. Jasmine has exams tomorrow. She is ready. What about the party afterwards?

Morty: Did you get my e-mail?

Erika: I got it but haven’t read it.

Morty: All the info’s there for everyone.

So big news, I managed to convince Volkner to come down for the party.

Erika: Oh did you?

Morty: I’ve been talking with Phoebe about this, and it’s made me realize something. I need to end this, sooner than later.

Erika: Are you having doubts? Backing out?

Morty: No, I want it to succeed, more than ever, but if it takes much longer I won’t be able to handle it. I love Phoebe, I really do. This whole thing with Jasmine is really clouding over my feelings for Phoebe, getting in the way.

Erika: Is she pressuring you?

Morty: Not at all. She’s been really supportive of me the whole time. This is all coming from me. I’m the one who feels like this is dirty and cheating on her.

Erika: Could you not bear it out for a little longer? I think we are close.

Morty: Yeah. A little more. I’m going to try one more time.

Erika: Try what?

Morty: To find the truth behind Ed.

Erika: This again? It weighs on you that much?

Morty: It does.

Erika: And if Ed is not the root of Jasmine’s depression, would you still care?

Be truthful.

Morty: Not like this, not with the same intensity.

Erika: I see. There is something that has been nagging me this whole time.

Morty: What is it?

Erika: Just, I do not think the Indigo incident was the root. Merely a punctuation. I have
other hints that would explain her issues.

Morty: Ok.

Erika: But I would like to hold off sharing, for now. Let us see if your theory stands first. Do your thing, whatever it is, and then we will discuss the endgame.

Morty: I’m going to tell her the truth about Indigo.

Erika: That could backfire on you.

Morty: I’m prepared.

Erika: Do you think that will get her to share her side of the story?

Morty: If it doesn’t, I have nothing left. I can’t do anything more for her. If it fails, well, I’m going to go ahead with phase 2.

Erika: It’s too soon for that.

Morty: Sorry. Volkner is coming, he knows what to do. I’m going to try to leave them alone together and hope for the best. With any luck. I can start subtle, just get her acclimated to him. If Jasmine doesn’t trust me enough to tell the truth about Ed, I’ll use that as an excuse to become annoying and push her towards Volkner.

Erika: Tsk tsk. I think it is a rash plan.

Morty: I can’t handle this kind pressure. I have to speed things up, or I’m going to crack.

Erika: Well, we will see. Try your best.

Morty: Hey, can I ask you something?

Erika: I suppose?

Morty: Why do you care so much? About Jasmine?

Erika: Because.

Morty: That’s no answer.

Erika: She is my friend.

Morty: Hmm.

11-20-2012
10:43 P.M.
Erika: Hello. Are you there?

Morty: Hi.

Erika: That was a disaster.

Morty: She’s hurting.

Erika: What?

Morty: I was wrong. Ed didn’t rape her.

Erika: Well, that’s good isn’t it?

Phoebe: Hey Spooky, is Jasmine gone? Can I come over?

Morty: Yeah, she’s gone. You can come over.

Phoebe: Hurray! I’ll see you soon. Hi Erika! Bye Erika!

Erika: Bye?

Morty: She’s horny.

Erika: Is that usual?

Morty: Pretty much, she wants it daily.

Erika: …

Morty: ;P

Erika: Pervert.

Morty: I don’t think Jasmine was hurt by rape. She was pretty open to sex, she said she would be okay with losing her virginity after her probation was over. Did you know she was naked under that bathrobe?

Erika?

You there?

Erika: I did not.

Morty: We had a little hanky panky. The way she was acting, it was not the behavior you’d get from a rape victim. More like, a reluctant and scared virgin. Whatever happened to her, I think it was a long time ago, and it was emotional in nature. Indigo just reinforced her hatred of me and men.

Erika: I thought so.

Morty: Phoebe’s going to be here in a few minutes, can we talk later?

Erika: I will get back to my place by 12:00, will you still be up?
Morty: Yeah. We’ve got a lot to talk about it.

Erika: Yes we do.

11-21-2012
12:03 A.M.

Morty: Okay.

Erika: Had your fill?

Morty: You know I was this () close to dicking two women tonight instead of one. I wonder if Jasmine would be open to a threesome.


Morty: What about you? Would you ever do a threesome?

Erika: Unlikely. Never with you!

Morty: Meh. Boring.

Erika: Are you drunk?

Morty: Some people get their fix from alcohol. *cough*or sake*cough*

Erika: Not funny.

Morty: I get mine from sex. Little pumped at the moment.

Erika: Where is Phoebe?

Morty: Right here next to me. She’s about to go to sleep.

Hi Erika! He’s right, I’m really tired.

Erika: Oh, that must be you Phoebe.

Morty: Don’t keep him up too late.

Erika: I may have to.

Morty: Oh, if you must. Night.

She’s really precious. I don’t know any woman who can be so feminine and girly one minute and completely serious and philosophical the next.

Erika: Have you told her everything that’s happened?
Morty: Yes.
Erika: Did she offer any insight?
Morty: She did.
Erika: And?
Morty: She thinks it would have been better if we had not tried to manipulate Jasmine into romance. That we should have just been good friends to her and left her feelings alone.
Erika: I cannot do that.
Morty: On the one hand, she’s right, on the other hand, we’re in too deep now to try that route.
Erika: No, I strongly disagree with your fiancé. I do not want to see Jasmine wither on the vine of youth without ever knowing love. She cannot find happiness unless something changes, and if not us, no one else cares enough to enact that change on her. I have watched her suffer for too DAMN long to stand idle.
Morty: You’ve got some seriously strong feelings for her there.
Erika: Of course I do. Of course. She means too much to me. Now are you going to continue helping me or not?
Morty: What’s there to help? She’s ready. I got my answer. I’m going to hand her off to Volkner now. If you want to keep digging into her past, use him, not me.
Erika: No. It must be you. You are the one she trusts. You have that history with her, you have developed the bond no one else has managed. It must be you.
Morty: Stop. Right there. It can’t be me.
Tonight, I gave her a choice, plain as day: if she slept with me, I would tell her my past. She backed out.
She wants to fuck. I can sense it. I know she wanted to then. If I had asked her outright instead of making it some sort of ultimatum, she would’ve agreed. But she was not going to give her virginity away as a bargaining chip. In other words, she doesn’t care about my past enough to give up her virginity to learn it.
She doesn’t know me. I don’t even think she loves me.
Deep in her heart, without her realizing it, I think she’s using me.
Erika: She is clinging to you because she believes you are her last chance for intimacy. She will accept no other, because of what she has suffered and is suffering. That is why it must be you. She will not accept Volkner, or any other male, without clearing out this darkness in her heart.
Morty: Why does it have to be me? Why does it have to be a lover, why can’t it be a friend?
Why not you?

Erika: Because her problem is with men. Because the one who created those problems will not help her!

Morty: Why not? What if we found him and forced him to apologize to her, you think that won’t fix her?

Erika: It’s not a HIM.

Morty: What the hell are you talking about.

Erika: I am saying, I think Jasmine’s first love was ruined for her, and all her future romances poisoned, because of a woman!

Morty: Huh? Who?

Erika: Her mother.

Morty: Nooo… well, maybe. Nah. I don’t believe you. No mom would go that far.

Erika: Jasmine’s hatred of men did not form overnight. She did not like boys because they acted like typical boys to her, but she did not despise and fear them like she does today when I first met her. That attitude developed gradually, over time.

Yet, from the first time I met her in Celadon six years ago, the mere mention of her mother would send her into shock.

I cannot know this for sure, because it has only come in bits and pieces, mumbled and implied, never stated out loud- but I think Jasmine has been subjected to emotional abuse at the hands of her mother. That included a very, very nasty intervention into her developing relationship with the one boy. I am left wondering as to the mechanism, but I can guess the psychological path it took:

Whatever her mother did was so incredibly cruel, it overrode any amount of pride, stubbornness, or rebelliousness Jasmine might have displayed. It caused Jasmine to fear her mother. And being forced to live with her, she could not oppose her mother. So she transferred all the negative feelings from the incident onto the boy, and blamed him, and continued blaming him, because it was expedient to do so. She internalized her mother’s prejudice towards men and thus saved herself from her mother’s wrath. Every man since has been a casualty of Jasmine’s upbringing.

Morty: Why would a mother be so cruel to her own child?

Erika: Because she is a control freak. Because she believes her daughter’s actions reflect on herself. Because she is unhappy with her life and her marriage and is taking out her stress on her daughter. She selfishly does not want her daughter enjoying happiness while she suffers.

Morty: I’m not convinced.

Erika: I am.
You have not been privy to Jasmine’s conversations for the past six years. You have not heard her stories.

Morty: Of us two, I actually met Mrs. Mikan. Is she scary? Yes. Strict? Oh yeah. But evil? Abusive? No, I didn’t get that vibe from her. And I do not think so little of Jasmine’s toughness, that she would still be shackled by her mother’s hatred three years after moving out of their house.

Erika: Her stubbornness is a front. The same mask she has to wear at home. Do you not realize how delicate and fragile she is on the inside? How could you be so oblivious! She has broken down more than once before because of your antics. What do you think a lifetime of abuse would do to her?

Morty: She is sad but not stupid. She wouldn’t blame men for crap her mother did to her. To me, I still think it was because a guy she loved abandoned her while she was still developing her ideas of romance. Not some trauma induced by her mom.

Erika: I stand by my theory.

Morty: I reject it. I think there’s something else going on. Something with the boy. I’ll figure it out, eventually.

Erika: I thought you didn’t care.

Morty: I care to a point. Not enough to try to pry into her soul and risk hurting her. She is three years out of that house. She lives on her own, she’s independent. Her interest in sex and boys is at perfectly normal, healthy levels. Right now, all I’m interested in is making sure she’s stable and ensuring her future happiness.

I just need to coach Volkner up and give him a push in her direction. She’s not going to be happy with me, and the longer this keeps up, the harder it’s going to be when I have to start distancing myself from her.

Erika: No. I need you. I want you to find out what her mother did to her.

Morty: You sound like you’ve already made up your mind. If that theory is correct, you don’t need the details, you’ve got enough.

Erika: I need to confirm it, at least.

Morty: Then ask her yourself.

Erika: No!

Morty: Why not?

Erika: I cannot.

Morty: Course you can.

Erika: I dare not!
Morty: Shut up and do it! Yes you can!

Erika: I do not want to risk my friendship with her.

Morty: So you’ll have me kamikaze my friendship with her instead?

Erika: You agreed to bear that burden!

Morty: Maybe I’m rethinking that idea.

Erika: Don’t you dare.

Morty: What is it that you’re trying so damned hard to achieve? Why’s Jasmine got to be in a relationship for you to be happy?

Erika: Because I want her to be happy!

Morty: Why?

Erika: Because I care for her.

Morty: Why?

Erika: Don’t ask me why, don’t you pry into my past. I have my reasons.

Morty: Lol. You’re asking Jasmine to give up her secrets but you won’t do the same.

Erika: Neither are you!

Morty: That’s not true.

Erika: Then who is Katrina?

Morty: ... none of your business.

Erika: See! And my reasons are none of yours.

Morty: Where did you hear that name.

Erika: Katrina? You blabbed it out.

Morty: I never talk about Katrina. No one ought to know her name.

Erika: Apparently Will knows her.

Morty: Halloween night. Oh I get it. That bastard. Will only knows Katrina’s name because he invaded my brain a long time ago. I never volunteered that information to him. You should’ve ignored him and forgotten it.

Erika: I will let it go if you stop accusing me of foul intent.

Morty: Oh really. You see, Katrina is my burden and it’ll only ever be my burden. But you’re projecting your issues onto Jasmine and I know you’re going to hurt her if you keep it up. So maybe, for her sake, why don’t you tell me the reason you’re so obsessed with her!
Erika: You first! Why do you care so much about the girl’s feelings? Jasmine should be nothing to you!

Morty: Because Jasmine is Katrina!

...  ...

Forget I said that.

Erika: You too?

Morty: Me too what?

Erika: You do love her.

Morty: She can never know that.

Erika: Ah.

My apologies. I am sorry.

Morty: Thanks.

Erika: You and I are the same.

Morty: Huh?

Erika: We both love her, but cannot have her, and she will not return our love.

Morty: Wait a minute- are you...

Is that why...

Erika: I should go to sleep now.

Morty: Oh. Okay. Are you okay with the new plan? Me just bowing out and handing it to Volkner?

Erika: Do what you want.

10:14 A.M.

Morty: She knows.

Erika: What now.

Morty: She knows about Phoebe.

Erika: What?!

Morty: I don’t know how. She found out. Maybe someone told her, or she came back and spied on us last night. I don’t know. But she does know.
Erika: What happened?

Morty: I called her on skype to talk about last night, and she sprung it on me out of nowhere. She knew me and Phoebe were screwing each other.

Erika: What did you tell her?

Morty: The truth.

Erika: You idiot!

Morty: Not the whole truth. I just, my dignity got the better of me. I told her who Phoebe was and that we’re engaged. I was going to explain more but she hung up.

Erika: She does not know about the plan? Then we can still salvage this.

Morty: Fuck the plan. I’m going to tell her the whole truth when I see her again.

Erika: No, do not.

Morty: Why not? We’re screwed anyways. If she finds out, and I think she will, and we keep lying to her past this point, who knows how far off the rocker she’ll go.

Erika: I can’t have that. I need her to still believe.

Morty: Why? What’s so important about deceiving her?

Erika: Because if I can’t have her I will make sure some man worthy of her will! She will be loved! I swear!

Morty: So that’s how it is. I get it now. Maybe… Hey, wait a minute. Were you just using me to scope out her orientation?

Erika: Oh rest assured, I am already confident which team she swings for. I am at peace with that. I will do whatever it takes to make sure she is happy, even if it is not with me.

Morty: How are you going to do that now? Because I’m stumped. I don’t have a godly clue what to do. She’s gonna go off the deep end.

Erika: If you keep your mouth shut, maybe, just maybe, we can still use your infidelity as a means of turning her towards Volkner. Volkner would be faithful to her, right?

Morty: Volkner would be faithful to his woman, yes. Whether he’s still willing to be with her after last night- damn it, I’m not worried about her love life right now, I’m worried she might hurt someone- herself or one of us.

Erika: Pah. I will take care of her.

Morty: Is there any reason to think that her mother might not help us? Even if she’s a horrible mom, she at least cares enough about Jasmine to want to protect her, right? A control-freak mom would do that, right?

Erika: I seriously doubt it.
Morty: What about her dad?

Erika: She never talks about him. She says he is always busy.

Morty: Gah.

Erika: Wait a minute.

Morty: What?

Erika: Someone is knocking on my door.

Morty: It’s her.

Erika: Yes. I am going to calm her down and keep her here. Stick around, we will figure out what to do next.

Morty: Tell her it’s all my fault. Put all the blame on me.

Erika: Alright. Talk to you soon.

Morty: I’ll be waiting.

11:24 A.M.

Morty: How’s it coming? Is she safe? Is she sane?

Erika?

Erika: Hi.

Morty: Ah. Was it Jasmine? What’s up?

What’s wrong? Did you tell her anything?

Erika?

Erika: Erika is indisposed at the moment.

Morty: … Jasmine?

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I took the tablet computer and drifted to the backdoor, opened it, and plodded out into the yard.

Erika sat on the bench in front of her rock garden, head bowed, hands folded in her lap. With the dead foliage of trees hanging around her, the cold sun giving light but no warmth from overhead, and the air chilly but still, it felt serene, tragic.

She heard me and raised her head.

I tossed the tablet into the sand before her. It landed with a barely audible thud. Erika stared down at
it blankly.

“This doesn’t make it right,” I said.

Then I left.
Free Fall

What is that noise?
My cellphone.
Damn it.
Flop out of bed. Reach reach reach.
Stab palm on corner of dresser. Ow.
Painful. Keep reaching.
One finger touching. Two.
Got it.
“Mnn?” I answered hazily.
Then I realized that by answering my phone, I ran a high risk of talking to one of the select individuals I wholeheartedly did not want to hear from right now. Too late now.
“Jasmine? Where’ve you been?”
Ah, it’s Connie. I’m lucky. She’s okay, I can stand exchanging a few words with her.
“Hi.”
“What’s the matter? You sound awful. Have you been sick?”
“Yeah.”
“Oh crap. Okay. How bad is it?”
“Bad.”
“I mean, how bad?”
“Bad.”
“What are we talking here? A few days? A week? Hospital visit? Am I going to have to attend a funeral?”
“Don’t know.”
“Damn it, Jasmine, give me something here.”
“Just hold the gym down for me.”
“I’m just a volunteer, how should I know how to run the place? The challengers are getting antsy as all hell.”
“Oh well.”
“Oh well? That’s all you’ve got to say? I know you’re sick, but come on!”

“Just hand out badges to anyone who wins. Easy. Cancel everything else.”

“Right, fine, whatever. I can’t work Monday, what then?”

“Close the gym.”

“But…”

“Connie, I’m tired. Please help me.”


The line went dead. I tossed the phone atop the bed and then dragged myself after it. The sheets were warm and inviting. I wedged myself further into them. My body felt like going back to sleep, but my brain would not allow it. Reaching no internal consensus, I decided on browsing my phone.

It was an old thing, only basic functions, no wifi connection or internet access. The one Volkner had gotten me would have all those fancy apps, but we never had time to set it up. Where was it? Oh. Probably back in Ecru-

My chest heaved. My limbs tensed. I planted my face into the mattress and bit into the sheet.

No. I mustn’t think about them. Stop. Look at your phone.

I forced myself to check the display.

38 unread messages.

**Delete All.**

**Confirm?**

31 missed calls. 20 voice messages.

**Delete All.**

**Confirm?**

Don’t think about them. Think about something else. Something neutral. Something inconsequential. The date. What is today?


I’ve slept for three straight days. I vaguely recall brief forays to the bathroom and fridge, doing less than the bare minimum to maintain homeostasis. I felt thinner. That’s probably not a good sign, for someone like me to physically feel weight loss. Oh well. Back to sleep we go.

My brain was being unreasonable, however, and slumber did not come easily. I tossed around, trying to find a comfortable position. My bones felt sore, making it hard to rest no matter which side I lay on.

I feel so weak. Not just my body, either.

Why?
Why had it all come to this?

There was a knock on my door.

It creaked open.

He strode in, warily.

“Morty, go away,” I muttered, throwing the covers over my head.

Footsteps. They ended right by my bedside.

The lip of the blanket was pulled back, just a little, enough to show my face.

“Go away,” I repeated.

“I want to apologize. I was wrong. I am sorry,” he said.

“I don’t care. Get out.”

“I want you to be happy. I want us to be together. That’s what I felt deep down, but just never had the courage to tell you. What can I do to earn your forgiveness?”

“Nothing.”

“There has to be something. Do you want me to leave Phoebe? That’s reasonable. I will, for you.”

“Not enough.”

“I will give you my money. All of it. You’ll never have to worry about finances ever again. You’ll want for nothing. I will stay by your side, and worship you. I won’t ever tease you again. We can have sex. Or we can abstain from sex altogether. Whatever you’re most comfortable with. What would you have me to do?”

“Leave.”

“That’s the one thing I won’t do.”

I sniffled and turned my face away.

“What must I do to earn your forgiveness? Is there anything, anything you can conceive of that would wipe this sin away? I will do anything. I love you Jasmine. I want you. Tell me what to do.”

“Liar.”

“Are we that far gone? Is forgiveness impossible? Would I have to die for you to forgive me?”

“If you kill yourself… do it outside. So I don’t have to deal with the mess.”

“Okay. But then, will you feel better? Will that fix everything?”

“No.”

“Then I’ll do it anyways. Because you asked me to. I’ll prove I care by doing it, even if it gets me nothing. I love you, Jazz.”

He rose up and slowly walked to the door.
“Wait!” I cried.

The door was closed, no one was there.

*Just a damn fantasy*, I silently grumbled.

I turned under the shelter of the covers. So warm. Why can’t I be an Ursaring? They get to hibernate for months at a time. Well, I suppose they fatten up first. I don’t want to be fat. Fat? You’re headed in the opposite direction, my dear. At some point, you’ll have to get up, for no other reason than to raid the fridge again. Well, the fridge is almost empty, so you’ll have to do the inconceivable and actually go to the store.

But to buy stuff from the store, you need money. To get money, you have to do your job. Your job is at the gym, being a Gym Leader, commanding your Pokemon to fight other people’s Pokemon. I don’t want anything to do with people or Pokemon right now.

But you have to, in order to get food.

Unless you would rather starve to death.

Are you okay with that? Just dying?

Maybe…

The hours slipped by.

My phone read 11:39 A.M.

My bladder hurt. I stumbled to the toilet. The trickle was weak, pathetic, too yellow. I hadn’t been drinking enough water. I turned the sink faucet on and slurped water directly from the tap. Thus hydrated, I returned to bed.

**1:32 P.M.**

Hmm? Already? I must have dozed off. Did I dream? I can’t remember. I took another glance at my phone.

3 messages. 2 missed calls.

**Delete All.**

**Confirm?**

Go fetch your netbook.

A momentary venture across the room won me my mini-computer.

It’s like a laptop, but miniature, just eight inches across. It’s pretty old and underpowered, but it works well enough for what I use it for. The battery was pretty weak, though, and only kept a two hour charge. Not to mention it sometimes lagged badly when browsing the internet. I want to replace it, but Devon Co. doesn’t make netbooks anymore. Tablets are all the rage now, even though their touch UI is complete crap. That’s just my opinion, though, no one else agrees with me.

I booted the netbook up.

Internet? No. Bad idea. Too many reminders of just how awful humanity can be. Plus, I might
accidentally stumble onto one of my social media sites, and face a barrage of messages from so-called “friends”.

Better to be safe and play SimKingdom. And I did, for an hour.

I smiled, faintly, watching my level 999 hero Sir Steelix gallop across the screen, meandering between the endless walls of my empire. I had him make a lap around the Great Zoo, where I had completely encircled a trio of rival empires and quarantined them, then laughed as they tore each other to pieces. I even arranged for resources to be shipped to each of them, to prolong their violence as long as possible. That was in the past. The A.I. had long ago petered out, the rival kingdoms were now practically ghost towns. I guided Sir Steelix to the center of the Zoo, where I had built a memorial for the tens of thousands slain. Ah, fond memories.

Another half hour was spent raiding a basilisk lair on the edge of the frontier.

Then I was bored again.

I’m hungry.

I don’t really want to die.

Let’s see what’s in the fridge.

I trudged to the kitchen and addressed the refrigerator unit. Looking inside, my fears were realized. A bottle of mustard, one-third full. That’s it. That’s everything. I already knew the pantry was bare.

I have to go out.

I don’t want to go out.

But you have to.

But I can’t.

Oh you stupid girl.

I sighed and went back to bed.

Checked my phone.

4:05 P.M.

1 message unread.

Who exactly keeps contacting me? I bet it’s Erika.

I risked the pain to actually look at the message.

Jasmine, hey what’s up? You haven’t picked up your phone lately. Just wanted to see if you’re doing anything for the end of your probation.

-Whitney

Oh. Well. Whitney.

What about Whitney? How do you feel towards her?
She’s not involved. She’s obsessed with her crush, Brawley, and her rivalry with Maylene.

I don’t think there’s anything to worry about with her. She wouldn’t be hiding anything from me. Whitney is the kind of girl who ‘what you see is what you get’. She wears her emotions on her sleeve. She may be promiscuous, but she’s honest about it, and tries to make sure her desires don’t hurt others. I’ve been privy to all of her relationship drama, and it seems she goes out of her way to not hurt the feelings of those boys that don’t deserve to get hurt. Honestly, her biggest issue is how sensitive she is. The tantrum she threw when a boy she had a major crush on called her a “slut” became legendary in middle school. The guy’s parents moved him to a different school to protect him from the backlash. Yet, her hysteria only lasted three days. Whitney isn’t one to dwell or obsess over things. She gets over drama fast and moves on to the next exciting thrill in her life.

Seeing Whitney’s message made me feel incredibly lonely.

I don’t need deep conversation, nor to be assuaged with loving and meaningful words. I just need someone to listen to. Someone I can be normal with, create a basis from which I could lift myself back to emotional stability.

I dialed the call button.

“Hello? Jasmine! Hey!”

“Hi Whitney.”

“How’ve you been? It’s been a few days. How’d the rest of your party go?”

“It was fine.”

“Did you and Morty, you know, have a nice time? Mmm?”

“No, not really.”

“Awww.”


“Oh, that’s rough!”

She’s sounding very chipper. Like usual.

“I hope you get better soon.”

“Thanks.”

“Hmm. Oh yeah. I was wondering if you were going to do anything for the end of your probation. A party or outing or something to celebrate.”

“Wasn’t planning on anything. I’ve had a lot of parties lately.”

“Ah, aww, you are such a recluse. Oh well. Maybe we can meet up at your gym? Me, Erika, and you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure I’ll pass probation.”

“What a pessimist. Think positive! You’ve worked hard so far, aren’t you good on your win ratio?”
“I haven’t looked at it lately.”
“Darn.”
“What about Lyra?”
“Hmm?”
“You left out Lyra. We could invite her too, if we’re going to do something.”
“Oh…”
“Oh?”
“You didn’t hear, did you?”
“Hear what?”
“Lyra ran off to Kanto.”
“She did?”
“Yeah, with Silver. She said they’re going to do something big, we’ll read about it in the newspaper she said. Or history books. Ha! I’d like to know what they have planned.”
“Huh.”
Well, I’m not too surprised. A little bummed, though. Lyra was another friend I could have relied on.
“I wish I could do that.”
“Do what?”
“Run away,” I said.
Whitney giggled.
“That’s not like you,” she said. “You’re the Full Metal Gym Leader! You face problems head on! Come on, don’t sound glum. That’s just the cold talking. You’ll pass probation. We’re all cheering for you.”
“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”
“No problem! We’re here for you. Everyone. We all care for you.”
“Why? Why do you guys care for me so much?”
“Um, because you’re our friend?” Whitney’s reply was joking in tone, like the answer was self-obvious, and I was being funny in even asking it.
“No, really, why? I don’t see why.”
“Uh, I don’t know what else to say. We like you.”
“But why?” I insisted. “I’m such a horrible person. I’m bland, I have a bad sense of humor, I just get in the way of your merriment. I must be an awful friend.”
“You are not.” Whitney clucked to herself. “It’s like... remember that lesson in biology class with Mrs. Laker? How every ecosystem has all these organisms that interact? How every organism has a niche they fill, that they can only fill that niche, no other creature can do the same job? That’s how you are. Not everyone can be the big sister like Erika or the jokester like me. We need someone who keeps us anchored and reminds us to be serious or sorry when it’s called for. That’s you. We love having you around.”

“Mmm.”

“You know, I think the others are hell-bent on making you happy, but maybe they don’t have a good idea what a happy you looks like. Sometimes they try too hard because of that.”

“I noticed.”

“Remember our field trip to Tin Tower?”

“Yeah.”

“And everyone started a game of hide and seek when we got to the top?”

“Mr. Belk went crazy.”

“Haha, yeah, that was fun. But you just sat by the railing, looking at Ecruteak. I remember you had Sunkern in your lap.”

“Ah.”

She’s conjuring up a distant memory, one that was hazy for me.

“I thought that was the most ‘you’ moment. You seemed pretty happy to me then. I mean, not joyous, but you were really at peace then.”

“I guess.”

Is she right?

I’ve done the same thing, gazing at the scenery from high up, usually with Amphy at my side, a number of times. Those moments of restfulness were my greatest comfort when life was being hard on me.

“I’m with Erika, I think a boyfriend would help you. Not sure about Morty though. The best guy for you, I think, would be someone who could sit by you and make you feel like yourself. Or really, keep you feeling like that everywhere you two are together.”

“You don’t think Morty could do that for me.”

“Probably not. You two bicker too much. I mean, not to try to push you away from him. You two are adorable when you’re being lovey-dovey. But that’s only infatuation. Been there, done that. Doesn’t last forever. I wonder if you’ll be okay with dating Morty once that wears off and you act like your default personality around each other.”

“We’ll see,” I said. Obviously, listening to her bring up Morty was awakening memories and emotions. Not really painful, this time, but sore, like poking at a bruise the day after acquiring it. Besides, what she’s saying does make sense.

Had I staked too much hope in a relationship with Morty? Was the infatuation and lust-filled bits all
that was driving me towards him? What about his ‘default’ personality, as Whitney puts it? Could I have transitioned to loving who he really is?

Or wait. Wasn’t his behavior deliberate? Their conspiracy was aimed at getting me into a relationship with Volkner. They only wanted me to become infatuated with Morty, so he could manipulate me. Morty was probably withholding his true personality, to avoid risking me falling in love with him and making it easier to disengage and toss me towards Volkner.

What a sad, stupid plan. What a twisted concept. Not only would it never work, it offends me, that they would think so little of me, my emotions, my intellect, and miscalculate what was best for my well-being so badly.

“Do you think Morty and I can work? On a basic level?” I asked, leading Whtiney on.

“Don’t know. That’s up to you guys, I guess. I’m starting to think me and Brawley might not be suited for each other long term. It makes me kind of sad, you know. I really love how he makes me feel, like, on dates and then in bed, but I don’t see a lot of basis for us getting married. Maybe he is better off with Maylene. Sometimes I wish I could be more like you.”

“Like me? How?”

“Well, I don’t have any regrets about how I lived so far. I love sex, I love sleeping around, I’ll admit all that- proudly! Women’s rights, damn it! But I’m getting older and sometimes I think it’s time to settle down, but I worry that I won’t find a guy who’ll accept me because of my past. You’ve kept yourself pure, you don’t have to worry about a guy judging you for that.”

“No guy is going to judge you for that. They’re all Mankeys, they don’t have any qualms about those things.”

“Tsk tsk tsk. Jasmine.” I could pretty vividly see Whitney shaking her head in reproach. “You need to get out more.”

“Well, sure, the old farts and women and bitter neckbeards and married couples will all think that, but that’s not the demographic you’re aiming for. The bachelors will accept your past. To them it means you’re more open and willing to have fun in bed.”

“More fun for a one-night stand!”

She let out a *humph*!

“But there’s a lot of guys, including just about every guy worth taking to the altar, that’ll look at me and just see a future cheating whore. I’m not that way though. I can be loyal, and affectionate, and fun, and a great wife, if they’ll give me a chance. But it’s impossible to prove that to them, because of what I’ve done. You don’t have to deal with that.”

“Then they’re wrong, not you.”

“Yeah, I keep telling myself that. Doesn’t change the fact I’m stuck without a husbando prospect.”

“Do you really want a husband?”

Whitney murmured something inaudible.

“Hmm?”
“I don’t think a slut like me deserves to even want one,” she said.

I paused.

This is hard to deal with.

It seems like Whitney and I’s problems are running parallel to each other. Of course we both want love in our life, it’s natural to desire a partner. There’s just this impossible thing getting in the way. It’s how men think and behave. For Whitney, it’s their patriarchal arrogance. For me, it’s their primal lust. Two different motivations, same outcome- mistreatment of us women.

A thought occurred to me. Not that it’s a viable solution for her, given everything I know, but I am curious about the possibility.

“Hey Whitney, have you ever considered dating Morty?”

“Yes,” she answered reluctantly.

“Why not try him? You two seem to get along, and he’s got no problem at all with you not being a virgin.”

“But he’s your guy.”

“What if he wasn’t my guy? What about high school? I wasn’t around then, how come you two never dated?”

“Because…” she trailed off.

“No reason?” I inquired.

“There was something about him,” she said. “He pushed away his first three girlfriends. I didn’t like his reasons for doing it. I didn’t want to be next in line.”

“Can you tell me what the matter was with him?”

“I mean, no. I mean, yes, I could, but I’m afraid how you’ll take it.”

“Is it because he was still holding out for me?” I inquired.

Whitney grumbled, upset and maybe surprised I had guessed so easily.

“It’s complicated,” Whitney said. “The way he treated you- it was special for a girl. I don’t know why. Yeah, I think he dumped his girlfriends because he was comparing them to you.”

Then what about Phoebe? I silently, angrily asked myself. How’d she pass muster?

“Kind of sounds like- did you not want to be compared with me?”

“Oh you’re full of yourself Jasmine.”

“It was a joke.”

“Heh. Nah, I wasn’t worried about that. Maybe I was a little jealous that Morty fixated on you instead of me, but I got over that. Chris and then Brawley were bigger deals to me.”

“I see.”
“If you’re still worried about that time at Indigo, it’s no big deal. That was just us goofing around. There were no feelings involved. Right now, if you want him, and if you think it will work out, he’s all yours. I won’t interfere. I just hope whatever happens, you’ll be happy.”

“I understand. Hey Whitney?”

“Hmm?”

“Did you know about Morty and Erika’s plan to hitch me up with Volkner?”

A long silence.

“Jasmine… everyone knew.”

My thumb came off the End Call button and closed the cell phone.

Despite the layers of covers over my back and the heater dialed way up, my body shivered. I dug into the blankets even harder.

Every last one of them.

I have no one.

No human, anyways.

I cast a gaze at the pile of Pokeballs on the dresser. They hadn’t been let out since that night. Would they comfort me? Probably not, not after what I said to them. I should apologize to them. I won’t, though. I’ll just keep them penned up in their Pokeballs. They’ll survive, the balls keep them in stasis without need for food or water.

I’m alone.

You don’t have to be alone.

Just admit you were wrong. Go say sorry to him. He will understand. You can do like Whitney said, sit at the railing, gaze at the sea with him at your side, and you’ll be at peace.

Well, maybe. But I don’t think I can do it. My ego is too brittle, my pride is too strong. Besides, what looked like peacefulness to Whitney was really a sort of melancholy. I’m comfortable with feeling sad. It’s not happiness or contentedness, but stability. This turmoil, this drama, is what wears on me and makes me so upset. I can’t stand chaos. Relationships with humans have always brought me chaos. Pokemon, until now, have brought order to my emotions.


There goes my phone again.

Probably Whitney.

Why would I talk to her? She would have been better off lying and feigning ignorance of everything. Go away.
Nonetheless, the phone kept ringing, insistently, for minutes and minutes on end.

When voice mail activated, the ringing ceased, only to continue again a few seconds later. This cycle repeated four times.

“What the hell Whitney?” I yelled and picked up the phone, ostensibly to shut it off completely.

Wait a…

Who’s number is that? It’s local, but…

6:25 P.M.

255-232-1098

Answer Call?

I clicked on the Answer Call button and shakily brought the phone to my ear.

“Mrs. Hayate, are you there?”

“Huh? Hello? Yes, I’m here,” I said. I know that voice.

“This is Mayor Adoch. Are you alright?”

“Yes.”

The Mayor of Olivine? Why would he be calling me?

“Mrs. Hayate, I am concerned. Are you aware that for two nights in a row the Glitter Lighthouse Ampharos were not on duty?”

“Huh? Aw wah-”

“We sent an officer to investigate and found both Ampharos were locked inside their Pokeballs.”

I did that, didn’t I? Because I was mad at them. Then when Morty told me the truth, I stormed out of the lighthouse without thinking about the Pokemon.

“I mean, it was…”

I couldn’t think of an excuse, not even a lie to tell the mayor.

“The officer also found the office computer monitor destroyed. Now, I don’t want to make hasty accusations, but you are the only person with regular access to the office room. Be honest, are you responsible for these things?”

“No… I… there was a personal issue, and…” I murmured.

The mayor sighed.

“I was afraid so.”

My chest tensed up.

“It is evident to me that you are undergoing stress. I am aware of your probation status and that you have been missing from the gym for the past few days. I sympathize. However, the operation of the
lighthouse beacon is a vital component of this city’s maritime safety. Even for sympathetic reasons, we cannot have the beacon’s function interrupted. It is an endangerment to all shipping traffic coming to our port.”

“What are you saying?” I asked in a whisper.

“This is not the first issue, there was also the technical malfunction caused by your carelessness a month ago. I have spoken with the Port Authority Chief and the Chief of Police, and we have decided that you are no longer capable of performing the custodian duties for Glitter Lighthouse.”

“How?”

“Whereby, you are relieved of your caretaker status of the two lighthouse Ampharos. I am terribly sorry. This is the reality of the matter. Safety must come first. If you would please come to Town Hall tomorrow morning and turn in your keys, we would appreciate it.”

“No. Wait. You can’t do that.”

My heart was racing. My breath was choking.

“They’re my Pokemon,” I said in disbelief.

“No, the Ampharos belong to the city. Another caretaker will be appointed. Until you’re cleared by a psychiatrist, we have decided it is too dangerous to even grant you visitation rights. Again, I am sorry.”

“They are my Pokemon! My Amphy! I raised him! I-”

“Miss Hayate! If you do not comply, we will be forced to take legal action against you! Please do not make this harder on yourself!”

At that, the phone went flying across the room.

I gripped myself and convulsed.

It felt like the earth had been pulled out from underneath me. The world was rushing past me, battering me with one barrage after another. Things keep getting worse and worse and worse. I feel like I’m falling and there’s no bottom in sight.

Oh god, why do I feel so alone?
Er since Mr. Beret retired, he's taken to secluding himself in the back office. If you peep inside, you'll probably find him gazing out the window and watching the street and the people passing by. Edward and Beth hung out in the lobby when not battling. There weren't many visitors these days. That should change. Summer was just around the corner, when all the high schoolers would be out on break and starting their Pokémon journeys. For now, though, the gym arena was empty.

I sat alone on the bleachers, no company, not even a Pokémon, observing the emptiness in silence. I liked it this way. It was lonely, draining, and devoid of emotion, and I wanted that.

In my hand I palmed Beret's gift, a Metal Coat. The chunk of metal felt impossibly heavy, far more difficult to lift than a weight, bowling ball, or brick. It's not often in our everyday lives we come across something so incredibly dense. Our muscles are accustomed to the easy heft of ubiquitous plastic, exemplified by Pokeballs. Nothing strains us, everything feels brittle, cheap, breakable. Nothing like this Metal Coat. Not even rocks compare. I, on my own power, could never so much as dent the hard edges of the item. The effort to hold it up was too great to maintain for more than a minute at a time. Take a hammer to it and you'd sooner peel the skin off your hands than crack its surface.

Rocks can be crushed. Flesh rots. Wood burns. Metal remains. Metal endures.

I will become Metal.

I will endure.

I grasped the Metal Coat in my hand as hard as possible, squeezing until my fingers hurt.

The next moment I was leaping from the stands, marching for the exit, and beyond, to a new and different future from the one I had dreamed of all my childhood.

Present Day

"Are you okay? You seem out of it."

Connie approached me while I stood staring down the last challenger. The bearded man with the Machoke and Hypno looked happy to receive his Mineral Badge. Connie looked annoyed that she was forced to hand out the badge in my stead. Magnézone, Magnéton, and Skarmory lay on the sidelines, nursing bruises and looking glum.

Their performance was unconscionably bad. Their attacks were weak, their ability to withstand attacks absent, their overall effort half-hearted. They did not fight until they could not, but just until they received enough damage to justify bowing out without looking like they were faking a KO.

Steelix had no problem finding motivation. He fought with every ounce of strength he could muster. Yet that did not help him secure victory, because the one who was supposed to be coaching him was
"Hey."

Connie snapped her fingers in my face.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

In answer, I pointed at the metallic Leviathan churning the ground before us. The Pokémon had recovered from fainting only a minute ago, but already he was stretching and shaking himself, getting ready for another round.

"Steelix?"

I nodded.

"Steelix can't keep carrying your team like this. That's nine losses today. At some point your other Pokes are going to have to contribute, and you're actually going to have to give them commands. You understand that, right?"

I shook my head.

"Do you need to take another sick day?" she asked.

"I took ten already," I answered. "I thought you didn't like running the gym."

"Yeah, that was before I saw you throw every other match for five straight hours. It's depressing. I know you don't get paid sick leave, but seriously, if you keep losing you're going to fail probation. Go home. Come back when you've got your mind straight."

"I'm not going home."

"Fine! Sheesh. Ignore me will you. Well I'm getting tired of playing customer service for you, so unless I get your permission to go back to battling I'm going home to study."

"Go study. I'm closing down the gym."

"Hey, wait now, you can't do that."

"I'm the Gym Leader. I'm closing my gym now."

There were rules, consequences to closing one's gym during normal business hours. Without external factors to justify a closing (and personal issues don't count), the consequences were more severe. I was not prepared to find out how bad those consequences would be, but then again I didn't really care what fell on my head.

When all the disappointed challengers were shooed out and Pokémon sent back to their balls, I was alone inside the cavernous building.

Only Steelix remained with me, stretched out straight and laying on his side. Along his flank were the signs of numerous battles: burn marks, dents from Fighting and Normal strikes, chafing from Ground vibrations, warpage from Psychic- and Ice-type assaults.

I lay my palm flat against one injured area, gently.

"It's been six years since I evolved you," I said aloud. "Metal breaks after all, doesn't it? It just takes
more force, and more time."

Steelix let out a low, placid grunt.

My chest expanded as far as it could, taking in as much as possible in one great gulp. The air was cold. It pricked against my lungs in a thousand tiny places like molecular-sized Icicle Spears. I let out the air in a long, slow *whoosh*.

“Coming up,” I said.

I lifted myself up Steelix’s flank. My bare arms were greeted with a more acute version of the frostbite that had just accosted my lungs. The rough edges of his injuries bit into my palms and fingers. Nonetheless, I continued up his spine and to the peak of his head.


Steelix turned and slithered towards the back gate. We exited, and he pulled up at the back lot, murmuring for direction.

“Keep going. That way,” I said, pointing. He continued down the street without complaint. The urban landscape of Olivine City passed by us: grocers, office towers, apartments, the like.

There it is- the accursed building. A low, nondescript office with barely any signage out front. I turned my nose up at it as we passed. Just another reminder.

The grave I had tossed those memories down and hoped to bury under so many mountains of molten iron had been dug up. They laid open, like a gaping pit in the earth, and I couldn’t help but dwell on them the last two weeks. It was strange. The one time I had tentatively talked to the school counselor about it (without giving her details), she had told me that introspection would help ease the pain. I didn’t believe her. Now having given the subject two weeks of contemplation, I found that the pain did go away- only to be replaced by sorrow, regret, and self-loathing.

“Left, up the hill,” I told Steelix. The Pokemon obeyed and turned northwest. There were mountains in the distance ahead of us. I had to squint to see them; the setting sun was glaring out of the corner of my left eye.

I’m back where I started.

Literally speaking, actually. Steelix passed the onramp to the Route 39 highway. I remember father waking me on the return trip from Ecruteak.

“*Hey there, look, we’re home.*”

Our exile in Ecruteak was over, we were back where we belonged. I was overjoyed, and would have leapt out of my seatbelt had I not been so exhausted. Soon I would be in a new high school, surrounded by kids, some familiar, some not. The first thing I wanted to do was sprint to the lighthouse and toss myself at the little fuzz ball waiting at the top.

Life had felt so hopeful back then. Everything wrong had been fixed. Even my parents would stop fighting, I thought, the nightly bouts of screaming would halt, the blaming would stop, because we
were back. For a time, it did, and I forgot what it was like to fear going home. It felt like a new beginning for me.

“Be on your best behavior. I absolutely mean it! I know you got away with those childish antics in middle school, but that will not be tolerated here. We came back to Olivine for you, do not make us regret it!”

“Yes Mother.”

I got to high school, and found everything different from what I thought it would be. The people I used to know weren’t the same. The teachers treated us differently. It felt stricter, more formal, more distant. The other teens pulled away from me. I guess I pulled away from them as well. Rumors made their rounds.

“She used to be a wild one.”

“A tomboy.”

“I heard she caused all sorts of trouble.”

“I heard she was a teacher’s pet.”

“Well she’s pretty shy now.”

“Ecruteak changed her.”

“Kinda weird if you ask me. They’re weird up there. Cursed her or something.”

“Don’t pick on her, she’s works for Mr. Beret. He’ll eat you alive.”

“I dunno, she’s kinda of sweet I think.”

“Look at that little girl with her Pokemon! She’s so tender with them. I bet she’s turned into a nice, kind young woman.”

I felt lonely. No one bullied me, and they never outright ran me off when I wanted to join them— but I was never actively accepted anywhere either. No one invited me to join them, no one went out of their way to make me their friend. In elementary school this was no problem, I would have just marched up to folks and forced them into my fledgling empire. In middle school, I never bothered myself over it, and Whitney’s social circle was shared with me by default. In high school, though, this wallflower feeling came out full-force and would not relent.

At times, it was unbearable. It felt too much like home.

There was one little idea that kept tickling the back of the mind, planted there by Morty and Whitney, nurtured by shoujo manga and feminine fantasy novels, and blossomed into maturity by hormones.

“Father, um, I have a question.”

“Yes Jasmine?”

“Now that I’m in high school, am I allowed to start dating?”

“Oh. You’ll have to ask your mother.”

I was neither naïve nor innocent. I noticed all the handsome young men parading through the halls of
Olivine North High. I was also disappointed to find all of them inaccessible for various reasons: most were already taken or soon to be snapped up by aggressive courtiers. Many paid me no attention, either put off by my reputation or just not impressed by my looks. A few were confused and afraid of my lead Pokemon, a monstrous earth snake. Quite a few were terrified of my mentor, Gym Leader Beret. Not one young man of repute asked me out.

Not to say I didn’t suffer the advances of less reputable males on occasion.

“I’m not into goths. Sorry.”

“I just don’t think dyeing your hair teal is very attractive, Peter.”

“Baseball isn’t really my thing.”

It didn’t bother me that much. I thought I could afford to be picky. I was still enamored with the ideal romantic partner as presented by anime and chick flicks. There were certain traits I was adamant a potential boyfriend must possess. He must be smart. Easy to talk to. Clean and sound of body. Most importantly, he must be interested in Pokemon and show great kindness towards them. There wasn’t anyone in my school who fit these criteria, so I was not too concerned by the lack of interest towards me by the male student population. I simply existed in a state of passive hope and expectancy.

“Hi there. Is the Gym Leader here?”

“Oh! Um. I guess… you could say… I’m the Gym Leader… kind of. Sort of.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. I just assumed…”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I didn’t think the Gym Leader would be a cute girl like you.”

“Eh?!”

Then one day, my hopes were seemingly answered.

What followed could not be described as a romance, but a delayed-fused nightmare.

“Keep going.”

Steelix eyed me.

“Yes, that’s where we’re going,” I told him. He slouched but kept moving. The mountains loomed larger. The sun had set behind them. The sky was still aglow, but the earth beneath was already darkened. The street we were following wound its way up to a plateau. A wide open area was brightly lit up, surrounded by glass-walled buildings. I guided Steelix towards the largest of these.

When I said I was back where I started, what I really meant was that my situation was the same as back then. My life lay open-ended, without a clear path forward. I gambled my happiness on a boy and had my hopes dashed. I then withdrew into myself and closed my heart off to the world, hoping to protect myself from further pain. Yet the pain wouldn’t go away, it grew by little turns until it consumed me. I didn’t realize my desire for love had survived that nightmare, and that depriving
myself of romantic engagement was eating away at my soul. I refused to acknowledge that part of myself. When a fleeting desire passed my mind, I purposefully recalled the poisoned memories and sent myself into a rage, blaming everything on men and patriarchal injustice and lecherous perverts. My own feelings were taboo to me. It shouldn’t have been a surprise that Morty suckered me into his trap so easily, and yet I was astonished at myself anyways. It goes to show the depths of the delusion I had fallen into.

Then Morty showed his true colors, as did Erika and the rest of my friends.

Now again I find myself in this state of tabula rasa. Perhaps a little bit wiser and more self-conscious, but that only serves to further shackle my confidence. I know deep down inside that I want love. There is within me a gaping chasm that can only be filled with the affection of another human being, and if not addressed, will crumble away until I have nowhere to turn, and will fall. Poetic words, I know, but there is a concrete reason for my misery; I simply cannot look the issue in the face and address it honestly. It hurts too much.

Maybe if I had someone to call my own, a soul that I could hold onto for support and be able to trust intimately, I could brave the dark labyrinth of my mind and bring this secret out to court. What Phoebe is for Morty, his “solace” - someone like that. Except, where do you find that kind of person? That piece of shit Morty- he promised to be that person for me, but in the end he was just a confused, cowardly little child, heaping his wish-wash emotions on me and lying the whole way through about it. Ditto for Erika. Not only have they robbed me of the trust I placed in them, as my boyfriend and best friend respectively, they have once again- again! – reinforced my deep-seated fear that I can trust no one.

No one truly wants me. No one cares about me. No one respects me. What am I to them? They claimed to have noble intentions and worked towards my happiness, but any bystander would tell them that manipulation and lies are wrong, that a conspiracy would never end in a happy arrangement, and most of all their inconsiderate actions give proof to the selfish root of their motivations. Because what they really wanted out of me was the positive reinforcement of their own desires. They tricked themselves into thinking their actions were altruistic, but underneath it all they just wanted the positive feedback begot from my manufactured happiness.

How am I supposed to trust anyone after this? How am I supposed to fill that void? Existential questions without clear answers.

So what about the future? What do you want to do from here on out?

Crawl back into your shell? Forsake love? Survive?

I’m not sure that would work.

What is survival? Nothing but a slow march to the grave. Mere survival would do naught but lengthen the duration of the march, with nothing of interest to mark the path. It’s not a life worth living, in my estimation.

Besides, last time I had my friends and my Pokemon. This time I would have neither. This time, I am not sure how I could survive myself without something to hang onto. Running away is no longer a viable option.

Yet, trusting another human being, a man, is not viable either.

I’m stuck.
Find something different. A third option, or a back door.

I shut my eyes and wracked my brain.

I cannot think of anything else that would stabilize my emotions. Every other option would demand more of me than I could give. My job is imperiled. I’ve no idea how many battles I’ve missed, how many forfeits have been credited to my win/loss ratio. I seriously doubt I can find my life’s purpose in a career I can barely hang onto, let alone succeed and excel at.

However, I’ve spent my entire childhood devoted to Pokemon and Pokemon battles. My grades faltered in my senior year and I never took the college entrance exams. My knowledge of job hunting is pretty much zero. Let’s not talk about my ability to actually perform work: I was quickly fired from the one cashier job I ever tried my hand at. Too much stress from constant customer interaction, too fast paced, and I bungled the mechanics of the cashier itself. I’m not smart enough or confident enough to start a business. I suppose I could join the Pokemon League Volunteer Services; but I’m too much of a wimp to endure the hardships involved (extremely low pay, demeaning, labor-intensive work, zero job security, zero benefits, compulsory relocation- i.e. tours of duty in third world countries). I would like to devote my life to Pokemon and do charity work helping them, but A) how would that fulfill my desire for human contact/romance? and B) how would that pay the bills? The answer is, it could not. Pokemon can only ever be an important aspect of my life, but not the core pillar of it.

There’s nothing left.

We reached the terminal entrance. I slid off of Steelix.

He let off a low growl.

Hungry, I understood.

“I don’t have anything.”

Steelix whimpered.

I’ll eat anything.

I looked around.

“There.”

I led him over to the far side of the parking lot, where the asphalt met a low wall of granite. It was far from nutritious- Steelix typically derive sustenance from the hydrocarbons locked away in deep sedimentary rock formations, not energy-poor igneous rock like granite. My Pokemon nibbled away at the edges, being careful not to cause a mess. I stepped away to give him room to graze, turning southeastward.

The landscape fell away, revealing all of Olivine City. At the foot of the hills were clusters of residential neighborhoods and small shopping outlets. Their density and bulk increased by gradations, until they rose up all at once into a collection of modest office towers. Downtown was crowned by its two centerpieces: Bank of Olivine and Hemsi Tower, both rising about twenty stories aboveground. Far beyond, the tallest building in Olivine rose against the blackness of the sea, a brilliant ray of light rotating about its peak and extending out to the horizon- Olivine Lighthouse.

I hadn’t been back since the mayor’s call. Nor had I turned my keys in to city hall. It wasn’t a reality I wanted to accept. I refused to accept it.
They even took Amphy from me.

I miss him. I want him back. I want to play Patty-Cake and Go Fish with him, and laugh when he gets confused and silly, and comfort him when he’s feeling down. It fills me up with joy to see him happy. Why did they take that comfort away from me?

Wait, if that was how I felt about Amphy, then…

I collapsed onto my knees.

It had been a week since I last cried, enough time to allow my reservoir of tears to replenish. They began trickling out once again. Back then the floodgates had been burst open by shock and emotion. Now they were calmly opened by means of intellectual revelation.

Erika had said so herself.

What I felt for Amphy, she felt for me.

What I did in bringing Spectra to Amphy and fulfilling his desires, Erika was trying to do for me. I cursed Erika for doing this in such a roundabout, dishonest way. Yet, how does that compare with my own behavior? I lashed out at Amphy because I was jealous that his joy was not shared with me, but with another. Erika was fully prepared to sacrifice her feelings for the sake of my happiness. I was not prepared to make that same sacrifice for my own Pokemon.

Erika was stupid. I was selfish. Who is the monster here?

I can’t face her now. Not like this. But I can make this better. There is one thing I can do to ensure everyone gets what they want most- even me.

“Steelix!”

“Schteel?”

“Back in your Pokeball.”

He took one last chomp and then bowed his head, ready for recall. A zap of the laser, and I was alone. I looked at my purse. The rest of my Pokemon were back at the gym. All I had on me was Steelix. That was fine, he would be enough to protect me. Like always. The others would do well to have time away from me, I didn’t deserve their company at the moment.

With that, I entered the terminal. A row of counters with three short lines greeted me. I walked up to one, and after a few minutes greeted the lady travel agent.

“Hello there. Welcome to National. May I have your name?” she asked politely.

“I don’t have a reservation.”

“Okay. Do you have a question then?”

“Can I buy a ticket for a flight tonight?” I asked.

“Well, we are close to capacity, so getting a walk-on booking might be difficult. However,” she paused to check her computer terminal. “We do have available first class seating, if you’re willing to pay the premium.”

“Hmm, depending on where you’re going, about 39,000.”

So, half a month’s salary. Or just about every last Pokedollar currently deposited in my checking account.

“Would you like to book a ticket? We have a flight to Saffron International leaving in an hour and a half, we can route you from there to anywhere in Nihon.”

“Yes, please,” I said, making my decision.

“And where would you like to fly to?” the lady asked.

I swallowed.

Even iron rusts, weakens, and grows brittle. My pride is brittle. By doing this, I will break it completely.

Yet I’ve finally come to the point where I am willing to let my pride shatter to pieces, rather than allow the same to happen to my spirit.

“Sunyshore,” I answered.
I rubbed my eyes. A ray of light was streaming in through the window. The sun had broken the horizon, laying all the Earth bare to the eye. The world was awash in color from horizon to horizon. I’d never seen anything so breathtaking.

“Attention passengers, in a moment I’ll be switching on the seatbelt sign, so please buckle up and get your belongings in order. We’ll be landing in Sunyshore International in about twenty minutes, only about three minutes behind schedule. The weather is clear, but a bit chilly; the high for Sunyshore today is supposed to be 47. If you look out the left side you can get a good look at Mount Coronet as we make our final approach. Thank you for flying National and see you all groundsie.”

“Nnn.”

My seat was on the right side of the airplane, my view was of rolling forests and endless water. Still, from thirty-six thousand feet up it’s a spectacle no matter what you are looking at. I rested my forehead on the glass and continued gazing down on the patchwork earth and swirling ocean.

“There’s Sunyshore,” one passenger remarked. A moment later I saw it too.

From this high up, cities look a lot like circuit boards. Given Sunyshore’s reputation as a technology hub, the comparison feels appropriate. As we got closer, circuits and transistors turned into roads and houses, and another comparison came to mind.

*It looks like Olivine.*

The city was perched on a series of capes with beaming white beaches wedged in between. Forested hills hedged it in on the south. The architecture was mostly modern. A series of what looked like azure-paved catwalks wove their way above the streets. Downtown was noticeably larger than Olivine’s, with more and taller skyscrapers. The port was not as large, though. I spotted what looked like a large commercial fishing ship and a naval vessel at dock. A distinct tower rose on the farthest outcropping, lording over the bay. Vista Lighthouse, I realized.

*I don’t even know where his gym is. I’ll start at the lighthouse, I thought.*

We landed. I made my way out of the airport and across the unfamiliar city, guided mainly by the rising sun. Locals gawked at me atop Steelix, and I felt like I was being judged for being out of place. Eventually it got to me; I put Steelix away and continued the rest of the way on foot.

Vista Lighthouse was perched atop a tall outcropping of rocks. It was structurally similar to Glitter, having a base, a narrow stem, and then a two-tiered bulb at the top. Architecturally, it wasn’t quite the same. The walls were stucco, not brick, the crown was square, not circular, and the tower was striped white and red, not solid white with blue trim. That said, I was pleased with it- it was a fine building, very picturesque.

Unfortunately, it was quite empty. There was no one in the viewing lounge upstairs, nor even a Pokemon in the light room- they use a high-powered spotlight, not a Pokemon, for illumination. I discovered a door to a third floor, which read “Maritime Navigation Center, Employees Only”. The door was locked though.
I didn’t really expect to find him here, though. The main point to coming here was the scenery. It would be easier to find Sunyshore Gym from this tall vantage point, or failing that, maybe they’ll have a Sunyshore tourist brochure lying around.

The view wasn’t as wide as from the airplane, but it was closer and more detailed. Even after spotting the gym on another rocky hill, I spent maybe an hour picking through the urban jigsaw puzzle, soaking in all the little details.

*It’s nice. I could stand to live here,* I thought.

I took a short nap and then set off for the gym. Once there, I soon learned the Gym Leader was off doing technical work for the city’s solar paneled footpaths.

“Where can I find him?”

“Somewhere out there,” the Gym Trainer said and pointed.

“Thank you.”

It’s warmer than I expected for a city this far north. My cardigan and tights were enough to keep me warm despite the chilly air and breeze. Must be the sun. There’s not a cloud in the sky. It’s really bright. Too bright. It’s making me feel light and airy. I don’t want that. I want to hug the ground, hide, or better yet, for a bank of clouds to roll over. Something about clouded skies helps calm me. Maybe it’s because I’m more comfortable when the weather reflects my mood, and my usual mood tends towards melancholy. Isn’t that kind of sad though? For a person to want to feel downcast because they’re so used to it?

No, it’s not crazy. Because when you’re feeling sick and cold, there might be someone to throw their arms around you and make you warm- and that’s the best feeling in the world.

It was past noon and I could not find him anywhere. There were miles of pedestrian walkways crisscrossing downtown and I could never walk them all before sundown. It would be better to go to the gym and wait for him there, I decided.

Just as I set course back for the gym, I saw it.

*Chu! Chu! Chu!*  

A Raichu was struggling to climb a lamppost. It scampered up easily enough, but upon reaching the top it tried reaching out to the electrical box with its two forepaws, lost its grip, and came sliding down. The poor creature tried valiantly four times with the same result. After its last failure it looked up forlornly at the lamppost.

I noticed it wearing something, like a utility belt full of spare parts.

“Hello.”

I approached the creature. By deduction, it’s more than likely his Pokemon.

“Raichu?”

“My name is Jasmine. I’m a Pokemon trainer. Would you like some help?”

“Chachu?”

It was tilting its head at me, staring me down while taking glances at the lamppost.
How can you help me? – probably its thoughts.

“Do you need to work up there?” I pointed up.

The Pokemon nodded.

“My Pokemon can help.”

I let out Steelix. The walkway shuddered under his immense weight, but held. He lowered his head and allowed the both of us on top. I held the jittery Raichu steady as we rose up high. On getting close, Raichu immediately went to work, quickly tearing through the wiring, clipping loose ends, replacing parts, and splicing new wiring into place. It looked like it was adding some sort of tiny gauge to the system. I noticed a pile of similar-looking parts in one of the belt pouches.

“Rai-ru!”

“Huh?”

“Rai!”

Raichu motioned for me to come closer. It pointed at a loose wiring and after a little gesturing I understood I needed to help hold the gauge in place while Raichu wired it up. With that accomplished, Raichu closed the box and sat back, relieved.

“Down we go.”

Steelix lowered us to the walkway.

“So, where is your trainer?” I asked.

It dutifully pointed, first west, then north, then south. It scampered around in a circle and then shrugged its shoulders.

“You don’t know?”

It shook its head in the affirmative.

“Okay.” I sighed.

I turned to leave when I felt a tug at the hem of my cardigan. The Raichu was insistently pointing at the next lamppost.

I took a look. There was a whole line of the things, maybe ten on this one pathway alone.

“You want more help?”

“Ra!”

“Ah. Well.”

I didn’t have anything else to do, and sticking by his Pokemon was probably the best way to find him. Besides, this was enjoyable.

“Steelix, up we go.”

“Schteel.”
Affirmation, no complaints. Ever reliable Steelix.

We went up, Raichu cracked open the box, I held it steady while it worked, lent a hand when needed, and then we descended. That cycle repeated over and over well into the afternoon. That saying about how work can be therapeutic, I kind of get it now. There’s a simple, mindless existence in it, where worries can’t intrude. Once you’re in the zone, it does a better job than daydreaming at blocking out stress.

Once more Raichu had us rise up to a lamppost and opened up the plastic box. At that point it stopped mid-action and stared at its belly.

“Chuu…”

“Huh?”

The Pokemon sighed and its shoulders slumped.

“Raichu.” It turned and showed me its utility belt. The pouch where it had kept the gauges was empty.

“Oh. I guess that’s it. Steelix, down.”

“Schteel.”

Steelix lowered us back to the walkway and we disembarked.

“Raichu, do you know where your trainer is?”

The Pokemon had skipped down the walkway a little bit, scanning the cityscape. It heard me and looked back over its shoulder.

“Chu?”

“Your trainer… I mean... where is he? Do you know?”

Raichu gazed around, then at me, shrugged its shoulders, and shook its head.

“No?”

My shoulders went limp.

“What did you intend to do when you were finished?”

Raichu started counting the light posts we had worked on. Evidently, it had never counted on my assistance. We were far away from its intended stopping point. Realizing this, the Pokemon slumped down, looking dejected.

“That’s okay. Here, why don’t we go back to the gym? He’s bound to show up there eventually.”

Raichu twitched, then jumped up and bounded to my side. It looked overly eager to show me the way. The Pokemon bounded away, saw that I was falling behind, and rebounded back towards me. This yo-yoing repeated itself until we reached our destination.

The way it’s acting, Raichu reminds me of an overly energetic Amphy. I can see why the guy took a liking to my Ampharos.
Once at the gym, however, we were greeted not by a Gym Leader, but a senior gym trainer, one Zachary Shoma.

“Oh, the boss? He came back.”

“Oh good! May I see him?”

“Uh, he came and then he went back out.”

“Really? Where did he go?” I asked, fearing the trainer wouldn’t even know and my entire journey would be wasted.

“The Lighthouse. Actually, he said he was going to Lumen’s Grill, that restaurant that’s adjoining the lighthouse.”

“Oh, thank you so much!” I started off.

“Hey, wait one sec. Who are you, anyways?” the guy asked, perhaps suspicious of a complete stranger marching into the gym and demanding a personal audience with the Gym Leader.

“I’m Jasmine Mikan, um, I know the Gym Leader through a friend,” was the best I explanation I could manage to come up with. Again I started out.

“Wait wait wait wait! You’re THE Jasmine?”

“Huh?”

“Um…” Zachary, as well as the other gym trainers, starting exchanging worried looks.

“What’s going on?”

“Zach, better tell her,” a young woman prompted.

“He left the gym with a lady.”

I tensed up. My hopeful, flittery mood was doused in ice.

No, please not this. Not again.

“Maybe… you should check it out for yourself.” Zach advised. “I mean, none of us have ever seen her around here, so if you want to try…”

“Do you know who I am?” I asked.

Zach slowly nodded.

Great. Even lackeys in this faraway city knew about the conspiracy.

Damn it, this had better be worth it. I can’t take it anymore.

My thoughts were a-tumble all the way back to the lighthouse. Even to me, they started sounding like craziness, or like the waves crashing on the nearby shore. At one point I lost my footing on a curb and began stumbling. Raichu zipped around just in time to prop me up.

“Thank you.”

What a sweet Pokemon. If he raised it, and if my old theory of Pokemon taking on their trainer’s
persona was correct, then that further validated my decision to come here. That is, unless everything falls apart.

A woman?

What happened? Why would he take a woman out to eat?

Did Morty lie about the plan? Was the skype conversation a dupe?

No, that didn’t seem plausible, too far-fetched.

He once claimed the plan was to get him a girlfriend, which at the time I thought meant someone else, but according to the conspirators he really meant me. But what if he was telling the truth and he really was after another woman? Or what if he got tired of Morty’s games, or tired of his wishy-washiness, or mistrustful of his intentions, or impatient, or found someone more enticing, or thought I would never reciprocate, or was forewarned about the conspiracy’s failure? I mean, I can think of seventy-five reasons in seventy-five seconds why he would be dating some other woman right now.

My thoughts turned to apprehension, then fear, then panic, which made me want to hurry.

“Steelix, let’s go.”

Locals be damned, I want to get there as fast as possible now. I hopped onto Steelix and Raichu hopped after me, and away we went.

We arrived in a screech of steel on asphalt, sparks flying. I didn’t wait for Steelix to lower his head, I hopped ten feet down and sprinted off towards the lighthouse. The adjoining diner was open and looked busy.

Then I spotted them. They were at the entrance, facing one another, and talking earnestly. I was too far away to discern their body language or facial expressions. I held my breath and started tip-toeing forward. When I reached the parking lot driveway, I stopped.

_Holy Miltank. She’s beautiful._


Tall, blond, bombastic breasts, curves in the right places, toned muscle in the rest, a perfect face, perfect skin, piercing blue eyes, fashionably dressed in a dark fur-lined jacket, flared baby-blue blouse, and black trousers; everything about this woman screamed “celebrity”. If his love is a beauty pageant, I’m doomed.

She took his hand in both of hers, shook it, nodded, smiled, and waved him off. He responded in kind.

She’s headed this way.

Run!

Too late! She noticed me!

“Oh hello! Jasmine Mikan, I believe?”

“Huh?”

She’s talking to me.
She knows my name.

What the hell is going on here?!

“I’m sorry, but, I don’t know…”

“Oh how rude of me- oops!” She was checking her phone, apparently for the time. “My flight is leaving soon, I’ve stayed too long. Sorry.”

She brushed past me, but then, a few paces out, stopped and turned back.

“I do want to say, I watched you at the summit, and you have a really beautiful voice! Sorry about my husband though, he can be such a dick, the power gets to his head sometimes. If you ever need a favor, call me! Oh, got to go! Bye!”

The blond bombshell waved and hurried to a parked sports car. I watched her as she climbed in and zoomed away (egregiously speeding, I might add).

Husband?

My singing voice?!


“Hey.”

I jumped from the dual shocks of his voice close to my ear and his hand on my shoulder.

“Volkner!” I cried.

Volkner.

I hadn’t dared speak his name, or even think it, afraid that might somehow Jynx everything.

“Hi. Didn’t expect to see you here. This is a surprise.”

“Are you married?” I blurted out, pointing to the sports car rapidly disappearing into the distance.

“What? Don’t you recognize her?”

I shook my head.

“Should I?”

“Wait, seriously? You don’t know who just talked to you?” he asked, his face in awe.

I shook my head.

I feel like I’m about to have a “D’oww!” moment.

“That was Cynthia Stone.”

Holy Miltank milkshakes “D’OWW!” doesn’t begin to describe my shock!

“The Cynthia?” I squeaked.

Stone.
Mrs. Stone.

Cynthia Stone.


Mr. Stone was my childhood idol. By virtue of her marriage to him and her own accomplishments, Mrs. Stone became my teenage idol. Now I’ve finally gotten to meet her, and I didn’t even know it. I’m a little overwhelmed right now.

“You honestly didn’t recognize her?” Volkner asked.

I just continued gaping at him.

“Do you live under a rock or something?”

I shook my head.

“I just have the world’s worst facial recognition,” I said in a really pitiable sort of defensive tone.

Volkner sighed.

He’s in his grey utility jacket, the one he wears for dirty work, not his blue military jacket he wears for Gym matches. His hair was showing signs of recent heavy sweating. As usual, his face was kind of soft and innocent looking.

“So what are you doing in Sunyshore? Long ways from Johto,” he said.

“I, uh, I’m here on vacation,” I said. He tilted his head. “And I found Raichu and helped him do whatever he was doing for the light posts. So I brought him here, for you,” I mumbled on.

“Thanks,” Volkner replied. The Pokemon in question came waddling up, thrilled to finally be reunited with its trainer. Volkner patted the creature’s head, a small, familial gesture.

“Um, so since we’re here, would you like to walk around, or something…?”

Volkner nodded in assent, and I felt relieved. We set off along the seaside boardwalk.

As we walked, he kept glancing at me, and I at him. In my desperate desire to not appear as nervous and furtive as I really felt, my mind started spouting the most obscene questions. Such as:

“Are you and Cynthia having an affair?”

Volkner stared at me funny.

“Are you the kind of person who gobbles up celebrity tabloids?” he countered.

“Um, no, no.”

“Really, me and Cynthia? As if I could ever seduce that caliber of woman.”

“Then what were you two on a date for?”

I keep running my mouth and running my mouth, and every time I tell myself “Jasmine you rude,
fantastical idiot!”, I immediately forget and impulsively shout out the contents of my scandalous imagination.

“You and your gutter-mind. Will was right about you.”

“Owww-” I finally managed to reign in my tongue, primarily by biting it.

Volkner sighed and let out a “heh”. “It was a business meeting,” he explained. “Bertha is retiring. Cynthia was offering me her position in the Sinnoh Elite Four.”

“Oh!”

Now it all makes sense.

And I’m an incredible, gullible, defamatory idiot.

“Well, um, did you say yes?” I inquired.

“I said no.”

“Oh.”

That’s surprising.

“I feel pretty good about where I’m at. I like Sunyshore. Pokemon League is too small, too boring.”

“But it’s a really big promotion,” I said.

“With a lot of annoying responsibilities,” Volkner countered. “Flint complains all the time about his job. Being a Gym Leader is easier.”

“I wouldn’t think that’d be the case.”

Well, maybe not. Sinnoh’s government was more lenient than Johto’s, I don’t think they have as many tedious regulations for Gym Leaders.

“You know, a while ago I would have said yes. That was my dream, especially with Flint there. But the past year taught me a lot; I know what I want from life and where I want to call home. Right here,” he said, waving to his left, at the urban landscape.

That sounds reassuring, I thought.

“So that’s my gig. What’s yours? Would’ve thought you’d be too busy for a vacation.”

“Stress,” I answered, and then scrambled for an adequate explanation for said answer. “Just, I needed a change of scenery.”

“So you came to Sunyshore.”

“Right. Sunyshore.”

Volkner smirked.

Does he know what’s going on?

“Hey Raichu, what’re you doing with the young lady, huh? I thought I told you to fix Balmer Street.”
“Cha-chu!” Raichu proudly held up the empty pouch from its utility belt. “Rararaiyachu!” the Pokemon exclaimed.

“Balmer, Forest Way, and Ririkuo Avenue? Man, you’ve been busy. Sounds suspiciously productive. You sure you got all that done?”

“Chuhu.” Raichu pointed a finger directly and insistently at me.

“Oh, so ya got help, is it. Offloading your chores onto young ladies, shameful.”

“Rarai!” Raichu took exception to that accusation.

“Well if you think you can slack off tomorrow because of it, think again.”

I giggled. Volkner noticed.

“You’re a real task master, aren’t you?”

“These guys are lazy,” he insisted. “I do ninety percent of the work around here.” To which Raichu had something to say, puffing its chest out and making indignant-sounding whining noises. The overgrown electric mouse started mouthing off in a string of rebuttals. Volkner equaled its banter all the way through, though I noticed that, no matter how heated the argument got, Volkner never used a swear word and his voice never turned vicious. So it was an act. I giggled again.

“Hey, since you’re feeling so helpful, why not come help us fix the power relay too?” Volkner asked me.

“Oh,” I agreed without hesitation.

“The gauges I had Raichu put in were seasonal adjustment regulators, to turn the lights on and off in sync with dusk and dawn, not just 6:00 o’clock twice a day.”

“You have to install a timer on each one?”

“Yep.”

“Why not install a light sensor, for cloudy days and such?”

“Budget constraints.”

Nnn, money issues. Sounds familiar.

“Couldn’t you control all the lights from a centralized station?”

“That’s the goal, eventually, but the streetlight system is interconnected with other grids. I’ll have all the different systems compartmentalized in three or four years. In the meantime, we’ll have to make do with the gauges.”

“Oh I see.”

“Now we’ve gotta do some work on the power relay, make sure it can handle the extra load time from the lights during the longer nights. Winter’s coming fast, you know.”

“It’s December,” I said aloud, mostly to remind myself. Summer seems like forever ago.

He led me off the boardwalk into a side road. Soon we came to a compound surrounded by barbwire
fence and housing massive electrical machinery. High tension wires led off in every direction. There was no visible crackling, but a constant, ominous hum was a reminder of the dangers housed within. Volkner let us in with a key.

“Watch yourself. Don’t wander off, don’t touch, stay close,” he ordered.

“‘Kay.”

The path he took through the industrial overgrowth was deliberate, always making sure to keep a good four feet of clearance on each side. I saw a few opportunities where he might have taken a shortcut, but didn’t probably to keep me safe. Raichu frolicked amongst the wires and steel towers, oblivious to the splinters of electricity that flickered across its back and limbs.

It.

Bad habit, Jasmine.

“Is Raichu a girl or boy?” I asked.

“Boy.”

“Hmm.”

The boy in question hopped atop an upright, accordion-shaped apparatus and smiled down on us.

“Raichu, get down here.”

“Rai!”

The Pokemon leapt off and landed on Volkner’s back. His body bent under the weight, but did not stumble and recovered.

“Got your tools?”

“Rai.”

The Pokemon handed the human his belt. Volkner extracted a socket wrench and threw the rest over his shoulder. Our journey ended near the far corner. A transmission tower stood over us, with a multitude of lines trailing down into a jumbled mass of boxes. Volkner pointed to one overhead wire and traced its path deep into the machinery.

“Okay. Raichu, go depower grids four through seven and redirect the backup into ground three. Jasmine.”

“Yes?”

“Over here.”

He waved me over to a box. Upon opening it, I was greeted with a plethora of gauges, dials, and meters.

“Here. See this gauge?” He pointed to one. I nodded. “It’s going to go down to zero any second now.”

A few seconds later, it did.
“So what do I do?” I asked.

“Watch this meter. If it ever goes over 100, shout out to me and hit this switch, immediately.” He pointed to a large red dial at the top of the console. “Turn it all the way right, to ‘OFF’. Got it?”

“I think so. This is a kill switch, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And I’m supposed to keep you protected in case the power comes on?”

“Yeah.”

“But I thought Raichu shut the power off. Shouldn’t it be impossible?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Just keep your eye on the gauge.”

He left me there and rounded the corner.

“Are you sure this is safe?” I shouted after him.

“No!” he shouted back. “That’s what I need you for!”

He then went silent, and all I could hear was the noise of mechanical work being done. Raichu returned and went to his side. Feeling a little left out, I turned all my focus on the needle. It was resting at 0, with the maximum being 2000 and demarcated in increments of 50.

A few moments into the task, the needle jumped. Fear kicked in- I didn’t even have my hand on the kill switch yet. I jerked and prepared to cry, but caught myself at the last second. The needle was indeed moving, but it remained below the 50 mark. At points it jumped over 50, nearly causing me to tense up and turn the switch, but each time the needle came back down. The blasted thing never stayed still, as I had initially thought it would, but jittered about in the 20-30 range. I spent ten minutes or so coping with this task, suffering wracked nerves, shaky hands, and uneven breathing in the process.

Then the needle suddenly shot well over 100, all the way up to 1500.

“All clear! Don’t kill the power!”

“Ah!”

My fingers were coiled around the kill switch like an Arbok, the mechanism a sliver of force from tipping to the ‘Off’ position. I slowly, shakily withdrew my hand.

“It’s at 1500!” I yelled.

“That’s fine. Look at the top right corner.”

“Yes?”

“Read to me which lights are on.”

“Um, LIS, G-Main, S1-TP, S2-TP, and S3-TP,” I called out, without the slightest clue what any of those acronyms meant.

“That’s all? What about the light for ML-Cap?”
I took a careful second look.

“It’s off.”

“Bah. Raichu, get that. No, THAT! Yeah. Good.”

Volkner continued to grunt and guide Raichu without addressing me further. The meters remained stationary and the lights kept their state. After a few minutes of awkward dawdling I was starting to feel forgotten.

“Hey Volkner, do you need me watching this?”

“Huh? No, not really.” A pause. “You can come watch, if you want,” he added.

I did, and marveled at the tiny tunnel Volkner had opened in the machinery. He was on the ground, on his back, and wedged inside the opening up to his waste. It looked about as comfortable as invading a Lairon’s cubby hole. Raichu took a position in a crevice overtop Volkner, reaching down towards him to help.

Volkner didn’t chat, or say anything except to instruct Raichu. His concentration was focused solely on the job. I could see a bit of his face in the gap, saw his furrowed brow and intense, concentrated gaze. His arms were busy, hands steady. Every motion was gentle but firm, precise in its application of force, careful and heady in its execution.

He’s not thinking about you.

But he’s not thinking about anyone else, either.

What does that mean?

You’re not getting the attention you want?

I shrugged.

Isn’t this like dad? Or the young man? Boys get into this mode where they can be really into something, and they probably are getting a lot of satisfaction from doing it, but they don’t show any emotion, any hint of happiness on their faces. I don’t like it. It makes them feel distant, unengaged, hard to read.

I inwardly churned.

I once thought that they treated women the same way. A “I’m into you” face was the exact same as a “Do I know you?” face. With the bastard, this delusion kept my hopes going far longer than it should have. Now that I’ve experienced Morty’s affections, his wealth of blushes, smirks, and irrepressible stares, I know better what an interested man looks like. Volkner doesn’t have that look.

Don’t worry over something like that, I told myself.

There are many explanations for that kind of behavior. Morty’s expressions could have been faked, or they betrayed the wrong sentiment; after all, he did betray you. Nor does it mean every man expresses his interest so readily. What if Volkner is distracted? Or his work really does consume him? Or perhaps he’s worried about why I’m here and what my reasons are.

Or… maybe he doesn’t really care about you.

Maybe you will have to make him pay attention to you.
They say girls can lay back and make men do all the work of initiating romance. False. That only applies to girls who could care less about their prospects. Not a desperate, foolish girl who nonetheless insists on a certain amount of selectiveness in her romantic partners.

How stupid. Make up your mind, Jasmine.

I want to be loved!

No, I want this kind of guy! Not that kind of guy!

It’s contradictory at best. Needlessly picky. At what point do you think you deserve to have your perfect man?

It’s not about what I deserve, it’s about what will make me happy. There’s no hope for my emotional well-being if I desperately fling myself at any sleazeball or perverted lolicon that crosses my path; even if it would be easy to gain their affection, it’s not an affection worth having. There’s no way I could trust those kinds of men, they would be worse than Morty.

“Good to go.”

My spew of thoughts was interrupted by Volkner’s announcement. He wiggled himself free and came to his feet. For all the hard work, he wasn’t especially dirty, just some sweat on his brow and hands. I suppose, unlike automotive care or metallurgy, working with power systems was a passably clean profession.

“Raichu, go power on the grids.”

The Pokemon dutifully took off. Volkner finished by replacing coverings and checking gauges. When all was finished we made our way back out. Volkner locked the compound behind him. He stood a moment, staring down at the lock.

“Hey Raichu, could you take this back to the gym for me? Tell them to close down, I’m not coming back for the evening.”

“Cha- chu uu?” Raichu gave him a curious look as he took Volkner’s belt and tools. The Pokemon glanced at me, seemed to realize something, and then scampered off at a mild pace. He kept looking back at us, all the way to the point his path took a bend around a corner. I looked after the Pokemon, took a glance at Volkner, and realized the man had been staring intently at me.

“Hm?”

“Let’s go to the beach,” he said in an understated, definitive tone.

As we walked between row houses and street side shops, I was caught in a fit of deja vu. It took a moment of surveying the situation to understand it. Volkner was on my right, staring straight ahead, and I was consciously matching him step for step. The sun was at our back, casting our shadows before us. My neck felt warm, even though my stomach and chest felt cold. Everything was the same as back then, at the summit.

September 11, 2012
“Jasmine, Jasmine, how are you ever going to get a boyfriend with such a sour attitude? Smile! Be merry! And eat a little more.”

“For the hundredth, no, _millionth_ time, Erika, I do not want a boyfriend!”

“See, there’s a gaggle of fine looking men! Let’s go talk to them.”

“No!”

“Hello there! Do any of you handsome young men happen to be single and in search of true love?”

“Erika, stop it!”

The boys in question stared at us incredulously. Most took it as a joke, but a few cocked their heads with interest. Their focus was on my brazen older friend, until she shoved me forward. I instantly backed away and averted my eyes. Erika went to my backside and planted her hands firmly on my shoulders, holding me in place.

“We have a lovely young bachelorette here in want of a prince charming. Do any of you think you could oblige?”

She’s in one of her moods. I swear, I need new friends.

After a bit of awkward silence I dared to peek at the boys. To my surprise, none showed any hint of coming forward or even making a sly remark.

“Hey, you’re Jasmine, right?” one guy ventured. I didn’t answer.

“She is, that is correct, one Jasmine Mikan of Olivine.”

The group of boys exchanged knowing looks with each other. Some grinned, others nodded. The one who had spoken up kept staring directly at me. It unnerved me. An ordinary average-looking male is enough to put me on guard, but this guy was over-the-top crazy looking. He was light skinned but sported a firetruck-red afro and a smirk fit for the disco stage. Contrast that with his yellow shirt, grey sweatpants, sandals, and wristbands (two per arm), and I felt like this was some hobo from a street performance gang who had accidentally wandered into the Battle Tower. He took a deep breath, and I readied myself to run before the creep could accept Erika’s offer.

“Sorry, not interested!” the guy dramatically announced. The lot shuffled off, snickering and keeping whatever inside knowledge they were mirthing about to themselves. I was rather relieved, Erika was baffled.

“They looked so promising,” she whimpered.

Later, while we lounged about the Battle Tower lobby and waited for registration to open, I spotted that same group of boys from a distance joking among themselves.

“Is it too much to just allow yourself to socialize with boys?” Erika asked.

“Perverts. Creeps. All of them,” I replied. “I mean, what was that guy going on about? ‘Not interested!’ Does he think I’m stupid? That’s not a very subtle way to call me ugly and not worth his time. It was rude! Erika, seriously, could you at least vet these guys before you try foisting them on me? I can at least tolerate a Gary Oak over these random bakas.”
“You tolerated Gary Oak? It seems to me you ran him off. I still don’t understand why you turned him down.”

“I never said I accepted his feelings. It was his fault he thought we were developing into something.” A groan of exasperation rumbled about my throat. “I don’t want to talk about boys anymore!”

“Well, you seem wrong on one account. That striking young man must not think of you as being ugly, because he keeps looking over here.”

I checked, and sure enough I caught Red Afro staring across the lobby at us. He saw he’d been caught, too, and quickly ducked into hiding among his friends.

“Great, now I’ve got a stalker. Another one.”

“You must be more positive. Think of them as suitors!”

“Can we talk about Pokemon? Or girls? Just for a change of pace?”

“Oh I had no idea you swung that way!” Erika said teasingly.

“You know what I meant! Whitney and Lyra and our female friends! Humans who don’t have an genetically inbuilt lust that causes them to be creeps towards me!”

“I kid, I apologize. Lyra is coming on Thursday. Whitney will be here tomorrow. Do you have lectures tomorrow morning or evening?”

“Morning.”

“Eh. Mine are in the afternoon. Thursday?”

“I’m free on Thursday.”

“Oh, good. I’m thinking about getting us together for lunch then.”

“I don’t want any more cafeteria food.”

“We can eat out.”

“I don’t want to walk to downtown. It’s too far and too hot.”

Erika frowned, unhappy with my excuses.

“There is a place nearby, Café Le Rei. Why not there?”

“Le Rei is…” I grimaced. It wasn’t the greatest place to eat- dirty, overrun by obnoxious young trainers and beach goers, serving undercooked, overpriced food- but if I had to, I could stomach it once, I guess.

“G through J, please approach the registry! I repeat, last names ending in G through J please approach the front for registration!”

“That’s me,” Erika said, standing. I started up as well, but she nudged me back down with a finger. “I don’t think there’s room in line for by-standers. You’ll have to wait for me.”

“But…” I took another glance at the group of boys, some of whom were still casting looks my way. “What if the boys come over and…”
“And what? Chat you up? That’s not the scariest proposition in the world. Why not entertain yourself? An expectant young man is such easy fodder for teasing.”

She left with a smile on her face.

Erika, you’re evil!

And now I’m alone.

In order to not feel totally alone, I brought out my Pokeballs. In this crowded lobby, it would be considered rude to let out large Pokemon without good reason, but smaller Pokemon were acceptable.

“Magnemite.”

“Mag mag mite.”

A few minutes of calm passed by before the disaster started in earnest.

“Magnemite, what are you doing?”

My junior Magnet Pokemon was on the fritz. Its poles were swiveling wildly, blue and red sparks were flying off in every direction, and it desperately wanted to follow an Elekid that had wandered by.

“No. Stop. You can’t! Get back here! Not now!”

It was EMSA: Electromagnetic Sensory Attraction. It’s a kind of manic addiction Magnemite and other Electric Pokemon pick up on occasion. They go ballistic when they sense an EM field tuned to their inner cortex. It’s treatable, but it requires another Electric Pokemon with the proper counter-frequency. I typically use Voltorb for this, but I didn’t bring Voltorb today. Magneton can’t help, wrong frequency. This is going to be annoying.

Of course, worrying about fixing Magnemite’s condition is a moot point if you can’t even keep ahold of your Pokemon, Jasmine. Which apparently you can’t, because the living magnet is halfway across the lobby.

“Magnemite, stop! Get back here!”

I managed to keep tabs on Magnemite by the sounds of people yelping as they were shocked by its involuntary discharges. I spotted the Elekid first, following its trainer and about to slip out the door. On a hunch, I raced towards the planter sitting aside the entrance and rounded it, leading to an open space. Magnemite appeared from between strangers.

“Got you!”

I lunged and caught the Pokemon in my arms. It whined, sparked, and electrocuted me, but I managed to keep a hold and tap it with the Pokeball. To no avail.

“What? Get in your Pokeball!”

It would not, or really, could not. EMSA’s known to interfere with the Pokeball’s recall function.

Zzztt!

“Ouch! Come on, let’s get outside.”
Maybe if I can make it outside, I can use Steelix to corral the rogue spark plug. Magnemite did not resist as much either, apparently thinking we were following the departed Elekid.

The stairs were my downfall. I wanted to go right, to the grassy knoll. Magnemite spotted the Elekid and trainer heading left, towards the parking lot. At the most inane moment it could possibly choose, the Pokemon cracked off a full-power Spark attack. My muscles spasmed.

“Magne-AHHHHH!” My calf locked up right as I was about to descend a step. I stretched too far, missed the step, and began tumbling.

Instinct saved me, mostly. I was upside down and caught myself with my hands. One, two, three cartwheels down the steps I went, mortally scared that each flip would end with my head cracked on the concrete. I landed on my haunches at the bottom of the steps, having eviscerated my hands but saved my noggin from grievous harm. Some bystanders clapped, apparently thinking I had been performing a stunt.

“Magnemite, where’d you go?”

The Pokemon had been thrown somewhere in the middle of my acrobatics.

I spotted the Pokemon, now absolutely convulsed with electricity. I rushed to go help it, but someone had gotten there first.

In my rush, all I saw was a head full of spiked blond hair kneeling over my beloved Pokemon.

“Don’t worry, Jazz, I got it.”

Reflexes can be a good thing. They can pull up ancient gymnastic skills to save one’s life from imminent danger. They can also be a bad influence, triggering an involuntary karate chop onto the young man’s neck. I screamed, grabbed Magnemite, and dashed as far away as I could. That being about twelve feet, whereupon Magnemite zapped me again. I flipped over, landed on my butt, and then Magnemite landed on my head. Another paralyzing shock pierced my cranium.

“Ouch!”

“Ugh. Let me help.”

“Morty stay the hell away from me!” I screamed and attempted once again to run. My flight brought me to the sculpted pool beside the tower. A series of footfalls crossed a feeder stream. It was an awkward feat of skill to dance across these, Frogger-like, what with my legs paralyzed at the knee and only allowing for pogo-stick maneuvers.

“Wait up! You forgot your Pokemon!”

I almost made it to the other side before losing balance and tumbling into the water. As I was about to keel over, I brought out a Pokeball. Steelix appeared beneath me, saving me from a soaking. Unfortunately, Steelix doesn’t like water himself, causing him to convulse like a giant slinky. I was thrown into the air, finally landing on my back on a nearby grass slope. Between my whiplashed head and busted lungs, I was in no condition to continue my flight from the cretin. A shadow passed over me.

“Hey there.”

“You creep! It’s been three years since I’ve had to put up with your perversion and I’d just a soon make it fo- oh.”
My eyes focused.

“You’re not Morty.”

He reminded me of him. Same blond hair. Same soft smile. However similar the face and hairstyle, though, a quick glance showed that this man was most definitely not Morty. His spiked hair was a brighter shade of blond, and stiffer and better kept, probably gelled. His attire was less preppy, more uniform-like, a kind of formal, sea-blue military jacket over slacks and black polo. Most noticeably, he held himself completely different from the Ecruteak miscreant. He stood tall, stiff, and standoffish. His face was all business, when he spoke his eyes averted themselves and he looked more reserved.

“Heh. No, not nearly,” the young man said with a wry smile.

“Who are you?” I asked, feeling a weird sense of misplaced familiarity.

“Don’t you recognize me?” he asked.

I took a closer look. Faces are so hard for me to remember, and this guy was harder than most. Was he one of the dozens of crass suitors who I’ve rejected over the years? A friend of a friend of a friend met during a party I didn’t really want to attend? A one-time gym challenger? No, look, he’s wearing a badge on his breast, just like me- it’s customary for Gym Leaders to wear their badge on the first day of the summit, which must mean he is a fellow Gym Leader (good detective work, Captain Obvious!). What city is he from? Think!

“You really don’t remember,” he said aloud, sounding dejected.

“My memory’s blank… were you at last year’s summit?” I asked tentatively.

“Yeah. The Pokemon Contests, and then Dino Fries…” he led on.

“Oh!”

THAT GUY!

“Um, um, um ummm…!”

Last year’s summit was in Jubilife City. Whitney had pulled me into a class for Pokemon Contests. She met with a group of Sinnoh Leaders and we agreed to team up for a group competition. Groups were divided into pairs and everyone quickly found a partner except me and one other guy hanging back from the rest. The two of us ended up together by default. He was a little awkward and shy, I recall, but then so was I, and we didn’t talk much. Afterwards, the Sinnoh folks invited us to a local burger joint. At first I was dead set against the proposition, but then I spotted Morty lounging around the entrance and hastily agreed, simply to escape the pervert’s notice. My contest partner sat across from me, and I vaguely recall the two of us striking up a conversation; I think it was about the funniest getups we saw at the Beauty Contest.

That was as far as my memory goes.

What was his name?

“V-V-Vo-.” I wracked my brain. His name, it sounded like ‘voltage’, I recalled. “Volkner!” I said aloud at last.

“You remember,” he said, smiling. He leaned forward to give me a hand up, which I was reluctant to take. He saw my hesitation and stepped back, just as I decided to accept the help. He reversed course
and tried to offer again, but by then I was already lifting myself to my feet. He ended up grabbing my shoulder briefly, realized he was touching me, and then took two full steps back.

How awkward.

I remember him being like this a year ago, as well.

“Sorry.” he said softly. His attention went to Magnemite, who he had carried and deposited nearby. The Pokemon’s eye was jittering about.

“EMSA?” he inquired.

I nodded, dumbfounded that he could recognize the problem instantly.

“Okay. Let me see.” He let out a Jolteon, and had it hold its head to Magnemite’s surface. After a minute the Pokemon huffed and backed away.

“Got it?”

The Jolteon nodded.

“Alright, calibrate and Thunder Wave.”

A gentle shower of electricity wafted across Magnemite. In short order the sparking died out, its eye went still and focused, and its magnet tightened up and ceased gyrating.

“Magnemite.”

“Magnemite!” I held out my arms. My Pokemon, now back to its senses, gladly hopped into my embrace. I hugged it tightly to my chest and then turned to its savior.

“Um, I guess, I think I should thank you.”

The young man rubbed his neck where I had hit him.

“No thanks necessary.” Now that we were standing and addressing one another, he couldn’t look me in the face.

“So, um, thank you for curing Magnemite. There’s not that many people that know what EMSA is.”

“It only affects non-biological Electric-type Pokemon. I work with those kind of Pokemon every day, so it’s just part of my job.”

“You’re a Gym Leader in Sinnoh, right? Electric-type specialist?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Ah. I see. I don’t think you told me back then.”

“Nope. Don’t think so,” he said. “Are you an Electric-type specialist too?”

I nodded to Magnemite in my arms.

“No, Steel.”

“Oh. Wow. That’s unusual for a girl.”
“Why would it be unusual?”

“I mean, it’s pretty cool. It takes a tough trainer to control Steel-types. I don’t know many women who can do it. So I respect the ones who can.”

“I see.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment?

“Woah. Big. Is that yours too?”

He just noticed Steelix.

“Yes. My team leader.”

“Does he have a nickname? Or just Steelix?”

“Steelix.”

“Ah.” He futzed around a bit more, taking glances at me before looking away. He had the face of someone desperately searching for a topic of conversation. I remembered the reason why I was here, at the Battle Tower, and decided to be helpful in furnishing a topic.

“Have you registered yet?”

“Yeah, just got done. Denzi.”

“Denzi? Oh, your last name?”

He nodded.

Denzi. A traditional surname, like mine.

“Mikan, so they’ll be calling me up soon. I should head back.”

I turned and made to depart.

“Wait!”

A pause.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Um… okay.”

I did mind. Awkward male with unknown intentions- I was wary of where this might lead to. However, he did cure Magnemite for me, and it would look ungrateful on my part to turn down something so trivial as a walk-and-talk. So I agreed, and off we went, side by side, chatting.

“So how’ve you been?” he asked, gingerly, but with a hint of eagerness underneath.

“Okay.”

A complete lie.

Any one of these would be more accurate. They would also degrade my outward respectability to admit to, so I merely gave him an “Okay.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

My tone betrays me. Such poor acting, Jasmine.

“Nervous about the exams?” he ventured.

“Only a little.”

“You’ll be okay. I get that way too, just before. It’s the possibility of failure that gets on you, since they stress it so much. Pass these tests or get kicked out of the League! Dumb, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” I glanced around, already a little annoyed by the small talk. “It’s actually the crowd that’s bothering me,” I said, which was not untrue. We’d made it back to the front plaza, which was busy and overrun with trainers and Gym Leaders.

“Don’t like crowds?” Volkner asked.

“Too many strangers,” I clarified, and then unthinkingly went off into a rant. “Stress. Every one of them is a potential stress that I don’t want to deal with right now. Everyone thinking about themselves, about what they need, what they can get out of you, what they don’t like about you. Because what I really need when I’m about to go into career-defining exams is a lot of social obligations.”

“Are you an introvert?” Volkner asked suddenly.

My first reaction to the question was “How rude!” Yet I held my tongue, because my second reaction was “I don’t actually know.” I paused a moment to process.

Was I an introvert?

I’ve never given it much thought. I went through the list of introverted stereotypes, looked for similarities with my own behavior, and quickly settled on an answer.

“I guess I am,” I said at last.

“You know there’s a good place to unwind here, not many of these people know about it.”

“Where?”

“Top floor.”

“The viewing deck? But that’s closed off during the summit, VIP-only.”

Volkner put on a sly grin and withdrew a badge from his jacket. “I know a guy who knows a guy… Want to come up?”

“I need to register.”

“Ah, right. But I mean, after that.”

“Um…” Some clarion in the deep recesses of my mind started sounding off, faint and almost unheard.
'Stop. Don’t go. Jasmine, STOP!'

“Well, since you helped Magnemite,” I said, and assented.

Registration took another thirty minutes, as the lines were predictably awful (a Torkoal on its back moves faster). Once through, I made for the exit, half-hoping my awkward new acquaintance had forgotten about me and moved on. Unfortunately, no, he was waiting patiently right in my escape path. His face was beaming the moment we made eye-contact. I returned a half-hearted smile of my own.

“I just… you don’t have anything you need to be doing, right?”

I shook my head.

“Ah, cool. Then, up we go.”

You idiot! He literally handed you a way out, and you whiffed on it! You could have easily told him you had to go attend to Amphy!

Except Connie agreed to feed Amphy tonight so I could focus on preparing for the summit. Erika was at some function with her Kanto Gym Leaders. Whitney hadn’t arrived yet, ditto Lyra. I had no real excuse, and me being the naïve, honest idiot I am, couldn’t invent one off the top of my head.

So, bereft of an excuse and chained by social conscience, I followed him as he led the way to the elevator. Between the fear of interacting with a male with suspect intentions and the sense of social obligation instilled in me through twenty-one years of hard parenting, the latter won out. It would be incredibly rude to turn down someone who offered aid to my precious Pokemon out of hand.

‘Just put up with his chit-chat for a little bit and then excuse yourself, then all obligations will be fulfilled,’ I reasoned to myself.

Our conversation continued through the halls and onto the elevator.

Volkner flashed his badge before a bored-looking guard, gaining us access to the VIP lounge. As promised, it was empty of people. On one wall was a table full of neatly arranged snacks and drinks, on another were plush couches. The bay windows looked out over the main arena, the parking lot, and the sea beyond.

“They’ve got board games too,” Volkner pointed out. I went over to pick through them, while he found a remote and began fiddling with it. Moments later a wall-length video screen came to life. I was startled and mesmerized by the sheer number of windows that popped up. By my guess, every Pokesport channel on the continent was being displayed to us at once. Volkner selected one window. It blew up and the sound came on.

“...many participants at this year’s Yogyakarta tournament, don’t you think?”

“The South Super-Regional qualifiers are later this month, so it’s likely most contenders are conserving their Pokemon for that.”

“As it stands, there’s not much in the way of a Sidhar/Shimeji final, except maybe a big upset from Giriki in the quarter-finals.”

“I wouldn’t put too much stock in Giriki making it that far, these south oceanic players love unbalanced offenses, which hurts a cover-all strategist like Giriki. I don’t think his monsters have the stamina to muscle through them all.”
Volkner listened to the commentators with genuine interest. I was drawn to the creatures being shown on the screen, a pair of two different feline Pokemon I didn’t recognize. They were hissing at each other and waiting for the battle to begin.

“What kind of Pokemon are those?” I asked, curious.

“That’s a Purrloin, that’s a Meowstic. One’s from Unova, the other’s from Kalos. That’s a…” he paused. The Purrloin was recalled for a large, chunky Pokemon with fire rolling off its elbows and chin. “I don’t have any idea what that is. Must be some Oceana Pokemon.”

“Mmm. Hey. Try that channel.”

Volkner took note of the window I was pointing to and immediately flipped to it.

“…almost two hundred gym leaders gathered here representing twenty-four regions, there’s some serious Pokemon expertise crowded into this building.”

It was an aerial shot of the Battle Tower. The video feed said LIVE in one corner. I dashed to the window, and sure enough, spotted a Pelipper with filming gear attached. I waved, looked to the screen, and frowned. The glare of sun whited out the tower windows.

“Trying to catch yourself on TV?” Volkner asked with a chuckle.

“Yes.”

“You could be a movie star. Two seconds of fame.”

“Right. Fun. That would be… fun.”

I really have nothing better to say.

“There’s a legit way to get on TV.”

“…”

“You could join the Gym Leader Tournament. The finals will be broadcasted nationally.”

“No thanks, I’m not that good.”

“Ah. Well, you’ve got to have faith in yourself first. A girl who can handle a Steelix, I’m sure you would go far.”

“No, I wouldn’t. My Steelix is good enough to help me keep my job, but that’s all. The rest of my Pokemon aren’t up to the likes of Clair.”

He looked a little annoyed at my pessimistic self-assessment.

“I don’t think Clair will be in the tournament.”

“Maybe not, but others just as good as her. There’s a lot of top tier Leaders here, I doubt they’ll all pass up the chance. How am I supposed to keep up with those power-hungry try-hards?”

“Well…”

Volkner squirmed a little. I tilted my head, confused.
“I don’t want to brag, but I’m kind of one of those try-hards.”

Oh…

He let off an embarrassed laugh. “You know, second-ranked trainer in Sinnoh and all, no big deal. It’s not like I have no social life because I’m training my Pokemon all the time, there’s Flint and…”

I slumped into the seat, not terribly interested in his personal excuses.

“I was looking forward to the tournament actually, and was just curious if I’d maybe see you there.”

“Probably not, sorry. There’s no reason to come on Sunday if I pass my exams, and I have my Pokemon to attend to…”

“Oh. Okay. What Pokemon is that?”

“Amphy. The Lighthouse Pokemon.”

“Oh cool. That’s right, you live here, don’t you?”

He glanced out the window, all the way across the bay to the far cape where Glitter Lighthouse stood like a slender pin stuck in the rock.

“It’s a been awhile since Vista used a Pokemon. Is it bothersome?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh.”

“It’s a job I really enjoy, actually. Amphy is a lovely Pokemon.”

“Well that’s good.” He looked at the table, noting the game of Gremlin’s Gorges I had absently taken out. “Want to play?”

“Okay.”

The television started broadcasting exhibition matches from the stadium. The rest of the afternoon was spent taking turns between commenting on the matches and maneuvering multi-colored gremlins across the board. Volkner slowly got more and more annoying with his commentary, talking to the television as if they could hear him.

“That’s not how you use a Shoot-Look-Shoot tactic, you nimrod! Throw up some defensive feints first! Of course he’s going to charge you!”

“I win.”

“Huh? Oh. How’d that happen? You’re pretty good.”

You weren’t paying attention to our game, I thought to myself.

On the one hand, he’s annoying. He came off as awkward and creepy at first, but after a bit he’s relaxed and opened up. Which is to say, he’s just become irritable and overly emotional about some televised Pokemon matches. He lectured me on what each trainer should be doing and why what they were doing was boneheaded and tactically stupid, and kept glancing over to me to make sure I was paying attention. When I tried to speak up with my own thoughts, he would pause, look like he was listening, and immediately rebut my input. After a while I gave up trying to make it a two-way
conversation.

Well, at least he doesn’t seem interested in getting inside my pants, I thought.

You’re wearing a dress, not pants, I then thought.

Bah, whatever, it’s just an expression. You know what you meant.

But really, I was afraid Volkner would turn out like every other man who showed interest in me: “You’re pretty, you’re cute, let’s go on a date, let’s go to my room, let’s f---”. Volkner wasn’t like those guys. He seemed almost too eager to treat me like just another one of his pals. He wants to talk shop about Pokemon battles, play games, and relax. He’s interested in having my company but not interested in my body, or even flirting.

Isn’t this what you would prefer from men? For them to not treat you like an object of lust?

Except he’s not even paying attention to our board game.

What was the point of coming up here?

He helped Magnemite, so you were going to do the proper thing and accepted his invitation to hang out.

But why did he ask you to hang out?

Because he’s a man who wants to sleep with me.

But he’s not acting like he wants to sleep with you.

Well maybe he’s just taking that round-about way of trying to “woo” me through kindness and chit chat. You know, that thing “Nice Guys” do.

Except he’s not even acting like Robert or Edward. He’s just being himself.

Well, what are the subtle signs that a guy is romantically interested? Is he displaying any?

Interested guys will compliment you- does calling me a tough lady who can handle a Steelix count as a compliment?

Checks to see if you’re paying attention to him- yep, that’s a check, he’s not going ten seconds without looking at me in the eye.

Overly agreeable, won’t refute anything you say in a desperate attempt to curry favor- ahhhh, no:

“I think Pikachu are cute.”

“Nah, they’re faggy, that’s why I had Raichu evolve as fast as possible.”

“Hmph.”

Asks too many personal questions- well he started out asking a lot, but not since we sat down.

Finds ways to touch you- he grabbed my shoulder by accident, once. Does that count? It’s not like Peter’s attempts, slinking an arm around or holding a hand out to sneak a butt pat as you brushed by or begging for a less-than-innocent hug. So, if we narrowed the definition to deliberate attempts to touch my body in inappropriate ways- no, not once, nor even a hint or threat of such an action.
Final verdict-

There is no final verdict. Reality is realistic, Volkner’s intentions are muddled.

“So you have a Magneton?”

“That’s right?”

“Oh cool. How long have you had him?”

Then he launched us into a conversation about Magneton, since he was thinking of evolving his Magnemite and wanted to know the ins and outs of that process. The fact that he spent a good twenty minutes on this topic, and that he was so eager and focused on it, led me to believe he was genuinely interested in it and what I had to say about it. That in turn got me thinking that maybe, just maybe, Volkner was actually interested in me as a friend.

That’s fine.

We can be friends.

For the four days of the summit, at least.

Then I won’t see him again for a year.

This afternoon will mean nothing.

Nothing will come of it.

No stress, no drama, no negative memories.

And everything will be all right.

On Wednesday I attended a series of workshops and lectures, and then met Erika and Whitney for shopping. When we returned to the Battle Tower, who else should be waiting for me but the awkward blond-haired boy from yesterday. He saw me and waved.

“Who is that?” Erika asked.

“Just an acquaintance.”

Volkner was headed this way. I did NOT want Erika witnessing any sort of interaction between us, less it give her strange ideas about our relationship, so I quickly excused myself.

“I’ve got to go. See you tonight.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Volkner met me halfway. I kept walking past him without a word. He stood and gawked for a moment, before a pause in my step signaled for him to follow. I prayed he would do so discretely. He did not, and very obviously hustled to catch up with me.

“What was that?” he asked when we were safely out of sight.
“I told my friends I had a lecture to attend and that was why I had to ditch them.”

“Do you have a lecture to attend?” he asked.

“Of course not.”

That brought a happy-look to his face.

“So I was thinking we could practice together. What do you say?” he offered.

“That sounds like a good idea.”

It did sound like a good idea.

I sighed in exasperation upon recalling the previous night:

“Mother, I need to practice battling.”

“You practice every single day in a live setting. Trust me, I know big bureaucratic institutions, they’ll put more weight on your exam results than your play-fights. Study.”

“I don’t need to study.”

“Yes, you do, and yes, you will.”

“But Mother-“

“No buts, Jasmine! I don’t want you to lose your job.”

“Yeah, just admit you don’t want me moving back home.”

“SHUT UP AND GET YOUR NOSE IN THOSE BOOKS!”

“Fine! Alright! You win!”

That woman can be such a… I don’t even know why I bothered to answer her phone call. Oh, right, something about my health care coverage, one of the last bills she and Father are footing for me.

Well, I did end up spending all of last night studying, and I’ll probably do the same tonight, after tending to Amphy. Which means, if I’m going to get any live practice in, it’ll have to be during the day. So Volkner’s suggestion was actually welcome.

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Really? Is it me?”
“No, not you. Family,” I said, waving him off.

“Ah. That touchy subject. Okay. I got a field reserved for us. It’s inside, hope you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all. It’s kind of hot outside anyways (it’s actually disgustingly hot outside), so that sounds great. Where to?”

He motioned and set off; I followed.

We got out our Pokemon and started with simple warmups, stretches, and exorcises. Then followed drills, where our Pokemon helped each other execute various maneuvers and attacks. The most interesting drill was the strength-on-strength practice. Raichu and Magneton stared down one another, taking turns lighting off Thunderbolts. It was the job of the defender to counter with their own Thunderbolt, cancelling the two electrical beams out, but only if they could connect in time. It was a test in accuracy and reflexes. The other strength-on-strength was Electivire and Steelix, attempting to push each other away from a line with brute force. Volkner called that drill off when Steelix kept easily winning by a good four yards.

“Yeah, that’s not fair. He weighs like twenty times more than Electivire.”

We exchanged ideas and tactics. I showed him Steelix’s Dig attack, how I liked to use it to create pits beneath opponent’s Pokemon and trap them. In turn, he had Electivire show me a more efficient way to Dig so that I could conceal the surface signature of my burrowing Pokemon.

“So you can evolve a Magnemite by itself? I didn’t know that. I always thought you needed three of them.”

“Yes. The difference is their conscious, whether it has one or three personalities after evolving into Magneton. Mine has three, it fused with two abandoned Magnemites a few years ago. I’m debating what to do with my second Magnemite.”

“Is one better than the other?”

“Situational, I think. Having three minds makes it harder to train, but it withstands Confusion and Paralysis better. It’s better at Electric attacks, but weaker with its Steel attacks.”

“Is it a big difference?”

“In mine, yes. Even my Magnemite, unevolved, has a stronger Mirror Shot than my Magneton. Well, that’s also because of the different abilities, Magnemite has Magnet Pull, which also gives a small boost to its Steel attacks.”

“Magneton is a Sturdy, then.”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. My Magnemite has Magnet Pull. I’ve been wondering why it’s had so much trouble learning Thunder Wave.”

“Oh. Haha. That’s not the reason. Magnemite need a TM to learn Thunder Wave.”

“Oh! You’re kidding!”

“I’m not.”

“I’ve spent forever trying to get it to work! I’m an idiot. But wait a minute, I got it to work before…
sort of… here, just watch.

He had his Magnemite demonstrate an Electric-type wave attack that exploded like a bubble. The attack looked weak and unpolished, in my opinion, and I quickly realized why.

“So how come it can use Thunder Wave at all?”

“That’s not Thunder Wave, that’s a Discharge! And an improperly trained one at that, you’ve been teaching it all wrong. I thought you were an Electric-type specialist?”

“Eh, I’m sorry, I don’t pay as much attention as I should to Magnemite.”

I couldn’t criticize him for that failing, not when I thought of Choir, Oddish, and Sunkern.

“It’s fine. Now you know. A TM will help.”

“Right.”

That’s how my afternoon passed. Thanks to the relentless focus on our Pokemon, I was able to relax and put the fear of his intentions out of mind. Even when I dwelled on it, my instincts tended towards the positive- Volkner genuinely did not seem interested in flirting or sexually romancing me. The only thing ticking off my alarm bells was the fact that he was giving me any attention at all. After all, I was a woman, and he was a man. Isn’t it natural to think some underlying romantic motivations were present?

“Phew!”

We finished our routine.

Steelix turned over in the dirt to clean himself off, and then sloughed over to us. Volkner was attending Electivire, who gave him a playful shove. The human man stumbled backwards and bumped into me.

“Sorry!”

RUMBLERUMBLERUMBLE!

Steelix ploughed between us, separating me from Volkner with his massive body. The Pokemon glared down on the goofy, apologetic human.

I let out a little laugh and rolled my eyes. Ah, Steelix, you’re not my dad!

I motioned for my behemoth to back off.

“You hungry?”

“Not very. My Pokemon are, I think.”

“Feeding station?”

“Yes!”

We walked and talked our way to the station where Pokemon meals were dispensed. Rows of automated vending machines were swamped by a crowd of trainers. The lines were moving fast, thankfully. Volkner let me go first.
“Hey, don’t be cheap, your Pokemon worked hard for you.”

“Huh?”

I had my hand over the purchase button.

“It’s all I can afford.”

“Let me.”

“Oh. Wait no!”

Too late. Volkner butted in and ordered enough premium meals to feed both of our Pokemon teams. I squirmed as he slid his debit card through.

“That wasn’t really necessary,” I said in protest. He ignored me.

“Hey big guy! Not sure what to feed you. You like Cinnamon Patties?”

“He doesn’t eat regular meals…”

Again tardy in protest, I watched helplessly as Steelix gobbled up the plate-sized patties like candy.

“Hmm. I don’t think three is going to be enough.” He looked over the rest of the wrapped meals. Altogether they could fill a pair of grocery bags. Altogether, Steelix could devour them and still have room for a bathtub in his maw. “You don’t feed him on just this stuff, do you?” Volkner asked.

“I was trying to tell you. He eats rocks. This stuff is bad for him.”

“He seemed to like it.”

To my consternation, Volkner appeared to be right. Steelix was nodding and eagerly waiting for more. He had his head bowed and gently nudged Volkner’s forearm. Wait… is this Steelix begging?

“No! BAD POKEMON! BAD STEELIX! NO BEGGING! I TAUGHT YOU BETTER THAN THIS!”

Steelix grumbled, but obediently rolled back.

“You know, I think I miscounted. I bought enough for the Magne-Pokes, but they feed on batteries, don’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Then who else? Does Graveler eat anything?”

“She can have whatever.” The moody living boulder had spent our practice not practicing, preferring to sulk in the back. Upon hearing herself mentioned, she eyed Volkner and the Pokemeals. Greed and expectation crept into her expression.

“Hey there! Come and grab it.”

Graveler waddled up, snatched the offering, and scurried back to her isolation, delicious food in hand.

“This is why I didn’t want you to buy the expensive meals. None of my Pokemon benefit from
them.”

“Graveler seems to enjoy them.”

“She doesn’t deserve anything nice, she’s been misbehaving.”

I remembered last week’s training session, when she Self-Destructed on Steelix, against my orders. I used a Revive on her to get her back into the training session, and she promptly Self-Destructed again. Revives aren’t cheap. The session left me a bit resentful towards her. I had decided I was going to use Magnemite in my battle exams because of the incident.

“Oh. Well, your Pokemon, your rules. Hey, you guys, come and eat!” He called his own Pokemon over. We found a table and his more biologically-oriented team chowed down. I directed Steelix to go to the Bronze Sand River and chomp down on the riverbed stones.

“I’m fortunate. He only needs to eat once a day, and only when active. Otherwise, I don’t know where I would find enough for him to eat.”

“I’m guessing it’s a lot of rock.”

“Four hundred pounds in one meal.”

Volkner whistled.

The day passed into evening in much the same way, idle chatter focused on Pokemon or our jobs taking up the majority. Night fell and the Battle Tower was closing, forcing a departure. Volkner hung back.

“Me and some friends are going to see a movie, want to join?”

“No thank you.”

Even if he says friends, I assume they’re all guys. Just dealing with this man was testing my nerves, and he was not anywhere near as coarse or annoying as the rest of his gender. Besides, going out to the movie with him sounded a lot like a “date”, and regardless of what he viewed it as, I know Erika would definitely make that conclusion.

“I’m sorry, but I have things to do tonight.”

“I’m sorry too.”

His gaze lingered on me as I started away.

“Goodbye,” I said.

“See you tomorrow,” he replied.

I made it out to the parking lot before ducking behind a car and then sneaking a glance through the windows.

Volkner had his hands in his pockets and was staring at the ground. He sighed, trotted around, settled to a position, checked his phone, and didn’t do much else. He gave off an air of dejection.

“What are you thinking? What’s your goal?” I muttered.

RING RING.
“Ahh!”

My phone was buzzing. I clicked it open.

“Who are you stalking? Is he cute? Is he single?”

I jumped.

“Eeeek! Erika you fiend! Where are you?!”

“Behind you, by the red pillbug.”

I found the stubby car in question, and my stalker of a best friend perched atop its hood.

“What are you doing?”

“What were you doing?” she asked insistently.

“Nothing!”

“Is there someone who caught your eye? Are you afflicted by a crush? You do know you have the looks of a schoolgirl still, so it would not look out of character for you to blush and giggle and make an adorable love-stricken fool of yourself.”

“You’d better stop before I start pointing out your waste size,” I threatened. At that exact moment my stomach growled.

“My oh my, whose waist size is up for comment now?”

“You didn’t hear that. Bully.”

“May I ask, was your behavior linked to that fine young gentleman we spotted earlier?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? I do think I spy him over yonder. And he seems to have spied us as well. He is looking this way right now. Oh, he is coming this way.”

“No! Impossible! Not happening! Let’s go!”

“Awww.”

“Come on! We’ve got to go to the river and pick up Steelix. Then your hotel room.”

“Have you eaten today?”

“No.”

“Oh dear. There’s a nice seafood restaurant by my hotel. We will eat there.”

“Okay. Um, can I stay with you tonight? I want an early start tomorrow.”

“Of course! Splendid!”

The truth of my request: I was lonely and wanted to spend more time with Erika. Especially quality time away from crowds, when she was less likely to harp on the subject of boys.
The REAL truth of my request: I have no food at home, and want to bum a free meal.

“Ah, Whitney’s room is right next door. We can have a slumber party.”

“We can’t stay up late.”

“Of course. Ah, and lunch tomorrow, Café le Rei, do not forget! Lyra is coming.”

“Right. I’ll remember. How could I forget Lyra?”

“Oh haha, that Typhlosion.”

“Wait. ‘There are visions of Hell that haunt me, fire and brimstone, ashes to every horizon, a doom and the doomed, all dancing their anguish before my eyes, and I find comfort in those visions, because then I can put out of mind what that monster did to my Pokemon.’ I tried my hand at literature, what do you think?”

“Write a book and sell it. “Tribulations of a Gym Leader”. Make sure to write me in as a character. I would be the old wizened mentor.”

“Sorry, that role is taken by Pryce.”

“Oh. Hmm. The hyper-intelligent sidekick, perhaps?”

“But I’m the nerdy one. You would be, um, the strong and dependable leader.”

“Oh I like that role. Who is the protagonist?”

“Lyra, I guess.”

We chuckled, as we both knew my literary talents were not fit for the fanfiction boards, let alone professional publishing.

“Now, tell me all about that young man you were stalking.”

“Ugh! Drop it! I mean it! It’s not like that at all! I don’t know him, we’re strangers, I have nothing for him, he is nothing to me, you’re making up things in your head, you romance-obsessed Luvdisc!”

“Ohohohoho! But seriously, tell me, and I will treat you.”

“He’s just a Gym Leader from Sinnoh. We met last year, so he thinks we’re friends and he’s been bugging me to hang out. That’s all there is to it.”

“So-”

“And NO! That does not make him a love interest! I am sick of boys, and I am sick of the expectation that I need a boyfriend!”

“If you say so,” Erika said softly. “Very well, then let us talk about something else. Fashion! Apparel! Yes, that will do. What will you be wearing to the gala tomorrow?”

“There’s a gala?”

We slipped into her rental car and drove off, our conversation running the gamut of typical female topics- clothes, decorations, gossip, the things that annoy us. I picked up Steelix, called in on Connie and Amphy, and stopped by a quickie mart for toiletries. I had never been to the seafood restaurant
Erika had suggested; it turned out to be pretty good. Whitney joined us at the hotel. She wanted to go swimming, to which Erika agreed. I didn’t want to, but they somehow forced me into a “cute” (by certain *notmine* definitions of cute) onesie Erika “just happened” to have on hand and we all dipped into the pool.

The night was spent in bathrobes, Erika hosting an impromptu study session for the written exams.

It was truly an innocuous night, a very momentary respite from the stress of crowds, from Mother, from my job, from men and Volkner and all the other drama that dogged me at every turn of my existence.

Up until this night, my whole existence had been static, a depressing but stable egress that threatened to settle in and become the story of the remainder of my life.

How could I know everything would change tomorrow, that events would be set into motion that would utterly shatter this melancholic existence?

“It’s sooo hot. Whyyyyy…”

We’re two weeks into September, the rainy season should be right around the corner, and yet, it’s almost 90 degrees, to say nothing of the humidity- I can feel the moisture ON MY BRAIN.

Which is why I was pleasantly surprised to find Volkner coming to greet me with a pair of ice-cold drinks in hand.

“Thirsty?”

“Yes!” I grabbed the can and smacked it against my forehead. It was freezing, and wonderful. When frostbite threatened, I started rubbing the mini-repository of coldness all over my head.

“You’re supposed to drink it.”

“Negative heat is too precious to waste.” Having brought my suffering down by a marginal but critical degree, my social awareness returned in force. I cradled the can between both hands and gave Volkner a curt bow of thanks.

“Thank you very much. That was greatly appreciated.”

“You’re welcome, but, ah, you don’t need to be so formal.”

“I wouldn’t want to seem rude, though.”

“It’s okay. Hey, so what are you doing today?”

“Um, eh, a lot. I have lectures this morning, lunch with my friends, then I was going to check out the free battles, and then something that I’m forgetting…”

“Which lectures?”

“Ethics? I think.”
“Oh, cool, I have to check Ethics off too. Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.”

Yes, I do mind!

And yet we entered the lobby and pushed on through the crowds together.

I don’t want company. I don’t want male company. Even polite, helpful male company. What if Erika saw this? You’re walking too close, put some space between you and him. Don’t give the impression that we’re more than acquaintances. Ahh, but what if he’s offended by my behavior? So what. He’s a guy. They don’t notice things like that. They’re stupid and daft.

“How is Steelix doing? Did you feed him?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And what about your Amphanos? I thought you said you needed to visit him.”

“No, I’m having one of my Gym Trainers take care of him while I focus on the summit.”

“Oh. Here’s the room.”

He shrugged.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said tiredly.

“I sort of like Ethics, though,” I replied.

“Why’s that?”

“It’s the only course that they touch on our relationships with our Pokemon.”

“Oh.”

We were a little early, and most of the speaking hall was empty. Nonetheless, Volkner guided us to a seat at the very back, like middle school flirts. The League lecturer eyed us as we took our seats.

It’s just idiot people and their own ignorant perceptions, I told myself.

As long as Volkner himself continues to act platonically.

Just two more days, I only have to tolerate him for two more days.

“You’re close to your Pokemon,” he said. “I’ve got a good idea about what a bond is like between girls and cute Pokemon and guys and cool Pokemon, but you and your Steelix and Magnemites, it’s kind of a mystery to me what that would be like. What’s it like?”

“It’s…” Hard to find the words… “Reliability. Trust. Working together.” I shook my head. That’s a really generic and cliché way of putting it. “I mean. I command them and they obey. They tell me their needs and wants and I fulfill them. We know what to expect from each other and how to live with each other peacefully. They don’t try my patience a lot.” Except Graveler. “And we all understand why we’re battling and that we’re all working hard to excel at it. It’s simple really. I told you I have trouble with crowds and people and all the drama they invite. Well, all my Pokemon are very, very anti-drama. Like cogs in a machine, no wait, a battle tank.” Volkner chuckled “-we all rely on each other to work as intended. That’s our bond.”
“Huh.”

I smiled, a pithy smile of fondness.

“Except Amphy. He’s special. He’s the squishy core everyone in the battle tank is working to protect.”

“Cute,” Volkner said.

Nnn…

“So Ethics ties in to that?”

“Yes. The sections about how to treat your Pokemon as their master, what’s permissible to ask of them, what’s discouraged, and what’s forbidden. I think it’s an interesting angle, what the government, lawyers, and scientists have come up with about Pokemon treatment and how it compares to my personal beliefs.”

“You’ve really thought about this.”

“You could say that.”

“When I- oh, they’re starting.”

However, to my disappointment, the Ethics lecturer droned on for over an hour and spent maybe forty seconds on Pokemon. It was mostly boring rehashes of standard interaction with Gym Challengers, a topic I could gladly gloss over.

Volkner showed me a text he had written on his phone under the table, ostensibly as a kind of new-age note-passing.

‘Yada yada! :P’

I nodded along.

The next text:

‘Oh, WE’RE the ones who have to behave!’

And the next:

‘Why don’t they force the challenger brats to take ethics?’

I giggled and nodded along. I took his phone and started my own line.

‘Why don’t they force the challenger brats to take ethics?’

Volkner shot me a quizzical look.

‘Spelling mistakes bug me.’ I typed in.

‘Sorry.’

It’s like we’re back in primary school, two kids passing messages under the table. The lecturer hardly cared, there were fifty other people packed in the room and a few were holding their own muttered conversations. Some were even playing games on their phones.
‘Want to check out the Victory Garden after?’

I shrugged and gave him a “maybe” look.

The Victory Garden was the Hall of Fame for the Battle Tower, an outdoor memorial for the greatest Pokemon and Trainers to pass through its halls. In all my years living in Olivine and visiting Battle Tower, I’ve never actually toured the Gardens, merely passed through them.

On arrival, I was drawn to the stone statues lined in a circle around the main rotunda. There were nine, each carved in the likeness of a Pokemon. A Tyranitar, Machamp, Hippowdon, and so on stood carved in exquisite detail.

“They represent the three teams with the longest win-streaks in the tower’s history,” I said as Volkner came up behind me. He shifted between them quickly, while I lingered on each one. His interest was drawn to the plaques and etched stones, lesser victors of days gone by.

I laughed a little on reaching the south face, depicting the three silver medalist. One statue stood towering over the rest, although it was still much smaller than the actual Pokemon.

“Gyrados. I remember you.” The sculptors were really good. I could see the scars and wrinkles that had marked Gyarados’ face in real life.

“What’s that?”

“My mentor’s old Pokemon.”

“Oh. Old? Is it still alive?”

I sighed.

“Maybe. He was released into the wild when Mr. Beret passed away. Never liked his Pokeball.”

“Oh.” Volkner backed off a step, looking worried, probably thinking he had accidentally asked something insensitive (he did).

“It’s a neat place,” he remarked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you ever dream of making it here? Ever tried?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Not enough time.”

“I’ve tried my hand at Sinnoh’s Battle Frontier. Got a decent score, but the place is overrun with top-tier players. Couldn’t break through the ceiling.”

“That’s sort of the reason I don’t bother.”

“Lot of names here. Lot of people who’ve come through the tower.”

“Yeah.”
He brushed his hand over the statues and flowers. I took a seat at the fountain in the center and followed his progress.

He seems nervous. A little downcast too. And sweaty. Probably because of that jacket he’s wearing, it’s so hot and yet he’s still covered head-to-toe. But there’s also a little something hiding in his actions, a hesitation, or uncertainty about where to keep his focus, that I can’t quite decipher. Even his hand placement and walking motion were vague. There was nothing I could discern from his body language about what he was thinking.

What am I doing here?

“Do you know why they do it?” he asked.

“No. Why?”

“It wasn’t rhetorical, sorry.” He gave me a stiff smile. “I don’t understand it, what drives them.”

“To fight?”

“No. Yes. I know what the books say about Pokemon battles. It’s an important outlet for their wild instincts. And sure, trainers get the thrill of being a commander. But I mean, what drives people to kind of, I don’t know, elevate this to a passion? I couldn’t ever really get inside the emotion of battling. It always seemed too violent.”

“Mmm.”

“Have any idea what I’m talking about? I wouldn’t take offense if you thought I didn’t make sense, I’m not good with words.”

“Well,” I said, “I think you and I have a different perspective on battling than ordinary trainers, because of our jobs. We don’t fight for the same reasons they do. We don’t have the same incentives. We’re Gym Leaders, we’re fulfilling a function of the Pokemon League’s competitive access strategy. The system is designed to disincentivize us from being very successful. Trainers can aim to be the best and win championships, there’s nothing comparable for us to achieve.”

Volkner stared at me.

“I guess I do have a way with words,” I said with a shrug.

“You could say- but you’re right. Maybe I just can’t get motivated to continue to be the League’s badge piñata.”

“Is something the matter? You sound frustrated.”

“It’s nothing.” He wandered up to me. “I feel like I’m missing something. About battles, and Pokemon, and trainers. And life in general. It feels like I missed the class, Figuring Out the World and Your Place in It, 101.”

“That would probably be a graduate level course. Have you thought about college?”

“Already tried it, flunked out.” He grimaced. “Not that it was too hard, or anything. Maybe I’ll go back. Well, I don’t really need to. I’ve got enough experience to land any electrical engineering job in Sinnoh.”

“That’s good.”
“Not really.” He shook his head. “Pokemon Battles, college, career. Friends. I’ve got a lot going for me, but I still feel like I’m missing something. You ever get that feeling?”

“What feeling?” I asked.

“Of being alone.”

“Sometimes,” I said, confused.

He stood right over me, bowing his head, hands at his sides.

“I think what I’m missing, is that special someone in my life. Someone like you.”

BOOM.

CRUSH DETECTED.

INTENTIONS CONFIRMED.

RED ALERT.

DISENGAGE!

DISENGAGE!

DISENGAGE!

My heart went crazy.

He’s this close. *THIS* close. And you let him.

This one was clever. And patient. What a bastard. Waiting this long to spring his trap on me, it got my hopes up, that I could meet one single male who was not after my virginity. Someone who didn’t screw with me, a man that actually respected me and wanted to be around me as a thinking, self-motivated human being. But NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

Damn it all! God! God you’re horrible! I’m going with the Pokemon God, Arceus, its creations are much more reasonable!

Volkner is staring at me, waiting for a reply. I got up, strongly considering the urge to shove the young man away. I resisted. Barely.

Run, just run.

No, that would look undignified.

But we have to correct this.

Correct this? What is this?

Another pervert wanting to get between your legs.

“Jasmine?” he said.

His eyes were soft, and for the first time, looking straight at me, unflinching, unapologetic, without diversion.
He really is a nice, quiet kind of guy.

Jasmine, it’s the first time in six years that a man has actually treated you this way. What he said about being lonely- maybe, just maybe, he was telling you the truth?

What if he does care about companionship more than lust?

It doesn’t matter, he’s still a guy, and comes with all the faults built into the Y chromosome.

But, but, but… he’s right, don’t you feel lonely all the time too?

You have Pokemon, Amphy and Steelix!

But they can’t always be with you. And no matter how much joy you get out of caring for them, do you ever feel really, truly cared for by them in return?

Why not, and this may a revolutionary idea… accept Volkner’s feelings? Or even, oh come on, entertain them, just a tiny bit?

But…

Or even pretend? It’ll get Erika off your back for a little while, at least. You could use this to mess with her like all the times she’s messed with you.

Oh bug off with Erika. This is between me and the guy standing right before me.

“I’m sorry. I was just muttering off,” Volkner said. “Ignore that. Let’s get out of here, do something exciting. There’s a party tonight.”

Say yes! YES! It’s that easy!

But what if, oh God, it actually works?

Then you’ll be in love.

I don’t want that.

What is there not to want? A human being that attends to your every need, hugs you, gives you comfort, and will stand by your side, to treasure and want you…

Until he gets tired and moves onto another bimbo.

Until he relaxes and takes you for granted.

Until he lets down his guard and shows you the crude barbarian underneath.

But those are only possibilities- an undefined percentage chance that may be high, but not 100%. If they have a less than 100% chance of coming true, that necessarily means that the other possibility, that he turns into the perfect companion for me, has some slim, marginal chance of coming true. And then, good grief, you’ll be happy, right?

YEAH RIGHT!

I am not supposed to be happy. That isn’t in my character, that’s not who I am, that’s not a destiny I was born with. My lot in life is to, at best, live in contentment, and provide what I can to my Pokemon and friends. Happiness is a fairy tale belonging to people on TV.
But, you know, there’s still a sliver of chance that you’ll achieve a less boring, more interesting state of melancholy with a lover around.

Fine.

“Hey Volkner.”

We’ll say something mildly reassuring to him here, roll with it, and try to enjoy this relationship as what it is, what I should have recognized it was from the start- a transient fling, its life cycle staked to the duration of this summit. I’m sure it will die out a pathetic end once we part and have no more occasion to see each other in person. Long distance relationships are so fake and untenable.

But, but, but… what if you want a long-distance relationship?

Think of all the benefits. Companionship, but on dictated terms. Your time is still yours. If he becomes a jerk, you can just block him. He’ll never be able to molest you. Erika can never bug or tease you about being single ever again. It’s all the benefits and none of the drawbacks!

So say something to him!

“Let’s walk back,” I said.

We exited the gardens, him confused, I in the midst of a mental cyclone.

A relationship.

A short fling with a shy guy who just wants affection and someone to talk to. He seems like he has something on his chest, maybe he just needs a girlfriend to unburden on. That’s not so bad, right? Riiigght? It’s actually a little off-putting. Men need to be strong, and resilient! Think of all the things you need to get off your chest! A wimp can’t handle the darkness locked away in your heart! Ha! You sound like a soap box opera set in a medieval fantasy world.

Then what? We go back to our homes, a thousand miles apart, and that’s that. Maybe we keep a relationship up, see each other a few times a month… actually, legitimately fall in love… I learn to tolerate the disgusting vulgarities of his sex, somehow… I come to love him, and he’ll love me… it’ll be great. And then we’ll find a way to move closer, and move in together, and slowly grow closer, and then he’ll spring the question on me in some fun, creative way. We’ll be married. You’ll be like every other human being.

You’ll be happy.

Jasmine, why would you shy away from that?

Because you’re afraid of sex?

Come on, I’m sure after six or seven years, you’ll want him to touch you, you’ll be comfortable enough for that to happen.

And then… and then… and then….

No.

Never.

It will never happen.
It can never be allowed to happen.

I mustn’t.

This was foolish, Jasmine.

You know what has to be done.

We walked along the steps of the drive, and each footfall on the concrete reverberated up into my chest and head. It was nurturing a headache there. My breathing was picking up. My nostrils were flaring.

This… drama. This heinous drama.

Humans. I don’t want to deal with them anymore.

He’s glancing at me, looking worried. Stop looking at me!

I can’t believe how stupid I was. To not recognize his feelings sooner, and worse, to even entertain the thought of reciprocating them! Jasmine, you idiot! Get rid of him and get this over with! Erika and company are waiting. Oh, they’ll have a heyday when they find out about this! Gah!

Come on, Jasmine. This isn’t something to be angry about. Just calm down. Look civil. Look polite. Don’t give him an excuse to retaliate. This is all just a misunderstanding. A terrible, horrible, stressful, undignified misunderstanding.

We arrived at the top of the steps. The sun was at our back, away south. I felt it, the heat all across my back, but my stomach was heavy and cold. The Battle Tower rose ominously above us. The place wasn’t busy. We had a modicum of privacy. The words came to me, the well-worn line I had heard so many times before, from my own lips, to be given once more to the air.

I took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what you’re making of this, and I don’t like to fool around with people, so I’ll be clear. I’m fine with being just friends. And that’s all I want us to be. Sorry.”

- Present Day

Sunyshore, Sinnoh

I stuttered to a halt.

We had reached the tree-lined steps leading down to the beach. Vista Lighthouse rose up high on a nearby bluff. The sun was hanging overhead, bright but cold.
I stared forward, gaze locked on the ocean waves, not seeing them, not seeing anything. I could say nothing. I was in shock.

“I think what Morty did to you was wrong. I’m sorry. Sorry I didn’t tell you about it. That I didn’t—
that I couldn’t bring myself to do something about it sooner, kind of speaks to the kind of person I am. You wouldn’t want me for a boyfriend. I’m a coward. And I’m messed up. I wouldn’t want to burden you with what I’ve been through. No woman deserves that. Do you understand? Is that all right with you?”

“No.”

I still couldn’t face him.

“That’s not acceptable.”

He sighed.

“Don’t be difficult.”

“That’s not what I want. I wanted to hear you say what you said back then. That you’re lonely. That you’re missing someone. That you want me. Those are the things I want to hear. Just tell me that. Not that other stuff.”

“Listen, Jasmine. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry. I flirted with you ‘cause you were cute, and we seemed to have a little in common. It was just a crush. It didn’t last. It was stupid and impertinent. It meant nothing.”

“Stop saying that. That’s not what I need from you right now.”

“I’m not saying this because I have some ulterior motive. Not because of Morty. I’m not like him. This is what I truly mean. I don’t think we would work out.”

“Why not give it a chance?” I said, shrugging.

“Because I know it would end in disaster.”

“Why even bother in the first place, then? Did you think I was cute? Do you still think I’m cute?”

“Yeah, you are beautiful, but-”

“Then what more excuse do you need!” I flipped around to face him. “Am I not a woman? Are you not a man? Does it have to be any more complicated than that?”

“Yes, there-”

He couldn’t talk, not with my lips locked on his. I had his head in my hands, grasping it tightly. The kiss was hard, and sloppy, and forced, and completely without pleasure. He pulled away. I looked up to him. I shivered and stuttered as I spoke.

“I’m not asking you, to be, to see this- as anything more- than- I- I- I don’t expect anything—other-than you to love me in any way you see fit— and I’ll be yours. Isn’t that what you want?”

He stared at me wild-eyed.

“I’m not that kind of man. You’re not that kind of woman. I know that much about you,” he said.
“What do you know about me?” I demanded. “You don’t know anything about me!”

“Everything,” he replied. “I know everything.”

“What?”

“I even knew you were coming here.”

“You’re lying.”

“He likes to play it down and act like he doesn’t even have them, but when push comes to shove, he’ll use his powers. He called me.”

“Morty?” I asked, startled.

“He told me everything. And I mean everything. Your favorite foods, your pet peeves, your middle school adventures. The whole conspiracy bit. Even things like the lurid little trysts you shared on the gym balcony and in the hot springs.” Volkner’s voice grew bitter and forced. “He loved watching me squirm, lapped up all my jealousy, forced me to listen to the details about how he got to mess around with a girl I thought should be mine, a girl he didn’t even love. I realized he was playing me just as much as he was playing you. He knew I thought it was a god-awful plan, but he also knew exactly how to keep me strung along. I thought I was a better person than that, that I could get over letting my dick run my life, but I wasn’t, and I hate myself for it, and I hate Morty for exposing that in me.

And even when I realized that, I still went along with their damn conspiracy, because I still had the idiotic idea that the possibility of winning you could motivate me to become a better person. And all along, Morty kept saying he would make that happen, that the means were kinda fucked up, but the ends would make everyone happy. Except what Morty says and what he does are two different things, and in the end he wasn’t helping me get you, he was satisfying his own morbid curiosity about your past. Every time he told me he’d create an opening for me, he interfered, or you backed out, or you went off-script, and I was left wondering why, and I’d go to him, and he’d tell me it was all part of the plan, and to be patient. The damn liar. You know that part of him well enough, don’t you?”

I tried, in vain, to get my warring emotions under control.

“He’s ten magnitudes of awful but he wasn’t wrong,” I said. “I wish I had never found out about their plan. I wish it had worked. I wish you were never in on it either, that way you wouldn’t be spouting this nonsense to me right now!”

“Oh, yeah, Morty told me to do that too, play dumb. You want to know what he said? That I should take advantage of you, that this was the culmination of the plan. KACHING! Everyone gets what they want after all!”

“I don’t get it.” I shook my head. “I’m here. It worked. What’s done is done, and if everyone gets what they want, why do you have to dwell on the process?” I shivered. “If you’re rejecting me, then all this pain we’ve suffered will be for nothing!”

“That’s just it- this isn’t what I wanted. At all. I didn’t want a desperate girl whoring herself out to me as a last pitiful resort. I wanted someone who genuinely loved me, for being me. Isn’t that what you wanted? Not some ass who harassed you because he thought you were pretty and wanted you for sex in order to assuage his own insecure ego? That sound like the basis of a loving relationship to you? I seem to recall you turning down just such a prospect a few months ago, and quite frankly, I don’t blame you for doing it, it was the right call.”
“I don’t care anymore. Please!”

“And why should I care? Because after all this, I think I’m finally seeing the truth of things. Like what a coward and a selfish ass I’ve been, and a fool for listening to Morty. I want to be a better person, starting now, and taking advantage of you in this state isn’t going to help. It’ll just end badly, for both of us.”

“Then let it end badly! Why not get there and find out for ourselves? I need someone, right now.”

I tried reaching for his hands, he pulled away, so I clung to his jacket. My words came out in one long gush, interrupted only by sobs.

“I’ve been lied to and betrayed and my job is falling apart and my family and my friends and even my Pokemon hate me! And even my precious Amphy who was there when everything started and he helped me by being the only creature in the world who loved me completely unconditionally is now with some other Pokemon and he loves her instead and I don’t even have the chance to share him with her because they’re stealing him away from me- and I have nowhere to go and nothing to look forward to in life, and now you! You were the guy who said I could be his special someone, right? And not like Morty, you weren’t lying, you really meant it, but now you’re going to go back on your word? I’m not asking- demanding-” my chest heaved with a sob “-I only want to be wanted, just a little, just say you love me, or hold me, or fuck me, I don’t care, anything, just give me something to hold onto, please!”

“No. Not like this,” he said, shaking his head.

“What is wrong with you?! Just love me, damn it!”

I tore at my dress, ripping it open and exposing my breasts, and then shoved my nude front upon him. I made him touch me. Forced him. He consented long enough to stare at his own hand on my breast, shocked at the sight, and then tore himself away. I pressed him, but he shoved me away.

“You’re crazy!”

“No! I’m not! I just want what every other human being wants! To be loved! And if that means just giving my body over to you, why can’t you accept that? I love you!”

“No you don’t!” he shouted back. “You’re just saying that! Look, look at you! You’re desperate and emotional and out of your mind! Arceus, I’ll kick Morty’s ass for pushing you this far, but you’ve got to know this isn’t going anywhere, I can’t love you! Why can’t you understand that?”

“I don’t need love, just sex, or cuddles, or anything you want.”

“I’m not some schmuck who’s going to take advantage of a desperate girl looking for a rebound. I’m not that much of a lowlife, at least.”

“I don’t care! I don’t! Why can’t you just be a man and-”

“I AM A MAN! I have my dignity! I’ve put a woman between my legs that I didn’t love and felt the guilt and shame of it! I’ve seen a baby born, I’ve seen a marriage fall apart! I let a friend die because of my own cowardice! Don’t tell me who I am, who I’m supposed to be! I know who I am!”

His yelling brought me to tears. I thought I’d run out. Yet tears are a renewable resource, unfortunately for me.

“You bastard. You men, you’re all bastards.”
“We are not bastards. Stop blaming my entire gender for your own misery. We didn’t cause this.”

“But you can fix this, and you’re refusing. So why don’t you just- just fuck me and-” I lunged for him once more.

He turned violent.

He bull-rushed me, grabbed me by the collar of my dress, throttled me until I went limp and fell to my knees. The man leaned over and whispered furiously into my ear.

“Let me teach you what you so cruelly taught me: The height, the very height of perversion is to foist your lust upon someone you don’t even care about, thinking absolutely nothing of them and only doing so out of your own weakness and selfish desires. I do not want your virginity. I do not want YOU.”

He let go and stood back.

“Why?” I uttered.

“Because you won’t tell me what happened six years ago.”

I went still with shock.

“Morty told me EVERYTHING. Including the one thing you wouldn’t tell him- what the hell happened to you, to make you this way?”

He paused.

“See, you won’t answer. You don’t trust me. And if you don’t trust me, you can’t possibly love me.”

“I can’t say,” I said. “Even to someone I love. I can’t ever say.”

“Why not?”

I shook my head, refusing to elaborate.

“See, you won’t tell me. And you wouldn’t tell Morty. Or Erika. Or anyone else. Which to me, sounds a lot like an excuse to draw sympathy without ever accepting the responsibility to even try to make things better. Maybe you think, as long as you keep it secret, you can keep exaggerating about how bad it was and can always claim it as an excuse for all kinds of outrageous behavior. Well I can’t forgive your violent tirades, your lashing out, your totally unjustified bigotry towards men, your snide demeaning of everyone around you, your obsession with Pokemon to the detriment of your human relationships, your manipulation, and most of all, the shame and embarrassment of being rejected by you! I hate, despise, and loathe the societal double-standard where men can be persecuted as deviants, creeps, and perverts for the slight missteps of trying to establish a relationship and continue the human race, but the gross crimes of females are completely glossed over and treated as their birthright, no I can’t stand that hypocrisy at all- and you’re the worst example of that I’ve ever met!

You’re a horrible human being, Jasmine, and you need a lot of help.”

Volkner heaved and took a deep breath. He leaned back, held his back, and grimaced towards the sky. His next words came softly, lacking the anger and resentment he had already unloaded.

“I could accept your feelings, I really could. There’s that part of me that’s raging right now, just as
desperate as you, that horny, lonely little bitch I was in the past, that wants to say ‘yes’.

But I know, after everything I’ve been through, remembering all the times I’ve been jerked about, and seeing you for who you are, that I can’t take this as-is. It’s gotta be on my terms. I need to know I can trust you’re being sincere, that you’re not trying to use me as a convenient comfort pillow, that you’re not mooching up to me for money, that you won’t agree to a relationship and then hate me for any little pithy fault you find, that you won’t dump me for another man when it’s convenient. A real, honest, genuine relationship, that starts with trust. If your oh-so-dark secret is so important to you, if you’re not just making it all up, then you need to tell me. That’s my condition.”

Volkner closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’m not going to be a hypocrite. I’ll go first. Here’s my story: The thing I had Morty swear to keep secret? If you want to know, last year, I tried to kill myself. I put a gun to my head, I was seconds from pulling the trigger. Why would I try to end my life? It’s because I was a coward, and let a bunch of nobodies dictate my actions.

My best friend was bullied in high school for being gay. They picked on him, called him names, assaulted him, put him in the hospital. My other best friend abandoned him, the same guy who secretly kept him as a lover. I was the only person in the world my friend could fall back on, and I failed him. When he begged me for help, I gave him the cold shoulder, because I listened to my dick, and cared more about what a bitch thought of me than for my own moral code.

…

His name was Gill. He hanged himself. I was the one to find the body.

…

So maybe you should understand where I’m coming from when I don’t want to go around life making big decisions based on what gets my dick wet.

That’s my sob story. It’s not even the worst one I know. Flint let Gill die too, but unlike me, he had everything to lose. He got stuck with an impossible choice.

Morty’s lost a dozen family members to early deaths, some violent. Even his best friend in elementary school, run over by a cement truck, right in front of him. He ever tell you about that?”

My eyes widened.

“He’s a nihilistic wreck on the inside, you want to see it, get him really, really drunk. Yet, he still manages to think of others, and tries to help them. I know he royally sucks at it, but he tries. He stopped me from pulling that trigger. That’s why I could forgive him of anything.”

Oh God.

“There’s tragedy all over the world. Your secret, your sob story, I promise you, it’s not so bad.”

No, you’re wrong Volkner. It’s worse, far worse.

“You can move past it, if you try.”

No, I can’t.

“And it’s easier, if you let someone know. If nothing else, it shows you care for the ones you open
up to. I want to know you actually care for me, and that you’re not using me.”

_You can’t ask that of me. That price can’t be paid._

Volkner stiffened up, his voice rose, his speech came to its ultimate point.

“So who are you? Tell me your secret, and then I’ll love you.”

I was silent.

And silence was the only answer that question would ever elicit from me.

“I thought so.”

I tried very hard to keep myself together. It was difficult. I had the presence of mind to wrap my exposed breasts back in my dress, but that was all. He turned to leave. I reached out and caught him by the wrist, holding him back.

“You can’t go.”

“I’m leaving,” he said definitively.

“I… I have no money. I’m stuck here. I need you.”

Volkner reached into his pocket and got out his wallet. He dug out all of the bills in it and offered them to me.

“This should get you home.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Take it.”

“I don’t want money!” I slapped the bills out of his hand. The paper money fluttered across the steps, like so many dead leaves.

“Fine. Whatever. Good bye.”

He stalked off in the direction of the city.

After he was gone, the reality of the situation set in. I collapsed to the ground and started groveling around on my hands and knees, collecting the bills. The worry of trying to return home lasted a minute, before giving way to the enormity of what had transpired. I paused, overcome. The emotional impact hit me.

Tears flowed that could not be heard.

Light streamed from above that could not be felt.

A young woman, bereft of love, knelt down, bowed her head, and wept beneath a cold and lifeless December sun.

Chapter End Notes
I'm back.
“I told you this would happen.”

I sat on the bedside, head bowed. She stood over me, arms crossed.

“That’s what you get for acting like a whore.”

“I didn’t know.”

“What else did you expect from that boy? Love?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“Hardly. Men only think of us in one of two ways, Jasmine- as Bitches and Whores. Neither will earn you love, but only the former will earn you respect. Flaunting your body like that, you deserved what you got.”

“It’s not my fault.”

“Oh yes it is.”

“Why?!”

“Because he is a man. That’s how they were made by nature. You are the one with agency, you made the mistake, you are the only one that can control your own actions. If you can’t accept the consequences, you shouldn’t have chased that fool in the first place.”

“I didn’t want it to be like this. I wanted him to… to like me.”

“Of course you did.”

“Why didn’t he… why?”

“It doesn’t matter why, and the sooner you accept the fact that it doesn’t matter and it wasn’t worth it, the sooner you can work on things that actually matter- like getting your life in order.”

…

I sat on the bedside, head bowed. She stood over me, arms crossed.

“That’s what you get for acting like a whore.”

“I know.”

“What else did you expect from that boy? Love?”

“Yes.”

“As if throwing your naked breasts at a man is enough to get him to love you. That’s good for no more than a prostitute’s night out.”
“I would have settled for that.”

“You would have, and you tried, and yet he still rejected you.”

“Why?”

“Who knows? You’ll never know.”

“I could try again.”

“How?”

“Just… ask him.”

“He’s seven hundred miles away now.”

“I’ll buy a plane ticket.”

“You have no more money.”

“I’ll go on a Pokemon.”

“You’re going to cross all of Nihon on Steelix. Riiight.”

 “…I could call him?”

“Hmm. Well you’ve never been propositioned by phone before. Something tells me the chances for success are lower than face-to-face.”

“If I said the right thing…”

“Face it, you screwed up. You screwed up at the very beginning and now he’ll never love you.”

“Why not? What went wrong? Even if he hated me, couldn’t I do something for him to forgive me… all I did was turn him down, it wasn’t mean, I didn’t hate him. Don’t I deserve a chance to make it up to him? I gave Morty a chance, damn it! Why don’t I get the same?”

“You had your chance, and botched it.”

“I was desperate. And couldn’t think. He jumped on me with that rejection when I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Kind of like what you did to him.”

“Still- he didn’t give me any chance. He didn’t even want my body. I don’t get it. Aren’t all boys big balls of horniness? If only I’d… I don’t know, maybe if he and I fucking, that would’ve given me the chance to win him over? Why didn’t he want sex? Does he think I’m ugly?”

“Do you honestly think you’re pretty? Have a look!”

She flaunted herself before me. Her body was slender and bony and completely naked. She held her wiry arms folded across her chest, just under her breasts. Her breasts were smaller than average and honestly could have been mistaken for a child on the cusp of puberty. That mistake wouldn’t be averted by a search for body hair, either- every parcel of skin was exquisitely shaved, with especial attention to the underarms and pubic region. Save, of course, her head of hair, which was a damp, tangled, mess, as if recently washed and cut short. The crown was missing the twin spike tails a
casual observer would expect to find there. Her face was hard and angular, like a robot, like a tool, like the rest of her body, a thin steel coil whose lack of thickness belied its true strength. Her eyes didn’t recoil or stare off into space, but kept a doctoral attentiveness on its subject, myself.

She never smiled, but every word was said with an invisible smirk.

“I don’t want to see this,” I grumbled, averting my eyes.

“Why else am I here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it to look at yourself? Did you need another reminder that, yes, indeed, you are thin as a Sudowoodo, and no, that does not necessarily mean a man has to find you attractive. Look at this brow! It’s wider than Hoenn’s ocean routes. Where is the makeup? You never wear any, it makes you look too plain and unassuming, and of course there’s nothing helping you if you never smile. Frowning faces aren’t particularly attractive, no matter the rest of the package. A lite package, I might add. What man would embrace you? It’d be like hugging a skeleton! Perhaps you need to eat more.”

“There’s no food in the pantry.”

“Then go buy some.”

“I have no money.”

“Then go make money.”

“I don’t want to.”

“You don’t want to work? You already have one of the most interesting and fulfilling jobs in the modern economy and you don’t want to work? No wonder he turned you down! A lazy, spoiled child who wants everything and contributes nothing to society, that’s hardly wife material.”

“No. I can be a good wife. And a good worker. If only… he’d love me. Or someone. A good man. Someone who wants me. I can’t do this alone anymore.”

“Ahaahaha! You’re coming at it backwards.”

“What? How?”

“Dessert doesn’t come before veggies. You don’t get a man’s affection for being a sour, prudish, bitchy, unattractive, unhappy, selfish, unforgiving little gnat of cynicism. That all needs to change first, then a man will love you. Love is a reward for getting your act together, not a catalyst.”

“But how am I supposed to do that? What am I supposed to cling to? Nothing works, there’s no guarantee Volkner will love me then.”

“You should probably forget Volkner, it’s a lost cause. Life isn’t a video game, you don’t get a new save file, only continues. Your only good bet is to prepare yourself for the next worthwhile man to come along.”

“It’s useless. He won’t like me either.”

“Not with that attitude.”
“I can’t fake being happy.”

“Yes you can. It’s called Prozac.”

“Oh god, I don’t want drugs. I can’t even afford them.”

“You could if you worked.”

“I hate work.”

“You need the money.”

“I hate money. Just a fake carrot for everyone to run after while they spin the Dedenne wheel. It turns people into greedy monsters.”

“Oh not this argument. Money is necessary, period. It’s magical, really, all the things you can buy, all the things you can make people do, just with a flash of a card. I bet it could even make Volkner or Morty think twice about you, if you had enough of it. Men can be just as whorish as women.”

“I don’t care. Morty can go to hell.”

“Money can help with that too. Point is, you need it, and to get it you need to do your job.”

“No.”

“Slacker!”

“I’m not lazy.”

“Then why don’t you want to work?”

“It’s too stressful.”

“Excuses excuses. Well, if the competitive nature of being a Gym Leader is too much for you to handle, why not try something else? Someone with your credentials, there has got to be something out there that will put dinner on the table. A Pokemon daycare worker, for instance. Or a Pokevet. Or a Pokecenter Nurse.”

“Too stressful.”

“Still? What’s so stress-inducing about those careers?”

“I don’t want to deal with people. Or Pokemon. Or anything that can think for itself.”

“Is that so? That rather narrows it down to near nothing, you know. Money is a unit of human labor, it’s pretty useless by itself. Unless you plan on living in the wilderness and growing your own food… ah, I think the government has laws against going off-grid. Oh, I have a great idea!”

“No.”

“A professional escort!”

“NO!”

“Why not? It’s well paying, you get the attention and physical intimacy you’re so desperate for, there are enough desperate men and their tastes are not so picky that a stick in the mud like yourself
couldn’t have some leeway in her clients. And once the night is over, you can dump them, no strings attached, no drama, no enduring complications. It’s the best option for you, given every other requirement you’ve set.”

“I’m not going to be a whore.”

“Then there’s no helping you. Please don’t starve to death somewhere where no one will find the body for an extended period, decayed corpses are kind of gross.”

“Are you done yet?”

“No, not nearly.”

“Ugh! Of course! Of course! You’re always like this!”

“Like what? Trying to get you on track? Trying to overcome the endless fountain of “No”s and excuses in a vain attempt to motivate you to do the right thing and improve yourself?”

“I mean all the crappy endless fountain of bad ideas that are all just veiled insults!”

“I still have no idea why I’m here, then.”

“I just wanted to sort this out. To figure out where everything went wrong.”

“Well the answer to that is easy. You found that envelope and learned the truth and decided everything was ruined, for all time, and you weren’t going to try anymore, you gave up going to college, you blamed everyone else, especially boys, especially him, became anti-social, and used that excuse to justify some really selfish, self-destructive behavior, when the reality is that it’s a thing of the past with no bearing on your present situation. It’s all in your head.”

“You sound like the MRAs who say rape isn’t so bad because there’s no lasting harm.”

“Then I will sound like an MRA, I don’t care. I have no interest in being morally correct or passing judgement on societal norms. My only interest, and indeed my only purpose for existing, is to address your situation and try to help you make something positive of your future.”

“You suck at it.”

“Please, insults are so redundant.”

I collapsed onto the bed and rolled over. The near-perfect doppelganger had no trouble flicking through the folds of space and appearing in front of me once again, a motion faster than the speed of light.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” She bent over and started tickling my nose. I batted her hand away.

“Oh, you want an answer that puts the blame somewhere else? Would that make you feel better? Would it motivate you to get up and get on with your life?”

“I already tried that.”

“Hmm. True. How did it work out for you?”

“I didn’t stick with it. I fell into Morty’s trap.”
“Ah! Hahaha. Well then, so if you just hunker down and clamp up tighter, close yourself off and this
time make damn sure you don’t go chasing the littlest promise of love, you’ll make it out okay? It’d
be a very fitting end for this story, wouldn’t it? The flat girl turns into a flat character. The effect of a
thousand pages of plot development does nothing to change her disposition and she returns to her
original state, which itself is a kind of poetic testament to her characterization as a stubborn shrew.
Lovely. Okay.”

The person opened the window, and a collage of dénouement tropes paraded through. She narrated
them as they drifted by.

“Jasmine wanders to the cape overlooking the ocean, with the lighthouse in the background. The sun
is setting, and as it touches the horizon, a ray of light shoots out, reminding Jasmine of the Pokemon
who meant so much to her. She cries her heart out, shedding all the pain of the past months out in
one cathartic rush. She renews her vow to become Steel, an unyielding, emotionless element that
denies all human frailties and follies. She returns to her gym, rallies her Pokemon with a speech
about determination, and then urges them to a slew of victories that salvage her career.

With her faithful Pokemon around her, and finally free of all the humans who bring nothing but grief
and disorder into her life, she steps into a perfectly predictable future. The suffering and turmoil she
has gone through failed to change her, and she re dedicates herself to a boring, soulless existence
devoid of romance, humor, joy, or any other mortal pleasure- a fitting finale for the Ironclad Gym
Leader of Olivine City.”

“The End”

“Like that? Is that how it will go?”

“No. Too optimistic.”

“I’m insulted. It was my best writing. What edits would you make?”
“To be more realistic? Jasmine barrels on, until the weight of the world is too much to bear and some little thing causes her to snap. She dies at the age of forty-eight of health complications resulting from the poor health care in the mental institution she was committed to.”

“A very dreary existence you’ve painted for yourself.”

“Well, it’s also the worst ending I could imagine, so there’s that silver lining.”

“The “worst”? Nothing worse comes to mind?”

“Well, yeah, a zombie apocalypse comes and I’m one of the midseason victims- you know, not one of the lucky people who get to survive to the ending, but long enough to get to struggle and fear and fight, just to see all that culminate in a gruesome death. Oh, and to make it worse, I meet my end because I’m betrayed by another living human who I’ve come to trust and respect. Now that would be a pretty bad ending.”

“Yes, but zombies aren’t real.”

“But I can imagine them, and if you’re going to be pedantic, I’m going to run with the literal.”

“Ah. Touché. Have you considered a career in writing?”

“Stop!”

I flipped over again to try to escape her. This time she ripped the sheets off and lay on top of me. Her slender body was heavier than I thought. The only reason I could think it should feel like a ten-ton burden was that I was weak and atrophied.

Her feminine curves insinuated themselves into my personal space, her bony protrusions bit into my skin at irksome points and angles. A hand roved through my hair.

“This is what Erika would feel like, if you had accepted her feelings,” she whispered into my ear. “She would be heavier.”

“Hehe. True. A man like Volkner would be heavier still.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“You never will, if you keep acting like this.”

“It’s impossible.”

“It was very possible. All you had to do was tell him the truth. Or even the first half, really. Say you’re sorry. You’re much too proud, you never apologize for anything. I bet he would have softened if you had apologized and asked for forgiveness.”

“It wouldn’t be sincere.”

“If you can’t even fake an apology, you really are a lost cause.”

“I know that.”

I buried my face in my pillow.

What was I thinking? Throwing my naked self at Volkner, how was that supposed to win his
affection? What did you expect there?

It was impulsive and stupid.

“Don’t be facetious. It was bigoted.”

Great. She can read my thoughts.

“Naturally. And it was bigoted, and demeaning towards Volkner. “Impulsive and stupid”? You’re only disparaging yourself with palpable criticisms. Just admit, you are prejudiced. You saw Volkner as a man, and men as animals governed by nothing more than their sexual urges, and their natural sexual urges as disgusting perversions. None of that is fair to them, though. They’re only trying to express their instincts, instincts which create families and makes civilization possible. It’s a beautiful thing, and a difficult one for them. Men bear that burden, but you’ve given them zero allowance for the mistakes they’ve made in the learning process. What’s more, we have Volkner, one of the better and more refined attempts to romance you, and yet you still rejected him soundly. You never gave him credit for trying to be nice and restraining himself from the vulgarities other men have shown you.”

“But I did, I changed my mind, but-”

“Sure you did! Except, you say you did that, but when you went back to him, you were still prejudiced, you just assumed everything you thought of boys was still true, and it was merely that you had finally fallen to their level of depravity in order to filch some scion of comfort and desire. You still weren’t giving him any credit.”

She leaned her head around. I didn’t want to look her in the eyes. I closed mine, and found her staring directly at me all the same. There was no escaping this phantom.

“Didn’t it occur to you that Volkner might actually be a good, chivalrous man with no designs on your body? That sex did not motivate him? That such lewd attempts to woo him might actually put him off and make him think lesser of you? That he might, *gasp* genuinely want a companion to share his life with- you know, your “ideal” love?”

A sniffle fluttered from my nostrils.

“I thought he wouldn’t like me like that. I thought I needed to be dirty to get his attention. I was hoping, maybe, we’d come to be like that someday, if I got the chance to be with him first.”

“You were wrong.”

Men aren’t all sex-driven perverts.

I’m no pure and innocent maiden.

“Good girl! You finally admit the truth. Too bad it’s too little, too late, wrong audience.”

“If only I’d told him that.”

“It would have helped soften the blow, sure. It’s an important character development that will prepare you when you next decide to chase a boy. But for now, with him, I seriously doubt it would have mattered.”

“What not?”
“Well, beyond the fact your personalities weren’t really suited for each other, you still couldn’t address his one demand. You’re still clinging to that old shame. Out of what? Embarrassment? Pride?”

“Fear.”

“Hmm?”

I’m afraid.

That’s why I won’t share that secret with anyone.

“Oh.”

She lifted herself off the bed and floated over to the window.

“Tell me, is this fear the thing that’s keeping you from entering a relationship? Or is it the thing that’s driving you so desperately towards one?”

“…you know the answer to that.”

She stared blankly out into the world.

The skies were cloudy, the wind was blowing, the ground was wet, and more rain was promised.

“It’s that bad, huh? Well, my last critique is that it’s not so bad that it excuses you for not feeding yourself. Life is coming, it’s almost here, and you’re going to have to figure out how to face it, no matter how fearful it is.”

“I don’t know how.”

“You’ll have to do something. You can’t stay in bed. It’s here. It’s knocking on the door.”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

I jolted in place.

I was standing at my bedroom window, looking out between the blinds, butt-naked. There was someone pounding at my front door. In a dazed panic, I threw my white sundress on, sans panties or bra. A quick stop by the bathroom ensured I wasn’t letting any private bits peak out.

Who’s here?

Erika, I bet. She finally decided to see me in person.

Scratch that, someone I don’t know, or I’m not expecting. It’s always like that.

I pulled the door open, stupidly not checking the spyhole first (in case it was a kidnapper or something). Who I found was a grumpy old man in a grey business-casual suit. It took me a moment to recognize him.

“Hello, Ms. Mikan.”

“Mr. Preston?”

He nodded.
“Good. You’re here. It was a lot of trouble to get in touch with you.”

He’s grown a mustache since I last saw him. Same bald spot atop his head, though. In one arm he was holding a briefcase, which looked weighty by the way he was constantly hefting it. A new sedan was parked out front, still running.

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Please, Mikan, don’t be coy. Would you follow me.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“I don’t understand.”

He raised a paper to my face. In my daze, I could barely read it. Preston did me the favor to read the header aloud.

“Pokemon League Gym Leader Probation, Notice of Terms Violations.”

My stomach twisted into a knot. My face flushed red.

Not good.

No no no no no.

“I, um, I’m not following.”

“You were given the details of your probation, and you read them and agreed to them. I know this because we have your signature on file. You should know why I’m here, and what you did wrong.”

“I’ve forgotten,” I admitted, flush and panicky.

“Get in the car, I’ll explain on the way.”

“Where are we going?”

“Your gym.”

“I’m not decent,” I said, looking down at my bra-less chest.

“I’ll give you five minutes.” I turned to go back in. “Oh, and you had this notice hanging on your door.” He handed me a flyer.

My stomach knot extended down into my intestines.

**NOTICE! RENT OVERDUE!**

I quickly rushed through the text while pulling on a proper set of undergarments.

My apartment rental payment was overdue by more than a week. The notice told me if I didn’t pay the bill, plus a fee, by December 31st, I’d be evicted. My mouth went dry. I knew this place had strict payment rules, it was one of the tradeoffs for getting it so cheap.

I have no money, though.
Well, if I got my paycheck, I could solve this newest problem easily. That’s contingent on me getting a paycheck, though, and that issue was a question mark with Mr. Preston’s face plastered across it. What was the Western Johto Pokemon League Chief doing here? What else had I screwed up? I wracked my brain for possibilities as I pulled on panties, shoes, and a coat. Mr. Preston escorted me to his car, I got inside, and he began explaining. It turned out, the guess I thought most likely was what it turned out to be.

“You’ve been absent from your gym for eleven working days.”

“Sick days,” I explained.

“You’re allotted ten sick days per year.”

“And more are grounds for a hearing and possible remedial measures, like weekend work or docked pay,” I argued. “I get a warning. I read the rules.”

“Hmph. You read the rules for ordinary terms of employment.”

Oh crap.

“Under probation, the League isn’t so lenient.”

I took a deep breath.

Absenteeism is essentially the reason I’m under probation in the first place. How could I be failing so hard at this job-thing?

“Does this mean I’m fired?” I asked.

“Ms. Mikan, I’m beginning to think you didn’t read any of the forms you signed.”

“Not very carefully,” I said, sheepishly.

Mr. Preston kept his eyes on the road. I understand why, safety, but it was unnerving.

“Today is your eleventh absence. You’re very young and I doubt you realize the gravity of your situation. You are not some menial laborer, but a salaried manager with responsibilities over your facility and your position. This is considered a dereliction of your duty as a League trustee.”

“I know it’s serious, but what does it mean? Am I fired?”

He snorted.

“Jasmine. I am here to conduct an audit on your gym. Depending on what I find, termination is the least of your worries. You could be brought to court.”

“No way.”

“You have two hundred million Pokedollars worth of League assets under your care. If I find a single misplaced dollar, or any instance of institutional abuse, that would be a violation of your contract. It could mean jail.”

I tried keeping my composure, but even with just his peripheral vision Preston could see I was breaking down. My chest was heaving. My hands were shaky and unsettled.

“I’ll be asking for access to your computer files. I will need your password. It would be in your
interest to hand it over. I would hate to have to order an executive override.”

“I’ll cooperate,” I said. My mind was stuttering back through the last three months, wondering which of the many incidents at my gym might get me jailed.

We made it to my gym around 2:00 in the afternoon. It was less crowded than usual. A Gym without a Gym Leader is no more than a fancy hangout with no beer or amenities. Hardly a lively place. Connie was there, and shocked to see me and Preston marching in wearing grim faces. I shook my head, warning her away. The back office was occupied, a local Pokemon fanclub I recognized.

“Get out,” I said.

“Huh? Oh, it’s Jasmine!”

“Out! Now! League business!” I mutely shouted. The group scattered in a hurry.

Preston navigated through the messy office and found the main filing cabinet.

“Key.” He held out an expectant hand.

I realized I had forgotten my purse. Thankfully, we kept a spare hidden inside a broken Pokeball behind the microwave. I handed it over. Preston motioned for me to help pull files- all of them, six stacks, each one a foot high and weighing more than a Geodude. He had me stack them neatly by the main computer terminal. Then he asked for my password, which I wrote down on a sticky note and handed over. The chief went to work.

Twenty minutes later it was apparent he wasn’t going anywhere fast. Every page, every computer file, was meticulously documented. I got the feeling this would take some amount of time measured in hours, and considered leaving.

“It would look suspicious for you to leave in the middle of an audit, Mikan,” Preston warned.

“I need to talk to my assistant. I won’t go far.”

He considered for a moment.

“Go ahead. Don’t do anything stupid,” he growled.

“What’s going on? What is he doing here?” – Connie’s whispered questions. She met me at the door to the office. Behind her, Gym challengers and other guests were all staring at us, probably with the same question as her.

“I’m under audit.”

“Shit, Jasmine! That’s bad.”

“I know.”

“What’s he going to find?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve done anything wrong, but he threatened to bring me to court. Something about defrauding the Pokemon League or violating my contract.”

“Crap. It’s because of all those days you missed, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”
“You brought this on yourself! Shit. I hope we get out of this okay.”

“It’s all my responsibility, you won’t get any worse than maybe being let go.”

“Good thing I don’t need the money.” She paused. “But you do, right?”

I shrugged.

“I hope it works out for you.”

“I don’t know if I want it to. But I don’t want to go to jail.”

Connie patted me and turned back to the challengers.

“Show’s over! Back to business! Taking challengers, three on three!”

Connie had been filling in for me. She had borrowed some of my Pokemon, but even still, she wasn’t as good as me, and lost more often. It was depressing to see scrubs who had no business in the Johto League Tournament breeze by because she didn’t know how to direct Magneton.

“Thunder!”

Magneton’s Thunder is really inaccurate, it’s a guaranteed miss if the opponent is moving even a little. When it failed to connect with the opponent’s Furret, she hastily called for a Reflect, but again, not Magneton’s specialty. The Furret got in behind Magneton’s incomplete defense and ripped in with a Shuca-based Natural Gift. Magneton groaned under the Ground-type waves and fainted.

I shook my head.

As the day progressed, I took turns watching Connie flail against superior competition, and reading spare manuals and strategy books. She had Magneton, Magnezone, and Skarmory working for her. Tyko was nowhere to be seen. Once, Magneton spotted me and wandered over a little way, before I warned it off with a wave of the hand, urging it back to Connie’s side. At another point, Skarmory saw me, but defiantly turned his beak and flapped away, refusing contact.

The more I saw, the more depressed I became. It was obvious. They weren’t trying very hard. Even under Connie’s inexperienced command, they should be performing better. It was yet another blow to me- the fallout from that one night two weeks ago had yet to heal. When I realized this, I retreated back into the office permanently.

Preston’s work went well past nightfall. He took one break, for dinner. I was forced to accompany him; he locked the doors to the office during his absence. I understood that he was making sure I didn’t tamper with evidence. The late hours of his audit were spent sifting through innumerable video captures, both of battles and routine office work. Every so often I would have to answer questions about this or that activity.

“Red flag,” he would mutter at times.

The office got colder. I wasn’t inclined to turn up the heater. Nor was Preston. My bare legs prickled. I tucked them into my coat and hunched into a ball. By 8:00, the outside temperature was 39 degrees. The inside thermometer read 60, but it didn’t feel like it.

At 9:49 Preston finally ended his work.

“That’s enough for now.”
He pushed himself away from the table. Mounds and mounds of paper were strewn about him in precisely organized piles. The desktop had dozens of windows opened, one atop another. I was hard pressed to name every bit of bureaucratic documentation assembled before him.

“For now?” I said.

“The good news, for you, is that there are no obvious violations. Many red flags, many things to follow up on. I’ll be sending one of our techs here over the weekend to go through these files line by line. However, I don’t see cause to put you on final notice.”

He swiveled to face me.

“You’re not out of the woods.”

“What’s the matter?”

“In addition to your absences, there are other potential issues here. Last month you denied a trainer his right to a gym battle.

“He got one,” I countered.

“After I signed off a mandate to compel you. I remember that. Warren Avery. That’s not a good look for a Gym Leader on probation. It makes it seem like you’re blocking trainers who you might lose to.”

“It wasn’t that. He was harassing me.”

“There was no report issued.”

“I didn’t expect the police to believe me.”

“No report made to the League, I mean. There is a form of redress with hostile trainers, you know.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well it’s too late. Mr. Avery does have an outstanding complaint filed against you, although we haven’t heard back from him on a follow-up inquiry. There are other grievances here. Allegations of harassment, criticism, unfair treatment. I have noticed a pattern of males filing complaints. The League is attempting to diversify its appeal and ensure gender equality at the moment; a rogue female leader with a prejudice against males would look extremely counter-productive.”

“In that case, you should be looking at harassment by male trainers towards your female leaders,” I protested. Preston shrugged.

“That’s a matter for HR to resolve. It’s not the only potential issue I saw. We have the matter of your caretaker duties of a state Pokemon being stripped.”

“That’s not a League matter, though.” I wanted to wretch- how much more painful can he make this? Losing Amphy was still not something I had accepted; I firmly believed it was a mistake, a temporary setback that I would correct once I got my act together.

He waved my complaint off.

“It’s of concern to us nonetheless. There are a laundry list of such matters here. As I said, nothing that warrants immediate termination. But normally, it would be cause to open an ethics review. However, your case isn’t normal.”
“It's not?”

He swiveled back towards the computer and clicked on one subscreen.

“Follow along. It’s complicated, and not clear-cut. See, it’s typically wasteful to hold an ethics review on a Leader that’s under probation- most people who land on probation are already under some suspicion anyways. When we’re this close to the end of your probation period, the normal procedure is to end probation early and roll the ethics review into your end-term evaluation.”

“So, my probation would end right now, and you decide whether I’m fired or not, based on… the ethics complaints?”

“Not quite. Your probation is classified as performance-based, meaning it would end now and you would be judged based on your battle record, your written exams, and your basic ethics record. Let's review them- for starters, you’ve gotten your written results back, and you passed.”

Preston showed me the results on the computer screen: I scored 92%, passing was 90%. I smiled, a little. One small victory.

“And although there are grounds for an ethics review, your basic record, at the moment, is satisfactory. The guidelines say any such review would be held immediately after a performance review judgment.”

“Okay.”

I started tensing up.

“And then there’s your battle record.”

I knew it. Something was off here.

“I’m failing.”

I hadn’t been keeping track of my ratio. It can’t be good. Not after all the forfeits I must’ve racked up during my absence.

“That’s where your case is not normal. You see, if you were above the 50% benchmark, I would end your probation right now and schedule your ethics review. That would be my preferred solution to this mess. If you were failing, I could put you on immediate termination notice. Not my preferred choice, nor yours, I assume, but it would also be an easier process than what we actually have.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve been very busy, thanks to you. You see, your official record is 312 victories, and 312 defeats.”

My draw dropped ever so slightly.

There’s no way.

“You’re kidding.”

Mr. Preston leaned back in the office chair.

“I’ve never heard of anything like this. A perfectly balanced record. Let me assure you, I scoured the regulations and talked with every policy official I could get a hold of, and no one could come up with a consensus answer. The rules never explicitly defined what constituted a 50% pass margin.
Different parts of the manual explain it differently - one section making it seem like a tie was grounds for termination, other parts saying it was acceptable. I want you to know what a headache you’ve given me over this idiotic technicality."

I stuttered and sputtered for a bit, and tried pulling my thoughts together.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“With no other recourse, I’ve decided to take some… creative executive action. I’ve looked ahead in your schedule, and on Monday, the 10th, you have a reservation for a Gym battle.”

That’s pretty normal, especially on Mondays.

“So, I’m going to use my discretion and let your probation end on schedule. After that battle, your tie should be edged one way or the other, we can get on with the normal proceedings, and I don’t have to deal with this rule vagary. Got it?”

“So my entire career hinges on one battle.”

“If you hadshown up and done your job, this would not be an issue. You are lucky to even get this chance.”

“I guess,” I said.

“You “guess”? Don’t be flippant,” he said angrily. “You are not some mid-level employee. You are a Gym Leader of the Pokemon League. You are a manager and a public representative of this organization, with major responsibilities. A screw-up in your position has cascading effects throughout the League, on our reputation, on our finances, on our operations.”

Mr. Preston got up and began packing up his papers.

“I’ll be locking this place down. Take anything you’ll need now. You may not get the chance to retrieve it later. There will be officials visiting tomorrow to comb through your records, and I wager, for a few more days after that. I hope they won’t find anything amiss - misappropriated funds, win-trading schemes, the likes.”

“I wouldn’t do anything like that,” I said.

“I should hope so. I will personally be here to oversee your battle on Monday. I am also disallowing any further battles that day.”

That surprised me. I was holding onto the faint hope that I could battle all day, to have a better chance to get my ratio up by beating up amateurs. Preston was having none of that, though.

“This is a routine measure. We don’t want you bribing bystanders to hand you easy victories. One battle, that’s it. If you’re lucky, we can schedule your hearing in the afternoon, and if all goes well for you, you can be back to normal business by Tuesday.”

“Okay.” I sounded defeated already.

I followed Mr. Preston out of the office, collecting some of my personal belongings on the way out. Tuesday. It can all be over on Tuesday.

If I win one battle. If I can get my Pokemon together for one battle, against some stranger. A
reservation? Those are usually rich kids. They’re not easy pickings, their parents like to buy them strong, professionally bred and trained Pokemon, and they can afford to go to Trainer Academies where they pick up on advanced tactics.

I thought about my Pokemon, how I had treated them, or basically not treated them, ignored them really. I hadn’t talked with most of them for a few days. From what I remembered, Tyko’s feelings were still hurt, and Skarm Skarm was acting bitter towards me in her stead. The Magne’s were even more emotionally distant than usual. Electrode and the little ones had gone off to my parent’s house. The only one I could rely on was Steelix. I ran a hand into my coat pocket. The touch of plastic greeted me. I sighed and smirked. I’d forgotten my purse, my keys, and my phone, but I still had Steelix by my side.

Steelix- I don’t know how, but I’m going to need you to carry my hopes again. You’re the only living being I can trust.

“Jasmine.”

“How?”

It was Connie.

“I expect to see you on Monday,” Mr. Preston said. “Of course, if you fail to show up, it will be a forfeit, and you will certainly lose your job. Don’t be late.”

He walked between me and my assistant and exited the gym. Connie motioned for me to come to the lobby.

“Why are you still here? It’s late.”

“I was worried about you.”

“Thanks, but you really shouldn’t…”

“Hey, I like battling, and I like being on this side of the gym floor. You lose your job, I probably get the boot too.”

I let off a wry smile.

“Yeah, I know you, Miss Pragmatic, always need a practical excuse to cover up genuine care. Seriously, my sympathy only goes so far, and you’ve been really testing it lately. Better do whatever the grandpa says and get back to work. Anyways! Come on. There’s someone waiting on the phone for you.”

“Really? Who?”

“Your boyfriend, Morty.”

GAH!

“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s a damn traitor. I don’t want to talk to him.”

“Eh? Not another squabble, Jasmine, I’m getting tired of them! Come on.”

“He manipulated me and cheated on me with another woman!”

“Oh jeez, now you tell me.” She swore under her breath.
“I’m not going to talk to him.”

“Fine, fine. One sec, then.” She went into the lobby, got on the phone, and spoke into it explaining the situation. She paused to listen some, acknowledged, and then hung up.

“He just wants to send a message.”

“That he’s sorry? I’m not accepting apologies!” I said, pouting, arms crossed, incensed the bastard had the gall to still call me after everything he did.

“No, he wanted me to tell you, he just got his ass whupped by the champ, and we’re up next. Red is on his way to Olivine.”
I didn’t know what to tell them. They stared at me, blankly, bitterly, like they didn’t want to be here. I got the feeling it wasn’t because of the tantrum I’d thrown the night of my birthday, but the weeks after, and how I had shunned and ignored them. The bond between us that I had prided myself in so much had crumbled so easily. The only reason they stayed put was the metallic leviathan circling around behind them, cutting off easy escape. I sat cross-legged, hands in lap, sighing and looking lost.

“I don’t really know how to break this to you all.” I gulped. “This is probably going to be my last battle. Ever.”

I had two nights to think this through. Long nights. And the conclusion I came to was this: if I couldn’t keep this job, there was no reason for me to continue being a trainer.

“I’m doomed. And I think you guys deserve better than attaching yourself to a sinking ship. So if anyone wants out. Um. Just back away.”

They shifted and began moving. My faintest hopes stirred, and were then dashed.

Magneton, Tyko, Skarmory, and Magcargo backed off. Magnezone showed no inclination to do anything. Steelix grunted in disapproval.

“Yeah. I figured.”

I’ll have to beat Red with two Pokemon.

I went over the rules of the reservation in my head.

There weren’t many. Standard clauses: one held item, no use items, certain rare/legendary Pokemon were banned. He did put down a preference for a three-on-three battle, but it wasn’t mandatory. Single battle was specified, no double or triple battles. That’s in line with a high-level tournament trainer who’s mastered switching tactics like Red.

I considered going in 1v1, and laughed.

You’re thinking like you can put up any kind of fight at all.

If you dictate 1v1, he’s going to know it’s Steelix, or at best, Magnezone, and throw a Ground or Fire type at you.

Haaa… what an idiot. I’m delusional. He could beat my entire team with his Pidgeot, I bet. Any single one of them could do it, they’re that good.

He’ll just use Pikachu and sweep your team.

Probably.

That’s so like you, Jasmine. You fretted all weekend on how to beat Red, when it was an impossible task to begin with. You should have been scouring the legal channels, to see if you had some technical workaround that let you keep your job. Like a waiver to fight other, lesser trainers today. I could lose to Red, if I beat two or three other kids by the end of the workday.

But you did try! You asked around, the mayor, the Johto office, the internet. Mr. Preston’s got you in
a vice- they’ve had corruption scandals in Kanto recently and the League’s really locked down on these sorts of things. You’re hooked.

Maybe you should be concentrating on what to do with your life after battling.

I can’t even imagine that.

This was the only future I’d ever known.

What am I going to do? I can’t even run a cashier! I’m not fit to be a Pokecenter receptionist. Even becoming a housewife or a hooker is beyond me, I wouldn’t have the confidence to approach people.

Maybe I could apply to the Rescue Center. They pay less than a gym trainer, but I could do the work. I think. Rescue Pokemon are more difficult to handle than my trained Steel-types.

Every scenario I imagined ended in failure. No matter what I tried, it would turn out worse than what came before. I could struggle and survive for a bit longer, but the cruelty of the world and my own fallibility would shatter that brief respite and send me back onto the downward path. It was all so… hopeless.

I bowed my head and sighed.

A gentle nudge crossed my cheek. I reached up and found a metallic cone caressing me. Its movements were impossibly delicate given the owner’s size. The tip traced a soothing path across my cheek, down my neck, circled around, and ran back up, ruffling through my hair on its way. For a few guilty moments, I enjoyed the sensation. The tip went back to my cheek and prodded.

“I know, I know.”

I brushed Steelix’s tail away and took a deep breath. He looked down on me.

I know that look. It was the same kind he gave me when I first caught him. The same Mr. Beret and Pryce would often give me. Stern, but not angry. Hard, but not hostile. It was a gaze full of expectations.

Another sigh.

“Yeah, it’s not like that. I’m not giving up without a fight. I have a plan, even if I think it’s a hopeless one.”

I gazed over the deserters.

“If none of you are going to help, it’ll be that much more impossible,” I said to them. My guilt-trip failed, none of them budged an inch. I’ve seen this behavior before. They’re all acting like Graveler. It irritated and shamed me. I shook my head. “So that’s that? Fine. You all can go home, if you want. There’s Pokemeals there- they were meant for Amphy, but you can have them.”

Skarmory led the exodus. The last to go was Tyko. She gave me a forlorn look over her shoulder, before a caw by Skarmory prodded her to follow. She waddled away.

“Oh.” I forgot one. I let out its Pokeball.

“Troda!”

It’s settled down a little bit since evolving, but had yet to lose its enthusiasm for myself. As soon as it
was released, it jumped into my arms.

“Electrode.”

“ELECTRODE!”

“Haaa… would you fight for me, this one last time?”

“TRODA!”

“Okay. Good. Now I have a three-monster team. At least there’s that.”

I smiled, then frowned, then buckled and broke down. There’s no time for tears, Jasmine.

*Let’s get serious, you can’t allow yourself to get sentimental here.*

…It’s just, these were three of my first four Pokemon. Graveler’s no longer with me, which makes these my senior-most companions. I’ve known them for the majority of my life. I don’t want to imagine the next ten years without them.

“Electrode. Magnezone. Steelix.” I nodded to each in turn. “Well, listen up. The champion doesn’t have a real weakness. He’s smarter than me, and his Pokemon are stronger than you. The only hope we have is something very gimmicky, and needs an impossible amount of luck to work. So let me explain the plan.”

I went through it with them, and they nodded at the appropriate points, comprehending their roles and my overall intent. Even so, they looked a little dejected. They understood as well as I how bleak the chances were that this would work. If my opponent did anything unexpected, it would completely fall apart, and I’m sure someone on his level would have multiple unexpected backup plans in place. My one and only advantage, I think, was that he would be sure to do his due diligence in researching me. He would know I’m a defense-oriented, cautious, slow-developing tactician, with a tendency to rely on simple, brute-force attacks for my offense. This strategy would fart in the face of that expectation.

I tried being an optimist.


Olivine City surrounded me. I soaked it all in— the bland, faded pastel colors, the cold breeze, the intermittent hum of cars, the quiet plod of pedestrians, the shivering of low trees fast losing their leaves, houses and shops too old to be clean and refreshing, but too new to be comfy and sentimental. A timid, unassuming exterior covered over an unremarkable, unlikable, confused interior, shaded over by melancholy and never-fulfilled hopes. In so many ways, this city reflected who I am. I can’t say whether it would be better or worse for me to stay here.

“They’ll never say I didn’t try,” I said to myself. “When we get back, we’ll talk about the future,” I said to my Pokemon. “Let’s go.”

The gym’s front doors were basked in sunlight and open, which was unusual for this time of day. A crowd of trainers were busy flocking in and out of it. Ted and Janina were patrolling the entrance, guiding people along. I approached, Electrode to my right, Magnezone to my left, Steelix behind me. The crowd noticed the latter’s presence instantly. An excited murmur rippled through them.
“Hello,” I said, with no force and not loud enough for them to hear. Nonetheless, Janina still bounced my way and greeted me.

“Jasmine!”

“I thought you had quit, Janina.”

“Well, I was going to…” she glanced over at Ted.

“Is he bothering you?” I asked.

“Um, not really. We made up. Sort of. It’s complicated. You wouldn’t want to hear it anyways, it’s all that lovey-drama stuff you always hated to listen to.”

“Right,” I said, nodding.

“Anyways, I wasn’t going to miss a chance to see him,” she said emphatically and grinning.

“Is he here?”

“Yup. Inside.”

“Hi Jasmine.” Ted had wandered over. I noticed he set himself on the opposite side of Magnezone from Janina. I guess that issue wasn’t resolved. Ah, kids, love is not that complicated at your age.

“He was already here when Mr. Preston came to unlock the doors. The guy is hardcore!” Janina went on. “I’m hoping you beat him! That would be awesome! It would be, like, the upset of the century!”

“That’s probably not going to happen.”

“Well, but, you have to, right?”

“We heard what happens if you lose,” Ted added.

I tensed up.

“I won’t be Gym Leader anymore, that’s right.”

“Is there any other way?” she asked.

“Maybe, but I couldn’t find it. The probation process is there so the League doesn’t have to think twice when they decide to fire someone.”

“Awww.”

“It’s really unfair.”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

Life is unfair.

“If I lose my job, you guys will too. You can try to reapply when they appoint a new Gym Leader, I’ll give you a recommendation.”

“That’s really kind of you, Jasmine,” Janina said.
“Don’t let it come to that! Beat that guy!” Ted added.

“We’ll see.”

I took out my Pokeballs and recalled my Pokemon. They didn’t cry as they were zapped inside their mini-universes. I had Ted continue to direct traffic while Janina followed me inside. There were quite a few trainers despite the ban on regular gym matches. Everyone wanted to see the world champion in action. My trepidation increased with every step into the arena hall. I had my head on a swivel, scanning the crowd for my challenger, but couldn’t find him.

“Jasmine.” Mr. Preston greeted me. Connie was not far behind.

“Good morning.”

“Your challenger is in the back lot preparing. Would you follow me? We have some details to go over regarding your accounts.”

“What details?”

“The auto-tiller system.”

“I got permission to install it, it’s up to code,” I said.

“Yes, but the loan you took out to pay for it was not authorized by the League.”

I grumbled as I was led to the back office. There, Mr. Preston very kindly informed me that the League did not like one of its Gym Leaders exposing themselves to so much debt for work-related reasons, and that IF I defeated Red today and retained my job, I would still be subject to a hearing regarding my finances.

“So basically, you’re saying the debt is my problem and not the League’s.”

“Yes, roughly.”

“I already knew that.”

“As long as that was clear. Please sign this waiver.”

I looked at the document.

“I’ll sign it after the battle.”

“I’d rather you do it now.”

“I want time to read it first. Right now, I need to prepare.” More like, I needed time to relax and focus. It was 8:45, the battle was scheduled for 9:00.

“Fine. Be sure to meet back with me, this is more important than your battle.”

“To you, not me,” I grumbled. I was at the door of the office, looking out across the arena. The giant video display board was turned on. It had my face on it, with a blank for the challenger’s space. The little signal box on the bottom right corner was crossed out, meaning the auto-recorder was set to passive.

“You’re officiating the match, right? Not the computers?” I asked, making sure.
“Yes, I will be overseeing it personally.” Mr. Preston rapped the desk. “And I’ll be on the lookout for any irregularities here. I should hope it’s a clean battle.”

Meaning, he’ll be watching to see if Red phones it in and loses in some limp, lame way. That would be a sign that I bribed or pressured him into giving me the match. Which is ridiculous, I would never do something like that, and I’m sure someone in his position would never agree to it either. The funny/sad thing is, even if my gimmick strategy does work, it might look like I cheated, and I would fail probation anyways.

“Have you decided the rules of the match?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. “3v3, singles. The usual clauses, except one change- No items of any sort. Also- *Timed*. Five minutes.”

That last condition raised an eyebrow.

“Five minutes?”

“That’s the minimum for a timed match. I looked it up.”

“And how is victory to be ascertained in case of a draw?”

A fit of nerves ran through me. I swallowed it down and locked it inside my chest. A deep breath followed, settling me down. I stared directly at Mr. Preston.

“In case of a tie at time’s expiration, the challenger automatically wins.”

“Oh.” He tilted his head. “Very well. I will go inform him. See you in the arena, and… good luck,” he said.

“I’m going to need a lot more than “good” luck,” I said, in a hapless, helpless, so-in-despair-I-can-only-laugh manner.

As soon as Preston exited, Connie was on my case.

“ARE YOU CRAZY?!”

I shrugged. She shook me by the shoulders.

“You just gave Red the best possible conditions!”

“I know.”

“He *likes* lightning battles! A timed match is perfect for him! And you’re gonna let him win a tie game, just like that?!”

“What do you think I should have asked for?” I asked.

Connie looked at me like I was dumb.

“Victory by decision, duh!” Which means, in the event of a tie after time expires, victory goes to whoever has the healthiest Pokemon, i.e. the most total HP as determined by the arena sensors.

“Or hell, even a sudden death, or overtime, or shoot-out! Anything but a guaranteed win!”

“Does it matter?” I countered. “It’s not like I have much hope of even staying even with him. He’ll
destroy me in those five minutes.”

“You could have Steelix burrow and dodge attacks from underground until the timer runs out, though, triggering the overtime rules-”

“-which he would win by virtue of his superior offense.”

“Or use hit-and-run, play defense with Steelix, have him Rest, and then win by HP-decision!”

“Which he would be expecting, and counter with his own tanks and regeneration,” I replied. “He knows all about how to handle special cases, he showed as much when he beat Whitney.”

“But you didn’t have to make it so damn favorable for him! What were you thinking?”

I managed a sly smile.

“There’s a very obscure rule. One I doubt even he knows about.”

She cocked an eye at me.

“What are you talking about?”

“If the conditions are set so that a timed battle tie goes to the challenger, the Gym Leader is allowed a victory in the case of a 0-0 tie, if, and only if, the challenger’s Pokemon initiates the attack that causes the mutual knockout that ends the battle. It’s a caveat to guard against cheap tactics.”

“How the heck are you going to manage that?”

She was incredulous.

“There’s no way you can con him into using a Self-Destruct or something.”

“Well, no, actually, I don’t need to rely on him using a specific move or Pokemon at all. There’s a very obscure definition, buried so incredibly deep in the rulebooks that it took me three hours to track it down and verify that it wasn’t struck from the register in the forty years since it was last applied to a battle, that I think I can exploit. Honestly, if it goes well, I think I have a 33.3% (repeating, of course) chance of it working.”

I sighed.

“The problem is getting to that point. Which means I need to beat two of his Pokemon with another strategy that only has a 10% chance of working- if his Pokemon stand completely still. Of course that’s not going to happen, so make it, like, .1% chance. And then, this all relies on Red being a typical male and acting stupid, cocky, and arrogant. Which just doesn’t seem like him at all.”

“Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine.” Connie shook her head. “It sounds like you put a lot of effort into this, but damn, you’re approaching it like you’re going to the dentist. You’re already acting like you’ve lost.”

“Haven’t I?”

“Couldn’t you have come up with some better strategy than this gamble you’re taking?”

“Morty lost. Clair lost. Pryce lost. Those three are all stronger and smarter than me.” I huffed. “Cynthia lost to Red. She’s brilliant! Did you see her match against Red in the finals?”
Connie shook her head.

“Her Milotic used *three* Mirror Shields *simultaneously* to redirect Pikachu’s Thunderbolt and the Pokeball laser so her Electivire could get a Motor Drive boost! And it didn’t help. Red’s Espeon Trick Roomed and his Venusaur Cursed. Cynthia lost three Pokemon before she could recover. It was just basic strategy on Red’s part, but it was effective, because not even Cynthia expected him to be that crazy-prepared. To have those Pokemon with those moves learned, it’s just insanely rare. It shows what I’m up against here. He has no weaknesses.”

“Oh sure he does. He’s lost matches too. He’s not Steven Stone. He couldn’t even beat a rusty Steven at the Gym Leader summit.”

I shrugged.

“That’s Steven Stone. The “Invincible” Steven Stone. Even then, from what I gathered, Steven got lucky. And his Pokemon are like, level 200.”

“Pokemon levels don’t go that high. Besides, levels are like, approximations.”

I threw up my hands.

“That’s not the point! If the computer says there’s a five level difference, okay, sure, it’s a wash, but when it says forty and fifty level difference, do you think there might not be a little discrepancy in combat ability?!”

Connie poked me in the chest.

“Yeah, but he’s still human, and he’s got human weaknesses, just like you. A lot of battles, a lot of wars, weren’t won by the stronger side. They were won by the more motivated side, the one that had their head on straight and made the fewest mistakes. You’ve got way more to lose here, don’t tell me you don’t want to win this.”

“I’ve got my head on straight?” I grasped my skull and tilted it side-to-side in mockery of her suggestion. “He’s the world champion- has a 100-to-1 win ratio- hasn’t let his guard down once in this Gym challenge of his.” I shivered. “Red is the best in the world, a complete professional, and I’m a washout that can barely hold herself together, let alone hold down this job.”

“Hey, now-”

“Mr. Preston made it clear when he set this up. He doesn’t want me to keep this job. He knows I’m not cut out for it, I don’t fit in with the League’s corporate culture. If not Red, he’ll find another excuse- Warren’s whining, or the loan I can’t repay, or the court case they’re going to throw at me for what I did to Amphy.”

“Just because dip-stache wants to knock you down, means you’re giving up? Just because it’s the fucking world champ, means you’re giving up? I know the odds, Jasmine, but it’s that defeatist attitude of yours that’s pissing me off. Come on, show me some fight. You were better than this, before that fuckard Morty showed up.”

Connie’s hand clamped down on my shoulder.

“Get off.” I didn’t appreciate being handled.

“I don’t want to lose my job here. I need the money, and I don’t fancy manning a cashier. Try for me! Or damn it, try for your Pokemon.”
“My Pokemon…?” I looked at my Pokeballs. “Most of them left me. Even Amphy.”

Remembering that injustice started my heart pumping.

“What’s this about Amphy? Thought they took his ownership from you,” Connie inquired.

I shuddered. My pulse quickened.

“I got another letter. The City’s been talking with the League. They’re discussing taking away my Pokemon license, because I won’t give them the key to the lighthouse.”

“Fuck Jasmine! Give them their damn key back.”

“If I do that, I’ll never get to see Amphy!” I explained angrily.

“You’re an idiot.” She poked me in the forehead, repeatedly, until I threw my arms up to defend myself. “You’re never getting Amphy back if you piss them off any more than you already have! There’s ways to climb back into their good graces, but you can’t keep doing shit just for your own damn pride.”

“Why not?!” I cried. “They keep screwing with me, all of them, however they please, whatever suits their whimsy, and over and over and over again, I’m the one who’s told to swallow my pride and humble myself, and I’m sick of it! I’m sick of all their screw-ups being forgiven and I have to be Miss Perfect!”

Memories came crashing in, and my temper was ignited.

“I WAS PERFECT AND IT STILL WASN’T GOOD ENOUGH!!!” Connie was taken aback by my yelling.

“I did everything right, I gave it my best, and they still hated me! I made a little mistake, and what’s a mistake supposed to be, forgive and forget, a lesson learned, right? But no! It’s another brick to fling on my back, more ammo for their persecution, and I’m about to break under it all!”

I stormed back and forth, my sudden temper building, like a Plinian eruption, a continuum of successive, escalating explosions. At points my hands and arms went flying up in disgust. Connie backed off, not daring to intervene, merely answer details when possible.

“Good grades sunk by one miserable group project! I stand up for justice and they smack me down! I comply and they ignore me! I’m a little late because of that BASTARD and now I’m stuck in probation.” A pause. I whirled around. “Because when everyone else got fair proctors, I got stuck with the head of the Elite Four! So I’m on the chopping block because they thought it was a clean fight between my Steelix and a freaking Dragonite! Not just anyone’s Dragonite, Lance’s! And now after I’ve worked so hard, and improved so much, and got this far- I’m still stuck fighting someone I can’t possibly beat!”

“That’s because you were absent all those days.”

“Because Morty and Erika ruined my life!”

“Calm down,” Connie begged. I ignored her.

“All I wanted was someone who gave a crap about me, and stopped asking me to be perfect, or hell, at least acknowledge the effort I gave them. Morty didn’t care, though. He’d rather go fuck his fiancé. Erika just wanted me to fuck her, that’s all. All of them want something from me, and they’re
all judging me when I can’t give it to them, because I’m not perfect!”

“Stop, you’re just ranting, you’re not making any sense.”

“Me, me, me, me, ME! I want, for once, something to go right for ME! Is that too much to ask?”

I picked up one of my Pokeballs and brought it right up to my eye, staring straight into the glowing red button.

“I hate them all. I hate everything.” I dropped the Pokeball back onto the desk. “Who would ever care about a girl who just hates everything?” I asked Connie.

“Calm down.”

“Okay.” I tried. It worked, or seemed to, until I realized my mental pendulum had simply swung from ‘rage’ to ‘despair’. I was still every bit as emotional.

“It’s useless. Morty left to go be with his lover. Erika left because I can’t be her lover. Volkner didn’t want me. Lyra and Ethan, they’re gone, having their own adventure. Whitney, stuck in her own world. I’ve got no one.”


“Why are you still here?” I asked. “I must be a pain to you.”

“It’s nothing personal. I like this job more than I hate you. You’ve got no idea how stressful Engineering School is, I need somewhere to blow off steam. And like I said, money.”

“Jasmine!” A call came from outside. The clock on the wall read 8:59.

“I have my Pokemon. That’s all.” I sat down on the swivel chair, folded my legs up, and buried my head in my knees. “I won’t even have them. They’ll take them away. Like they took Amphy.”

“Jasmine, they’re calling for you. It’s time.”

“I need help but I can’t get it. You know what they’ll do? If I go to a psychiatrist, they’ll say I’m not mentally competent to take care of my Pokemon, and they’ll take my license away and they’ll take my Pokemon away.”

“No they won’t. But they will take your job away if you don’t get your ass out there.”

“They’ll take my job away even if I do go out there,” I muttered, clinging tighter to my knees.

“That’s Red. World champion. He’s got two hundred and eighteen Pokemon, thirty-four of them are ranked S-class, level 80 or higher. He’s lost six battles in the last three years, with over seven hundred wins in the same time frame. He beat Clair, who’s a far better Gym Leader than me, in a half-dozen matches of increasingly stacked odds without suffering a single attack. His ELO rating is 2502, higher than the invincible Steven Stone ever attained. Graded S++ proficiency in switching, offensive pressure, and mobility, S+ in momentum-pivot, defensive resilience, field-control, and reaction, S in every other category, except defensive resilience, where he is “merely” S-. A grading of 393 out of 400 on the PokeBat scale. Guess who’s higher? No one. The only one to come close is Tobias, 390. Do you know what mine is? 84. Average of C+ through all categories. A theoretical matchup has Red winning 99.96% of the time, according to the ESN sims. Those are the odds.”

“What a nerd! Geeze, just get out there and get it over with! Preston’s waiting. So is Red.”
“I don’t want to.”

“You have to.”

“The end’s the same, can’t I just stay back here and take the loss? Maybe Preston will feel sorry for me and let me battle the kids to get my ratio back up?”

“He’s not going to feel sorry for you if you slack off and don’t show up. Maybe if you go out there and get your ass kicked.”

“You’re right.”

Reality set in. All the anger and despair melted away. I’ve let my emotions run loose for too long, it’s time I took back the façade of the respectable Iron-Clad Gym Leader of Olivine City.

That determination lasted all of two seconds.

I got up. And then sat back down. “But it’s not me getting beat up, it’s my Pokemon. They don’t deserve to be mauled by Red,” I said, convincing myself anew to procrastinate against the inevitable.

“They’ll do whatever you tell them to, they respect you at least that much. They care about you.” Connie grabbed me by the wrists and hauled me up. She tried capitalizing on the subsequent momentum by shoving me towards the door, but I circled right back around.

“Jasmine! It’s time!” Preston shouted into the office.

I wandered around the cluttered office in doodle patterns.

“It’s really unfair,” I said. “And ridiculous!”

“What’s ridiculous is you,” Connie shot back. “You’ve got to go!”

“He’s so much better than me. Why did Preston do this to me? Does he really hate me that much?”

“Gym Leader, NOW!”

Connie was at the door anxiously looking out. “Preston’s getting upset.”

“He’s too good. How did Red get that good? It’s stupid. I wish I was that strong. I worked just as hard as him, why aren’t my Pokemon death-machines like his? And he’s popular, too, I bet he could have any girl he wants, and has all the money so he’d never have to worry about loans or debt or apartment payments or how expensive a restaurant is.”

“Hey, Jasmine, if you don’t show yourself, imagine how everyone’s going to see you. They’ll say you chickened out,” Connie warned.

“I’m not scared, just realistically hopeless,” I said, while hyperventilating.

“They’ll call you a coward.”

“Noooo,” I moaned, backing off.

“I thought you had more pride than that. If you’re going to lose, take it on the chin!” Connie implored.

“Alright! Okay, I get it!” I stepped up and looked straight towards the door. “My life is kinda falling
apart right now. You’ll forgive me if I get a little emotional, right?”

“I’ll forgive you if you win this. I don’t want to find a new way to waste my afternoons,” Connie answered.

“Alright. I’ll try. Tell Preston I’m coming. I just need…” I looked around, searching for the cheat sheet I had drawn up on Red’s Pokemon.

“She’s on her way! One second!” Connie shouted outside.

“Ah.” Found it. Now my Pokeballs. Now, arrange my hair, make sure my spike tails are up, make sure to wipe my face off so it’s not teary-looking.

“World Champion. Red. Here I come. Ready or not. I hope you don’t know how Fissure works. Haaaa. Is he out there already?”

“Yeah, he’s been standing there.”

“Okay.” I walked out, slowly and shyly and musing to myself the idiosyncrasies of the world.

“It’s stupid, he’s way too strong. And “Red”?! What a stupid name. It’s just a color! What woman would name her child after a color?”

Connie looked at me, baffled.

“You didn’t know? It’s his nickname, the fans gave it to him.”

“Eh?!”

“Jasmine, if you please! One more second and I will disqualify you!”

“Ah. Coming!” I shouted out, and sprinted outside, prepared to face the most difficult and most important battle of my life.

The arena was brighter than the office. Rafters crisscrossed the ceiling, with stadium lights, sensors, and shield projectors hanging at regular intervals. The stands on either side were filled with trainers, their attention divided between me and the challenger. Mr. Preston had taken a position at the midfield podium, hands grasping its side. My place was a simple low stage made of metal, empty and awaiting my arrival. Opposite this was an identical stage, upon which Red stood. He was erect, stiff, and uncomfortable-looking. His stare was fixed on me. In one hand was a Pokeball, the other was on his waist, where four other Pokeballs hung. His Pikachu sat at his feet, stretching.

He wore a red and white jacket unbuttoned, a black undershirt, and blue jeans. His signature red cap was missing, which meant his dark, spiky, unkempt hair was left bare. His face was sort of angular in shape, but soft around the edges. It wasn’t used to frowning, little wrinkles around the eyes and lips belied a face that liked to smile, in fact. But it was frowning right now, a tight, lip-pressed frown that clearly was not enjoying the occasion. Clear almond eyes were hidden by drooping eyelids, beneath a slick of bangs and straight-edged eyebrows. It would have been a handsome face, really, if not for the grim expression.

Red had the air of someone who was ready for battle, and expected to win.

I would have been intimidated by it. What little hope I had put into my hail-mary strategy would have evaporated in the face of his presence. He didn’t project an aura like Tobias, though. The word to use, really, was not ‘imposing’, or ‘overwhelming’, or ‘brutal’, or ‘powerful’. The exact adjective I
would use is “lethal”. Like a gun. Without foreknowledge, a gun looks like any other bit of machinery, unintuitive to the natural senses. But to any civilized human, with the faculty and knowledge of what it truly is, a gun’s capabilities are frightening, and command instantaneous respect. So too, Red’s capabilities in the arena of Pokemon battle inspires fear in anyone who can appreciate the vast chasm between they and him. This fear pinnacles into soul-shattering despair upon witnessing and comprehending his physical presence, unless one is also one of the few people on this planet that can legitimately claim to be in league with him. I was not one of those individuals, nor was I stupid enough to presume I was one of those individuals.

If I had focused on Red, this battle would be over before it even began.

“Jasmine,” he called out.

But I wasn’t focused on him. His figure was too blurry to make out from this distance.

I was staring at the massive video board above him, upon which his profile picture and his bio were displayed.

And it was there that I, in utter despair, read his full name:

Ashley K. “Red” Satoshi

Trainer, Pallet Town

“No way,” I whispered.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I shook my head.

My heart, my chest, my breath, all began firing off. My eyes squinted, straining, in vain, to make out his face. I stepped closer, halfway across the arena, before halting.

I saw him. I saw his face. I recognized it.

“Ash?” I uttered.

He looked me in the eye. His stoic face turned to surprise.

“Hey. Wait. Where are you…?” He held a hand out, as if trying to reach me, but it was useless.

I was gone. The arena, the lobby, the doors, the gym itself, all passed by in a blur.

Yet no matter how hard I beat my feet into the pavement, I could not outrun the memory- a burning cloud of darkness, like a pyroclastic flow, that had finally burst out of the surface, and at last caught the light of day, and snuffed it out, and engulfed me.

The memories I had thought buried away forever had finally come back to meet me, face to face, bringing with them all their ugly truths: what had happened at the lighthouse that day, what came after, the horrifying history they had uncovered, the reason I hated men, the reason I could not live peacefully with society, and most of all-

I was again reminded of the one all-consuming reality of my life, that dictated I should NEVER find happiness.

And I cried, the pathetic, unbecoming dirge of a teenaged girl spurned…
…as I recalled Ash Satoshi, my first, and only, crush.
Meet Cute

He found me squatting on the steps of the Pokemon Center, knees drawn in and arms wrapped around tight, like a Darumaka doll. I didn’t hear him approach. He came softly, without a sound. My first and only clue to his presence was his voice.

“Hi Jasmine.”

I glared at him, startled.

He really followed me all this way.

I had left the gym in a dead sprint. That was twenty minutes and two miles back. He caught up to me, which meant he had decided to chase after me the instant I bolted. How decisive. How typical of him.

“How can we talk?” he asked.

I buried my head in my arms without replying.

“The judge said you would forfeit the match if you didn’t come back.”

“I don’t care,” I mumbled.

“He told me it was an important match for you. Isn’t it?”

“What does it matter to you? It’s your win.”

“I couldn’t accept that kind of win. It’s not fair to you. Just like last time. You know I couldn’t do that to you.”

I grumbled in response.

“…I don’t hate you,” he added.

“Then why don’t you forfeit the match.”

“Because I need your gym badge to compete in the Johto tournament.”

“Come back another day, then. I can’t lose today.”

Ash sighed.

“The judge told me the situation. I know what will happen if you lose. He also told me what will happen if I quit or give up— he’ll assume we fixed the match, and he’ll still fail you.”

I clutched myself tighter.

They really are trying to make this impossible, aren’t they?

“I didn’t think you were the kind of woman to ask for sympathy,” Ash went on. “I just want to give you the chance at a fair match.”

“A fair match…. funny.”
Nothing about this was fair.

He mulled about, looking uncomfortable on his feet. I couldn’t see his face from my position, and didn’t want to either.

“Can I sit?” he asked.

No answer.

He took my silence as permission, and sat down beside me. I glanced sideways under my arm. He was leaning forward and had his elbows on his knees, fists cradling his chin. Sometimes he would turn his head towards me, but I still couldn’t make out his eyes from under my cover.

He didn’t say anything.

We just sat there, awkwardly, wordlessly, and let the raw emotions simmer.

Moments and then seconds and then minutes passed, with nothing happening. It was maddening to me. I didn’t want to think. I didn’t want to remember.

I really, really did not want to talk to him.

The oppression of silence grew. The fact that he could sit there so calmly and at peace bothered me. He’s the one who chased me down, at least speak up damn it!

“Why?” I asked at last.

He cocked his head, waiting for me to clarify.

“Why are you here?”

“For the badge,” he answered simply.

“Why now? Why me? Why do you need my badge so badly?” I spat out.

“It’s a long story,” he said.

“I hate that excuse.”

“I know it’s an excuse, and I don’t like repeating it. But all of you Gym Leaders ask the same question, and I’m tired of trying to explain something I’m not allowed to talk about.”

“If you’re not going to tell me,” I grumbled, tucking my head deeper into the folds of my fetal position, “then just leave! You’re good at that.”

Ash let out a heavier, emphatic sigh.

“Still upset?” he asked.

“Why would I not be?”

“It was years ago.”

“It’s not like I got closure.”

“We were kids.”
A shiver ran through me.

Yes. That’s right. I was a child until that day.

“I’m sorry,” he added. “About everything that happened.”

I thought back to every instance of contact between the two of us these past four months. Goldenrod. Blackthorn. The summit tournament. The gala. I can’t believe I didn’t recognize him at any point along the way. Not even when I watched him on TV or read about him. It’s embarrassing.

Well, to be fair, it has been six years, and we were kids, and he’s definitely changed. His looks, his demeanor, his attitude, everything’s different. What’s more, I’ve tried so very hard to forget that period of my life, his face included.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked accusingly.

“Say something? When?”

“At the gala. I didn’t recognize you. You recognized me though, didn’t you? So why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wasn’t sure you would want to talk about it.”

“I didn’t.”

I did not want to talk about it, or remember. I tried so very, very hard to forget. I wanted everything about that meeting, that month, that final day, to be purged from my memory. I wanted the life I would have had if I’d never met him, and lived on in perfect ignorance. The misery of my life would not have been laid bare, I could have and would have gone on without noticing anything amiss, and continued to blame my hardships on things that were firmly addressable and within my power to confront.

Except for that meeting, I would not have learned how impossible attaining happiness was for me, and me alone.

April 25th, 2006

Olivine City

Glitter Lighthouse

“Hey there sexy lady!”

I looked up, startled, to find the head of a youth popping out of the doorway.

“How rude,” I said.

“Hah? Wha-wha-wait a sec! I didn’t mean to- oh sorry!” The young man was beside himself. He jumped into full view, acting much like one would expect from the Aipom adorning his shoulder.
The first, most obvious, and honestly only thing I comprehended of his features was his goofy hairstyle- he wore a yellow and black ball cap backwards, with a big lock of hair sticking awkwardly out the front. Between the crass salutation and his punk-like dress, I dismissed his presence and turned back to my main worry.

Amphy lay at my knees, tucked into a tight ball.

“So, uh, you’re the Gym Leader, right? The old man said I would find you up here.”

“That “old man” is the real Gym Leader,” I replied while stroking Amphy’s flank. “You should have battled him if you want our gym badge.”

“But he said he was retired, that I had to face a cutie in the lighthouse if I wanted to prove myself!”

“I highly doubt he referred to me as a “cutie”,” I replied.

“Ah. Hahaha. I’m kind of paraphrasing, a little bit… but that means you are the gal I should be looking for, right? C’mon, battle me!”

“No.”

“Haaaaaaah?! Why not?”

“I’m not taking challengers right now. I’m occupied. Sorry.”

“But- but- but- I came all this way and was really looking forward to it! I tried really hard to hustle here too. She’s gonna tease me if I can’t beat you before she does!”

He knelt to the ground and clasped his fists into a pleading motion. His Aipom did the same beside him.

“Sorry, but begging won’t work. I don’t have time for this. Please go away.”

“Awww! You’re too cruel!”

The youth stomped the ground and grumbled. The Aipom hopped and skipped around in a fever. The two of them launched into a comedic panic routine- except I wasn’t laughing.

“Pleeeeasse?! Just a quick battle, I promise!”

“No. Hey, stop, put those down!”

“Huh? Aibo! Hey, watch it!”

The monkey Pokemon was juggling various items it had found on the counter, including a Pokeball and a Potion. At the youth’s exclamation, the juggler lost concentration and all the flying objects tumbled to the ground. It started growling and throwing a tantrum.

At first I flinched and shied away, but then girded myself. Mr. Beret was always teaching me to be strong and confront the problems that had to be dealt with forcefully.

“Um, well, I hate being forceful and blunt, but you two are being pests, and I want you to leave. I’ve got something more important to take care of, and I don’t have time for a gym battle. So please, go away.”

“Aww really? I hate being a pest, I didn’t mean to be one. Hey, Aibo, stop! You’re making us look
bad! Well- worse!” The Aipom, clearly unhappy with the situation, was dancing around wildly. The boy spent a considerable, maybe exaggerated, effort tracking down the Pokemon and catching it.

“Pom pom! Pooooo! Pffffffit!” The creature, caught firm by the boy’s grip, resorted to sticking its tongue out and splurting. The boy had to wipe the drivel off his cheek with his forearm.

“Shoot, I know it’s unfair, but she’s being prickly, and I don’t wanna make the cutie any more mad at us!” The Aipom gradually ran out of steam and ceased struggling. The boy cautiously set it down on the ground. The Pokemon started looking around and shifting, but at least stayed in one location.

“Are you super sure you can’t battle?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered definitively.

“Dang it,” the youth muttered under his breath. He slumped down to the ground, dejected and despairing. He looked forlornly to his Aipom partner, back to me, and finally to my Pokemon. His posture instantly loosened and face softened.

“Oh. I get it. Your Ampharos is sick. Um, sorry ‘bout bursting in on you.”

He started to back off.

“Wait!” I called over to him. He paused. “How could you tell Amphy is sick?”

“Oh. Well, his tail bulb is dark.”

I took a closer look at the sphere protruding from the end of Amphy’s tail, but couldn’t discern any difference. Its color was never something I had paid attention to. “You can tell that?” I inquired.

“Yeah.”

“And his gender too… are you some sort of Pokemon expert?” I wondered.

“Nah, I’m no Professor Elm. He’s a genius. He said he once beat THE Professor Oak on the PokeTrivia Gameshow.”

“But you just guessed everything right off the bat,” I stated.

The youth cocked his head, his face passing off a goofy, humbled grin. He waved his hand.

“It’s no big deal. My uncle has a Mareep ranch up north, he taught us all about them.”

“Is that so?”

The youth shuffled over, leaned down, and gently pet Amphy right along the flank with a cupped palm, just how my Pokemon liked.

“So, um, could I get a gym battle later? When he’s all better?”

“Yes, later would be better.”

“All right! Thanks! I’ll go back to the gym and train hard for it. Hope Amphy gets better! You’d better be prepared, I’m kinda good at Pokemon battling. And thanks again!”

“It’s my duty. There’s nothing to thank me for…” I murmured out. “And your name is?” I looked up to find him already out the door and disappeared.
“Ah. That was a weird visit.”

“It’s Ethan! See you later, sexy!” His head popped into view, piped out his message, and disappeared again.

“Rude! Rude! Very rude!”

I simmered in place for a moment.

Why are all the cool, good-looking guys so crass? It’s not fair! Where is my Prince Nichi-kun?

I shook my head.

This was no time to be angsting over boys again.

Amphy was worrying me.

He couldn’t light up last night. He tried, valiantly, but his body wouldn’t hold up, and his tail bulb flickered and sputtered but would not shine. I had to contact Port Authority Chief Gatto about the situation; he was not happy about having to set a patrol boat on night watch.

This morning I was hoping to find Amphy improving, but the opposite turned out to be the case. My Pokemon was collapsed on the bed, curled into a tight ball and breathing heavily. Every so often he would have shivering fits. I gave him medicine for the PokeFlu, but so far it didn’t seem to be working. The symptom that really worried me was his temperature- when I took it, it was two degrees under normal. Body temperatures should rise during sickness; after all, fevers are the immune system’s normal response to infection. To do the opposite, even on a warm, muggy day like today, baffled me. I had been figuring out what to do when the young man had interrupted.

“Amphy, how do you feel?”

Amphy gave out a weak, unintelligible utterance.

“Is it that bad?

Amphy nodded weakly.

“Would you like inside your Pokeball?”

Amphy shook his head in the negative, but then convulsed with another wave of chills.

“It’s no good. You’d better go in.”

Pain is mostly negated when a Pokemon is digitized. It won’t make him better and won’t stop the illness from getting worse, but at least it could help alleviate his symptoms while I figured out a solution.

“Aaaaph.”

“I know. Still, it’s the best I can do.”

I reached over to the counter to grab his ball- and clutched at air.

“It was right here…”

I puzzled to myself, checked, and re-checked. Amidst the clutter of the countertop, I found potions,
spare parts, electronics, and one Great Ball- which I snatched up and activated. Alas, false hope. I knew even before I chucked it that this was not Amphy’s Pokeball, but Magnemite’s.

“Magnite.”

“Grr.” I tried firing the recall laser at Amphy, full knowing the futility ahead of time. Common sense was born out, as the laser pinged off Amphy for no effect. Individual balls are locked to individual Pokemon, otherwise it would be easy to steal someone else’s Pokemon (and Pokeballs don’t have a way to discriminate a single owner’s Pokeballs). I’d have to go to a PC to change them over.

“Where’d it go?” I asked myself, expanding my search to the floor.

“Ah!” Epiphany! Wasn’t the Aipom playing with a Pokeball? It must have dropped it somewhere. Yet, a few minutes of searching turned up nothing, and I slowly realized the scope of my misfortune. Comprehending what had happened, I shuddered in anger.

“Aphoo?”

“That- that- that- stupid stupid baka monkey took it! He took your Pokeball!”

“Arooa.” Amphy moaned, as if to say, ‘that’s fine by me’.

I sighed.

“No, it’s not okay. I was going to carry you to the PokeVet in it. Do you think you can walk?”

Amphy tried rolling onto his belly and lifting himself, but collapsed. I bent over and rolled him back onto his back.

“I thought so.”

A plan of action began formulating.

“I’ll go to the gym, track that little thief down, and get your Pokeball back. Then I’ll bring it back and carry you to the Pokeyvet. Wait, no, by that time the vet will be closed. Um, I’ll go see if I can get the vet to come here while I’m away. Does that sound okay? And the gym has a PokeMedkit, it has some advanced potions that might work.”

Ampharos gave me a despondent look.

“Yes, that means I’ll have to leave you here.”

“Phoo. Roo. Amphor.”

“Not alone! I’ll have Magnemite and Graveler look after you.” I let out Graveler to join Magnemite. That’s two of my three Pokemon on hand. Choir and Slugma were at home, with Mother and Father respectively. “Now you two look after Amphy, and do everything to help him. Got it?” They both nodded. Magnemite went to hover around Amphy, looking curious but worried. Graveler made for the cupboard, and soon enough was warming a pot of hot water.

I hugged Amphy tight.

“Hold tight. I’ll fix you. I promise.”

“Ampha.”
Amphy rolled into a ball and buried himself into the bed covers as I departed.

I opted to take the stairs, as I could jump down them quicker than waiting for the old elevator. The windows flashed by at regular intervals, each one a glimpse closer to the ground, alternating between views of the city and ocean. When I reached the bottom it was a sprint out the door.

“Onix!”

He was waiting by the grassy cliff face overlooking the ocean.

“We’re going to the gym! Fast!”

Amphy was sick, and that had me worried, and anxious, and frenetic, like it always does. Things took on an unreasonable urgency when my Pokemon were threatened. I don’t like seeing them get hurt or suffer. Maybe that’s why I preferred defensive-types so much?

I counted down the distance in terms of blocks passed. Downtown Olivine was a patchwork of ill-fitting squares packed with wall-to-wall shops and offices. Onix wasn’t allowed down the main thoroughfares, the sidewalks were too crowded and he too big for it to be safe to pedestrians (I’d gotten into trouble for this before- and got into more trouble when I complained about discrimination against my hulking rock leviathan). We had to skirt the city-center, wasting more time, prolonging Amphy’s suffering and my anxiety.

The gym came into view.

“Wait right here, I’ll be back quick,” I promised.

Just like he said, the boy was inside the gym, training, or what passed for training. To me it looked like a poorly organized game of tag between six hooligans, with one of that number being the human himself. It was hard to keep track of the tornado of Pokemon and trainer, but eventually I isolated five creatures, none of which were the wanted Aipom.

“Excuse me.”

I leaned in, and then backed away just in time to dodge an errant Pin Missile.

“I’m sorry, trainer, could I have a-” again I was forced away in order to avoid becoming a target board. My voice wasn’t reaching his ears at all. It was bad enough with his Pokemon making a ruckus, but the gym floor around us was also flooded with trainers and their Pokemon, all making an absolute ruckus.

“Um, hey. Um. Um…”

There was also the small matter of my shyness. Not timidity, I’m not meek. It was the fact that I’m about to accuse his Pokemon of theft, and I’ve been wary of causing conflict ever since we came back to Olivine. Maybe it was part of growing up and the age I was at. Maybe it was the cold shoulder and judging eyes I ran into everywhere I went. Or maybe it was the hard edge that had crept back into my household. Whatever the source of the feeling, I no longer felt as free to flaunt my anger and stubbornness as when I was young.

Yet, this youth’s Pokemon had very likely stolen my Pokeball, which I desperately needed at the moment. There’s got to be a polite way to get his attention and explain the situation.

“Ethan!” I called, remembering his name.
“Okay, okay okay! Like that, but faster! When you’re coming in low, keep your weight forward, so you can leverage it. Right! Okay, come at me! Woah! Yeah! Way better! Hahaha!”

I’m being completely ignored. I tried circling around so he could see me, but was nearly bowled over by a Furret. Reflexes kicked in and I tumbled into a backflip- in perfect position for a flying Goldeen to Tackle me. My back met the concrete with a *wump*. I was seeing stars that looked oddly like a multitude of five-pawed chimps. That is, until the blurry images coalesced into one actual five-pawed chimp.

“Oh. There it is.” The Aipom was in the ceiling rafters, looking down on the action. And there was Amphy’s Pokeball grasped in its tail appendage.

“Hey! Aipom! Aipom!” I tried waving, but the Pokemon was as clueless as its trainer.

This was useless, I needed my courage in order to do anything. I ran outside quickly. A minute later, I introduced my “courage” to the arena.

“Woah WOAH! WATCH OUT!!” Trainers and Pokemon dove apart.

“Um, hey, could you please give me some room… I need to get to that Pokemon and have a word with it,” I stuttered out. No one heard me from way down below, but they got the message nonetheless. Even Ethan stopped to gawk at the thirty-foot earthen snake weaving through the room (and was promptly flattened by a still-in-play Heracross).

“Hey, it’s you! You’re here!” he gasped from underneath his Pokemon’s body.

“I tried to get your attention, but… I need your Aipom to give me back the Pokeball it took.”

“Aibo? Pokeball?”

The thief caught a whiff of its name, deduced the situation in an instant, and screeched. The next moment it was flying through the girders.

“Onix, catch him!” I ordered. Onix ducked and weaved after the miscreant thief. Each time we got close, he raised his head up between the rafters and I tried snatching the monkey. Sadly, we were much too slow, and the foe much too agile.

“Aibo! What’re you doing?”

The Aipom screeched a string of barks down to its trainer.

“Huh? Ohhh! Not a bad idea!” Ethan exclaimed.

“What is it saying?” I asked.

“He said we should get you to battle, if you want the Pokeball back.”

“What? No! I don’t have time for that!”

Onix thrust upwards, launching me high into the air. I skipped across the girders, catching the Pokemon off-guard and sending it off in a panic. I lunged and missed, falling into the void between rafters. As planned, Onix was there to catch me. I rolled and relaunched myself, getting ahead of the Aipom. The foe barked and twisted around. It found Onix’s head waiting for it. We had it trapped.

“Aibo! Come down here!”
“Ouo ouo. Aipo.” It shrugged its shoulders and shook its head. I swung under the girder, treating it like a gymnastics bar routine. Aipom was ready and just barely jumped over my grasp. I lost my grip and started falling. Onix was right there and in perfect position to catch the thief, but as soon as he saw me dropping, his vector shifted. I landed awkwardly on his head, and only managed to stop from falling by catching my arms around his horn.

Aipom was laughing.

That irritated me.

Greatly.

“Onix, Earthquake against the rafters.”

My Ground-type smacked the main beam, sending a violent vibration through the girders- and the rest of the roof, for that matter.

Aipom was stunned and started falling. I stretched out, my fingers brushing off its limb.

An unsuspecting Doduo provided a soft landing pad for the creature. As soon as it slapped onto its back, the bird Pokemon squawked and dashed off.

“Chase it!” I ordered Onix and leapt off.

Ethan sprinted up to my side.

“What’re you doing here? I thought you weren’t battling? Did you change your mind? Did Amphy get better?”

“No!” I waved at the Aipom atop a Doduo doing laps around the arena, being chased down by Onix, the Doduo’s owner, and a half-dozen other Pokemon. The majority of spectators were largely engrossed by the chase scene.

“That Pokemon of yours stole my Amphy’s Pokeball, and I need it to bring Amphy to the vet.”

“Oh now I get it. Well, eh, sorry? He’s a mischief maker, can’t really help it.”

“Like his owner,” I muttered. “Can you recall him?” I asked aloud. The boy in the baseball cap nodded.

“Sure!”

I turned back to the commotion, hoping this would be the end of the ordeal- only to gawk in dread.

The chase had turned into a full-on stampede.

Twenty or forty Pokemon were running wild. For every Pokemon recalled to its Pokeball by a level-headed trainer, two more joined in the panic/fun. Bodies of every color and size flashed by, a whirlwind of monsters on a mindless marathon. Nidoqueen, Jigglypuff, Houndour, Sandshrew, Hooothoot, Ledian, Jumpluff, Teddiursa, Butterfree, and Grimer I counted among the moving zoo, even a freaking Diglett followed where it could.

“Aibo, c’mon! Give the lady back her Pokeball!” The boy tried to fire the recall laser, in vain. The Aipom ducked behind the Doduo’s haunch, using it as a living shield.
Onix couldn’t corral the thing on his own. Each effort to corner the Pokemon ended in failure of one sort or another- the Doduo hopped over his hind section, or he was pushed aside by a berserking Primeape, or some other stroke of bad luck.

I saw an opening.

“Onix, go left! To the center, there!” I shouted. Onix obeyed and slithered away from the mounted Aipom. Six other Pokemon followed him, some attacking him, some riding him. It cleared up room and created a narrow lane. The Doduo naturally veered for the opening.

Normally, this would be the time I would order Magnemite to fire a paralyzing Thunder Wave. However, my Pokemon was back at the Lighthouse, and the task of stopping the Doduo and its thieving Aipom rider lay squarely on my human shoulders. I swatted the Aipom’s Pokeball from Ethan’s hand and took a stance in the path of the Doduo.

“Now I’ve got you.”

The land-bound bird charged headlong towards me. I counted the distance down: Three. Two. One. Go!

I rolled aside, letting the bird pass. As I came out of the roll, I spun and let off the recall laser. An enormous flash erupted. Success!

The flash got brighter, though, much too bright!

Aipom was holding out Amphy’s Pokeball and firing its recall laser too! The beams intersected, creating a continuous explosion of light and sparks at the point of contact. The Doduo continued on, bringing the Aipom out of range. The laser light show abruptly ended.

“Oh come on!” I let out my frustration. To add insult to injury, the Aipom jeered at me and pointed in my direction.

“Watch out!” Ethan screamed.

Wait. The monkey wasn’t pointing at me. It was pointing behind me. I slowly turned around.

Have you ever seen a Snorlax sprint? It’s like a giant marshmallow galloping through candy land.

You think I’m being funny?

You’ve never stared a six-thousand pound blob of fat bearing down on you.

It’s terrifying.

I had no time to move. It was already on top of me.

I cringed, my vision went black, and I fully expected to wake up in a hospital or heaven the next time I opened my eyes.

Flashes of light. Visions of a wall of flesh suspended above me. Purple tendrils of ether whorled all about me. These were the images that greeted me when I blinked my eyes opened. I could feel an arm across my chest.

The Snorlax was floating in mid-air above me.
“We have to move. Come on.”

A strong arm pulled me out from under the improbable floating mass. A second later, the etheric tendrils dissipated, and the monster came crashing down.

“Snaarrr. Laaax.” The creature slumped into the ground and immediately began snoring.

_Hypnosis?_ I wondered.

All around us chaos reigned, but in this tiny bubble of space, I felt a serene sense of warmth and security. Something, or rather, someone, was hovering over me, protecting me from the chaos.

“ENOUGH!”

Six Hydro Pumps streaked across the air, washing out the arena and every unruly creature occupying it. Every living being was shoved by the wall of water to the far corners of the room, doused and shocked into stillness. I spotted the army of saviors, Pokemon I knew well: Blastoise, Gyarados, Mantine, Kingdra, Starmie, and Lapras. A battered, shaky, and absolutely _enraged_ old man stood behind them.

“Out, the lot of you! You shame this profession! What utter lack of control! Disgusting, craven, clueless idiots! Don’t come back to my gym until you’ve learned how to handle a Pokemon!”

Mr. Beret’s bellowing orders scared the rabble into compliance nigh-instantly. Within a minute the arena was nearly empty.

I was stunned, and caught myself staring up at the figure of my savior.

Ethan?!

No.

Similar face, same hair color, but otherwise very different. No stupid-looking hat and hair lock, for starters. His hair was better kept, combed at one point, I could tell. He wore a travel jacket and proper pants, not the boyish capris of the guy from earlier. Just from his face and posture, I could sense he was older; he looked so much more… what’s the word… _mature_.

Handsome, even.

Really, _really_ handsome.

“Hi…”

“Hi there. Are you alright?”

“I think so…”

“That’s good. I’m guessing you work here. Is the Gym Leader around?”

“Oh! Um. I guess… you could say… I’m the Gym Leader… kind of. Sort of.”

“Oh. Sorry about that. I just assumed…”

“Huh?”

“I mean, I didn’t think the Gym Leader would be a cute girl like you.”
“Eh?!”

On a scale of one to Solar Beam, of what color and what luminescence would you wager my cheeks are right now? Go ahead. Guess*.

In the meantime, I’ll be burrowing myself into the earth, with realistic hopes of reaching Orre in the next hour or so.

*Oh, and if you must know, the correct answer was “Total Output of the Sun in a Standard Earth Hour”.

“This belongs to you, I think.”

He held up an ordinary red and white Pokeball, indistinguishable except for a tiny “A” marked in green permanent marker on its back. Amphy’s Pokeball.

“That’s right.”

“And this belongs to you,” he added, holding out a gentling snoring Aipom off to his side. A youth stumbled up to us, soaked from head to foot.

“Ash! What’re you doing here?”

“For starters, not causing trouble, unlike you.”

“I didn’t mean for everything to get out of control like that!”

The older boy shot the younger one a daggered look. It silenced Ethan into sheepish submission, whereby he took Aipom and backed off.

“Sorry for the trouble. I know the guy, he’s young and a bit of a ditz, but he means well. That old trainer seems like he got the rest of the place under control, that’s good. So I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Ash Satoshi. You are?”

I shook my head.

“Jasmine,” I mumbled.

“Jasmine? That’s a beautiful name.”

Seriously, no. Stop this.

I’ve been watching shoujo anime all my life and this is way too much like a pilot episode of a romance show. For one, this is far too perfect and I must be dreaming. For two, if real, there must be a catch. For three, even if sincere, I cannot think of a worse possible time for me to live out my knight-in-shining-armor fantasy. There is a somewhat more important matter to attend to, although I can’t quite remember what it is at the moment.

“Oh.” An Espeon strolled up and began rubbing the young man’s side. “This is my Espeon.”

Ah. Psychic and Hypnosis. This must be the Pokemon responsible for saving me from Snorlax and Amphy’s Pokeball from Aipom. What a useful Pokemon. But it was the trainer himself who tackled me out of the way of the Snorlax. If not for him-

Amphy’s Pokeball!
That’s right!

“Um, uh, um. That Pokeball.”

I reached out, and he obligingly dropped it into my upturned hands.

“So if you really are the Gym Leader here, could I ask you for a Gym Battle?” he said politely.

“Not happening,” Ethan exclaimed from the side. The young man shot him a glare.

“Um, he’s sort of, well, not sort of, I mean, he’s entirely right. I’m not taking challengers today. I have a Pokemon that I need to take care of- this is his Pokeball, you see, and I don’t have time, and, um…”

Jeeze I’m falling apart.

“I see. That’s fine. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Oh!”

This Adonis, offering to help me?

I shook my head.

Not to answer the young man’s offer, but to put some sense into mine. After all, I was imagining that these polite overtures meant more than mere civility.

He’s a trainer looking for a Gym Badge, not your own personal Nichi-kun come to life, baka! He’s just acting nice because he’s a nice guy!

Quit dawdling and get back to Amphy!

“Um, sorry, but I have to go. I will see you both tomorrow, if I can.”

“Mmm. No, that’s okay, don’t say sorry. It’s your precious Pokemon, he deserves your attention more than us guys.”

“Looking forward to it!” Ethan added.

I stumbled off, dazed by the whirlwind of events that had just taken place.

The daze did not wear off, not in five minutes, nor in two hours.

The vets office was closed by the time I got there. I went back to the lighthouse and greeted a very weak Amphy wrapped in a blanket. Graveler was goofing off. Magnemite was trying to turn on the TV. I checked with Amphy, hoping to find him getting better, but he wasn’t. I recalled him into the ball, as well as the other two.

By this point I should be going home, but didn’t really feel like it. I got on the phone and began making a series of phone calls.

“Mr. Gatto, this is Jasmine. Amphy is still very sick and won’t be able to light up again tonight. I’m
going to take him to the vet tomorrow. You should be prepared to be without him for a while.”

“Mother, I won’t be home tonight. I’ll be staying at the gym and going to school straight from there in the morning. It’s necessary because Amphy’s sickness is getting worse. My homework is done so don’t worry about that.”

“Mr. Beret, please don’t lock the gym tonight, I’ll- *click* huh?*

“Hayate, what’s going on?”

“Oh.” Mr. Beret had picked up in the middle of the voice mail. “Um, I’m going to spend the night at the gym with Amphy. Could you please leave it unlocked for me?”

“No need. We’re all here, staying late.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll be over soon.”

“Acknowledged.”

I clicked the phone shut.

The gym was no better than the lighthouse for a sleepover, the difference in distance to the Pokevet’s office was negligible. True, there was a more advanced medkit and the PC there, but the lighthouse had Amphy’s quarters and a more comfortable place to stay, with an actual bed and mini-kitchen. Was there a reason to go hiking across the city once again? Your legs are getting sore.

Hey Jasmine, are you really going to the gym because it’s the best option for Amphy? Or is it because you want to see that cute trainer again?

I shook my head.

My motivations are moot now. I told Mr. Beret I was coming over, and that’s that. The old captain does not tolerate breaking promises.

I made my fourth and final trek across Olivine for the day. The sun was beyond the horizon, with only faint indigo rays left to streak across a clear sky. The only hint of clouds were gathered far away to the south, over the ocean.

The office was unusually crowded for the evening. On normal weekdays I could usually count on someone hanging back and lounging around, but not eleven people at once.

Beth was browsing a celebrity magazine, with our new third-grade recruit Janina and her older sister Chiba looking over Beth’s shoulder. Ed was on the computer looking up something about League politics, guessing by the picture of CEO Lance in the header. Peter was shooting paper wads into the trash bin and pestering Ed with questions and jokes. At the back of the office, behind the desk, I spotted the tall-backed chair turned away from us, with a wrinkled hand resting on the armrest. The television was on and turned to the local weather, showing a graphical map centered on a dark green mass of rain hanging over the ocean with lots of lightning bolt icons spread across it.

Five visiting trainers were hanging out on the couches. I inhaled sharply when I spotted them: my savior was among them.

Oh no no no! I wasn’t expecting him here. I’m not prepared.

Should I go and greet him? How would I go about doing that? Should I apologize for not taking his
challenge? No, that wouldn’t do, you’re not sorry, you had a more important task to take care of, and it might look too meek to be apologizing for something so ultimately trivial. Ah, what about introducing him to Amphy? He’ll understand when he sees my Pokemon looking sick and distraught. No, that’s a bad idea, you don’t need to make Amphy suffer any more than necessary just to show him off to a complete stranger.

Grr.

“Hayate!”

“Ah!”

My decision was made for me. The captain wanted my presence, and from his tone, I knew I was in trouble.

“Front and center!” he shouted.

How did he know I was here? He’s just like that, it’s one of his preternatural abilities, leading me and others to wonder if he secretly possesses byakugan eyeballs.

“Sir.”

I stood rigid at attention before my mentor.

His timber eyes were locked on the television screen, never wavering. He didn’t even need to stare a victim down to keep them on edge.

“You’re a disgrace.”

“My apologies, sir.”

“Shut up!” he roared. “You listen first and you wait to speak when I ask it of you. Now today it was impressed upon me the dire need for you take a leave of absence, and I allowed it. What then do I get, but to see you back, and at the center of a hell-raised riot, and not doing a damn prissy thing about the mess but freeze up like a Slowpoke in the arctic! It’s outrageous to allow that kind of hooliganism to break out in your gym, but it’s an absolute DISGRACE to not deal with it yourself!”

I stood shivering and silent, enduring the barrage.

“And to rely on a challenger to save your hide, utterly shameful. Three light fixtures broken, concrete floor has cracks, one stand upended, six formal complaints already filed, one trainer bruised and suing us for hospital bills, the damages from this incident would fill the entirety of that Pidgey-sized braincase of yours! Quit shaking and man up!”

“Sir!” I made an effort to stand erect.

“Now give me a full report of the situation, and don’t try to sugarcoat a damn thing. Why’d you come back from leave?”

“Alright. I asked for leave to attend to Amphy in the lighthouse, who is sick. In order to transport Amphy from the lighthouse to the vet, I needed his Pokeball. His Pokeball was stolen by a challenger’s Pokemon that visited me at the lighthouse. I came back to retrieve it. The Pokemon, an Aipom- I underestimated it. It managed to evade capture and incite other Pokemon into panic in order to aide its evasion efforts. My Onix was occupied with apprehending this Aipom and could not assist with the secondary contributors to the disturbance. My other Pokemon were tending to Amphy
at the time so I did not have them available for action. Sir! And if one day you would like to tell me how you combatted a charging Snorlax one-on-one I will apologize for not being able to protect myself and relying on another party for my personal safety! Sir!”

“Cheeky shit.”

I tried very, very hard not to grin, and succeeded. Grinning would ruin it, and I’d be tasked to menial work for the next month. Keeping a straight face, however, kept my little retort’s power and seriousness intact, which just about tipped Mr. Beret’s mood from “angry and judgmental” to “angry but forgiving”.

“You’re hooking a taut line, Hayate, trying to balance your two jobs. In the future, you might have to decide one to fully commit to. There’ll be crisis at one or the other, and your limit is just that, one or the other. They ever blow up at the same time, you’re done for. Understood?”

“I’ll take your advice into consideration,” I replied.

“Like hell you will, you willful brat.” He snorted. “And what now? Is that Amphy you’ve got there?”

“Correct. He’s very sick, I wanted to stay here for the night, so I can take him directly to the Pokevet in the morning.”

“What about school?”

“I have an understanding with them, I’m taking flex classes, so I can be late.”

“Lucky you.” He waved over to the far side of the office. “That trainer’s the one who saved us all, isn’t he?”

I looked over to the soft, vacant face nested among the visitors. He looked like he was enjoying the conversation, but for a moment, he glanced over and our gazes met. Startled, I quickly turned away, back to Mr. Beret.

“His name is Ash,” I said.

“He wanted a word with you. Go thank him properly for all of us.”

“Yes sir.”

“Wait one sec.”

Mr. Beret rose, slowly, shakily, from his seat. Even in his condition, he was still taller than me. His eyes looked down on me, seeing me for the first time tonight.

“I’m going home.”

“Oh. Okay,” I uttered.

He passed by, patting me on the back.

“I’ll be taking my own leave of absence for a little while. Five days. I hope this ruckus taught you a lesson. I expect this place to be in better shape by the time I get back.”

“Understood.”
“And Jasmine,” he said, leaning down, close to my ear.

“How?”

“Watch the weather,” he whispered.

“Oh. Right. I guess I can do that?”

Mr. Beret shambled off.

I glanced at the television and saw it playing a commercial for Ruff Puff’s Power Flakes. Ah, oh well. Time to go say my thank you’s to the young man.

“Hello.”

“Hi again,” he replied.

I twiddled my thumbs behind my back and went silent.

Ash cocked his head, confused.

“Um! Ahahaha!” I giggled nervously. “So, um, I appreciate what you did for me and for us. You saved me in more ways than one.”

“No problem.”

“Pikuuu?”

A yellow head with pointed ears propped up from under the jacket in Ash’s lap. A Pikachu?

“Go back to sleep,” he told his Pokemon, pulling the jacket over its head.

There were laughs from the other visitors.

“So, um, thank you!” I bowed.

“Hey, don’t bow. It was nothing.”

More suppressed chuckles erupted from the others.

“So Max cleared up the situation for me. You’re the acting Gym Leader, and that old man is in pseudo-retirement.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, it just strikes me as unusual, for a little middle schooler to be handing out gym badges.”

“Middle school?!?!?” I sputtered.

The other trainers began laughing so hard spittle started flying. Peter across the way was clutching his gut. Ash looked around, confused. I was shaking, somewhere between rose-red embarrassment and crimson-tinged indignity.

“What?!”

“GWAHAHAHAHAHA!”
“He fell for it!”

“He’s freakin blind.”

“AHAWHAHAWHA!”

“Kekeke!”

“What’s so funny? What’s the joke?!?”

“You!” I backed off. “Middle school!”

Edward glanced over with a disapproving glare. Beth made her way to my backside, catching me in her arms.

“Jasmine is in ninth grade. She’s a freshman in high school.”

“Oh. Ohhhh!” Ash’s look could be likened to someone discovering a novel solution to a video game puzzle. It was revelatory, but lacked any apology or embarrassment. “Sorry! But eighth grade is middle school, so I’m not that far off.”

“Well, thanks, that’s very kind and reassuring,” I said with a huff, and bolted away. A pair of hands took my shoulders and twirled me around. Beth guided me back to the group.

“What are you doing?!” I whispered furiously.

“Don’t blow this,” she whispered back.

I was sat across from Ash. Feeling surrounded and uncomfortable, I dragged Beth down beside me. She obliged. Soon enough, Ed and Peter plopped into the couch with us. Chiba had to take little Janina home and so said goodbye.

“Max, Brendan, Kris, and Ethan,” he said, introducing the others one by one.

“Hi.”

“Yo.”

“Hello! I’m Kris, that’s with a K!”

The young nuisance from earlier gave a curt salute with his fingers, not looking at me but seemingly focused on outer space. Conversation began in earnest, mainly driven by Kris’ excited recap of the regional competitive scene.

“He’s still doing Elite Four challenges as CEO?”

“Well, it’s not like that’s a lot of work. Kanto League’s rough. How many make it through the first three each year?”

“Ten? Twelve?”

“Less.”

“I don’t think Lance would be all that hard to get through, Boltbeam rips his team apart. Agatha would give me more trouble.”
“Ask the champ here, he beat them all last year.”

“How’d you do it?”

“Champ?” I inquired.

“Ash beat the League on his first try. He’s the Kanto Champion,” Kris chimed.

“No I’m not, I didn’t win the tournament, lost in the semifinals,” Ash corrected.

“Oh right. But you still beat the Elite Four!”

“You mean you beat Lance?” I asked, incredulous.

“Yeah.”

He’s so nonchalant about it!

_Oh, I’m just a teenager going toe-to-toe with adults thrice my experience level and still winning, no big deal- YEAH RIGHT! Give me a break!_

“Was it hard?” I asked stupidly.

“Oh, yeah. In the beginning, and near the end. And dealing with the Rockets was tough. Lt. Surge demolished me, like, four times in a row.”

“Rockets?! What do you mean by that?”

Kris chuckled. “Tell them,” she insisted. Max and Brendan leaned in, also not having been privy to this story.

Ash bowed down, rubbing his temple.

“It’s not really worth a story. I was visiting Silph Co. Headquarters to check up on an acquaintance who wanted to show me a Lapras, when the whole Rocket takeover thing happened. I had to fight some of them.”

“Hahaha.” Kris was beside herself.

“What’s so funny?” Ed asked.

“He beat Giovanni by himself,” Ethan muttered.

“Wait, THE Giovanni? No way! Impossible!” Peter was beside himself.

Ash shook his head.

“I didn’t do anything like that.”

“Quit lying! You beat him and sent the whole goon squad of his packing!” Kris insisted.

Peter got down on his knees and sidled right up to Ash. He poked him in the chest, as if accusing him of a crime.

“You mean to say you came face to face with the most infamous crime boss on the planet, and you’re still alive? I’m not buying it. You’re full of shit.”
“Peter!”

“He did just that!”

“Seriously!”

Ash put his hands up defensively.

“I beat him in a Pokemon match, that’s all. That’s nothing special. He had a pistol trained on me the whole time and could’ve shot me if he wanted. The only reason they left was because the SWAT teams showed up and the Rockets got what they were looking for.”

“Oh don’t be so modest! You beat Giovanni three times!”

Peter looked like he was about to choke.

“Their Celadon hideout, Silph Co., and in his own gym in Viridian!”

“Why’s it such a big deal?”

“Uh, duh, it’s Giovanni, the biggest, baddest bastard who ever chucked a Pokeball.”

Ash sighed.

“Look, okay, I’m good at seeing the potential inside a Pokemon and coaxing them into achieving that potential. That’s all. I talk to Pokemon “good”. That’s my claim to fame. Let’s stop acting like this is a big deal.”

“We are trainers. This is our whole life. It is a big deal to us. You’ve had an experience we and millions of others in our community can only dream of.”

Ash craned his head around.

The shy-acting Gym Leader had spoken up and said something almost profound.

I don’t know where those words came from within me, but they seemed to hit their mark.

His mouth was agape and his eyes were locked onto me.

“It’s not modesty if you can’t acknowledge that others perceive it as a great accomplishment. That’s just false modesty, and it’s disrespectful to those who look up to you.”

Ash continued to stare, bedazzled.

“I never thought of it like that. That’s really smart and… mature.”

“Middle-schooler,” Brendan reminded him.

Ash punched him on the shoulder.

Thereafter, with prompting from Kris, Ash told us all about his journey through Kanto, and with each successive story, my amazement skipped ever higher. He had coaxed a pack of male Gyarados to help stop the S.S. Anne from tipping over in a storm by using the party lights to project images of female Gyarados onto the hull. He went on a parkour tour across the backs of a herd of thirty Tauros because he thought it would be cool. One time he made a friend of a Diglett and negotiated a truce between its colony and a construction company building a dam. The most absurd tale was of his
friend, Bill, fiddling with a gene-splicing machine and accidentally turning himself into a Pokemon (I’m not sure I believe that one). The most impressive story, without a doubt, was his stay in Celadon. There, he had the experience of double-crossdressing: pretending to be a girl so he could get into the all-female Garden Club at the Gym, and then sending him on a mission disguised as an old beggar man to infiltrate the Game Corner basements. There he rigged the machinery so he won an obscene fortune from the slots. When he went to collect his prize, the Rockets dragged him downstairs before their boss, where he had his first battle with the crime lord.

“When Pikachu knocked out his Kangaskhan, he laughed, and told me ‘You’ve got spunk, brat. I respect that. Join my team, I’ll make it worth your while!’ But I turned him down,” Ash finished.

“So cool,” Peter whispered.

“I guess.” He shrugged off the awe and praise. “I never felt like I deserved any of it. It’s all thanks to these guys.” He cradled his Pikachu affectionately. “They fight so hard for me. I just hope I’m doing enough good to deserve them.”

Oh goodness. Be still, my fluttering heart.

“Who’re you carrying?” Ed asked.

“Pikachu here. Espeon, Charizard, Noctowl, Sudowoodo, and Lapras, for now. I have a bunch more at home. I try rotating them around, give everyone an opportunity to travel and battle.”

“Is it hard to balance them all? Won’t it hold you back from building a really strong team?”

Ash shook his head.

“I think most trainers just concentrate on one or three Pokemon because they want to keep a social life- but Pokemon are my life. I don’t party or have other hobbies, really, so I can spend a lot more time on them than your average trainer.”

“There’s benefits to rotating among Pokemon,” I said.

Ash gave me a smile and nodded.

“She’s right. They’re less prone to injury and exhaustion when the load is spread out, and they learn to adapt more quickly to different situations. It gives me more flexibility when I’m heading into a big battle. I couldn’t have beaten Agatha with any of my regular team, her battling style is way too deviant. Good thing I had Muk, just swallowed her poisons and ignored her Tricking and Double Teams.”

Peter launched into a dissertation on the virtues of Poison-types and how shift-stalling wasn’t really a cheap tactic, to which Brendan emphatically disagreed, starting an argument. I backed out of it. Ethan sprawled out and took a nap, Kris bounced around, getting up more than once to refill her hot chocolate. Beth changed seats to be by Ed, who kept glancing at me. In the course of the game of musical chairs, I found myself seated next to Ash.

“You mentioned an Ampharos?” he asked me suddenly.

“Yes, he’s sick,” I repeated.

“I’ve got a Super Potion, if it’d help,” he offered.

“No, I already tried that, it didn’t work. I think it might be the flu,” I said.
“Oh, it must be bad. I’ve seen other Gym Leaders who wouldn’t take a day off when their Pokemon are sick. Is he the leader?”

“Excuse me?”

“Of your team.”

“Oh! No!” I cried, comprehending. “He doesn’t ever battle. Amphy is the lighthouse Pokemon.”

“Well that is what the pokedex says. Very bright.”

I stumbled for words.

“Oh, um, I mean, he’s the literal lighthouse. He lights up the night for the ships. We have a dangerous crop of sea rocks on either side of the harbor, and heavy fog most of the year, so it’s important for him to show the ships a safe route.”

“OH!!! I’m sorry! I didn’t get that at all! So he doesn’t battle, he works for the lighthouse.”

Awkward chuckling ensued from the boy.

“He’s not important to your job or anything. Taking time off your Gym Leader duties just for him… You must really love him, then.”

I cupped Amphy’s Pokeball in my hand.

“Mm. He’s been a precious companion since I was little.”

I remembered Mother’s hurtful tirade, Father’s aloofness, and Mr. Beret’s abusive treatment, all feeding into that moment of despairing clarity no seven-year-old should have to confront.

‘You are not my child! I never!’ I shuddered and squeezed the memory from my mind.

Seven years on, and those words still haunt me. I’m scared to think where I might have ended up, without that comforting paw landing on my shoulder that day.

“I kind of owe him my life,” I admitted.

“I would love to meet him,” Ash said.

“Hmm.”

He must have seen the look of concern wash over me.

“It’s alright! I don’t want to disturb him if it’s a bother.”

I raised the Pokeball.

“You’re older than me right? You look older.”

“I’m seventeen. You?”

“Fifteen. You know more about Pokemon and Poketech, right? What goes on in a Pokeball? How does it feel for a Pokemon to be in there?”

Ash’s faces contorted in thought. He didn’t have an answer right off the bat, and I took it as he didn’t know.
“Oh well.”

“I’ve never talked with them about it. This guy hates his Pokeball, refuses to go in it, so it’s not a subject that we’ve gone over,” he said.

“Oh I see.” I looked down on the cute little Pikachu in his lap. It had fallen into a deep sleep, snoozing away obliviously.

“What is it?”

“Huh?”

I looked up.

“What?” I asked. He was looking at me curiously.

“You had a look…”

“Oh…” I didn’t know how to respond.

“Was it about Pikachu?”

“…cute,” I muttered.

“What?”

“I think Pikachu are cute.”

He smirked.

“That’s not an unpopular opinion.”

“I mean, I know a lot of people own a Pikachu, just not serious battlers. It’s unusual. Haven’t you thought of evolving him?”

Ash nodded.

“A lot. But Pikachu doesn’t want to evolve, and I’ve decided to respect that. I guess I can make do by playing up to his strengths. He’s more agile than he would be as a Raichu.”

“I see.”

“Mmhmm. Haha.”

“Hmm?”

“Well you’re interesting, calling Pikachu cute when you’re toting around an Onix. I don’t know what to make of you.”

“I mean, I’m this Rock-type specialist and everyone wants me to act cool and tough and serious, so calling a Pokemon cute is not really what’s expected of me,” I stuttered out, back peddling hard and harder. “I have a certain image to keep up as this gym’s leader, but I’m still a girl at heart, you see.” I gave him a helpless smile.

“Hey, it’s fine. I won’t tell anyone.” Ash glanced around. Peter and Brendan were having a shouting match that was sucking all the attention their way. Still, sometimes I swore Beth, Ed, and that Ethan
guy were taking side-glances at our conversation. “Do you want to go on a walk?” Ash asked.

“Sure.”

I picked myself up. In doing so, I spotted the medicine cabinet on the near wall.

“Oh, right.” I gave Ash a hopeful smile. “You can meet Amphy after all! I want to give him some anti-biotics to help his immune system. The manual I read said Pokeballs can negate pain and suffering, but can’t stop the progression of a disease.” I lilted over to the cabinet, with Ash in tow.

“Hey, leaving?” one of the guys asked.

“We’re not going far. We’re treating her Ampharos.”

“Oh I want to see Ampharos!” Kris exclaimed.

“I’ve met it before, it’s pretty playful,” Brendan said.

“Will it light up for us?”

“Um, uh, no…” I wasn’t expecting all of this attention all of a sudden. “Hey, please stand back. Please? He’s very sick, and crowding him in would be sort of…” It was useless, they were all excited to see a new Pokemon.

I sighed. Ash coaxed them back, giving me enough room to release Amphy.

“Aww, how cute!”

“Hmm.”

Amphy blinked under the light and gave a weak little cough.

“Hi again. Feeling better?”

“Is it alright if I pet him? He looks so fuzzy!”

“Don’t. She just told you not to.”

“Hi there little guy!”

Amphy seemed dazed by the attention. I trusted Beth and Ash to keep the rowdy lot off of him, at least for a few seconds while I rummaged through the medicines.

“Cough. Hmm. Maybe? Allergies, no, runny nose, no, headache, maybe, but I shouldn’t give him too many of these at the same time.”

“Is he alright?” Ash asked.

“Coo! Coo! Coo coo coo!” A fit of coughing caused me to turn around. Amphy was on his haunches.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry Amphy! Here, let me get you some medicine and water.”

Amphy leaned over on all fours. I grabbed the cough syrup and kneeled down beside him.

The coughing grew stronger. A little drivel of spittle and vomit came out of his mouth. My concern piqued, so I leaned in closer and placed a hand on his back. Amphy’s body began convulsing.
“Amphy?”

The vomit turned red.

“AMPHY!”
My breath touched the glass, leaving a puddle of condensate. I put my hand against it.

Warm, I thought.

I peered through the translucent wall, staring at the creature on the other side. He was laying on an operating table, wrapped from head to foot in heavy blankets. A pair of intravenous lines slithered under the covers, pricking the skin in some unseen corner and feeding god knows what directly into his body. He was shivering. He never stopped shivering. Sometimes he coughed as well. Still, he looks so cold.

“Amphy,” I murmured.

I clenched my eyes shut.

“Miss Mikan,” came a voice.

Doctor Maveli. It’s only been a day, but she feels like an old friend already. Must be all the talking we’ve done in the past twenty-four hours. She’s the kind of professional with the personal touch, that really makes you feel like she cares about you. A good people person.

Not a good doctor, though.

“You can take him home now.”

“Nnn.”

I nodded absently.

Home. His home. The lighthouse.

“You should get a move on.”

“I know,” I said.

The staff hovered around Amphy one last time. They removed the IV lines, tucked his head in, and gently picked him up. I stood by the surgery room door to receive him. The Pokemon was slowly deposited into the cradle of my arms.

Had he always been this light?

Dr. Maveli rubbed my back and guided me through the corridors. Not a word was said between us. Amphy murmured in my arms, but otherwise was too weak to move or cry.

A sign on the wall caught my attention for a moment.

‘Maternity Ward’ it said. An unremarkable corridor opened beyond it.
I frowned.

That’s where I was born.

Then we were past it, and I turned my attention back to Amphy, trying my best to keep him steady, keep his head propped up.

“Be safe,” were the doctor’s final words. She left me at the lobby. The lights were dimmed, the result of drawing from the backup generators. The automatic glass doors were propped open. There was no spare power for their motors. Puddles of water lapped across the threshold. I shuffled up to the opening, pulling the hood of my jacket over my head.

Out there, Olivine was all grey.

The sun did not dawn this morning. Only clouds, and wind, and rain- endless, endless rain. Water enough to drown out the whole world. Not enough to drown out my sobs.

I thought I stared out on time itself, each drop of water a manifestation of the passage of events through space, each individual tear tracing a life of its own through the sky, until... dashed to pieces, scattered and obliterated to the flood. I saw everything there, and nothing.

The future was a blurred void, unknowable, feared.

The present was a moment, singular and defined.

The past was crystal, fixed and inevitable…

4-25-2006
10:15 P.M.

“Get in the car!”

“A towel! Someone get a towel!”

“God damn look at all that blood!”

“Shut the hell up Peter and help!”

“It’s like a horror movie!”

“Peter!”

“I’ve got him. Let me take him.”

“Hey, new guy, leave her alone.”

“No one asked you.”

“Do we need water?”

Bodies fought and scrummed in the periphery of my vision. I didn’t see who or what or where. All I
could see was my Pokemon, sputtering a trail of blood from the gym entrance to the parking lot.

“Back seat! Back seat!” someone shouted. I crawled in, Amphy on my lap. A heave, and more detritus came up, this time yellow. It smelled awful, like bile. It probably was bile. Hopefully was bile.

“You, in! You out! Out!”

The car sped off.

“Where should we take him?”

“The vet is closed.”

“The hospital?”

“Yeah, but do they treat Pokemon?”

“It’s an emergency, they should, right?”

“I don’t know!”

“You missed the turn.”

“Damn it!”

It was all I could do to keep Amphy’s head tilted upright. Another wave of body fluids came up. I tried catching as much as I could with the paper towel, but some got on my dress anyways. Holding him became impossible, and I lost my grip on his haunch.

A male hand reached over and propped him back onto my lap.

“Thanks,” I said.

A glance informed me it was Ed’s helpful hand. Beth was driving, she was the only one of us with a driver’s license.

“They’re following us,” Beth noted, looking in the rearview mirror.

I turned back over my shoulder. The visiting trainers were riding their Pokemon and attempting to keep up, although the car was outpacing them.

Back to Amphy, I held him as still as I could. He was still heaving, but nothing was coming up anymore.

My hand emerged from around his neck. It was wet, a revolting sensation when I realized what it must be.

“Wash your hands when we get there, okay?” Ed warned me.

I ignored him.

“Amphy.”

No reply.

“Amphy, hang on. We’re almost there.”
The hospital was just on the other side of downtown, a couple miles. The ride felt ten times longer than that. It’s a well-known fact that adrenaline has strange, time-distorting properties. I didn’t believe it until now.

“Breathe, Jasmine, remember to breathe.”

“Yes, breathe. That’s what you need to keep on doing Amphy, keep breathing,” I said, partially in shock.

“Hold on.”

We rounded a sharp curb, the force of the turn hurtling me, Ed, and Amphy to our sides. I shielded Amphy as best I could, banging my elbow and back against the door. *Seatbelt*, that would have been a good idea, if I had thought about it sooner.

“Sorry. We’re here.”

I bolted out of the door, carrying Amphy in my arms. Olivine General loomed ahead, a six-story white concrete building, looking like any other hospital in the world. To me it looked like Hope.

“Help me!”

Tired, somber eyes followed my entrance and dash across the lobby.

A receptionist was seated behind a glass receptacle. When she saw me running in she rose from her seat.

“Miss, calm down. Miss,” she called out. “What’s the matter? Is that an Ampharos? We aren’t a Pokemon hospital, you’ll have to go to a vet…”

“Please!” I begged, coming to a breathless stop right before the window. “It’s an emergency!”

“Okay. Calm down. Don’t shout. We’re a human hospital, we’re not staffed to handle-”

Amphy began wriggling in my arms.

A spasm, coughing, shivering, convulsions.

A drivel of crimson sprung from the corner of his mouth.


She hurried out from behind the counter and showed me to a gurney. Beth rushed forward and dropped the towel on it. The receptionist immediately grabbed the towel and tossed it away, muttering something about “contamination”. She had me place Amphy on his side, neck stretched out and head resting over the edge. Then she slammed her fist down on a call button.

“Lobby to E.R. We have a Poke, very sick. Need parameds now!”

“Amphy!” I was anxious, and a little panicked, and was not happy about the amount of help. The receptionist caught me trying to push the gurney towards the backdoors by myself.

“It’s okay. We’ll take care of it. We’ll take care of it. Call your Pokevet. Do you have a Pokevet?”

“Nn-nn.” I shook my head.
“That’s okay. We’ll keep him alive. Get a hold of a vet and ask them to visit us. Have him call our main number and ask for Sattler, she’s the manager of C.U. on duty tomorrow.

Two big men burst through the doors dressed in green scrubs and masks.

“What’s the problem?”

“They just burst in. There’s blood and excrete on the floor.”

“A Pokemon? Shouldn’t they see a vet?”

“Yeah, I know, I know, but…”

“Keep it still.”

“Feel this.”

“What?”

One paramedic took the other’s hand and placed it on Amphy’s forehead.

“What the hell, it’s freezing!” The one who seemed to be in charge cursed under his breath, sounding surprised and exasperated. Then, like a professional, he took a breath and went to work.

“Alright, it’s our problem now. Get an I.V., get blankets, get the hypothermia unit. We’ll use the atmo unit. Ma’m. Ma’m! We got this. Let us do our job.”

They had to tug at me to get me away from Amphy. The junior staffer held me back while the senior pushed the gurney away.

“Strong!” I called out after them. “Like a rock! In the ocean!”

I thought I heard a soft cry as they carried him through the doors.

4-27-2015

7:47 A.M.

My jacket wasn’t made for this kind of rain. My clothes were already soaked down to my skin. It made me cold.

Amphy was curled tight and clinging to me with all his puny strength. I clutched him closer, wicked some raindrops off his brow. His eyes looked up at me with the half-awake haze of painkillers in them.

“Aaa-aaa-?” he cried.

“It’s alright. We’re going to the lighthouse. It won’t be much longer.”

I bit my lip.

What bitterly ironic words.
The streets seemed abandoned. Of course. Anyone with any sense would have bailed by now. Including my friends and acquaintances.

Even he ditched.

But how could I blame him?

4-25-2006
11:03 P.M.

The hospital is open twenty-four/seven, even to visitors. I welcomed their courtesy, because there was no way I was going home that night. The other trainers thought so as well, as they all began arriving, in order of the swiftness of their mounts. To my surprise, the young man Ash was the first to enter through the lobby doors.

“Hey!”

“Hi.” He was giving me such a warm, honest smile, I felt obligated to give him a faint smile of my own.

“How is he doing?”

“I don’t know.” I looked around, a little lost. “One of the staff came back and asked me all sorts of questions, but he couldn’t say what was happening to Amphy. They’re not supposed to handle Pokemon, but he said he understood, Olivine doesn’t have an E.R. room for Pokemon.”

“What about the Pokecenter?”

I shook my head.

“We’re not that big a city. You should know that.”

Ash nodded, comprehending.

“Yeah. I’m from Pallet. We’re hardly a town.”

Every Pokecenter has a modern-issue Healing Terminal. Sometimes we take it for granted what these miracle machines can do: stamina drains, burns, chaffing, cuts, bruises, concussions, they’ll fix all manner of battle-induced maladies. But for the serious injuries and grave illnesses? No. You need a trained physician and specialized equipment, just like you would for humans. It’s really a matter of population if your local Pokecenter is equipped to handle dire cases. Olivine’s Pokecenter serves enough trainers to justify a dedicated Pokemon veterinarian, but only one, and of course she doesn’t work overnight. An all-hours emergency service was beyond our budget.

Olivine General was the only thing I could think of on short notice.

“Do you know what you need to do next?” he asked.

“Yes. They told me to call a vet and have them make a visit here. I found one, Doctor Maveli. I left a message, I hope she calls back in the morning.”
“I hope so too. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, but thank you,” I said.

Brendan and then Ethan and Kris arrived. Max was last. Peter never showed up. They all asked me the same questions, some insistently, and so Ash helpfully filled them in while I got some rest.

“Amphy, stay strong. STRONG! Like a…” A tune began playing in my head, highlighted by a chorus of “Stay strong!” I can’t remember if it came from a pop song on the radio or a poem studied in literature class. It didn’t much matter, it was relevant and stuck in my head, so I kept repeating the phrase, a few times a minute, until it melded together into one meaningless mumble.

When I woke up, it was still dark outside. The clock on the wall read 5:59. It didn’t say A.M. or P.M., but I hoped it was the former; I would hate to think I slept through the entire day.

“Ya’ll just gonna eat breakfast here? They got a cafeteria over ‘yond the corner there.” A new receptionist with a rotund belly and thick country accent waved at a hallway.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I heard Ash’s voice.

He was heading towards the exit.

“Are you going?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“But…” I didn’t want to say what I felt- ‘Don’t leave me! I feel like I need someone like you around, for comfort!’

Sure. Tell him that.

I gulped and tried pleading with my eyes. It didn’t seem to work.

Ash smiled faintly.

“I talked with the orderly. He said Amphy was stable. They don’t know what’s wrong with him, but they have him all dressed up and doing as well as can be expected. That doctor you called, called in, said she’ll be here in a hour or two.”

“Where are you going?”

“Well…” he looked a bit sheepish.

“What?”

He pointed to the television in the corner of the lobby. It was on and turned to the weather channel.

“They say there’s a tropical depression coming through. I was thinking, if you’re tied up taking care of your Pokemon, you’re not exactly in a position to take gym challengers. I was going to cross over to Cianwood and take on Chuck in the meantime.”

“Oh! Really?”

Shush, Jasmine! Don’t act shocked. He’s just a passing trainer, come to prove his mettle and acquire a gym badge. He was just being nice to you. Don’t get upset that he wants to maximize his time. He looks like a junior or sophomore in school, this might be his break, he might not have time to twiddle
around Olivine waiting for Amphy to get better. Shame on you! You’re reading too much into this!

“But, do you have to go so soon?” I asked despite myself.

“Well, if I want to get across Route 40 before it gets rough, I guess I have to go now,” he explained.

“Oh. Okay. Well. I’ll be waiting for you when you get back.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you again. Both of you.” He tipped his cap and was gone.

“Ash… No… Get back here! Lyra wants ta…” a sleepy-eyed Ethan stumbled after him and smacked into what he thought was an automatic sliding door but was really the glass wall directly adjacent to the door. The thud fully woke him, as well as the rest of the crew. They came alive, some grumbling for food, others flocking to me and pelting me with questions. Beth wanted to know if she should get in touch with our teacher for me.

Oh right, school. And officials. And Beret. Oh dear, I have a lot of calls to make.

But first…

“Hello there?” I approached the receptionist.

“Yeah honey?”

“My Pokemon, he’s in the E.R. right now, may I go see him?”

“Sure thang sweetie.”

4-27-2016

7:54 A.M.

Olivine City was made of nothing but the concrete sidewalk directly in front of me. The rest of the universe was nothing more than mist and rain.

It was truly endless. It came down heavier than a broken shower faucet, and sideways, as the gale buffeted it directly into my face. Sometimes I could see it coming in a great curtain, a line of machinegun fire that spanned the whole street and raced up it like a tsunami. These curtains hit me with enough force to stop me dead in my tracks and force me to wait for it to pass by.

Water gushed from the drain pipes and overtopped the rain gutters. The street was an inches-deep pool streaming in one direction. The farther I pushed ahead, the higher up the curb it came. When I reached downtown, it had topped the curb and poured across the sidewalk. Every step became a slog. A look down Maxis Street confirmed the worst fear of coastal emergency workers everywhere: the main levee was cracked and the flood control channel was overtopped. Olivine City’s business district had become a two-foot-deep running river.

“Green Street,” I told myself, turning back around. Green Street followed a natural rise around the perimeter of downtown. It would be a longer hike, but shouldn’t be submerged, hopefully.

I clutched Amphy to my chest and trudged on.
“Sixteen years, I’ve never seen anything like this,” the doctor said. She shook her head in frustration. “Hypothermia, endothermic homeostasis, elevated white blood cell count, no pathogens, no mutagens, alveolar hemorrhage, involuntary muscle spasms… it’s a whole range of symptoms that don’t make sense together.”

“Could it be more than one thing?” I asked.

“It’s a possibility,” she acknowledged.

“Can you figure it out? Can you help him?”

“The hospital’s already done most of what can be done for him. Plasma drip, painkillers, antibiotics, steroids.” She turned to me. “Correct me if I’m wrong, this is the Glitter Lighthouse Ampharos, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I figured, seeing the city pick up the paperwork. I know how much this Pokemon must mean to you. He means a lot to all of us. I’ll try my best to get him the help he needs.”

“Doctor Maveli.” An orderly appeared with a stack of papers. She flipped through them and handed them back.

“Fax these to Professor Elm. Oh, right. Put a cover page on it, title it “Calling in the Namari debt”.”

“Yes Ma’m.”

I looked at them, confused but a little hopeful.

“Ampharos’ bloodwork. I’m getting Professor Elm to take a look at it.”

“I didn’t know he was a medical specialist,” I said.

“He isn’t, but he knows every expert in Nihon and consumes the journals like a Lickitung. I’m hoping he knows someone to forward this case to.”

I slumped down to the bench.

“That means waiting.”

“And praying,” Maveli said.

I brushed her suggestion off.

Dad had me pray with him once. We kneeled upright, put our hands together, and closed our eyes. Dad says that brings him peace and clarity, but whatever god talked to him, didn’t say anything to me.
I don’t know what’s more terrifying for me now: a universe without an Almighty, or an Almighty so cruel and indifferent as to allow such a misery to happen to my innocent Amphy.

I wandered around the lobby for the rest of the morning, sometimes standing, sometimes laying on the old couches and turning over and over. Beth visited at lunchtime, as did Ed. They brought me notes and homework from class. They told me school had been canceled for the afternoon. I thanked them and they left. I tried distracting myself with the homework, but couldn’t make any headway. It only took a glance at the “Wet Floor” signs to remember the blood and vomit that spattered across the tiles a few hours ago.

It was 12:45 midday when the first sirens started blaring.

It was a quick burst, three short screeches in a row, then silence.

Across the lobby, ears pricked up, wondering what the sirens signified. The receptionist brushed into the room and stole the television remote from another visitor. The channel switched to the weather channel. A harried middle-aged man was staring intently behind the camera. Nothing happened for a few seconds.

“Are you sure?” he asked at last. He received some unheard answer and turned back to the broadcast.

“We’ve received confirmation that Tropical Storm Adaline has been upgraded to a category three hurricane and is rapidly gaining strength. The national weather service is predicting a landfall on southern Johto within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours. This is a slow-moving storm, so expect extensive flooding when and where it hits.” The broadcast switched to one of their studio climate scientists, who regurgitated a lot of common-knowledge facts about hurricanes and emergency preparedness. All I thought at the time was that this was another inconvenience stacked atop this horrible day. No one beyond the meteorologists fully appreciated what this storm would become. Certainly not me. I was aching over every known and unknown medical contrivance that could explain my Pokemon’s suffering, coming up with nothing, nothing reassuring.

The first drizzle set in around four o’clock.

4-27-2006

8:15 A.M.

“Owwww.”

I moaned in pain.

Amphy couldn’t even make a sound, but he was gasping in pain too. My foot had caught a submerged bolt in the ground, sending me tumbling to the pavement. I had hit my shin and elbow, and dropped Amphy into the inches-deep water. I grunted, tested my arm, and then took Amphy back up. With the Pokemon held close, I scurried to a gas station. The inside was dark and the door locked. I sat atop a trash receptacle under the awning.

My first task was squeezing out the excess water from Amphy’s cloth. I checked under my coat. My cardigan was pretty soaked, but wasn’t sopped and draining off water in streams. I took it off and
wrapped Amphy up in it, and then wrapped my jacket around him. I threw his rag of a blanket over my head. To be wet is one thing, but now I was getting cold, and my joints were growing tired and painfully cramped.

Looking out over the landscape wasn’t cause for optimism. There was no more cover between us and our destination. Just Cape Road, and the flood to either side of it. The rain had momentarily let up a tiny bit, in favor of a vicious wind that cut and battered in turns. It was whipping up waves that sprayed me in the face even under cover. Trees were bent over backwards and dancing. Some had snapped in half. Trash and debris flew by in droves. I began thinking of the storm as a bully, kicking over everything with utter indifference.

And to think, the eyewall was still an hour offshore.

“Okay. Just a bit further,” I said to Amphy.

4-26-2006
4:19 P.M.
The power flicked on and off several times. An orderly came in and warned the guests to go home. They tried to escort me out, but I refused. They had too much to do, so they didn’t argue and let me be. Soon afterwards, another set of sirens went off. Soon after that, Doctor Maveli approached me.

I knew what she had to say. She didn’t even have to say a word. The look she had on her, the unsmiling, unflinching face, the way she held her shoulders and the fax papers in her right hand. She knew, I knew, and she knew I knew. It was never spoken out loud.

“How long does he have?” was my first question.

“Twenty-four hours, not much more.”

One day.

I collapsed.

I expected this, all of this.

The worst case scenario.

My own shell-shocked reaction.

The rush of overwhelming emotions.

Foreknowledge did nothing, absolutely nothing, to assuage it.

My chest quivered, violently, my eyes clenched, my brain reeled and wheeled with all the chaos of the oncoming atmospheric disturbance. My breathing stopped.

The doctor reached out and supported me, helped me to a couch.

“Breathe,” she commanded.
Such a trivial thing to ask, such an impossible thing to actually do.

“T’m sorry,” she said, rubbing me along the back and hugging me tight.

“W-w-wha-” I started stuttering out. I shook my head, heaved, sobbed, and gritted up. “What is wrong with him?” I managed to say.

“It’s a rare autoimmune disease called Induced Mitochondrion Apoptosis. The trigger is unknown, probably an airborne pollutant, some researchers blame particulate metals. It triggers a violent immune system response that targets Ampharos’ mitochondria. Basically, his body is attacking its own energy centers.”

“Okay. Okay. Okay.”

I shook my head.

It’s not okay. I didn’t understand, I couldn’t comprehend. What was this thing that was ripping Amphy from me?

“Details. Explain it to me,” I ordered.

She obliged.

“With IMA, a foreign agent induces the immune system to mistake the body’s own mitochondria organelles as an antigen and produce cytotoxic T-Cells to target and destroy them. This is, to say the least, extremely abnormal.

T-Cell production in the Ampharos species is concentrated in the ante-alveolar lymphoid tissue manifold, that’s tissue that blankets the back of the lungs and interconnects with the biovoltaic nodes. Biovoltaic cells have extremely high mitochondrial concentrations, upwards sixteen thousand per cell, and with a reaction like this where the T-Cells specifically target the mitochondria, and where the T-cell production is so closely intertwined with the T-cell’s most vulnerable targets… the damage can be catastrophic.

It explains all the symptoms. The attacks on his biovoltaics and muscles is causing a drop in body temperature, spasms, and weakness. The weakening of the alveolar tissue causes ruptures of small blood vessels in the lungs, the convulsions force up stomach contents. The secondary damage causes the lymphoid system to swell and beef up the immune system, which creates more T-cells, which attack the body, and so on. It’s an irrecoverable cycle.”

I felt as though I were going through exactly what the doctor just described. My chest was cold, painful, and spasming uncontrollably.

“There’s nothing you can do? Nothing at all?” I uttered.

The doctor inhaled sharply.

“There is a cure.”

My eyes lifted.

The way she said that, that guarded, bitter tone, instantly warned me against hoping.

“What’s the matter?” JUST GIVE IT TO HIM! DAMN THE CONSEQUENCES! I barely managed to suppress myself from screaming.
“There’s an effective herbal medicine prepared from the Cho Bokun plant. Researchers think it creates interferon proteins that prevent the T-Cells from recognizing other cells. If it’s applied quickly, there’s a good chance for recovery, better than 80%. However…”

“Are there side-effects? I don’t care.”

“No, it’s not that.” She shook her head. “If I could apply it, I would. But the Cho Bokun is impossible to cultivate, and it only grows in a few places in Nihon. It’s biodegradable and expires after only a couple weeks. IMA is extremely rare… twelve cases per year in the whole nation… We don’t stock Cho Bokun extract. No one does.”

I steeled myself and looked Doctor Maveli in the eye.

“Where can I get this herb?” I asked directly.

“Cianwood,” she answered.

“Okay, let’s go get it from there.”

Maveli sighed and guided me towards the lobby television.

“That’s not possible anymore,” she said, nodding to the radar map.

I stared in disbelief.

A deep crimson whorl consumed the entire Osaka Sea. Five hundred miles of nightmare incarnate.

“Hurricane Adaline has reached Category Five status. We’ve got maximum sustained winds of over 170 miles per hour, a pressure of 902 millibars, and a nine foot storm surge. Precipitation is expected to be extremely heavy, over fourteen inches in a very short time period. Estimated landfall is between the Bronze Sand estuary and the Dohoheki Strand around noon tomorrow. Affected areas are Nora, Cianwood, Kobeyashi, Ganymede Terrace, Battlefront Plaza, and especially Olivine City. We are warning everyone, everyone in the path of this storm to evacuate. Not take shelter, but evacuate. This is the most dangerous storm to affect the straights in the past century. I repeat, EVACUATE.”

4-27-2016

8:49 A.M.

There were points I wanted to quit. I wanted to hurl Amphy into the water and let him drown then and there, before my legs gave out and I fell and drowned myself.

There were points I was revolted with myself for the thought, and the icy pain ripping through my calves was mere fuel for my determination.

These points of high and low emotion were few and far between.

Mostly there was just elemental misery: Cold water drenching me. Cold wind battering me. The weight of water-logged boots and the struggle to push one before the other through six inches of water, over and over again, until it blotted out all other conception.
I had made the trek up Cape Road a thousand times before. It was always a pleasant stroll, something I enjoyed and looked forward to. There was usually a beacon of hope to guide me onwards. Each step up the gentle slope felt lighter than the last, each breath a little cooler in the summer, a little warmer in the winter, a little slower on busy days, a little faster on plodding nights.

But not now.

Now it was nothing more than a death march.

Glitter Lighthouse appeared long before I could reach it. I gave it one glance in the distance and then turned my attention downwards. There was no light up ahead to guide me. The only important things in the world were right before me- to keep taking one more step, and hold onto the life in my arms as tightly as I could.

Amphy had quit shivering. He was limp in my arms. I hugged his head tight to my cheek, and felt the faintest breath there- cold and slow.

“A little farther,” I said.

4-26-2006
8:10 P.M.

Three fucking hours.

That’s how much time I wasted trying to track Mr. Gatto. The Port Authority Chief was supposed to be at one of three places during an emergency: City Hall, Police HQ, or the Weather Station. Half an hour each just to find out the man was missing and no one had a damn clue where to find him. Another hour pissed by frantically trying to get a hold of anyone who could help me.

Beth found me on the steps of the city courthouse, huddled against the steady drizzle and trying to figure out a solution. Her blue sedan roared around the street corner, kicking up puddles of water as it went. It splashed to a halt right before me, and the young woman leaned over and opened the passenger door.

“We found him,” she said. I bolted inside the car, slamming the door shut behind me.

“Take me there,” I ordered.

“Roger.”

She explained more on the way.

“They’re putting out warnings on the radio nonstop. It’s going to be bad. They’re already saying the flood control won’t cope, downtown will be underwater. The coast is a goner. The eye’s basically headed straight towards Battle Plaza.”

“Cianwood?” I asked.

“Already hit. They’ve lost power. No signal’s coming from them. The PC Network is down, they can’t send the medicine over the wire.”
“I thought so. We need a way to get there and back. Have you talked to Gatto?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You’ll see.”

It didn’t take long to get my answer.

There was a crowd surrounding the entrance of the PokeCenter.

A bright yellow hardhat stood tall among the hoods and umbrellas. A loud voice was hurling instructions in every direction.

“You can’t make a simple line! Curve it! That’s not going to stand! Curve! No, we do not have service at this time. Yes, it’s all screwed up.”

I spotted a few faces I knew hugging the back of the crowd.

“Ed!” I gasped, trotting up to my longtime co-gym trainer.

“Jasmine! There you are!”

“What’s going on?”

“We’re screwed,” Ed said, shaking his head.

“Only screwed if you aim to lose!” piped in another familiar voice.

“Ethan,” I said, recognizing the brat.

“Hey, kid, shut up, adults are talking.” And Peter.

“I’m not that young!” the trainer boy shot back. That set off an argument. Ed brushed off the pair and addressed me.

“Cianwood’s PC Network went dark.”

“I know.”

“Olivine’s is out of operation too. They overloaded the network trying to transfer Pokemon and items to Goldenrod for safety. Gatto’s trying to protect the center. He says if the backup generator gets knocked out, it’ll be bad for all the digitized Pokemon.”

“Will they die?” I asked, fearing.

Ed shrugged his shoulders.

“There’s a run on the PC, trainers trying to get their Pokemon out just in case.”

I looked over the PokeCenter. It was in the middle of the main shopping district, not much higher than downtown. That must be worrisome for others. All of my Pokemon were in their Pokeballs, so it didn’t affect me personally.

“I’ve got to talk to Mr. Gatto,” I said.
“That could be a little tough…”

I pushed forward through the crowd. It was as stated, tough. People didn’t want to move, and Mr. Gatto did, trying to do his job while dozens of others plied him for attention. The lack of good exterior lighting didn’t help.

“Oof!” I got elbowed in the chest, and then squeezed and crushed between two people. Just when I thought I had popped out to the front, Gatto darted towards the Pokecenter door.

“Hey!” The trainer, Ethan, pulled me through a gap. “Got you!” He twirled me around and shoved me through another tight gap.

“Thanks!”

I was almost there…

“Sir! Have you coordinated with the national-”

“What?”

“HAVE YOU COORDINATED WITH THE NATIONAL EMERGNECY-”

“WHAT?”

“NERA!”

“Yes the storm is near!”

“NERA! National Emergency Relief Agency! Have you contacted them?!”

“What? No! No! NERA’s for after the storm! Hey, carry those over- yes over to the fire station.”

“How are you going to evacuate so many people? Olivine has 150,000 people!”

“We don’t need all of them to move! Just the low-lying areas! God gave us hills for a reason! Now get out of my way!”

“Mr. Gatto!”

“I don’t have time for this!”

“Mr. Gatto!”

“Why is the city so unprepared for this storm?”

“Because it’s too damn early for something this big. Freak storm, once in a century, that’s why. Now quit bitching and figure something useful to do with that mouth of yours- how about telling all your viewers to not be stubborn idiots about sticking this monster out.”

“Mr. Gatto!!!”

The harbor chief was almost through the door, but found his movement arrested. I squirted out of the front of the crowd, clinging onto his coat.

“Hayate! Dear gods where have you been?!”

“I need a favor!”
“YOU need a favor?! I need help from you! Where’s your Pokemon? We’ve got a dozen ships wandering around offshore and none of them know how to work a damn radar!”

“I told you Amphy is sick!”

“What? No, to hell with that, they can find them on their own! Well tell that little Crawdaunt shit to go figure it out from the police! What’s that? Sick? At a time like this?! Oh damn, you did say that. Well can he work anyways?”

“NO!” I spotted another interloper trying to barge in and grab Gatto’s attention. In fury I grabbed their arm, jammed their shin, and flung them out of the way.

“What the fu-“ they cried. Even then, another person, a young female reporter by looks, was cocking in. I ripped, scratched, and tore my way back to Mr. Gatto.

“Let me through! Let me through! Gatto!”

“Concentrate on the south east end. No, Taker Street is all factories, prioritize Belk and Calk, those’re homes. Jasmine, it’ll have to wait.”

“But Ampy is so sick, and he needs-”

I felt Gatto drifting away, a mass of hands tugging at him and pushing against me, separating us. It felt suffocating, watching my one hope being torn from me.

I took a deep breath and charged.

“Oww!” Strangers clutched their backs as an angry whirlwind tore through them. I got right up to Mr. Gatto and grabbed him by the collar, making sure he couldn’t get away.

“AMPHY IS DYING” I screamed.

Gatto blinked.

“Amphy is sick and dying and the only cure is in Cianwood! I need something to go there and fetch it! A… a… an airplane! Or boat! Or something!”

“The hell are you thinking?” Gatto said, shocked.

“I want my Pokemon- the Pokemon you and your ships rely on- I want him to live! And I need your help to make sure he lives! Cianwood! Get me to Cianwood!”

“Are you crazy? You’re crazy! All planes are grounded. There’s no flying into Cianwood!”

“A boat! A submarine!”

“Like we have a submarine! Miss, Amphy’s precious to you, I get it, but he’s gonna have to tough it out until the weather’s passed. Now let go of me, I got important stuff to take care of.”

SMACK!

My palm reeled in pain. I didn’t care.

Gatto stared at me, cheek glowing red, eyes going buggy.

“You all put your life in Amphy’s hands every single night, for years, and he never failed you! Now
“He’s going to die and you’re going to do nothing? You’re the crazy one!”

“I’m sorry, but—” Gatto sputtered.

“He’s dying! He’s not going to last another day! Get me a boat to Cianwood!” I demanded.

Gatto suddenly revolved his shoulders, split my hold up the middle, and caught me in his grip. In the blink of an eye our grasps had reversed.

“Listen, you little bitch! You think I have the time to waste talking to you? You think I can risk an evac copter and its whole crew flying over open ocean straight through a Cat 5 hurricane for one damn Pokemon? Fuck that! It’s one Pokemon! I already have twenty humans confirmed dead. Your’s not going to be the only Pokemon to die, there’s going to be a lot more, you damn well know it! It’s my job to keep that shitty number from going into the thousands! So back off! I’m not sending my crews on a suicide mission just for you! I’ve got nothing! Go find your own transport!”

He shoved me into the crowd.

Some stared in disbelief, others murmured disapproval. An official shouldn’t be manhandling a schoolgirl like that, or shouting down her plea for help.

“Please… please…” I started begging, eyes hardening.

Yet others in the crowd found their opening and started pressing in. Mr. Gatto’s attention turned to the next crisis.

…

He was right, objectively.

I didn’t know it at the time, but the situation was so much worse than I could ever conceive or comprehend. A small passenger jet had skidded off the Olivine airport runway while attempting a landing in the poor conditions. Three had died, fourteen more were sent to the hospital. The emergency response had closed down the main runway, leaving only a small auxiliary runway available to emergency aircraft. This was in use constantly, radar planes trying to track the storm and coordinate rescue efforts. Olivine’s one coast guard helicopter was hovering over the Dory Gray, a fishing ship with ten humans aboard and rapidly sinking. MT-LP450, an oil tanker, was listing at a 20 degree angle and caught precariously between two offshore rock formations; harbor control was desperately relaying them instructions and praying the 500,000 barrels of petroleum aboard didn’t burst out over the bay. Twenty-thousand people and all their cars and luggage and pets were struggling to get out of the flood zone, creating a nightmarish traffic snarl. Two more deaths occurred from a car crash. Another person drowned while foolishly trying to surf the fifteen-foot waves. Cianwood, as far as reports could tell, was spared major flooding, but was ravaged by winds that knocked down everything in their path, even cinderblock storefronts. All this chaos, and the storm had yet to even make landfall.

To a god looking over this great landscape of impending catastrophe, my tragedy was a tiny dot, lost among all the other dots, insignificant.

It was a mistake to expect the machinery of the state to bend to my whim and prevent my one tragedy. That is not to say what they did was right. Rather, it was stupid of me to believe humans would ever be as selfless as I needed them to be at that moment.

I stared on in disbelief as Gatto and the mass of selfish souls receded out of my reach.
I looked left and right, to all the people in the slowly thinning crowd. They all heard Gatto, they all understood the injustice of it. Yet none of them said anything. No one stepped forward. They all just turned away and averted their eyes.

“No one?” I said, dispiritedly. “No one’s going to help? Amphy’s going to die… and nobody…”

“There there.” Beth caught me as I slunk to my knees. I wanted to cry. “Come on. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

I nodded and helped myself up.

Hospital. Yes. Good. I’ll see Amphy. We can do… something. I don’t know what. I want to see Amphy.

My dearest, precious Pokemon.

My child.

____________________________

4-27-2006
9:10 A.M.

“My little one,” I whispered, looking fondly upon him.

I was sitting with my back to the wall, with my Pokemon in my lap, all wrapped in a bundle. I reached behind me and hit the elevator button. It started up; thankfully, the backup generators were working. The floor shuddered and began accelerating, carrying us upwards.

“We’re home,” I said to him. My hand fluttered over his head, lifting the soaked cloth off his brow. He turned his head, painfully slowly, to look up at me.

“Aaaaph?” he rasped out.

“Your home. The lighthouse.”

“Am. Pha.”

I sniffed and tried to smile.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” I said to him.

His voice was so weak. He couldn’t move, to mime out the context of his utterances. There were so many things I could imagine him asking me. Simple things, things a small child who didn’t understand anything would ask:

Jasmine? Trainer?

Are you there?

Hold me.

Why does it hurt?
Make it stop hurting please.

I’m hungry.

I’m wet.

I’m cold.

Can you dry me?

Is it going to be alright?

Why is it so rainy?

Is it night time? It’s really dark.

Is it going to be alright?

I’m scared.

Mommy, I’m scared.

...

“Mommy!”

A voice from the distant past echoed within my memory. It was my voice.

“But Mommy, I’m really sowwy.”

“SHUT UP! AND QUIT CALLING ME MOMMY!”

...

Ah, yes, that one time.

Meeting Amphy was a life-changing event for me. What should I think of it now, after everything that’s happened?

Should we begrudge the misfortunes that lead us to our greatest loves?

Or should we curse them twice over, once for their misery, and again for showing us how much we can gain before cruelly ripping it all away?

Would that one day be such a blessing without the torture that came before it?

No no no no no... look at it again: would today be so wretchedly painful if not for that wonderful, hope-fulfilling moment so many years ago?

All of life is of relatives and contrasts, I guess.

“Aaa.”

“I know.” The elevator came to a halt. I lifted myself and Amphy to a stand and wobbled my way up the last leg of our long journey. The lighting chamber was dim, illuminated only by what little sunshine penetrated the grey clouds and pouring rain. Everything around us was panels of monochrome detail framed by stark shadows. The air was musty, humid, and cool. Every surface
was cold to the touch, and seemed hard and metallic no matter what material it was made of.

I eschewed the pedestal and made my way to the far side, before the door leading outside. I grabbed Amphy’s cushion from the pedestal and placed it on the floor, then slowly set my charge down on top of it.

“Wait there,” I said, and scurried downstairs. My energy lasted only long enough to enter the office. I felt drained and my legs gave out. It took a minute sitting on the bed to regain strength. I slowly circled the office, gathering everything that looked remotely useful, and tromped back upstairs.

“Amphy?”

He didn’t cry or turn his head.

I rushed over. He let out a soft grunt when I lifted him up.

“Sorry! Sorry. Here. Dry blankets. There. Let me brush you down, get you nice and warm and cozy.”

I did everything I could think of to make him comfortable. It was a short list. Water to drink, pills for the pain, covers to wrap him in, my presence. That was all. There wasn’t anything else I could do. So I sat beside him and pulled the blanket over us both.

“Water?” I offered.

Amphy shook his head away from the sippy cup. I set it aside.

He’s so pathetic looking, like a newborn babe, all slick and weak.

Gazing at him continually just made me more and more aware of how terrible his condition was. Creatures shouldn’t breath like that, in struggled fits and jerks. They shouldn’t be clenching their eyes shut. They shouldn’t be shivering under two layers of heavy cotton. As much as I wanted to look at him and touch him, it was making me all too conscious of the coming end. So my gaze wandered away, to the room and all the objects and memories held within it.

The lighting room was octagonal in shape, with six of the walls being glass. A seventh was the door to the utility room and stairwell. The eighth wall had the ladder leading up to the machinery housing in the ceiling, as well as the fire extinguisher and emergency phone. It was on this wall that we hung all of Amphy’s souvenirs.

The photographs were a given. The very rare occasions Amphy has gotten to go on vacation were commemorated. There was one of us posing in front of Tin Tower, and another before Goldenrod’s Pokeathlon Dome. My favorite was the candid shot of a sleepy Amphy plodding across the beach of Whirl Island.

His certificate as the official luminary of Glitter Lighthouse was framed and hung there. As was the mayor’s New Year’s wreath and Mr. Beret’s gift, a heavy woolen scarf with the navy insignia. I got up to fetch it and stumbled over something on the ground.

“Haa.” A little laugh. There were his coloring books. I reached over and picked one up.

Amphy could draw. It was one of the more amazing facts about him that I loved to show off to visitors. Okay, I’ll admit, he was very, very bad at drawing. His style consisted of stick figures and crude circles heaped atop one another. Night after night, with nothing to do but light up the bay, he would doodle in these sketchpads. There were no words, but the contents were usually easy enough
I took the scarf from its peg and sat back down with Amphy. I wove the strand of fabric around his head and neck. Sensing warmth, he craned his neck out towards me. I took him in my lap, settled in, and opened the sketchbook.

The first page showed a blue scribbled plane with a green scribble at the bottom. A blue outline split the page vertically, and white circles were drawn randomly across the top. One yellow dot was etched into the green scribble.

“This one is easy,” I asserted. “It’s your first time coming to Glitter Lighthouse.” I was eight and half when that happened, I’d known Amphy for a year or so at that point. It was a big day for him, he’d been groomed for the task his entire life.

The next page was blue again, but heavier. Overlaying the blue plane was a chaotic whorl of red and zigzag yellow lines. A broken green box was drawn at a tilted angle near the bottom. “Was this from the night you slept under the bed?” I wondered. I think the inspiration for this was a nightmare of his, after they showed him a video of a ship sinking to try to impress upon him how important his duties were.

The next was a two-parter: three grey balls with yellow scribbles radiating out towards a black blob, and a grey circle running into a green circle ringed with little yellow circles. Both scenes were encompassed in pairs of large, interlocking black circles.

“My battle with Camile!” I said, remembering the famous Goldenrod idol who came to challenge my gym. We agreed to a beach battle, ostensibly so she could show off to her fans. Apparently Amphy had watched me give the spoiled brat a lesson in Pokemon battling from his perch atop the lighthouse. Although, the lighthouse was over a mile from the beach, how did he manage to see us? “Oh! Beret lent you his binoculars, didn’t he? You were rooting for me and I didn’t know it! How sweet.”

The next picture brought a warm, fuzzy feeling to me.

A bright yellow stick figure with a pair of stars on its head was holding hands with a clump of yellow circles, overlooking a mosaic of green and blue and grey.

“That’s us.”

I held it up so Amphy could see. He stared at it vacantly.

“But I never could figure this one out,” I said, turning the page.

There were stick figures and boxes, like this was supposed to be a scene from somewhere. Except, the whole page was ruined by a deep black cloud scribbled over everything. It reminded me of an eldritch monster, with slithering tentacles reaching out to blot out the characters and scenery and everything else. At its core a solid crimson dot was etched deeply into the paper. It worried me when I first saw it. When I asked Amphy about it, he became defensive and embarrassed and tried to hide the sketchbook.

“What did you mean by this?” I asked.

“Aaaaph.”

A weak, meaningless reply.
“I wish I knew.”

It looked ominous. It couldn’t represent his illness, it was drawn over a year ago. Something else disturbed him enough to draw this ghastly scene, and I couldn’t fathom what it was.

I stroked Amphy’s head.

Was there something bothering you then? Is it still bothering you? A nightmare? A bully? A bad feeling? Were you upset with me? It’s really depressing me, not knowing. I know it’s foolish, but it feels like if I had figured it out, we wouldn’t be here today, like this, me watching you gasp your last hours away. If only I had understood.

If only I had protected you against the pollutants.

If only I hadn’t overworked you.

If only this and if only that.

But like my own life’s sufferings, this outcome seemed unavoidable even in hindsight, because the cause seemed so out of reach and unknowable.

A fit of bitterness overcame me and I threw the sketch book away.

It was a mistake to come here. All of his toys, his pictures and his conveniences, were all concrete reminders of a daily life spent idling by in happiness. Things that only held transient joys, creating momentary entertainment and leaving nothing of value behind. What comfort was there in being surrounded in these useless trappings? I should have gone to the gym, or home. It would have been safer, and conjured more poignant memories.

I propped him further up onto my lap and hugged him tight.

“Do you remember our first meeting?” I asked.

“Phoo.”

“I was crying and desperate and upset, and you tapped me on the shoulder. I… I never apologized. I’m so sorry. For hitting you.”

My eternal shame-

“Get away from me! Don’t touch me!”

“Amphy?”

In the depths of my seven-year-old breakdown, it was he who offered a curious, consolatory paw, and I smacked it away. When he came again, I got upset, and struck him in the cheek and cried. He didn’t cry. He came to me a third time and wrapped me up in a hug. His body was warm and light, and little static pricks from his fur tickled me up and down. The fear disappeared. Relief set in. Awareness came, of what this was, what this meant.

Someone cared for me.

It was the first time I’d ever comprehended that most human concept, the one I had read so many times over but never truly felt:
And now the one being who had ever accepted me, without reservation, without condition or reciprocation, was being stripped from me.

“No.”

I shook my head.

“Not like this.”

I set Amphy down upon the bedding. He looked up at me, not able to lift his head. His eyes did the asking.

“I’m going.”

“Aaaph?”

I rose and went to the exit, every fiber in my body tensing. I took a last look at the bundled creature, his long ears drooping, his eyelids the same, his forehead gem blackening. He was dying. There was no question of it. And I knew a way to stop that from happening. Why then was I still here, wasting time?

“I haven’t done all I can,” I told him. “You gave me everything. I haven’t done the same. I still have my life to give. No matter what it costs, I will save you. I love you Amphy.”

Down I went, a rumbling quake rising in defiance of the raging storm. Every foot down the steps became deliberate, thunderous. I would not rush this. I would think, and figure out a plan that would have the highest chance of saving Amphy.

His salvation was in Cianwood, across the ocean. In between us and it was a category five hurricane. The government was not willing to fly through the storm, or lend me any other assistance for that matter. The PC network and all other communications were down. My Pokemon were Rock and Electric types, nothing that could brave the open ocean.

I reached the doorway. I tried opening it, but couldn’t manage more than a few inches. The wind outside was brutal, not even letting me exit the lighthouse. I let out Graveler.

“Push this open,” I ordered. She complied, for once, and muscled the door open. I forced myself threw the small gap.

It was a scene from an apocalypse film.

The cape had become an island.

The ocean had risen on all sides, blotting out the coastal lowlands. Beaches had vanished, roads had become rivers, fields had become lakes. Ferocious waves battered the cliff face. I looked for the pier braces, which normally stood ten feet above high tide. I could just make out their tops in the troughs of the waves. Spray and rain filled the air. Visibility was limited to a few hundred feet. The wind, as stated, was strong; at its peak it forced me to kneel and crawl along the ground.

I wish I could talk to Mr. Beret. His Water Pokemon would be helpful. His house was up in the hills, however, too far away to reach. Besides, I know he would stop me, as would anyone I could think to
petition for help.
You’re on your own, Jasmine.
How do I get to Cianwood?
“Docks,” I said aloud.
I turned back to the door.

“Graveler! Take care of Amphy! I’m going to be gone for a long time!”

“Grava!” I heard from inside.
She has a bitter rivalry with Onix, but she and Amphy got along well enough. I could trust her so far as that.

“Onix!” I let out my leviathan. He felt the rain and instantly began groaning and squirming.

“Tough it out! We’ve got to get to the docks! Amphy’s life is on the line!”

I couldn’t ride him, not in these conditions. Yet I couldn’t get through the hellish landscape without his assistance either. He dug into the earth and acted as a shield against the gale, while I trudged alongside him and held onto his body. Slowly, we made it down to the brink of the sea.

“Can you ford this?” I asked.

He tested it with his tail, and nodded.

I rode his head over, thinking I could cling to his spike. That was a mistake. The current was far stronger than I realized, and swept me off. For a moment I was tumbling end over end. My head dunked under and I couldn’t breathe.

Then I felt a push. My body lifted up towards the surface, and I could taste air again. Onix was supporting me. We couldn’t fight the current, but it was all headed towards the mainland anyways. Half-submerged, Onix did his best to keep up and keep me above the waterline as it pushed me along. We reached a vista with a fence and I finally felt solid ground underneath me. Onix slithered up onto the embankment behind me.

“Oh no.”

He was heaving, and moments later collapsed. It wasn’t even an attack, but his double Water weakness still got to him. It was amazing he even made it this far.

“Onix, you’ve done enough. Take a rest.”

He nodded appreciatively, and went back into his Pokeball.

“Docks,” I reminded myself.

They have motorboats in the private marina. I can steal one and use Magnemite to jumpstart the engine. As long as I can find one powerful enough to break through the waves, I think I can make it to Cianwood.

I do have Magnemite, don’t I? I checked my jacket pocket and felt its Pokeball. Yes. A tap and the ball went into ready-mode. Magnemite gave a little cry, expecting to come out.
“No, stay in there. Save your strength. It’s too harsh out here for you to come out yet,” I told it.

The way going forward was excruciating. It made me wish I hadn’t fainted Onix just to cross the flooded Cape Road. Every step was a harsher struggle than when I brought Amphy to the lighthouse. I could not go south towards the ocean, the wind was simply too strong. The marina was northeast, thankfully, but anytime a flooded road, building, or high fence got in my way, I needed to take a northerly detour. Sometimes this was convenient, other times, not at all. A divide in the highway forced me to march three blocks off track. Making my way back on course was difficult, I needed to use the larger warehouses to use as a shield against the gale, and these weren’t always available. Even with the cover, I was still bowled over several times from sudden microbursts. It was like getting hit by a rotating glass door.

It was only by the sight of numerous boats jumbled atop one another that I realized I had made it to the marina. Otherwise, the place looked like a garbage dump, or rather, a garbage compactor, as objects of every size were in constant motion.

“There.”

A covered motor boat looked like my best option. It was being battered repeatedly against the side of a boathouse. Unlike most of the other boats, it was still accessible by foot and had access to open ocean. The pier alongside it was a raised elevation docking, meant for larger yachts, but the water level had risen to within inches of its underside. Large waves crashed over it, sweeping it clean with one stroke, and leaving junk and debris with the next.

I reached the landing. It was thirty yards to cross the pier, and not much time in between waves. Got to time it just right…

An enormous swell surged over the planks. It lasted longer than the others, receding slowly. I got anxious watching the water rush in a hundred different miniature rivers through the cracks, thinking the next crest would hit before this one even drained out. Then the water abated. A deep trough followed.

Now!

I dashed down the steps and along the pier.

My mistake was that the last wave wasn’t actually that big compared to the one right after it. I got two thirds of the way down the pier before the mammoth wave hit. It crumpled me at the knees, bowling me over. Then it was on my back and shoving me across the pier. I grabbed onto a wood stud and held on as the current dragged at me. My feet kicked at flowing liquid and nothing more; they were dangling over the edge. My strength gave out right as the water started to drain out. My whole body was pushed to the brink, my back was a sliver’s balance from tipping over into the water.

Too close.

I felt like I couldn’t do anymore. My muscles cried out in silent, nerve-borne anguish. Another great wave was coming on.

If you die, so does Amphy.

Get up!

My strength returned. I lifted myself onto my elbows and knees. The boat was a few yards away. It was a frantic crawl getting to it, and a last herculean effort to throw myself onboard.
“Magnemite!”

My ball of gizmos panicked when it materialized in a half foot of water.

“Get the motor started! Don’t electrocute me!”

I spotted what looked like a hand pump and began working it. It wasn’t long before the thrum of a motor hit my ears. I worked at the pump but couldn’t get it to crank at all.

“Zzzt!” A slight shock tapped my shoulder.

“Hey! I said don’t- oh!”

Magnemite was pointing out a switch- ‘Electric Pump On/Off’. I flipped it. A second motor started up and the water level began falling, slowly but noticeably.

“Let’s go.” I gritted my teeth and sat myself at the wheel.

This was a sporting boat, made for cruising the bay and luxury fishing trips. I hoped it would be enough for the open ocean. Maybe not the real ocean, but Route 40 was not so wide you ever lost sight of one piece of land or another. If I could just make it across…

I kicked the accelerator and pitched the wheel. The boat responded well.

Getting through the marina was a struggle. We hit one water-logged piece of junk after another. At one point I ran the prow atop a submerged pier. It took Magnemite super-charging the motor to reverse us and steer around it. Waves of water pitched us up and down, while waves of air smacked me hard across the face over and over.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!”

And at last, we cleared the docks.

I found a slip in the crests and angled the boat along that. It worked. Though the going was rough and sometimes violent, we managed to stay afloat and make progress. Olivine Harbor passed by.

I looked up as Glitter Lighthouse came back into view. As we cruised around it, I waved.

“Magnemite! Light up! Show Amphy and Graveler we’re on our way!”

Magnemite did so, lighting up a brilliant Flash.

Hold on Amphy.

I’ll be back with this Cho Bokun herb, and you’ll be safe.

We cleared the cape and broke into the sea proper.

Then everything went to hell.

I thought the waves at the marina were huge. They were nothing. Splashes at a kiddie pool.

These waves were taller than my boat. Scratch that, they were taller than my boat was long. I gawked at the swelling pitch, and realized even that assessment was off.

*They’re taller than my house,* I realized in fear.
My motor boat suddenly pitched forward. I fell on the wheel. My whole vision was filled with churning water. Then we slammed into the surface, I hit my head, and suddenly my whole vision was filled with clouds. My craft and I were falling skywards and crashing earthwards. This happened again, and again, and again, and did not let up.

I clutched the wheel and tried angling for the wall, hoping to ride the wave like a surfer. It was useless, it just knocked the boat backwards towards shore. I lost control.

This is insane.

Amphy needs me.

Try harder!

I turned the boat back towards the waves. Once again I was rebuffed.

HARDER!

I wedged my body against the wheel and rammed the gas pedal as hard as I could. The motor roared. The next wave loomed over us.

“I’m not giving up!” I yelled.

The wave smacked the bow and turned it aside. My ship was sent spinning, and then rolling. I remember being dumped twice while clutching the wheel, and finally letting go. For a few moments I was completely underwater, disoriented, and drowning. Then my head found the surface. I took a deep, desperate breath. Then my head found the boat’s side and exploded in stars and pain.

The next few seconds- minutes? I don’t know how I survived. The waves kept tumbling me over and over. When my nostrils sensed air, I took a big breath. When water covered them, I held my breath. Sometimes I was under so long my lungs burned.

A solid object slapped against my side. It was the boat, flipped over. Magnemite hovered over it. I tried reaching up to my Pokemon. It buzzed away, refusing to haul me up, afraid I might drag it into the water with me. My hands clawed at anything. Nothing took. I was going under again.

Then the boat shoved me under, and my butt hit something semi-solid.

Sand.

The hardest struggle was the last little stretch, and my whole mind was filled with the fear that I might drown in nothing more than three feet of water. Magnemite hovered over me, anxiety-riddled for being useless to help me.

I finally collapsed in mere inches of water. My nose plowed into the ground. I inhaled, and swallowed sea water. My chest choked up. I struggled, and fought, and demanded of my muscles like an ancient god might demand something of a mortal, and all that accomplished was to flip me over onto my back, and still I could not breath air.

A force hit my lower body, crushing me but also lifting me. The wave carried me upwards and onwards. When it receded, my nostrils were above the water line.

It was a long time I lay there.

Longer still to lift myself and look around.
I was near the bottom of the cape. Glitter Lighthouse stood above me, silent, gloomy, and unlit. The motorboat was nowhere to be seen.

I had almost killed myself, and for all that effort, I hadn’t made it a hundred yards out to sea.

It would have been a death sentence had I gotten farther.

What was I thinking, taking a little sporting boat against this kind of storm? These waves grounded an oil freighter, sunk a commercial fishing vessel thirty times my little craft’s size, parked a coast guard cutter on top of a jungle gym in the kid’s park. I didn’t know these details at the time, but nonetheless, I knew, in my gut, how futile my idea of crossing the ocean was. Even if there was a better way, I no longer had the strength to attempt it. Magnemite had to help me back up the hill. The raging storm dimmed only a little as I entered the building. The elevator did not work, the backup generators had been flooded and destroyed. I resigned myself to climbing the steps, one story at a time, taking a five minute break at every floor.

My mind was dull and useless by the time I reached the deck.

As I lumbered in and took in the scene, my battered mind awoke.

“No!”

Blood.

Blood was everywhere.

Little drivels of it ran all across the floor, from the bedding to the door to the pedestal and back. A stiff yellow body lay curled up beside the outer door, which was open and letting in rain. He was clutching a blanket stained all over in crimson and shaking terribly.

“Amphy! Oh god, oh god! Amphy! Graveler! Where are you?! What were you doing?! Amphy!” I raced to his side.

“Talk to me!”

I cradled him in my arms.

He coughed.

It wasn’t a regular cough. It wasn’t forced, it wasn’t involuntary. It was a desperate, weak, near futile attempt to just draw breath. Spittle colored by vomit and blood trickled from his lips.

I clutched him close.

“Amphy. Amphy. Amphy.”

Don’t leave.

Don’t die.

I don’t know anyone else in this world I can trust.

You... you’re just a Pokemon, but that doesn’t mean anything to me. You’re a thinking, feeling, sentient being, with a soul and spirit and mind. And you cared for me, and we grew up and shared our lives together, and brought love and support and joy to each other in a world that cared so very, very little for us.
I don’t want to lose you.

“Don’t die!” I uttered, tears welling up.

He was so cold.

His coughing subsided.

Minutes passed, and I could feel the warmth leaving him.

And at last, nothing but his faint breath remained of his life.

Helplessness. Despair.

I had felt them before, and I felt them again now. But this time, there was no paw to tap my shoulder and give me hope…

…there was a **roar**.

**“CHHHHHHHAASAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!!”**

When I lifted my eyes, I bore witness to the most monstrous, most regal, most absurd, and most heart-warming angel to ever grace the heavens.

A Charizard was flying amidst the storm. It was flapping furiously, battling the immense wind and rain. Yet, with all the fury of the elements crashing upon it, the creature fought even harder, and never fell prey to them. The Pokemon grew from a speck over the ocean to a real living beast flapping over the outside balcony.

I scooped Amphy up in my arms and carried him over, dazed by the Charizard’s sudden appearance.

A figure jumped off and landed easily. He stared at me, a cold, steely stare of resolve. He lifted his hand, clutching a brown paper bag.

“I was told Ampharos needed this.”

His gaze went to Amphy.

“Did I make it in time?”

I shrugged my shoulders. My tears started welling up. I lay Amphy down gently, shakily took the proffered bag, opened it, found instructions and a plastic bag full of green and blue weeds, and began reading. Minutes later, I had the herb dissolved in water and filling the sippy cup. I leaned over Amphy, gently, delicately nursing the precious liquid into his mouth.

Half an hour later Amphy stopped breathing.

I cried and broke down.

Half an hour after that, he took a new breath.
Three hours later, he moaned, then curled up, and did not move. His breathing became steady. He had fallen asleep.

I turned to the youth who leaned against the glass, passing the time by keeping to himself, sometimes attending to his Charizard, sometimes alone. He didn’t say anything.

As I saw Amphy resting so peacefully, my heart gave out. I approached the young man.

“Is he okay?” he asked.

“Ash,” I gasped his name. The guy took a funny look at me. “Thank you,” I said, and hugged him. He didn’t expect it, but slowly, by moments and heartbeats, he accepted it. His hand ran over my shoulder.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

My chain of ‘thank you’s’ strung out across the boundless void, seemingly without end. Yet they did have an end, and that end was a silent, never-spoken, naively-given, but wholly, genuinely, honestly-felt three little words-

*I love you.*

And so, a young girl fell for her first boy.
Clear blue skies. The air was endless, brilliant, and beautiful.

By contrast, the earth was utter desolation.

The coastal areas were still flooded, and the Bronze Sand River was actually rising, not receding, as upriver precipitation started reaching us. The water itself was filthy, a seedy brackish green at its best, a poop-colored brown at its worst. In many places, roofs had been torn off and windows blown out, street signs lay three and four blocks away from their namesakes, and powerlines stood akimbo like rows of broken corn stalks. Debris of such dizzying variety littered the streets, you would think the world’s largest garage sale had been carpet bombed.

I stooped over and picked out a ruined baby bib from a drainage ditch.

Ash gave it a wry, tepid look.

“That doesn’t look sanitary.”

“You don’t think I could wash it and give it to Amphy?”

“I would rather buy you a new bib myself.”

I shrugged and flung it into the garbage bag.

We continued our patrol around the Pokemon Center. In just an hour we had cleared the front walkway of trash and were about to turn the corner. Amphy was inside, being attended to by both Dr. Maveli and Dr. Fukada, the resident veterinarian. Maveli was shocked when I brought the struggling, but still alive, Ampharos in the front door.

“You got the medicine?” she exclaimed.

“A very brave person brought it to me.” I nodded to the aloof young man, who wanted no part in the accolades.

The center was overburdened as-is with Pokemon needing care, but Fukada promised to prioritize Amphy. In return, I agreed to help with cleaning up the exterior grounds. Ash volunteered to join me.

“Look at these. Oh!” He picked up a clear plastic box that was half open. Playing cards fell out of it, more were scattered on the ground. “Someone’s going to be missing these.”

“What are they?”

Ash held one up. There was a familiar face on the front, and though it was half-mucked from being soaked, I eventually recognized it.

“Steven Stone,” I said.

“Collectible trading cards, for famous trainers. This is a rare edition card, they only gave it out at Stone’s world championship parade. It’s worth probably five thousand Pokedollars. Or, well, *was.*” He tossed the ruined card into the bag with the rest.

“You’re, um, a really big fan of Pokemon battling, aren’t you?” I ventured.
“Sure! And not just battling. Everything Pokemon. It’s my obsession. Ah, but don’t tell anyone that, it’ll just feed the rumors.”

“What rumors?”

He glanced around.

“Between you and me, if they want someone to really nail with that whole “Pokephilia” label, they need to go sniff around Bill’s lab. There’s ammunition there, if you know where to look.”

“That’s, um…” I spluttered about.

Too much information for my innocent little heart, thank you very much.

Ash picked up the hint and laughed the subject off.

“Too much, huh? Well, what about you? You’re pretty… um, pretty young to be a gym leader. How’d you come by the job?”

“I worked very diligently and earned it,” was my sensible reply. “And also, the old gym leader was my father’s scout master, so I had family connections, an insider track, if you will,” was my honest reply.

“The League is okay with it, though?”

“Technically, I’m acting gym leader, I only handle the actual Pokemon battles. Mr. Beret takes care of all the other official duties. But I am learning quickly, I plan to take over when I turn eighteen.”

“Oh! Hey! I should’ve guessed that, there’s a gym leader in Celadon that’s doing the same thing. Still, if they trust you enough to battle for them, must mean you’re pretty strong.”

An embarrassed pause. “I don’t know, really. I’m not the best, not nearly as good as Mr. Beret. All I have is Onix, the Magnemites, and Graveler really, the rest of my Pokemon are no good. There’s Voltorb, I guess, but it’s a bit… erratic.” I let my Pokeball-doppelganger out to show him. Voltorb promptly bounced on top of my head and balanced itself there. Half-hearted attempts to swat it down proved futile. “Sometimes Mother and Father want to take Choir, my Corsola, and Slugma away for their own hobbies, and then I can’t even field a full Pokemon team.”

“You only have seven?”

“That’s right.”

I was about to blush, or fume. So what if I didn’t own that many? Compared to you and your dozens, I must look so pedestrian.

“I wish I was that picky when I was younger. Your Pokemon are lucky. That’s less competition for your love.”

Oh.

I never thought of it that way.

Ash pulled out an electronic device.

“Is that a Pokedex!?” I marveled and gawked. You can’t buy one of those! Only accredited professors can distribute a small number of them to select candidates. They’re really rare!
“Professor Oak gave me this when I started out. He said he wanted help cataloging the Kanto region.”

“Can I-” I held my hand out like a curious, begging Meowth.

“Sure.” He handed it over, and I received the precious computer with reverence and a little bit of awe.

Say you want a complete catalogue of all the Pokemon in a given region. Easy, right? Just go look it up on an internet database. Or hey, an old paperback encyclopedia would suffice. Our feudal lords had access to as much information. It’s not a big deal to just make a list of Pokemon.

No, what made a Pokedex special was its active bio-data scanner. In other words, it’s a miniaturized, portable DNA sequencer. Father once took me to a lab with a second-gen DNA sequencer. The machine was as big as a pickup truck, cost fifty million Pokedollars, and required days to map out a single person’s genome. This little pocket device could do the same thing in **seconds**.

“You look like a kid on Christmas morning,” Ash joked.

I turned to him all formal-like.

“May I turn it on?”

“It’s kinda fire, water, bomb, virus, and idiot proof, so uh, do whatever you want with it.”

I tapped at the power button, and the device hummed on. It was an older model, as evidenced by the pixelated graphics, retro audio full of **beeps** and **boops**, and lack of backlighting that forced me to angle it just so relative to the sunlight.

“Voltorb, come down.”

Voltorb hopped off my head and began hopping instead atop a fallen traffic light.

“No, stay still! Stay still!” I waved the pokedex up and down, but it wasn’t able to track my giddy Pokemon’s movements.

“The motion tracking isn’t very good,” I said.

“Yeah, sorry,” Ash apologized. “It’s not as good as newer models, but I kinda don’t want to upgrade, sentimental reasons.”

“Hmm. I know.”

I let fly another Pokeball.

The street suddenly became crowded with the body of a rock leviathan.

“Oh!”

Ash stepped back a pace.

“Woah. Bigger than Brock’s,” he muttered.

“Onix, I’m going to measure you.”

“Oni?”
I pointed the Pokedex and clicked.

“Onix, the Rock Snake Pokemon. It twists and squirms through the ground. The thunderous roar of its tunneling echoes a long way.”

The device then displayed a long list of readouts and data. Ash helped me navigate to the more interesting bits. The information it gleaned was staggering:

Age: 18 years, 201 days, born October 9\textsuperscript{th}, 1987.

“I never knew his birthday! This is fantastic!”

Length: 32 feet, 2 inches.

Weight: 21,065 lbs.

BMI: 28, species-nominal.

Sex: male.

Level: 34

Nature: Serious

Ability: Sturdy

Known Moves: Earthquake, Rock Slide, Rock Throw, Slam, Bind, Dig, Tackle, Screech, Stealth Rock.

Combat metrics (estimated)

Health: 85

Attack: 33-34

Defense: 135

Special Attack: 26

Special Defense: 39

Speed: 62

The list went on and on. There were tabs for genetic breakdown, ones that could trace his family and even species lineage, ones that predicted risk for inheritable diseases, ones for his diet, readouts for the health of individual organs- everything was here.

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed.

“I know, right? And it stores the data of every Pokemon it’s ever scanned. I’ve got a folder for my own Pokemon set aside.” Ash switched the screen to show some of his team members. I noticed a lot of Kanto regulars clustered near the top: Pidgey through Pidgeot, a Butterfree, a Victreebel, a Haunter, Hypno, Muk, Scyther, Ninetales, Seel, his Charizard of course, an Ivysaur and Wartortle, and oddly, thirty straight entries for Tauros.
“What about your Pikachu?” I inquired.

“He gets a page all to his own.”

“Is Pikachu special to you?”

“Yeah.” Ash gave off a hint of a smirk. “Professor Oak gave him to me for my first Pokemon. It was a child of his own Pikachu. Pretty rebellious when I first got him, but we learned to like each other. Still has that spunk.”

“That’s nice. Ah, I remember Oak’s Pikachu, it helped him win the final in his second world tournament. That’s a good lineage yours has.”

“They’re good battlers, if you know how to use them.”

I nodded in agreement, recollecting a half-dozen famous trainers who had featured Pikachu on their team.

Ash continued to show off his Pokemon horde. I lost count of the number of Pokemon he had scrolled through, it was over fifty at least. Yet, when he reached the Lapras he got from Silph Co., the progress bar was still only halfway down the page.

“So many,” I said.

“Yeah.” Red laughed nervously and scratched his head. “Oak told me to go catch them all, said he could use a specimen of every Pokemon back at his lab for study.”

“That’s where you keep them?” I asked.

“Professor Oak’s lab, yeah. I couldn’t stand to just let them sleep in a PC all day. It makes me feel a little guilty, like I’m not a good trainer to them. I try rotating them around, but still… Sometimes I take them out and they don’t even recognize me. Others, they get into really bad fights over getting to join the team. Pidgeot hurt Noctowl’s wing last month. And Butterfree… I think I’m losing him, he keeps running back to the woods.”

“I see.” So that’s what he meant, my Pokemon not competing for my love. “Well, I have a little different problem,” I said, thinking to assuage him by sharing my own predicament. “I give one Pokemon way more time than all the rest combined. They all have to sacrifice for his sake.”

Ash rapped a knuckle against Onix’s side. I shook my head.

“And he’s not even a fighter on my competitive team.”

Realization came to Ash’s face.

“Oh! Right. Ampharos.” He cocked his head. “It’s 10 o’clock. The vet said we should check back about now, right?”

“Oh, you’re right!” I perked up.

The young man led the way back inside the Pokemon Center, gunning straight for the medical ward. It was crowded. Dozens of trainers lounged around waiting for their turn to be called up. Blank or worried expressions filled their faces. Some had their Pokemon out in their arms, others clutched tightly onto Pokeballs. Even the receptionists were being drafted to help- Nathan was trying to administer first aid to the underside of a Kingler while frantically dodging the irritated monster’s
Ash and I waited a minute while Nathan successfully evaded the snipping claws of the monster (mainly by using his lab coat as a matador’s cape) and applied a gauze bandage.

“Whew! All done. Here you go sir.”

A burly middle-aged man thanked the receptionist and carried off his Kingler with one hand.

“Is Dr. Maveli available?” I inquired.

“Maybe. She’s having to deal with a couple cases, but I’m sure she’ll see you soon. You can go on back.” Nathan let off a sly grin. “He’s doing good, considering,” he added.

I motioned for Ash to follow into the backrooms.

“Friend of yours?” he asked.

“Nathan? Yes. Goes to my high school, senior. We do Gym-Pokecenter work collaborations too. He’s a good guy.”

“Mnn.” Ash smirked and said nothing more.

We met Maveli just as she exited a room, her head hung low. Her mood did not pick up when she spotted us.

“This way,” was all she said.

“Is something the matter?” I asked worriedly.

“No, not for you.” Maveli glanced back at the closed door. “Zoomer, Beedrill, had its abdomen sliced off. We’re going to have to euthanize. Just waiting for the family to get here.”

“Oh.”

Maveli went on.

“Tenth one today. Another sixteen in critical. I’m sick of this.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

The doctor whipped around on me.

“Don’t be.”

I flinched under her sudden, withering glare.

“Fifty-five in our morgue. That’s just us. That’s just domesticated. We can’t even get to the wild ones. There’s not enough people. I’ve never seen anything like this. God damn it.” She was frustrated, and shaking, and barely holding it together.
“I’m sorry,” I repeated. “Am I getting in your way? Should I come back another time?” I was becoming self-conscious of the situation and my awkward role in it. Here I was, worrying about my own Pokemon, when a glance around showed just how lucky I was. In one ward a Sandshrew was struggling on life support. Another had a Fearow with two wings bent at an impossible angle. A Ledian lay comatose. Through a miracle, my own Pokemon had survived. That couldn’t be said for scores of other trainers and their Pokemon today. A feeling of guilt came over me. I took a step backwards.


The veterinarian seemed aware of her own breakdown. She took a deep, long breath, collected herself, and addressed me.

“Be happy. Amphy shouldn’t be alive, but he is. Celebrate that. We need something to cheer about around here. Follow me.”

She took us to the end of the corridor, talking along the way.

“He’s conscious, but tired, and in pain. The T-Cells did a lot of damage to his lungs. We’re having to use opiates to suppress the pain. Which reminds me, there’s a treatment regime he’ll have to take to ween him off the pain-killers once we release him. Make sure you follow it, you don’t want medical opiate addiction. Beyond that, steroids, boosters, and biomat packs to help his body repair the tissue. I’d also recommend you clean out his living space and make sure it’s properly ventilated. You’ll have time. He’ll have to stay here for another week or so, but you can come visit whenever, however long you like.”

She entered the room first.

“Hey Amphy. How are you feeling?”

Amphy was actually sitting up. His butt was flat on the bed, legs splayed out in front, and tail lay behind. His arms hung limp at his side. He was staring out the window.

“Amphy!” I called out.

He didn’t respond.

“Shh.” Maveli motioned for me to stay back. She then rounded the bed and waved her hand in front of Amphy’s face. The Pokemon followed her fingers lazily, as if his muscles were stuck in slow motion.

She directed his gaze back towards me, until we met eye to eye. Even then, Amphy didn’t react.

“Hi Amphy!” I said with a faint smile.

Amphy blinked, the only motion to cross his blank expression.

“Hmm…” The vet curled her lips.

“Is he alright?” I asked nervously.

“Still sedated.” Maveli showed me an IV line hooked up to his forearm. She twisted a dial hooked up to the thin tube. “There, he should come to in a couple minutes.” She followed this with a quick examination, checking his breathing, heartbeat, pupils, and body temperature. Satisfied, she backed away to allow me through.
“Be gentle with him. Don’t put pressure on his chest, don’t make him exert himself.”

“Thank you for your care of him,” I said nodding.

“You’re thanking me? Fuck that,” Maveli said, surprising me with the profanity. “It’s a damn miracle. I didn’t give him three hours to live when I sent you out. Amphy shouldn’t have recovered.” The vet eyed Ash. “Kid, what you did was beyond brave. Ten, maybe twenty minutes, this Pokemon wouldn’t have made it. You’re reckless, an idiot, and a hero. Olivine needs guys like you. Today, especially. I have to go.”

A beeper was sounding off in the next room over, summoning Dr. Maveli with urgency. She hurried out of the room, a small squeeze on the shoulder for each of us her parting gesture.

I turned to Ash. The boy was brimming red from toe to cheek. The vet’s praise was getting to him. He did an excellent job of suppressing it as soon I caught him, though. The young man stiffened up and assumed his usual air of indifference. I giggled.

“So, well…” I didn’t really know what to say, or what was proper to say. It dawned on me that the two had not yet met properly. “I guess, Ash, this is Amphy. Amphy, this is Ash. He’s the one who saved you.” I made room for the two to greet each other.

“Hi there.”

Amphy stared at Ash’s outstretched hand for a moment- and then sneezed all over it.

“Eww! Ugh!” Ash shook and wiped the snot off, making cute disgusted faces. Amphy was holding his nose in both hands and looking embarrassed. I couldn’t help but laugh.

Then Ash did something unexpected.

“C’mere you.” He didn’t hesitate or balk for a single moment, but reached out and took Amphy around the chest, patting him down and squeezing him. “Glad you’re okay.”

“Phoo.”

Amphy, as was habit, went limp and still in order to enjoy the petting.

“Hahaha. Careful now, he’s known to be clingy. You’ll never get rid of him,” I teased.

“I don’t mind,” Ash replied.

Also in keeping with his habits, the creature tried to light up to show his pleasure. His tail bulb briefly flashed, but then sparked and gave out. Amphy started breathing heavily.

“Yeah, don’t push yourself. You’re still recovering,” Ash warned. He slowed down his own petting motions. “Likes attention, doesn’t he?”

“Very much so,” I affirmed.

“He doesn’t battle?” he asked.

“No.”

“That’s a shame.” Ash caught a hold of the tail bulb. “See how clear it is right here, in the center?”

“Yes?”
“It’s a sign of really good conductivity. I bet this guy’s got a wicked Thunderbolt.”

“Ah, maybe.”

“If he’s lighting up every single night, that’s a tough job for one Pokemon. It’s basically pure power training. I wonder how he’d do in a battle.”

“Poorly, very poorly.” I said with a laugh. “I tried, a long time ago. He doesn’t have much sensibility about combat. Remember Spearow, Amphy?”

“Pharupha!” Amphy pouted, with not a happy face.

“He lost.”

“To a Spearow?” Ash asked.

“To a wild Spearow,” I emphasized.

“Oh wow, how? That’s a huge natural advantage.”

“He panicked, and his defenses are kind of terrible. It only took a few pecks and he ran away.”

“Poor guy.”

I shrugged.

“Not every Pokemon enjoys battling. I don’t see the point in forcing them to participate in one if they hate it or aren’t suited for it.”

“That’s considerate.”

“Amphy loves games.” I pulled out a deck of index cards. Amphy’s eyes lit up.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a trading card game we made.”

Ash picked a card out.

“These aren’t Pokemon,” he noted.

“No they are not. They’re from Amphy’s fantasy story.”

“He’s a writer?”

“Artist.” I pulled a second article from my backpack, Amphy’s latest coloring book. He grew even more excitable and I had to warn him to not overexert himself. “He draws the figures and I make up the rules. It’s a simple game, I could teach you if you want.”

“Maybe later.” Ash grinned. Amphy was hoarding all of the cards to himself, preening through to make sure they were all there. He tapped my backpack.

“Yes, I know, I know.” I surrendered the colored pencils and blank cards over to him as well. Then his blankey, and lastly his sippy cup. “You’ll be staying here awhile, so I got everything prepared for you. Remember to get some rest and not stay up late, got it?”

Amphy waved me off, already absorbed in a new drawing, in addition to the back rub currently
administered by Ash.

“Spoiled. Spoiled rotten.” I rubbed his head, but he shook it off.

“Well, I guess it’s time to go.”

Ash and I pushed off. As I reached the door, a little cry rang out. I turned about. Amphy was sitting in the bed, staring forlornly at me.

I went down to his side and wrapped him up in a hug.

“I’m so happy you’re alive. I love you,” I whispered.

“Amphapha. Roora pharoa pha pha ampharosa.” He nodded his head. I giggled.

“I hope so too.”

A lingering touch, sad smiles, a last promise to return tomorrow, and we departed.

“What did he say?” Ash asked.

“It’s our little secret.”

He could only shake his head.

“Ash. Can I call you Ash?”

“Uh, sure…”

“I didn’t know if it’s proper, seeing as you’re from Kanto. They’re stricter over there about formalities, right? And we’ve known each other so little time.”

“That’s funny, us Kanto kids think you Johtoans are the old-fashioned ones.”

“But still…”

He saw my reticence. Could he guess what drove it?

“Look, I didn’t cross an ocean just so we could be strangers. Call me Ash, and I’ll call you Jasmine. Deal?”

“Alright.”

I nodded.

We’re officially on familiar terms. That was easy.

“You really did cross an ocean. In a hurricane.” I looked away. “I tried going across the bay in a boat, but it capsized. I can’t imagine how you did it. On the back of your Charizard? That’s incredible.”

Ash smirked.

“If it were that easy. Heh. Even Charizard couldn’t make it alone. I pulled out Pidgeot and Aerodactyl and had the three of them relay. Lapras helped in between transfers. It was a team effort. Charizard got the last leg, he had the most stamina left for that final stretch. It was still pretty brutal.”
“So much effort, just for me.”

“For your Ampharos,” Ash corrected me.

“Oh.”

Wait.

Why exactly did he take on such a dangerous job?

You were assuming he did it for your sake, didn’t you, Jasmine? Because he liked you.

Nah nah nah nah! Don’t utter stupid things like that! Not even in your empty brain! You’ll Jynx it!

Stop! Tell yourself the truth.

He probably saved Amphy because he cared for Amphy, because he cares about Pokemon so much. Not because he specifically likes you.

And you, you’re not fawning over him and blushing every time he glances your way and dreaming about holding hands because he likes you, or because he did something heroic for you. You’re this way because he did it at all. You would have fallen for such a guy if he had braved a mild thunderstorm to protect a wild Hoothoot. That the storm happened to be a historic typhoon only swelled your admiration to untold heights. That the Pokemon he saved happened to be your precious childhood companion only served to turn this fluttery attraction into a full-blown crush. If he were to outright admit he did this all out of feelings for you… it would be too much for your heart, you would die of a broken heart, shattered by joy.

Remember, he left for Cianwood instead of sticking around to comfort you when it looked like Amphy was a goner. Which, now that I think of it, seems a little suspicious.

“How did you know to bring the cure back, anyways?” I asked.

“I uh, um.” He seemed a little off-guard about the question.

“I think you had already left when Maveli came back with the diagnosis.”

“I had a hunch.”

“A hunch? That’s it?”

“No, wait! See, this.” He pulled a pamphlet from his backpack and showed it to me.

‘World’s Greatest Herbal Medicine Shop! One-stop shopping for every cure conceivable! Pokemon or Human, we have it all!’ it read.

“I heard rumors about this place. I felt kinda useless standing around at the hospital, so I decided to go check it out, to see if it was bogus or not. When I got there and told the guy about Amphy and his symptoms, he knew right away what the problem was. Seemed like a nice guy, sold me the Cho Bokun stuff at a big discount.”

A big discount?

My Pokemon’s life was in mortal danger!

I snickered, sure in the knowledge that Ash had gotten ripped off, and indignant that a merchant
would profit off of our suffering.

Yet, Ash must have paid all the same.

“Devised a plan to get it back through that hell, and here I am.”

“Why would you go to such lengths?”

“No reason.”

I gave him my best “I’m not buying that”-look.

He turned away, though, and didn’t elaborate.

This, of course, flustered me. Too much ambiguity.

He didn’t look comfortable with the conversation anymore, and took steps to end it. Literal steps, he power-walked ahead, and then stupidly paused.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

I sighed and gave up.

If he likes you, it’ll come out eventually.

Or else, you can make him like you.

What would my elders say?

Mr. Beret would probably tell me: “Patience. Scope the situation, let the battle unfold, assess, and then act. And act decisively.” Okay, admittedly, this was Pokemon battling advice, not relationship advice, but it’s applicable, right?

“Where to?” Ash repeated, waiting for an answer.

“The Gym. And then we’re heading out.”

“Out where?”

So eager!

“Wherever Pokemon are in need. After all, we Gym Leaders are the experts in Pokemon. It’s expected of us to help in disaster situations where our expertise can be of assistance.”

“Ah. That sounds fun, actually.”

I noticed, as we walked along, that he liked to keep beside me, step for step, neither leading nor trailing.

Every little sign, right Jasmine?

As it turns out, the most immediate crisis assigned to us was a truly banal one.
“Isn’t there something, um, a little more important we could help with?” I asked.

Mr. Beret’s voice came over the phone, loud, clear, and contemptuous.

“After that fiasco at the gym the other day? You’ve not earned the right to pick up my Pokemon’s shit. Sending a couple of wet-eared teens into a disaster zone? I’ll do nothing of the sort! Prove to me you can handle this mop-up task, and then I’ll figure something of more import for you to handle.”

“But… but… but… really? They’re all…”

“No buts, Hayate! You get your skinny ass out there and sort those Miltank!”

…but that’s right.

Miltank.

We are going north to Route 39 to sort cow Pokemon.

To be precise, a large herd of livestock had broken loose into the fields and were currently intermixing with a population of wild Miltank. Our task was to separate the two groups and return the cattle to their owner.

Easy, right?

And somewhat beneath a gym leader, or so I thought.

“This isn’t going to be easy,” Ash and I said in unison.

We stared down the hill upon a mosaic of black and pink. There were easily over a thousand Pokemon here.

To make matters worse, their chosen hangout was a flooded, mud-caked pasture that could pass for the swamps of Dagobah.

“Let’s get to it,” Ash said with not all that much enthusiasm.

We carefully made our way down the slick grass, or rather tried, as we kept losing our footing about once every ten feet and landing on our butts. The last bit of elevation saw me slip, overcompensate, and fall forward. I stumbled down the hill, into a six-inch-deep mud puddle, and only prevent a total disaster by catching myself on a big fat rear hind.

The Miltank looked over its shoulder, chewing on a cud of grass.

“Um… hi!”

The creature stared blankly back at me.

“How do we know the domestics from the wilds?” Ash asked as he glomped up next to me.

“The cattle are marked with ear tags. So, this one is one we need to bring back.” I pointed to the pink tag stapled into the creature’s ear.

“Roger. Okay girl, let’s go. Follow me.”

Ash waved a Pokeblock bait in front of the creature’s nose. It was corn-flavored, the same as their feed on the farm. The Milank sniffed it, opened her mouth wide, and chomped down on the alliums
“Organic Miltank, huh? Alright, let’s do this the old-fashioned way.” Ash shifted himself behind the Miltank and began pushing. “Come on! Let’s go. Get going. Move!” A wild Miltank weighs as much as a grown man, about 165 lbs. A livestock Miltank weighs double that. Ash wasn’t moving this beast anywhere she did not want to go (she did not want to go up the hillside).

“Okay, time to give you a reason to shove. Tauros!”

“Wrong choice,” I said reflexively, just in time to dive out of the way.

The male bovine Pokemon went berserk. He pawed the ground, raised his horned head, and violently whipped his cat o’ nine tails against his flank. His eyes were fairly popping out of his head.

“Round ‘em up!” Ash cried, oblivious to the danger.

“ARRRROOOOOO!” Tauros let out a bellowing cry. The female Miltank, heretofore docile and oblivious, perked up. They spotted the Tauros, took one glance and the fearsome male, and bolted.

The stampede propagated through the herd like a tidal wave. Fountains of mud split the air. Fattened bodies squashed against one another, panicked animals frantically searched for an exit, or at least the general direction of the rout. The mass soon turned into a crush. Above all was the din of countless mooing cries as the Miltank let their distress be known.

One Miltank couldn’t get through the mud on its four legs, and curled into a ball and began a Roll Out. This was the individual I found myself dancing on top of, like a circus performer, desperately trying to stay upright. One look at the chaotic frenzy going on around us told me a fall would be deadly.

“ASH!” My mount was bouncing all over the field, up and down the mud puddles and overtop the bodies of her comrades. I hopped as she rolled under another Miltank’s haunches and managed to land once again upon her spinning form. With some delicate toe taps, I managed to steer her back towards the hill. She met the incline and abruptly halted, throwing me off and face-first into the grass.

“Oh god.”

Ash was riding atop his Tauros’ back rodeo style. The animal was not so much pouncing as bolting from one Miltank to another in a frenetic attempt to, eh… you know… er, yeah. Anyways! The girls weren’t having any of it, and those that could not get away launched Double Kicks at Tauros. Tauros would rear up and about, sending Ash for a literal loop. He barely hung on with one hand, twisting and turning like a gymnastic acrobat in order to land properly.

“Tauros!”

I waved him over, and then presented the rear hind of the dazed Miltank I had barrel-rote to the embankment.

Tauros’ eyes bulged, like, halfway out of their sockets. His tongue hung panting off the side of his mouth like a wet rag. He roared, pounded the ground, and charged.

My Miltank spotted the oncoming train wreck, bellowed in fear, and struggled to run away. I
grabbed her around the neck and held her put.

“Come and get some!” I shouted.

Tauros and Miltank collided with a massive smack. I was sent flying, and Ash was sent flying on top of me.

“Ugh.”

Ash shook his head, and then realized he was on top of my back. He tried to get up, panicked, his hand slipped in the wet grass, and his whole weight came down on my behind.

“Owww! Oooo! Oh god, good god, I’m so sorry, I can’t get up. Are you alright? Jasmine?”

His pelvis was pushed right up against there.

“Bovine style,” I whispered to myself, cheeks luminescing.

“That’s one.”

We had to wait for Tauros to finish, which it did quickly, and then Ash recalled him back to his Pokeball with a helpless, embarrassed grin. The exhausted heifer had a pink tag, and so we corralled her up the cliff with the help of Ivysaur’s vines. The rancher hooted and hollered as we approached.

“An’ I tot you were some kind o’ experts! Hoo haa hoo haa ha!”

“One… Miltank… delivered,” I said, exhausted.

“Mmm, yea’p, that’s a one. Now fer da other therr hunderd?”

“Three… hundred… ugh.”

I looked to Ash. He looked right back and shrugged.

Our predicament only got worse from there. Remember the pink alliums the Miltank was snacking on? Well, the wild Miltank started noticing the pink paper ear tags and decided they were as tasty as the flowers. By the time we hoofed two more Miltank up the hill (using Magnemite to electro-prod them), practically all the Miltank’s tags were devoured.

“How’re we supposed to know the wild Miltank from the domestic?” Ash asked. The rancher suggested we weigh them. The livestock would be fatter.

Well. Can’t say we didn’t try.

“Woah!”

“Hold her! Hold her steady!”

“I’m losing it! Ahhhhh!”

I got flipped end over and landed in front of the Pokemon. I stared up to find chomping molars filling my vision. Little pink flecks filled the crevices between its gums and teeth.
“I think this one is wild. It’s got paper in its teeth.”

“Okay.”

We retreated to the hill once more.

“That’s not going to work. Too big to handle and weigh.”

“Any ideas?”

“What if we just waited them out? The wild herd should move out after dark, right?” Ash suggested.

I shook my head.

“The rancher says the livestock Miltank will imprint on the wild ones if left together too long. They’ll follow the wild ones into the woods.”

“Oh. Hmm. Maybe Onyx can round them up.”

“I think he would scare them away.”

“Oh.”

Ash stewed in thought.

“We can scare the wild ones away with a tractor. The livestock should be used to it and won’t run away.”

“That might work.”

We pitched the idea to the rancher. He said it was a good idea, but wouldn’t work. The tractor would never make it back up the hill.

“Argh!”

I clutched my twin tails. Ash gave me a half-hearted smile.

“Think!”

“I could grab all of my Tauros and herd the whole group back to the ranch… nah. Never mind. That’s probably a death sentence for us.”

I shook my head.

“The rancher said we need to sort them first. He doesn’t want the wild ones at all. They’re bad for the herd.”

“Why’s that?”

“I didn’t think to ask him.”

“Hmm.”

Ash looked over the herd, scoping out the terrain and angles between his extended fingers.

“If we could sort them, I could use Jolteon and Electabuzz, and you could use your Magnemites… we’ll create a lightning wall between them to herd them back up through that gully.”
“That’s a good idea. But-”

“Yeah, I got it, we need to figure out a way to separate them.”

We fretted and freaked some more and more.

It wasn’t that we didn’t have ways to tell them apart. It’s that we didn’t have an efficient way to do it. If we only averaged one every ten minutes, it would take fifty hours to finish the task.

Ash turned his Pokeballs over, muttering about his options.

“I’ve got it,” I said, looking at him.

“What?”

“We’ll catch them.”

“Catch them?”

“Do you have empty Pokeballs?”

“Yeah, but why?”

I begged for one. He handed it over.

I galloped once more back down the hill. This time, experience and technique helped me stay upright and reach the bottom with somewhat more dignity than the last few treks (if not cleaner- my jeans, shoes, and t-shirt were caked in mud by now). Ash followed, puzzled by my plan.

“How is catching them going to help us? You mean catch them all and sort them later?”

“No, I mean this.”

I chucked a Pokeball.

It hit the nearest Miltank, sucked it up, wiggled thrice, and stopped.

“Congratulations. You’ve got yourself a Miltank.”

“New ball,” I said, hand outstretched. He obliged.

It took four more tries, actually, such was my luck, but my point finally bore out on the fifth Pokemon. The ball struck the Miltank- and simply fell to the mud, inert.

“Huh?”

“Even livestock Pokemon are registered to the Pokemon PC system. They’re marked as owned by the rancher. The Pokeballs know which ones are wild and which ones aren’t. We can just catch all the wild ones and release them somewhere else!”

Ash brightened up at the idea.

“That’s right! But I’ve only got a few Pokeballs, maybe seven. Should we head back to town and buy more?”

“There’s no need. Remember, there is a ninety minute window before the registry is uploaded to the satellite network. We can release the wild Miltank without locking the Pokeball, so we can reuse
them over and over!”

“That’s cool. Hey, you know what?”

“What?”

“You’re actually pretty smart,” Ash said with a beaming smile.

“Thank you!” I sputtered out, turning away.

He called me smart!

You are smart! Be proud of that big forehead of yours!

It took a little finesse to get the plan to work. Some of the wild Miltank did not want to get caught easily. It was a waste of time to weaken them first, seeing as we only needed to identify whether they could be caught at all, so we simply assigned Ash’s strongest Pokemon to faint them while we moved on. Noctowl and Gligar helped relay the occupied Pokeballs up to the rancher, who released them into the opposite gully. We took turns throwing the Pokeballs, but it was mostly Ash- he had the better throw and aim.

“Wow,” I said after one particular fastball.

I bet he could play in the minor league.

His throw was so smooth, and swift, so incredibly fluid from aim to motion to arc to release, that I was left with the impression of a natural-born pitcher. He’s not even breaking a sweat.

“Gligar, coming up!” he yelled. He tossed a trio of Pokeballs high into the air. Gligar swooped in and, displaying the same skillful ball-handling as its master, exchanged the filled balls for empty ones in one stroke. Ash danced side-to-side and caught the three falling balls as easily as an outfielder.

“Three more. How’s it progressing over there?”

“Ah!” I shook myself out of my swoon. “Getting ready!”

My job was to coordinate the Electric types. Magnemite senior, Magnemite junior, and Ash’s Jolteon and Electabuzz were busy practicing their Thunder Wave Link. Their first goal was to keep all the confirmed domestic Miltank separated from the unsorted mass. This was becoming harder as the former group steadily grew. I had to keep repositioning our Pokemon to account for surges in the herd that might overrun the incorporeal fence. Eventually it became too much for our Pokemon to keep.

“Um, I guess it’s okay. Take a rest everyone!”

It would be okay, by now the unsorted herd was smaller and easier to manage than our own affirmed domesticated. Jolteon ran patrol, occasionally letting off a Spark to keep the two herds separated.

“Whew!”

Ash wiped sweat off his brow after sending a gaggle of six Miltank my way.

“Watch out!”

“What?”
“Houndoom!”

I pointed.

A pack of the wild predators prowled along the far tree line. They were eying the big, juicy meat platters milling about the meadow.

Ash readied his remaining Pokeball.

“Get Onix ready.”

“He’s not really healed from yesterday,” I said.

Though, I might not have an option. The pack alpha was staring very greedily out our tight-packed herd of livestock. It trotted out of the trees.

Ash tensed up. So did I.

The fiery dog took another step forward with its front paws, which unexpectedly sunk into the wet met. The Houndoom yelped in surprise. A frantic back pedal freed it from the quagmire. Thinking twice of raiding the bog-ridden field, the leader howled and led his pack back into the woods.

“Phew!”

We relaxed once again, turned to each other, and broke into laughter.

“Ohahahaha! That was scary!”

“I know, right? Like, the big vicious dogs turn into puppies around a little puddle!”

“Hahaha! Ah. Well, it’s good we didn’t have to fight. There were a lot of them.”

“Yeah.” Ash checked his Pokeball, Tauros held within. “Should’ve brought more than six,” he muttered. He caught me staring at him, puzzled. “Force of habit,” he explained. “It’s not like this is a League battle.”

I shrugged.

“I only have four today.”

“Right. Okay, let’s finish this up.”

We went back to the task at hand. The more we worked at it, the more efficient our system got. Soon enough, we were left with a pack of animals all bunched together. We performed a quick tap of the Pokeball to double-check, but each one was rejected by the recognition software.

“All good!”

“Alright! Everyone, spread your arms, and Thunder Wave!”

A crackling chain of electricity spread between the four Electric type Pokemon. They slowly spread out and surrounded the herd. As before, the Miltank shied away from the lightning fence and slowly milled towards our intended route.

“Gud gawd, took er long ‘nuff. Ain’t you mite see ‘em down that ‘o way?”
“Yes sir.”

We led the herd down the road a couple miles in good order, and soon enough we were waltzing them into their barns.

“Thank ‘e. Lemme go count, see if ya got em all. Doubter did, but close ‘nuff, t’hopes.”

“We did good.” Ash brought his hand down on my shoulder. I lightly grabbed his fingertips, spun, and pirouetted round. The result of my dance maneuver brought us face to face.

“I think so.”

“Human minds, Pokemon ability, I like to think nothing’s impossible with those two ingredients,” he mused. “And it’s fun working beside them, don’t you think?”

“Yep! Well, not always fun.” I showed him my raw red hands. “I could use a bath.”

“It’s barely noon. We’re not done yet,” Ash reminded me.

“Ah, that’s right.”

Ash strolled over to one enclosure. The Miltanks within were happily munching on corn feed. One turned and poked her head out between the bars.

“You look happy to be home.”

The Miltank mooed and smiled.

Ash caught her by the cheeks and rubbed affectionately.

“You like that, don’t you huh? Big, bubbly cow you. Bet you wish you were dairy Miltank.”

“Git way from ther! Git off! Hands off!”

The rancher came railing down the stall line, waving his hands and shouting. Ash backed off, like he’d been caught trying to steal something.

“I wasn’t doing anything!”

“What’r ya think yer doin? You think they some kin of frinns of yers?”

“He was just petting it.”

“Ya can’t pet a cattle-mon, missus!”

“What’s the harm in it?” Ash asked.

“Same ole risson I call ye out to drive off’n the wild’oes! They’m ain’t sentient ‘mons, ‘less ya start fondling them! Don’t go ruinin my livestock with yer fallutin! C’mon! Ya should know better! “Experts”. “EXPERTS” My holler, they dun sent me morons.”

Oh I get it. I understand why we were called out here, and why Mr. Rancher is throwing a fit.

I quickly begged our pardon and ushered Ash out of the barn.

“What was that all about?”
I was too sheepish to answer him at first.

“What’s the matter?”

“All those Miltank… they’re meant to be eaten,” I explained.

Ash went silent.

I think he knew that, in the back of his mind, but maybe that fact had gone overlooked while we worked so hard to round them up.

“I know.” His eyes cast aside, gloomily.

“Those Miltank were bred to be stupid. They’re not self-aware. That’s the only way a lot of humans can justify slaughtering and eating them. But it’s easy to mess up, just a little human interaction can force a micro evolution that makes them too smart to be considered livestock. For that matter, even an extended stay with wild Miltank would do the same. If they got smart enough to understand they’re being used for food, well, I think the law says you can’t slaughter them.” I looked back at the barn and the rancher within.

“He was worried you were going to spoil his merchandise. One Miltank is worth about 90,000 Pokedollars.”

Ash shrugged.

“To be honest, I wouldn’t care.”

“But why?”

“It’s not right, even if they aren’t smart enough to realize what’s happening to them. They’re still living creatures. We shouldn’t be killing them for food.”

“Really? Have you never eaten a burger?”

Ash’ lips curled.

“Not since I was old enough to figure out where they came from.”

“Really?!”

“I’m a vegetarian,” he said. “I thought you’d be the same. What with the way you care about Pokemon.”

“No, I…”

I looked down at the ground, ashamed.

“I. Um. It’s not like I’ve never thought about it. But. Um. I just like meat, it’s tasty, and everyone else is okay with it. I always thought it was okay because they were two different kinds of Pokemon. Those ranch Miltanks aren’t real Pokemon.”

“Yes they are,” Ash insisted. “They are Pokemon and they have feelings. Not complicated feelings like you and I have, but they’re legitimate emotions. They can feel fear, and pain, and they want to keep living. Heck, even if they didn’t, they have that potential. You just said they can evolve back into self-awareness with human interaction, right? That’s enough for me. I’m not eating something that had to be butchered.”
“It’s not like I eat a lot of meat,” I said in my defense. Steaks and patties were a rarity in my household.

Ash sighed.

“I’m not going to give you a hard time about it,” he said. “It’s the way I was raised. You were raised to accept it, I get it. It’s not like society is changing because I want it to. This is just my sincere belief. I’m not going to apologize for living the right way. Hopefully, one day, everyone else will feel the same.”

“Huh.”

Somehow, I feel touched.

This guy isn’t your average guy.

I don’t mean that just from his super-human heroics to save Amphy.

I mean, I’ve never met an adult who talked like him, thought like him. I’ve only read about people who embrace Pokemon like he does.

Look at me, the supposed lover of Pokemon, and I still do the same mental gymnastics everyone else does to justify munching on a Miltank whopper. I’m a half-baked Pokephile compared to him.

It’s… making me feel small.

We walked back to the bus stop, mostly in silence.

Once we arrived back at the gym, we found most of the usual gang waiting for us. I recognized six or seven of Mr. Beret’s old buddies, and a dozen or so youths who regularly practiced at our gym. Ed, Chiba, and Janina were present as well.

“Where is Beth?” I asked.

“Her aunt and uncle are missing,” Ed explained.

“Oh. That’s bad. Do they have an idea what happened to them?”

Ed shook his head.

“That’s all I know. Mr. Beret’s expecting you.”

He handed me a phone. I covered its transceiver and whispered to Ed.

“Is he not back yet? Even at a time like this?”

Ed shook his head.

“I think something is wrong with his health. He just got off a doctor’s visit the other day, right before he said he was taking off.”

“Oh.”
That shouldn’t be a surprise. His declining health was the reason he promoted me in the first place. I kept that in mind as I put the phone up to my ear.

“Hello sir?”

“Well?” came the old captain’s raspy voice.

“All Miltanks accounted for.”

“Hrmph. I knew that, Mr. Dodd called in. Slower than I expected, but I guess you got the job done.”

“We’re still willing to do more. Is there anything I can do?”

“You said you wanted to do real work? Fine. Go to the Bronze Sand watershed, west side of town, and find Rally Point Bravo. Ask for Chief Katoma. He’ll set you to work. Make sure you’ve got that snake of yours in top shape, you’re going to need him.”

“Yes sir. Understood. Mr. Beret, um, when will you be coming back?”

“Dismissed, Hayate,” he said, brushing my question off. The phone clicked dead.

“Well?”

Ash, Ed, and all the rest hugged in close.

“Oh, hi! Um, so yeah! We’re going to help out around the Bronze Sand area! Get your Pokemon and follow me!” The twenty or so individuals gave a cry and rallied to my back. After a few last chores, healing Onix and such, we were off. I felt good. Ash faithfully followed at my side. Each time the group gave off a cheer, he would quietly glance towards me and shoot me a grin. The carnivore-shaming had been forgotten.

“Let’s do this,” he said.

The group launched into a rising chant, urging us forward and pushing our spirits higher.


I stared in disbelief.

Beside me, Ash’s face tightened into a grim, unsmiling stare.

Behind us, everyone went silent.

Before us- utter devastation.

“I knew it was bad, but not this bad,” someone muttered.

I had no words for it.

The street immediately before us was flooded in two feet of water. Emergency workers struggled to haul a stretcher over the rubble where a house kitchen once stood. The stretcher was occupied, but with what or whom, I couldn’t tell, because a cloth was wholly draped over it. They managed to
bring it down to the street side, where a small motorboat waited. Once loaded, the boat crew sped off, sirens blazing.

“No way,” I gasped, belatedly realizing what I had seen.

We would come to learn over the next few hours the extent of the devastation.

Olivine City was somewhat fortunate. Hurricane Adaline had made a westward veer right as it hit the coast. The east side of the cape had just missed the brunt of the storm. That area contained Olivine’s seaport, the downtown business district, half its industrial base, and the Gold Sand River estuary, which led up into Olivine’s residential heartland. Flooding there would have endangered countless homes, including my own. Thankfully, the storm surge capped out at five feet and flooding was light and quickly draining.

The Bronze Sand River in western Olivine, by comparison, was much less heavily populated.

It saw a twelve foot storm surge.

When we found Chief Katoma, he was giving a briefing to various officials and journalists.

“Two hundred, maybe three hundred dead. Bastion Cove and True Day suburbs got hit hard, got hit both ways, storm surge from seaside and flooding coming down river. Got Laurel Village apartments flooded up above the second story. Downy Side apartments is in danger, around five hundred people still trying to evacuate from there. Got a lot of folks hanging tight on roofs, we don’t have craft to reach them. Lot of our boats got swept out to sea. Don’t need food or water. Later, sure, but right now we need equipment, manpower, Pokepower, search and rescue. Then medical supplies. Lot of injured. It’s bad.”

Katoma paused and nodded to our freshly arrived troop.

“I’ve never seen things like I’ve seen today, not even on TV. 18-wheelers where kitchens used to be. Grid towers bent over ninety-degree angle. Sunset Bridge got washed away. Sunset was solid metal and concrete. Still lost it. What’s that? Yeah, we’re checking the Bay Bridge foundations, not letting public traffic cross it for now. Woah woah woah!”

The crowd boiled over with anxious shouts. He steadied them down.

“There’s no need to get riled up. Only the Bronze watershed’s been cleared out. Everywhere else is safe to come back to. Upper Side, Aerie Cove and the like, they say the water’s run down. Careful, don’t trust any road covered in water. Only takes a few inches to sweep a car out. But yeah. My best advice for everyone- we’re gonna need a lot of support from you all. Got to make room in your homes and hearts for those don’t have a home anymore.”

He wrapped up the session and stepped over to us.

“Chief said you were coming. Gatto is coordinating things from the park.”

I bristled at the mention of the man who would have left Amphy to die.

This isn’t for his sake, I reminded myself. It’s for all those who are suffering. Still, I found myself hesitating.

How the heck were we supposed to help?

I looked around and felt overwhelmed. Block after block, house after house, there was nothing but
inundation and destruction. Everything beneath the first story rooflines was submerged in water. Everything above was shorn to pieces by the wind, like a titanic cheese grater had passed over. I couldn’t imagine how I was going to make a difference here.

I froze up. It was Ash who stepped in for me.

“We’re all professional Pokemon trainers. We’d like to offer our services,” Ash told Katoma. The fire station chief acknowledged him.

“Gotcha. Great. Alright, I need generally three kinds of Pokemon: flyers, scope out rooflines and look for stranded folks; swimmers, Water types, go save those folks; and muscle, lift wreckage and move earth. Sort yourselves and report to Mack, over there, for high water rescue, and Decker, there, for dry rescue.”

“Okay.”

Ash explained the situation to the rest. Soon enough we were off.

I was assigned to Decker.

“You’re Beret’s girl, aren’t you?”

“His subordinate, not daughter,” I clarified.

“But you’re the girl with the big Onix, yeah?”

“That’s right.”

“Great! We need that big boy right away. You with the Snorlax, you come too.”

Ash was in the middle of explaining the different roles to his Pokemon (he exchanged his Miltank-herding squad for a different set at the gym- he has so many!).

I looked over his team.

“Wouldn’t it be better for you to go help the flood zone teams?” I asked. He had nine Pokemon, with four Water types and two Flying types.

“I was always planning on tagging along with you,” he explained.

“Hurry up! Radio says river’s coming down the mountain. We need to make a berm to cut off Windrift Street or else it’s gonna drown the guys trying to help Downy Side. Let’s go!”

“Let’s hurry.” Ash took my hand and pulled me along with him as we chased Decker. The young man looked incredibly reassured and determined. With all the disaster surrounding us, he managed to radiate a sense of safety and hope. Like, “I’m here, I will protect you, I will take care of everything”. The perfect gallant knight in shining armor.

But is he my gallant knight?

His fingers gave mine a reassuring squeeze.

I’m getting closer to saying “Yes, definitely”.

Now’s not the time, Jasmine! Worry about that stuff later!
Decker led us down to the intersection of Carroway and Windrift streets. Carroway wended through the valley carved out by the Bronze Sand River, while Windrift led inland towards a block of apartment complexes. Beyond the intersection, everything was inundated. Houses and storefronts steadily receded into the waterline until even the second story rooflines were submerged. The sight of it was too surreal to process, like I was looking at a miniature model city being sunk in a bathtub. Even now, the flood was visibly creeping across the intersection foot-by-foot, second-by-second.

Decker’s radio phone buzzed.

“Yeah what’s up? Ah. Damn it. Okay. Yeah I’ll take care of Windrift. I got help. Call back every five.” He snapped it shut. “Listen up! Top third of the Tsuchikoyo dike just washed away. They just had twelve inches of rain dumped on them, and the terrain is going to funnel all that water right down to this spot. There’s about five hundred people trying to evacuate from Downy Side apartments behind us. That water cannot reach them. We’ve got fifteen minutes. I need a wall this high and twice as thick.”

Mr. Decker reached up as high as he could (and he was a pretty tall man). I looked around, just a little nervous. There were five total trainers. Of the Pokemon they had out, I noted an Ursaring, Poliwrath, and nothing else of use for earthmoving. The older trainers looked more apprehensive than us about the task assigned.

“That high?”

“It’s too much.”

“Shouldn’t we get a bulldozer?”

“There’s no time.”

“Come on, we don’t have time! Miss Gym Leader, bring out that big boy!” Decker barked.

“I, um, I’m not sure he’s fully healed,” I stammered. Onix hadn’t gotten a turn in the healing machine; the Pokecenter and gym’s were booked up for hours by Pokemon in more desperate need. All he had was about twenty hours of natural recovery and a Super Potion from the gym.

“Don’t worry. He can handle it. Bring him out,” Ash said. He laid a reassuring hand on my Pokeball. I gave him a silent thank-you for his encouragement, and flung my Pokeball into the center of the street.

“Onix!”

“ONIX!”

The small crowd’s apprehension melted the moment my thirty-two foot rock snake hit the ground.

Onix turned to me, awaiting instructions.

He’s always been so obedient and faithful. He’s never quit on me, and he always works as hard as he possibly can. I don’t quite know what he saw in me in that cave so long ago, but apparently it was good enough for him to stick by me and put his considerable strength at my service. I was going to need that strength now.

“Earth relocation. We’re building a wall. Right here!” I pointed out the line. Onix nodded and glanced around. He found a grassy ditch and began ploughing into it.
“Yeah, good idea! That’ll double as a drainage path. You, guy with Snorlax. Help me carry sandbags. Poliwrath owner! See those I-beams? We need them driven into the ground, we’re going to use them to reinforce the wall.”

Decker clapped his hands, getting everyone moving.

Onix was having a hard time pushing the dirt and looking to me for directions at the same time, so I climbed on top his head and issued orders from there. Not only did Ash direct his Pokemon, he was right there beside them, adding his own muscle to the effort.

“Watch those power lines!”

“Got it!” A down line began sparking as flood water got near it. I deployed Magnemite to ground the current and cut off the cables further up the street.

“Here it comes!”

The first wave came roaring down the street. It was only a few inches high, but it crashed against our pathetic looking wall and instantly eroded a chunk out of the front.

“Get some sand bags across the front! Move move move!”

The next wave was a foot high and faster. Our wall was progressing, but the right flank had yet to be reinforced with sandbags and tarmac. The wave tore a giant swath out of it and carried our precious dirt away.

“Snorlax, clog that up!” Snorlax couldn’t move fast enough. Ash was quick on his toes, though, and thought to zip Snorlax from one side of the street to the other via its Pokeball.

“Just stay there.” Ash motioned for the mountain of fat to sit down. When the next wave came, it crashed across the creature’s back, protecting the vulnerable wall section. Snorlax smiled and sighed, enjoying the splashing as if it were at a waterpark.

“Onix, position! Okay, advance!”

Onix shoved his torso sideways, moving a dump-truckload of earth against the pylons all at once. The muscle-monsters did the rest, packing the dirt into place with strong Low Kicks and Body Slams. The smaller Pokemon and humans finished the barrier off by nailing tarp down, waterproofing it.

Ash reached a hand up for me. I gladly obliged, hopping off Onix and landing in the boy’s waiting arms. He put his arm across my shoulder and hugged me tight as we watched the water quickly rise against our newly-built berm. It held, amazingly.

“It’s coming over the top!” one of our coworkers shouted in alarm.

With every gust of wind, small waves crashed over the crest of the berm. Some places had been built too short and had small streams flowing across.

“That’s alright! As long as it doesn’t break!” Decker shouted.

He was right- by and large the berm was holding back the flood. What little got through was not going to threaten anybody. There was a cry of relief and cheer of success among our task force.

Decker’s radio buzzed once more.
“We got it!”

“Get back! Get back now! Elliot Street crew couldn’t get theirs in time. Downy Side’s flooding.”

“What the hell?!”

Decker screamed at us to move out. We started running back up Windrift. I could see the issue right away. North of us, all of the side streets were foaming with brown, muddy water. Behind us, the water was already starting to lap at the dry side of the wall we had worked so hard to build.

“I’m getting pretty tired of H2O,” Ash muttered. “One second. Lapras!” He let his Water-type out in one narrow alley and jumped aboard her. The pair disappeared for a minute and returned as a trio the next. In his arms was a male Nidoran. The poor thing was drenched and shivering, and had an exhausted, desperate look in his eyes.

“Spotted him clinging to a floating gutter. Wonder how long he’s been there.”

“Aww.” How sweet of him! And how lucky a Pokemon! Everyone else, including me, had walked right past that alley.

Ash tapped the Nidoran with a spare Pokeball, which promptly rejected the creature.

“Seems like someone is missing him.”

“There’s a collection point for missing Pokemon at the Pokecenter,” I told him.

“Good. I’ll just have to try holding on to him until then.” That wasn’t a simple task, what with the poisonous spines sticking out of his back. Ash didn’t seem to have too much trouble handling them, however.

“Pick up the pace!” our supervisor shouted. The leading edge of the flood was accelerating, forcing us to start jogging. Within five minutes we had arrived at Downy Side.

Downy Side was a sprawling complex of three story apartment buildings intended for Olivine’s lower-income residents. They were a couple decades old and considered one of the rougher parts of town. Most kids who lived here were good, normal people, but the stereotype in my high school was, if there was a notorious bully causing trouble, it was very likely they came from here. Peter, as example. The result of these unfortunate implications was that the place was poorly constructed and its evacuation badly organized. It looked like the hurricane winds had already ravaged the place yesterday, but the humans and looming floodwaters promised to make today even worse.

Too many idiot tenants were trying to haul off their furniture and big electronics, even as couch cushions and porta-potties floated by their front doors. Pokemon ran wild barking and roaring at strangers while owners thrashed amongst their belongings. There weren’t enough emergency workers to go around, and too many were wrapped up in screaming matches with stubborn residents. A scuffle broke out as one person accused another of looting their possessions.

Wait. I recognize the accused.

“Peter?”

The youth with the teal-dyed hairdo was slapping away his accuser with one hand while tightly grasping a radio set with the other.

I started his way. Before I could get there, another familiar face jumped in. Ed knocked his friend in
the shoulder, tore the radio out of his hands, and threw the equipment into the water.

“Both of you are morons! Quit arguing over junk! Grab what you absolutely need and get out of here!”

“What the hell do you know Ed? We don’t have fuckin college bonds tucked safe in a bank like you. This ‘junk’ is our life savings!”

The rebuke halted Ed in his tracks.

“Hey, you guys. You’d better start thinking about saving your own life.”

Ash pointed a thumb back over his shoulder.

The Elliot Street break must have been more disastrous than we thought. We tend to think of floods as a steady rise of water, like the ocean tide or a bathtub filling up. This was more like a wave rolling down the street. It crashed over a last-resort line of sandbags and then washed over our feet. Just like that, in seconds the water level had risen by a foot. Screams went up all over the apartment row as water poured into first-story floors.

“Yeah, whatever,” Peter said bitterly. Still, his next action was to fetch a duffel bag and dart out.

“Peter get back here! Help us out!” Ed shouted after him. Useless, the coward was already out of ear-shot.

“He’s not wrong. Running’s probably the safest thing to do right now,” Ash said.

“Yeah. Hi Jasmine. So what are you going to do?”

“Help evacuate,” Ash answered, and nodded to Decker. Our supervisor was taking charge and organizing people. He stormed into one apartment, efficiently ransacked it for vital supplies, and then shoved the owners out the door and towards a waiting bus. His example was followed by several volunteers, who spread out and began copying his heavy-handed tactic. Ash was about to join in.

“And you?” Ed asked me.

I stared down Windrift. Another wave came washing down, raising the water level to our knees. The boys retreated to the second-story staircase. Ash reached out a hand to help me up.

I stood my ground.

Is it enough to stand back and let Ash do everything? If I’m so worried about his feelings towards me, can I afford to sit back and bask in his attention? Will that win his affection?

That wasn’t exactly the way I was raised.

You lose the right to complain about not getting what you want if you never put in the work and sacrifice to earn it.

That’s right.

Give Ash a reason to admire you, the same way you’ve been admiring him all day, I thought to myself.

“There’s not enough time. I’m going to fight,” I declared. “Onix!”
Onix materialized over the water and came down with a huge splash.

“Um, dig up a ditch! And make another berm!”

Ash shrugged.

“She can’t do it alone,” he said, and jumped into the water beside me. Ed grumbled, but then he too stood by our side. We set to work, both our Pokemon and our own muscles being put to use.

Onix hated the water, but didn’t complain once he saw me shoving debris into piles. He followed suit. With his massive tail sweeping up boards, trash, and everything else, soon enough we had a workable garbage dump with which to blunt the waves. Ed’s Scyther cut apart poles and fencing, and Ash’s Rapidash used a combination of Fire Spin and Stomp to fuse them together. The boys erected the improvised fence across another section of the street.

Water still got through, and it was apparent we had no chance of stopping it. However, with our efforts, the difference in water levels between outside and inside the barrier became noticeable.

Several volunteers took note of the slowing rise. A few cheered our efforts, until Decker passed by and chewed them out for wasting their time cheering. After that, another dozen trainers and their Pokemon joined us. The work was frantic, and makeshift, and often as not the flood burst through one barrier and found its way around another. We didn’t give up though.

“Put these on,” one worker said, handing out life jackets. By then we were wading through water up to our chests and had to basically swim between debris heaps. It was cold, and strength-draining, but we struggled through it.

“Orrrgghhh.” Onix let out a low roar. He’s spent too much time in the water, he had to get out before he fainted.

“You can fall back, big boy,” Ash said. He was riding his Lapras around, guiding its Ice Beam onto leaks in the levee system. “Decker says this block is clear. We’re going to drop back to the community center,” he told me. I accepted his help up onto the majestic beast and rode clinging to his back. His shirt was soaked through.

Cold, I thought. But it feels good, to be this close.

The whole process repeated, this time slower and with less vigor. We were tired, and it showed in our work. I had Onix attempt to dig another draining ditch, but before it could be finished it was already filled up and overflowing. Ash’s Pokemon were breathing heavily and struggled to get the next barrier in place. Only when the trainer himself jumped in with his own back did they manage to stand up an aluminum fence.

“Jasmine, help fill the sand bags,” he asked of me. I looked down on the water lapping at our feet, and then up at our first barrier, which was already crumbling.

“I don’t think we have time,” I said.

“We’ve got to do something.”

“But, there’s nothing we really can do,” I pointed out. The others nodded. The floodwater was now entering the complex from every direction, at a rate faster than we could erect a barrier against, if we had any materials to build said barrier with, which we did not.

It was Mr. Decker who saved us the conundrum. He hustled up to us.
“Good work. That’s everyone out, I think. We need volunteers to check every unit, make sure no one got left behind.”

“I’ll do it,” Ash said immediately.

“Same,” Ed chipped in.

“I’d like to as well,” I said.

“You don’t have any Pokemon who can swim,” Ash reminded me. “You’d better evac with everyone else.”

“But I don’t want—” I held my tongue. I don’t want to leave you, was what I almost said.

Ash, you’re the one I feel safest around right now. Besides, there’s something about being with you that makes me feel, I don’t know how to say it… motivated? It’s like an attraction, but not exactly a romantic attraction, although I won’t deny that’s also played a part in my decision-making process. But beyond that, there was an undefined, positive force drawing me to his company.

“You should go,” he said.

“No,” I murmured.

“Neither,” Decker said, intervening. “Hope that Onix is still up. We need him to clear debris up by the gate.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“It’ll be okay. You go and do what you have to. I’ll join you soon,” Ash reassured me. He patted me on the shoulder.

Decker’s task turned out to be quick but painful. Trees had been uprooted, dragged along the road, and deposited in front of the main gate. The combined efforts of Pokemon and humans had cleared off some branches, but there still wasn’t enough room to allow vehicular traffic through.

“Can your Pokemon do it?” Mr. Decker asked.

“He will do it,” I asserted.

I know he will. Onix never backed down from a challenge.

And sure enough, the moment I pointed to the massive trunks, he slithered off with a power in his movements and determination in his stare. His tail wrapped around one great trunk, heaved, and wretched the whole thing end-over. It landed with a heavy thunk, the vibrations of which could be felt through the ground.

The second trunk was the largest.

“Double Edge,” I commanded. A single swing of Onix’s tail and the tree was shattered in two. Onix hauled them individually off the road. By then, water had started to wash over the road, immersing it by a few inches. Nervous drivers started honking and edging up on one another.

Onix tried pulling at the last tree trunk, but it wasn’t budging.

“Is it stuck?” I asked.
Onix was out of strength. He’s been working in wet conditions all day long, and was at his limit of water tolerance. For good measure he threw himself against the trunk. It budged a few inches, but no more.

I surveyed the obstacle for a moment.

“I’ve got a solution. Magnemite! Magnemite! Come here!”

Seeing as the work up until now had been unsuitable for my Electric types, they were fresh and ready to help.

“Sonic Boom the tree. Rip the branches off, all of them! Even the bark, if you can. I want it smooth.”

The pair acknowledged the command and set to the task. Slices of ultra-compressed sound waves ripped through the canopy. The leaves and twigs were readily cut apart, but the thicker branches resisted the attacks. The Magnemite found they had to concentrate together for a half minute to blast each major fork off the main trunk.

“It’s taking too long,” I said. What should I do? What would Ash do?

He would step in himself.

I spotted a hatchet resting among a collection of tools. I snatched it up and walked to the nearest big branch. I took aim, lifted the blade over my head, and came down with it full force.

The head hit its mark, amazingly. Unfortunately, the blow reverberated up and down my puny arms, jolting them with pain and causing me to let go.

“What’re you doing?” A worker approached me, hefting a chainsaw. “It’s easier with this baby.”

“Oh! By all means.”

I showed him where I wanted the tree stripped down. He and his crew of five tackled the branches with gusto. With my Magnemite shredding and disposing of the small stuff, they had easy access to problematic branches.

The water was up to our shins by the time they were done.

“Okay Onix, one last effort! Roll the tree off the road!”

“ONIX!” He bunched up into a coil, and sprung. Foliage exploded into the air. The trunk shifted a foot over, but did not roll.

“Again!” I urged.

Onix sprung again, and again the massive trunk shifted a few feet, but failed to roll or otherwise clear itself.

“Onix- that’s bad form! S-curve, and gain traction! Dig into the ground and apply continual pressure!”

“Oni!”
He pounded the flooded roadway with his tail.

“Yes, you have permission! Don’t mind the asphalt!”

Onix lowered his body and braced himself in a wriggling line. He did not spring violently forward this time, but pressed against the wood and pushed.

The tree never rolled, as I intended. However, with my revised posture, Onix found the purchase needed to simply shove the trunk across the road. Perhaps the rising water also served to buoy the obstacle. In any case, the trunk floated into the nearby ditch and the road was clear. Onix looked about ready to collapse, a possibility I forestalled by recalling him into his Pokeball.

Someone else’s Mr. Mime and Xatu put up a Reflect wall that temporarily held back the water. With everything clear, a hundred-vehicle motorcade slowly rolled through the gate. I watched them go until the last bus crested the hill, heading towards higher ground.

“Thanks for your help,” Decker said, giving me a handshake. “You trainers and your Pokemon are amazing. This would be hell of a lot harder without you all.”

“We try,” I said, looking away.

“Whatever possessed you to do this, anyways? It’s rough work, and you look like, what, thirteen?”

“Fifteen,” I corrected him. “And for myself, it’s because I have a duty to my position and my mentor, Mr. Beret.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right, that makes sense. Heh. Well, glad to have you here. Okay, now. We’ve got a couple outriggers over in the community parking lot. We’ll gather all the volunteers when they’re ready to scoot. We’ll rendezvous with the rest at Bravo and continue on from there.”

I nodded absently.

More? But we’ve already done so much and I’m completely exhausted! It would be nice to get into some dry clothes, or at the very least, dry shoes. I should have worn my sandals. Or rain boots (you don’t own rain boots, Jasmine). Ugh.

That aside, my mind wandered back to Decker’s statement.

Why were we doing this?

My answer was simple and straightforward- as a student of Mr. Beret and acting Gym Leader of Olivine City, this was my duty. It was expected of me. I hate letting people down.

But why oh why was a stranger, with no connections to this city and no obligations to anyone in it, throwing himself so bodily against such a strenuous, dangerous task?

I hopped a ride atop Magnemite and floated up to the roof of the community center. From there I could watch the other volunteers swim from building to building, knocking on doors, checking for signs of life, occasionally rescuing a stray Pokemon or overlooked valuable possession. I saw a red jacket working a block on the south side and followed its progress. Door by door, minute by minute, I counted down the distance between us.

A horn sounded, signaling we had no more time and for everyone to meet up. I clambered down onto the outrigger just as Ash pulled alongside atop Lapras. We jumped into the boat simultaneously, nearly bonking our heads together. Ash rubbed his head and we both laughed.
“That wasn’t too long, was it?” he said with a grin.

“Hehe. I’m ready to take a rest, get some dry clothes,” I said, wringing out my sleeves and jacket.

“Not me.”

I looked up to him.

He was already eying the next block of houses down the road. A fat old couple was struggling to lift a TV into the trunk of their car, even as the water was up over the wheels.

“It’s not over yet. There’s more to do. We can’t rest. I can’t rest,” he corrected himself.

I stared in disbelief.

“It’s almost sundown,” I said in protest.

“So?” he replied. “There are people who’ve lost everything. Do you think they’re going to sleep tonight?”

I shook my head.

“Then why should we? I’m gonna keep going.”

The evening that awaited us was torturous, miserable, and lasted an eternity. There was never a shortage of emergencies, never a break in the back-belaboring tasking, never fewer people requiring aid. It was hard. Not as hard as yesterday, not as soul-crushing and body-breaking as that dreadful march to the lighthouse. Yet, this came after that, and lasted much longer, and consequently demanded far more of my weary body, if not my spirit. Every time we seemed done, another call came in over the radio, sending us scurrying to another corner of the Bronze Sand Valley.

A family needed to be evac’d from their roof.

A boyfriend needed help locating his girlfriend.

A doctor needed someone to dive into his submerged clinic to retrieve vital subscriptions left behind.

An electrical substation needed to be turned off so they could reroute power around a downed transmission tower.

They wanted a sandbag wall around a local gas station.

A single mother and her three kids needed to be rescued from their rooftop.

Debris needed clearing from a vital road linking the upper and lower valleys.

An angry Pinsir was harassing a fire and rescue squad.

A middle-aged man needed to be evacuated from his roof (okay, yeah, this kind of thing happened a lot, and constituted the majority of our missions).

All throughout, Ash never stopped, and never complained. He kept going, and going, relentless, determined, and with the same intensity as ever. Even when his Pokemon grew tired, he kept throwing his own body at each and every challenge we encountered. Even when his body gave out and could no longer keep up the pace, his mind and will were still strong. No, what’s even more admirable, or absurd, depending on how you looked at it, was how after dozens of tasks and hours of
labor, he could still greet each survivor with a beaming smile and humble, reassuring words of encouragement.

Now I recognized what that feeling was earlier that I could not explain: Inspiration.

This was a young man gifted with that rarest of attributes, that is, natural-born leadership. I wanted to follow him. He was the kind of person anybody would want to follow. And I did. And so did many others. Before long Decker was the one deferring to Ash’s judgment, perhaps out of exhaustion and the desire to let someone else shoulder the burden of taking the initiative, but nonetheless. When the sun’s last light disappeared from the horizon and the moon rose up in the sky, there were some who mumbled about putting in for the night.

“Yeah, and there’s people and Pokemon who are going to spend the night in the water, waiting for someone to help them. I don’t like keeping people waiting,” Ash angrily responded. After that, a few of the least invested slunk back to their homes, but most stayed.

Later on, we cleared a flooded neighborhood roof by roof, checking for signs of victims. All the rooflines were clear, but even still, Ash insisted we search the alleys in-between as well. At one point he turned a high-powered searchlight down between a row of townhouses.

“Don’t look!” he suddenly said. Of course I wanted to look, but he got his hand up to my eyes in an instant.

“What is it?” I tried prying his fingers off my eyelids. “I want to see.”

“Deceased.”

My curiosity vanished.

I had to hold my stomach. Ash jumped off Lapras and onto his Kingler. He was gone for only a minute.

“Yeah. No helping them. Hand me one of those red flags.” I did so. He was gone for another minute. When he returned, he didn’t look the same. The intensity was gone.

“We can go back now,” he said softly.

We reached what passed for a shoreline and hopped off the Pokemon. Ash petted them up and down.

“You’re the last up. Thanks, guys. Thanks so much for putting up with me.” He hugged them both in turn, and recalled them. Then it was just him, me… and Nidoran.

The Poison Pin Pokemon was kept under Lapras’ care for the duration of our work. Now we had to figure out what to do with the little creature.

“I think there was a collection point for lost Pokemon back at the rally point,” I said. Ash nodded.

“Then let’s go and see what’s there. Come on, Pringles.” He’d taken to calling the Nidoran that. He apparently did not like the nickname, and would not respond to it- however, Poketreats were a different matter. He happily munched down on the raspberry flavored candies Ash offered. After that, it was a simple matter to keep him perched on Ash’s shoulder.

“How are you feeling?”
“Exhausted.”

“We did good,” he said.

“It’s not over. The recovery is going to go on and on. I can’t even imagine how long it’s going to last.”

“That’s okay. I’ll be here as long as it takes.”

“Aren’t you just a visitor, though? Why stay?”

He gave me a small laugh.

“Did you forget? I want to challenge you.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve been clinging to me just for that!” I let out.

“Ahaha! No, not at all! Hanging around you is nice. I kind of like you.”

There are no words… I’m speechless.

*I kind of like you.*

No no no no no! Don’t fool yourself, Jasmine! Remember what you’ve been told about boys, what you’ve learned about them through so many encounters! Remember Morty! They never really mean what they say!

Are you sure you’re not practicing a form of psychological spin control? Keeping your expectations negative in the hopes they turn out to be wrong?

I shook my head.

Keep your head clear, Jasmine! Stop fussing over it!

“Something wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You’re acting funny.”

“It’s nothing!” I blurted out.

“Okay.”

“Nidoran!”

Even the Pokemon can see what’s going on. Ash looked on placidly. Does he suspect? How is he reacting? What is he thinking?

You just told yourself to stop fussing over it!

We walked the rest of the way in silence, although not on account of my embarrassment and awkwardness; we were just too darn tired. It had been a long, grueling day. Following on yesterday’s emotional and physical torture, this ordeal had become a nonstop marathon of punishment upon my body. I think the worst was the chafing against all the raw, pruned parts of my limbs.
Base camp was dead. The only person with any energy left was the firefighter chief, Mr. Katoma, and even then it was just to pour over his computer, organizing recovery efforts for tomorrow. Of the twenty or so people still present, half were sleeping, and the other half were getting there. I didn’t see Ed or the other trainers. They must have gone home by now. Our handler Mr. Decker was hunching over a cup of hot chocolate. He quietly offered us each a cup as we passed by; Ash turned it down, I gratefully accepted.

“Katoma, sir, we’ve got a lost Pokemon.”

“Inside,” he motioned without looking at us.

The temporary camp was set up outside of a grocery store. Inside, a children’s playpen had been repurposed to hold lost Pokemon and keep them from running off. A number of smaller monsters were already situated within, most dozing. A few humans milled around.

“I guess this is where we let you off.”

Ash pulled Nidoran off his shoulder and held him up.

“Nor nor?” Awww. The cutie wants another snack.

“Don’t have any more.”

Nidoran’s expression soured and then went despondent. He took a woeful glance at the playpen.

“Gintima! Gin Gin! Gin Gin! Mom it’s Gin Gin!”

A young child, a tomgirl by the looks of her haircut and outfit, rushed over. She snatched the Nidoran before he could touch the floor, flung him skyward, and caught him on the way down. Pokemon and owner cried in joy.

“We found you! Oh Gintima! I was soooooo worried! I thought you were gone forever! Thank you mister!”

“Deedee, did you- oh you did! Thank goodness!” A mellow-looking lady teetered up to us. Her first reaction was to calm her daughter down and check Nidoran for injury. Her next action was to acknowledge us.

“You found him? Where at?”

“Near Windrift Street.”

“Oh that’s far! No wonder we couldn’t find him, we searched and searched… I’m sorry, I should be thanking you. That creature means the world to Deedee, she’s been going berserk since we lost him. We’re so happy you returned him to us.”

“Look! He’s gotten bigger! And tougher! He toughened up! I bet I can evolve him! Oh, oh, I bet I can beat the Gym Leader now!”

Ash gave me a glance. I giggled.

“I look forward to it,” I said.

“To what? I’m sorry.”

“Oh. My name is Jasmine Mikan, I’m the Gym Leader of Olivine City.”
“Oh! Really! Why, that makes so much sense, this is part of your job, isn’t it?”

I looked over the girl and her partner, lost in the throes of joyous reunion and showing infinitely more energy than the rest of the camp combined.

“It’s the best part of my job,” I told the mother.

“Again, I can’t thank you enough. Oh, Nidoran, Nidoran! What’s Deedee’s name, Gintima, that’s it! Gintima, come on! We need to get back to the shelter before they close! Let’s not bother these workers anymore!”

“Coming! Gin Gin, little prickly Gin Gin, scamper up and down and lick me on the chin chin!”

Nidoran did sprints across her arms and shoulders, never touching the ground, looking as if it had discovered jungle gym nirvana.

“Hi! Yes, we just found him. The Gym Leader and her friend brought him in, would you believe it? Good thing Deedee wanted to check one last time, right? Am I right?” The lady followed after her daughter, speaking excitedly into her cell phone to what I assumed was her husband. The mother, the daughter, the Pokemon, all united in one happy family.

They must have gone through what I went through yesterday. This is the reversal, the sudden flip between despair and joy, the abyssal depths of the former only serving to push the latter to greater heights.

What Ash did for me and Amphy, we did for this family.

No, Jasmine. You didn’t spot Nidoran. He did.

“I’m ready to put in for the night,” the young man announced while stretching his arms.

“You’ll be staying at the Pokecenter, I assume?”

“Got that right.”

“It’s a long walk.”

“Mmm. That’s a problem.”

“We can ride on top Onix.”

“Can we? I’ve never tried.”

“It’s easy.”

Onix appeared. I commanded him to take us back to the Pokecenter, and he obediently lowered his head. Ash climbed on top and took a tentative position behind his spike. I, with more experience, balanced on Onix’s forehead. And off we went.

The night above us was filled with stars. More stars than I’d ever seen. The sky glowed like daylight there were so many. We humans stared, captivated, by the celestial tapestry. By contrast, the earth was a darker void than the blackest reaches of space.

“There’s no light pollution to blot it out,” Ash explained.

“It’s beautiful.”
“Sometimes I think I’d like to retire somewhere really remote, so I can stay up late and soak this in every night.”

“Where would you do that?”

“Mmm. Mt. Silver, maybe.”

“It’s cold up there.”

“I can live with it.”

“But could you live alone?”

“I wouldn’t be alone. I’d have my Pokemon.”

“Well, they’re easier to get along with than people.”

“It wouldn’t be bad if I had someone I got along with really well by my side.”

“Heh.”

Ash waved the notion off.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I’m not sure I’m marriage material.” He paused. “Bah! That’s such an awkward thing to talk about! Forget it, forget it, that’s way in the future! I’ve got things I want to do first!”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like become world champion!”

“You’ll never make it. That’s too much to dream for.”

“Is it?” He held a fist to the air. “I bet none of the other world champs ever told themselves to aim low. They always reached as high as they could, and believed in themselves and their Pokemon. They never doubted they could climb to the top! So I won’t either.”

“Poignant words.”

“That’s what Professor Oak told me. He’s got two cups, so it’s not like he doesn’t know what he’s talking about, right?”

“True. I’ve nothing to criticize that logic. It’s sound.”

“Goofy. And what about you? Do you have a dream?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“Can’t tell you,” I said, sticking out my tongue.

“What’s this? Shy girl can’t spit out her secret?”

“It’s the kind of dream that evaporates if you ever share it.”

“I won’t tell anyone, I promise.”
“Nope! I will not divulge!”

Ash patted me on the shoulder.

“Well, then, whatever it is, work as hard as you can towards it, and I’m sure it’ll come true.”

“Hey Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“About our match… when did you think you would like to have it?”

“Oh, don’t know.” He considered the question for a moment. “I guess, whenever you’re ready. I burned through Goldenrod and Ecruteak really fast, and now I’m kind of regretting it. Wish I’d stop and taken in the sights. I guess, what I was thinking was to stay put for a while and train.”

“Oh. I see.”

“So, maybe a month or so would be good.”

“Mmm.”

A month.

Can I woo him over the course of a month? And then what?

I guess we will see.

For now, it’s time to rest and relax. It was a hard day.

“Hey Jasmine?”

“Yes?”

“That Nidoran family.”

“What about them?”

“I’m really happy I got to meet them.”

“Me too.”

“Everything we did today, all the work, we did for moments like that. I know a lot of people died, and a lot more lost so much. It’s going to be tragic for them. But the silver lining is, all this tragedy really makes you appreciate everything good in life. I love those moments.”

“Stop it.”

“I mean it!”

“I know that! But still, it’s too much, too sappy!”

Ash leaned flat on his back.

“Yesterday was bad. Today, though, today was good. Tomorrow will be better. And every day after that, hopefully, we’ll remember what it was like right now, and give ourselves a little smile, that the worst is over. Today was a good day,” he repeated lazily.
No, Ash.

Today was a great day.

Because, for all the pain and suffering, I got to spend it with Amphy, who shouldn’t be alive, and
with you, the wonderful young man who made that miracle possible.

Without a doubt, this was the best day of my life.

We reached the Pokecenter, later than intended on account of Onix’s weariness slowing his pace
down. I didn’t mind, it gave me extra time to be with my hero. Each moment around him felt more
and more sacred, to the point I started counting it out like currency earned.

Alas, to my woe, our time together needed a reprieve. Ash began waltzing off towards the public
hostel section of the Pokecenter. I tugged at his sleeve.

“What is it? Ooof!”

He wasn’t expecting my hug. Nevertheless, he took it and reciprocated it.

“Be safe,” he said, and then disappeared within the doors.

“I will,” I said after him.

The rest of the ride home was spent in dreamy reverie, imagining a future I had only the faintest hope
of happening.

‘He’ll go on his journey and I’ll be stuck here…’ was a recurring thought/fear. I assuaged myself.

He’ll like Olivine so much he’ll decide to stay!

No, that’s unrealistic.

He’ll go on his journey and do what he set out to accomplish! He’ll become world champion! And
then he’ll remember the pretty girl who urged him on and come back to settle in Olivine.

No, no, he’ll forget me when leaves.

Not if you go meet him.

Join him on his quest? I can’t just drop everything here, my family, my Pokemon, my position at the
gym, Amphy…

Next summer. See if you can be let off to go on that Pokemon journey you’ve been procrastinating
on. Then you can catch up to Ash.

That may be your best bet.

Summer is such a long time away.

So get his cell phone number, or Pokenav number, or whatever he uses…
Tomorrow. Fret over him tomorrow.

For now, sleeeeeeeep…..

I recalled Onix and zombie-walked inside the door of my house.

“I’m home,” I said with a big yawn.

“Where the hell have you been?”

I stopped cold.

She was waiting for me, in the foyer, arms crossed, an icy stare upon her face. My breathing came to a standstill. I had nothing to say in my defense. Every tired nerve throughout my body was suddenly and painfully on edge. The air hung suffocating and still, like the final passing seconds before an execution.

Mother reached around me and slammed the front door shut with a bang!

My wonderful day was over. My terrible night had just begun.
The Mikan Inquisition

Four hundred and eighty six. It’s just a meaningless number, no different than four hundred and eighty five or four hundred and eighty seven. There is no qualitative difference between it and other big but not very big numbers. Even if it were assigned a value, like days passed, Pokemon encountered, or battles won, it’s the kind of statistic that raises no great emotions or evokes any kind of response from an ordinary human. Even when it is the value of the number of lives lost during a devastating hurricane, there is no way to connect to it, no way to appreciate the magnitude or meaning of it. It’s just a number.

Two is a much smaller number. And also, two is the number of coffins being carried down the aisle between rows of black-clad relatives. Two is the number of family members lost, never to return to our lives, never to grace us with their presence, never to create their own experiences and joyful memories, no longer a part of our world. For that, two is a much larger number than four hundred and eighty six.

I never knew the people in the coffins. I did, however, know Beth. She was the one classmate I managed to reconnect with after my exile to Ecruteak. To see her hunched and weeping brought me pain. Through her, I felt the loss of the two lives more acutely than the hundreds of strangers with whom I never had a connection.

I looked around, dwelled on each individual face of sorrow.

We’re all connected. We’re all suffering.

Four hundred and eighty six is a large enough number of people, in a city of two hundred thousand, so that everyone is touched in some way.

If I had drowned in the bay, who would be here at my funeral? How far would my web of mourners reach?

The church was crowded, hundreds packing the pews, to the point that latecomers were forced to stand around the perimeter.

Not as far as this, probably.

The coffins passed out of the chamber. A brief pause, and then a stir of motion washed through the room as everyone sought to rise. I got up. Beth tried to do so, and broke down. By happenstance, it was my shoulder she fell on. I hugged and held her, coddled her as best I could. It was awkward on my part, I didn’t know how to comfort someone. For Beth, I’m not sure it mattered, as she continued to cling to me all the way out the door and down to the parking lot. When I went to join Mr. Beret’s car, she followed, holding my arm. On the way to the cemetery, she wept into my shoulder. Ed sat opposite, took a look at us girls, and shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

We walked to the graveside along with everyone else. I escorted Beth to her parent’s side, and then turned to take my place among the friends and acquaintances. A hand gripped me.

“Stay,” she murmured.

It was a confusing request. As I took my place among the inner family, I felt out of place, that I didn’t belong in such an intimate circle. Nor did I understand why Beth wanted me to keep by her side. I was no motherly Swanna, ready to take a grieving child under wing. Rather, I felt like a Sudowoodo, stiff, deceptively fragile, and prone to snap at the lightest stress.
I looked to the boys for support. Ed had no answers and shook his head. Mr. Beret nodded for me to pay attention to the rites.

Beth gripped my hand harder. Her sandy golden hair flung up in the wind across my nose. I brushed it off and patted the back of her head.

Why me? What was I doing here? Shouldn’t she be crying on her mother’s arm, or brother, or father? What consolation was I to her? I’m feeling about as inert and useless as the earth being turned over into the hole.


The last handful of dirt slid off the shovel and was tamped down. Soon seeds would be scattered over the earth and watered, and by autumn the ground would be flush with slender green stalks.

People departed in small groups. There would be no wake, it was not appropriate with so many having so much to do in the aftermath of the storm. Even still, I would have thought the immediate family would want to return to their home and mourn together. Not Beth. When all the other relatives left for their cars, once again she opted for Mr. Beret’s vehicle. We rode back to the gym in silence.

I looked out the window and watched as one ravaged block passed by after another. I was awed and humbled by the destruction, and now saw it anew, without the shock and urgency of crisis, but with the sadness and numbness of a tragedy passed. Each house washed out by flood, each business ripped up by gale, I did not marvel at the viciousness of the damage, but wondered whom no longer had a home, a job, a place to belong, and how that would affect their lives, how hard it must be for them.

So much ruin. So much pain.

And here I am, sitting, untouched, unfazed, and feeling nothing.

‘*There go I but for the grace of God.*’

A phrase Father had used a few days ago. We were watching refugees of the Bronze Sand Valley stream across central Olivine, hauling whatever they could salvage. I saw a brother and sister, adults, bearing their exhausted, elderly mother between them. The expression in the old lady’s face was unnatural, shell-shocked. That’s what prompted Father to pitch in. I hadn’t told him about the boat incident, but it seemed like he knew, and those words were spoken for me.

“There go I,” I whispered.

No wonder she was so mad.

“How could I?

She’s going ballistic. I’m scared.

“Do you… can you possibly comprehend how much trouble you are in?! How much trouble you’ve already caused?! Two whole nights, in the middle of a storm, I’m hearing nightmare scenarios from
across the city and you didn’t come home, didn’t even contact me! What was I supposed to think when you went missing? Do you know what I thought? ‘This is it. I’ve lost my daughter.’ I had every reason to believe you were dead!”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s it? ‘sorry’? Do you honestly believe that’s going to make it okay? When you can just apologize away your blunders, mistakes, and fuckups?”

“I really am sorry.”

“I have heard sorry out of you too many times before! I don’t believe it anymore! Are you really sorry? Truly? Are you going to do the things you need to do to fix your head and avoid these kinds of damn mistakes in the future? Because I have no faith, no faith whatsoever that you can! Or even that you want to!”

“I did leave a message-”

“Two days ago! Before the storm! And you said you would be at the lighthouse, which you weren’t, not when I called in, nor were you at the gym, nor at the school, and no one could tell me a fucking thing about your whereabouts! I was completely in the dark! Where the hell were you? Wait, don’t answer. It doesn’t matter, because of all places, the only one you should have been is right here! How can I call myself a parent, how can I be held responsible for a child that does not take the most basic responsibility for their own safety seriously?!”

“I had to help. There were so many needing rescue, including-” I started explaining but she cut me off-

“Help? Help who, strangers? Don’t tell me- Pokemon. What a load of shit! You are no hero, Jasmine. Wrapped up in all those damn fantasies of yours, I want to know, really, truly, did it ever occur to you that you could have, should have died out there?! Do you even understand what death is?”

“I know what death is.”

“Really now? That’s news to me! Because either your reckless scampering around town in a disaster demonstrates a blithe ignorance to the state of non-existence, or you are outright suicidal and seeking it!”

Mr. Beret pulled off the road and into a small drive. I didn’t recognize where we were. Somewhere in the coastal hills, by the looks of it. Once out of the trees, we were greeted by the vastness of the ocean. Crescent Bay Park lay out below us.

“Where are we going?” Ed asked.

“I have to make a visit,” Beret answered. We pulled up to the crest of the hill. A small lot walled off by wrought-iron fencing was perched overlooking the bay. A peep through the bars made apparent that this was another cemetery. The car pulled to a stop before its gates.

“Stay outside. You’re not allowed in,” Beret warned gruffly. He unlocked the gate and slipped
inside.

We three kids wandered off, generally gravitating towards the hill crest. I took a seat in the grass. Beth sat beside me, scrunching her legs in tight to her chest. Ed stood sentinel over us.

Beth spoke up first. Her voice was shaky and addressed to no one in particular.

“I feel awful.”

“That’s natural,” Ed said.

“The preacher told us to remember them when they were alive, but I can’t stop thinking about the last time I saw them, and how they’re not here anymore. All I can think about is that they’re gone, and I’m never going to see them again, and how awful that feeling of losing them is. It makes me feel sick. I know I’m allowed to feel sad, but this is like… terror. For the future. For me. For everyone I know.”

“Nnn.”

I had no answer nor anything to say that could assuage her.

Although, she was talking, that’s a good sign.

“I’m so afraid. No one told me how to handle this.”

I looked to Ed, he looked back to me. We were both thinking the same thing.

No one told us either.

Death really is abstract until it’s not. Then it hits you full in the face, and if you’re lucky, it takes you and you don’t have to worry anymore. For those left behind, it places them in an unwinnable battle, against time, and against reality.

Reality is realistic.

A harsh, harsh reminder.

We spent the next ten minutes staring awkwardly at the sky, the ocean, the park, anything but one another. Beth took turns sobbing, telling us little things she remembered about her aunt and uncle, sobbing again, and falling silent. It was uncomfortable going on excruciating. I felt helpless, again. A different kind of helpless, but nonetheless, not equipped by temperament nor experience to handle the issue before me.

Mr. Beret reappeared, locked the gate, and ushered us back to his car. Ed rode up front this time. Beth didn’t buckle up, but lay in my lap.

“I’m so sorry, putting you through this,” Beth said to me.

“Are you sure you want to be here? Wouldn’t it be better to be with your parents? I’m not sure I’m helping.”

She shook her head.

“You just keep being you. It helps. I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t make sense.” She sighed, sniffled, wiped her eyes. “You’re our rock, Jasmine. I can count on you to be just like you are, a stubborn girl, nothing gets to you.”
“That’s not true.”

“It’s true enough for me. When I think of you, I think- ‘there’s someone who doesn’t care’."

“Hey! That’s definitely not true!” I blurted out.

“It’s not… I’m sorry, that came out wrong.” Beth sucked in a deep breath. “You’re not sad, Jasmine. You’re not upset. I can’t stand to be around my parents right now, they just keep reminding me of auntie and uncle, how miserable we all are. I couldn’t stand someone who was cheery and happy either, that would make me rage. Like, ‘How dare they shove their good feelings in my face!’ But you- you’re just a stonewall. Someone to hug, who will take my hug without fuss. At least, you’ve done it so far. I never asked, just assumed… is that alright? You can do that much, can’t you?”

“I… I don’t know.”

After everything that’s happened, I feel like crumbling myself. Only the fear of judgment instilled in me by her, and the discipline to stand firm under pressure instilled in me by Beret, allows me to keep up this stoic façade. I wonder if anyone has seen through it, and how much longer I can keep it up.

I patted Beth’s head down and stared at our driver. The old man kept his eyes fixed firmly on the road. Ed glanced between us.

“Sir,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Um, can’t you say something? For Beth?” he asked tentatively.

Beret snorted.

“You want comfort from me, little girl? Some sage advice to help cope with the loss? I’ve lost a lot of good men, good friends, family, in my time. Horrible deaths, some of them, nightmares you civies will never know. Yes, I’ve taught myself how to cope, if that’s what you want to call it. Look at me! Is this what you want to be like? Do you want to become a bitter old human like me, Murasaki?”

Beth murmured something, it sounded like it could be a ‘no’.

“Don’t ask me for succor. You wouldn’t want it. Hayate can do better.”

Thanks for the vote of confidence, captain- not.

He’s such a harsh, grating old man, but I understand where he’s coming from. To have gone through what he’s been through, it would change most humans… break them. Was he broken? Not that I could really tell, but I knew how belligerently averse he was to the concept of pity, especially self-pity. I remember the one moment he was ever careless with his feelings, shortly after informing us of his cancer.

‘Stoicism is a coping mechanism, Hayate. Do not mistake it for strength. It is a tool for the weak and fearful to hide their weakness and fear.’

I remember his grim face, and the shiver that ran down my back as I listened to his next words.

‘I appointed you as my successor because you never looked up to me as a hero.’

I think he saw it then.
He knew I understood his meaning and would not make that mistake, because he saw that same quiet, stoic stubbornness in me. Everyone else just mistook it for shy modesty, and some, such as Beth in my lap, took it as patient acceptance and caring. They’re wrong, and Mr. Beret is right. It’s almost cruel what he just told us- “Hayate can do better”. That was only relatively true. I was young and he was old and burdened by so many horrible tragedies. He was asking of me what he himself could not, or would not, do, even though he knew we were of the same mold.

He is older and therefore wiser, Jasmine. Very likely, he’s guiding you away from a future like his own. Those words- ‘Do you want to become a bitter old human like me?’- were also for me.

I sighed and tumbled those thoughts in my head for the rest of the car trip. Beth took my passivity as acceptance and continued to use my lap as her cry-pillow. The men up front sat stony-faced, eyes forward, not saying a word. When we reached the gym, our procession was robotic and inhuman. Once inside, Beret quietly, with a few words, set us to work cleaning the place up and preparing for tomorrow’s resumption of gym activity. The rest of the afternoon was spent in study, making up schoolwork missed during the storm. On account of my prolonged absence to tend to Amphy, I had missed more work than the others. Ed helped me out on that account, for which I was grateful.

“You all are back to school tomorrow, correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“So I expect to see you at 15:30 prompt.”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

Mr. Beret waved us off.

Ed and I escorted Beth back to her car.

“You’re going to be alright, right?” Ed asked her.

“Yeah.”

“Call Jasmine or I for anything. We’re always here for you.”

“Okay.”

Ed said goodbye to me, with a parting question.

“Going home?”

I was turned and had taken a half-step back towards the gym.

“Yes,” I answered. “I just wanted to… I don’t know.”

It was hard to articulate, because I had no definitive action in mind, just a thought that was in need of physical expression.

“I’ll see you tomorrow in class. Be safe.”

“Goodbye.”

I waved Ed goodbye half-heartedly and then followed my feeling back inside. I made it as far as the
office doorway before pausing. It was still open and I could peep inside. I did, without entering or making a sound.

Mr. Beret was writing in a book, a diary by the looks of it. This was a surprise, I never knew he kept a diary. After a short while he leaned back into his den chair. Another minute passed and then a few more (actually eight, I counted off the clock on the wall), and at last a soft snore assured me he had fallen asleep. I tip-toed across the office, until I was within a step of the captain’s desk. One more glance at the slumbering old man to confirm… ah, good, no movement. I paused, trying to keep my nerves from frying up. If he woke up now, I was toast.

Daintily, I nudged the diary around so I could read it. It wasn’t an ordinary diary with blank lines, but had sections and acronyms printed onto it in organized groupings.

A captain’s log, I realized.

The date, weather, and personnel were noted in their proper spaces, the navigation panel was filled out with our destinations for the day. The most extensive writing was near the bottom, in the misc. notes section. It was small and crammed into the margins, making it difficult to read. I took another glance at Mr. Beret, hoping and praying he would remain asleep, and then leaned in close to read.

‘Attended funeral of subordinate’s relatives lost to tropical storm. Tragic circumstances. Visited Kerry’s resting place. Had subordinates ready gym. Attended to post-storm and routine financial matters. Planned session to teach successor how to handle these duties. Pain in stomach growing by day, intend to rest for the evening shortly.

…I am again reminded of my ineptitude in all manner of things, and most especially, basic human empathy. I was asked to assuage the pain of the bereaved, and once again I found the task impossible. Kerry would be ashamed. I am afraid to die, if only because it would mean facing all those I have let down by this pitiless ethos I have lived by. It was meant to ensure there would be no such tragedies, but that way of living has limits, and no recourse beyond.

I am so bitter. So hateful at what I have become.

Hayate- when you inevitably sneak in and read this, I want you to heed my advice. Do not follow my path. Learn compassion. Let my toil mean something. If by you and the others I can leave something positive to this world, at least I will not regret the pain I have suffered and inflicted.

And dear God, smile, like you used to.’

I almost jumped and crashed into the bookcase behind me upon reading the last paragraph. Regaining my composure, I righted the log and slowly, carefully backed away from the desk.

He knew I was there, he knew I would be too curious to let his open diary alone, he knew! The man is the devil, I swear it!

My heated rush to exit cooled off, and I trotted to a stop by the far wall. My attention came to dwell on the trophy shelf. It was a small thing, we weren’t known for our accomplishments here. A handful of minor medals and miniature statues were shoved towards the back, a thick coat of dust dirtying their surface. These were facile awards, “Johto Gym Leader of the Year”, “1000th Victory Commemoration”, and so on, nothing Mr. Beret would care about. None belonged to me. As acting gym leader, I was not yet eligible.

One stood out, though; it was a simple plaque, dusted and polished, standing up front and center for all to see and note.
“Commendation for Valorous Action, awarded to Captain Ian Beret and the Crew of the S.S Testament, July 2nd, 1985”.

He never told us the story of what happened, ever. Of course, I looked it up on the internet and got the general story: the Balkov Peninsula Conflict, anti-government militias besieged a port city and cut off supplies to thousands of civilians; Beret and his ship made a daring run through the straights to deliver food and medical supplies while coming under fire from artillery, torpedo boats, sea mines, and combat Pokemon units. Those were just the facts, though, Beret refused to share his personal experience, or why he retired from the navy shortly after. It must have affected him.

I took another glance at the former captain, a flimsy skeleton of a once strong man, swallowed up in his armchair and snoring gently.

He looks so pitiful, and yet, he has earned the right to be. Fifty years of service to others, it’s amazing all he’s done for his country and his city. He is respected, even idolized, in this community, and if I don’t follow the rest in hero worship, it is only because I’ve gotten too much exposure to his terrible temper. Add it all up, and he has accomplished enough to deserve the title of “Hero”. Yet, even he has regrets and worries.

You want me to be your legacy? You want me to surpass you, to make the same impact on the universe as you, and somehow attain happiness too? I’m supposed to do all that by myself? That’s cruel, Mr. Beret. I can’t handle all these expectations.

I can’t even handle her expectations.

Well, Jasmine, let’s be real. Repeating Beret’s blockade run through the Strait of Balkov would be easier than meeting her expectations.

“I didn’t mean to not tell you, it just slipped my mind.”

“LOOK LOOK LOOK LOOK, JUST SHUT UP! You are not getting it. Not calling in was your last mistake, not your biggest! You should not have been out there in the first place. You were to be here, at home, by my side, where I can keep track of you, where I don’t have to blow my fucking head for worrying about your safety. By all appearances you don’t give a damn about your own survival, but think about me! If we lost you, how would I face your father? Your teachers? Child services?! They’d haul me off to jail for gross negligence! And for what? Because I failed to drill into your thick, stubborn head the basic tenets of survival, like “return home during a crisis”. It’s viciously unfair, is what it is, heaping on me this impossible responsibility of raising a disobedient brat like you! Shut up!”

She cut me off the moment I opened my mouth. There was no getting a word of defense against her.

“What am I supposed to do with you? I have tried everything. I have tried so hard to teach you how to function in society, to be a positive to others, not a drain, not a burden, and this is the result I get: a flippant abdication of responsibilities.”

“But I-”

“I’m not done! Shut that mouth! There is no defense for this, no excuse! I already have a good idea where you have been and what you’ve been doing. Relief work, for Pokemon and strangers, right?”
“How?” I gasped out.

“Mud caked boots, ripped up jeans and t-shirt- which you’ll be replacing with your allowance, by the way- it’s obvious enough even without the local radio bragging about the efforts of the gym staff. And I bet you feel so great inside, helping all those idiots and getting all that recognition. That wasn’t your job though, that wasn’t your responsibility.”

“It was too!” I shouted out. “I’m the gym leader, I have to-”

“You are an under-aged little child playing a grown-ups’ gladiator game! You teach monsters to hit and bite and burn and blast each other! You are in no way qualified to carry out disaster relief! If you wanted so badly to help out, we have enough downed trees right here in our neighborhood! Where you could have done it under supervision, not gallomping across the city where any freak accident or criminal could have ended you. Good grief, you think you’re an adult!”

She leaned back against the wall and hissed out a long string of curses and self-reprobations.

“What the fuck was I thinking? David, damn it, I knew better, and I let you talk me into it anyways.”

She turned on me.

“Where was that old bastard, what was he doing through all of this? He at least should have got in touch with me.”

“Sick. Mr. Beret has cancer.”

“Cancer!” she spat out, incredulous and wild-eyed. “And they keep him in charge of that place?! Then, then, who the hell was in charge while he was gone?”

I held firm.

“I was.”

SLAM!

Ornaments rattled on the shelves as her fist met the wall. The blow left a dent in the drywall.

“You are a child, not fit to be in charge of a fucking bathroom stall, let alone an athletic establishment, to say nothing of a disaster relief effort! You should know your place!”

Her scream reverberated off the walls and ceiling of the house. She was becoming shrill. She knew it, too, and took several deep breaths before continuing.

“This was not supposed to happen. These kinds of episodes were supposed to be a thing of the past. Damn it, it’s like elementary school all over again. We’re regressing. Why? What happened? It’s because I let you take that gym position, isn’t it? They’re giving you too much freedom and power and it’s getting to your head.”

“No! It’s not like that at all!” I replied indignantly. “Being a gym leader is full of responsibilities. It’s taught me discipline, like you always wanted. What have I done since joining to make you think like that? My grades are fine, my chores get done, you don’t get calls from the principal anymore! Signing that consent form was one of the best things you’ve ever done for me!”

Wrong answer.

“The only reason I allowed you to join that establishment was because your father promised me the
old man would straighten you out and keep you out of trouble. My apologies if I don’t share your
rosy assessment of your personal growth!”

She started counting off points on her fingers:

“Young grades are nowhere near where they need to be to enter a half-decent college;

For every mess you clean up your damn Pokemon create another;

Instead of calls from the principal I’m now getting calls from the mayor’s office!

And I’m so glad you brought up consent forms, because I would love to see the form that gave you
permission to recklessly throw yourself into a disaster zone! You have no idea how much trouble
you could have brought down on us. If you had died, if you had hurt yourself, if your naïve actions
managed to get someone else hurt, or damaged their property, or interfered with actual, professional
rescue efforts- I never signed off on that. Who did? Was it Beret? Did he give you permission?”

“No, he didn’t. He wasn’t even around.”

“Ha! Don’t make me laugh, Jasmine. Permission by omission of prohibition, ever heard that phrase?
If that old dirt bag had been doing his job, you would know better than to run off. What kind of
guidance are you getting there? The wrong kind, apparently. What a piece of trash, a failure.”

“He’s not trash!”

She could belittle me all she wanted, with good reason, but there was no way I would stand her
insulting my mentor.

“He- he- he’s the most upstanding man in the city, you’ve done nothing compared to him!”

SMACK!

My cheek burned red.

“You’re right! I have sacrificed so much and gotten nothing for it! Not a decent job nor a good
husband or even a respectable daughter! Why, I must look like shit compared to the “Heroic”
Captain Beret! Shut the fuck up! Don’t you dare, ever, ever question me like that!”

I clutched my cheek and backed away. It was hard to bite away the tears foaming up. It was outright
impossible to hide my fear. This woman could reduce anyone to whimpers with just her words, but I
knew the truth- she could so easily break me with her fists. Mine was a terrifying position to be in.

I sniffled. My voice came softly and stuttered. An apology was necessary, before she exploded.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It was wrong to say.”

Her hard stare grew colder, but she did back off and relax her stance by a fraction.

“I wanted to say, it’s not Mr. Beret’s fault. He didn’t know what was going to happen. This all
started because… I did what I did because Amphy was sick.”
“Amphy! Okay boy, vacation’s over!”

For his part, Amphy was overjoyed to be leaving. He scurried around to collect his belongings, checking under the bed, inside the drawers, and everything in between. In the blink of an eye he was standing before me, at attention, with his backpack loaded and a little impatient bounce to his stance.

“Amph pha pha!” -I’m ready!

The Pokecenter staff waved us a cheerful farewell.

“Goodbye! We hope to see you again!” the nurse said. We both laughed (it was the not-so-subtle slogan/joke of Pokecenters everywhere). Amphy kept in-step just behind me as we worked our way through the busy urban streets.

“We’re going shopping for new clothes for me, and maybe some accessories for you, and then back to the lighthouse. Sound good?”

“Ampha!”

“Alright!”

We visited a department store where the majority of my savings disappeared into a new pair of jeans and t-shirt. I tried them on before a mirror.

“Ugh.” My hair spikes had fallen out again, my hair was a mess. Better find some new clips before we leave.

As for the pants, they looked okay, but I wasn’t entirely satisfied. I showed them to Amphy, who gave me a positive appraisal.

“You’d say anything looks good! You have no fashion sense!”

“Ampha!”

“Well try this on!”

I stuck a lady’s hot-pink scarf around his neck. The male Pokemon promptly ripped it off, flung it as far as he could into the air, whereupon it fell right back on top of his head. He fought with the fabric until the whole thing twisted around him in an inextricable knot. I laughed. He whined.

“Not your style, huh? I’m sorry.” I gently untied him and replaced the scarf. Next I showed him several more scarves and pull-overs, these more masculine in style. He seemed indifferent. A tug came on my t-shirt.

“What is it?”

He was pointing to a store across the way. I squinted to make out the name.

‘Boss Pro! Pokemon Accessories! Pokemon Battle Items! Pokemon Supplements! All Pokemon, All The Time!’

“Oh okay,”

We happily jaunted over, Amphy miming the things he wanted to look at.

“But you never battle, what would you do with a Magnet?”
“Pharoowawa! Aoophal!”

“Oh please, no one is going to attack you!”

“Amphooie! Rapho! Phar phura amphar phua raphua am pa pa ampharup!”

“Wait what?”

“RAPHUA! Phua amp!”

“Monsters! No way! Oh now you’re scared, huh?”

“Amphar par. Umpha uuu.”

“There’s no monsters hiding under your bed.”

“Phu rararu phar!”

“They can’t follow you home because they don’t exist! I think you stayed too long at the Pokecenter, what did they do, drug you? Aw come on, don’t sulk! What about a new Light Globe? You can use it to send Zubat-signals across the bay! Wouldn’t that be funny?”

“Pharaoho!”

“Ahaaha! Of course!”

The automatic door to the Pokeshop slid open and I nearly stepped in. Made it three inches inside, even.

Then about-face, fast-march, and ten seconds later I was gooooooonce.

No, no, no.

…

NO!

I shook my head and checked behind me.

Why was he here? This is too much of a coincidence!

Ampharos hopped up behind, looking befuddled.

“Ampharoo? Phar phar?” he cried out, confused and disappointed. He wanted to go back and look at the toys.

“Nope. No can do. Not happening. Maybe later. Is he still there?” I peeped around the corner. Yes, yes he was, just standing there and browsing the shelves. I flittered back behind the corner.

Amphy cocked his head. He took his turn to peep around the corner.

“Ampharos!” He recognized the young man and waddled out to hail him. I dragged the Pokemon back behind cover by his tail, and then clamped my hand down on his mouth before he could cry out and give us away.

“No! You can’t! I can’t meet him... it’s not good right now!”
“Amphar?”

“Just trust me. It’s complicated. For now, um, sorry, we’ll have to go to another store or something.

“Pharoooo.” -the sound of a disgruntled and disappointed Pokemon.

I guided Amphy to the nearest Pokemart, aware that their selection for toys and trinkets was far more limited than the specialty shops. Amphy was also aware, and displeased, and did not hide his displeasure. Trash began flying across the street, courtesy of his Tail Whip.

“Oh don’t be that way! I’ll buy you snacks, how does that sound?”

It sounded like the *thunk* of a soda bottle hitting a street sign. Maybe he’s upset because I wouldn’t let him greet his savior.

The soda bottle landed back near Amphy, who kicked it full force back the way we came. I checked to see if it hit anyone.

“Oh no.”

He’s there!

Run!

I took Amphy by the arm and sprinted off. We huffed our way into the Pokemart, catching the eye of the staff and customers.

“I’m okay!” I announced, and then sheepishly made my way to the back aisles.

Ash strolled through the doors a few seconds later.

Oh no, he’s following me! You’ve got to be kidding! This is bad!

But wait, he’s not…

The young man’s behavior was not that of someone seeking another. His gaze went to the restorative item shelf. He slowly worked his way down the aisle, picking things out, putting them back, weighing the merits of each individual potion brand.

Oh dear, he hasn’t seen me. Good, but not good.

“Keep down!” I told Amphy with a hush. I spied the young man’s red cap moving between the shelves. He had an erratic browsing pattern, such that he would slowly peruse one section at a leisurely pace, and then suddenly take off to a completely different part of the store in a kind of frenetic rush. It didn’t do me any favors that he kept his line of sight on the front entrance clear. I tiptoed along, ducking between aisles and diving behind display cases.

“Eeek!”

“Ack!”

“Ooowah!”

A series of complex contortions behind the cardboard cutouts ensued.

“Hmm.” He was looking directly at us, with nothing but the beaming image of Banana Man and
Cherry Woman separating us. Amphy and I stood like frozen mimes, holding our breath. The other customers gave me befuddled, suspicious gazes. I shook my head, silently begging them to ignore us.

“I bet these taste great.”

Wait, what?

I heard the sound of teeth crunching into something.

He’s tasting the Poketreat samples.

Ew! That’s just gross!

“Bleh!”

Coughing, spitting, disgusted grunts met my ear.

Ah, his taste buds are human after all.

“Milk.” He rounded the displays. He was right there, in front of me, with his back towards me.

“Wait!”

He whirled around.

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head, oblivious to the old woman and her shopping cart passing by. He made his way to the back aisle where they kept refrigerated goods. Incidentally, there was a young woman and her Pokemon hiding behind the aforementioned cart and making a breakaway for the exit.

“Phew!”

“Ampha! Raa roo ura! Ampharo!”

“No. We’re going straight back. Come on. Hey, don’t sulk, or I’ll put you in your Pokeball!”

Once out of the crowded shopping district, I let out Onix and rode him the rest of the way. Amphy rode behind me, staring backwards at the receding urban sprawl. The sun shined across the city, with a few stray clouds covering the sky. It was warm, but not yet oppressively hot or humid. It was a beautiful day, really.

“Raaaaa.”

“What’s that?”

“Aph.”

“Ash?”

Amphy nodded.

He was asking why I was avoiding him.

“It’s sort of embarrassing, I can’t get into it without being weird. Um. Yeah. I’m just so embarrassed and ashamed, that’s all. I’m nervous. Jittery. Don’t you ever get that way? Oh, wait, of course not. You’re a Pokemon, you wouldn’t know about crushes, would you? Ahahaha, sorry!”
Amphy puffed up in indignation.

“I know you wanted to see him, but maybe later, okay?”

We arrived at the lighthouse. Amphy looked about his room, sniffed here and there, rearranged certain things to his liking. There were still signs of damage from the hurricane. There wasn’t really time for me to clean up, I still had school work to do, but later on I’ll see to it. Amphy was taking it upon himself, anyways, seeing as he was picking up trash and depositing it into the trash can. Eventually we made our way to the top deck. Amphy inspected the equipment, making sure it was in working order. I smiled with pride. He knows how to operate the machinery on his own. What a smart creature, and reliable.

It did take some time, though, and I got bored. I wandered to the outer deck and began circling it, looking out over the horizon.

That’s when I saw him, strolling across the parking lot and making his way to the lighthouse.

In an instant I was flying down the steps- three, four, five at a time. There were times I felt like I was falling, only saving myself by holding tight to the railing. I took the last seven steps in one leap, landing in a crouch. One last dash, and I arrived at the ground floor entrance.

I spotted his head through the window, all of ten paces away. One last sprint, and I slammed myself against the door. Click click! Just like that, the lock turned. Six seconds later, the handle rattled. It shook two times. Then came a big knock. Then nothing, no further disturbances.

I let out a deep breath. My back was leaning against the door, prepared to manually hold it shut should the lock fail. That wasn’t necessary, thankfully. A peek through the window reassured me, the young man was already walking off. Occasionally he craned his neck upward, probably searching for signs of Amphy. A minute later and he was a small dot on the causeway, temporarily gone from my life.

I slumped to the floor and started sniffling. My body was shaking from the nerves.

That was too close.

…

This is stupid! Of all the places he could have appeared at, to thread his way across Olivine in that exact order, to dog me at three different locations in a row, is absurd! Granted, as Pokemon trainers we both had reason to be at those places, but at that exact time, in that exact order, was beyond probability.

It’s fate, Jasmine.

Don’t talk to me about fate!

I shouldn’t have to do this, this game of predator and prey, desperately avoiding the boy who days before I would do anything to spend time with.

“Aroo?”

Amphy stood before me, having descended the tower. He looked concerned. I grabbed him up in my arms and held him close.

“It’s not fair. It’s because of him that I still have you, Amphy. It’s not fair!”
“Amphy was dying! I didn’t have a choice! Even you can’t be that heartless!”

“Someone else should have been taking care of it.”

“No one else could! No one else should! It was my responsibility!”

“Your responsibility is where I say-”

“No! My responsibility is to be Amphy’s caretaker! The city says so! It’s not something I can ignore, it’s a legal contract, I signed an agreement with the mayor! You know that, you signed that very same paper!”

Mother’s mouth gaped open, for once at a loss for rebuttal.

“I’m sorry I didn’t inform you where I was and I was wrong not to, and you can yell at me all you want for that and for not coming home after, but that first night, I was doing my best to take care of Amphy and make sure he didn’t die!”

Mother crossed her arms, looking displeased and uneasy.

“Well. What was wrong with him? Why were you the only one in charge of him? What exactly were you doing out there? Who was in charge of you? What were the procedures for an emergency? Did you follow them or wing it?” She belted out her questions one after another, hoping to overwhelm me and catch me in a bind.

“The doctor called it Induced Mitochondrion Apoptosis. Amphy started getting sick five days ago and was getting progressively worse. The night I told you I was staying over at the gym, I had brought Amphy along with me so that I could take him directly to the Pokecenter in the morning. He got very sick, vomiting blood even, so late that night we had to rush him to the emergency room of the hospital. The doctor there explained what was wrong with him. No, there were no protocols or precedents for me to follow, I had to use my best judgment.”

“What exactly is Induced Mitochondrion Apoptosis? An ATP deficiency? A genetic disorder? Explain it to me, in detail,” Mother demanded, wanting specifics. I sometimes forget, she has a P.H.D., which was really two-thirds of an M.D. before her studies were sidetracked. I explained what Doctor Maveli told me, and when Mother drilled me further I stumbled through the fine details until she ran my knowledge of the disease into the ground.

“Obviously, they treated it, so why didn’t you come home afterwards?”

“They didn’t get the diagnosis until the next morning, and then… the treatment wasn’t available. The only place that had it was Cianwood. With the hurricane right on top of us, it was really hard finding a way to get it delivered.”

“Don’t tell me you went across the ocean in that weather!”

“No, I didn’t do anything like that!” I said.

I think it prudent to not tell her about my little venture on the bay with the stolen boat.

“Yesterday I was just taking Amphy home, his home, thinking he was going to die. They told me to
be with him when he passed away. It was so close, and I was so scared. The medicine only arrived at
the last minute. We went to the Pokecenter once it started working, I was there all night. Today was
my fault and I’ll take the punishment, but I’m not going to apologize for yesterday. He’s alive now
because I did what I did, and I’m happy for it. You know how much Amphy means to me. I’d rather
die than let you or anyone take him away from me.”

Mother began pacing the foyer. She had her arms crossed, one hand to her lips to nibble at her
fingernail. There was a monologue going on that I was not privy to, but the fact that she hadn’t
immediately started gouging me with more accusations was a good sign. I started to relax.

“Who did you say the doctor was?”

“Maveli, Alize Maveli.”

“I’ve heard that name. She was in school at Olivine at the same time I was.”

Now she looks irritated by something she just remembered. Ah, wait. Mother turned on a dime,
-facing me and staring me down. She’s found her new angle of attack.

“That reminds me, what’s going on with your school? When do you return to classes? Do you even
know?”

I shrugged.

“No.”

Ugh. She just had to bring up school.

Mrs. Rekishi was at a loss. Her students showed exactly zero interest in 1800s Johto history. Those
who were still recovering mentally from the storm’s tragedies were zoned out. Those who hadn’t
been touched by loss were too excited by the hubbub surrounding the relief efforts to sit still and
attentive. The few who were serious about their studies were ignoring the teacher in favor of more
pressing assignments from other classes. In short, the class was a disinterested mess. Unable to cope,
Mrs. Rekishi gave up and droned through her lecture like a pre-recorded audio-book. Mercifully, the
bell rang five minutes early.

“So class- hey! Wait! Wait don’t leave! You have homework! Homewoooork!” Half the class was
already gone. I was not one of them, and dutifully stayed behind to jot down the assignment. It
joined a long list of other unfinished assignments.

There goes all my free time for the next, ooohhh… EON.

On my way out, I overheard a conversation just outside the classroom door.

“Beth’s absent again?”

“Yeah.”

“I saw her earlier, in second period.”

“She wasn’t at lunch. Skipping classes, doesn’t look good.”
“She’s got permission. I mean, considering what she’s been through, do you blame her? I don’t really care to see her crying all day.”

“Crying shame, she’s a cutie when she’s tearing up.”

“You’re into that, huh?”

“Oh yeah, I’d comfort the fuck out of her. She can lean on this tent pole all she needs to.”

“Shut up!” I said, approaching the crass speaker and giving him my best death-glare.

Of course it would be Peter. When I first met him, I didn’t think much of him. Just another boy with a nice svelte body, feminine face, quiet demeanor, and a habit of staring off into space. Over the course of the past year, that changed. He became more athletic, more narcissistic, dyed his hair a garish teal color, and started dressing like the fashion-conscious thugs who had taken over Silph Co. a few years ago. His manners took a turn for the worse too. As example:

“Well well well, she cometh! Watch yourself boys, the Stickler Princess appears in rage and wrath, mind your tongues!”

“Peter, cut it out!”

“And how have I offended thee, thy majesty?” He took a deep, mocking bow. The other boys cracked up, the girls rolled their eyes.

“It’s mean and cruel, what you’re saying about Beth!”

“What’s wrong with what I said about Beth?” he asked. “I’m only suggesting she could use some sensual healing, you know, a little something to help fill that hole between her le- oops! I mean in her heart. Hehehe.”

“You… that’s… you’re awful! A pervert! A deviant!” I cried.

“Excuse me? I’m the deviant? That word, you know, ‘deviant’, sort of implies I’m off base, not the same as any other guy around here. Hey guys, am I weird for wanting what a man wants?”

“Idiot, you’re no man. You’re sixteen and have pimples,” one girl spat out.

“Lay off!”

“Acting like- ‘I’m a grown up, I cuss, I drink, I say what I want about a woman’s body.”

“What the hell would you know?”

“Have you even kissed a girl?”

“I’ve already fucked a woman. Multiple!”

“Tauros-shit.”

“Whiny women always starting this dumb-fuckery.”

“I’ve done it. Me and Kate. Couple weeks ago.”

“We don’t care Charles.”
“Peter’s a liar, he’s never touched a girl, he was bitching about it last week.”

“How the hell would you know? Like I was even around to tell you, hurricane wrecked my homo’s place.”

“I thought it was kind of cute how up front you were about being a little sex-dog, but you know, I’m starting to think it’s just an act and I’m getting tired of it.”

“Hey hey! God fucking shit shanked dick-sucker- what the hell are you getting at? Damn it!”

I sort of stepped back in bewilderment. I didn’t expect my initial rebuke to turn into a shouting match between all the girls and boys. The brunt of the criticism was being leveled at Peter, though, which pleased me. It was better for the whole class to come down on him than me alone. Although, I’m a little irritated that the primary point of contention was Peter’s virginity, or supposed lack thereof.

I shook my head and left for the exit.

That was my intention, anyways, when a hand stopped me.

“Bitch, don’t just leave and let others do your dirty work.”

I felt a force holding me back. Peter had me by the shoulder. I glared back at him, temper rapidly climbing.

“I’m the deviant, huh? Me?! I’m deviant! Yeah right! I know you’ve got rapey fantasies aimed at that Kanto boy. Keke! Oooo, got you there, don’t I?”

“Get your hand off me,” I said.

Instead, he pulled me towards him.

“Got your panties all toilet-trained over him, don’t ya? Well, how about I give you some pointers, get you prepped for your crush-hubby.”

“Dude lay off.”

“Arceus, he really is a creep.”

“I’m getting the teacher.”

“Let go of me,” I said direly.

“No? Well, I know you’ve got practice with that sheep of yours, but aww hell, I don’t mind a threesome.”

“Peter Phaeton, hands off, NOW!”

Mr. Badger, the school security officer, barreled in like a Rhydon. Peter instantaneously dropped his hold of me and backed up. The gesture did not save him from being yanked by the collar and dragged to the far side of the hallway. It did save him from the throat-chop that was a millisecond from launching off my clenched fist.

“Go home, all of you! Quit littering in the hallway! Peter, you’re coming with me!” Mr. Badger shoved Peter along towards the main office. The sulking youth managed one last glance over his shoulder at me. He raised his hand and gave me a “I’ll see you later” gesture.
I huffed.

“Hey Jasmine.”

“Ah! Oh. Hi Ed.”

He strode around until he was in full view.

“What was that?”

“Peter got in trouble. He was saying some disgusting things about Beth.”

“Like always.”

“How could you even stand to be friends with him?”

“We’re not friends. He just latched onto me.”

“I see.” I pursed my lips, still looking in the direction of Mr. Badger and Peter, now tiny figurines at the end of the hallway. “Mother keeps telling me to avoid creepy men, that they’re dangerous and mentally disturbed. Sometimes it feels like she means all guys, but I think guys like Peter are the ones she’s really talking about. He’s rotten to the core. I don’t like him.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Come on, let’s walk. Talk to me. What did he say?”

“Oh, you know, dirty things. He wanted to, er, ‘sleep with her’- he didn’t even use language that polite. You get the gist. And he made fun of her loss, laughed at it, saw it as an opening for him to… you know… be a pervert. Hey, do you know if he’s ever been with a girl?”

Ed snorted.

“Are you asking if he’s a virgin?”

“Well, uh, yes, to be coarse.”

“He said he’s done it?”

“Yes.”

“Pffft. What a liar. He’s never gotten past first base, and even that he stole.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, kissed Niriya over in tech class. She said she didn’t give him permission.” Ed rolled his eyes. “Someday the cops are really going to come down on him, put him in juvie or something. He shouldn’t be allowed to get off with just detention and talking-to’s anymore. The principal is too lenient.”

“Agreed. He’s terrible. But doesn’t he realize he’s coming across as a creep? Why brag about something like that?”

Ed’s expression was that of someone who knew the answer, but did not want to divulge it.

“Hmm?”

“It’s not… something like that should be obvious to you, right?” Ed answered.
“No, I don’t see the logic in it. Tell me, if you know.”

He squirmed and averted his eyes. Is he blushing?

“Oh tell me already! Is it because you’re a guy too? I won’t hate you for being honest.”

Ed sighed.

“That’s how guys think they need to act to attract girls. Even if it’s a lie, he’s still showing he’s confident. Being a jerk is better than being a nice guy.”

“That’s not true! Being a jerk and a creep is much worse to us women!”

“Yeah, well, that’s what you tell yourselves, but it doesn’t play out like that, does it?”

“No, you’re wrong.”


Ugh.

“But all those girls are…”

I choked on my words.

“Sluts?” Ed finished my sentence for me. My cheeks lit up in shame. “Sakura is a slut?”

“No, I didn’t mean her.”

“That’s what you implied. Is that what girls think of other girls?”

I folded into myself and went silent.

“The truth is, if a guy wants to get laid, he’s got to act macho and project confidence. It’s the only way he’s going to attract the kind of girl who’s receptive to that. You can say that’s not absolutely true and that some guys take it too far, but that’s really a matter of degree. It wouldn’t be like this if all you women weren’t so fond of jocks.”

I grumbled.

“Heh. You don’t think that’s true. What about yourself? You obviously have a crush on that hotshot out-of-towner.”

“Eeep!” No way! Was it that obvious?!

“He’s here, you know.”

“!?”

Yes, go ahead and staple a big neon exclamation point above my head, my shock couldn’t be more evident than that.

“He is?!”

Ed clucked his tongue and shook his head.

“Where is he? What is he doing here?”
See? You’re all over him. Am I right? Did I prove my point? Girls like confidence. The only difference between him and Peter is how blatantly obvious they are about their lust. Meanwhile, the nerds and up-tights are left sucking dust.

I sighed.

“You’re complaining about that mythical friend-zone, aren’t you? Don’t tell me you’re jealous.” The thought suddenly struck me, that Ed might have a crush on me too, the way he was talking. Then he laughed, and I couldn’t help but laugh too— the idea was patently ridiculous. That’s not the kind of guy Ed is at all. “Nice guy” and “shy guy” were not a part of his character sheet.

“Nah, no way. I’m just speaking on principal, for all guys,” he replied.

“Ha. I get it. Point taken. You’re right. We women are a bit incomprehensible and maybe unfair, aren’t we? Still, you didn’t have to lie about Ash being here to prove it.”

“That wasn’t a lie.”

“Eh?! He really is here?!?!?” I stood stiff in shock.

“He’s in the computer lab taking online courses. Trainers don’t get to skip school just because they’re travelling. You oughta know that.”

“He’s here. He’s here. He’s… right there.”

In fact we were directly opposite of the computer lab as we stood there. A glass wall gave a partial view inside. Rows of computer terminals were visible along with a handful of students, although I did not spot a familiar face among them.

“Go,” I said, pushing Ed towards the lab door.

“What?”

“See if he’s still there.”

Ed shrugged and sauntered over to the glass. He took a sweeping glance through the room beyond.

“Yeah. He’s still there, in the back.”

“Eeep!” I let out another frightened squeal.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I shook my head without answering.

“Do you want to go say ‘Hi’?”

I shook my head ‘No’.

“Nervous?”

A third shake in the negative.

“Fine by me.”

I tip-toed up to the side of the glass wall, hiding my figure out of sight. I craned my head ever-so-
slightly around the edge, getting a peep inside the computer lab.

There he was.

He had his back towards us and I couldn’t see his face. Nonetheless, I recognized him by his outfit, and there was no mistaking that luscious mop of hair. It was shaggy, a little overlong, and unkempt. I wanted to brush it.

He was focused on the computer screen, absorbing the teaching material with the same intensity he put into the rescue effort. His head pivoted between the monitor and his notes. They were quick, precise movements, no wasted energy. It reminded me of a Fearow scanning the forest for prey or threats.

He’s going to be a real challenge on the gym floor. All those skills, the mental coolness, the precision and dexterity, the analytical adeptness, the sheer efficiency with which he operates, it all translates directly into excellent trainer ability. Everything I’ve seen of his Pokemon and heard of his previous exploits backs that assessment. I don’t know if I can beat him, I caught myself thinking, I wish he would teach me how to get better.

I caught Ed staring at me, leaning against the wall, hands in pockets, coolly processing my nerve-jilted self.

“Do you like him?” he asked.

I gulped.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to tell him, or do I have to?”

“NO! No no no, don’t you dare, don’t you dare! Ed that’s not funny!”

But Ed wasn’t laughing or even cracking a grin. He was dead serious.

“Why would you even say that?”

“I just don’t feel like it’s healthy, keeping your feelings secret from the person they’re meant for. And the more we all let you go on like this, the worse it gets.”

“So it really is that obvious? Am I that bad?”

“Yeah. So…”

I nodded to him- myself- maybe no one in particular, as if I had figured something out when in fact my brain was currently the biggest, most discombobulated piece of clockwork devised by evolution. What could I say to him?

“I just want to let it evolve naturally. Don’t worry about it,” was my answer, at last.

Ed sighed.

“Okay. Suit yourself.”

He turned to depart.

I took one last peekaboo at the object of my crush. He was stretching and looked ready to wrap up.
His head started scanning the room. I darted away before he could see me, trying to keep his image fresh in my mind as I left.

Ed took an easy pace towards the south exit. I trotted up next to him. We were both headed to the Pokemon gym, and the company wasn’t unwanted. The conversation, on the other hand…

“So about your crush,” Ed began.

“Ash?”

“Yeah, him. If you guys start dating, do you think he’s the kind of guy that, you know, wants to get in bed with you?”

“Edward! Oh my gosh! Do we really have to talk about this kind of stuff? Our parents would kill us if they found out!”

“I’m just asking. It’s not like it’s uncommon around here.”

“For the seniors! We’re freshmen! We’re too young! I’m too young!”

He shrugged.

My gosh, it’s true, no boy can go six seconds without their thoughts teetering into prurient territory.

“Just don’t want you to end up like Sakura, is all.”

“That’s just… no, I wouldn’t let something like that happen,” I said.

“That’s good.”

We made it out of the school building whilst the taboo subject continued to nibble at my thoughts.

“I don’t think he would do something like that to me. He genuinely cares for others. I trust him.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t believe me!”

“Yeah, sure, I do.”

“No really, you don’t like him! Is that it?”

“Just worried about my friend. This is your first time, right? Having feelings for a guy.”

“Well… yeah, I guess.”

“It’s not easy, I bet. Heck, I can tell, just looking at you, talking with you. It’s a dicey proposition, falling in love. Me, and Beth, and the others, we’re just worried for you. As your friends, we’re kind of torn between rooting for you and hoping you don’t get hurt.”

“Oh. Thanks, I guess. I appreciate it. Well, we’ll see.”

“Ha ha. Enough of that, getting bored of all this heavy talk. How’s your homework? Got caught up yet?”

“Oh shoot!” I broke out into performance art- I call this ‘School Girl On Suicide Watch’.
“Take that as a ‘no’. Same here. Let’s get to the gym and work on it together. I’ll share my notes.”

“Thank you!”

“Hey, no need to thank me, I’m not doing it just because. I need help with physics, you’re good at that stuff, right?”

“Passable.”

“You got the fourth best test score in the grade on the midterm exam.”

“Okay, I’m above average.”

“Like I said. Give me pointers.”

“Fine, I’ll try. You have the notes for Bella Sera’s thesis in literature class, right?”

“Yeah. So, can you explain angular momentum? I think my eyeballs started spinning trying to make sense of Mr. Szilard’s notes.”

I sighed.

Of course he had to pick a difficult subject.

“See, angular momentum is different from regular momentum in that the point of origin actually matters.”

“I heard that, but why?”

“Because you’re measuring it in relation to the center of rotation. First you’ll need to find the linear speed, some problems call it tangential speed, it’s the same thing, don’t get confused. Next…” and yada yada, I won’t bore you with the details of 9th grade prep physics and formulae that look like this: \( L = (r^2m)(\frac{v}{r}) \).

We took the school bus to the nearest public transit hub and a public bus the rest of the way to the gym. Ed got out his notes and textbook and made me write it down for him. Thankfully, that also made it easier for me to explain it. I’m not all that great at math, and trying to map out complex equations with just words was trying my intellectual faculties. It was made more difficult by an inattentive pupil. Ed kept zoning out, and I had to snap him back to attentiveness.

“Do you understand? Hey, doofus!”

“I’m listening.”

“Trig functions! You need them memorized!”

“Yeah I know.”

“You seem out of it. Maybe I should ask, are you okay?” I asked.

“Sure. I’m fine,” he answered.

“Your mind’s not in the material.”

“Everything’s so chaotic, we’ve got so much on our plates. I don’t get how you can stay focused on school.”
“Work is my coping mechanism. Also… I’m not in a position where I can slack off in school.”

“Why’s that?”

“It was an ultimatum,” I answered.

Her knuckles rapped against the broom closet door. It was unnerving, and made it difficult to focus on the question.

“I… um… where do I see myself in four years?” I repeated dumbly, begging for a moment’s concentration in order to form an answer. Mother continued rapping her knuckles and staring down on me, and the longer her question went unanswered the harder it became for me to give her an answer.

“Ah, um, er.” I feel like an idiot, stuttering in front of her, shaken and wilted. This whole evening had been a roller coaster of emotions. This was a trough, and the next big hill was coming up.

“Well?” she said.

“In college?” I threw out. That’s the answer she wanted to hear, right?

“College? Really? That would be wonderful. A miracle even, what with your grades.”

“My grades? No… my test scores are fine, they’re good.”

“They were good. They’ve been dropping, I’ve noticed.”

“From high nineties to low nineties! That’s not a big deal!”

“Have they taught you the meaning of momentum? Maybe in physics? Or the phrase ‘slippery slope’, in composition?”

“It’s a temporary blip, I promise! My test scores are okay, they’ll stay high, I’m good at tests.”

“Well you’re certainly much better at test-taking than other assignments. You don’t think I pay you enough attention and that may be true, but I do put in the effort to keep track of your academics and I do request a copy of your full course work from your teachers each semester. Your take-home assignment scores are subpar, your in-class assignments are outright atrocious. Considering your so-called ‘good’ test scores, I expect far better than a mediocre 91 point average out of you.”

Oh gosh. She’s got everything in front of her, I can’t hide a thing.

“I, uh, it’s just not my strength. Mrs. Rekishi says we all learn differently and should be judged by what we’re best at!”

“Wrong!”

I flinched.

“That imbecile of a teacher is giving you that kind of advice? Listen, Jasmine, this is how the real world works: you will be lauded for your successes until you fail. And then the world will judge you
for your failure far, far harsher than you can possibly imagine, and your previous successes will mean nothing. Nothing. Your weaknesses have to be addressed first and always, so that they never cause you to fail. Got that?”

“Got it,” I said with a timid nod.

“Why are you struggling with ordinary assignments? I know it’s not because you’re lazy, I see you working and studying all the time.”

“Um, it’s because I’m distracted at home, I can’t concentrate. And at school, the really bad grades, those are usually group assignments, and I don’t know how to work well with others. Everyone else picks their group, but no one wants to group with me, so I usually get paired with someone who doesn’t like me. Then they give me the cold shoulder and slack off, and I’m stuck doing all the work. I can’t cope.”

Mother dropped her head and sighed.

“That explains it. That’s unfortunate. Come on, I’m tired of standing.”

She led me to the kitchen and pulled out a seat. I dutifully took it. She busied herself making a cup of hot tea for herself and a cup of hot cocoa for me. I watched her in silence, thoughts a tumble. When the drink was set before me, I took it and sipped, eyes never leaving Mother.

She looks exasperated and tired. Her breathing was heavy and her voice was getting hoarse.

I know the lecture isn’t nearly over, but maybe she’s done yelling at me.

“I know it’s hard, working with others who aren’t as dedicated as you are, who don’t like you and don’t want you to succeed. I’ve been through that hell myself. But Jasmine, toughing through personal differences and forcing them to get on board and work together is something you have got to do. I wish society didn’t function this way, but the sad fact of the matter is that merit only gets you so far and connections are all-important.”

“I get that, but…”

“It’s hard, yes, I know. I know.”

“Most of the kids don’t really like me. How do I get them to work with me if they hate me?”

“They don’t need to like you, Jasmine, they just need to respect you.” She shook her head. “I had hope for your gym leader hobby. Discipline was one thing I wanted you to absorb from that old bastard, leadership was another. It’s in the title, right? Gym Leader?”

“Yes. You’re right.” I nodded along obediently.

“I’m glad you are making friends and moving up the ranks there, that’s the kind of social networking that’s necessary to advance in this world. I’m just worried it’s the wrong social network. How are these people and this hobby going to help you get into college? How are they going to build you a stable career and give you independence and personal reliance? I’m having a hard time seeing it.”

“Colleges love these kinds of things on the application form. Even as an acting gym leader, that’s already a big accomplishment most people can’t match. If I put that on my form, they’ll have no choice but to accept me. Right?”

That was the excuse I always used to justify my choices, to myself and my parents. She’s heard it
enough times, I don’t think it carries any substance in these arguments anymore.

“Those extracurricular accolades only go so far Jasmine, and they are worthless without the grades to back them up. See if you can take what you’re learning in the gym and apply it to your class work. If your classmates won’t work with you on a cooperative basis, then treat them like your Pokemon and put them in line. That shouldn’t be hard, you have enough experience managing those disobedient monsters of yours.”

“I guess…”

“Jasmine. Jasmine.” She repeated my name until I looked her in the eye. “I’m serious. I’m really serious. If this Pokemon stuff isn’t helping you develop the right way, if it’s becoming a distraction to your academics, I will end it.”

I took a deep breath.

“Magnemite, Thunder Shock!”

This was a welcome reprieve. Three straight evenings of school work, gym work, chores, and nonstop lectures had wrung me thin. This after a solid week coping with disaster- first Amphy’s sickness, then the storm, and then the fallout with Mother. My stress level was approaching the upper atmosphere and I was afraid if it went any higher I would enter the “crazed lunatic” plane. It was good to finally engage in an activity I enjoyed. That is, a Pokemon battle.

“Corphish, dodge!”

Corphish was much too slow to execute the command. The Water-type fried, burped out a few bubbles, and was finished.

“Hey! I thought you were a Rock-type specialist!”

“My apologies, it would seem that way, wouldn’t it? But I’m not. I haven’t settled on a type specialization yet.”

Max growled in frustration.

“What am I gonna do. I don’t have a Ground-type.”

The dark-haired tanned kid from Hoenn looked to be at a loss. He thumbed the row of Pokeballs on his belt. We had agreed to a three-on-three battle, but I granted him a handicap, that he could pick his three Pokemon from his full roster mid-battle. Having lost Mightyena and Corphish, it was now his decision to pick one of four to battle my remaining three. He twiddled between the Pokeballs indecisively.

Come on! Hurry up! And please make it a challenge this time! I’m bored!

“Munchlax!” he called out, settling on his final entrant.

The little runt of a Snorlax stared goofily across the battlefield. Its gaze wasn’t focused on its opponent, but rather the crowd of trainers and spectators cramming the gym.
“Protect!” I commanded.

“Chip Away!” Max shouted.

Munchlax tottered over to Magnemite and wacked away with its claws, boxer-like. Its flails bounced off harmlessly. Magnemite’s Protect shield was adequate to neutralize the damage. Also, now I was sure Munchlax didn’t know Earthquake, Fire Punch, or any other coverage attack that could threaten Magnemite.

“Super Sonic.”

Max probably thought that Munchlax was his best bet because it could tank a lot of damage. What if that damage was coming from itself, though? Not so durable then I wager.

“Cover your ears!” Max said.

Magnemite vibrated and sent out piercing sound waves to disorient the opposing Pokemon. Once the racket died down, however, Munchlax looked happy and alert. It lowered its hands from its ears.

“Yes!”

“It didn’t work?” I wondered.

Own Tempo? No, Munchlax can’t get that ability. Maybe this one was just so slow in the brain, it couldn’t actually get confused.

“Alright, Sonic Boom.”

“Defense Curl!”

Magnemite’s pitch changed. The pulses of sound became visible from the increased power. Munchlax rolled into a tight, compact ball before the Sonic Boom hit. To my amazement, the compressed sound waves bounced harmlessly off the creature. Max followed up with a Roll Out, which was surprisingly fast. Magnemite got hit and was sent spinning.

“Ow… Magnemite.” I knew it wouldn’t do that much damage to my Steel-type, but I was worried nonetheless. His simple body attack did more than my aural-based assaults.

“Munchlax can absorb sound waves with their fat,” Ed called out.

“Oh! Good to know! Alright, then let’s try Thunder Shock!”

Magnemite attempted to fry the Munchlax as it returned for Roll Out #2- it worked in that it inflicted a non-zero amount of damage, better than Sonic Boom, but still, it hardly registered. Munchlax barreled right through it, hitting Magnemite again. My Pokemon whined in pain.

“That fat also gives it good insulation against electricity. Well, it’s got above-average special defense all-around,” Ed added.

“I knew that,” I replied. “Magnemite, Protect!” Munchlax was curving around for a third Roll Out. Judging by its momentum, this one would seriously hurt if I let it connect. Instead, Magnemite pulled up a barrier to defend itself and send the Munchlax bouncing off course. It hit the turf and shook off the confusion.

“Oh fine, I give up.”
“Really?” Max shouted out. “I win?”

“Oh, no, of course not. I meant, I’m giving up on doing this the hard way.”

“What?!?! Oh come on! Give me a break. Not-”

“ONIX!”

Onix took Magnemite’s place.

“Rock Throw. Surround it.”

“Oh, uh, Roll Out!”

Onix dug into the ground and flung a wave of earthen debris over Munchlax. The heaviest chunks dug into the ground and stood erect. Munchlax’s Roll Out was stuffed, it couldn’t navigate around the newly placed obstacles.

“Slam!” I ordered.

“Defense Curl!”

Onix whipped his tail down before Munchlax could defend itself. It took only a single heavy blow to end the matchup and the match.

Max rushed onto the field to nurse his Pokemon. The Munchlax was actually smiling in its fainted state, made somehow cuter by the big, fat, red bump on its noggin.

“Yikes! You’re strong! Geez, I was totally outclassed.”

Well, actually, I’m just a little above average, and your Pokemon are very, very weak.

It was a mean thought, I realized, so I decided to keep it to myself.

“You fought really well! There’s potential there for you to grow. When you get stronger, come back and try again, okay?” I said to him.

“Ah, nope, no can do.” Max shook his head. “I’m going home tomorrow, this was my only shot. Glad I tried, at least! Hey Brendan, were you watching? Think your dad could take her on?”

“Oh heck yeah, no problem! It’d be a piece of cake, Slaking would just, like, RAAARGH! and toss that Onix out like yesterday’s trash!” (this assertion brought to you by a twelve-year-old runt).

Patience, Jasmine, don’t let them get to you, they’re just little kids. Just as I was calming myself and getting ready to bid the young teens goodbye-

POOMPH!

There was a rainbow-colored explosion at the lobby door. A Togetic carrying an Azurill tumbled out of a cloud of confetti, crying in shock. They landed on a panicking robot, the little cylinder kind that vacuum floors, which carried them off in circles. A girl in a goth outfit and a woman in a police uniform followed up, tripped over the robot, collided, and fell on their haunches. An Ursaring followed, lunged, whiffed, and fell face first between them, while a shadow that it appeared to be chasing rocketed skywards. There was another explosion up above. A figure dropped like a sack right in front of me. It was a guy, covered in confetti and ash. A moment later, a Pokemon egg dropped into his lap. He stared in befuddlement for a moment, and then his face lit up in exultation.
“Got it!”

He held the egg up for everyone to see, mimicking a certain green-capped video game hero showing off his new inventory item.

“See? I told you I would get it back, miss- OH HEY! It’s you!”

“You!” I repeated right back at him.

“Sexy lady!” he cried in joy.

“Rude dude!” I cried back in disbelief.

“Well I go by Ethan, but that’s not bad for a nickname.”

_SMACK_

Ethan’s figure collapsed under a debilitating karate chop. This was actually not me, but courtesy of the police lady. In the background, Ursaring could be seen arresting the sour-looking goth girl.

“I swear I was trying to help! Ouch! Don’t hit me sexy officer lady! Ouch! I said stop! OUCH!”

The last chop caused the egg to drop out of his hands and bounce onto the ground. The vacuum bot swung around and came to a stop. The Togetic dismounted and excitedly flung itself on top of the egg. It_- she, I’m guessing-_ cooed and harped while hugging the precious cargo.

“Phew!” The officer sighed in relief, then addressed the young teen. “You need to grow up, young sir, that was reckless, idiotic, and could have gotten yourself hurt! Leave the heroics to the professionals, understand?”

“Yes ma’am. Right ma’am. Will keep that under consideration in the future ma’am.”

“Cheeky brat. Alright, get lost! Togetic, Zuzu, come on, let’s get you back to your owners. Beg your pardon, Gym Leader, we’ll get out of your way.” The officer lady nodded to me, rounded up the Pokemon and apparent culprit, and departed. Ethan made rude faces to the officer’s back as she left.

“Well that was interesting. I’m sure there’s quite a story in there, but I think I got the gist of it.”

“Oh you don’t even know the part about the lasagna truck!” Ethan wheeled about to face me. His face was carrying the biggest, cheekiest grin I’d ever seen. “This town is way too fun!”

“Hey kid! What kind of trouble are you up to?!” Another voice, a familiar, skin-tingling voice boomed out. I flinched and bolted. Luckily Beret’s Blastoise and Gyarados were nearby. I ducked behind the blue beasts. Then, being sure I hadn’t been spotted, peeped out.

Mr. Handsome was now Mr. Wrathful, and was marching towards the younger miscreant.

“Ash!” I whispered, biting back shock, tears, joy, and a dozen other emotions.

“Why are there three patrol cars looking for you?!! Answer me!”

“It’s a long story, but it’s alright now! Everything worked out, Miss Officer was just here and got them all back, and the real bad guy was actually this little punk girl and they nabbed her, so don’t OUCH! Don’t hit me there, it’s already bruised!”

“I don’t believe you. Come on, you’re coming with me and we can settle this at the police station.
Come on!”

“No! Noooo!!! Jasmine, Jasmine, you saw everything, back me up!”

“Jasmine?” Ash perked up.

“Jasmine? Where’d she…? She was just here! Aww gosh dang it!”

“Psst.”

“Eeek!” I jumped.

Ed sidled up to my hiding spot. I waved for him to lay low.

“What are you doing? It looks like you’re hiding.”

I motioned to the two bickering boys on the arena floor.

“Oh, this again? Sheesh, Jasmine, I didn’t think you were that shy. Just go say hi to him.”

“No! Quieter! And get down!”

An order that was made more difficult to accomplish because Blastoise decided to start practicing Skull Bash. I rolled, ninja-like, behind Gyarados’ larger frame. Ed casually strolled along with me, not bothering to hide his movements. I prayed the other boys wouldn’t notice him.

“Gyarados, this is an order, stay still! Perfectly still!”

“Rarararararghghg.”

Translation: “You’re not Beret, you can’t boss me around.”

“Hey big boy, have you seen the gym trainers around here? Jasmine, or the old guy? Come on, I need a character witness. Hey, maybe you’ll back me up?” Ethan caught Gyarados’ attention. The leviathan stared at the youth impassively, determined there was nothing of interest, and turned back to Blastoise.

“She was just here, don’t know where she got off to.” Max and Brendan joined Ash and Ethan.

“Yeah, we were just battling. She’s good, I couldn’t beat her.”

“Did she go back to the office?” Ash mused.

Ah, the office, that’s a good idea! I could lock myself in there and hide, but only if I could reach it covertly…

That idea was nixed when the boys decided to dash to the door and check for themselves. I negotiated Gyarados’ form as best I could, not easy when the beast was busy Headbutting Blastoise. Ed took a seat in the nearby stands, content to be a spectator.

“Not there.”

The boys piled out of the office.

“Hey there! You work here, don’t you? Have you seen the gym leader? We’re looking for her!”

“Yeah, I have,” Ed said.
I crawled around Gyarados' belly and hopped on top of his back. Hearing Ed, I peeped through the creature's back spines and gave him a vicious "Don't snitch!" stare. Ed smirked.

"Where?! When?! Where?!"

"Just a moment ago."

I shook my head feverishly and made several throat-strangling motions.

"But where is she?" Ethan begged.

"I'd also like to know," Ash added.

Grrr, Ed don't you dare rat me out!

"Hmm. Don't know, lost track of her. She can't have gone far, though."

"Shoot."

"Here, let's spread out and see if we can find her."

The four boys nodded in agreement and scattered. I was rapidly running out of angles. Ash and Brendan went left, Ethan and Max went right. If I stayed put I would be caught. The only direction left to retreat was up.

I gingerly crawled my way up Gyarados' spines, not easy when the darn thing kept jerking and roaring.

"Jasmine?!"

"Gym Leader Jasmine!"

"Leader!"

They were hollering my name, systematically sweeping through the entire room.

I perched precariously atop Gyarados' head. Good, as long as they don't look up, I should be safe.

"Arugghhg!"

"Woah!"

Blastoise dished out the hardest-hitting Skull Bash yet, sending Gyarados reeling backwards. My feet went flying into the air; I barely hung on by the tips of my fingers. Then Gyarados decided to retaliate in kind, throwing a devastating Body Slam forward. I lost my grip and went airborne.

A hump appeared under me- Gyarados' midsection. I hit it with outstretched arms, tucked my head, and rolled. The world went dizzy as I cartwheeled down Gyarados' tail. The terminal fin lifted up, creating a makeshift ramp from which I sprung. Cement floor rushed up to greet me. I twirled, flexed my calves, and nailed the landing.

"HA!" I stretched my arms out, safe and victorious.

"WOA WOA!"

"HOOO YEAH!"
“Awesome!”

“Ten out of ten.”

Crap.

Not only the boys, but everyone in the room was witness to my impromptu acrobatics.

“Yes, it is I, Jasmine Mikan, Gym Leader of Olivine City, ready once again to take on all challengers!” I declared, hoping to hopes they would buy the theatrics.

“Excellent! Just what I wanted! I’m Ethan Hibiki, and I challenge you to a Gym Battle!”

The youngster held out a pokeball.

I noticed Ash starting forward, somewhat shocked and spellbound by my sudden appearance. I could say the same for myself.

“I accept! Prepare yourself! All spectators, clear the arena! All spectators!” I emphasized.

Ash had no choice but to retreat.

Thanks, kid, for giving me a reprieve. Now I have the duration of our battle to think of a way to slip Ash.

You’re being a child, Jasmine. Just tell him the truth.

No! I don’t want to.

“Hey, I stand here, right? Azumarill, you’re up first!” Ethan didn’t even wait for the floor to clear, he had his Pokemon out. Together they performed a shadow-boxing routine.

I trotted over to the Gym Leader’s box.

“Would you like to battle six on six, singles, standard clauses?” I asked. I’m actually at a disadvantage, my team’s depth is a little lacking in quality compared to a typical trainer. However, a full battle would give me maximum time to cook up an escape plan.

“That’s fine! Just say when!” Ethan said eagerly.

I took a breath.

“Onix!” I flung my Pokeball, only just now realizing I hadn’t healed anyone since my battle with Max. They’re all conscious, thankfully, but probably nicked and bruised. Between that and my ulterior objective, I’ll have to run my stall strategy pretty hard.

“Let’s begin! Onix, Screech!”

“WAIT!”

Ethan held up a hand. I dropped mine, Onix took notice and stood down.

“What is it?”

Instead of answering me like a proper human being, the youth came dashing straight across the arena, past a wary Onix, and tromped to a halt ten inches in front of me.
Too close!

Ethan spoke in a lowered voice.

“Just a sec. Before we start, I wanted to make sure, ‘cause I was assuming things since you’re taking challengers again. But anyways, Amphy made it out alright, right? He’s okay now?”

“Oh.”

I was taken aback. That came out of nowhere… but also- how thoughtful of him.

“Um, yes. We got the cure just in time, thanks to your acquaintance. Amphy is doing perfectly well. He’s back at the lighthouse, healthy and happy. Um, thank you for your concern. I feel really blessed for all of you guys’ support back then.”

“Ah. I see. Okay.” He paused a moment, looking down, but then perked up the next moment.

“That’s great to hear! Awesome! Okay, let’s get this started!” He sprinted the length of the arena back to the challenger’s box. “Azumarill, you ready? We’re going all out!”

“Azu zazu.” Azumarill nodded. The Pokemon appeared a bit more serious and level than its excitable trainer.

“Very well,” I sighed, taking a deep breath. “Begin.”

“Defense Curl! Cover your ears!”

“Stealth Rock.”

Azumarill braced itself for a status attack that never came. Instead, Onix churned the ground, crumbling the earth into sharp, tiny, refractive pebbles. A flick of the tail sent these all across the arena.

“Wait, what? You were gonna Screech weren’t you?” Ethan protested.

“That was before your interruption. I’m not obligated to repeat my tactics just because you forced a mulligan. Hey! Wait a minute, was that your strategy? That’s cheap! Don’t prey on my feelings like that!”

“What?! NO!!! I wouldn’t do something like that… oh jeez Azu watch out, dodge!”

Onix sensed my anger and instinctually went on the offensive. He pounded down on Azumarill’s position. The blob of blubber managed to leap away, but got caught in the backlash. It was hurt, and couldn’t counterattack to boot.

“Good job Onix, keep up the pressure!”

“Try Water Gun!”

Onix whipped his tail around in a Slam attack that dredged the ground as it went. Azumarill rolled over, found footing, and spouted a hose of water. The stream burst on contact with Onix’s tail, doing nothing to stop its momentum. The foe was sent flying with a direct hit.

“Come on, we have the type advantage! Azu, you can make this work! Bubblebeam!”

Azumarill is slower than Onix, I realized.
“Rock Throw,” I commanded. Onix obeyed. He bit into the ground with his massive jaws, ripped it up, and sent the debris flying towards Azumarill. The foe tried Bubble Beam, which worked to vaporize the incoming rocks but failed to break through. The ranged attacks neutralized each other, leaving a dense mist over the battlefield.

“Okay, I was scared of this. Azumarill, you’re gonna have to fight up close! Aqua Tail!”

Azumarill cowered back a step.

“Yeah I know that thing’s huge, but you got to do it! Go!”

“Marazu!” Azumarill gathered its courage and bounded forth. It made it to the center of the mist, readying a water-propelled tail slam attack. A shadowy figure loomed in the fog. Azumarill roared (a kind of cute roar, truth be told) and leapt in for the KO.

“Spark.”

Azumarill’s tail collided with hardened metal, not the expected fragile rock.

“Zazu?”

It had one second to gaze at the baffling site: a dirt replica of an Onix standing still and statuesque. For a head, it sported a Magnemite. This was the target for Azumarill’s Aqua Tail. True, the attack did quite a bit of damage, blowing apart the Onix-replica and bludgeoning Magnemite, but it was not enough to break through Magnemite’s Sturdy ability. The point-blank Spark, on the other hand…

“Azuzazazaazzzzzzzzzzzzztttttt!!!”

You know when you’re taking a family photograph and the photographer tells everyone to say “Cheese!” to make them smile? And then the photographer takes his sweet time and you’re stuck trying to hold a grin and it starts hurting? And sometimes the photographer is a cruel jerk who leaves everyone in that painful limbo for minutes and minutes while they diddle around with the settings, and your family members start resembling the clowns from the Hall of Horrors? – That’s the face Azumarill is making right now.

“That was a terrain-based Substitute attack. That wasn’t in the pokedex eval. Did you teach Onix a new move?” Ash wondered aloud. I ignored him and focused on the battle.

“Spark once more!” I commanded.

Magnemite didn’t let up. The first Spark attack fully paralyzed Azumarill, which kept it immobile and vulnerable for a second Spark attack, which reinforced the paralysis, and so on, in a never-ending combo. Well, that’s not accurate, it did end, when Azumarill keeled over and fainted.

“That’s it. Azumarill is fainted and disqualified. Next Pokemon, challenger! I hope this one presents a greater challenge.” I actually sort of enjoy being my own judge. Well, the perks of officiating one’s own matches is a plus, but better still, it’s an excuse to be a little hammy and outspoken, something I’m usually too shy for these days.

“Buh-buh-buh-but… Azumarill was my pal, my strongest. Oh shoot, what am I going to do now? Heracles? Aibo? Drat!” The kid looked pretty frustrated and lost. “Oh I know!” Then he reversed form and perked up.

“Sunshine!”
“Huh.”

The Sun Pokemon Sunflora emerged from its Pokeball and immediately backpedaled.

“Double-huh.”

Is it… is it retreating?

“Psst, Sunshine, the bad guys are over there. Go forward!”

“Fora? Sususu!”

The Pokemon looked confused.

“Yeah, so just use Light Screen.”

“Sunflar.”

Light Screen? What is he thinking? This smells like a trap.

Magnemite can barely hover after taking that Huge Power Aqua Tail, so I suppose I can treat it as expendable at this point.

“Magnemite, Self-Destruct.”

“Miiiiig.”

“Oh. Right.”

It was my younger Magnemite that was taught Self-Destruct. Also, older Magnemite wasn’t too pleased with the notion that it should fodder itself. The Pokemon buzzed in indignation.

“I’m sorry!”

“Zzzt!”

“Well I thought it was the best you could do given the situation. Look, you can’t even hover anymore!”

“Maggzzt! Bzzz. Bzzzt!”

“Do you want to forfeit yourself?”

“Znnn.”

“Very well, but if you want to make your sacrifice worth something you need to listen to me! Try Supersonic and then Thunder Shock.”

“Like I’d let that happen!”

Sunflora had successfully set up the Light Screen in the midst of Magnemite’s protest.

“Mega Drain!” Ethan called out.

Oops. There goes Magnemite.

I sighed in disappointment.
That was a waste. I need to train these Pokemon to obey me without question. Like Onix. He’s such a good boy. I considered sending Onix out, to show them how it’s done. However, he would be at a disadvantage, what with Sunflora’s Grass typing. Slugma would match up better type-wise, but with the Light Screen active and Slugma’s lack of experience, I’m not sure how that would take. Plus, the opponent might be expecting it. This is a quandary.

I bit my lip and decided on an unorthodox line of action.

“Graveler!”

“Grava!”

She’s been butting heads with Onix a lot lately. I think she thinks she ought to be my team leader. Well, for that to happen she’ll have to prove herself.

“Graveler, Tackle.”

“Tackle? That’s it? Watch out Sunshine, she’s up to something!”

Graveler barreled in. Sunflora steadied itself.

“Mega Drain!”

Graveler will act first, I think. If I time this right-

“Secret attack! Brick Break!” I yelled at the last moment.

Graveler rolled in. Sunflora hastily fired off the Mega Drain orbs without being able to charge or aim them properly; as such, they glanced off Graveler’s shell. My Pokemon closed the gap and came crashing in with an overhead strike. Her fists pounded down on the Light Screen shield, shattering it into pieces. The foe blocked the blow.

I smirked. That was all I needed.

“Graveler, retreat! Go, Slugma!”

I switched out Graveler for Slugma.

“Ember!”

Slugma proceeded to cry and let out- wait a minute.

“You’re not Slugma.”

That’s Graveler.

I thought I brought her back.

“Graveler, it’s a Grass type Pokemon, it’s too dangerous for you to stay and fight! I’ll let you battle one of his other Pokemon!”

“Grervvrrrr,” she complained with a low, strained growl.

Wait a…!

That’s not a Grass-type blocking Graveler! It’s a-
“WOBUFFET!”

“Boo yah! Fell right into my trap!”

“Nooo!”

“You tricked Azu into attacking Magnemite, so I just stole that idea and threw it right back at ya! What do you think about that?” Ethan was bristling with pride. Oh, sure, he’s soooooo clever, huh? Annoying little dork. “Wobble, Shadow Tag Graveler!” he ordered; redundantly, it turned out, Graveler was already nailed in place by Wobbuffet’s voodoo magic.

“Graveler, Rock Slide!” I need to use her strongest attack before-

“Counter!”

Graveler gritted her teeth and dug in. Wobbuffet leaned back, back, back, and farther back, until its head was brushing the ground behind it. Then it released itself like a loaded spring.

“BONK! BONK! BONK BONK KABONK BONK!”

*sound effects courtesy of the Wobbuffet- yes those were its actual cries.

It resembled two punching bags knocking into one another, rebounding off one another only to recoil and collide again. Graveler was tethered and could not escape the repeated blows. She tried to Tackle, Flail, even crack a rock over the Wobbuffet’s head. It was all useless, Wobbuffet just returned the force of the blows twofold.

“Gravabllrrrglblrglebrgle…..”

“Graveler! Ah. She’s gone.”

Collect yourself, Jasmine, don’t overreact to a temporary setback.

“Graveler has been fainted. The current score is my four to your five. I’ll be sending a new Pokemon out. You have the opportunity to switch out as well.”

“Awesome! We did it! It worked! Okay, now what? Hey, which Pokemon are you going to send out?” Ethan asked.

“You’ll see. Do you want to switch?”

“Only if I get to know which Pokemon you are going to use.”

Impetuous! You think I would volunteer that information?

“No, I’m not obligated to tell you that.”

“Oh come on, it’s only a few seconds difference, right?”

“Seconds may determine the match.”

“Fine! I’ll switch. Count it down, so we go at the same time.”

I grumbled. This was really a formality, not even a part of the rules, technically, and it got turned into something awkward and dramatic.
“Three, two, one, Onix.”

“Noctowl! Oh. Shoot.”

“Rock Throw.”

All that arguing, and his Pokemon gets taken down in one hit.

“Bad matchup,” I commented. “Well, now you know who I’ve sent out, you may pick your challenger accordingly. The score is four to four, tie.”

Onix spat out spare pebbles and dirt, waiting to see who came out next.

“Sunflora, I guess.”

“Screech.”

“Ah, no, slow down some! Mega Drain!”

I motioned for Onix to slither all the way to right field. Sunflora turned to keep face with him. As it did, the tint in its petals faded ever so faintly and drooped ever so slightly.

Thought so. The only natural sunlight in the gym came from the big bay window on the wall to our left. Maneuvering Sunflora’s face-flower out from direct exposure weakened it. Not by much, but it was enough to ensure the ensuing Mega Drain did not knock out Onix. Onix, in turn, severely weakened Sunflora with an ear-splitting cry.

“Again!” Ethan called.

“Slam. Bottom up.”

Onix knew what to do. He pounded the earth in front of Sunflora with his tail, throwing up a dust cloud. The dust blinded Sunflora for a split second, right as Onix’s tail rebounded upwards. It caught Sunflora off-balance and flipped it onto its back.

“Finish it off, Slam!” Onix rose to his full height and came crashing down. Sunflora was crushed.

“That is three Pokemon vanquished by me, and two Pokemon vanquished by you. Three and four remain, respectively. Please pick your next Pokemon.”

Oh wouldn’t Mother be pleased to see me acting all formal and authoritative!

“Erm.” Ethan counted up his available Pokeballs. “One, two, three. Uh…”

“What’s the matter? Um, could you pick a Pokemon?”

“Um… I… honestly don’t know what to do.”

“You can always forfeit,” I noted dryly.

“No way!” He clenched his teeth.

“Ethan, what are you doing?” Ash called out. “Haven’t you noticed all her Pokemon are weak to Fighting?”

I cringed.
What was Ash doing, helping the kid out?

“Oh shut up! I don’t need help!” Ethan didn’t like the intervention either.

“Use Heracross’ Fighting attacks,” Ash said.

He stood apart from everyone else, away from the crowd and the stands. I desperately avoided so much as looking at him, let alone addressing him, so I couldn’t tell who or what he was paying most attention to. He had every right to be here, and yet I dearly wished he wasn’t.

“Yeah, but Heracles- I just caught him last month. I haven’t taught him any Fighting attacks.” Ethan sighed. “Well, we’ll see what he can do. Go, Heracles!”

I was on guard. If Ethan was telling the truth, Heracross couldn’t hurt Onix all that badly. Still, Onix would have a tough time hurting the Bug-Fighting in turn. If he was lying about his Pokemon’s abilities, and I suspect he was, this could turn into a beat-down quickly.

“Onix, keep your distance,” I ordered.

“Herc, follow it! Wait up, it’s too far, try Bullet Seed!”

Onix rolled to the back right corner of the arena. Heracross moved to the center and spat out a chain of high-speed seed pods. They didn’t quite have the accuracy, though, and only one hit Onix. He grunted in annoyance at the minor damage. It’s a quadruple-effective Grass attack, but not really a threat unless Heracross gets closer.

I dared to glance at Ash.

He was following the battle intently, giving zero heed to myself nor my opponent. Even his released Pokemon, Pikachu and Espeon, were coolly analyzing the battle.

He’s scouting us, for his own match, I realized.

I grumbled.

Wouldn’t that mean, regardless of any feelings he might have for me, he puts his Pokemon battling profession first?

Then Jasmine, if that’s the case, your best bet is to win this battle and win his admiration!

That’s if you even want to win him over now…

“Horn Attack!”

Shoot, I got caught not paying attention!

Heracross was right on Onix’s flank. It reared in for an attack. Thankfully Onix responded autonomously, retreating into the corner and using his flailing tail as a deterrent. Heracross lunged multiple times, each thrust being turned back by a swipe of rocky appendage.

“Grab it!” the foe commanded.

Heracross ducked under one tail slam, then pounced on the appendage from behind.

“Twist!” I countered.
Onix twisted around violently. It caught Heracross off-balance and unable to leverage its hold.

“Now Slam it into the Stealth Rocks!”

Onix tried, but Heracross was too strong and tough to allow itself to be thrown around. It plowed its horn into the ground in the middle of Onix’s backswing, anchoring itself and preventing it from being tossed. Onix tried to pry it loose, could not, tried prying himself loose from the bug’s grip, and also could not.

“Bind!”

Onix wrapped his massive bulk around Heracross’s body, utterly burying the creature in a mass of rocky flesh.

“Bullet Seed!” Ethan ordered.

“Redirect!” I cried in response.

There was a scuffle in the folds of Onix’s form. A gap opened up, from which rapid fire seeds popped out. I smiled.

“Wow!” There came a cheer from the stands. Some of the older spectators, including Ed and Ash, took respectful nods. The younger kids were confused.

“What’s going on?” one asked.

“The gym leader’s Onix dodged the Bullet Seeds while keeping Heracross all wrapped up. That’s some pretty incredible muscle control. No wonder such a young girl became gym leader, she’s trained a fantastic Pokemon.”

“Oooooo. I don’t get it.”

 Poor kid. Cute, though, has a little cowlick coming off the top of his head.

Another glance to Ash: he was fixated on Onix, his hands now balled tight.

Ethan, meanwhile, was acting out.

“Come on! break through! Bullet Seed! Tackle! Can’t you do anything?”

More green projectiles spewed out of the hole in Onix’s Bind. Onix had Heracross locked up, not even letting it turn its head an inch. There was nothing it could do.

“Retreat!” Ethan finally ordered, firing off the Pokeball beam. It bounced uselessly off of Onix’s hide, unable to penetrate.

All of us watched in silence as, moment by moment, Onix strangled Heracross into submission. After some minutes, Onix growled and his muscles slacked. An unconscious Heracross plopped out from his coils.

“Heracross is unable to battle and disqualified,” I announced. I took another look at the unmoving foe.

You didn’t kill it, did you Onix?

I waved Ed over to check on the creature.
“He’s okay,” my coworker announced after checking for a pulse. “Might be out longer than usual.” He carried the Pokemon over to its owner. “Let him rest before you put him back in the Pokeball,” he advised.

Ethan took his Pokemon back, a despondent look on his face.

“If you’re ready, please bring out your next Pokemon.”

“Fine, I guess,” Ethan said. He released another Pokeball, this one disgorging an Aipom.

I checked the clock. Despite Onix’s prolonged chokehold, the battle hadn’t lasted very long, only ten minutes. My intention to stall things out wasn’t materializing. Ethan was forcing me to go on the offensive on account of the type matchups. A fragile speedster like Aipom was not going to make this go any slower.

I’m probably going to win this, but what do I do then? Rush my Pokemon to the Pokecenter? We have a healing machine right here, and my Pokemon aren’t even badly injured, that excuse won’t do. Say I’m tired? That’s a cheap cop-out. Take more challengers? That might work, but what if he butts in and wants a match himself?

“Alright, let’s try this! Aibo, I’m counting on you! Sand Attack!”

“Hey!” I cried.

“Go!” Aipom scurried around Onix’s big frame. Onix instinctively lashed out, flicking his tail at the tiny, miscreant creature. It went about as well as the first time they met. A single blow would knock the monkey out, I’m sure, but only if got hit in the first place. Between its agility and the dirt it was flinging in Onix’s eyes, that was not happening.

It’s a Normal type. It can annoy Onix to no end, but can’t really hurt him. Just let it play around while I think up a way to confront Ash.

“Jasmine, what’s the matter? Are you stumped?”

I jumped. Ash was talking directly to me. Apparently he noticed I was lalala’ing away in the middle of a battle.

“Low Kick!” Ethan ordered. Aipom jumped in low, trying to knock Onix off-balance. Onix merely lowered his body and displaced his weight. The attack nicked off.

“Ethan, back off for a moment, Jasmine’s distracted, and besides, that’s not working.”

“What else am I going to do? I’m trying to win a battle here!”

“Jasmine, what’s going on?” Ash asked.

Stop! No! Don’t talk to me! Idiot! Baka!

The more he talks to me, the more flustered I was getting and the less able I was to reply, or direct the battle, or do anything at all.

“Are you okay?” Ash took a few steps towards the gym leader box.

“I, uh, er, nnnnnn.” I clasped my hands behind my back, averted my eyes, and played coy. “Um, uh, I know! Onix, Dig!”
Yes, that’s it, do what I want to do right now, bury yourself ten feet underground.

Onix looked to me, shrugged (or what constituted a shrug for a creature with no shoulders), and dove into the ground. There was a rumble, the earth split open, and the rock snake disappeared beneath the ground.

“Okay, you’re functioning,” Ash noted sarcastically. I shooed him away with a wave of a hand.

“Aibo, dodge around, don’t let it trap you!” Ethan shouted. His Pokemon quickly obeyed, giving Onix a more difficult target.

I took a breath and refocused.

My Pokemon need me. I have a job to do. Enough with the dithering and stalling. Beret would chew your head off if he found out the reason for your poor performance. Let’s just concentrate on finishing this match first, then you can figure out what to with Ash.

“Onix! Dig a tunnel around the perimeter of the arena!”

“You should surface and switch for Magnemite, use Thunder Wave to slow it down,” Ash called out. I snubbed my nose at the advice and doubled down on my new strategy.

“Shallow. Yes! Then use Stealth Rocks as you go.”

“What is she trying? Aibo, watch out, this is some strategy! Avoid it at all costs! You can wear it out!”

“Keep digging, Onix.”

The rumbling that marked Onix’s passage slowly circled the outer edge of the arena. The Aipom watched with apprehension, keeping to the opposite side of the arena. It barked out a distressed cry.

“That’s fine! It can’t dig out the whole field.”

“Ethan, don’t just hold back! You’re giving her the initiative for free,” Ash said.

“I don’t have a choice!” Ethan responded.

Wait, who is he helping here? Why is he playing for both sides? Does he want me to win or not? This is our match, Ash, stop butting in!

Some of the other audience members thought the same, and booed at Ash until he dropped back.

Onix finished his circumvention. He popped just his head out of the ground and grunted.

“That should be enough. Dive underground.” *Grunt grunt grunt.* “Just somewhere random near the center.”

“What’s she doing?”

“No idea.”

“Aipom’s gonna get a surprise.”

Ethan surveyed the arena.
“Aibo, Swift!”

The Aipom slashed at the air, producing magic stars. The projectiles shot out at blinding speed, hugging the ground. Upon reaching the center of the field, they veered sharply into the ground, leaving little puffs of dirt and neat little holes in their wake. Muffled *tink tink tink* sounds signaled they had hit their target.

“Keep doing that! And keep your distance!”

He’s using Swift as a homing locator on Onix. Well, it’s not like I had any intention of deceiving him about Onix’s location. It didn’t matter anyways. This was a problem of geometry, and I’ve solved that.

“Onix, Earthquake!” I ordered loudly.

“Back off! Back off!” Ethan screamed.

The center of the arena crumbled into cracks and dust. Violent waves of earth jumped in place. Shockwaves emanated outward, carrying damaging seismic energy. Anything it touched would be shaken to the bones and rendered unconscious. However, Earthquake has a certain range, beyond which the damage drops off significantly. Ethan understood this.

“Come over here! As far away as… AH! Crap! Watch, Aibo, NO!”

Aipom back-hopped away from the growing concentric rings. It took one too many hops, however, and ended up at the edge of the arena—right where Onix’s tunnel had been. The shaking was enough to collapse the thin crust overtop the tunnels, turning them into Stealth Rock-lined moats.

Aipom’s foot hit the edge. The creature nearly toppled over into the pit. Its tail caught ahold of the ground and helped leverage it back onto solid ground.

Except the ground wasn’t so solid. It was being tossed and churned by the Earthquake.

“Onix, advance door-side! Keep the Earthquake up!”

The epicenter began slowly moving towards Aipom. The creature was caught in an absolute bind. It couldn’t run forward, or else it would get tossed like popcorn, and it couldn’t back off, because then it would fall into the toothy trench.

“Run around it!” Ethan implored.

“Rock Slide! Veer right 30!”

Aipom dodged to its left. The shaking suddenly stopped. Onix emerged from the ground, shoving a fair amount of earth chunks in a massive avalanche. The attack seemed presciently aimed, inundating Aipom’s escape route and sweeping the shocked creature right over the edge. It yelped and fell into the trench, where it was buried. It struggled briefly to extricate itself, but found the dirt mixed with the preternaturally sharpened Stealth Rocks. The Pokemon yelped in pain and then went still, afraid to get cut further.

“Aibo! No! Aibo, can you free yourself!”

“Onix!”

Onix slithered up to the edge, towering over Aipom. The latter stared up at its opponent, helpless and
fearful.

“Um, sorry, could I ask you to withdraw Aipom? I mean, I’d like to give you this chance to have Aipom forfeit. I don’t want to have to knock him out with Earthquake,” I explained to Ethan.

He stood stock-still and stared at the two Pokemon. His eyes darted back and forth, and then closed.

“Low Kick might… nah. She’s got us.” He shook his head. “And what about Wobbs? He’s healthy, he can go again. We’re not finished yet!”

“Wobbuffet can’t directly attack anything,” Ash said from the stands.

“It would be four against one,” Max added.

“I know how you feel, and I apologize, but it wouldn’t turn out well. I intend to have Onix use his new move, Substitute, as cover to safely deal damage to Wobbuffet. Failing that, I could have Magcargo burn it, or Magnemite to paralyze it, or if all else fails, Corsola can outlast it with Harden and Recover. That’s my strategy.”

Ethan’s expression slumped into a dejected, sheepish grin.

“I guess that’s that? Huh? We’re not getting this one.”

“You may always try again,” I said.

The young teen looked to his left and right, at all the different characters in this play, and I got the real sense that for him, this was a tragedy.

“It’s no shame if it’s an awesome gal like you. All right, I give up, you win. Aibo, come back.”

The Long Tail Pokemon looked more defeated than its trainer. Maybe it felt betrayed? That it was declared out even though it could still fight? Well, with it trapped in the dirt, Onix’s next Earthquake would have pulverized it. The Pokemon disappeared into the safety of the Pokeball beam without risking further injury.

The crowd cheered and rooted. Some of them were definitely cheering for me, but a large part, more than the majority, were clapping and hollering in support of the challenger. No one was more enthusiastic than Ash. He actually bounced up, sprinted to the younger trainer, and gave him an encouraging pat on the back.

The cheers didn’t last long, of course. The match concluded, the applause died out as people turned back to their own interests.

CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP…

Except for one spectator, who slapped his hands together far longer than anyone else, until he was all alone. The rest of the room fell silent, all eyes turned towards him.

“Bravo, Miss Princess, bravo! What an excellent performance!”

Each and every nerve in my nervous system tensed up. My prefrontal lobe ramped up to red alert status. This was bad.

Very bad.

He shouldn’t be here.
I couldn’t even bring myself to address him, such was my rage.
Ed did me the favor.

“Peter, what the hell are you doing here?”

“What am I always telling you?”
“You always tell me a great many things.”

Mother balked.
“You need a great many reminders.”
“I am forgetful, you know.”

“I know. But you should at least remember the number one thing I have always tried to teach you.”

I sighed.

“Everyone is trying to take advantage of me.”

“And?”

“Always be aware and don’t ever let them,” I finished.

“Emphasis on awareness,” she said.

I slumped in my chair.

Is that how you think of me, Mother? Someone taking advantage of you?

“Men more so than women.”

“I know, Mother. I’m not about to let a guy jump into my pants.”

Mother smirked.

“You hardly ever wear pants.”

We both looked down at the ruined pair I was currently wearing, slight grins passing our faces.

“It’s not always sex they want, Jasmine. Sometimes it’s power. They have egos that need nurturing, and they view us as weak creatures that can serve as fertilizer. They’ll put you down just to raise themselves up.”

“Money,” I added.

“There’s that too. Society doesn’t want to believe a man would emasculate himself by preying on a woman’s gullibility for financial gain, but they do exist, and in a certain way, they’re scum beneath even rapists. Watch out for them.”
“I know.”

I know. I know. I know I know I know I know I know I know.

I know because I’ve been through this lecture only about a million times. Men are disgusting, perverted, wretched, violent, fraudulent, narcissistic, selfish beings. That’s what you’ve always told me, drilled into me, baked into my very upbringing.

“Mother, may I ask a question?”

“Save it,” she said.

I asked anyways.

“How did you and Dad get together?”

For her avowed disdain for the male race, it seemed odd that she somehow married and had a child, a modern miracle even.

Her nose wrinkled. She really didn’t like that question.

“You mean your father?”

“Yes, Father. With all your warnings about guys, it just seems to me, I’m here, so they can’t all be awful, right?”

“There are exceptions,” she answered. “Your father… is one of the better examples of his sex. He is smart, humble, and a hard worker. I was attracted to that.”

“But like, how did it happen?”

Mother rested her chin in one fist. She traced circles around the rim of her tea with her forefinger. Her gaze wasn’t quite focused on me.

“There was nothing special about how we met. We shared a class in college and bonded over our studies.”

“Oh.”

I could tell now, her attention was definitely not on me. The lecture was mercifully coming to an end. She let out a yawn, which all but confirmed it.

“Speaking of your father, he’s asleep, so don’t make a racket. Get to bed.”

“Um…”

“What is it?”

“Am I going to be punished?”

She smirked.

“Punished? How? What could I do? You’ll be helping father and I clear out the hurricane mess around the block for the next few days, but I would ask you to do that misbehavior or no. What else? Tell you to get better grades? Stop getting in trouble? You already know what to do, you just have to go out and do it.”
I nodded and made to leave. Before I exited the room, though, I had one last question. Mother perked up.

“How did you know Father was not like the others?”

“Ugh! Jasmine, enough, just get to bed!”

Peter is brave, I’ll give him that. To come into my fortress and challenge me in the midst of my friends, colleagues, and Pokemon with nothing but a Koffing to one’s name takes courage. Brains, not so much.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

“What do I want? What do I want?! Heh. Let’s see. I’ll start by accepting an apology. I got detention with old Badger because of you. He doesn’t do the whole extra schoolwork and sitting on your hands spiel the other teaches do. No, he made me clean out the gunk from the kitchen stove. Nastiest, cruudiest shit I’ve ever been through, and keep in mind I’ve just had my place flooded out. Let me put it succinctly- it’s sick. But you wouldn’t know that, Miss Princess of Perfection.”

Peter jumped to a stand and leapt down the stands. There was a cocky swagger to his gait, which seemed at odds with the sheer hostility being directed at him by the entirety of the gym.

“But I know better. Under that shy smile and oh-so-sickly-sweet personality, you’re just an outright bitch who rejoices in bringing ruin on others. That’s a dirty trick you played on me, dragging in old Badger grumps to do your dirty work. I always thought you had some humanity in you, and I’m willing to still believe in that notion. So prove it to me. Apologize. Right now.”

“I have nothing to apologize to you for. I have nothing to say to you. Go grovel before Beth and apologize to her! Then I will suffer your presence here!”

“Oooh, big girl, acting tough, acting righteous, makes me want to puke. Acting like you own this place, like your Gym Leader title isn’t a big barfing joke, as if you aren’t a puppet on the grownups hands. Is that how it works?”

Peter waltzed right up to me, right into my personal space, until I had to physically stop him with both outstretched arms.

“He puts his thing up your ass and you get to play Pokemon for him?” Peter reached around and made a grab for my butt cheeks. I slapped him, as hard as I could. He winced in pain, obviously feeling the sting- but I’m not Mother, my hands don’t carry the debilitating power of hers.

“That’s a second thing you better apologize for.”

“Peter, you lay off this instant…”

“Ed, back off, I need to handle this on my own,” I warned.

“On your own?” Peter laughed. “Or don’t you mean with that big rocky thug behind you? Cause’ if that Torchic-slap was as good as you got, I think I can handle you.”

“And what about me?”
A whiff of dark hair filled my vision.

Peter rolled his eyes, not the least startled or intimidated by the senior teenager’s sudden insertion between us.

“Hey.” Peter snorted.

Ash appeared wrathful, his shoulders were shaking.

“I want to handle him on my own,” I told him.

“I know. That’s why I want to step in.”

“He’s right. This might be your job, Jasmine, but it’s our duty.”

“As men, we can’t stand idle and watch another guy assault a woman.”

“He’s not going to lay a finger on you.”

“Not if we can help it.”

“We know Onix could just squish him and his Pokemon like bugs, but we don’t want you to get into trouble.”

All the boys I knew swept around me: Ed, Ethan, Ash, Max, and Brendan. It was like my own little security detail.

“Oh, this is sooo fair,” Peter complained. “What’s your plan? Beat me to a pulp? How many days in the slammer you think that’s worth?”

“None, once they’ve heard what you’ve done,” Ash replied.

“What have I done? Express my grievances? You’re the asses who are threatening violence.”

This felt much too real. How close were we to a fight? Peter was obviously feeling the odds turn against him. He angled for a self-serving solution.

“Want to settle this with a Pokemon fight? That’s your gig, right? Let me take a go at her. I win, she apologizes.”

I was thinking of accepting, knowing how weak his Pokemon was. Yet, Ed stepped in before I could speak up.

“Olivine Gym policy, you face down two assistants before you get to challenge the Gym Leader. Let me go first.”

“That’s Tauros-shit, Ed, I know you guys make exceptions all the damn time. Let me fight her.”

“You’re not getting an exception from me,” Ed growled.

“You guys don’t even need to go that far. He’s done nothing to earn a Pokemon match,” Ash said.

“You shits.”

“Ahem.”

Peter heard a cough coming from behind him.
He came face to face with a shriveled, gaunt face that could pass for a skeleton.

“The fucking hell? You! Old man! What are you doing?!”

“Beret!” I said, astonished.

His grizzled, bony hand clamped down on the collar of Peter’s jacket.

“Damn, you too?! Fuck my life. Get your creepy hand off me. I’m going to call the cops.”

“Go ahead boy.”

Beret released Peter, and chucked a cell phone at him.

“Call the police. Ask for Officer Rice, he’s working today. While you’re at it, ask him about the drug bust by the river, see if the Poliwhirl I loaned him was of any help.”

Peter took the bait.

“Hey there, I want to report an assault. Yeah, an old guy just put his hands on me, intimidated me. Hold on, there’s a bunch of guys. I’m gonna get beat up unless you get here real fast. We’re at the gym. The Pokemon gym. Wait. One sec. Back up. What was your name?”

We could hear the voice on the other side of the line faintly answer “I’m Officer Craig Rice-”.

Peter dropped the phone.

“Woah. Woah woah.”

Peter is only now realizing just where Mr. Beret is situated in this city’s hierarchy. Beret took an innocuous step away, in the direction of the office.

“I take it you enjoy the use of your knees. It’s normal, for a human,” he said casually.

“The fuck? What are you getting at geezer?”

“I’m just going to the back and grabbing my 12-gage. I will be back shortly.”

I think it was specifically the mention of the firearm that triggered Peter’s flight response. Johto may have laxer standards than other Nihon regions when it comes to granting weapon licenses, but they’re still generally hard to obtain and reserved for characters you don’t want to mess with- such as ex-military war heroes. That may have given Beret the extra edge that the other younger men lacked. In any case, it was enough for Peter, who dropped all semblance of cockiness and bravery and hightailed it out of the gym. Once he was gone we all had hearty laugh at his expense.

Our laughter died when Beret returned- long-barreled shotgun in hand.

“Oh crap, he wasn’t kidding,” one bystander said.

“Hayate, I know it is difficult, but please mind letting vermin into the premises. They have a tendency to take root and multiply. I’m getting too old to play pest control.”

The old man, gun in hand, stomped off.

There was a collective sigh of relief when he disappeared back into the office.
Then I was immediately swamped with attention.

“He was totally going to blow his knees off! Can you believe it?!”

“What happened? Who was that guy? Did something happen between you two?”

“Can I have a gym battle?”

“I know it’s totally lame, but the fact is you are a girl. Don’t try to fight a guy straight-up. You have us, or your Pokemon.”

“Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine! Can I get a rematch?”

“That guy was a creep! I can’t believe how arrogant he was. Don’t you think so? We should have called the cops on him!”

“Kind of ballsy if you ask me. I wanted to slug him. I don’t work here, so you all wouldn’t have gotten into any trouble.”

“Are you alright, Jasmine?”

The last, most-direct, most-concerned address came from- who else?- Ash.

“I’m fine,” I replied.

And of course I shied away.

“Hey hey!”

“Jasmine!”

Ash waved everyone away.

“She’s fine! come on guys, don’t crowd her, she needs to calm down after that!”

I could use fresh air. I headed towards the back gate, tapping on Onix’s side as I went. He dutifully followed. No one immediately followed after, probably because Onix’s huge tail was getting in the way.

The weather outside was mostly sunny, warm, and humid. I breathed in the air- not exactly fresh, mind you, we are in the middle of a city- but it did feel good. It took several minutes before my heart settled down. It’s been awhile since I’ve had to deal with an ill-intentioned man, and never one so brash. Grain by grain, I sifted through the details of the encounter, addressed them with the rationale than absolved myself of any wrongdoing, and set them by the wayside. It took some convincing, but eventually, my body and mind adjusted back to normal.

“Are you okay now?” came a voice. I craned my head around, searching.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said.

“That’s good.”

It came from the other side of Onix. He wasn’t showing himself.

“I’m glad the old gym leader stepped in. I didn’t want to have to intervene. Things could’ve gotten messy.”
“You didn’t have to do that,” I said.

A pause.

“You’re right. But I wanted to.”

“But… never mind.”

A longer pause, as if he were collecting his thoughts, or allowing me a moment to collect mine.

“Jasmine?”

“Hmm?”

“I don’t know how to say this nicely. It’s like, I feel like you’ve been avoiding me.”

“Oh.”

He noticed?!

“We haven’t spoken in a while. I couldn’t find you anywhere I thought you would be, and even here, you’re not talking to me like we had been. Is everything okay?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“Am I bothering you?”

“No.”

A lengthier pause.

I knew what he was getting at, and dreaded having to tell him.

“Sorry,” he said.

“For what?” I asked.

His voice came drifting over Onix, a little farther than before.

“Maybe I was being a little presumptuous. I thought that, maybe because of how we were getting along, that you would want to hang out with me more. I was hoping, anyways. If that’s not the case, I understand. I’ll take my leave. See you later.”

“Wait!”

I jumped on top of Onix’s tail. Ash was heading away.

This feels… familiar. Like I’m always trying to catch people as they’re leaving me.

Ash didn’t, though. He not only turned, he tromped right up to me.

“Did I hurt you, or offend you? I’m really sorry if I did.”

I shook my head.
“No, it’s nothing you did at all.”

“Oh.”

Jasmine, just tell him the truth.

I can’t.

This is wrong.

Everything’s wrong.

Just do it!

Tell him! TELL HIM!

Nooooo!

I shivered and froze up.

If there’s one thing you wanted to inherit from her, it was her decisiveness. Be brave. Even that jerk had the courage to confront a gym full of (righteously) hostile men. Ash had the courage to confront you directly and apologize for a situation he was not even at fault for. You could at least tell him—

-no.

I shook my head again. Ash gave me a curious, inquisitive look.

Just… do that.

Okay.

I decided. I made my decision.

You’ll have to live with it.

I know.

That being—

Follow your heart.

“Ash?”

“Yes?” He looks so eager.

“I was thinking, maybe later, oh gosh I’m so busy and have so much to do, but sometime I’ll have free time, and then…”

Ash tilted his head expectantly.

“There’s a little island just offshore, called Mantine Island. It’s a nice place, people have picnics there. Would you sort of… want to go and spend time there with me?”

I just did that.

I really did it.
I asked a boy on a date.

“Sure!” Ash said with a big grin.

And he said yes.

Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear… what are you doing Jasmine?!

I’m going on a date with my crush, that’s what!

“Ah. Here’s my number, when you figure out the details.” He handed a little note to me. I took it in both hands, cradling it like the precious cargo it was. Then he skipped away, but I called him to stop, and hung on to him by the sleeve, and explained that I was hungry and there was a quaint coffee shop just across the street. He happily agreed, and we set off, holding hands.

“Both,” I said to myself, smiling softly, “I want them both.”

I paused at the kitchen door.

“It’s just, Mother… I really want to know.”

“Why?” she demanded, exasperated.

I gulped.

“There’s a guy I like.”

Silence.

She’s just staring at me.

Do I go on?

Is that her reply? Was my statement not even worthy of an answer?

I couldn’t fathom it, and opted to go full-on advocacy.

“He’s been very good to me, and my Pokemon. He’s just like what you saw in Dad: humble, and smart, and hard-working, charming and talented and selfless-”

She’s not looking impressed…

“And he’s more than a good person. He’s a hero. He was the one who brought the medicine through the storm. I didn’t even ask him, he volunteered.”

Would this fact even register with her? He risked his life to save the life of my precious Pokemon! I hope she understands that.

“So, yeah, I really respect him… I really, truly like him. I don’t know if I want to commit to anything and I definitely, absolutely will not let him touch me inappropriately or anything like that- but I just wanted to know, um, errrr…”
I took a breath, firmed up, and voiced my question.

“May I start dating?”

She waved me over. I trotted over. She got up, put one hand on the crown of my head, and leaned in close. Her eyes drilled into mine. Her voice was calm and even.

“Absolutely not.”

“Huh?” I stood limp, mouth agape.

“Let me put it this way. You have room in your life for one man. You can have Amphy, or this stranger. Your decision.”

She left me with a pat on the head.
I never imagined it would end like this.

To watch it all go up in smoke was excruciating. All of my efforts, my domain, my allies, my very soul, all reduced to ashen waste. The flames of failure surrounded me, and I was left an empty husk, unable to comprehend nor respond in any dignified manner. I wanted to cry, but couldn’t. I wanted to scream, but daren’t. If this was how my world would end, I would rather have never been born at all.

And it started so innocently, too…

Scritch scratch scritch scratch went the pencil across the page, imparting truth (or what I hoped was truth) to the empty paper.

“What are you working on?” came a voice.

“Homework,” I answered. “Johto History,” I specified. I had my head laid sideways on the table, and my body and arms drooped across the surface. It was too much exertion to keep myself propped up for such an endless trove of assignments. For that matter, it was too much effort to even lift my head to greet him, even if his presence was welcome.

“Onix was having fun over there.”

“That’s odd. He doesn’t usually do things for fun.”

“Is that so?”

“He’s a very prideful Pokemon. He takes his pleasures from being strong and doing his duty.”

“Really now? I could have sworn, he was tossing a boulder around like a beach ball, I thought it was a game.”

“That’s training I’m having him do. Many Pokemon rely on being grounded for leverage in close-quarters combat and can’t maneuver when airborne, so I’m teaching Onix to toss them into the air and keep them there. I figured- oops!” I paused.

Ash sat down opposite me, leaning down and resting his chin in his crossed arms. His eyes were level with mine now.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“It was a tactic I was planning on using against you,” I said.

He grinned in response.

“You do plan on challenging me, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Of course.”
“You’re sort of taking your time, aren’t you?”

He shrugged.

It’s been three weeks since his arrival. He hasn’t mentioned our destined battle since the day he arrived. Of course the storm and its aftermath made holding a Pokemon match untenable for a time, but my schedule has normalized and I’ve been taking regular challengers for a while now (case in point- that annoying New Bark Town kid keeps challenging me and failing in ever more amusing ways). Yet Ash still refuses to broach the subject. Not that I’m complaining, it gives me more time to prepare. With each passing day, I get more nervous about it, and more confused as to why he’s putting it off.

“Do you want to battle me?” I asked point-blank.

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Eventually.”

That’s a very non-committal answer.

“Are you waiting on something?”

“Sort of.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing really.”

“What is it?” I repeated, begging. My pencil came to a halt, my head lifted, my eyes locked onto his. I wanted to show him I expected a real answer.

“Maybe you didn’t pick up on this, but I’ve been travelling nonstop for a couple years now,” he said. “Even when I went back home, I only stayed there two weeks. I thought I was more comfortable always being on the road, visiting new places. After a while though, it got really exhausting. By the time I got to this city, I felt like I needed a rest, badly. So you could call this a sabbatical.”

“That’s it?”

That’s your only reason, Ash?

“I’m lucky,” he added. “I didn’t plan on staying here, but it turned out to be a nice place. I’ve had a lot of fun.”

I buried my head.

He couldn’t possibly mean that the way you’re thinking he means that, Jasmine.

What if he does?

Ask him!

No! It’s not the appropriate place.

I grumbled and mumbled something indefinite, catching his attention. He tried asking me what I said,
but I ignored him.

You haven’t even gone on that picnic date you asked him to. The gym and school and social obligations have been so demanding, and I never could find a good opportunity to sneak away without alerting Mother. It was hard enough justifying my time spent performing Gym Leader duties to her.

“The road gets lonely,” he said absently. I peeped up at him. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, he was staring off towards the backlot. “I make new friends all the time, but they’re never, you know, close friends. I don’t stick around long enough to really get to know anyone. It’s one of the few things I miss about Pallet.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Hmm?”

“Settle down.”

“I couldn’t do that!” he said. “Then I would miss out on so much. And I’ve got dreams, too! I want to be the best trainer there ever was! I couldn’t do that if I gave in to a little home sickness, could I?”

“Dream on!” I said. “The best there ever was? What’s that supposed to mean? That sounds so naïve.”

“It means winning the Globals.”

I cocked my head.

“The World Championship?”

“That’s right.”

“But… well, maybe you’re good enough to win, even though I think you’re crazy and overreaching a bit, but still… do you really think they’ll hold another one?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” he asked bewilderedly.

“Castelia.”

“Oh. Right. That’s a good reason, but- no, I think they’ll hold them again, in some form.”

“Do you think we’ll still be having Pokemon battles in five years? The way Lance is going, I’m sort of worried.”

“Oh don’t be worried about that. There’s a lot of people who are pushing back against him already. He won’t completely ban the sport. Maybe they’ll have new safety rules, but I can work with them. When the next world tournament comes, I want to be there.”

“That would be 2008. Two more years.”

“Ugh, that close?” He grimaced. “Maybe 2012, then. Or 2016. Most world champions don’t win on their first try, if I’m being realistic.”

“Winning it at all isn’t realistic!” I countered.

“I doubt any champ ever went in thinking he couldn’t win or only “might” win. Every one I’ve read
up on said they expected to win, so I’ve decided to copy their mindset.”

“But why aim so high? What’s driving you?”

He didn’t hesitate.

“I want to be the best.”

“That’s it?”

“Because being the best proves, without a doubt, that I gave it all I had, for myself, for my friends and family, and for my Pokemon. That’s what I decided I wanted to do with my life, to find something I’m good at, and work at it as hard as I possibly can, without excuses or regrets. It turns out, I can coach Pokemon to fight others in mock combat really good, that’s my gift. I’m pretty happy I have this talent too, since it lets me bond with Pokemon. They really are amazing creatures, and I’m not just talking about their abilities. They have souls, like us, I really believe that.”

I gawked with a mix of incredulity and admiration as the boy finished his answer. Wow. This guy is something else. You don’t meet these kinds of guys at school, you read about them in books, you see their names embossed on the walls of the halls of fame.

He really might go the distance.

I buried my head in my arms, desperately trying to hide my rose-ridden cheeks.

“Hey, don’t do that! You’ll mess up your hair.”

“Eh.”

Please don’t bring that up.

Hey, please don’t touch my hair!

It was too late, he was already poking my spike-tails. The nerves at the base of my hairs prickled.

“Don’t!”

“How do they do that?”

“What?”

“Your spiky things. I’ve never seen anything like that. They just stick out. It looks unnatural but really cool.”

“Hey!”

“Is it the clips? Are they something special?” He took a swipe at the plain grey clips that kept my spike-tails in place. I swiveled my head away from him.

“You can’t touch them! You’ll mess them up!”

“Sorry! Are they easy to mess up, then?”

I frowned at him, a very serious frown.

“Yes.”
If only he knew… it would be the end of me.

“I work very hard to get them that way,” I lied, “so I would appreciate it if you treated a lady’s hair with respect and mind your hands!” That should dissuade him, right?

“Yes ma’am. My apologies ma’am.”

“I’m younger than you, you don’t have to call me ma’am.”

“But you just called yourself a lady, so it’s like you were asking to be addressed like that.”

“‘Ma’am’ is short for ‘madam’, not ‘lady’. Get your titles right!”

“Yes m’lady.”

“I’m not your lady!” Oooo! Not yet, anyways…

“Yes.” That was all this time. He mimed zipping his mouth shut.

If I’m ever going to be his lady at all, we need to work on communication.

He opened his mouth once more, but thankfully found a new subject.

“So back to your Pokemon, I saw Onix tossing the boulder around and I let my own Pokemon out to play with him. Want to go check up on them? Maybe train together?”

“I don’t know. I still have homework to finish, but I guess I could do it tonight.”

“Jasmine!”

The question proved moot, as my attention was wanted elsewhere. Ed waved at me from the gym’s back entrance (it was a nice day, I had chosen to do my homework outside).

“What do you want?” I shouted out to Edward.

You’re interrupting my precious time with Ash, you nitwit!

“You have a challenger!”

“Have they won twice?”

“Yeah!”

“Have they checked in at the counter?”

“They’ve done everything like they’re supposed to! It’s normal operating hours, you can’t get out of this!”

I grumbled and stomped to my feet. A last check of my spike tails to make sure Ash didn’t upset them- they felt all right- and then I was off to the back lot to fetch my Pokemon.

“Tell them I’ll be there shortly!”

“You’ve got a challenger?” Ash inquired.

“Yep.”
He nodded along.

“T- I w-a-n-t t-o w-a-tc-h.”

“C-h-e-e-r f-o-r m-e. B-u-t d-o-n’t t-r-y t-o m-i-c-r-o-m-a-n-a-g-e m-e t-h-i-s t-i-m-e!”

“O-h r-i-g-h-t, s-o-r-r-y f-o-r t-h-a-t! I j-u-s-t g-e-t c-a-u-t-h-p-i-n t-h-e a-c-t-i-o-n, y-o-u k-n-o-w?”

Ethan wasn’t the last time he tried giving advice mid-match, and he didn’t even restrain himself to one party or the other. It was like he was trying to play both sides of a Pokemon battle by himself. In fact, he told me he would do that with his own crew, pit them against each other with himself barking orders for both sides. I’m not sure I could do the same without playing favorites.

“If y-o-u’r-e t-h-a-t i-n-v-e-st-e-d, c-h-a-l-l-e-n-g-e m-e y-o-u-s-e-l-f,” I t-o-l-d h-i-m. A-sh s-h-r-u-g-g-e-d.

“O-n-i-x! M-a-g-n-e-m-i-t-e! C-o-m-e h-e-r-e, w-e h-a-v-e t-o f-a-c-e s-o-m-e-b-o-d-y! T-h-e-y m-i-g-h-t b-e h-a-r-d!”

“O-N-I!”

Onix was squaring off against a trio of Ash’s Pokemon- Machoke, Tauros, and Charizard- in a tug-o-war competition (and winning, apparently). He heard my voice and immediately disengaged. The big brute came to my side and dutifully nodded, ready to be taken in by the pokeball laser.

“N-o-t t-h-i-s t-i-m-e, b-o-y. W-e’r-e g-o-i-n-g t-o m-a-k-e a n-e-n-tr-a-n-c-e.”

“G-a-a-a-r-r-r.” H-e l-i-k-e d-t-h-a-t. H-i-s h-e-a-d l-o-w-e-r-e-d t-o t-h-e s-o-f-f-f-f-s-o-t-h-a-t I-c-o-u-l-d h-o-p a-b-o-a-d.

“W-a-n-t t-o j-o-i-n m-e?” I a-s-k-e-d A-s-h.

“N-o, I’-m f-i-n-e. D-o-n’-t n-e-e-d t-o s-t-e-a-l y-o-u-r s-p-o-t-l-i-g-h-t.”

“A-s i-f y-o-u c-o-u-l-d,” I r-e-s-p-o-n-d-e-d t-e-a-s-i-n-g-l-y. “L-e-t’-s g-o, O-n-i-x!”

“Y-o-u l-o-s-e t-o h-e-r?” I a-s-k-e-d, q-u-i-t-e s-h-o-c-k-e-d.

“Y-o-u’r-e u-n-d-e-r-e-s-t-i-m-a-t-i-n-g h-e-r. I d-i-d, t-h-a-t’-s h-o-w I l-o-s-t,” E-d t-o-l-d m-e.

“B-u-t s-h-e’-s h-o-a-k… s-h-e’-s h-o-o-b-y!”

“H-e-r P-o-k-e-m-o-n a-r-e n-o-t b-a-b-b-y-s, I c-a-n g-u-a-r-a-n-t-e-e t-h-a-t.”

“O-k-a-y.”

O-n-i-x h-a-d m-a-d-e a g-r-a-n-d e-n-tr-a-n-c-e s-l-i-t-t-e-r-i-n g t-h-r-o-u-g-h t-h-e b-a-y d-o-o-r-s, h-e-a-d h-e-l-d h-i-g-h a-n-d m-y-s-e-l-f p-e-r-c-h-e-d a-t-o-p. I t-h-o-u-g-h-t I w-o-u-l-d g-o f-o-r a n i-n-n-o-c-e-n-t a-p-p-e-a-r-a-n-c-e, w-e-r-i-ng m-y f-a-v-o-r-i-t-e p-u-r-e-w-h-i-t-e s-u-n-d-r-e-s-s, s-e-a-t-i-n-g m-y-s-e-l-f w-i-t-h l-e-g-s t-u-c-k u-n-d-e-r, a-r-m-s a-t r-e-s-t, a-n-d h-e-a-d s-l-i-g-h-t-l-y t-i-l-t-e-d, g-i-v-i-n-g o-f f a s-o-f-f s-m-i-l-e. Y-o-u k-n-o-w, t-o g-i-v-e o-f f t-h-e i-m-p-r-e-s-s-i-o-n o-f a s-w-e-a-t l-i-t-t-l-e g-i-r-l w-h-o h-a-p-p-e-n-e-d t-o b-e i-n t-o-t-a-l c-o-m-m-a-n-d o-f a t-o-u-r-i-n-g l-e-v-i-a-t-h-a-n m-a-d-e o-f l-i-v-i-n-g r-o-c-k. T-h-a-t w-o-u-l-d u-n-n-e-r-v-e-e-th-e-m, r-i-g-h-t?

B-u-t n-o, I w-a-s m-e-t b-y a p-e-r-s-o-n w-h-o m-a-n-a-g-e d t-o o-n-e-u-p-m-e i-n t-h-e i-n-n-o-c-e-n-c-e d-e-p-a-r-t-m-e-n-t b-y t-e-n-f-o-l-d. T-h-e g-i-r-l’-s e-x-p-r-e-s-s-i-o-n w-a-s a-b-s-o-l-u-t-e l-y b-e-a-m-i-n-g, w-i-d-e-e-y-e-d a-n-d g-r-i-n-n-i-n-g f-r-o-m e-a-r-t-o-e-a-r. H-e-r o-u-t-f-i-t
was somewhere between adorkable and kawaii, blue overall shorts atop a red blouse, white thigh-highs, and a white, puffy toadstool cap that made her look like the gender-bent version of Jumpman. Her cuteness was off the meter, I felt like I was looking at a pop idol starring in a coming-of-age Pokewood movie. Seriously, I could gobble her up, she’s too cute.

You’re jealous, aren’t you Jasmine?

No, I wouldn’t go that far!

Besides, what she couldn’t match me on was the intimidation factor of her Pokemon. I sat atop a 32 foot tall primordial rock monster, and she…

…she was cuddling a Togepi.

“And your name is?” I asked, gawking.

“Lyra!”

Even her name is precious!

I took a gander around, sizing up the situation:


This is going to be a massacre and I’m going to be a villain. There’s enough spectators here, word will spread that I brutalized a little girl- they’ll call child welfare services.

You’re becoming Mother-

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

“May we start? What are the rules?” the girl asked.

“Onix,” I whispered. “Try going easy on her. Just, like, tap it out, okay?”

Onix actually chuckled. Onix can hold back, he couldn’t carry me around safely if that wasn’t the case. It just doesn’t suit his battling style at all.

“Hello?” the girl named Lyra called out, confused.

“Oh. Alright! My name is Jasmine Mikan, Gym Leader of Olivine City! I mostly use Rock-type Pokemon, because they’re old, tough, and wise, like our elders, and I really respect people who’ve been on this planet for a long time and seen many different things! These Pokemon have seen a lot of different things, especially Pokemon battles! You can bet they’re smart and tough! If you really feel like you can take them on, um… then I guess, I accept your challenge!”

I rehearsed that speech, just so you know.

“Yay! Just what I wanted to hear! This is so exciting! Hahaha!” She paused and became a little more serious. “I heard about you before I got here. Some people don’t take you seriously because you’re a shy-looking girl. But I can tell you’re strong, just by looking at your Pokemon. I’ve got four Pokemon badges already, so don’t think you need to go easy on me!”

She’s cute but also level-headed. That’s pretty rare. Well she did beat Ed, so there’s got to be something to her. Is it an act?
“Jasmine.”

“Hmm?”

Ash wanted my attention. He spoke so that his voice didn’t carry.

“She’s telling you she’s not judging you based on your appearance. Take the hint and don’t judge her based on hers. I’ve met her before, she’s not half-bad.”

“Oh really? Okay, I’ll be on my guard.” I switched attention to the opponent. “This will be a six-on-six singles battle! Standard clauses! I’m going to have to put a time-limit into effect because my schedule is limited today. Twenty minutes, and if no one wins by then, the winner is decided by KO’s, with the standard stamina-meter tie-breakers. Got it?”

“Sure! That sounds fair, although, I don’t think it’ll take that long. Let’s play fair and have fun, okay?” she said cheery-as-could-be.

“Ready? Set. Begin!”

“Togepi! Go!”

I held a hand up to Onix, who was about to rush onto the field. Per Ash’s advice, I was going to send Magnemite out first, to scout her team and see what her deal was.

“Magnemite!”

“Togepi! Tackle!”

Tackle?!

“It’s a trick, Magnemite, keep alert!” My living dynamo-thing (now that I think of it, don’t Magnemite sort of look like one of those rope and ball hand-crafted puzzle toys? What the heck even is a Magnemite supposed to be? They can’t breed so… oh no! I’m just now realizing I have no clue where Magnemite come from or how they’re born! Ack!)

Jasmine, BATTLE! FOCUS!

In those few seconds of distraction, our Pokemon had already exchanged several blows. Magnemite bounced backwards, knocked about by a Tackle. Togepi was on the ground and grunting in pain.

“Thunder Shock!” I ordered.

“Togepi, Sing!”

Magnemite hit first, and last. The Thunder Shock easily knocked the Togepi out.

“First down.”

That took less than a minute. Maybe this battle will be over quickly after all? I can get back to Ash and homework that much sooner!

“Huh. I’m sorry Togepi, I underestimated her after all. I should have switched you out. But you got to see a real battle, against a strong trainer, right? One day you’ll be strong and can hold your own in a match like this! I promise!”

“Pi pi pi pi,” Togepi responded, incapacitated but not fainted. The trainer and Pokemon exchanged a
hug, and then the latter was sent into a Pokeball.

“Your next Pokemon, please. I will be staying with Magnemite,” I told the challenger.

“Ha! Okie dokie! I promise, this next one will be tougher! Sudowoodo, go!”

The wannabe-tree sprouted on the far sideline. It swayed left and right, sizing up its competition.

“Sudowoodo, it’s a Magnemite! That means it’s a Steel and Electric type! Use your secret attack!”

Hmm, a secret attack? That must be a super-effective move. Fighting, Ground, Fire (unlikely), it doesn’t much matter. The only question is what vector it will take.

Sudowoodo began waddling towards Magnemite.

“It’s probably a melee attack, Magnemite. Back up, Thunder Wave.”

Magnemite lashed out with a whip of electricity. This slowed down an already slow Pokemon. And yet…

“Sudo! You’re paralyzed! But that’s alright. Like we trained, concentrate on your limbs, it’ll be okay.”

Huh?

To my amazement, the paralysis had no effect on the opposing Sudowoodo’s dexterity. It was moving normally, without the jerkiness and spasms that typically cripple paralyzed physical attackers.

“Magnemite, wait! Ah!”

“Rock Throw! Spear special!” Lyra ordered with a flourish. Sudowoodo pierced the ground. It pulled out the earth, not in round chunks, but long slender cylinders.

“Harden!” Sudowoodo scraped its arm across the poles, causing sparks to flash out. When finished, the poles’ surface was shiny and smooth. They resembled iron javelins.

“You can harden dirt into rock?” I wondered.

“Sudowoodo can!” Lyra said proudly.

“Wow. I want to teach Onix how to do that.”

“I can show him first hand! Like this! Toss them!”

Sudowoodo mimicked an Olympian hurler, expertly lofting the rock spears in a ballistic arc. They rained down on and around Magnemite.

However, Rock type is ineffective against Magnemite’s Steel type. What was she thinking? How much damage could it do?

Then I saw Magnemite’s predicament and realized damage was not the goal of the rock spears. Four spears had wedged into the ground around my Pokemon and pinned it in place.

“Now Magnemite can’t go anywhere. Even paralyzed, Sudowoodo can knock it silly!”
“Thunder Shock!” I said desperately. Magnemite ramped up a jolt of electricity—only to watch it harmlessly siphon down the spears and into the ground.

Shoot! She’s grounded Magnemite!

What to do? There’s that… but it’s not like senior Magnemite is any good with those kinds of attacks. Oh, whatever, desperate measures!

“Magnet Bomb!”

“Oh! Dodge!”

Magnemite charged up a glob of magnetic energy and railgunned it away. Sudowoodo leapt sideways out of its path. Except, Magnet Bomb is a seeker munition, it doesn’t typically miss.

“Haaa!” The silvery bomb swerved at the last moment and exploded on Sudowoodo’s back. Super-effective hit! Now, to see if we can get Magnemite free from the spears—oh cool, Magnemite’s using Screech to reverse the rock pole’s Harden! Nice job!

The spears crumbled back into dust and my Pokemon shook itself free.

“Now, I think a Sonic Boom will finish it… ah. Oh. Um. I’m sorry.”

Sudowoodo lay on the ground, conked straight out. Its back was bent at an unnatural angle (well, I assume that’s unnatural. It would be a broken spine for a human anyways. Maybe Sudowoodo are more flexible than we give them credit for? Seriously, it’s a 90 degree angle!). Lyra rushed over.

“Sudo! Oh Sudo, I didn’t think it would do so much damage. Are you alright? Oh you’re out! That’s no good!”

“Challenger, would you please refrain from entering the combat area? It’s not safe.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, I get emotional. I know, I know, that’s no excuse.” Lyra tapped her Pokemon and scurried back to the challenger box.

“It only took one Magnet Bomb. Even with a type advantage, I didn’t expect it to be that dangerous,” she mused.

To be fair, I didn’t expect it to be that strong either. Junior Magnemite was the one who specialized in Steel attacks. Maybe Sudowoodo’s Special Defense was just that weak?

“I better take you really seriously now, then. I’ll send out my first Pokemon. Quilava, I’m counting on you!” She tossed her Pokeball. A mustalin with bristling spines and embers cracking off its back appeared. It turned in circles before coming to a sit before its master. I knew these creatures well. They were popular with young boys with well-off parents, being hard to find in the wild but easily (if expensively) obtained from professional breeders. Sometimes professors give them away to a lucky kid as part of a civic promotion. I didn’t typically have much trouble with them.

“Quilava, we’ve already lost Togepi and Sudo! She’s not even using her strongest Pokemon!” Quilava turned, eyeing Onix.

“Qui?”

“No, not that one! The ball.”

“Quiyava? Lavava?!”
“Yes!”

Quilava spun around and leapt onto the center field. It took an aggressive stance. I guess it wanted revenge for its team mates? Not a chance.

Ed waved at me. So did Ash.

Both boys were pointing fingers at the Quilava.

I see. Quilava is her secret weapon, I presume. Alright, I’ll treat this one as if it were my toughest opponent. Think of it as if you had to face Ash’s Charizard. A worthy adversary- no, an impossible obstacle.

A smirk crossed my lips, quickly suppressed.

Suuure.

“Magnemite, Thunder Wave and then retreat. We’ll rope this out.”

“Dig!”

Quilava burrowed into the ground. It was safely entombed before Magnemite could get in range with Thunder Wave. Magnemite tried nonetheless, fruitlessly. It wanted to turn to me for instruction, but couldn’t take its eye off the ground around it.

“Huh. That was unexpected.”

Where would the attack come from? We kept scanning the field, looking for the telltale burrow mound.

“Flame Wheel!”

“What? Where? Magnemite, guard yourself!”

The hole where Quilava burrowed under lit up with flames. A blast of smoke and dirt erupted from it.

It hadn’t dug anywhere, he was right there all along! No, now it’s closing in!

“Magnemite, Thunder Wave!”

Too late!

Just calling Magnemite’s name was a mistake and took too much time! Quilava rolled in, a runaway tire of bristles and flames that struck Magnemite head-on. My poor Pokemon was finished. Not even Sturdy was enough to protect it, Togepi and Sudowoodo had seen to that.

“Hurray! Okay, we’re still in this! Now, Quilly!...?”

Lyra, I, and the rest of the spectators gazed at the Pokemon in confusion. The Flame Wheel hadn’t dissipated. In fact, the flames were getting hotter, brighter… turning white.

No.

No no no.
No way.

“You’re kidding me,” I whispered.

The flames blossomed into a thousand scintillating tendrils of light. Quilava’s bristles glowed as if superheated in a steel forge. They began growing, its whole body began growing. The creature’s size doubled. Its edges got edgier, its muscle became bulkier. Its slender head filled out. The fiery lights roared in one last inferno, and then subsided.

“A Typhlosion,” Ed broke the silence.

“Quil… losion?” Lyra said, agape. Then she sprung up in ecstasy. She started running out onto the field, caught herself with one foot over the line, and tipped backwards in comedic fashion to just barely save herself from running afoul of the safety regulations again. She slammed onto her back, groaned, and then leapt up once more.

“Typhlosion! Typhy! Maybe Tiffie? Tiph! Tiphers! Haha! This is awesome! Typhlosion for now, come over here, let me look at you!”

“Ehem.” I regained my composure and calmly recalled Magnemite back to its Pokeball. “I’m very sorry to interrupt this occasion, but the match must continue.”

“Oh, even for this?”

“Yes.” I sent out my next Pokemon. “Corsola!”

Evolution grants a major power boost to the Pokemon undergoing it, but I’m willing to bet Typhlosion can’t adjust to its new capabilities quite so soon after evolution. Let’s catch it while it’s still tender. I’m not too concerned, anyways, I have many different counters for Fire types. Corsola being one of the best. A double resistance should more than cancel out the power differential.

“Okay. Typhlosion, are you good to go?”

“Typhlo!”

“Alright, let’s test you out! Go! Flamethrower!”

“Corsola, Mirror Coat!” I shouted.

We’ll-

The whole arena erupted into a wildfire that set off the sprinklers and fire alarms. I raised my arms just to protect my eyes from the blinding light and residual heat. Corsola was later found among the ashes, a blackened smudge amongst the bone-white landscape.

When all was settled and the fight resumed, Magnemite junior suffered the same fate. I don’t even know what I was thinking sending it out; maybe I was hoping for a miss and to be able to paralyze the living inferno facing us. My Steel type simply melted into the field without making a single gesture of resistance.

I assumed Graveler, with her Rock typing and extensive battling history, would fare better. I assumed wrong.

“Flamethrower! Aw yes! It worked!”

Voltorb followed. Voltorb fried.
I clutched my dress with one hand. My other lay on Onix’s hide.

“Onix…” my voice trailed off.

I don’t know what I am witnessing. I’m in shock. There’s only enough sanity in me to give out one command.

“Onix, you have to go. Earthquake, as fast you can,” I said softly.

“NIX.”

Onix slithered out onto the court.

“Can you Fire Blast? Okay, Fire Blast!”

Onix slammed the ground, sending out-

A Fire Blast exploded in his face, sending the leviathan flying into the force fields, which shattered, and he crashed to the ground near me. It was better, really, the arena he had exited was some kind of window into the Earth’s mantle, a liquid wall of temperature exceeding ordinary experiences such as hot stoves, campfires, or lightning bolts. I’m only half kidding.

“Onix?”

There was a stark line down his hide. One side was completely normal grey rock hide, the other was crispy black crust. Onix wasn’t moving at all.

I stood there staring wide-eyed at Onix for many moments.

I… lost.

I cranked my head, slowly, fearfully, towards the foe.

Typhlosion stood huffing. Its trainer was swinging off its neck in celebration.

I didn’t lose.

I wasn’t defeated.

What transpired could not be called a defeat, because only contests between opposing forces may result in such things as winners and losers. This was no contest. It was an annihilation.

“Ed,” I called out, voice hollow.

“Uh… yeah. Yeah?”

“Please give the challenger a badge and my regards.”

“Why? Isn’t that your job? What are you doing?”

“Sitting.”

I sat. I placed my back against Onix, fixed my eyes on the wafts of flame, and did nothing else.
“Should we do something?”

“She’s been sitting there for an hour now.”

“I think we should say something.”

“I’m afraid to. She might crumble.”

“Or explode.”

“Never seen anything like that. You?”


“I mean, we have to do something, right? Onix seriously needs medical attention.”

“Don’t touch him. You see that? He’s conscious, but he hasn’t moved an inch. He’s staying put for her.”

“Damn. To take a blast like that, and then…”

Murmurs. People. Humans who are concerned for me, I think.

No, that’s wrong, it’s just echoes. Flames and fire, the illusion of incandescence washing out my vision. It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel… nothing.

Shadows of things I once knew as living beings surrounded me. Illusions, all of them. This was not reality as I understood it, and therefore, I reject it as a legitimate reality. Whether a dream, or the afterlife, or the ephemeral catalogue of a life once lived, experienced in the confines of a dilated time frame- fifteen years compressed into the microseconds preceding death- yes, that was the best guess as to what I was witnessing.

“You don’t have to cry,” I heard.

I touched my cheek. Indeed, a single tear had journeyed down the contours of my face.

It was he of my dreams that made this comment.

Crying, huh? Me? No way. That would make me as weak and whiny as Whitney. This is not crying. This is effluence forced out by physical trauma. I swear.

Then the thought of being compared to Whitney in the midst of one of her legendary child tantrums jolted me out of my all-consuming lethargy.

I brushed my cheek dry and looked around.

Ash, Ed, and Chiba were hovering over me. I didn’t have the courage to acknowledge them right away, so I scanned the rest of my surroundings. The gym was fairly crowded still. The gym leader being indisposed, challengers were waging casual battles against one another. One in particular was having success.

A Flamethrower charred a Wooper to a crisp shell. A Typhlosion stood proudly over its latest kill.

“Tyhpo you’re awesome! Wow! Even Water-types can’t stand up! I’m really impressed! You’ve
been working hard for this day, haven’t you? We’re going to the Elite Four!”

“Hey hey what’s the fuss? Lyra? Lyra?! LYRA!!!”

“Dorkster!”

Impetuous brat collided with flippant brat. Two children twirled round in each other’s arms, oblivious to the showdown between Hypno and Raichu that they had stumbled into. Miraculously, their lithe forms dodged volleys of brilliant energy convalescing all around them. Their world became a fireworks show of auroras and sparks.

“You finally made it!”

“I did, I did! I got caught up doing stuff at Tin Tower! There was this weirdo who wanted me to chase down a blue dog Pokemon with him and he wouldn’t let me go! But I got a pretty feather out of it, he told me it was magical!”

“Okay, that sounds cool. Show it to me later! Hey, right now, take on the gym leader here, I want to see how you do. She’s really tough!”

“Oh? I already did, she was easy, I won.”

“SERIOUSLY?!?! No way! I don’t believe you!”

“Seriously!”

“Prove it! Show me the badge!”

“She hasn’t given me the badge.”

“You’re faking it! I want proof! Proof!”

“I’m not lying, dork! Go ask her, although, she’s not feeling well, I think.”

“She’s not feeling well? So that’s it! She’s sick! You didn’t get her best shot, that’s the only reason you won. That’s so cheap!”

“You’re just jealous I won so easily. I bet you had a hard time.”

“Ha! You’re right. I haven’t even beaten her!”

“Seriously? How long have you been here, and you haven’t won yet? I’m sooooo disappointed.”

“Ah jeeze Lyra, you make it sound embarrassing. How did you do it?”

“You wouldn’t believe it. Quilava evolved in the middle of the fight into Typhlosion! Then he burned everyone she sent at me. It was beautiful! Like the Goldenrod Summer White Festival!”

“Quilava evolved, huh? Silver’s going to throw a fit. You just keep getting stronger and stronger. You’re way ahead of us now.”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about Silver. I think he just pretends to be weaker than me, for motivation. After all, who would believe a hardcore guy like him would be wimpier than a girl who tries checking her Pokemon into a human hotel?”

“You are such a bad humble-bragger, you know that?”
“Dork!”

“It’s not an insult! I like that about you.”

“Dork! Dummy! Stupid! Don’t say that!”

“You’re blushing.”

“Am not!”

Lyra pouted. Ethan removed her oversized hat, patted her on the head, and whispered something in her ear. Her blushing dialed up such that it became luminescent. She shrank in on herself, hesitated, and then shyly stuck out her hand. Ethan grabbed it in his. Beaming smiles, full of hope and optimism, slowly lit up the kids’ faces.

“Come on, let’s get your badge!”

“Won’t we disturb her? She didn’t look that well. I hope I didn’t embarrass her.”

“Hurry up, she’s prone to disappearing, you gotta catch her while she’s sleeping. Like an Abra.”

“Oh. Okay. Gym leader!”

“Her name is Jasmine.”

“Miss Jasmine! I’m coming over for my gym badge!”

By “coming over” she meant she would leap into Ethan’s arms and have him carry her across the field.

I didn’t know how to react to the incoming social obligation, with what emotion or in which frame of mind I would express when forced to talk with my vanquisher. Humility? Bitterness? Anger? Graciousness? A myriad of choices were available to me, all with drawbacks. Most would assuage my hurt feelings but hurt those of my opponent. Pride would not allow me to celebrate her victory- I know we’re supposed to accept our losses and be happy for the young trainers, that this means much more to them than to us- but I can’t do that. Beret and Price can do that, but that must be the sagacity of old age.

Then I remembered once again Whitney’s tirade, and Mother’s lectures, and how I wanted to be perceived by others: as someone who is respected. Thus, my default attitude kicked in.

“Hello,” I greeted the young trainers.

Lyra fell out of Ethan’s arms, awkwardly landing on the floor and flopping to a stand before me.

“Hi! What a battle! You had me worried when you put out all those Rock types, I didn’t think I could make it with Quilava! I mean, I couldn’t have made it with Quilava, but him evolving mid-match was amazing and just what I needed!”

“Please,” I said beggingly, signaling for her to calm down.

“Sorry!”

She’s giddy. She has every right to be, after such a victory.

“You’ve earned the right to Mineral Badge. Here, um, ah. Ed?”
The young man ducked over and returned the badge to my hand. I leaned across and held it for Lyra to snatch up, which she did with a flourish.

“Tada!”

I bowed to her.

“Um, if you would, please remember this experience with fondness as you continue your challenge. I wish you the best of fortune in your future battles.” Yes, please, go kick the other gym leaders’ butts twice as hard as mine, so I don’t look like a fool.

“She’s so formal!”

“It’s an act, an act, she’s a major a tsundere when you get to know her.”

“Oh really? So that’s like sweetie-poo pretending to be a spicy tobata wrapped up in yamato nadeshiko leaves?”

“That would make a great snack! Let’s open a bakery! Hey Jasmine, do you like custard?”

“I don’t eat custard very often,” I answered, bewildered by the sudden change in topic.

“Honey or sugar?” Ethan asked his friend.

“Sugar, but only if it’s cane. I don’t like that rooty stuff,” she answered.

“No wonder, they make that out of Oddish.”

“Ewww! No way! That’s gross, that’s disgusting! Waaah!”

“I was kidding! Stop hitting me! And what’s disgusting about eating a Pokemon? I saw you eating Bellsprout spinach.”

“It’s not that, it’s Oddish! They’re weird and gross and I wouldn’t eat any part of it even if they were made of chocolate.”

“Huh. I wonder if there’s a cocoa bean Pokemon.”

“Good god Ethan you’re such a dork! You’re making me hungry!”

“Well you started it, comparing people to food.”

“Who, oh? Oh yeah! We’re terribly sorry. Thank you miss gym leader for the badge, we’ll get out of your way now and let you do your battles and stuff.” Lyra leaned over to Ethan and whispered.

“Errr… no, it’s not like that.” He whispered something back to her.

“Oh! I see!” She nodded emphatically.

What the heck is up with these two?!

Okay! Thank you so much and I’m sorry the match got away like that. Maybe we can have a rematch someday. Goodbye!”

“Um, goodbye?” I said, waving the crazy pair of youngsters off.

“So you’re hungry? You haven’t eaten?”
"Nope."

"Got a place in mind?"

"I was going to the Pokecenter."

"Their cafeteria isn’t that great. I know this cool burger joint down the block, their waiters dress up like cowboys and cowgirls, and there’s gunfights and showdown every hour."

"That sounds fun. How far? I’m really hungry."

"Not too far. Oh yeah, and tell me exactly how you won! I want pointers, advice, anything? She’s clobbered me eight times now! Ah- right. Goodbye Jasmine! I’ll be back! I promise I’ll get your badge too! Be ready! What the heck, I know you’ll be ready!" Ethan waved me off and then turned right back to an eager-eyed girl.

The two young kids exited the premises, happy as paired dumplings.


Young adults.

The very cusp of young adulthood, anyways, because there was no mistaking their behavior. By all his pervy, shameless antics, his constant addressal of every female he came across as “sexy lady”, his ogling on unsuspecting women, and his utterly “adventurous” (if I were to put it so mildly) remarks towards girls, I had assumed Ethan was single. I was wrong. His advances were more innocent in nature than I gave him credit for—though still annoying!

I sighed.

Look at them go. Look how easily they chat with one another. There’s nothing reserved about them, no shyness whatsoever. They’re holding nothing back. Everything one does or says brings joy and laughter to the other. It’s so utterly apparent, from just a sparse minute of witnessing their interactions, that they’re an item. And when a relationship has that quality, of being so self-evident, you know it must fill them with unimaginable joy.

I’m incredibly jealous.

I turned and gazed at the object of my affection.

Our relationship is nothing like that. It could charitably be called a friendship. I haven’t told him my feelings directly, and I can’t tell if he’s figured it out on his own. I drive myself crazy every night (yes, that kind of crazy) thinking about him, wondering if he suspects my intentions, if he harbors anything in return, and how sweet and wonderful it would be if the best case scenario turned out to be true. Classes were spent dreaming of beautifully awkward confession scenarios, gym work procrastinated in favor of salacious scheming.

Those kids are younger than I, and they’re already far progressed into this thing I desired so badly. I want what they have.

My gaze wandered until I found what it was searching for.

For some minutes I watched him without action, content to take in his every mood and demeanor. He was immersed in another Pokemon battle, following the contestants closely and occasionally giving the trainers advice. He had Pikachu in his lap, stroking it. Sometimes he would glance my way and
then quickly turn away, embarrassed, as would I.

Ethan and Lyra have known each other for a long time, I take it. Ash and I do not. It must be easier, becoming friends first, before conceptions of “love” enter the picture. Going from strangers straight to romantic yearning makes it so hard for the yearner to create a connection. How do adults do it? Lust, I take it? But Ash and I are too young for that kind of interaction. Nor would I want him to be attracted to me based purely on a chance to do it (although, yes, I admit, the thought of him and it does fill my secret fantasies). I want a companion who loves me and understands me too.

How? How do I get there? How do I achieve what seems so darn easy for these brainless lovebirds who have just reentered my gym pushing a Rhyhorn topped by an old lady...

“Just spend time together, is all I can really do. Alone, preferably. A date… if only Mother wasn’t so darn strict, I could… ahhh. Meh. Let’s figure out what this mess is about.” I raised my voice. “Ash, Ash!”

“How? Yes?”

“Emergency, I think.” I pointed out the odd assemblage marching across the gym floor.

“Oh really? What’re they doing? Who is that?”

I, Ash, and everyone in the gym scratched our head in wonder.

The old lady stood tall on her Rhyhorn, raised a megaphone to her mouth, and began broadcasting at ear-splitting volume.

“IAN! I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE! QUIT SULKING AND GET OUT HERE THIS INSTANT! THE LAWNMOWER’S BROKEN AND THE GRASS AIN’T CUTTING ITSELF! DON’T YOU SNEAK OUT THE BACK YOU BACKLESS COWARD! YOU THINK THEM PIRATES WERE SCARY, YOU BETTER REMEMBER WHAT I’D DO TO YOU IF YOU DON’T SHOW YOUR FACE PRONTO! IF I FIND OUT YOU’RE DIDDLE-DALLYIN WITH THE KIDDOS OR SCARIN THE STREET RATS AGAIN, ‘STEAD OF FIXIN THAT MOWER, YOU’LL BE SLEEPIN ON THE LAWN! DO YOU HEAR ME? ON. THE. LAWN!!!”

Oh joy. It’s Mrs. Beret. This is going to be soooo much fun.

“I’m home.”

“It’s six-thirty. Where have you been?”

“The gym.”

Mother looked annoyed, which was better than the expected rage mode.

“You were supposed to be home at five-forty-five.”

I knew this was coming, and had prepared. I took out a note and handed it to her. It was a half-page
long and in fine print, but she demolished it in a matter of seconds (speed reading is a talent of hers, and with memorization that’s borderline photographic). It told a tale of paperwork and community service and absolutely necessary staff meetings, and praised me for hard work, diligent effort, and brilliance on and off the battlefield. Completely fabricated, of course- such was my reward for bailing Beret out of his wife’s hotpot. Between Mother’s wrath and Mrs. Beret, I genuinely don’t know which is to be feared more. Luckily I’m only related to one of the hell-raisers. Unfortunately, it was the one before me, and so I held my breath, hoping she’d believe the note’s contents.

“How does he ever give up?” she said with a snort. “Well? Your homework then?”

Lucky me, she accepted the fib.

“Almost finished, another ten minutes should be all,” I said.

“Ten minutes, are you sure?”

“More or less.”

“Fine. You can do it after dinner. I made pot roast.”

Mother cooked? That’s a rarity.

“Alright.”

“There’s plenty. Eat as much as you want. Your father’s not coming home tonight.”

“Where is he?” I asked, disappointed but not surprised.

“Ecruteak.”

“Oh. To talk with his boss?” I guessed.

“Yes. The board wanted to know why his team didn’t predict the hurricane accurately, and he has to try to explain to them his program isn’t built to predict storms, only model them after the fact.”

“I see.”

I really didn’t.

What Dad does at work has always remained a nebulous mystery to me, even after he tried to explain it. What I did understand was that his program was majorly budget-constrained and that he was doing the work of three jobs at once. Him not being home for dinner, or even bedtime, wasn’t exactly uncommon.

I internally grumbled. Not just because Dad wasn’t home, although that didn’t make me happy either. The issue was, when he’s gone Mother gets moody, and then there’s no one left to take it out on except…

“Put your plate in the washer when you’re done,” she snapped at me.

I held the serving spoon over the pot roast, my plate still foodless and clean.

I piled up as much as I dared and then slid into my usual seat at the dining table. Mother picked at the remnants of her meal while seated at the counter. A pile of notes and folders were spread out before her. Work-related business, I surmised. Dinner passed in a muted void. My dish was dutifully washed and homework was resumed. Ten minutes later, homework was finished and put away; the
fact that some sections had been skimmed and would need further refinement was not divulged. For
good measure, I also packed up the leftover roast and washed the pot. Mother did not acknowledge
any of this. Of course she wouldn’t, but at least, when she finished her own work and began
wrapping up for the night, she would notice. I was sure she would notice, because any failure or
shortcoming would be noticed and noted and contemptuously remarked upon. This way, I would not
hear anything at all from her. I was okay with that.

In my heart, I believed she was okay with that too.

“Jasmine,” she called, as soon as I seemed ready to depart for my room.

A rare kudo, for my efforts? Surely not.

‘What have I missed? What have I messed up this time?’ I asked myself.

“I thought I told you not to see that boy,” Mother said.

I clung to the wall corner for support.

My god… is she omniscient?!

How could she know that?!

I mentally calculated the cost to simply running to my room. The immediate consequences would be
fairly light, actually. The long term consequences were more uncertain. It was always better to turn
and face her directly. If only I had some excuse, some absolution I could think of…

She was staring hard at me, daring a rebuttal.

“I’m not. I’m not seeing him at all,” I said.

Her face never really changed, not even a gesture of contempt or anger.

“Why are you lying to me?” she asked.

Of course, of course, lying never worked either. The thing was, if I told her the truth, what I really
felt, it could get so much worse.

“I can’t help but see him,” I said, deciding on a lukewarm deflection. “He’s a trainer, he wants to
hang out at the gym. He comes to me and we talk. Nothing is happening between us.”

She doesn’t believe me, I can see it in her eyes.

“Really? Then explain why you were late coming home.”

Ahhhh! That’s how she knew.

“Is it because you were loitering around with the boy? Were you even at the gym?”

“I was, the whole time,” I answered immediately and forcefully. It was the truth.

“If I call Beret, would he back that up?”

“Yes.”

I showed you a note with his signature on it, Mother. Even if I went eloping, do you seriously think
he wouldn’t cover for me?
Mother reached for the phone.
I froze, and for a moment worried.
Worried about what?
You weren’t lying at all, Beret would testify to that.
But what else would he say?
Would he tell her about Ash and I laughing together, walking together, playing with our Pokemon together?
My fears waned when she thought better of it and withdrew her hand.
“You meet him at the gym, right?”
I nodded.
“Alone?”
“It’s always crowded there.”
“You haven’t been anywhere alone with him, have you?”
“No.” We never have the chance, not with you keeping such a vigilant watch over my schedule, Mother.
“Has he asked you out anywhere?”
“No, not at all.”
I asked him out, and haven’t had the chance to redeem his assent.
She sighed.
“There’s a strawberry cake in the fridge. Eat it if you want.”
She picked up her work papers and drifted towards her room.
“Is that all?” I said, confused. Her scolding seemed like it was about to end abruptly, which was unusual. I should have known to just let it go and count my good fortune tonight. Alas.
“What do you mean, is that all? There’s cake, you’re always begging for sweets. Don’t tell me you don’t want it.”
“I mean, about my friend.”
“That? You already know my stance. Try to dissuade him from talking to you. Nothing can come of it.”
“Can I not even have guys as regular friends?” I asked. “Ed is my friend, you seemed fine with him. Can I not see or talk to him anymore? Or Mr. Beret, even?”
“They’re different,” Mother stated.
“How? What’s wrong with this boy and not them?”

“You’re not infatuated with them.”

“You mean I’m not in love with them.”

Mother dropped her papers on the counter and marched over to me. She leaned in close, hovering right over my forehead.

“Jasmine, stop.”

I backed off a step, scared.

“Let’s get this straight- you have a crush. That is not love. You are not in love with him.”

“But… I think I might,” I said. She raised an eyebrow. “I might fall in love with him. It’s that kind of connection.”

“Sit down.”

“Huh?”

“At the table.”

I complied.

She took the seat opposite me.

Now what? How much trouble was I in now?

“Tell me about him.”

“Eh?”

“Everything. Who is he, how old is he, where is he from, how did you meet, what you like about him, the things you’ve done with each other. Everything.”

“Ah. Um. Alright.”

So I began. It came in fits and starts, awkward three word sentences at first, and evolving into more fluid and confident narration. I expected Mother to interrupt, interrogate, scold, and insinuate at every turn and opportunity- if not for information on her nemesis, why bother demanding this info dump? Yet, except for a single balking expression when I told her he was from out of town, she remained stone-faced and silent throughout. Lack of opposition emboldened me and filled me with courage. I started waxing on about his deeds, his kind personality and sharp mentality, and above all how much our love of Pokemon brought us together. As I kept going, memories shared with Ash filled my mind, and those memories filled my heart with a warm fondness and longing. The mere act of voicing my affection for him was kindling all the wonderful feelings I had stored up, as if the boy was here and present beside me. The narrative turned from broad strokes to incredibly poignant details, everything from his looks to his actions during the storm clean-up. By the end I was blabbering nonsensically about my feelings and yearnings, barely mindful enough to keep my carnal fantasies from spilling out.

“Don’t you see? Mother, he’s not going to hurt me at all. If I get hurt, I’ll only have myself to blame, and you’re all about taking responsibility for one’s own mistakes. If this is a mistake, may I please be allowed to make it? I’ll endure the consequences if I have to. I just want a chance. To be a little girl
with a crush. Please? Please?”

I couldn’t even bare to look at her for support. I buried my head in my arms, afraid of the inevitable backlash.

“Don’t be late coming home anymore,” Mother said. A hand touched my forearm briefly, and then lifted. By the time I looked up, confused, she was already inside the foyer and headed upstairs.

That was it.

No scolding. No assent. No acceptance or refusal or rebuttal. Her reaction was no reaction at all. That scared me more than anything.

It was too late to do anything about it except worry and carry on, so I did. The promised cake was in the fridge, untouched. I took a slice for myself and munched away, brought out my homework, and began the tedious task of redoing the complicated sections. It was near bedtime when I finished.

“Shower?” I asked myself, and then a fiendish little thought entered my head. There was something I definitely wanted to do tonight, to release all these feelings built up from my serenade to Ash as well as the pressure from Mother’s lecture. It was only a matter of whether to wash before or after the act.

“Shower first,” I decided, thinking a clean body would not sully the sheets so much.

Even as I contemplated my own imminent satisfaction, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt. She wouldn’t approve if she caught me. Is this what she was so afraid of?

“It’s just myself,” I said aloud. “It’s harmless. We’re still too young. I understand that. He’s not the kind of guy to force it, and even then, I’ll be careful. She’s worried for nothing.”

Still… why did it feel strange? How do I put a finger on it? It wasn’t anything she said or did. It was… her mood. It was off. Not her normal self. I should have been scolded for what I insisted on telling her tonight. Instead, nothing.

Then the strangest thought of all occurred to me.

The last bit of cake entered my lips.

Mother never buys desserts. Only Dad does that. Yet here I am, munching on freshly bought strawberry fluff-bread.

One page of Mother’s work paper lay forgotten on the counter. I took a peek at it as I left the kitchen.

It was a calendar, with the month of May opened. Many of the boxes were filled out with notes, details about her catering jobs. One day was circled in bright red marker, even though there were no notes contained within.

May 15th.

That was today.

“Huh?” I tensed and bit my lip.

Cake and cooking and a day circled and cleared out… it didn’t take a genius to put two and two together.

“So that’s why. But…” My discovery only led to a further mystery.
There was nothing special about today. Their anniversary was in July. They first met in September. Her birthday is in March, his is in December.

“Why today?” I wondered.

I wracked my mind for some answer, found nothing, surveilled the kitchen and then den for a hint, found nothing, and finally resolved myself to ignorance. This was causing stress, and I had instant stress relief waiting for me upstairs in the bedroom.


“No. Nothing.”

“Oh, really?” Our class president gave me a weak smile and shrugged. “Do you want to study with us? We’re doing practice runs for finals.”

“No, um, I’m busy, I have to work at the Pokemon gym.”

“Oh that’s right. It must be fun, having a part-time job like that.”

“Only a little,” I admitted. “It’s extremely gratifying, but there’s too much tedious work between matches to call it “fun”.”

“Oh I get that. It’s like my job. Well, see you next week.”

Cali returned to her close friends and made off. I overheard their conversation as they left.

“What a killjoy. She doesn’t ever talk to any of us. Why bother inviting her?”

“Don’t be mean. She has her own priorities.”

“She only talks to boys.”

“She’s always been a tomboy, despite her looks.”

“No, she’s trying to hog them all to herself, the slut.”

“Nuh uh, you ever really talk to her? She goes belly-up if you bring up anything naughty. She’s just an awkward weirdo who can’t get along with humans like a normal girl. I’ll be shocked if she ever starts dating.”

“You girls are so cruel! Stop it! Besides, I hear she does have a date.”

“What?!!”

The gaggle of young women yelped, and then chattered in mild excitement, but by then they were out of earshot. I doubled down on the broom handle (it was my turn for after-class janitorial duties) and worked harder, to put it out of my mind. It didn’t work.

At least Cali stuck up for me. I liked her. She was kind and sociable to everyone, not just her clique. Her grades were excellent, and she was already talking about law school. She’ll be a politician.
someday.

And you, Jasmine? What are you going to do?

My freshman year was coming to a close, and it was about time the teachers started herding us towards career paths. It made me nervous, and no one was giving me real guidance. For all the pressure she put on me for academics, Mother never encouraged me to form long term goals. Sometimes Dad would nudge her about it, and she’d reply that she was going to let me decide my own way in life, but that felt like an excuse.

She just doesn’t care.

I sighed.

Mother, you’ve only ever told me “no”. The entirety of your life lessons has been nothing but a succession of prohibitions, never anything positive or nurturing.

Well, I can always make this temporary gym leader post a full time career. I think that’s Beret’s intention. He’s not healthy enough to give me personal guidance all the way through, but he’s hinted that the Blackthorn gym leader Pryce would step in at some point.

“Jasmine Mikan, Gym Leader of Olivine City”.

How does that sound? Is it what I really want to make of my life? Is that going to be my livelihood and legacy?

It will do, I thought. It’s only half the equation anyways. A full and happy life is not composed only of career, but relationships as well. Speaking of which-

My phone buzzed. A text message popped onscreen. I fiddled with the device. It was my first, a Christmas present, and I hadn’t quite gotten used to it yet. Only a few non-family members had my phone number. I glanced at the sender and a shiver of joy ran through me.

“Wanna get 2gther after schl?” it read.

“Silly! I’ll see you at the gym like always!” I slowly typed out. I don’t know about Ash, but I could never get used to using the text speak everyone else employs for texting.

“Nah! I wanna see u alone!”

Ah! Oh wow!

This was new! A chance! A chance, right? An escalation, what I’ve been waiting on!

Wait a minute. This sounds too good to be true.

Why alone? I entered and sent.

“Secret” came the answer.

“What kind of secret?”

“Pkmn kind”, he answered.

I smirked. I have a good feeling I know where this is going. This was confirmed with his next reply.
Mt Loft lodge.

Yep yep. I see where this is going. Yesterday Ash and I were discussing team building, and he wondered if I wanted more Pokémon to fill out my roster. I told him I was fine for now, and wanted to concentrate on getting my current Pokémon more combat experience and maybe evolve a few of them. He thought that was also okay, but maybe I was trying too hard to force my weaker Pokémon to fight stronger trained Pokémon:

“Why not train them out in the wilderness? You can find a lot of easy pickings for Magnemite and Voltorb to train on.”

“But they’re cracking down on that kind of behavior. They don’t like strong trainers rampaging through the main routes, it messes up the ecosystem.”

“Oh, right. That’s Lance’s doing. He’s a big pain, isn’t he? Taking his job too seriously. Hmm. What to do then…”

...

It seems like Ash has found a solution to that issue.

“Loft? Is it okay?”

“It is. Y wouldn’t it be?”

“Well with League rules about wild Pokémon culling.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Huh. I guess he’s right. It’s not a main route, so it would come under Johto authority, not the League’s, I think.

“Mount Loft, huh? Could be fun.”

Mount Loft was a natural park to the northwest of Olivine, filled with dense forests climbing up toward the namesake peak. It was a haven for wild Pokémon, particularly strong rare ones that aren’t found on the regular routes. Because of that, it was popular with adult trainers, especially those who want to nab a fully evolved Pokémon. Little kids were encouraged to avoid the area and stick to the routes, though, out of safety concerns. I took it that Ash wanted to go and train together on the mountain.

“Will we be safe?” I asked.

“Sure! Ill protect u.”

“Okay, I trust you. Meet you there at 4:30.”

“C ya!”

I let out a sigh, a half-happy one. It wasn’t the outright romantic gesture I was hoping for, but it fit with his personality. Maybe this was his idea of a date.

You’re not supposed to be going on dates, Jasmine.

I shook my head.
Two nights ago she just quizzed me and then let it go. She didn’t say anything last night. I take it she’s either given up on enforcing that edict, or she’s distracted and won’t care. Especially if I take pains to keep her in the dark.

I smirked. No one was going to be home until late tonight. Dad was still in Ecruteak, and Mother had a function to cater until ten o’clock. I could get away with a little excursion. First, though, I need to go home and make absolutely sure she’s occupied, and also, maybe touch myself up a little.

“You don’t have a single stick of makeup. Maybe Mother has some lipstick?” I thought, for the first time in my life excited about the idea of cosmetics.

“Magnemite, you know how to work this, right?”

“Zzzt. Mag.”

That’s a “no”. I grumbled and pocketed the device. Right, so, electromagnetic manipulation apparently does not magically allow a handless/fingerless creature to operate a cellphone.

“Fine, we can work around this. How about this, I’ll leave Voltorb too. Magnemite, if you see her coming, fire off a Flash, and Voltorb, you sprint right back here. You know Terry’s yard? With the row of pine trees? Skirt through there, it’s faster than the road. I’ll come pick you up when I’m ready.”

“Mig mag.”

“Torb!”

My sentries took up their post at the entrance to our neighborhood. I rode Onix back to the house. Everything looked quiet. I tiptoed up to the front door and peeped inside.

No movement.

I took a breath and stomped inside.

“Hello? Hello!”

No answer.

If someone were home, it would be better to act normally and pretend gym work had been canceled. That would torpedo my playdate with Ash, but that was the risk I had to take if I had any hope of making this work.

Luckily, there was no reply and no sign of habitation throughout the house. I checked the garage and happily found both cars missing. Then I checked the calendar to make doubly sure. Yes, it says Mother has a catering job until late tonight. Dad shouldn’t be getting home until midnight. This should work, if I hurry.

Even with absolute knowledge that I was alone, I still cautiously tiptoed into the master bedroom. It was neat and organized. The master bathroom was the same, or even more so. The tiles were scrubbed and trash emptied, the mirror and counter were spotless.
“Don’t make a mess,” I told myself. Oh, and leave everything exactly how you found it. Mother is the kind of woman that would notice a single toothbrush in the wrong cup.

I carefully perused her drawers, making an exact mental note of where everything was before I took it out. As predicted, she didn’t have much.

“No eyeliner.” It’s okay, I don’t know how to apply it. Face cream, to wash my skin down. “Ha!” That felt good, nice and clean. I used a towel to dry off, and then neatly folded the towel back in place. “Blush.” I tried the very lightest application on my cheeks, and then checked my reflection out. “Eh. I get redder from actually blushing.” It looked good, I thought. “Lastly, lipstick.” Mother had a single tube, labeled rose red. I took off the cap and grimaced at what I found. The applicant was old and dried up. I tried it anyways, drawing the nub across my lips, slowly and carefully. It was like drawing on myself with a stick of chalk. “Uh.” I smacked my lips, not entirely happy with how it turned out. It looks gaudy and fake to me. Oh well, boys like this look, right?

“Hair,” I said finally. “Haairrr…” I repeated, moaning and slack-shouldered. I took up a brush and began combing through the long strands. It was typical for me to let it grow out; right now it was a good three inches below the shoulder. The length was fine, the whole backside was perfect, I even get compliments from boys and girls alike for it.

“It’s so long! And smooth, and thick! You know, if platinum-brunette was a real thing, you’d be rocking it!”

Length nor thickness nor texture was the problem though, it was this… this… ugh!

I ran a hand through my spike tails. The barb-shaped puffs folded down under my fingers, and then popped right back up.

“Just leave it,” I told myself, trying in vain to convince myself it would be fine. Maybe I should get it surgically fixed. Was there even a procedure for that?

I took one last look at appearance.

“You’re pretty, you are pretty, that’s why the guys keep picking on you,” I tried to tell myself. A sad sigh and a sad shrug followed.

You’re not pretty.

You’re not even ugly.

You’re just very plain looking. And young, childish-like. People still mistake you for a middle schooler, sometimes even an elementary schooler.

If it weren’t for these ridiculous spikes, there would be nothing notable about your appearance whatsoever.

And you want to date Ash, a handsome bombshell come crashing into your life out of the blue. Why would a hunk like him pay any attention to a stick like you?

Silly. Because he’s not the one-in-a-thousand looker. He’s the one-in-a-million looker who cares about personality more than looks! He’s hung around you so far, you must pass for what he considers cute.

I thought all this and took another look at myself.
He thinks Jasmine Mikan is cute. That’s not the person staring back from the mirror. This girl was a garish-looking wannabe.

It’s the lipstick. It’s too red and stands out on my pale face too much. I look like a porcelain doll.

“Gotta get out in the sun more.”

I took a tissue and wiped the lipstick off.

My ears perked, catching a low grinding sound.

It’s the garage door opening.

SHOOT!

Magnemite, Voltorb, what were you doing?! She’s home early!

I whirled into action. In seconds the bathroom was once again spotless, everything placed exactly where I found it. Good? Good! I jumped to the window, just in time to see a silver sedan pull into the garage.

That’s not Mother!

It’s Dad!

He’s home early!

Um, should I meet him? Would he rat me out to Mother?

Let’s not risk it.

I leapt down the stairs and bolted to the backdoor. I threw it open, skipped through, and then gently, as gently and quickly and quietly as possible, guided it shut. Click! A second later the door to the garage opened. I didn’t even bother to see if I was spotted, but made my escape around the outside perimeter.

Minutes later I was scolding my defective lookouts.

“Why didn’t you warn me?! I was almost caught!”


“I know I told you to watch out for Mother, but don’t you think I would have liked to know about Dad too?! Oh think! Please! Argh! Whatever, come on, we’re going training, and you two are going to get stronger. Let’s go!”

I paused a moment. Better let Ash know we’re on our way. Good idea! I sent him a text to confirm.

“On my way to Mt. Loft now! See you there!” – and delivered.

“Okay, now let’s go!”
I watched from atop Onix’s head as our destination drew closer.

“Mount Loft,” I said to myself.

Now, I’ve been to Blackthorn City a couple times, so I can tell you what a real mountain looks like. Mount Loft would be a nameless hill if it were relocated to the Kanto-Johto border range; Mount Silver would absolutely dwarf it. Here in Olivine, though, it was a monolith that ruled the western horizon. Most of it was covered in forest, but the upper crest was barren and typically glaciated during the winter months. Even now there was a little bit of snow left on the tip top of the peak. It wasn’t a breath-taking piece of topography, but it was tall enough to be seen from anywhere in Olivine. When we moved back from Ecruteak, spotting Mount Loft was the first sign that we were “home”. It’s always standing in the background, and if I notice it at all, I’m reminded I’m where I belong, and can take comfort in that.

Usually, anyways. Like I said, it can be seen from anywhere in Olivine, so if your intention is to actually go there, you’re stuck staring at that rock pile the entire time you’re moving towards it, and the trip becomes an inexorable bore.

I whined, huffed, and willed the mountain to get closer, but to no avail.

You’re just impatient to see the boy waiting at the base of that rock pile, aren’t you? That’s what it means to you right now. “Adventure!” “Excitement!” “Romance!”

“Oh hush. We’re training today, you included! There are Bellossom, Vileplume, and Jumpluff on Mt. Loft. Those are Pokemon that give you trouble, right? I want you to practice getting better against them.”

“Hraa!” Onix let out the Onix equivalent of a “guffaw”. He wasn’t impressed by my speech, as if he didn’t need any practice against his weaknesses.

“Grass types don’t scare you?”

“Hra rawnix.”

“Well perhaps we should find some Fire types instead, would that be more of a challenge? Hmmm?”

Onix’s eyes widened and his head dipped, cowering.

“Thought so.” I don’t think Onix will soon forget that harbinger of hellfire. “Don’t act cocky. You still have a lot to learn and a lot more to grow. There happens to be a world-class teacher up ahead, he’ll show you things I couldn’t.”

Our focus turned towards the mountain slowly inching closer.

“Wow.”

In the minute it took to lecture Onix, the mountain had snuck up on us. I could practically sprint there, it felt like. We crested a hill in the road and the entire landscape was laid out for view. Mt. Loft
filled my vision, wide enough I had to swivel my head to see around it, tall enough I had to crane my
head to see the top. Very close indeed. Even still, a hike to the top would take four or five hours each
way. Thankfully that wasn’t the plan, we were just going to venture around the base. I diverted Onix
onto a gravel road for a mile or so, and soon enough we arrived at the lodge.

It was a modern log-cabin building, built as a base-camp for visitors to the mountain. There were no
permanent employees and by the looks of it no visitors either. The parking lot was empty and I didn’t
see or hear anyone. The only living creatures besides me and Onix seemed to be a flock of Spearow
chittering about the branches.

“Ash!” I called out, wondering where he was. I’d figured he would wait outside the entrance for me,
but that clearly wasn’t the case. Was he late? Waiting inside, perhaps? Or had he gone off ahead to
explore the woods?

I dismounted from Onix and went up to the door. The lights were on inside, but still I didn’t see
anyone.

“Huh. Strange. Onix, there’s an awning a little ways up the trail, would you please go check that
out? Ash may be waiting there.”

“Onaw?”

“I’ll check inside really quick.”

I saw Onix slither off, instantly regretting my decision.

‘I hate surprises’ - that statement is a little bit misleading. In fact, I hate being surprised. I do love
pulling surprises of my own and understand the prankish appeal. If Onix found Ash first, I would
lose the opportunity. Ah, oh well, it was a gamble anyways. Let’s check inside first.

I entered, saw no one in the kitchen or communal room, and started towards the dorm rooms. There
was a sound, footsteps and doors swinging. It came from the restrooms.

Ahh! So that’s it! He was taking a bathroom break! Got him right where I want him!

I grinned and tiptoed up to the boy’s restroom door, evil thoughts and insidious ideas crossing my
mind. How best to scare him? Would he still act cool or jump like a Meowth?

“Flash,” I said to myself. “I’ll blind him and then jump on him! It’ll be a big shock, he still thinks I’m
some timid little lass. Okay! Magnemite, come out quietly!”

I held out Magnemite’s Pokeball and clicked the release button.

The Pokeball opened.

That was all it did.

No materialization laser, no sound effect, not even an error chirp. The Pokeball acted as if empty. Or
dead.

“Magnemite?”

Did I pick up the wrong Pokeball? I was sure I had the right one. I did recall Magnemite into its ball,
didn’t I?

“Magnemite, go! Come out!” I jerked it hard and jammed the button down.
The Pokeball was inert. Nothing happened.

“It’s not going to work. It’s jammed.”

I froze up.

That voice…

…was not Ash’s.

The girl’s restroom door opened. Peter stepped out, directly behind me. I looked over my shoulder at his grinning face.

This was bad, seriously bad. I knew that and processed that in an instant, and reacted accordingly. We were wedged into the small nook between restroom doors, there was not much room to maneuver. I ducked and weaved, using the bending motion to also grab a new pair of Pokeballs out of my pockets. My momentum turned into a dead sprint, reaching the front door before Peter could possibly reach me.

I grabbed the handle and jerked. It didn’t budge. The door was locked or blocked somehow. There wasn’t time to figure out the locking mechanism. I twisted around and chucked my Pokeballs.

“Graveler! Magnemite!”

The Pokeballs bounced along the floor, inert and useless.

Peter had barely moved. He was leaning against the wall, even, wearing a rancid grin that made me want to puke.

“I got them all. All your Pokeballs. That’s not going to work.”

I wanted to scream, but thought better. Instead, I made a beeline for the dorm room. I tumbled inside, went for the window, and began clawing. No good, the molding around the windows was caked in ancient grime, there was no opening the thing. Peter appeared in the dorm room doorway, not the least bit hurried. His casual manner told me enough- he had everything planned, everything under control.

Well, almost everything.

“ONIX!” I screamed.

His grin grew wider.

“ONIX! ONIX!”

I waited, and waited, and every passing second I expected the familiar rumble of my great worm to reverberate through the wood flooring.

“ONIX!” I wailed out.

There was no rumbling, not even the tiniest shake. There was only me and Peter. He sensed something in my demeanor, maybe that I had come to the realization that no help was coming and no escape was possible. His hand went through his teal-dyed hair, brushing it back.

“What do you think you’re doing? What did you do to my Pokemon?” I demanded.
“I put an emergency lock on their balls. Super cool tech, if you ask me. Did you know? Nah, you wouldn’t, no one does. The government installed the coding without telling anyone, even the League! Imagine that, a Pokeball can be shut down cold with a remote server command, and even the server operators don’t know about it! Look, it’s just a piece of plastic now.” He lazily tossed my Pokeballs back to me one by one. The three hit me in the stomach, fell to the floor, and rolled under the bed.

“That’s impossible. You shouldn’t be able to do that. You can’t,” I asserted.

“Oh, sure, I couldn’t, not on my own. But my pals have this awesome computer, Cray 9100, PP-32 core, a hacker’s dream. I could brute-force a 64-bit crypto-code with that beauty, back-dooring the League servers off some dumb old fuck’s email was a cinch.”

“Hackers? Pals? What are you talking about?”

“You still haven’t figured it out? You really are a dumb bimbo.”

“I am not.”

I had most everything figured out already, actually, and only feigned to listen as he explained his genius. Meanwhile, my eyes darted around the dorm room, searching for something, anything to protect myself.

“I’m smart, but you never guessed that, didn’t you? Code smart. A prodigy, really. Just never had the chance to show it off, is all. Old people don’t believe a kid could do the things I can do, would never let me live out my potential. With the right set of tools, I can break into the Pokemon League servers and start releasing Pokemon, or switch their owners around, or hell, give them new names! Or for that matter, borrow a few, take them out for a test drive.”

Peter flashed out four Pokeballs between his fingers, all bearing the coloration of high-end premium balls- Ultra, Dusk, Premier, Heavy.

“Thanks to our paranoid government, I can even put an emergency lockdown on the Pokeballs, tells the ball’s computer to override the release button signal.”

“I can’t use my Pokemon?” I said dumbly. My focus converged on the neatly made beds. I could use the pillow to block his view, maybe…

“Duh! No big bad bolt-shitters to beat up on poor lil me! Got that figured out yet?”

“But Onix is outside, he’ll come back for me.”

“Ah, that big fella. I saw that coming in. It’s okay, he’ll be chasing my new friends around until he gets tired.”

“What friends are you talking about?”

The pillow probably won’t work. I need something long and hard, the lamp maybe, although it might get stuck from its power cord.

Peter lowered his head, his grin taking on a devilish tint.

“I joined Team Rocket.”

“You can’t be serious,” I replied, incredulous. “You’re a kid. They’re hardened criminals. You’re
“Shows what you know, bimbo. Get this. They not only let me join them, they’re promoting me right off the bat! Admin Specialist! I’ll be in command! I can get anything I want, do anything I feel like! It’s going to be crazy. All because I have leet computer skills.”

The room was barren, there was nothing functional as a weapon within easy reach. My only bet was to keep him talking and pray Onix returned.

“No one else acknowledged that I was good for anything. No one. I told them. I offered them. I could be a white hat, solve their security issues, root out the bad guys. They didn’t listen. Said I needed to grow up. Fuck that! There’s no bad guys, there’s no good guys. Only arrogant pricks who think they own the world. ‘Think’, operative word. We’re the ones who are going to own the world. We have plans, big plans. I’m off to Goldenrod soon as we’re finished here.”

“What kind of plans?”

“Like I could tell you,” Peter said, now taking a step forward. “After all, I wasn’t planning on killing you. That’s not my style.”

I backed myself up against the window.

“What are you talking about? You’re out of your mind.”

The grin vanished. He was getting serious.

“They’re all liars. You know that. You can feel that.”

He paused to watch me react. I gave him nothing but a hard stare.

“I’m not a virgin,” he said. “I’ve done it. More than done it, I rocked it. Who do you think knocked up Sakura?”

“That was you?!”

“The slut begged for my dick, literally got on her knees. Best blowjobs, tight pussy. I’ll miss her. Too bad, daddy got on her case, and so she broke up with me. It’s okay, I’m not mad. She’s the one paying for it. Tried to hide that baby bump from everyone, but we all know. Heh, wow! You know, I never really thought about it, but I’m going to be a dad!” Peter snickered.

“Why are you doing this? What made you this way?” I asked, hoping he might delve into his childhood sob story.

“Doesn’t matter. I can’t say I really ever had a thing for you, unlike some guys I know. Your attitude is pretty off-putting. But you’ve got a nice body, nice ass, I sometimes dreamed of fucking it. Now I’ve got plans to bail on this garbage dump, I thought I’d live out that dream. Don’t take this like I’ve got feelings for you or anything. It’s just a nice going-away present to someone I kinda fucking hate. Maybe I’ll give you a baby bump too, something to remember me by.”

“You sick, disgusting creep.”

He closed the gap between us. His right hand grazed my shoulder.

“Don’t you dare touch me! You’ll go to jail!”

“Shut the fuck up bitch. It’s time for my joyride.”
Peter lunged. I ducked. His hand caught my hair. The fingers clasped into a fist, getting a hold of my hair clip. I rolled onto the bed. He followed, leaning over and continuing to grapple at me. He tore at my head, pulling my hair. Both hair clips came undone. I started pelting him with my fists. He backed off.

Rather, he flew off- no, not even that- he was hauled off me.

Peter landed on the opposite bed, rolled, and came to a crouched stand on the other side. His expression was a mix of shock and wariness.

I was suddenly aware of another presence in the room, a man huffing and heaving in rage. My heart skipped a beat.

This is a fantasy come true. How he could he possibly be here?! Just in the nick of time, no less!

“Are you okay?” he asked me.

I felt out my head. My hair hurt from where it was pulled, but otherwise I felt unharmed.

“I’m okay.”

“How the fuck are you here?” Peter spat out.

Ash, my beautiful, brilliant, brave Ash, took another step, placing himself between me and the would-be rapist.

“What’s going on here?”

“How THE FUCK ARE YOU HERE?!?” Peter roared out. “I fuckin jacked your phone! I erased that conversation! You shouldn’t know jack! You shouldn’t be here! This is bullshit”

“What are you talking about? I got a text from Jasmine, she was expecting me here. What the hell are you doing here? You tried to hurt her!”

I gasped. The confirmation I texted to Ash right before I left- he came just based off of that?

“I had Jerry on lookout, the fuck happened to him?”

“You mean your stooges? They didn’t take kindly to me just asking for directions. Last I saw, a big rock snake was hugging them.”

And Onix pointed the way! I am so blessed!

But Peter is still free and he has his own Pokemon. They’re no match for Ash’s though, right? Unless Peter also locked his away too…

“Damn it. Damn it! I wanted this, I wanted this so fucking much!”

“Wanted what?”

“Her pussy,” Peter answered. “If it’s as tight as her asshole, it’s gotta be glorious. She’s been the bane of my existence time after time, taunting me, pissing on me and all the rest of us, her whole attitude telling us guys “Hands off! You can’t have me! This is reserved for Mr. Perfect! You scum aren’t good enough!” Fuck, I wanted a taste of that forbidden fruit so badly. Damn you, stop getting in my way!”
“You are sick.”

Ash took a deep breath.

“You don’t like that? I get it. She’s your property huh? Your winkie, your goods?”

“She is not my anything. She is a human being, and a woman, and deserves respect.”

“I respect her! I have never once made fun of her itty-bitty mini-titties.”

Ash pushed me back against the wall.

“Stand back,” he warned.

“What are you doing? Why not call the cops? They’ll take care of him!”

Ash replied in a low voice.

“I don’t want to.”

Peter was in mirth. He couldn’t help himself, the situation just seemed like a never-ending joke as far as he was concerned.

“Oooh, you gonna play the hero? Guess what, good act, you got her fooled. Jasmine, you realize it, don’t you? This was all his idea. He made me pull this hoax, so he could show up and rescue you. Ha ha, what do you think of him? Some goddamned hero? That’s so convenient! You are such a sucker for that kind of thing! We told him that!”

“I’m going to shut that lying mouth of yours,” Ash growled. “Jasmine, he’s lying, you know that? I would never.”

“I know, but please…”

Ash had Peter cornered between beds.

“Still playing at it, huh? What are you going to do? You want to settle this? I see, I see, fight for the right to cock her, winner take-all. I get it. Want to settle this your way?” Peter held up the pilfered Pokeballs. “My Pokes against yours. I bet I can take you now, these loaners are-”

“YOU! GOD! DAMNED! ASS!”

Every word was punctuated with a haymaker punch. Ash’s fists were flying free, reigning blows on Peter’s head and arms. The latter was surprised by the sudden onslaught and could barely defend himself. The dark-haired boy railed on the taller boy from every angle. When they couldn’t connect high through Peter’s raised limbs, he started coming in low. An upper-cut sent Peter stumbling back.

“I would never ask my Pokemon to fight for the sake of my own ego! It’s disgusting, it’s shameful, it disrespects them. Most of all, it shows how much a big, ugly coward you are.”

“Ha! Yeah.” Peter held up his hands disarmingly. “You got me, I’m a wimp. I’d rather go brawling with Jasmine over there.” He then snarled and threw his shoulder into Ash’s midrift, catching the latter by surprise. The pair tumbled over. Fists and feet lashed out. They got to their feet and began swinging at each other. Kicks landed and they were on the floor again. The melee was brutal and unrelenting. There was no more breath for taunts or threats. The next glimpse I got of Ash’s face was of a bloodied brow and frenzied eyes.
Peter kneed Ash near the groin. The latter doubled over in pain. Peter floored him with a hammer-fist to the back of the head. Ash was defenseless for a moment, and Peter was close to finishing him off. He didn’t realize he had his back turned to the spectator, nor did he anticipate that said spectator would cease to be a spectator given such an opportunity.

Peter screeched as his knee gave out. A well-placed kick landed in the back of his other knee. He reached around and took a swing at me, but missed badly. By that time Ash was back on this feet and grabbing him by the ears. Their fight continued, a messy, disjointed brawl. A punch to Ash’s gut gave Peter another opportunity. This time, he used the opening to bolt out of the dorm room. Ash gave chase.

“Stop! Ash, stop! He’s getting away, we don’t have to fight anymore!”

“He’s just going for his Pokemon!” Ash yelled.

True enough, as soon as he had room, Peter reached up to release his Pokeballs. However, in order to get enough room to release the creatures, he had to get out of the cramped dorm room and into the open common area. This gave his opponent room as well.

Ash took a running leap and Hi Jump Kicked the pokeballs right out of Peter’s hand. Ash landed on one foot, smoothly shifted to the other, and delivered a round-house kick to Peter’s face. Peter, in a rage, threw punches left and right. Ash deflected the first volley, backed off a step, and then met a lunging Peter with a single jab. It caught Peter in the throat, sending him reeling. He stumbled over to the cabin door. It was open now, apparently bashed in by some great force. In fact, that great force was waiting right outside the threshold.

“No. No.” Peter shook his head.

Onix towered above the cabin, wearing a look of fury and rage unlike anything I had ever seen a Pokemon opponent draw from him.

“Onix!” I commanded.

Peter took out a single Pokeball and heaved it. A Koffing appeared, right in time to meet a multi-ton sledge hammer of a tail. The purple gas bag exploded. A cloud of vile smoke erupted across the front porch. I was forced to stand back and help carry Ash away from the noxious fumes. Onix cared little for the gas and blindly hammered away. When the fumes cleared, Peter was nowhere in sight.

“Onix!”

My rock titan was heaving with uncontrolled rage, similar to Ash.

“Check the perimeter, make sure he’s not lurking!”

Onix did so.

After some minutes, it became clear that the perpetrator had absconded, leaving us be. After I was sure we were safe, I went to Ash back in the dorm room. I found him sitting on the side of the bed, bent over.

“How… *heave* did you *heave* like my *heave* taekwondo?” He let out a last big breath and grinned. I looked him over, taking in all the bruises and cuts, and couldn’t help but smile back. Peter would have beaten him if they had fought any longer. That bastard really was a coward.

“You idiot,” I said, barely able to suppress a giggle. “You can’t look cool by getting yourself beaten
to a pulp. That was reckless! You know, I have no reservations whatsoever about using my Pokemon for the pettiest personal vendettas.”

“Heh. That’s because,” he gasped for air, “you’re a girl.”

My nose wrinkled at that statement.

“Well, boy or girl, self-defense isn’t about ideals, it’s survival. Use your Pokemon next time you want to fight a psychopath! Or better yet, call the police.”

“I didn’t have time.” Ash rubbed his nose. “You know. You could thank me.”

“Thank you how?” I asked, head tilted.

“With a “Thank you”,’’ he replied simply. I flinched. Geeze, Ash, take a hint! Perfect opportunity, completely flew over your head! Whatever. You’ll learn. Peter was right, I am a complete fool for that knight-in-shining-armor trope. The moment lost, I kneeled down and started wiping down Ash’s blood and sweat with a pillowcase. He jerked away at first, but eventually stood firm. While I tended him, his eyes kept darting around, unable to meet mine. They eventually settled on a fixed point above my forehead.

“Hmm?”

“Your hair!”

“Oh right. I’m fine. He only got my clips…!”

I jerked all the way up.

“I am not fine!” I declared, and began running, hands held tight to the crown of my head.

“Hey!” He caught me by the hem of my cardigan. “Stop! What’s the matter? Did he get you? Are you bleeding!”

I furiously shook my head.

“What’s going on? He hurt you, didn’t he? Hey, did he manage to do something to you before I got here? Please tell me, it’s important.”

“It’s nothing!” I cried, landing on the other bed and balling up, still covering my head.

“Hey! What’s the matter? Tell me, tell me! Come on! Why are you holding your head?”

“It’s my secret! I don’t want you to find out!”

“Your what? Secret? Come on! Calm down, it’s no big deal.”

“Yes it is!”

“Oh really? What is your secret then?”

“I can’t tell you! It’s a secret, that’s what secrets are, they’re meant to be kept secret! Besides, it’s embarrassing!”

“Dang, I save you from a pervert and get all beaten up, and you think I care about what’s going to embarrass you. If you won’t tell me, then let’s get out of here.”
I crumpled into a wadded-up human dishrag.

This is incredibly embarrassing!

What would he think if he saw it? It’d be the end of us!

But he’s not leaving, and I had no escape path.

I moaned and whimpered, to no avail. Ash continued to wipe himself down and stare down on me, confused.

Well, crap, there’s no way to hide it forever.

“If I show you, you promise not to laugh, okay?”

“I promise. Only if you show me, because otherwise, I’m going to laugh at how silly you are freaking out about this.”

I turned over in the bed, came to a sitting position, and faced Ash. Slowly, my hands drifted down to my waist.

“Don’t you dare laugh.”

He kept his promise.

“Oh.”

I grumbled and mumbled, but could do nothing to assuage the shame boiling inside me.

I swore I would never, ever show this to anyone.

Well, there’s a first time for everything.

“So that’s how they work.”

“Yes. That’s the secret.”

“Is that natural?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

“I take that as a yes.”

“So? Now you’ve seen them, can you stop gawking?”

“They’re just so… so… eh.”

I looked to the mirror hanging over the bed stand. There I found my most ridiculous reflection staring back at me.

My hair, my wondrous, silky hair that so many people praised me for, was in disarray. The metallic brunette strands were ruffled and bent. The hair clips were missing, leaving everything free.

Including my cowlicks.

Yes. Cowlick(s).
Plural.

One growing out each side of my head.

Some people have cute cowlicks, singular antenna protruding over their forehead, giving them an endearing imperfection.

My cowlicks are more like bug antenna, misshapen and misplaced. I look like an insect, or a Martian. They’re hideous. Even unsupported they don’t droop, they just shoot straight out in a haphazard fan.

When I was young, they called me Venonat. It’s that kind of resemblance.

The truth of my signature hairdo, my twin spike tails? How they’re so spiky and stick out so much? It’s because that’s what my hair does naturally. Only by herding all the strands together with hair clips and carefully styling them does my hair turn from something awkward and painful to look at to something passably cute-looking.

I wish I could blend in with others, wear a normal hair style, but to date, absolutely nothing has worked. Not a dozen different kinds of haircuts, not mountains of gel, neither braids nor pins. The only way to salvage them is the hair clips. I will forever be cursed into a singular hair style for the rest of my life, thanks to these. I hate them. I hate these cowlicks so, so much.

“I’ve always wanted to wear tucked Kalos braids, actually,” I admitted wistfully. “But I can’t. I can’t do anything with this.”

“Huh.” Ash tilted his head. “I thought of something.”

“What?”

“Can’t tell you. Not yet.”

“Oh come on! You got to see my stupid hair, you can’t keep a secret from me!”

“It has to do with your hair, but seriously, just wait! Please, don’t look at me like that! It’ll be better as a surprise.”

“Grr!”

“No, Jasmine, come on. Here, how’s this? I think you were expecting a get-together between us, before that bastard interfered.”

“He hacked your phone and pretended to be you to lure me here,” I explained.

“Oh. Wow. Worse than I thought.” He got out his phone and double checked it. True enough, all his contacts and saved messages had been wiped clean. The only text was from me, the last one I sent before leaving. “So yeah, you came on a false premise, but still, you came. So…”

“Yes?”

Wait a minute.

Is he getting at what I think he’s getting at? No way!

“Are you free tomorrow?”

“I can be!” I said, too enthusiastically.
“You asked me a while ago if I wanted to go to Mantine Island, right? I looked it up, it seemed like a cool place. Want to go there?”

“Ah! Yes! Okay! Of course! I’ll be there! What time? What Pokemon should I bring? Do you want to train?”

“Well, I was actually thinking,” Ash said, his face contorting. “Um, I’d rather you not bring any Pokemon at all.”

“Huh? Why?”

His expression slowly broke out into a sheepish grin. He scratched the back of his head, as embarrassed as I was showing off my cowlicks.

“I just want it to be the two of us.”
First Kiss

My name is Jasmine Hayate-Mikan. I am a student in Olivine North High School and the acting gym leader of Olivine City Gym. I’m fifteen years old, five-foot-three, and single.

In my short life thus far, I have had a few interesting experiences and cleared certain milestones that are a part of a normal human life. I have caught my own Pokemon, gone to school, made friends, experienced sadness, questioned the nature of the universe, enjoyed moments of profound discovery, celebrated heroes from afar, learned valuable lessons from mentors, and set goals for myself to achieve in the future. My time on this planet has been filled with a dizzying number of memories, each and every one becoming a part of who I am.

Yet, to date, I will swear the truth of this fact: I have never kissed, nor been kissed, by a boy.

As we glided over the waves, sea spray in our face, a wild Mantine beneath us and bearing us aloft, I felt relieved.

It didn’t matter to me what the realities of our circumstances were, nor what outcome the future had in store for this romance. I was certain of myself and how I felt, and was confident of my companion’s feelings as well. There may come a reckoning for this, but before then, I knew that one moment, if only that one moment, would be gained, and thence secured for all eternity in my memory.

Then, finally, finally, I may be able to start filling this chasm in my heart.

“Ash,” I said aloud, and he turned to me, eye to eye, his so full of understanding and compassion I could disintegrate in their masculine brilliance.

“Yes?” he replied.

But I said nothing more aloud.

Ash, when will you confess? I know you now, and you know me. Every action, every word has led to this point. It’s so obvious to us both. What is holding you back?

“Hey, there’s another.”

He pointed out another Mantine slicing through the waters aside us. Our Mantine waved its fins slightly. The newcomer cried and ripped through the surface. It playfully twirled around our mount, eliciting excited cries from ours.
“Stand up,” Ash urged. He took me around the shoulders and guided me to my feet. I felt like I was going to tumble over, but our Mantine was steady and stable, and Ash’s arms on my back felt reassuring. The other Mantine flanked ours and began flying in tandem with it.

“Now hop over.”

I was given an unexpected shove and yelped. Instinct helped me keep my balance, though, and I found myself standing shakily on the second Pokemon.

Ash was laughing with joy. I followed suit while taking a surer stand. I held out my hand, which he took in his. Our fingers clasped. We two humans stood tall, riding the Mantines side-by-side, the whole of the endless ocean before us. The sun was in my face, not hot, but comfortably warm. The afternoon air was fresh and pure. I filled my lungs with it, closed my eyes, and basked in the perfection of the moment.

“Haaaa!”

When our mounts became tired they turned towards the shore. We were gently deposited at the surf’s edge. Ash went and fetched his gear, from which he brought back Pokeblock treats. One and then two colorful flavor-cubes went down their gullets. The wild Mantine enjoyed them immensely and begged for more. Ash indulged them. They cried for more, and the cycle repeated until Ash’s dispenser was completely depleted.

“Good bye! Thanks!”

The Mantine flipped and twirled in farewell, and then disappeared into the ocean depths.

“That was fun,” my companion remarked.

“Very,” I added.

We wandered the island, taking in the oceanic vista, enjoying the feel of the soft grass and sand on our bare soles, chatting idly, and losing ourselves in the simple pleasure of it all.

“The Mantine here don’t belong to anyone, but you know, they’re like trained Pokemon. They’ve learned taking tourists on rides will get them treats,” Ash pointed out.

“That’s acclimation.”

“Right. They’ve probably spent enough time around people to intellectualize. It wouldn’t be right to catch them for food at this point.”

“I know.” I pointed out to sea. “The water around this island is protected by the national park service. Fishermen have to go farther out to sea to catch foodstock.”

“Ah. I see. I’m glad there’s a place like this.”

“There’s also Pokemon living on the land too,” I explained. “Follow me.”

The island was the size of a large park. It took just a couple minutes to reach the place I wanted to show him.

“Corsola!” Ash exclaimed. They were easy to spot. Rocky outcroppings dotted the shoreline. The corral Pokemon could be seen here and there basking in the sun. Their pink iridescent shells flashed brightly where the sunlight passed across the surface.
“This is where I caught Choir.”

“Oh yeah. I love doing it that way. Seeing which ones are willing to be caught, letting them come to you, that’s the best method as far as I’m concerned. I think there’s a scientific explanation somewhere that links the two: a Pokemon’s willingness to be caught, and their aptitude in Pokemon battles. Maybe they’re easier to train, or more eager to fight for someone they like. Anyways, I believe it.”

“I believe it if you do,” I said. “Can’t really argue, what with how strong you and your Pokemon are.”

“We’re not that strong, not yet,” Ash said.

“No! Don’t play modest, I’ve seen you battle, you’re pretty good. You’re very good, actually.”

“When have you seen me battle? For real? Those scrimmages at the gym don’t count, I wasn’t trying at all.”

“I could tell, you lost more than you won.”

“Geeze! I was just trying to give my backups more practice. If I used my starters and got serious, I’d be undefeated.”

“I believe that too. I’ve seen you when you’re all-in, it’s amazing, really.”

“Yeah, but where exactly?”

“I took the liberty to request the footage from your match with Lance.”

“Really?! They let you see that?!”

“It’s a perk of being a gym leader. I thought about a dozen times Lance’s big boys were going to annihilate you, but your Pokemon- they’re so fast, and so skilled! When Dragonite went for the Skull Bash, and Pikachu dodged on top of its back and paralyzed its wings and sent it crashing into the wall with its own momentum, I thought that was impressive.”

“Yeah, well.” Ash leaned in close. “Don’t tell anyone, but I made that move up on the spot. I’m really proud about it.” Ash leaned back. “Ahaha!”

I laughed along and then made a suggestion. “Let’s go eat.”

There were a few other visitors on the island today. Most were playing on the beach or admiring the ocean view. I picked a reclusive spot behind a small grassy rise with a view of Olivine City. The lighthouse was easy to spot across the harbor from here. Ash laid out the blanket and I prepared the meals- peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and honeydew melon slices.

“For you,” I said, handing him a sandwich. “And me.” I bit down into the bread-enclosed lump of delicious goo.

“No meat?” Ash inquired.
“You’re a vegetarian, right?”

“Right. Thanks.”

We ate the meal in silence for a while, but halfway through Ash struck up a conversation. His words came through mouthfuls of melons, which I thought made him look funny rather than disgusting. For some reason, it put me at ease, despite the subject matter.

“So about yesterday,” he ventured. “What was the deal with that? I recognized the guy, he was from your gym. Seems like you two knew each other. How did it turn into that mess?”

“That was Peter.” I gave Ash the rundown of me and Peter’s scant history, his ill reputation at school, and the (in-hindsight) suspicious text messages I had received from Ash’s phone number.

“I didn’t think cell phones could be hacked like that.”

“Apparently he’s a coding prodigy with access to a supercomputer. Too bad he couldn’t figure out a better way to use his talents.” I thought about it for a moment. “Actually, I don’t feel pity for him. Even if no one would acknowledge his talents, that doesn’t give him the right to assault women.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Did you report him to the police?”

“Yes, this morning.”

“How did they respond?”

“They said they had just put a bulletin out for him, that he was wanted for questioning in connection with a suspected Team Rocket recruiter. Unfortunately, he’s gone missing. Not much we can do about it now.”

“Oh.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“I hope he goes to jail. He deserves it. Not for what he did to me, but for what he did to Sakura.”

“Who is Sakura?”

“A girl at my school. Everyone used to like her, but one day back in February she stopped coming to class. Her father told us she was switching to home school. Rumors started flying. Some were pretty nasty.”

“She got knocked up,” Ash guessed.

“That’s the general consensus.”

“By Peter.”

“Nobody else knows that, not even her parents. They think she’s hiding something by not telling anyone, as if she was protecting an over-aged guy, or did it for money.”

“They really say that about her? That’s awful.”

“Isn’t it? The truth is probably that Peter manipulated her and she’s afraid of what he would do if she outing him as the father. Or she really does love him and doesn’t want him persecuted, who knows.” I grumbled in frustration. “I don’t know if I should tell anyone about it.”
“Why not tell the police? Did you?”

“No, not that detail. It wouldn’t help their case. Johto laws are a little lenient. Even if one or both participants are under-aged, as long as they’re fourteen or older and within… three years, I think, of each other, it’s not prosecuted.”

“Three years? You sure?” Ash asked.

“Or four? It’s the difference between fourteen and legal age, but I can’t remember if it’s seventeen or eighteen. One is Johto and the other is Kanto, and I get them mixed up. I didn’t pay that close attention in, er… adult-ed class. Do you remember?”


“Ah. Well, as I was saying, if I told the police, it’ll probably get out to the school as well, and that would be bad for Sakura. She’s already suffering enough social spitfire as-is.”

“But it’s not her fault. I can’t believe your school is this bad. Are they a bunch of prudes or something?”

“Oh, they wouldn’t be making such a big fuss if Sakura was a senior or came from the ghetto. But she’s only a sophomore, and from a well-respected family, old-money types. That’s a double no-no. She broke the unwritten rules, so they’re all going to harass her, even more so if they find out who the dad is. There’s this idea in our community that high school children are still innocent and need to be protected. It’s instilled in us early, and things like slut-shaming are encouraged. Most of us kids know what’s going on and learn things on our own, or over the internet, but they still try. It gets annoying. We have to listen to a “Just Say No!” campaign speaker every year.”

“That sounds like an anti-drug slogan.”

“It’s actually about premarital- you know.”

“Sex?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I’ve never heard you say that word.”

“I try to be delicate about the matter, but it’s not something… I don’t know. It’s just how I operate. Is it that big a deal?”

“Not really, it’s just remarkable. You seem comfortable enough talking about the subject.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t like talking about this.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were okay with it.”

“It’s not that either.” I shook my head. “Peter made the subject unavoidable, and now I need to process everything that’s happened and figure out a way to deal with it. It’s not your fault. I got into this mess and I have to deal with it. I can’t avoid it simply because I find it distasteful. Still, to be honest, if it were up to me, all perverts would burn and we would never speak of such things until we’re adults, and even then, only in the proper, private context, and not going overboard with it. People who are openly lewd and lecherous, they disgust me.”

Jasmine, my dear, listen to yourself. Do you hear that? That is the sound of a BIG. FAT.
HYPOCRIT.

Were it up to you, you would ramble up an encyclopedia on all the things you would like to do to Ash’s body. Starting with his lips, of course, but progressing from there on downwards. Ideally, the attention would be reciprocated.

I shook my head. Such thoughts could not be entertained, especially not right now, right here, with temptation so close at hand.

Ash swung his legs sideways and gazed off into the distance. He’s avoiding eye contact. Did I go overboard with that speech?

“Sorry,” I said. “I sound like a prude, don’t I?”

“It’s fine,” he answered, in an absent kind of way that imparted zero confidence in its assertion.

“It’s how I was raised,” I tried backpedaling.

“I know. We’re all like that, we can’t help it.”

Not working.

“I mean, I was always taught that I had to wait until I got older before I could get into those naughty things.”

That was a true statement. What I’m omitting is the exact age where such behavior became permissible. According to Mother, I had to wait five more years. Then again, it was ‘five more years’ five years ago, it’s ‘five more years’ now, and it will probably be ‘five more years’ five years from now when I turn twenty. I get the feeling I could be standing by Mother’s deathbed, she a shriveled husk and I a ragged, wrinkled prune, and she would still croak out “Five more years!”.

I huffed and wrinkled my nose in displeasure.

I don’t want to wait that long.

How do I make him understand?

I like him, I really do, and I would be willing to do intimate things with him—maybe not the act itself, but kissing and foreplay would be fine by me. Those kinds of activities don’t disgust me, as long as they’re not presented or propositioned in a vulgar fashion. Ash, you seem like the kind of guy that understands the difference here, right? I hope…

What exactly does Ash think about intimacy?

Maybe that’s something you should find out before falling for him?

It’s too late for that!

Ask him!

“What about you?”

“What about me?” He was taken aback. “What about me?”

“Ah, well… you’re older than me, you’re almost an adult, so this subject wouldn’t embarrass you, would it?”
“Um, actually… it does, a little bit.”

“It does?”

“Never mind. If you don’t like it, we can move on to a different subject. How is Onix? Is he getting stronger?”

“No, wait. I think I missed something here.” I pulled myself up and scooted closer to him. Can he sense the curiosity welling up inside me? If he could without me having to say it aloud, that would be best. He looks like he’s getting the message, what with a goofy, flaming grin opening up on his face.

“You being like that, I didn’t want to drag you into a conversation that would upset you,” he explained.

“It won’t upset me,” I answered. “If it’s coming from you. I trust you.”

“Okay, then. The truth is, I’m in the same boat as you. It does bother me a little bit. Not because I was raised that way, though, but the opposite. Pallet Town is a small place, it doesn’t have much going on, so the kids sort of, eh… they don’t have anything better to do. They think it’s fun. Their parents don’t make a big deal about it either. What happened with Sakura- that’s normal for me. Ah! Not the whole rapey business with Peter, we’re not that depraved! But the fooling around, even as freshmen, getting girls pregnant, teenage marriage, I’m used to that.” Ash frowned. “That’s not right either. I never got used to it.”

I tilted my head, curious.

“Is that why you left on your Pokemon journey?”

“Yeah.”

“What about it made you uncomfortable?”

“I just felt like I wanted to keep my innocence for a while longer. Embarrassing coming from a guy, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. I feel the same way.”

Ash gave me a relieved smile.

“You too, huh. That’s nice to hear.”

Ash, if only I could tell you. My innocence was forced on me by another. I would gladly throw it away for someone like you- if only you were brave enough to ask for it. Although, indulging in this fantasy would mean going against her wishes.

I shook my head.

“Mother would never allow it.”

“Hmm?”

Oh, I said that aloud? Ah well.

“Even if it were normal for my school, even if I wanted to be a promiscuous slut - which I’m not! just to be clear!- I still couldn’t live that way. My mother wouldn’t allow it, she’s very strict about it.”
“Ah, I see. Figures. You were saying your mom’s pretty harsh on you right? I know how that can be. Mine’s always worried about me, wouldn’t leave me alone if I let her. But she’s just letting you come out here alone, without supervision? She trusts you that much?”

“She thinks I’m at the library, actually, working on a school project.”

“You lied to her? You sly girl!”

I bowed my head in shame. “Actually, she doesn’t want me hanging out with… with anybody. She’s stricter than you think. I’m not supposed to be doing anything that doesn’t relate to my grades or career. If she found out I was here with you, I’d be in major trouble,” I admitted.

“With me? … Well that’s unfair. What does she want, to control you?”

I thought about it some.

“Sort of? Mother doesn’t micromanage me, really. It’s more like she sets out expectations, and then I’m supposed to figure out how to meet those expectations on my own. It can be tricky and difficult sometimes. Remember how I told you about her blowing up on me after the storm?”

“Yeah, that was sort of my fault, wasn’t it? I kept you out late.”

“Not at all. That was my fault, I should have known better. Even if I was in the wrong, I think she was being unfair and too harsh. That said, I’ve gotten used to her mistreatment. It’s not easy, but it is fair.”

“Fair? How could you call that fair?”

“Because she has given me a lot of freedom. I’m allowed to try different things and take risks, and I’m only punished if I cause her trouble.” A quick smirk crossed my face. “I acted out in middle school a lot.”

“That’s when you were in Ecruteak, right?”

“Right. I was unhappy about moving away from Olivine, so I kept getting into mischief and doing naughty things, um, ‘pushing the envelope’ of her tolerance you could say. It was kind of a game of Persian and Pikachu- how far could I take it? Where were my boundaries? That sort of thing. If I messed up and stumbled into one of her pet peeves, I knew to avoid that particular behavior in the future.”

“That sounds terrible, to be honest. My mom is a big pain and a nag, but she doesn’t treat me like your mom does.” Ash reached over and stroked my cheek with his thumb. I raised my hand to the spot, skin tingling where his touch had been.

I don’t know if it was a smart idea, but I had told him about Mother’s tirade after I had gotten home from the storm cleanup. I also told him about her hitting me. He didn’t think that was okay, and that I should tell someone. I had brushed the suggestion off.

“I can bear it,” I said. “Well, I used to, anyways. The problem is, more and more, the things that cause her issues and which she wants to stop me from doing, are the things I feel like I need to do in order to grow as a person. Like my gym leader position. At first I just stumbled into it, but now I feel like this is something I want to continue, and maybe explore as a career. But she hates the idea, she wants me to quit Pokemon battles and focus on getting into college.”

“College? That’s three years away for you.”
“I know, right? And it’s not the only thing she’s taken from me. Gymnastics—when I was little, I loved doing the flips and balance beam. She put an end to that, saying it was too dangerous, but…that’s the thing, everything she’s put a prohibition on, she says it’s for my own good and gave a good reason to back it up. I believe her, or I did. Lately, I’ve started thinking everything she’s done is for her own petty reasons. It makes me resent her.” I bit my lip.

That’s no way to talk about your own mother. But it is how I truly feel.

“Please don’t repeat that to anyone,” I said to him.

Ash nodded.

“I know.”

“What do you think? What would you do?”

“Well, first off, I think you’re really brave for sharing this with me. It’s touchy stuff, and here I am, an idiot stranger, and you’re willing to tell me about your personal life.”

“You’re not an idiot, and we’re not strangers,” I told him.

“Heh. Thank you for that. Thank you for trusting me. I’m not sure what I did to deserve it.” He paused. “On the other hand, I don’t think you’re brave enough.”

“Hmm?”

“When I was little, I got it into my head that I was going to be a Pokemon Master. Mother was all for it back then. Then I got older, and my dream didn’t change, I still wanted to go off, catch Pokemon, fight, be the best there ever was. As I got more serious about it, she started to not like the idea. I don’t really know why. I think she was just worried. It was around the time of Castelia, that sort of changed her mind about Pokemon battles. It took Professor Oak to convince her to let me go on my first journey. She got the impression that it would be a one-time deal. When I said I was going on a second journey, and that I was going to become a full-time trainer, she was really upset. She wasn’t going to let me go.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“I just left.” He shrugged.

“Oh.”

“I guess the point being, if you’re in a situation where someone is trying to control you, just leave. Get out of there. Ignore your mother, do what you want, and if she protests, move out. She can’t stop you.”

“Um, yes she can,” I said.

“No she can’t.”

“The age for legal emancipation is sixteen.”

“Are you sure?”

“I looked it up.”

Ash stared at me for a long moment.
“You’ve already thought about this, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“There are ways around the age requirement. Request a legal guardian. That old man you work for. You say he’s your biggest backer.”

“He’s old and sick.”

“It’s not like he has to take care of you, you’re already pretty independent.”

“Eh.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“So… you don’t want to go through with it.”

“No.”

“Why? What’s holding you back?”

“Things,” I said absently.

How can I explain it to him?

“What things? Come on, you’ve come this far.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated. This feeling is hard to fix words to.

I opened my eyes.

“I don’t want to accept it.”

“Accept what?”

“Never mind.”

“Accept what?”

I don’t want to accept that I live in a broken family. That I’ve endured a miserable upbringing. That there’s no love between anyone in my house.

Because if I ever start believing any of those things, they will become fact. If I refuse to acknowledge them, I can still carry on and strive to ensure they never become fact. Just maybe, I can salvage something, and make the future better.

“Hmm?”

“It’s nothing! Nothing at all.”

“No, it’s obviously not nothing. Really, let it out.”

“I’m scared of being on my own,” I said. A fib, just to get him to back off the topic. On second thought, though, it wasn’t a fib at all.

“I get lonely a lot. Dad is always gone. Mother is working, or she’s too stressed and volatile to be around. I don’t have any close friends, and Pokemon are precious, but they’re not exactly people.”

Ash gave me a disagreeable look.
Oh sure, he would be content to hang out with Pokemon all day, every day, to the end of time. Pokephile.

“What about dating?”

“Eh??!!”

Where did this come from?!

“Is dating one of those things your mom doesn’t allow?”

He asks this so casually! As if he didn’t have a personal stake in its answer! Or is he just acting extremely cool about the issue? What to say? What to tell him?

Jasmine, don’t blow this! He’s looking for an opening! He really is into you!

Stop! Don’t get your hopes up!

No, say something cute!

“I don’t know. She’s been indefinite on the subject so far,” I told him.

That’s not cute at all! That’s deflating and depressing!

Should I lie to him, to make sure I don’t scare him off?

Probably not a good idea, Jasmine.

“Huh.”

He seems nonchalant about my answer.

“Why do you ask?” I inquired, nervous and hopeful.

“Well, I was thinking, if you’re lonely and need company and support, dating is a good way to fill the gap. But if your mom isn’t going to let you date, and you’re not going to go against her wishes, that’s not a solution.”

“Um. Uh. Um. She hasn’t exactly been adamantly against it,” I said, shooting for a middle ground.

“Maybe, if I could convince her, then I might consider it. It’s a good idea.”

“Maybe. Maybe not, if it causes you trouble. And hell, I know firsthand, making friends is hard, finding someone you like is even harder.”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend?” I asked impulsively.

“A girlfriend? No. Boyfriend, yes, but girlfriend, never.”

HOLY SHIT ASH IS GAY??!!

Fuck!

FUCK!!!

I clamped both hands down on my mouth. No curse word had been voiced aloud, but there was no way I was going to risk being heard uttering or even mouthing such tasteless profanity. Also, I needed to contain my shock. On that account, I was failing.
Ash burst out into laughter. He doubled over.

“I couldn’t tell,” I told him. “Is it… um…”

“HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

My face soured with comprehension.

“You’re not really gay, are you.”

“You should have seen your face! Arceus, it was like- your mouth was like this wide!”

“Not funny.”

“No, it’s really funny. Really, super funny. Not you, no, I didn’t mean you, I meant me having a boyfriend. It’s an inside joke, between me, Gary, and Emmie. She’s got this thing, where she goes online and reads this stuff, that’s all- um, well, she wrote some of her own, about me and him, and all- do you know what slash is?” he asked abruptly.

“It sounds like a rock band.”

“It’s nothing like- well, it could be, depending on the band. No, no, I better stop, you’re giving me this look. What about you? Ever had a boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Really? Are you still going out?”

“We’ve been steady for eight years, though there was a three year gap where we had to maintain it long distance.”

“Oh.” Ash leaned back on his hands and went quiet. I studied his expression. There was no hint of shock, grief, or embarrassment like what surely must have crossed my face a minute ago. He was merely lost in deep thought. At last he spoke up. “Eight years would make you seven when you first started, right? That’s a really young age. Childhood friends grown into something more. That’s sweet.”

He turned his gaze on me.

“May I ask who it is?”

I stared at him nonplussed.

“Is it Edward?”

I continued my stare.

…

…

……

Ash’s face contorted with epiphonal onset.

“It’s Amphy, isn’t it?”
“I take it back, you are an idiot.”

“GAAAH!”

He threw both his hands up into the air and flailed around.

“You can’t do that Jasmine, you can’t! You can’t! It’s not your personality, not you at all! No one expects you to make a joke, I always take you 100% seriously! Ahahaha! Dang!”

He settled down.

“So you’re single, huh?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Well good, then this won’t be awkward.”

I perked up. Was this it?

No, sadly, he was reaching into his pack and rummaging around for something. As he searched, he was also muttering under his breath.

“I am such a doofus. Here she is spilling her guts to me and admitting how lonely she is, and like two minutes later you bite her bait and think she’s already hitched. Oh, not ten seconds after you made the same kind of joke. Ash, Ash, you idiot. Look up baka in the dictionary, that’ll refer you to an encyclopedia, and that’s where you’ll find a full-page biography starring yours truly. Where are they? They’re not in here. The heck?! Oh, Arceus, you’re the paragon of morons!” He bolted upright and pulled a package out of his shorts’ pocket. He then bade me to stand up with him.

“I was worried, when you said you had a boyfriend. It would look weird of me doing this if you weren’t single.”

“Hmm?” I glanced at the wrapped-up package.

“This is for you.”

I took the package in hand.

“What is it?”

“A gift,” Ash said.

Hesitantly, haltingly, I began unwrapping it. My gaze darted rapidly between the contents in my hand and Ash’s eager expression.

What could he possibly have gotten me?

And what would such a gift mean?

Does it mean what I think it means? What I want it to mean?

I mean, honestly, anyone at all looking at us and listening to us could already tell. Everything that has occurred points in a singular direction and comes to an unambiguous conclusion. All that’s really left is to formalize it. Was this Ash’s way of doing that? Or was it an excuse to create an opportunity?

He’s just giving you something out of kindness, that’s all, Jasmine. Don’t take it to mean more than
what it is on the surface. He’s a simple, straightforward guy.

Even this far, you would still have doubts? How could you?!

Until he says those three words (or a reasonable substitute), there is nothing going on between you. Accept that, calm down, and wait patiently.

Or, like, you could always go first.

Never!

I unfolded the last paper scrap.

I was confused at first.

They looked like pearls: large, honey-colored orbs. Two of them, connected together somehow. I pawed them, trying to make sense of the golf-ball sized objects. Turning them over, I saw that they each had a clasp on the back. Seeing that, it dawned on me what these were.

“They’re…”

Ash took them out of my hand. He turned me around by the shoulders and stepped forward. His hands went to work on the crown of my head. They were deft, quick, and surprisingly gentle.

“The grey ones didn’t look right. Too boring. And these, well, they reminded me of mandarins.”

“Mikan,” I said, a soft smile crossing my lips.

“Yeah.”

Ash drew back and twirled me around to face him.

My hair felt in place, like usual. I didn’t feel any different. There was no way to tell what effect the new hair clips had on my appearance.

“How do I look?”

“Over here.”

We walked a short ways over to a water fountain. The water had spilled over and formed a puddle on the ground, from which a reflection of the sky could be seen. I leaned over.

“Wow.” I gasped.

My spike tails… they’ve changed.

My cowlicks were always thick and splayed out, like a fan. Using the old clips had rounded them up, but they still had the effect of sticking out, sort of like needles. Something about the way these new orange orbs worked, or maybe it was Ash’s handiwork, but there was a subtle wave in my twin tails now. They were more akin to feathers, or a Vulpix tail, or Dragonair frills. They curved backwards, no longer striking skywards at such an unruly angle.

The twin mandarin orbs and the hair tails that flowed outward… it was a huge improvement over my former hair-do.

I would even say, in my own humble opinion, that I look cute.
“Do I look cute?” I asked, a hushed question, perhaps not even wishing for an answer.

“You look beautiful,” Ash said, gripping my shoulders.

I turned to him.

“Jasmine.”

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you something for a while now, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Things have gotten in the way, my emotions, for one, circumstances, for another. I told myself to be patient, to wait it out and it’ll all clear up on its own. It hasn’t. It’s only gotten more complicated, more chaotic. There’s a whirlwind going on up here, in my head.”

“Could you tell me what it is?” I asked.

He shook his head.

“It’s really… personal. I’ve enjoyed our time together, I really have, and I wish things could keep going on forever like this. But they can’t. Something has to change, or else… Jasmine, I trust you, and I respect you, so I think you would understand what I’m going through if I told you. But first, before anything else, before I can be really honest with you, I need to ask something of you.”

“Yes?”

All my hopes and dreams, condensed into a single moment, crystallizing in my heart and threatening to stop its beating…

Ash stood up straight. His expression became serious.

“I want to ask you for a battle,” he said.

“Oh…”

I shrugged and let out a smirk upon my lips, the slightest hint of the cascade of disappointment and resignation welling up inside me. I struggled against it, and at last stamped it down, replacing it with acceptance and the determination to focus on the proposition that was placed before me. Besides, this was also something I’ve been looking forward to.

“It’s about time. I accept your challenge.”

Okay.

Now the greatest worry in my life is not how to gain Ash’s affection, but how to put up some meager resistance to his powerhouse Pokemon team. The task seemed overwhelming at first glance. He was on par with a regional champion, and had amply demonstrated his abilities in vanquishing the Kanto Elite Four. To get to that point, he had to collect eight gym badges in Kanto and has collected another five while traveling in Johto. That means he has defeated thirteen gym leaders, all of whom were more experienced than me and possessed stronger rosters than me. He was an elite trainer with realistic aspirations of competing in the global leagues.
However, I’ve had a month to plan for this battle, and I won’t belittle my abilities so far as to think I stood no chance. Upsets happen all the time, especially when the favored combatant underestimates their opponent and is ignorant of their capabilities. Ash has seen me battle quite a few times, but I’ve yet to show him my team’s full power.

Would that be enough?

We’ll see.

Although… I can easily imagine losing to Ash, and the thought doesn’t bother me all that much. Is it really that important for me to win?

I shrugged. It’s enough if I try my best, right? Ash would want that.

It was a couple miles between the bus stop and my house, so I had plenty of time to think it over. What I came up with was a strategy that would give me a sliver’s chance to win, if Ash cooperated.

“He’s a master of type matchups and switching, but he has trouble when he can’t get the right matchup. He’ll probably bring Water and Ground types, maybe Machoke too, and of course his leaders, Charizard and Pikachu. Maybe not Pikachu- it’s fast, but it doesn’t have any type advantages against my mainstays. Hmm. He knows my roster, but he doesn’t know about their new moves, so how do I maximize that advantage? He’ll just retreat his Pokemon as soon as he sees something he doesn’t like. Ah! Drag the battle underground, where his Pokemon can’t maneuver and he can’t switch them out, that’s what I’ll do.”

I skipped through the front door, feeling better and better about today’s events.

It was a nice date, wasn’t it? Even if he never explicitly called it that. And I got a pair of cute hair clips to go with it! I leaned over to look myself in the mirror.

Ah! Don’t forget, Mother might get suspicious if she sees these right now. Take them out for now and put them on later. Tell her I’m going shopping tomorrow and show up afterwards wearing them, she won’t know. Wait, maybe she’ll ask what store I got them from? Ask Ash where he bought them so I can skip by it. Would she think to ask to see a receipt? She’s not usually that picky, but you can never tell.

I picked the mandarin orbs out of my hair and replaced them with the old, ugly grey clips. Backpack on my shoulder, schoolwork long since finished (if not exactly perfect), alibis ready, I marched into the kitchen.

“Hello.”

“Jasmine.”

She was cleaning the kitchen. By the looks of it, she’s been cleaning all day long. A pile of filled-up trash bags lay on the counter, and she was in the process of emptying the kitchen trash can.

“I’m home,” I said.

“I see that.”

I paused a moment, just to give her the opportunity to pry into my going-ons. It was as if I was daring her to test my bluff. She was silent, though, and it appeared I would get off easy. Just as I was leaving for my room, however, she caught my attention.
“How was studying?”

“It was good, we got a lot done. I think I’m ready for the final exams, they shouldn’t be a problem.”

“You can never be too ready. Keep studying until they day of.”

“I will.”

“Who did you study with?”

“Cassie, Sam, and Lynn.” Classmates, loose acquaintances.

“Alright.”

“I’m going to take a shower.”

“Alright.”

I put one tentative foot out the door. Then the other. Then a single pace into the foyer. I reached the stairs. Nothing, nada, nil, not a word of protest, not a single “gotcha” remark.

I can’t believe it. I actually fooled her.

A smirk came to my face.

It felt good. Something finally went my way. Maybe we can keep this trend rolling.

I hobbled up to my bedroom.

The shower can wait, I want to talk to my Pokemon. We have all day tomorrow to prepare for the match, and I want to walk them through my new strategy.

“Hoy! Graveler! Magnemite! Magnemite! Choir! Voltorb! Onix! Oh! Not Onix, you can’t come out inside!”

I hovered over my little desk, crowded full of paper waste and knick-knacks. My brow furled.

I put them right here, on the edge of the desk- my Pokeballs, I mean.

They’re gone.

If not here, where did I leave them?

Did I take them to the island by accident? Did I leave them there? Or maybe my backpack?

I checked all the cubby holes of the backpack, but found nothing. The search extended throughout my bedroom, and failing to turn up a single ball there, continued outside, down the stairs, and into the rest of the house. As the minutes went by and the possible hiding places diminished, my pace grew frenetic.

“What’s the matter?” Mother asked.

“I can’t find my Pokeballs,” I said, consternated. “Do you have an idea where they might be? I left them at home…”

I watched, with horror, as Mother slowly and deliberately deposited a single tissue on the kitchen counter. The surface was stained rose red, the color of lipstick.
My heart seized up.

“You made your choice,” she said.

“Where are my Pokemon?” I asked, quivering.

“Safe. Locked away.”

“Tell me where. I want them back.”

Mother crossed her arms and looked down on me.

“It’s time you learned about the real consequences of your actions. It’s better this way, than to make a mistake you can’t take back.”

“Dad!” I cried.

“He’s not home. You’re not going to cry your way out of this.”

My chest was convulsing.

What a moron I was. An utter idiot. Who did I think I was? Some Machivian prodigy? I can’t hide anything from her, nothing, and now I can’t worm or reason my way out of trouble either.

“Give them back. Give me my Pokemon back. Give them back! Give them back!” I started yelling, logic giving way to emotion. “You have no right to take them away from me! I own them! They’re my creatures!”

Mother actually laughed.

“And you are my daughter! I have every right to take them! Everything that you own, everything you do, is at my discretion! Do you know why? Because I am responsible for you! This is my task. My burden. Your father feeds you and clothes you, that is his duty. I teach and guide you, that is my duty. Sometimes I have to punish you, because you’re too young and dumb to understand right from wrong. This is one of those times. Do you think it’s fun for me? It’s not. I would love to just leave you alone and let you figure things out for yourself, it would make my life ten times easier, but I can’t. I just can’t. I can’t. I can’t! I can’t! I can’t!”

She started pounding her fist on the table. I balled my fists. So help me god, if she smacks me, I will hit her back. She is pissed. I am enraged.

“Sit down,” she ordered.

I gave her a flippant snort and twirled around. I stormed my way back towards the foyer, intent on searching Mother’s room for my missing Pokeballs. A hand caught me by the shoulder. Out of instinct and sheer anger, I brought my fist up and swung.

It missed.

My arm bent at an unnatural angle as it was caught in her vice grip. In the space of a breath I had one limb locked against my back, the other grappled behind me, and my mobility was at Mother’s complete disposal. My legs stuttered to keep me upright as I was jerked along and thrown into the den’s armchair. As soon as my arms felt freedom I jumped back to my feet. I wasn’t even upright when a force landed on my shoulders, as if Onix had landed on my back. I crumpled back into the chair cushion.
“Sit down! Calm down!”

“I hate you!” I screamed.

“Jasmine.”

“You wicked woman! Pokemon thief! Bitch!” I screamed, even as I raised my arms to block. The expected blow came hard and fast, smacking against my wrists and sending a shockwave of pain through them. My arms gave way and fell to my side. Mother raised her hand again, and this time it was balled into a fist. I sobbed, closed my eyes, and braced myself.

The blow came crashing down. There was a shattering crack.

I felt nothing.

One eye peeped open.

Mother’s fist rested on the cabinet. The shelves had splintered and unloaded their contents all across the floor. Several fragile keepsakes had shattered, stacks of papers, folders, and notebooks came to rest in scattered, haphazard piles. A porcelain fragment landed in my lap. I shivered in fear. A single blow had lain waste to the entire den.

Mother stomped out of the room, back into the foyer, and there leaned against a wall. She didn’t move for several minutes, nor did I, except for labored breathing. When that returned to normal, she reentered the den.

“Jasmine. Look at me. Jasmine. Jasmine.” She repeated my name until I looked her in the eye. “I am sorry for hurting you. But you have to know this. That boy will hurt you far worse than I could. Pain goes away. Memories don’t. Mistakes don’t. Love doesn’t.”

“Love?” I wanted to laugh, but also, cry. Love?

What would she know of love? Is this her idea of love? I’m in meltdown mode, because of her, and she considers this love?!

“I know what’s going on. I understand. Now you need to understand, in no uncertain terms. This boy, Ash, he does not love you. I know you love him, or you think you love him. But to him, you are nothing but an impressionable nymph, something to jack him off, pleasure him, please his ego, and then dump when he’s tired.”

“You’re wrong. He loves me.”

“He is going to hurt you.”

“You’re wrong,” I cried.

“And before that happens, you need to grow up, realize what he’s doing, what’s going to happen if you keep nursing this stupid crush, and stamp it out. That is why I took your Pokemon. I’m sorry I had to take your precious pets, but it’s precisely because they’re so precious to you that I had to take them. If that’s what it takes to make you realize how serious I am, that’s all I can do. I can’t look out for you every waking moment. I’m too busy. Your father… I can’t trust him.”

“You’re wrong, and I don’t care. I’m getting my Pokemon back and I’m going to see Ash. I deserve to be loved, by someone!”
“Jasmine, damn it.” She paced off for a moment. “What the hell made you this stubborn? Why are you acting like a slut, putting on lipstick and bending over for him? Is that boy really worth it? Is he worth losing your Pokemon for?”

“He’s worth disobeying you,” I said.

“Kk.” She gave up addressing me directly and began musing aloud to herself. “What made you fall so hard for a random stranger? Why? Was it something we did? Was it me? David?... no. He wouldn’t. He said he…” A stillness came over her. She suddenly came around, marched right up to me, and kneeled beside me. Her face was earnest, beseeching.

“Jasmine.”

“Hmph!”

“Jasmine, look at me.”

I reluctantly obeyed, fearful.

“The reason you’re so head over heels with this boy… do you want to sleep with him? Is that the kind of girl you are?”

I glared at her and said nothing.

“Jasmine.”

Die in a fire, Mother. I’m not answering you.

“Jasmine. Please. I need you to be truthful with me. I need your honesty. Please, please answer. Just this one question.”

I shut my eyes, trying to blot out her face.

“Has your father ever touched you inappropriately?”

My eyes popped open.

“Whah?”

“David, your father, has he ever molested you? Insinuated anything sexual?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, mouth agape in shock.

“Don’t lie. You don’t have to lie. I will protect you. You can tell me the truth.”

“No. Never,” I said.

Mother’s eyes hardened.

She picked herself up.

“Never?”

“Never.”

Did she really just accuse Dad of being a pedophile?
Really?
Really?!
What is going on that I don’t know about?!
Would Dad really try to molest me?
I thought back across my entire childhood, trying to remember if something like that had happened. If, maybe, there had ever been an incident that I simply didn’t understand at the time. But no, not a single thing came to mind, no matter how hard I tried. Father is and has always been- kind, considerate, gentle to a fault.
Besides, for him to be able to carry out those kinds of loathsome, twisted deeds, that would require him to actually be home.
Mother shook her head.
“Forget I asked you that. Don’t repeat that to Father, ever. You’ll never see Onix again if you do.”
“What’s going on? Why did you ask me that?”
“It’s better if you don’t know.”
“Is Dad a child molester?”
“No.”
“Are you getting a divorce?”
“No.”
“Do you love each other?”
“Shut the fuck up,” she warned. I clamped down on my mouth and complied. She seated herself on the edge of the desk. “If not David… Jasmine, has anyone ever touched you? Has Ash touched you? Has he asked for sex?”
“No and no, Mother,” I answered. “He hasn’t and wouldn’t. He’s a good boy, as good as you could ask for. Peter isn’t, Peter is everything you warned me about, he tried to rape me. Ash stopped him. Ash saved Amphy from dying. He’s respectful and upstanding. He’s asked me for a Pokemon battle, so I need my Pokemon. It’s my duty as a gym leader to face him.”
“Wait up one second, Peter raped you?!”
“Tried. Tried! He didn’t really touch me or hurt me. Ash got there in time and beat him up.”
Mother stood appalled.
“What happened? Have you reported this to the police?”
I gave her a rundown of the events and told her about my visit to the precinct station. She seemed furious to know I had kept her in the dark but relieved to hear I had already filed a report with the police.
“See? I know the difference between a scum and a gentleman. I won’t get hurt. And I told you, even
if I get hurt, I won’t pout and I won’t get angry, I’ll accept whatever comes. Ash will probably leave soon anyways, maybe all I get out of this is a kiss. I know I might be stumbling into heartbreak! But I want that chance! You can’t control me forever and I would sooner learn about love now than wait until I’m a wrinkled old crone!”

Mother’s hands flexed, vacillating between fists and claws.

“You don’t get it, you don’t understand. It is an act, Jasmine, a ploy to get what he wants.”

“So what?”

“So what? Are those really the words you want to be using right now?”

“So what if he wants sex? So what if I give it to him?” I said angrily. As you can tell, I was quite a bit beyond reason right now. Previous notions of chastity had been flung out the window, for the sake of contravening her. It had the intended effect.

Her eyes flared into something like an unholy rage. She acted like she might go ballistic again, but then stopped short, perhaps balking at the sight of the smashed up cabinet.

“How do I get through to you?”

“You can’t.”

You’ve gone too far Mother, and I’m sick of this. Sick of you always getting in my way, shutting my hopes and dreams down, stomping on any and every shred of hope for joy and discovery in my life. I’m going through with this, and you’re not going to stop me.

My thoughts swirled around that singular point of determination. She must have sensed it too.

“One last time, Jasmine. Listen to me. If you have sex, at your age, with a ruffian like him, it will ruin you. Do you hear me? Ruin. You can’t even imagine. I am trying to protect you. And if Onix and Magnemite mean nothing to you, if you won’t be swayed by grounding or punishments or even being yanked out of that job, then I’m sure you will listen to this: if you have sex with Ash, you will never see Amphy again. Do you understand?”

A ghost passed through my heart, hearing that threat.

“You can’t do that,” I replied, with all the hate in the world and not a single iota of conviction. “You don’t have that power.”

“I won’t have to do anything,” she said.

I breathed in. I had to remember to breath in. At that moment, breathing would not happen naturally, I had to force it.

Mother stared me down one last time.

“Don’t come crying to me when he screws you.” Then she stormed off.

“Where are my Pokemon?” I shouted after her.

“You’re not getting them back. Deal with it.”

Damn her.
God damn her!

I don’t think I said a single word aloud all Sunday long. Monday school passed without emotion nor interaction. All my thoughts, my entire existence, were honed like a laser on a singular purpose—defy Mother.

Fortunately, I had the means to do so.

Mother is brilliant, really, truly, I cannot argue that point. Still, she is not omniscient, and quite frankly, is still ignorant of a great many things. For instance, Pokemon network infrastructure.

In official League-sanctioned battles, each trainer is limited to six Pokemon. This rule was enacted in order to preserve the health of the Pokemon, back when Pokeballs were not as advanced as they are today. Several decades ago, the dematerialization technology in Pokeballs was inferior to that of the PC network, which led to high rates of SAA (stasis acclimation addiction) and long term health hazards. The risk increased exponentially over time. A study found that trainers with large Pokemon teams tended to use their favorites often, while other less-loved Pokemon were left in their Pokeballs for long periods of time. These latter Pokemon were found to be much more susceptible to SAA than ones who regularly got to see outside their Pokeballs.

To alleviate this issue, a cap of six Pokemon was put on Pokemon battles. Along with other restrictions, this measure encouraged trainers to not carry as many Pokemon around in their balls, and instead load them to the safer PC network. As a further incentive to keep Pokemon in PCs over Pokeballs, a global satellite system was built, one that could automatically digitize and retrieve Pokeballs and Pokemon from anywhere on the planet. Nowadays, Pokeballs are more advanced and almost as safe as PCs, but the system and customs born from it remain in place.

Sounds complicated, right? Well, it is, and it’s also the kind of thing Mother wouldn’t bother to learn. Because if she did, she would also know that the global satellite system uses tracking technology to know where all the registered Pokeballs are and which ones should be recalled. And while it takes a high-level executive override to force a remote digitization, something your average citizen doesn’t have permission for, simply requesting a locational query is very much within the rights of a certain subset of Pokemon professionals—for instance, gym leaders.

“Locational Inquiry,” I said. The computer beeped at me.

“Enter your League Personnel Access Code.”

I pulled out the card with the sixteen digit code imprinted on it.

“Acknowledged, Ian Beret. Enter Pokemon Identification Number and Trainer Identification Number.” I pulled out a sheet of paper and entered two more sets of codes.


Somewhere high above, a satellite was sending out a pulse of radiation across the entire planet, hoping to find a device whose encryption matched its cypher. If it worked, the Pokeball’s location could be determined within a yard of the true location.

“Inquiry complete. Results as followed.”
A map appeared, with a location marked.

“I knew it.”

I had turned the house upside down while Mother had been out Sunday. My Pokeballs were nowhere to be found. The location marked was miles from our house. I recognized it as the community center where Mother was working to host a wedding reception. More specifically, the parking lot.

“I bet they’re all in her purse.” Maybe Mother does know that I can track my own Pokeballs. Keeping them beside her 24/7 would be the best way to safeguard them from righteous reclamation. Still, now that I know their exact location, I can formulate a plan to take them back.

And then what, Jasmine?

What will Mother do once she knows you directly disobeyed her and took your Pokeballs back?

What more could she do? She can hit me all she wants, I can bear the pain, and eventually child protection services will get on her case. No, it will never get that bad, she’s too self-aware to let it get that bad. It’s not like she’s a fan of corporeal punishment either, she only hits me when she’s enraged.

I rubbed my wrist, still smarting from her strike yesterday.

She can’t take Amphy from me, she has no power there. I can always petition Mr. Beret, he’s the one who originally landed me the Amphy caretaker job, and the one who would have the weightiest say-so in the matter. Ultimately, Port Authority Chief Gatto has final authority.

Can she stop me from seeing Ash?

Only if she figures out a way to stop me from going to school.

In the end, her last resort would be to call the police on me, to round me up and lecture me. Yet, I think I can suffer the shame of police intervention better than she can. She would be mortified to have to call the law on her own daughter. She has too much pride.

In the end, I think I win.

She only wins if she is right, and Ash betrays me.

What does that even mean, at this point?

Would he try to force himself on me? I highly doubt it. Would I even resist, if he tried?

I breathed in deeply, then let it out.

In your heart, you know you’re not ready to be an adult, not like that. It would creep you out. You might like it in the moment, but you would probably regret it later.

I don’t want to be the girl who lost her virginity as a freshman in high school.

But, I really think Ash wouldn’t do that.

He’s too kind, he cares for me too much. Words are easy to forge, but his actions have borne out that truth as well. He has gone above and beyond to make me feel not only happy but also safe, that he means nothing towards me but respect and genteel affection.
What about the gym battle?

Was this all some kind of bait, to suckle me in so that I would give him an easy battle?

Ha!

That’s patently ridiculous. It goes against his competitive pride and fire, to ask for an easy-mode. He doesn’t need it, if I were to win it would be a massive upset, not the other way around. Even then, he could always ask for a rematch.

What’s more, the way he asked for the gym battle, it seemed like there was something on his mind. Maybe he had something to tell me, but he couldn’t, not until our relationship as gym leader and challenger was resolved. I suspect I know what he wanted to say, but I’ll hold out a little longer before airing it. There are many variations, which could lead to different outcomes for us depending on what exactly he has says.

“I just want… I just want… I want to be wanted. I want him to say it. Then I’ll be happy.”

These thoughts roiled in my head, even as I exited the Pokecenter, hailed a taxi, and made my way to the community center.

I poked my head inside, carefully, to ensure Mother was occupied. The wedding reception was in full swing, and even through the boisterous crowd, I could spot the whirlwind of efficiency that was my Mother in the midst of work. I waited specifically for her to get caught in conversation- she does have the bad habit of letting others ramble on and finds it hard to disengage from a conversation (thus the brutal length of our arguments).

Ah, perfect, the bride and groom have caught her. The bride seems like she has some concern or another, what with the frown on her face and insistent intonation.

“Haaaa.” I sighed. The bride with her raven hair dolled-up and face a flush of massaged beauty, her dress a body-clinging river of lace and satin, all the bedecked architecture and celebratory crowd bending to her will- it was a marvel and a beauty, what I beheld. This was her moment of elation and joy, the day that marked her eternal conjoinment with the man she loved. Yet for all that, there was some small thing amiss. I take it, by her gestures towards the kitchen and then at a barren spot in the middle of the drinks and food, that the cake was not ready.

I smirked.

Someday, maybe, that will be me. Dazzling and picturesque in my wedding dress, my twin spike tails all made up into Dragonair frills, the center of all the world’s attention, and the freedom to crow over the tiniest, pettiest shortcoming in this most perfect day.

Maybe I’ll have a handsome hunk dangling on my arm, just like she has, a swathing gallant of a man trying his level best to reassure us that everything will be alright and the cake will be delivered on time. Maybe I’ll be wearing that same relieved, loving smile. Maybe, just maybe, I’ve already met this future groom.

“Pokemon,” I reminded myself.

They’re in Mother’s car, but it was locked. I needed her keys.

I snuck through the crowd, ignoring inquiries and doing my best to keep a low profile. For a minute I lost track of Mother, but spotted her purse left unattended on a table. I started to make a beeline for it, when a gaggle of people got in my way. A pause while I waited for them to move. They did, in
various directions. One person was in my way, but thankfully they were headed in the desired
direction. I bent down and used the lady as cover.

It was only when the lady went directly up against the table and began rummaging in the purse that I
realized she was, in fact, the woman who had brought me into this world.

“Oh, Elaina, the cooks were on break! I’m so sorry! They told me earlier…” It was the bride, calling
for Mother’s attention.

Mother spun around, sweeping her purse off the table.

Ice in my veins, I neatly and politely spun around with her, keeping to her backside, whilst
pretending to inspect another bag laying on the table so as not to arouse suspicion. Mother and the
bride lilted off. I followed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present the wedding cake!” Chefs in white coats and hats arrived, carrying
between them a massive seven-tiered mountain of sugar. The bride gasped.

“It’s beautiful!” She put an excited hand on Mother’s forearm, arresting her for just a moment. That
was my opening. I snaked one hand in under her arm, snatched the keys from the inner pocket, and
made off.

Just as I was about to exit, however…

“Hey! Hey you!”

A burly man in a black suit ran up on me.

“Hold it! I saw you! You took that lady’s stuff! Pickpocketing ain’t cool, miss, you better hand that
back over.”

“Oh?” I stuttered and stumbled. Shoot! They have security! Gotta do something, gotta do something,
gotta say something…”

“It’s alright. That’s my mother. I need something out of her car.” I held the keys up.

“Your mom? But wait a…”

“See? We look alike.” I faced him full on.

“Oh, yeah, yeah, I see it now. Hey, that’s the catering lady, isn’t it? You’re her daughter?”

“That’s right! But please don’t tell her. It’s her birthday, and we’re going to throw her a surprise
party tonight once she’s done, but we need stuff from her car. So please keep this a secret?”

“Huh. Hmm.”

I was up on the tip of my toes, praying this guy would believe me, and also that Mother wouldn’t
notice.

“Ah, alright. I’m cool, I won’t tell her.”

“Thank you so much! In fact, if you really would do me a favor, I’ll bring the keys back when I’m
done getting what I need, and you can give them back to her. Um, say you found them on the floor.
See, I’m no thief.”
“Ah, well, hmm. That sounds fishy.”

“Grr.”

Security is being a nuisance!

So I showed him over to the car, unlocked it, scrounged around and finally found my Pokeballs under the trunk in the spare tire well.

“See! This Pokeball has a Corsola named Choir.”

I let Choir out.

“Choir!”

“Corr? Corr! Corr!” Corsola jumped into my arms, careful not to prick me with her prongs. We both smiled sheepishly for the bouncer.

“Ahhh kay, that’s your Pokemon no doubt, I believe you now. Give me the keys, I’ll return ‘em for ya, subtle like. Good luck with your surprise.”

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” I almost cried.

Here they were, all of my Pokeballs- my Pokemon. This was my family. The ones that loved me unconditionally, the ones that never caused me angst or pain, unless it’s the pain from the thought of losing them. Even if Mother would never allow me the freedom to love and be loved, these creatures will always support me.

“I love you guys.”

I cradled them all for a moment, and then launched them into the air, unleashing everyone at once.

“Onix! My taxi’s gone, so you’ll have to take me to the gym.”

“Rorryx.”

He didn’t know where we were.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll give you directions. We need to hurry though, Ash is waiting. This will be the biggest battle of our lives! Everyone, hop on Onix, we’re moving!”

What’s this feeling?

Elation?

Could it be, something was going right, for once? I felt different right then. Alive. Whole. Hopeful.

I would even venture to say, I have never felt this excited in my life.

My life, my future, was so bright, as bright as the sun hovering over the horizon, lighting up Olivine in all its joyous beauty.
Maybe it’s just my memory of it.

Maybe I wasn’t nearly as giddy and excited as I remember.

Maybe it was just because that was the last time I could conceive of the future as something good, something other than the slow interim preceding death.

Because, despite everything that has happened since, all the highs and lows, promises made and broken, transient joys and interminable sorrows-

Riding upon Onix towards the Olivine City Gym-

That was the last time I genuinely had “hope”.

There’s my gym.

My gym.

Funny, Jasmine. Your name isn’t on top of the registry. Getting a bit possessive, aren’t we? Someday, it’ll be yours, if you want it. Three stories tall, white concrete brick walls reinforced by firetruck red steel beams, a curved drum to cap the main arena, and a large Pokéball sign mounted over the sliding glass doors- it was a serviceable building. Nothing special to look at except its size, which dwarfed the surrounding commercial shops and offices. It wasn’t about what it looked like or how fancy it was, though. What made it special were the experiences it imparted to those who competed within its walls. For someone like me, a longtime employee, the memories were piled on top one another, like pebbles that built up to a mountain. This was not a destination stop for me, it was a home.

A wash of sadness came over me as I rode to a standstill before the entrance.

“Just leave. Get out of there.”

His words came back to me, biting deep.

“You’ll never see Amphy again.”

Her words came back to me, like a slithering Ekans poised to choke my hopes and dreams to death.

I grit my teeth and balled my fists. My six Pokémon, without being told, went back to their Pokéballs. I stepped before the doors, daring myself to bravery as they revealed the interior within.

“Hayate.”

Mr. Beret sat at the reception counter.

I stared in shock.

“Everyone!”

It seemed like everyone I knew was present. Acquaintances from school, Ed, Chiba and her little sister Janina, all the regulars and out-of-town challengers, the Pokémon club leadership, the
Pokemart employees, even Beth.

“What’s going on?”

Beth approached.

“Beth! I haven’t seen you at school.”

“I know, I know. I’m moving to Unova tomorrow with my grandparents.”

“Unova!”

“Yeah. This town, it’s a little… I want to get out.”

“I see.” I couldn’t blame her, after what she’s been through.

“But,” she said with a faint smile, “before I left, I couldn’t miss this battle. This is a big one for you, isn’t it?”

I gulped and nodded.

“It is.”

“We all wanted to come and cheer you on. Um, and also maybe to see someone like him battle. We don’t get Elite Four winners here very often.”

“I don’t think we’ve ever hosted someone like him since I’ve been here,” I said. She nodded in agreement.

“Do your best.” She clasped my hands in hers and shook it whole heartedly.

Ed strolled over and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t get suckered in by that guy, Jasmine. He’s no slouch.”

“I know that.”

Ed tacked on a grin.

“I know you’ll do your best. I think you have a shot.”

“Thanks. I will.”

Turn by turn, every friend and colleague I had made in this profession made the same gesture of encouragement. I took a deep breath of relief once the last person had their say.

“Alright, everybody, I’m going to tidy myself up. You all go ahead and find your seats, if you’re going to watch. Where is the challenger?”

“Inside, by the arena, prepping,” Ed answered.

“Alright.” I waved them through the big double-doors. The lobby emptied out quickly, and just like that, it was just me… and one old fart.

He was staring out the front doors. I patted myself down, made sure I had my six Pokeballs, and then stood at attention, waiting for permission to enter. At first, it seemed that none was forthcoming.
“Sir.”

He glanced at me and then went back to his street-watching doldrum.

I coughed.

“Sir!”

“Did I raise you to ask for permission for every little thing?” he asked gruffly.

“Yes you did sir.”

A one-sided smirk.

“Fine, noted. Get on with it.”

I skipped along.

“Hayate.”

I paused before making it to the door.

“Did I raise you to take every little burden on your own shoulders?”

“Yes you did sir.”

“I did?”

“By example sir.”

He nodded deeply in understanding.

I turned but was caught once more by his grunt.

“Jasmine.”

“Huh? Huh?”

I perked up at the sound of my first name.

He never uses my first name.

Beret was actually looking at me, eye to eye.

“How long have I known you?” he asked.

“How long?” That’s an odd question. “Eight years I think.”

“Eight? Feels like it’s been longer.”

“What about it?”

“Did I raise you…” he paused, looking pained. “Never mind.” He shook his head. “Do you like that boy?” he asked instead.

“Yes, I do,” I answered without hesitation.
“Right. Dismissed.”

Beret looked over me, kind of forlornly, and then jerked his head sideways, telling me to go on.

I left the lobby trembling.

What’s come over me? It feels like I’m going to cry.

Not now, Jasmine.

Especially when he’s right there.

“Ash K. Satoshi” read the video board. His portrait there was an awkward, blank-faced stare, pretty much what you would expect when going to register for a Pokemon Trainer’s License. In real life, he looks so much better. Not that I could tell from this angle; he had his back turned towards me.

I walked by him slowly, flashing a knowing smile as I went. He finally caught sight of me and returned the gesture. My path took me to the gym leader’s stand. I placed my purse and Pokeballs down, and then turned to face him down.

I took a deep breath.

“Welcome challenger to the Olivine City Pokemon Gym! My name is Jasmine Mikan, I will be your opponent for today and accept your challenge. This will be a six-on-six singles match with all standard clauses. Do you understand the rules?”

“I do,” Ash answered.

“Then please meet me in the middle of the arena so we can shake hands.”

I began walking forward. He began walking forward as well. Our faces couldn’t help but crack into goofy grins the closer we got to one another, until we were almost tripping over ourselves from trying not to laugh by the time we met in the middle. He lent his hand out first. I took it and gave him a dainty little shake. He clasped harder, and I responded in kind. His grip tugged, bringing me a step forward.

“Hey,” he said in a low voice.

“Hello.”

“Just so you know, I’m going to win,” he said.

“No you are not,” I responded.

“Yes I am. And when I do, I want to take you out somewhere. The lighthouse, let’s say. Something I want to tell you.”

My eyes lit up.

“And what if you lose?” I asked.

“I won’t… I can’t.”

I cocked my head.

“You can’t? Sure you can. Let’s get this started and I’ll show you. You’re underestimating me.”
“No, Jasmine… I can’t lose. Because… I… Do you know what it’s like to have a dream you really want to accomplish?”

“I do,” I answered. “Isn’t yours to become the number one trainer?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, to do that, you need to win here, but I’m not going to let you. So… if I win, you have to stick around and keep battling me, until you do win, right?”

“Sure, but that’s beside the point.”

Another quizzical look from me.

“I wanted to ask, before we get into this, do you know what it’s like living under people who want to crush your dream?”

“I do, sadly,” I answered.

Namely, Mother.

“But who’s trying to crush your dream?” I asked.

“Well, it’s not really a person, more like an attitude held by a lot of people… but if I had to put one name down, it would be Lance.”

“Lance Cross?” The CEO of the Pokemon League?

“Haven’t you noticed?”

“Noticed what?”

Ash frowned.

This is a surprise.

He looks so depressed, but why?

“What is it?” I coaxed him.

“What’s the point of being the greatest trainer of all time, if they’re going to call me a violent sociopath for it?”

I grabbed his forearm, reflexively, maybe fearing he would fall over. He kept his balance, thankfully.

“You’re worried about Castellia? Like that could’ve been you?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding bitterly. “Jasmine, what I want to do is more than just be the best trainer in the world. I want to show them that being a trainer is a good thing. That we can get along, with our Pokemon, and with each other. I… I’m afraid. Afraid that I won’t be able to convince anyone, that they’ll rip this sport away from us before I can prove it’s worth continuing. I want to be able to have Pokemon battles where we fight each other with everything we’ve got, and then laugh and be perfect friends afterwards. This isn’t war. It’s not some shallow gladiatorial spectacle either. It has so much meaning for trainers and Pokemon. I want it to keep going, for myself, and for everyone else.”

Ash gripped my forearm, and our grips slid, until we were holding each other hand-in-hand.
“That includes you. Promise me you’ll fight with all you’ve got. Don’t hold anything back. Don’t let your feelings about other stuff get in the way. And don’t… please don’t hate me when my Pokemon kick your Pokemons’ butt.”

I broke out into a big, incredulous grin.

“As if! And I promise I won’t hold back. I’m going all out.”

“Thanks. And also, if you do somehow pull off a miracle, I still want to talk to you afterwards, in private.”

Yes. Yes! YES!

I could hardly contain myself. My blood was pumping hot.

“Nnn. Okay, let’s pretend we’re not both emotional about this,” I said.

I back-twirled around and pranced to the gym leader’s stand. As I came to a halt inside the chalked box, I leapt into the air, tossing a singular Pokeball as high as I could. It landed as I completed my about-face, every cell in my being full of fire and radiating.

“Let’s settle this! Ready, begin!”

The Pokeball erupted into scintillating sparkles that grew into a towering monolith. A string of living boulders emerged in a line, ending with a fierce glare, sharp horn, and gaping maw. Onix roared, unsettling the dust across half the arena.

Ash tossed his Pokeball out onto the floor before him.

“Tauros!”

The battle began.

Onix took a defensive posture, throwing his tail in front of him. Tauros stamped its hooves and trotted to the center of the arena.

So, Tauros huh? Unexpected. I would have led with Machoke, better coverage against my Rock and Steel types. Either he has something planned or he’s going easy on me. Considering the latter would make him a massive hypocrite, which is not the Ash I know, I surmise it is the former. I’ve never battled a Tauros before, amazingly, and am in the dark about their abilities. My best guess is that they’re medium speed, medium bulk physical sledgehammers. Let’s wear it down from afar, see how that goes.

“Onix, Earthquake!”

“Tauros, Blizzard.”

BLIZZARD?!

Tauros opened its mouth and yawned. An artic gale covering the width of the arena bellowed forth from its maw. It thickened into a roiling mass of air so cold you could see the moisture freeze and coalesce within. Onix was slithering forward trying to get into Earthquake range when he ran headlong into the advancing cold front.

“Forget Earthquake! Dig! Dig underground!” I ordered. Onix grunted and struck head to dirt. Chunks of earth flew into the air, and then the great leviathan was gone from sight.
“That won’t help him for long, the ground will freeze too,” Ash said.

“We’ll see. Onix, keep digging!”

“Where’s he going? Running towards Tauros or away? Tauros, keep your guard up, eyes on the ground.”

Truthfully, I don’t know where Onix is going. However, I’ve dealt with Blizzard attacks before, and know a trick- the act of digging at high speed through the earth creates enough friction and heat to prevent the digger from being affected by the permafrost.

“Ah! Okay, Onix, like we practiced, excavate how I showed you.”

“Got a plan? We’ll see how long Onix can last under there with this- Earthquake!”

Earthquake too?! Dang it!

Tauros ceased breathing sub-zero deep breaths and reared up. Its hooves came slamming down, rocking the ground and the building to its foundations. The violent shaking reached Onix, evidenced by the muffled, painful bellow coming from underground. Him being submerged, that must have really hurt.

“But I know you can bear it,” I said to myself. “Onix, are you finished?”

“ORO!”

Not quite. Well, he should have done enough.

“Now, retreat.”

“Tauros, run to their side of the field and Earthquake again!”

I waited a few seconds for Tauros to cross the midfield markings.

“Stone Edge!”

The ground tore apart. Tauros was alert and nimble, and dodged the initial burst of rocks. It veered around a second eruption and kept on its way towards my sideline. The rock blossoms didn’t stop, however, and in fact were getting faster, bigger, and more violent. Tauros reared up just in time as a huge pillar rose in front of it. The Pokemon decided on its own to retreat to find a better angle, only to have two more huge pillars emerge behind it.

“Tauros, don’t try to dodge! Skull Bash straight through!” Ash watched Tauros charge a pillar at full speed, expecting it to give way. The Pokemon’s skull collided with the rock with an impressive ‘crack!’ and left a giant crater that stretched the width of the four-foot-wide stone slab. However, rather than bursting straight through the assumedly dirt-constructed obstacle, Tauros was stopped dead cold. Tauros’ skull did not take so kindly to the impact.

“TARRUUUAAAA!”

Its pained cry almost made me feel bad for it. Almost.

“Keep it up!” I urged Onix.

The pillars emerged one after another, like watching fossilized trees sprout into a whole fossilized forest in real time. Tauros dodged frantically around until it found a glade free of ground-puncturing
stalagmites. By the time the series of Stone Edges were finished, half the field was littered with enormous columns of hardened earth.

“Geeze! Tauros, are you alright in there?”

“*Taaau!* Mraooool!” Tauros answered in the affirmative. It was trapped but unharmed.

“Can you break free?”

“Onix, can you get the foe?”

There was an underground rumble.

“Okay, just Earthquake where you are.”

Is Tauros close enough to hurt Onix?

Is Onix close enough to reach Tauros?

Tauros pranced around, found room to rear up, and came down on its hooves once more. The ground rattled and shook. One of the nearby smaller pillars cracked in half and fell down, but the rest held up remarkably well. Meanwhile, no organic sound was heard from underground.

“Get him? Hmm.” Ash dashed out of the challenger’s box and down his sideline, craning his neck.

“Tauros, behind you!”

There was movement among the rock pillars.

Tauros dodged around, coming face-to-face with Onix.

“Flamethrower! Headbutt!”

Tauros roared out a stream of fire above itself, hitting Onix in the face. It immediately followed with a charge into the rock snake’s gut. Onix tipped over backwards and fell apart.

“Did you get him?”

“Mraooraroo??!!”

“What happened? I can’t see anything! Tauros, get back here!”

Tauros scurried over the broken bits and pieces that used to be an Onix. The opposing Pokemon seemed confused and panicked, unsure if it had just committed murder.

Of course, Onix wouldn’t die that easily. Ha!

“Slam!”

Ash realized the ruse a moment too late.

“Tauros, that was a Sub! Watch your six!”

Tauros galloped back towards Ash, taking a glance behind it as it did so. Just as it was passing the last pillar before freedom, the rock edifice cracked apart. Onix’s face burst out of the crumbling monolith and lunged at the distracted Tauros. He caught the foe in his maw and lifted. Tauros mooed in helplessness, legs thrashing at thin air.
“Oh!” Ash jerked in surprise.

“As hard as you can!” I yelled.

“Hey, Tauros, Solar Beam!”

Tauros, wielder of seemingly every elemental magic, began glowing. Except, there was no sunlight in here and the overhead floodlights were not that strong. The charge took too long. Onix reared as high as he could and then crashed down, bringing all his strength and weight down on top of the bull Pokemon. The impact was sort of muted. A cloud of dust blew up around the combatants. Tauros let out a single “Mooof!” and then went still.

I checked the video board, confirming what my eyes saw. Tauros’ icon popped up and a big red ‘X’ appeared over its face.

“Tauros is unable to battle! Please retrieve your Pokemon and enter a new contestant.”

I didn’t allow myself to smile. It was only one Pokemon; I had five more to go. Tauros didn’t seem like a good matchup against my team after all, even if it did have some unexpected special attacks at its disposal. What else was Ash going to try?

“I didn’t expect Stone Edge, let alone that-!” Ash stated, staring at the Menhir Trail-like formation. “Have you been training your Pokemon while I wasn’t looking?”

“I told you as much!” I said. Onix had assimilated his new techniques remarkably well. He also deployed our prearranged tactics with perfect execution- first applying Harden to the surrounding dirt (learned from Lyra’s Sudowoodo), then creating an obstacle field via Stone Edge, deploying an earthen Substitute to fool the foe, and finally hiding inside one of the Stone Edge pillars for the final surprise attack.

“All according to plan. Unfortunately…” I bit my lip. That was as far as Onix’s prepared game script went. We would have to improvise from here on out.

Ash had to step a good few yards into the arena in order to reach Tauros for Pokeball retrieval.

“Those aren’t going anywhere huh?” he said. “So you’re planning on making me fight in that maze? That’ll make it way harder to switch.”

“That’s the idea,” I said to him.

“You do sort of know how to combat me, but only so far. Try this out then.” He released his second Pokeball. The emergent form shimmered and lifted off into the air. A Butterfree appeared, fluttering high over the rock pillars.

“Can’t hedge in Buttercup.”

“Um. It’s a Butterfree. I don’t think I’ll have to.”

Onix could take this thing out with one Rock Throw. What was Ash thinking?

“Double Team.”

That he was going to annoy Onix into fainting, apparently.

“Rock Throw.”
Butterfree was faster than I thought, however. It had the air full of after-images, and although they didn’t necessarily throw off Onix’s aim, Butterfree had no trouble simply flying out of the way of the rocky projectiles.

“Onix, stop. Stop!” Onix was getting a little carried away, heaving the last of six volleys into the air. Butterfree floated higher, watching the rocks fail to reach sufficient altitude to threaten it.

“Stealth Rock, first.” If we can’t reach Butterfree, we’ll just rig the field with more hazards. Onix ignored the opponent to start scattering multitudes of the small, camouflaged, barbed stones. This will make getting through the stone forest that much more dangerous further into the battle.

“Defog,” was Ash’s answer.

No sooner had Onix finished laying his traps than a strong gust poured between the pillars and swept out all the loose debris, including the Stealth Rocks.

“Problem averted. Now to tackle Onix. Sleep Powder.”

“Shoot. Dig!”

Onix was too injured and too tired to react with the necessary quickness. He couldn’t even get his face into the dirt before golden dust particles curled around him. His burrowing slowed and then stopped altogether, with a quarter of his length buried underground and the rest resting limp across the ground.

“Retreat, Onix.”

“Giga Drain!”

Butterfree rushed in and got one more potshot before the recall laser hit Onix. I double-checked his estimated stamina- it was in the yellow, less than 33%.

“Okay then. Let’s try Magnemite.”

I switched in Magnemite #1.

“Sleep Powder;” Ash immediately ordered.

“Magnemite, hide.”

Magnemite retreated to the thickest concentration of stone columns. Butterfree’s Sleep Powder wasn’t a field-wide attack, I noticed, but more like a spray gun.

“Lure Butterfree inside the rocks,” I told my Pokemon. Ash took note.

“Don’t get caught in there. Keep trying Sleep Powder from range.”

Hide and seek, huh?

Butterfree fluttered around the perimeter of the rock forest about twenty feet off the ground. Magnemite’s Spark attack had a ten foot max radius. Magnemite can also levitate, but its speed isn’t very fast when doing so. If I could just lure Butterfree down a bit more, Magnemite could bumrush it.

Butterfree tried again and again to land a Sleep Powder inside the formation, but Magnemite successfully stayed out of the line of fire each time.
“Butterfree, come here.” He waved his Pokemon over to him. Huddled together, he began explaining something to it.

“Free free.” Butterfree nodded and fluttered back to the stone formation. Instead of coming in at an angle, however, it went directly above, and also gained altitude. It began chewing something in its mouth.

A grin spread across my face.

“Magnemite, you know what to do!”

“Magne?”

It didn’t know what to do.

Shoot. If I have to tell him, Butterfree will realize the danger and move out of the way. I began frantically miming the order to Magnemite, who still didn’t understand. The spectators must think I look ridiculous.

“I just taught you this move! I spent half my allowance on that TM!” I finally yelled (said allowance was supposed to go towards new jeans, but whatever).

“Mag mug! Zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt!” Magnemite began charging its electrical capacitors. Sparks went flying.

“Now or never Butterfree!” Ash shouted.

Butterfree coughed up what it had been chewing and molding in its orifice: a giant, gooey chunk of coagulated powder. It hurled the spitwad bomb into the center of the rocks.

“Zzzt! MAG!”

Magnemite suddenly darted around the central stone and let loose. A string of electricity shot straight up, through Butterfree and into the rafters. An instant later, it returned ten-fold as a Thunder attack. The lightning bolt crashed through the air, catching Butterfree directly in its path. A small explosion of sparks and singed wing scales blew off where the bolt connected with the target, a larger explosion blew up at surface level.

Unfortunately, instead of destroying or blowing away the spitwad bomb, the Thunder triggered it, causing a secondary explosion full of crippling powder particles.

“Magnemite!”

“Butterfree!”

Butterfree was toast, that much was sure. The status of my Pokemon was more uncertain.

I paused and made sure there was no visible movement, then walked out onto the field. Butterfree’s fainted form fell on top of one of the stone slabs. Ash went to retrieve it, couldn’t find an angle, and so had to use one of his Pokemon for a boost. My Pokemon was not so easily found.

“Magnemite, where are you?”

I rounded several pillars, searching. What I found was Ash on top of a Lapras.

“Ah.” A smirk came to my lips. He’d inadvertently revealed one of his match entrants. Still, my
Pokemon was nowhere to be seen. That is, until I looked behind Lapras.

“Oh no! Watch out!”

It was my Pokemon, which looked all kinds of messed up- the eye was fluttering and rolling about in its socket, its horizontal movement was erratic, its magnets were going haywire, and its skin was half-covered with a purple goo. That spitwad bomb must have contained every status condition known to Pokemon. In its dazed and enraged state, Magnemite was still intent on fighting and didn’t realize Lapras was not technically an opponent.

“Ash!”

Ash looked over his shoulder. He leapt off Lapras backwards, flinging two Pokeballs as he went down. One went high and caught Butterfree, the other went low and caught Lapras. The two Pokemon dematerialized just as Mangmeite’s Spark attack lit up. Ash did not get to dematerialize, however. He landed in the dirt face first and curled into a defensive ball.

“Graveler!”

I had chucked my own Pokeball right in the nick of time. Graveler appeared just in time to face-tank the Spark. Her earthen bulk absorbed the electrical discharge and shielded Ash’s fetal form.

“Garava?!”

“Smack Magnemite for me!” I ordered. Graveler happily did so, knocking Magnemite upside the head. It bounced around a pair of pillars and then to the dirt. The Sleep effect took precedence over the other toxins and finally put my Pokemon into a deep slumber.

“Magnemite, recall.”

I checked its health. Asleep, but not too badly hurt.

Ash peeked up.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry, that was a terrible mistake on my part!”

“No, it’s fine, my Pokemon caused the confusion.”

“No, not that,” I shook my head. “We shouldn’t be out here, I should have made sure the arena was safe before letting you enter it. Oh no.” A cold feeling entered my chest. “I think… I think I have to concede. That was a serious safety hazard, I could get into huge trouble.” I rubbed my forehead. Little Magnemite we could handle, but imagine if that was Onix- his Tail Slam could send Ash to the hospital, or worse.

“Concede? No way! Don’t you dare.”

“I should. I have to offer the match to you, that’s the rules.”

“But I’m under no obligation to accept your surrender, right?” Ash countered. “If no one saw that, we’re fine, right?” We looked around. The audience was craning their necks and talking amongst themselves, trying to figure out what was going on. They didn’t have a clear view into the stone thicket. It was highly unusual for both contestants to enter the field at the same time, and even more so for them to take such a long time to sort their fainted Pokemon out.
“If no one says anything, I won’t either,” Ash said. “Let’s keep going. You’re really making me work for this. I’m having fun! Don’t be a killjoy now!”

“Oh. Alright.” I nodded with a smile. “Graveler, you stay here, you’re going to be next out.”

“Grrrvv. Grava! Garava var var.” She’s telling me ‘It’s about time’. She didn’t like Onix getting to lead, and wanted to be first out herself.

“Okay!”

The scoreboard officially read the tally as 4 to 6 in my favor. However, two of my Pokemon were incapacitated, and if I couldn’t get them to wake up, they would be disqualified.

“So Graveler huh?” Ash returned to his sideline, casually tossing a Pokeball over his shoulder. It landed and burst into sparkles. A woolen yellow biped stood up, ready for battle: Hypno. It had its customary pendulum swinging in slow, tight arcs that was making me drowsy even from this distance.

*Great.* I don’t like Hypno, for reasons completely unrelated to the challenge of battling them.

“Graveler, will you please do as I say? This is going to take some strategy to win.”

“Graver.” Graveler assented.


“It’s going to try to put you to sleep. Keep the stone pillars between you and it, don’t look at it directly,” I warned Graveler.

Hypno skipped over to our side of the field and entered the pillared section. It seemed unconcerned about getting caught in a close-quarters melee.

“Graveler, here. Here!” I directed her towards the nearest corner of the battlefield. Four stone slabs provided direct cover, and numerous more stood between us and Ash. This was the farthest and least visible section for him, it would be hard for him to follow the battle and direct his Pokemon. I half expected Hypno to pull back, but quite the opposite, it sauntered forward, taking its sweet time but advancing nonetheless.

“Graveler, wait for my signal.”

“Grava!”

“Hypno, try a Psywave pulse.”

Hypno paused and closed its eye. A faint distortion afflicted the air around it, growing in intensity. It built up into a shimmer, then unleashed. The psychic pulse expanded like an explosion, but with a different kind of impact. Everything it touched rattled and vibrated, sending out weaker distortion waves, like echoes. This included Graveler, hiding behind the largest slab. She cried, more in surprise than pain, when the Psywave hit her.

I noticed Hypno, eyes still closed, perk up when the echoed waves reached its ears.

“Graveler, move! It’s using Psywave like sonar!”

Graveler wasn’t one for subtlety, and conveniently interpreted “move” to mean “advance towards the enemy”.


“Psyshock!” Ash called out. There was no shortage of loose rocks and pebbles on the arena floor. Hypno waved its hands and hauled up a good pile. It directed these through the air, deftly maneuvering them around obstacles at high speed and flinging them against Graveler. My Pokemon grunted, annoyed by the multitude of impacts.

“Patience! Move to the other side!” She wants so badly to engage, but if she doesn’t catch Hypno by surprise, she’ll be put to sleep.

“Hmm. Hypno, do you know where Graveler is now?”

“No!” That’s ‘yes’ in Hypno talk, I’m guessing.

“Zen Headbutt.”

Graveler couldn’t see the foe from her vantage point, but I could. It was on the opposite side of the large slab she had taken cover behind. Hypno settled into a trance, concentrating and mapping out its next attack in exacting mental detail. It took a stance and became still as a statue.

“Graveler, tackle the pillar!” I called out.

Graveler hesitated a moment, confused by the command. Hypno snapped out of its trance and lunged, forehead-first, right at the pillar. The stone cracked at the base and began toppling over. Graveler reacted and shoved her four fists into the falling pillar. She strained, grunted, and gargled, but the enormous weight was too much. Her hold buckled and the pillar fell down on top of her.

“Graveler!”

“Now! Hypnosis, Dream Eater! No, cancel, get out of there!” Ash yelled, suddenly reversing himself. I was caught looking at Hypno and didn’t spot it immediately.

The enormous slab of stone, ten feet tall and three feet wide, was rising into the air.

Graveler appeared, eyes bulging out of their socket, rocky muscles popping off the bone, teeth gnashing upon one other, every fiber of her body strained to the max. She had herself planted firmly between the ground and the stone slab, and was slowly, inch by inch, lifting it skyward.

“How could Ash tell what was going on? I craned my head to get a better look at him. He was staring overhead for some reason. I checked the video boards, but they weren’t showing live feeds of the match. Then I spotted the green gas hanging over the battlefield. Even as I watched, another series of puffs floated out from under Hypno and rose aloft. A Poison Gas attack, I think. It was odd at first, I couldn’t think what Hypno was doing with these little puffs of fumes.

They’re in tight little balls, and paired in groups of three… wait a minute… Morse Code?

“You’ve got to be kidding! Poison Gas Morse Code?!” I shouted. And to think, the creature was
issuing them from its behind so it could keep its mouth and hands free for other attacks—now you get why I don’t like this Pokemon!

Meanwhile, Hypno was trying to find its lost pendulum in order to carry out a Hypnosis attack. Graveler was still breathing hard and recovering from the herculean throw she had just executed.

“Graveler, are you okay? Now’s your chance! Body Slam!” I called out.

Graveler gritted her teeth and picked herself up.

Hypno found its trinket under its back.

Graveler took a lumbering sprint and jumped onto the nearest standing pillar. She used Rock Climb to scale to the top in no time.

Hypno brought the tool around. It had no time and the wrong angle, so it began whirring the string and dial above its head.

Graveler leapt off the pillar and fell earthward.

“Hypnooo!”

Hypno’s eyes glowed with psychic exertion. The whirling pendulum turned into an evenescant disc.

“Grvver!”

Graveler landed directly on top of Hypno’s stomach. The foe’s glowing eyes abruptly blinked out. Its chest buckled under the force and weight of the slam. Its breath popped out like a cork from a keg. The pendulum smacked against the ground and rattled to a stop, the glow of the psychic emission fading quickly from it.

“You did it Graveler! Come back here!”

Yet, Graveler did not obey. She lay as still as her crumpled opponent.


I considered leaving her out, hoping to rouse her before Ash could send out his next Pokemon, but thought better of it. She had survived the big pillar falling down on her and even turned it on her adversary, but had taken a lot of damage in the process.

“Recall. Ash, come around the sideline this time.”

He calmly walked around the perimeter. His face was a bit stoic, but couldn’t help but sport a slight grin. You know, he’s now down three to six, but he’s taking it pretty well. I expected more of a reaction, especially after his boast about whipping my butt. Even when he was within range of the recall laser, he still kept going forward, right up to his fainted Pokemon.

“Sleep easy, snoozer,” he said with a chuckle, tapping the Pokeball directly to Hypno’s nose. The Pokemon disappeared within. Ash turned, gave me a curt nod, a shrug, and then retreated back towards his post.

I waited as long as possible before recalling Graveler, trying to bleed off as much of the sleep effect as possible.

What was Ash’s deal? He’s acting funny, for sure. This was the guy who beat the Elite Four and
breezed through Kanto and Johto. He had shown a mastery of Pokemon in battles and extracurricular activities that defied ordinary skill; he was at least on par with Johto’s strongest gym leader, Blackthorn’s Claire. Why was this battle so even, then? Had I truly overestimated him?

Had he underestimated me, maybe?

Had I underestimated myself?!

“Focus! It’s a trap!” I told myself. He was just lulling me into a false sense of security, is all.

“Slowking!” Ash called. The ornate bigger sibling of the Slowpoke family appeared. It was a little faster than Slowbro, but not by much. Six whole seconds passed before it perked its head up, realizing it had been called for battle (a Slowbro would take eight seconds, a Slowpoke- twenty-plus).

Ash must have caught me gawking at his Pokemon.

“That’s the thing about Slowpokes, though. They take way longer to feel anything, including pain. With their body fat and natural regeneration, it’s hard to injure them at all.”

“I’ll find a way,” I replied.

The onlookers followed along. Thus far there hadn’t been much noise coming from them. They were engaged and interested, but not riled up. It had been kind of an intellectual battle thus far, with no fast-paced action sequences. Slowking promised more of the same. Sorry people, this is the way it has to be, I like tactical stall-fests.

However, this particular matchup demanded a little more speed.

“I’ll respond with Slowking’s direct opposite, Voltorb!” My wiliest Pokemon burst out. It promptly took a lap of the entire arena, which took all of seven seconds. It could almost tag Slowking and return to my side before the foe even realized it had been touched. That was part of the plan I was improvising.

Slowking began slowly strolling forward.

“Slowking, let’s not fight inside that mess, it’s been bad news for us so far.”

By the time Slowking heard and heeded its master, it had almost reached the edge of the stone thicket.

“Voltorb, wait.” My Pokemon wanted to take a go at Slowking. “It has strong special attacks. It will level you.”

Voltorb heeded my advice, but only barely. It got within a few yards of the opponent, keeping a single row of slabs between it and the threat, daring me to let it loose.

“No, you can’t.”

“Surf.”

Slowking reacted slowly, but when it did, the effect was as strong as predicted. The foe gushed water out in an enormous quantity, more than could possibly be stored within the physical volume of its body. Pokecell mass-energy bio-conversion sure is amazing.

Except the amount of water grew and grew, until it was completely out of proportion with what was
necessary to produce a Surf wave. I shuddered, getting flashbacks to that awful storm.

“Voltorb, higher.”

The flood of water rushed across the arena, enveloping the ground level in a forty yard radius. Voltorb avoided getting swept in the rising tide by bouncing between pillars.

“Good! Wait for it to go back down, and then-” I paused.

Gravity spread the water out until it was only a foot deep and dispersed across a third of the field. Slowking was standing upright on its haunches, looking back at its master. Ash was giving it hand signals, disguising his next command.

“Okay, now Voltorb, Spark!”

Slowking turned back to us and opened its mouth. A deep, reverberating sound pulsated through the air. Voltorb ignored it and dove into the water. It let off a crackle, and the surface of the water flashed. The shimmer of violent light propagated through the entire pool instantly, hitting Slowking. Electrical sparks flew off the tip of its crown and lit up an outline of its skull.

Slowking didn’t react at all.

“Again!”

Voltorb followed with a second round of Spark. This time, Slowking jerked.

“Again!” The third Spark was stronger than the first two, and as wholly useless.

“Shoot! I knew it had beefy special defense, but still. How much can it take?”

As I finished my sentence, Slowking pirouted on one leg in slow motion and then collapsed into the water.

“Oh. Okay. That did it.”

Who knows, maybe the first Spark had actually finished it off and it just took that long to register.

“Good job Voltorb!”

“Good job Slowking. Come back.” Ash recalled Slowking and congratulated it for not landing a single hit-point of damage on my Pokemon. Odd, but he is an overly nice guy to his teammates.

“The score is four Kos to zero, in favor of the gym leader,” I said aloud. “Who are you bringing out next? Lapras?” I guessed. The shallow pool would benefit it in some way, I’m sure.

“Not yet. Ninetales first.”

Ah, a Ninetales!

This is the exact opposite of Hypno! I love love LOVE Ninetales! However, Mother won’t get me a Vulpix, she said they’re too expensive to import from Kanto.

The problem right now is, I have a lot of respect for a Ninetales’ combat ability, and now that ability is directed against poor little me. If it’s the kind of Ninetales with Sunny Day and Solar Beam, I really have no answer for it. I crossed my fingers and waited.
“Voltorb, take shelter. I want to be very careful with this one.”

Voltorb wasn’t moving, though.

“How? Voltorb, get back, into the rocks. Is something wrong?”

I checked the screen. It showed Voltorb at full health.

“Voltorb, come on!”

No movement, no response whatsoever.

“Wait, don’t tell me… that sound from Slowking was a Yawn, wasn’t it?!”

Ash thumbed his nose whilst wearing a big ol’ smirk.

I didn’t have a clear shot of Voltorb from here. I dashed around the side of the arena, Pokeball at ready. Ninetales had all the time in the world to attack or set up.

“Voltorb, back! Choir!”

Please don’t have Solar Beam, please don’t have Solar Beam, please don’t have Solar Beam!

I snatched the sleeping Voltorb up with the Pokeball laser and instantly substituted my Corsola in its place.

Ninetales used that moment to land a Hypnosis. Corsola’s pointy appendages hadn’t even touched down when a wave of narcotic energy swept over her. She floated in the shallow water, dozing off peacefully as can be. I didn’t waste time gawking or whining, but instantly picked her back up with the Pokeball laser. When I sent my next Pokemon out, I directed the release to a spot behind one of the stone slabs. This wasn’t strictly legal, you’re supposed to put in a substitute at the same place you retired your last Pokemon, but that rule is rarely enforced. Ash wasn’t making an issue of it at any rate.

“Ash!” I cried.

I waved for my last Pokemon, Magnemite #2, to get to the back of the stone slab thicket.

“What are you doing? You’re putting all my Pokemon to sleep!”

“Not a bad strategy, right?” he replied.

“But it’s been costing you KOs! You haven’t fainted any of my Pokemon yet!”

“It shouldn’t be hard now.”

He only has Lapras left- which also has Sing, so I might not even be at the end of this annoying strategy of his. First, to take care of this Ninetales.

“Ninetales, around the side of the puddle, don’t get wet. Slowking got knocked out by Spark in there. What has she got out, anyways? Looked small, I’m guessing it’s her other Magnemite. Don’t bother with Hypnosis this time, just Flamethrower.”

“Magnemite, to the back! Get away from Ninetales!”

Magnemite darted amongst the pillars, hoping to evade the searching Ninetales.
“Okay, um, I got it! Magnet Bomb, times two! Keep them stable!”

“Back left corner, Ninetales.”

Ninetales weaved and wafted around the stone uprights. It caught a glimpse of Magnemite at long distance. She tried a long-range Flamethrower. The thin, hose-like gout of flame had the distance, but not the power or accuracy. She would need to get closer.

“Got the Magnet Bombs ready? Now connect them with a Thunder Shock. Right, like that.”

My Pokemon frantically completed its orders. It kept looking up, wondering which second Ninetales would appear around the curve of stone.

“Flamethrower, full power!”

Above! No!

Ninetales was on top the rock pillar. It reared up, gathered breath, and then emptied its pyroclasm-filled lungs into the confined space.

Magnemite instinctively threw up a Lightscreen, but the difference in power and elemental weakness was too much to overcome. The flames roared around the little creature, consuming it whole. I hoped for a miracle, but my hopes were dashed. Magnemite was gone, felled by the fire.

“Return.”

I checked my remaining Pokemon. Onix, Magnemite, Graveler, Voltorb, Choir, all asleep. I checked the field. Hope sprang once more into my heart. Magnemite #2 had finished its task. All had not been in vain.

“Onix! We’re all counting on you!”

I heaved Onix’s Pokeball as high as I could. The timing was great. He materialized fifteen feet above the ground, crashing down practically on top of Ninetales. The Fire type jumped out of the way. Many of the stone pillars burst apart under Onix’s crash landing, sending boulders and debris flying around. By the time Ninetales found safe distance, it was too late to capitalize on Onix’s vulnerable entrance.

“Ninetales, Will-o-Wisp, if you can.”

Ninetales gave Ash a displeased look. In her hasty retreat, she had landed in the big puddle of water and had gotten splashed. With her fur soaked, her fire attacks would be dampened for a short time. Will-o-Wisp was out of the question.

“Then retreat. We can end this with Lapras.”

“Not yet!” I shouted. “Onix!”

“He’s napping.”

But Magnemite’s setup was good and my aim was perfect. The Thunder Shock-infused Magnet Bombs acted like a charged capacitor; Onix’s head completed the circuit. The electrical charge triggered, sending a jolt through Onix’s brain.

My big rocky leviathan is a Ground type, so naturally electricity doesn’t hurt him. Any damaging voltage just gets redirected around his organs, through his hide, and safely displaced into the ground.
However, a weak Thunder Shock applied directly to his brain can jolt him a little, enough to snap him out of an induced slumber. Onix came roaring to life and charged directly after the retreating Ninetales. She was faster and was about to make it to recall range—

“Stone Edge!”

I taught Onix multiple ways to utilize the Stone Edge attack. He instantly analyzed the situation and went for the simplest interpretation- picking up a rock slab in his mouth and hurling it at Ninetales.

Ninetales sensed the giant boulder coming and broke to a halt. The projectile overshot and crashed with a tremendous *thud!* At the same time, Ash’s Pokeball laser was intercepted and bounced off the inert rock. Ninetales turned its momentum into a sideways spin, coming round to face its opponent.

Ash hesitated a second, unsure what to do when his switching attempt failed to execute.

“Earthquake!”

Onix slammed the ground with his tail.

Ninetales tried a Flamethrower.

The spout of flame was not as intense as the one that took down Magnemite, and failed to reach Onix. It wouldn’t have significantly damaged Onix anyways. The Earthquake, on the other hand, was super-effectively devastating. Ninetales lost its balance and was caught in the rumbling, rolling earth. The shaking didn’t cease until Ninetales ceased moving.

“Got it.”

Earthquake was too strong, it turned out. The stone pillars were kept solid by the application of Onix’s Harden ability. The quake dissolved the molecular binding keeping them solid. Once turned back to compacted dirt and shaken further by the temblor, all the pillars fell apart. The field was now littered with small mounds that offered no tactical value. Also, the pool of water had drained away. After all the terraforming, the arena almost looked like it had before the match began.

“Ninetales, are you done for? Ah. Guess so. Good try. I didn’t expect her to get Onix back up.” Ash once again went up to his Pokemon to personally retrieve her, ignoring the ‘no trainers on the battling floor’ rule once again. Before he called it back into the Pokeball, he ran a hand gently through its beautiful flowing mane.

“You’re going to wake up a winner, I promise. Let’s finish this.”

Finish? Nuh uh.

If I can get Magnemite and Voltorb back awake, I think I can overwhelm Lapras with Electric type attacks.

True to expectations, the big blue beast was my final opponent. Lapras lay on the field, head held high, assessing the situation.

“Are you ready?” Ash asked me.

“This is your final Pokemon,” I said.

“It is.”

“Then, if you’re ready to lose, we can begin.”
“I am not,” Ash responded.

I gave him a fierce glare, trying to intimidate him into ditching that cocky grin that, for all his best efforts, keeps creeping onto his face.

“Lapras, Sing.”

“Underground!”

Onix was fast enough, and at any rate, getting his head under was enough this time. The sonorous voice that would have sent him back to slumber could not pierce the compacted earth surrounding Onix’s tympanic plate.

“Did I get him?” Ash wondered.

Probably not.

However, he seemed to assume he did, or didn’t care.

“While we’ve got an opening. Okay, let’s do this. Lapras, got your voice sharp?”

“Lapraas!”

“Huh. Okay, tune them up.”

Lapras nodded and then started singing, from high to low chords, as if loosening up for a concert.

I can do this, I realized.

Onix only needs to catch Lapras from behind with a Stone Edge. The STAB Super-Effective Rock attack should finish it in one blow, maybe two if its defenses are high. If only…

If only…

My arms came down. My voice faltered. My thoughts came unraveled.

Something is not quite right. And it’s not Lapras, whatever it’s doing.

Ash raised his hand.

“Okay, Lapras, Perish Song, Midnight Sonata!”

Lapras began singing.

It was a beautiful, haunting song. It felt like ghosts and mists floating over an ocean of clouds, lit up by a full moon. It brought out memories of things past and things passing, of winter and of snow. I myself felt affected by it, as did every member of the audience. We all went silent, entranced by the eerie, soul-resonating sound.

I almost allowed myself to drift off.

Jasmine! A voice in my head rang out.

You are a gym leader!

You are in the middle of a battle!
It sounded like Mr. Beret.

*Get yourself together!*

*And fight!*

I shook myself out of the stupor. What had Lapras accomplished?

Perish Song is a kamikaze attack, a slow death knell that would lull both contestants to fainting. Or it should be, but that would be insane for Ash to do in this situation. It clearly had another purpose. Midnight Sonata? That sounds like a code word.

“Onix!”

A rumbling roar came from underground.

“Oh, shoot!” Ash punched his fist. “That didn’t get him? I thought it was over.”

Why would it be over? I still have my four sleepers, unless he was discounting them already.

I checked my Pokeballs and blinked.

All five lights were dead. All the occupants were fainted.

The scoreboard confirmed it as well. A moment ago, the battle had been 5 to 1 in my favor. Now it was 1 to 1, tied.

I looked in shock between Ash and Lapras.

Realization dawned on me.

“It was the Sleep, wasn’t it.”

Ash acknowledged my guess with an affirmative nod.

“Perish Song can be fine-tuned for different effects. This melody knocks out every Pokemon who is asleep, even if they’re inside a Pokeball.”

I cursed to myself.

Damn it!

Pokemon waiting in their Pokeballs are in a semi-lucid state. They don’t have video access to the outside world, but they do have audio, and are usually expected to be listening for their trainer’s voice during matches. Sound-based attacks can still reach them!

Ash, that’s dirty, but also genius!

No wonder he was so relaxed, so content to trade sleep status for KOs!

He had this planned from the very beginning!

It might just have worked, too, if not for Mangemite’s heroic sacrifice. Now I have an Onix who should be tunneled directly underneath Lapras, and who can knock her out in one go.

“Onix! Do you hear me? He got us all, you’re the only one left! It’s up to you! Ready?”
I raised my hand, intent on giving him the signal that would secure me the victory.

But…

I sighed, and lowered my hand.

My head bowed.

My voice fell silent.

Ash…

Why are you letting me win?

Tauros, Butterfree, Hypno, Slowking, Ninetales, Lapras- a formidable lineup, to be sure. But, was that his best? Would that secure him the victory?

When Ash took on the Elite Four, only Lapras was there with him.

When he challenged for the Kanto Regional Championship, none of these six were present.

While deftly clearing out five other Johto gyms, he did not use any of these fighters. He never lost a match and hardly lost any Pokemon to fainting. Yet look at what happened here- I, a lowly, inexperienced, teenaged substitute gym leader brought his team down to one and stood poised to reduce it to zero.

Where was Snorlax? That meat tank could take any number of hits, even from Onix.

Where was Machoke? It had super-effective attacks against five of my six Pokemon.

Ivysaur? Wartortle? They were some of his earliest and strongest Pokemon.

He has an Espeon with a myriad of abilities, strong Psychic powers, and can match Voltorb in speed and agility.

Aerodactyl? Pidgeot? Two expert flyers that would have laughed at my attempt to create an obstacle course of the arena.

Where is Pikachu? Really, where is it? It’s his team leader, and even if it weren’t being used to battle due to type matchups, it should at least be stalking around nearby, cheering on its teammates. But I did not see the yellow mouse.

Most conspicuously, the one Pokemon I most identified with Ash, his strongest Pokemon, and Amphy’s dear savior: Charizard. Where is he? Would I have even stood a chance against that beast? Could I even bring myself to fight him with all my might, knowing that if it weren’t for him, I would have lost my precious charge?

That’s just it, isn’t it, Jasmine?

My face contorted. I didn’t know what to show Ash, what emotion to feel.

How could you bring yourself to face Ash with all you’ve got? What would you feel, knowing you defeated him and stood in the way of his dream? This right here, this hesitation proves Ash right. Pokemon fighting is not a shallow contest of egos, vying for total supremacy. Battles are matters of heart and emotion and experiences, between humans and humans, Pokemon and Pokemon, and humans and Pokemon. Right now, your emotions are holding you back, ever so slightly.
And I realized, they were holding Ash back as well.

He really is a hypocrite.

Fight with everything we have, holding nothing back?

He practically contrived a battle tactic that could have backfired on him at any moment. He gave me every opportunity to beat him. Even if he won, I could have told myself, with pride, that I had gone up against a titan and acquitted myself well, maybe nurturing the hope that a little improvement would make me the equal of tournament champions.

All a farce.

Why, then?

To let me save face?

To encourage me, to satisfy my ego, to not let the loss sting so badly, to give me the satisfaction of a mammoth upset?

All these reasons, but they are not reasons. None explain Ash’s goal in all this. What does he get out of it? What does he intend by it?

Is it- if Ash says he is being forthcoming, but his actions in combat are anything but, so that he’s actually holding back- does that mean his true feelings are the same? Has he been holding back what he really thinks of me this whole time?

Isn’t that self-evident, Jasmine?

You’ve been holding out for the hope that he’s been coy and shy, and was simply waiting for the right moment to express his affection for you. Doesn’t this, more than anything else, confirm it?

He’s going easy on you because he cares about you. Right?

He’s asking you to the lighthouse to confess his love, right?

Except, if I take this victory, what will he think of me? Will he see it at face value, that I really do want to win, and that I value Pokemon battles over romance? Or will he regard it as me knowing his intentions, and working within his paradigm all the same, because we both want the same thing?

It’s too complicated!

Jasmine, Jasmine, Jasmine.

What about Ash?

Do you care about him? Do you really like him?

Because maybe this is what Ash thinks is the best way to help you and gain your affection, but it is not the best thing for himself. If he loses here, he can’t go on to the other gyms, he can’t qualify for the Johto tournament. He would be stuck in Olivine.

That’s what you want, right? More time together?

Is that what he means by this?
If he loses he can trick everyone, including himself, into thinking he has to stay in Olivine.

Remember what he told you at the beginning of the match? About wanting to be the champion, so that he can show by example how being strong and being kind are not mutually exclusive?

Jasmine, you can feel it. This guy is destined for so much more. He has dreams, like you once held, but he’s actually going out and making them into a reality. If you hold him down here, put an anchor around his neck with a relationship, what will that do to his dreams? What will that do to his ambitions, his kindness?

What will he think of you?

Will he become bitter and resentful? Will it fall apart, eventually? Will he end up cursing me for fooling him into this contrived love?

I can’t… I can’t do that to him.

It’s not in me.

I fell in love with a boy whose heart was so much bigger than the small world I inhabited. If I imprisoned him here because of my selfish feelings, I am sure, in no small time, he would turn into a churlish man who I could not stand.

I won’t do it.

Ash…

I will not destroy your dreams.

My thoughts culminated in that moment into a single decision and a single word:

“Earthquake.”

Onix heard and complied. The ground shook, fiercely. The seismic vibrations tore into Lapras’ lower flank. They did their work and took their toll: heavy damage, shaken limbs, bruised internal organs, rattled brain and attendant mental discombobulation. Yet, it was not enough, not near enough to create a knockout.

Ash looked disappointed. Saddened. I wonder if he thought I had made a tactical error, or if he knew what I was doing and why. He seemed to accept the outcome.

“Lapras, Blizzard,” he commanded.

This Blizzard was not like Tauros’. It was full-fledged and held power. It filled the room with a roaring mass of coiled artic fury. It tore at the earth with plutonian viciousness, forming a wave of permafrost that rapidly bit through everything it touched. Onix tried to get away, but not even the friction of his tunneling could save him here. The Blizzard caught him in its embrace and sliced off the last remaining bits of his stamina. He had strength enough to surface his head before collapsing.

I walked out onto the arena floor. Onix was not out cold, but simply drained to the point of exhaustion. He eyed me coldly.

Why did you let this happen? I had it!

That’s what his stare told me.
He is such a prideful Pokemon.

If only I could match that pride.

I knelt down beside him and whispered.

“I couldn’t. He was going easy on us. It wouldn’t have meant anything.” I sniffled. “Sometimes, Onix, we have to swallow a loss we shouldn’t, because there are bigger things at stake. This is one of those times. Hopefully, it will be the last.”

Onix growled in displeasure, and then turned over. I took out my Pokeball, but he shook, as best he could, showing me he did not want to be recalled. I accepted his wish, and left him alone.

Ash was doing the same, explaining the situation to his Lapras.

He’s right. They do have souls. They may not have human levels of intellect, but I think that the difference is only a matter of kind. These creatures grow with us and learn from us, and they can understand human feelings. We humans were supposed to send them into a battle for the sake of competition, but we ended up finishing it based on ulterior feelings. They could sense that, and were confused, and disappointed.

I will have to live with the shame, I know.

I lifted myself and began gingerly making my way to the opposite sideline. It took a little effort, navigating between the scars of battle. Ash saw my approach and had time to compose himself. When I reached him, he was nothing but giddy.

“Well shoot. Did I put my foot in my mouth or what? I don’t think I kicked any sort of butt there!”

I didn’t say anything. He took the hint. This wasn’t a time for levity.

“So, ah, thank you for the battle. It was an honor. I would like, er, I would be humbled to receive the Mineral Badge.”

I quietly took the little piece of decoration out and held it out to him. He hesitated, hand held over the proffered badge.

“This badge is simple, an octagon with a clean silver face. That represents the purity of our sport, a competition to test our strengths and wills against one another. There is no higher purpose but what you give to it, and the same is true for our sport. It has no greater value but what you decide for it. If your choice is to teach society by your actions through battling, I am sure it will be a worthy endeavor, and that you will succeed in it. Take it,” I urged.

Ash palmed the badge, and in so doing grasped my hand. He shook it, firmly, sincerely, and then withdrew, badge in possession.

“Thank you,” he said.

I gave him a polite bow.

The crowd finally broke their silence and began cheering. Most of them, anyways. My own fans weren’t as enthusiastic, understandably. Ash smiled and waved to everyone.

“There’s a bunch of you who want a crack at me, huh? Well, come see me in Cianwood! Better hurry, I won’t be there long!” he announced.
I couldn’t help but frown.

He’s slipping away.

That’s fine.

I have a plan now.

Ash doesn’t even know it, but his dream is already coming true. There is one soul he has touched through his actions. She is going to make a brave decision soon.

“So, you know, uh, you could have used Stone Edge again and probably won,” he said.

“Oh I thought about it! I really did! But it’s sort of inaccurate, I was worried what a miss or two would do. I was thinking Onix had room to use two or three Earthquakes instead, because he was safe underground. Turns out Blizzard was strong, and well… that’s how a battle goes, right? Cheer up! You look so droopy, even though you won.”

“I could say the same! You didn’t do bad at all! And you were so serious there at the end. Where did that speech come from? Did you rehearse it?”

“Not at all! I made it up on the spot.”

“Seriously? But it was like an official speech.”

“I’m kind of good in writing composition class, I guess? It seemed like the appropriate thing to say. I do give a lot of thought to why we have Pokemon battles.”

“Did you read Professor Oak’s book?”

“Twice!”

“Oh cool! Did you know I helped edit some of it? Even wrote a few passages.”

“Ohhh! That’s interesting! Which parts?”

Our conversation happily carried us to the bleachers, where we sat and yapped away. We were interrupted repeatedly by acquaintances imparting their congratulations/condolences. After the dozenth well-wisher I was getting irritated, but the thirteenth was joyfully welcomed.

“Ed!”

“Yo.”

Welcomed on account of the sandwiches and water bottles he brought with him.

“Thought you might want something to eat.”

“Oh thank goodness! Thank you! Did you buy these?”

“Nah, the old man did.”

“Oh. Mr. Beret, what is he doing?”

“He didn’t want to see you. He was so pissed. And I quote: “What kind of tooly-time piss-keg duck-footed bleach-belly vomit-bilge whore-wanker cryin-hole crack of a shit-show was that?!” So yeah,
he’s upset you lost. I would steer clear of him for a while if I were you.”

“And yet he buys me sandwiches.” I smirked, prompting the same from Ed. Sandwiches, plural, I noted. I offered the second to Ed, who showed me a third. He nodded towards Ash.

“Oh.”

“Well, I’m out. Have fun, sorry you loss. Hey, Ash, congrats on the win… lucky bastard.” Ed reached out for a handshake. Ash reluctantly took it, and was surprised by the vigorous vice-grip he got. “See you later.”

Ed turned about and stomped off.

He seemed peeved too. Did he take my loss personally or something?

Finally free of interruption, I turned back to Ash. He seemed dazed, if anything, by the turn of events. It’s like he’s shocked he won, as if he was the big underdog.

“Ew. Meat.”

“I’ll take it.”

I picked the slice of ham off his opened sandwich and doubled up my own. Thus assuaged, we munched on our meals while continuing to hash out the intricacies of our concluded match. If Ash had something serious to tell me, it could obviously wait until later, when we had privacy. Even still, as the minutes passed by and words passed between us, I could sense the tension rising. Pleasant, soothing tension, really, I’m not sure tension is the right term. Arousal? Too sexual. No, this was more innocent, but of the same kind. Like flirting, or the feeling of flirting and being flirted to, even though the subject was very ordinary and particular to our sport.

It went on and on, until the crowd cleared, my feelings piqued, and my private thoughts were all knotted into a Gordian twist.

“Hey, you know,” Ash looked around. “It’s noisy here, right? Want to get out of here? Go to the lighthouse, you and me?”

“Oh! Sure, of course, I agree. Let’s go!”

My excitement was pulsating with the intensity of Amphy’s night-vanquishing ray.

I jumped to my feet, giddy, goofy, girlish, anticipating the myriad of possibilities, and bracing myself for what had to be done. I prayed, to what deity I didn’t know and didn’t care, but for something to give me the courage to see this plan through.

Ash rose to his feet and offered both his hands. I took them.

We could not look like anything but a happy couple to the whole wide world.

At least, Mother thought so.

“Hey you.”

“Ah!”

I nearly fell over.
She was sitting high up above us on the bleachers.

Had she been there the entire time?!

Had she been watching us?!?!

Oh god, gods, God, Arceus, Almighty!

My heart leapt from the peaks of joy to the abyss of terror.

What the hell was she doing here?!

Wrong question Jasmine.

You know exactly what she’s doing here.

I gulped and step up a row.

“Mother, I’m sorry but I had to. I’m the gym leader and Ash challenged my gym. I needed my Pokemon, so I took them back. It wasn’t right for you to take them in the first place.”

She rose without a word and deftly leapt down the bleachers two at a time. I was surprised by how fast she descended. In mere moments she landed one row up, standing directly over us. Her eyes stared down on us, on Ash in particular. I put my arm out between her and him, as if I could stop her warpath from reaching my companion. She saw this and her eyes flared, but she didn’t say a word.

“You can’t, Mother. I deserve this. After everything you’ve put me through, after everything I’ve done to try to please you, everything I’ve sacrificed for you and Dad and everyone else, I want something for myself. My Pokemon, and Amphy, and Ash- I won’t have you take any of them away from me. So just… go home!”

This time, I was prepared to defend myself, if necessary. Rage was plainly evident in her face. However, moments ticked by and she stood motionless.

Ash stood agape as mother and daughter faced off.

She took a deep breath. Her focus suddenly shifted.

“You. Come with me,” she said, pointing at Ash.

I was caught off-guard. She brushed me aside, leapt past us to the floor, and began marching. When Ash did not follow, she grabbed him by the wrist and began dragging him with her. He didn’t resist.

“Mother! You can’t do this! Where are you going? I told you, I won’t let you take him! Ash! Get away from her!”

Her force march was carrying a helpless Ash away. I started chasing after them.

“Let him go! Let him go! I’m the one you have an issue with, this is between you and me!

Mother turned on me suddenly. Her palm shot out and jabbed me in the square of the chest. It was expertly placed, the force of it knocked the wind out of me.

“You stay here. I’m talking to him alone.”

“Alone?” Ash finally spoke up.
“W-w-w *huff huff* with Ash?! Why? I want to know what you’re telling him. I’m the one you’re punishing, unjustly! I’m coming with you.”

“Shut up girl. I…” She shook her head, about to lose it. “I’m through with you. I’m done. Do you get it? I’m done dealing with you. I can’t anymore.” Her eyes were averted, downcast, like she couldn’t even look at me anymore. At last she turned and made her way to the office, a hapless, helpless Ash in tow. They disappeared inside.

I stood aghast.

All her threats, and now this. This is her final resort.

What the hell did she have in mind?

What could she possibly say to Ash?

I wanted to know, but was afraid to find out.

I’ve never seen her make that face.

The expressions of rage, wrath, disappointment, disgust, I knew what these looked like on her, and had suffered them so many times before. But this was different- something I hadn’t seen before, and didn’t know what to call it.

So, between the two extremes of running away or barging in, I took the indecisive middle option and sidled up to the office door. It was cracked open. I peeked inside.

They were at the back, talking seriously and quietly, in short utterances. From this distance I couldn’t make out their words. Mother was her usual self- imperious, dictating, and callous. Ash was unusually shy and stumped. No matter how great a man he was or would become, he was just another puddle of putty before her.

At last, she seemed to put some question to him, and he could barely answer. He bowed his head. She snorted, said something, and reached out. She was handing him something. Slowly and reluctantly, he took it.

She looked down on him a moment more, then turned towards the door. I backed off. When she burst through, her mood was serious, but that strange look was gone. She paused and glanced at me.

“What did you say to him?” I asked. No answer. “What are you going to do? You’re not taking either of them away from me. I’ll get Beret to-”

She flashed an angry scowl at me at the mention of Beret. It quickly went away.

“Jasmine, I don’t give a damn what you do anymore.”

She took a step, paused, and then leaned down towards me.

“It’s time you take responsibility for your life. I’m done. Don’t come home in tears begging for a hug.”

Mother, if only you knew… I won’t be coming home at all. Not tonight. Not ever.
As I walked along the Cape Road, coyly glancing to my right, taking in the handsome view (and of course I’m referring to my walking companion), I couldn’t help but be relieved. More than any other feeling.

Finally.

Finally.

Finally.

…Free.

I can smell it. The smell of saltwater, of the ocean that beckoned.

The evening air was rich with its scent. The sky was ablaze with the light of the setting sun. It reflected off the scattered clouds, turning them crimson and velvet. The grass was tall and rippled in waves under the wind’s breath. The air was humid but cool to the skin.

Glitter Lighthouse soon loomed over us, a tower and a symbol, of home.

No, I thought to myself.

Not home.

Home is a place you stay in.

This was a birthplace, a nest.

Nests were meant to be left.

It wasn’t yet time for the lighthouse beacon to come on. The fog was not so bad this time of year, and visibility lasted long into the twilight. Amphy was probably just getting up.

I could take him with me.

My first stop might not be to follow him. I should go north, catch and raise a Mareep, evolve it into Ampharos. That way I could hand the new creature over to the mayor and take Amphy with me.

Then I would chase him.

Ash led me to the top of the rise, the grassy knoll in front of the lighthouse overlooking the sea. On the very horizon, you could make out a dark smudge. His gaze was fixed there.

I took in the sight of him.

He had all his stuff. Just a backpack, not even loaded up. He was wearing his usual attire, jeans, black T, and a red vest. A ballcap rested on his hair, which was unfortunate. I loved the rich obsidian color, its shaggy length, and the touch of its silken smoothness. I want to play with it and ruffle it all up. I might have a hair fetish.

He was fit and athletic, not fat nor even decked out with muscle. A hiker’s body, is what he sported. I liked that. I never thought of myself as into big men, the bara camp as some girls put, nor did I really fall for the pretty-boy stereotypes either, the bishi camp. Ash was just as-is, perfectly acceptable by my standards.
His face was as cute as could be, though from this angle, I couldn’t see it. It was usually placid and serious, but when he really, truly felt something, he let you know with a smile that put wrinkles around his eyes. That’s a genuine smile, one from the heart, truly felt. He’s given me that smile numerous times now.

But it’s not just his looks.

It’s his words and actions, who he is, that I love as well.

What kind of guy had the capability to catch and train such a magnificent creature as Charizard? Who else could have braved a fierce hurricane to deliver life-saving medicine, and what’s more, who else would have done so, voluntarily, without hesitation or regret? He risked his life for my sake, for Amphy’s sake.

Then he saved my body and honor from Peter.

He’s a hero, through and through.

Yet, he’s not just a hero.

He is a kind person, thoughtful, soft-spoken, and jovial. He makes me feel at ease and secure. His love of Pokemon matches my own, his philosophy towards Pokemon battles is like mine. We have similar backgrounds and similar tastes. We laugh at the same jokes, even the little things that others take for granted. He has had a coy, overly-shy approach to our relationship, but then again, so have I. Were my wildest fantasy to come true and Nichiji, Prince of the Sun, were to step out of anime and into reality, I would still turn down his courtship in favor of my newfound crush. When I looked at Ash, I saw quite simply perfection- the ordinary, exquisite perfection of real life.

This was a heavenly happenstance- for a guy this cute, this handsome, to fall into my life, and then not meet my every wish in terms of personality, but exceed them. Then to have him return my interest in kind? It seemed like a fairy tale, a romance anime, a chick flick, a dream come true.

My dream when I was young was to become a world-famous archeologist, unearthing treasures of the deep all over the globe. As I matured, that dream gradually subsided, but the same basic feeling was there- I wanted to discover things. More and more, I wanted to discover new souls, the gems hidden in the hearts of people and Pokemon. I feel like here I have found my second great discovery.

I hope I get to keep that discovery. If I do, I will treasure it always.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

“Hmm?”

“This view. It’s breath-taking.”

“I know. It’s more so upstairs.” I went to his side. “Do you want to go upstairs? We can see everything up there. Together. Alone.”

I nudged him.

He sort of took a half-step away.

“I’m fine down here.”

I huffed.
Ash stood there as if he had all the time in the world.

Nothing is happening, and that means my nerves are being given time to frazzle. It felt like my opportunity was slipping away with the daylight. So I took his hand in mine, hoping he would notice.

He did. He turned around and took my hands in his, guiding them up and down. I could see into his brilliant blue eyes. The setting sun was at my back, lighting up his beautiful face.

“Jasmine.”

“Ash.”

He pulled his hands away.

I was startled to find something small and hard resting in my left hand.

I looked down and found a Mineral Badge deposited there.

“How?”

“I’m returning it.”

“What? Is this… this is your badge. What’s wrong?”

“I said I’m returning it.”

“But you earned it.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“But you do. You won the match.”

“It wasn’t a real match.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I said, confused and starting to sense the crux of the tension surrounding us.

“I think we faced each other… we fought on false premises. Um. That wasn’t the kind of battle I wanted.”

My hands fell to my side and I looked up to him. He was averting his eyes now.

“I was holding back. I didn’t try my best. I tried to let you win.”

“I know.”

He perked up.

“And you passed it up?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason you tried to let me win.”

A grumpy look passed through his face, like a scowl.
“I’m not sure you understand,” he said.

“Is something the matter?” I said. “Did my Mother tell you something mean?”

“Uh. Ah. No.”

“What were you talking about? Did she try to scare you off? You should know she can be a cruel and unreasonable person. You don’t have to listen to what she said.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “She didn’t say anything cruel or unkind. I think what she said was reasonable, for a parent.”

I tilted my head.

“So it’s not a problem?” I inquired.

“No, it’s not… I… I don’t know. Look, it’s complicated.”

“Can you tell me?”

“Not easily.”

He pulled away.

You’re losing him.

She did something to him.

He’s regretting the way the battle unfolded, because of her.

“Listen, Ash, if you feel like we didn’t have a fair battle because of something or other, let’s have another battle. We can do it right this time.”

“No possible,” he said.

“Sure it is. One way or the other, I don’t really care who wins, as long as we’re friends after it. That’s what you told me, right? That we should fight with everything we had, and then still be on good terms afterwards.”

“Yeah, I said that.”

“So, isn’t that what you wanted for the wider world? Pokemon battles are a sport, not a war? We can still be friends no matter how into it we get. So let’s have another battle, a proper one. You use all your powerhouses this time, not some gimmicky strategy.”

“I… no, I don’t think so. I don’t think it matters what I do, it’ll never be a proper fight.”

“Ash… do you, um… is the reason…”

I hesitated, but only for a moment to think. Just a moment.

I so dearly wanted him to come out first, but part of being brave and growing means taking the initiative, and right here, I think I need to be the brave one.

“I mean to say, is the reason you can’t have a proper battle with me, no matter what, because you have feelings for me?”
Ash’s head jerked up. His eyes stared directly at me, wide open, shocked.

“Because, I have feelings for you.”

Ash took a deep, deliberate breath.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

I started gushing.

“I feel constricted here, in Olivine, trapped. You said I should get out if I couldn’t stand it anymore. I couldn’t leave, though- or so I thought. The idea of being out there alone scared me. But this past month, I’ve gotten to know someone who I think can give me the courage to run out and start living. You. I really, truly, like you. I would like to join you on your journey- if you’ll have me.”

I rested my hands on his chest, imparting my proposition directly to his heart.

“That’s, um… it’s… I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he answered.

“But…” I started having trouble breathing. “Why? Please, tell me the truth Ash. I like you. I… I love you. How do you feel about me?”

Ash shuddered and went silent. His only response was to bow his head, overwhelmed by the sudden confession.

My nerves were giving out.

Does he even believe me?

Does he not think I’m sincere?

Is he too nervous to accept?

Or fearful of what acceptance might entail?

Or did he expect something else?

What could I do… what must I do, to get him to open up?

“Ash.”

“Jasmine, I don’t know how to say this…”

I leaned up to him, on my tip-toes, and pressed my lips to his.

I will always remember my first kiss.

Always.

He did not resist. He accepted it. He returned it.

There is nothing quite like a boy’s lips. They are soft and firm at the same time, and tasty, and squeamish, and the sensation they impart is nice, and the imagination ignites that nice sensation into something indescribably pleasurable.
That he remained still and pressed his lips into mine, for a moment, heightened the pleasure beyond the purest bliss.

Yes. That’s right. That is what bothered me so much.

My first kiss was never taken from me. It was given freely, and it was accepted freely, at first. Then he abruptly pulled away. I looked him in the eye, distraught, confused, and forlorn. I went to resume the kiss, but he interceded with his hands to my chest, pushing me away.

“No, stop,” he said.

“But…” I sputtered. “Ash, if you want, you can have me. All of me,” I said tearing up.

He paused and stared at me intently as comprehension of what I was offering dawned on him. There was a moment of hesitation. Then he took a deep breath and faced me dead-on.

His words came softly.

“I'm sorry if I misled you, but I have no interest in being anything but friends.”
“Do you want to talk about it now?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

“Do you want to battle, then?”

“No.”

“Then I guess I’ll just go back to the gym.” He got up to leave, milled about, and then sat down again on the steps. There was room enough between us for Pokemon Center visitors to pass through, which several did. Some gave us annoyed or worried glances as they went. They bothered me, as if they were judging me. Ash paid them no mind. We sat there in silence for a long while. The minutes passed and Ash offered no explanation for his presence, and it was slowly driving me mad. The longer he was there, the longer he said nothing, the more time I had to remember our past, and how much bitterness and pain it had caused me. Worse, the more I remembered, the closer I got to facing that wretched truth.

He dumped you, Jasmine. Left you like you were nothing, like you meant nothing to him, like he didn’t want you at all. You watched him leave, you sat on that bluff and cried your heart out, and even watched the ferry carry him over the horizon. And then...

And then I made the greatest mistake of my life.

I curled myself tighter.

Don’t you dare say it. Don’t tell him. Don’t tell anyone. No one will care, no one will believe you, and no will think it justifies everything you’ve done.

If not for Ash, you would never have found out in the first place.

“Ash,” I said aloud. I had to talk, I was driving myself crazy, and it was the only thing that could divert the downward spiral of my memories.

“Hmm?”

“What are you doing? You were going to leave,” I said accusingly.

“Well.” He got up and for a moment he really did look like he was going to leave. He stepped aside for a trainer with a Golbat in his arms. “This isn’t a convenient place, and actually, I wanted to talk.” He walked along the side of the building and then paused, waiting to see if I would follow.

Reluctantly, cursing myself and wondering why I would entertain him for even a second, and knowing all along the reasons why and knowing how those reasons made me look so pathetic, I got up and followed. He led me to the back lot of the Pokemon Center, where a small paved yard served as a makeshift Pokemon arena. There were benches for spectators to sit and watch. I made my way towards these, Ash followed at a respectable distance. I sat and he remained standing, which made me uncomfortable. I tugged him down beside me by the wrist. Thankfully, we were the only people present.

“Spit it out,” I said.
Ash bowed his head.

“Well? Say something or I’m leaving.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Stop it.” I sounded frustrated. I was. This was my pet peeve. “Sorry is just a word. I stopped saying sorry a long time ago, because it’s too easy to spit out and not mean anything.”

“I hurt you. I know what I did caused you suffering.”

“How could you know? You left.”

He scratched his head, looking guilty.

“When I fought your friend in Ecruteak, he tried really hard to stop me from coming here. He told me about your probation and how you couldn’t afford a loss.”

I bristled.

“So what? You got the same information from Preston.”

“I got the sense there was more going on than what he was letting on. Morty, I think his name is, he was trying to protect you, like he cared about you as more than a colleague.”

“His name is Trash, get it right,” I angrily spat out.

“Oh.” Ash’s gaze went sideways, embarrassed by my outburst. “That’s, um, a shock. See, because of what he said I got a bad feeling and kind of started snooping around. I figured out you and Lyra are friends, so I sent her a message asking about you. She told me you were fine, that you were going strong in your job and also that you were dating, errr, Mr. Trash.”

“Well she’s wrong, on all accounts.”

“Apparently.”

Ash paused once more. I glared at him until he spoke again.

“It was the last thing she said, though, that bugged me. She said you were doing better than you once were, that you used to be depressed and moody, and that you would lash out, especially at boys.”

“Yes, I was like that once and now I am again.”

Lyra’s impression wasn’t wrong, it was merely confined to a small timeframe that had passed, and now her information was woefully outdated.

“What does it matter to you, anyways? I’m just a “friend”, remember?”

That hurt him, I could tell. He winced under the weight of the accusation.

“I’m sorry,” he said dumbly. “Um. I know, I know. What I mean is, even if we’re friends- or acquaintances, I guess, at this point- I didn’t mean to hurt you. It sounds like I did, though. I knew you wanted more for us than I could give, and I knew you might hold a grudge against me for that. But, I just… I expected you to be tougher. I didn’t expect you to run off like that. If what Lyra said about your past was true—”
“No, not true. It was an understatement. Lyra was being nice.”

“Oh. Then, I’m to blame, right?”

I didn’t respond to that.

“It’s that bad, huh?” He gripped his pants. “I wish I could make things right. I would come back tomorrow, if it was possible, if it helped you. But I can’t. I’m under a really tight deadline, and my bet with Stone- he really put me at a disadvantage.”

“What bet? What’s so important it’s worth destroying my job?”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“Don’t give me that. I’m sick of it. I don’t want to hear another person clamp up on me because they’re too sensitive!”

“Hey, I wish I could tell you, especially you, but I can’t. I just can’t. It’s not the kind of thing I’m hiding because it’s embarrassing. It’s top secret League crap. It could land me in jail.”

“Oh, right, I’m supposed to be understanding because you don’t want to go to jail. You already ruined my childhood. Now you’re back and about to ruin my adulthood too. I don’t care anymore. Keep your stupid secret. If you’re not here to help me, I’m not going to listen to your half-assed apologies. Go away. Don’t ever come back.”

“It’s… damn it, it’s not like that! This is going to affect you too! The whole damned world. I know you’re bitter about back then, and you have every right to be. But right now, what’s at stake is more than just your job. Even if you win… you might not have a job to keep.”

“What are you talking about?” I jerked up.

Ash recoiled. He had just said too much.

“What was that? What about my job?”

“Forget it, I didn’t mean it.”

“No, you said I might not have a job. Like something is going to happen to it. What’s going on? Ash, this isn’t right. You can’t come here and say it’s okay to get me fired just because they’re going to get rid of the gym anyways. Is it just my gym?”

Ash stared at me blankly.

“All the gyms?”

He wouldn’t fess up.

I shivered, frustrated, confused, and sick.

“Out with it! Tell me, are they closing Olivine Gym?”

“I can’t say.”

It took every ounce of willpower not to start cursing out loud at him.

“Then why… what is the point of this anyways? Why do you even need my badge?”
Ash took a deep breath.

“I’ll say this. Stone and I want to fix things. If we succeed, you won’t notice a thing, life goes on as normal. If we fail, you and everyone else will notice, and you all won’t like it. The problem is, we have two different opinions about how to go about it. His way- I’m pretty sure it won’t work. My way has a chance. He doesn’t believe me. But he’s willing to give it a try, if I finish this idiotic bet of his.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” I said. “Just because you won the globals doesn’t make you a hero. You’re not saving the world.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you knew the truth.”

“Hmph!” I didn’t have to respond. From his face, he knew how tactless that sounded the moment it slipped his mouth.

“Sor- never mind.” He shook his head. “But I still need your badge. You’re not going to fight for it?”

“What hope do I have? Doesn’t sound like you’ll go easy on me this time.”

He shrugged.

“Then get lost. Go pry it from Preston. I’m sure he’ll be glad to hand it over. He’d be happy to kick me out of the gym.”

Ash grunted.

“I also checked out your League file on my way here. You’re right about that. They said you’re too emotionally compromised, that you’re not doing a good job representing the League. They would rather you fail probation.”

“Enough. Get out of here. I don’t care anymore. It all ends the same anyways. You want my badge?”

I pulled out my own personal gym badge, the one that’s supposed to be kept by gym leaders to identify themselves.

“Here! Take it!” I threw the little piece of metal at him full force. He reflexively snatched it out of the air. His gaze went down to the badge for a moment.

“You really won’t battle?” he asked once again.

“No!”

“Okay.” He slowly got up to his feet.

I buried my face into my palms, hoping he would finally leave me alone.

“You know. Regardless of everything else. I respected you. You were strong. I guess I was wrong.”

He sullenly strolled off across the court, back in the direction of the gym.

“Wait!”

He paused.
I did have one last thing I wanted from him.

“When my mother talked to you at the gym, she asked you a question. What was your answer?”

Ash paused without turning.

A cold wind blew through, chilling the skin. A bank of clouds drifted over the sun, casting shadows across the Pokemon Center and making it even colder. I started shivering, but from the weather or my own expectations of an answer, I didn’t know.

Ash shook his head and started walking once more.

“Hey! Why won’t you tell me? What was it? What did you say to her? Hey! Ash!”

He kept walking, right across the pavement, to the curb, and beyond. I got up and chased him all the way to the street.

“Did you even love me?” I cried tearfully.

“No,” came his muted voice.

So she told the truth, back then.

“Give it back,” I said. I held out my hand.

He turned.

“What?”

“Give it back. My badge. I’m not letting you have it.”

He thumbed the silver eight-sided octagon. That’s my heart he has there. It doesn’t belong to him. He doesn’t deserve it.

He looked confused and hesitant, holding the thing waist-high and turning his gaze back and forth between me and it. I took the initiative and swiped it from his hand.

“Oh okay…” He tried to turn once more to leave.

“Fight me,” I demanded.

“Huh?” When he turned back around, he did not find the same young woman standing before him. This woman was standing erect, and strong, and had a glare of self-righteous ferocity upon her. This was not a little girl who would meekly accept the inevitable, not now.

“I hate you,” I said. “I hate you so, so much. You and all you men. You heartless, selfish bastards, all of you. I kept telling myself to hate you, and I tried very hard to believe it too. I was good at faking that hatred, it was almost second nature to me. Like a hypochondriac, the belief was powerful enough to make it real. But you know? In my heart, I never could let go. I always had a tiny hope. That’s how Morty got to me. He found that chink and zeroed in on it.

But that hope was based on a belief, that what she told me about you was a lie. I should have known better. That damned woman may be the ruin of me and the worst, most sickening example of a human being on the planet, but she is not a liar. It hurts me so much, and I hate admitting it, loathe it, but she was right. About you, about men. Life. I should have listened to her.”
I cast my heart down on the ground.

“You made me feel this way. Your crimes, your deception. I don’t know why you went about it the way you did, but it’s over, I’m through, I won’t let you hurt me further.”

“But…” Ash started to protest.

“You stole my heart. I’m not going to let you steal my life. Fight me! Right now!”

“Here?” Ash asked, bewildered.

“Right here, right now.”

Ash frowned.

“Fine. What are the rules?”

“One on one,” I declared. I took up my singular Pokeball. Steelix was all I had on hand. “No items, no time limits. We go until one Pokemon or the other is out cold. I dare you to go easy on me like last time. I’ll crush you.”

Ash fingered his Pokeballs one by one. He nodded. “Fine. This is what I asked for, isn’t it? A fair battle. Alright, I chose Pikachu.”

I laughed in mirth, and rage.

He’s mocking me.

“You’re kidding. You really are taking it easy on me.”

“No I’m not,” Ash insisted.

“Steelix is mine. Pikachu won’t stand a chance,” I declared, and flipped my Pokeball into the air. Steelix emerged and swiveled around, disoriented by the unfamiliar environment. His gaze came to rest on Ash. His stare hardened. Hatred flickered across. Oh he remembers Ash’s face. He remembers carrying me home that fateful day.

“Pikachu.”

I stared with incredulity as he tossed his Pokeball and the pathetic little yellow rodent actually appeared before my leviathan.

“This is stupid. Face me with Charizard! I know you have it.”

Maybe Ash is a two-faced egoist with a hero-complex, but at least Charizard I could respect. That Pokemon crossed the storm, it was the one who saved Amphy.

“Pika!”

Whatever, I’ll crush this rodent, rid myself of Ash, of men, and report back to Preston victorious. My job will be safe. Screw the League, I dare them to try to shut down Olivine Gym. We’ll boycott them, we’ll riot before letting that happen. And then…

“Then I go back to the original plan. Steel,” I said to myself, balling my fists. I spoke up. “Prepare yourself! You’re facing the Full Metal Gym Leader of Olivine City, Jasmine Mikan! You won’t bend or break this iron will of ours!”
“Red, of Pallet Town. I’m ready.” He swiped the locks from his eyes with one finger.

“Steelix, attack!”

“Go, Pikachu.”

Two Pokemon, the one a small, lethal package of thunder, the other a rumbling, living mountain, charged against one another. As the creatures waged our proxy war, I winced under the realization of what this battle entailed.

Here we are again, forcing our beloved partners to hurt each other for our own selfish reasons. It was cruel, and it was wrong, or so I thought. Then I saw Steelix glance backwards, expectant of a command. My thoughts took a tumble, and my realization from a moment ago was flipped on its head.

For Steelix, this fight was every bit as meaningful as it was for me. He felt what I felt. He believed in what I believed in. My battles were his as well. I remembered, among all my Pokemon, only one submitted to me voluntarily. He accepted capture willingly, and to this day I don’t know why. Yet, what that meant has become apparent to me after years of loyal obedience: he wanted to be part and parcel of my life, to share in my joys and sorrows, to take up arms for my cause.

I had time for a single giggle.

Steelix don’t have arms.

Steelix- I won’t let your loyalty go to waste.

“Earthquake front!” I commanded.

Steelix pulled up. Pikachu was running at him head first. My Pokemon pounded the earth with his frontal abdomen. Shockwaves tore through the ground, rippling out towards the electric rodent. Even knowing who I was facing, I really did expect the mouse to faint just like that.

I underestimated its speed. Earthquake shockwaves travel through the ground very fast, faster than a bullet train, but even still, the foe had closed the gap between itself and Steelix by the time he hit the dirt. In the instant between Steelix cracking the ground and the wave propagating beneath the field, Pikachu had already launched itself into the air.

In fact, it had hurled itself to the only location immune to the Earthquake- right atop Steelix’s head.

Steelix roared and flailed his maw about, trying to bite down on the impudent Pikachu. The latter leapt again, down onto Steelix’s midsection. With agility that quite literally dropped my jaw, it curled around Steelix’s body, weaving around the trunk and in between the spines so that it perfectly dodged Steelix’s thrashing while remaining off the still-shaking ground.

“Bulldoze lateral!” I commanded.

Steelix began churning himself pitch-wise, like a log rolling in place. A great big metal log with spikes.

Pikachu dodged by leaping high into the air.

“Thunderbolt,” Ash said mutedly.

On its way down, Pikachu let off a stream of electricity into Steelix’s head. Steelix blinked in
surprise. The bolt functioned more like a Flash attack, as it couldn’t do any physical harm but could
daze him for a moment. Pikachu used the opportunity to land on Steelix’s upper abdomen with a
Body Slam attack.

Steelix groaned under the impact.

That hurt Steelix? The rodent shouldn’t be doing any damage with a Normal type attack like that.
Must be some sort of Fighting type attack then.

“Thunderbolt,” Ash called once more.

“Rock Slide, above you!” I yelled.

Steelix had to twist and turn to face his opponent. Pikachu was moving around him at close range.
The speed, my gosh, the speed- he can’t keep up with it.

“Steelix! Right above you! Over your head!”

I showed him what I meant with my hands. After conveying the motion, I took a quick peep at Ash.
He didn’t seem like he was calling all that many commands. He was sort of just standing there, slack-
shouldered and frowning. However, I caught sight of a small motion at his waist. His fingers were
actively flittering about. Directing Pikachu’s movements with sign language, I guessed. I don’t have
that luxury with Steelix. Their communication was better than ours.

Steelix dug into the ground and tore up a huge load with his tail. He hurled the fresh rubble high
above him.

“Earthquake!” I said immediately after.

I was hoping to corner Pikachu between rocks in the sky and tremors in the earth, but Ash and it
were much too quick. Pikachu was somersaulting backwards to the far corner of the arena. The
rubble fell harmlessly upon the rumbling ground. Neither attack reached Pikachu’s position.

“No Thunderbolt,” Ash called. His finger was pointing at Steelix.

Pikachu’s cheeks sparked and glittered. A bolt cracked off and struck Steelix in the head once more.
Without waiting to see the effect, Pikachu went racing off sideways.

I stared intently, gaging the battlefield’s dimensions. “Steelix, Earthquake.”

Steelix blinked off the Thunderbolt’s afterglow. A point-blank Thunderbolt did nothing to him, a
long-range bolt was less-than-nothing.

It’s a distraction. He’s trying to mask his true strategy.

It’s working. I can hardly keep focused on my own strategy.

My Pokemon was busy pounding the ground with his tail. Dust and dirt danced above the quake-
affected area. I held out my fingers and framed the lot between them.

This backlot was smaller than my gym arena. Steelix could just about hit the entire field with
Earthquake, except maybe the few feet around the corners, if he was centered in the exact middle.

“Steelix, move up a bit.”

“Thunder Shock. Thunderbolt!”
Pikachu was near the left sideline. It darted in and let off a quick skittering of electricity. The flash grabbed Steelix’s attention, who turned his head on Pikachu. He was promptly met with a powerful Thunderbolt to the forehead.

“Steelix, ignore it! It’s a Flash! Earthquake once more!”

If I was right, Pikachu couldn’t run away from this one. It would have to jump on top of Steelix again.

I could almost see it this time. Steelix raised his tail. Pikachu’s ears perked up, its eyes went wide, and its haunches tensed. Before Steelix had even begun swinging his tail down, the mouse had already taken two bounds. Steelix’s tail hit the ground, and Pikachu had taken six bounds, enough to bring it within leaping distance of Steelix.

“Right. Too fast. Steelix, Dig!”

Pikachu landed on top of Steelix’s head. The earth crumbled where it had jumped from not milliseconds before.

“Thunder.”

The foe charged up nigh-instantly and called down a solid pillar of lightning directly on top of Steelix.

Steelix roared from the nuisance of it. He tried pounding his head face-first into the dirt and smashing Pikachu into the ground. Pikachu couldn’t jump off fast enough, but it didn’t need to. It simply let itself go and let inertia carry it up and across Steelix’s head and back.

“Tail Whip,” Ash called.

Pikachu was rolling forward across the length of Steelix’s body, staying just above the churn where Steelix was digging into the ground. It slapped its tail upon my Pokemon’s backside with each rotation. It was an attack that was supposed to reduce a foe’s physical durability, but I’ve never seen it used effectively on large opponents.

At last, Steelix was underground and Pikachu was left alone on the surface. That took quite a lot of digging- this place’s terrain wasn’t as conducive for burrowing as my gym arena.

What now Ash? Steelix can blanket the arena with Earthquake and Pikachu can’t use him for a platform anymore.

“Magnet Rise.”

What?!

Pikachu’s cheeks lit up. It was clearly exerting itself.

“Earthquake! Hurry!”

A rumble. Steelix was having trouble underground. The soil was much heavier than he was used to.

“Hurry!” I said again.

A great roar came from beneath the surface. The ground began shaking- but it was too late. Pikachu was glowing brighter than a lighthouse and huffing like a Super Saiyan. The electrical output was immense. Two spheres of power emanated from Pikachu’s cheeks, overlapping and almost entirely
encapsulating the rodent. One was red, the other blue. The combined polarity interacted, creating a strong magnetic force that lifted Pikachu into the air.

“A flying Pikachu. I can’t believe it.”

The ground shook a few feet beneath Pikachu, failing to reach it with any of its violence.

However, it became clear this was not a great advantage for Pikachu. The little thing was having to focus its entire electrical output just to stay afloat.

“Steelix, dig towards me.”

I had another hunch.

That hunch bore out when Pikachu suddenly fell to the ground, glowing spheres and all.

“Pikachu, Protect.”

“Earthquake!”

The only way Pikachu avoided damage this time was by the sheen of a glowing fantastical shield. Bits of earth ruptured all around Pikachu, battering at its body and skin and sending white shocks of energy into its body.

As I thought, Pikachu don’t naturally learn Magnet Rise. Magnemite do, and can use a fraction of their total energy output to float some twenty feet aloft. What’s more, they tap into the Earth’s natural magnetic field. Pikachu couldn’t do that, it needed a much stronger and nearer source of magnetism: Steelix himself. The rodent could only hover directly over Steelix’s underground location.

My lip quivered.

That attack is so marginally useful, so incredibly situational, that no normal trainer would have their Pikachu learn it. But Ash’s did. This was beyond being prepared, it was paranoid, or obsessive.

“Diggers are such a pain. I wish I could switch. Eh.” Ash grimaced. “There’s ways around it.” He began motioning sign-language commands to Pikachu rapid-fire. It nodded and began working.

First came a Thunder- a truly massive one. This one looked like it went up all the way into the clouds.

The second was some sort of maneuver or dance. Rain Dance, I realized, as small clouds began forming overhead, and a drizzle set in around the Pokecenter. The third was not as easy to decipher. It began launching itself into the ground whilst cloaked in electricity. It punched a hole a foot deep, then quickly bounded to a nearby part of the field and punched another one. Volt Tackles, I guessed, but for what purpose, I couldn’t tell.

“Steelix, can you Earthquake again?”

A low grumble came from underground. He could, but it wouldn’t be as powerful as a surface quake. It was just too compact down there. The place wasn’t made with subterranean combat in mind.

Still, we can make it work.

“Earthquake!”
“CHUUUU!”

Pikachu let out a cry as it blasted the ground. Chunks of dirt went flying. The drizzle turned to a rain that covered the lot and beyond. I tried covering myself from the downpour. It’s December, not great weather to get wet in. I’m going to get hypothermia like this. Yet another crime to add to Ash’s list.

“SCHTOO!” Steelix roared. He put his all into the next attack. The rest period had paid off, this Earthquake was every bit as powerful as one triggered uninhibited from the surface.

Pikachu couldn’t possibly escape this one.

Right?

I gawked.

Pikachu was swimming.

The field was wracked apart by seismic waves, but right in the center was a beaming Pikachu enjoying a dunk in a small swimming pool. The earthen wrath passed harmlessly through the water. The foe was untouched. So that’s what it had been doing, excavating a refuge for itself from the shockwaves.

“Grrr! Steelix, Dig attack! Right front quadrant, two yards by one yard!”

Steelix burst through the pool’s surface, taking Pikachu with him. The water blasted out like a fire hydrant suddenly coming uncorked.

“Crunch!”

“Thunder.”

Steelix clamped its jaws down around Pikachu. Pikachu called down a lightning strike directly onto Steelix’s head. It was loud and fiery, and stunned Steelix, but again, no real damage. Pikachu went flying to the ground. It winced as it tried to regain its footing.

We actually hurt it.

“Got it up aboveground again. Good job Pikachu,” Ash said.

“Steelix, back underground!”

Steelix smacked his head against the surface. He tore at it, bit at, and lunged. He tried harder, but the ground wouldn’t give way. He groaned in frustration.

“What’s the matter?”

He nodded towards the earth. A closer look and I realized the problem. The Rain Dance had turned the dirt to mud. It was making the already-compact soil heavier and harder to move, and also causing it to fill in faster than Steelix could dig it out.

“Watch out!” I said.

Pikachu wasn’t wasting time. It ran circles in front of Steelix and then leapt off to one side, dodging Steelix’s simple Tail Slam and letting off a Thunderbolt in the same motion. Steelix shook his head.

“Steelix. Um. Um…”
The rain was finally subsiding, but that didn’t mean the ground dried up instantly.

“Chase Pikachu. Stone Edge too- no, cancel.”

Steelix would have to create the stone projectiles from his own body-mass. Not ideal, considering I want to save his stamina. This rodent was proving near-impossible to hit, but it had to start tiring out at some point. We can win a war of attrition.

“Thunderbolt.”

Again and again! What is Ash hoping to accomplish here? Steelix rolled towards Pikachu, occasionally lashing out with his tail. Sometimes it was for a direct Slam attack, other times it was a messy Rock Slide that more resembled a Muddy Water. Regardless, Pikachu maneuvered away from it with ease and responded with a Thunderbolt. I counted eight more as this played out.

Ground types are immune to electricity. The electric current flows through their hides or skeletons and thence into the ground, without touching vital organs. This was basic Pokemon knowledge, even a preschooler could tell you that. So why was Ash so insistent on using an ineffective attack?

“Magnetism!” I realized.

He was trying to exploit the weak magnetic field in Steelix’s brain. Every electric attack thus far had been directed at Steelix’s forehead.

“Steelix, stop letting it hit your head. It’s trying to mess with your brain’s cortex.”

An electric current running close to the cortex could fluctuate his magnetoreception organs, which would disturb his sensory organs and maybe interrupt his heartbeat. Could that faint a Steelix?

I furled my brow.

Steelix was putting his aft section forward now, trying to use his bulk to protect his head. Pikachu responded with a flurry of somersaults, long-jumps, Agilities, and Quick Attacks. Despite his best efforts, he was outmaneuvered time and time again, and the Thunderbolts struck true more often than not.

“CHUUUUU!”

That was the fifteenth hit. Even Pikachu was looking worn out from the constant electrical output.

Yet… I knocked at my brain, trying to recall the physiology research I had done on Steelix years ago.

Something-something-magnetic-attenuation… like, Steelix can naturally and automatically shut off their internal magnetic field, neutralizing the effect of any stray current that manages to penetrate their thick skull. So maybe Pikachu’s attack is actually completely ineffective after all? And Ash doesn’t know it?

I might have an advantage here.

“Steelix, how are you doing?”

“Schtalschtal.”

Not great. He’s starting to tire out. Chasing the rodent all over the field was draining him far more than the critter’s attacks.
“Bear with it a little longer, I’ll come up with something for you to hit that pest with.”

“It’s useless,” Ash said. “Come on. Don’t make me do this.”

‘That’s where you’re wrong,’ I thought to myself.

“Steelix, get ready to Earthquake again, but not yet.”

“Pikachu, another Rain Dance.”

This time the precipitation wasn’t as pronounced. It kept the field muddy, but it wasn’t going to fill craters.

“Body Slam!” I ordered.

Steelix rose and fell. The mud parted beneath him, splashing out in a crude wave. Pikachu surfed out of harm’s way atop a Light Screen.

“Bulldoze! Where you are!”

Steelix ground into the muddy surface. It coated his shining armor, turning him to the color and texture of cake batter.

“Now, center up and Earthquake!”

If Pikachu was going to jump on top of him now, it would probably slip off. Then Steelix could pulverize it in a messy close-quarters mud-brawl.

“Thunderbolt.”

Steelix rose.

Pikachu lit off.

Steelix came down, hitting the ground, but the earth didn’t shake.

“Steelix?”

“Grrrrrr.” He growled.

“What happened?”

Steelix winced in pain.

“Thunderbolt.”

“PI-KA-CHUUUU!”

Pikachu dashed forward, crying and letting off a stream of electricity with all its might. The bolt hit Steelix directly atop his forehead- and he reeled back in pain.

“Steelix! Steelix what’s the matter?!”

I went wide-eyed.

That hurt him.
An Electric attack hurt my Steelix.

I’ve never seen anything like it.

Not to my Steelix, not to any Steelix, or any Ground type, period.

“PIKACHUUUU!”

Pikachu had raced around Steelix’s backside, leapt atop the rear of his head, lost its footing, slipped off his right cheek, and fired off another Thunderbolt. Steelix lowered his head to the ground, lurching in pain. Pikachu rolled over in the mud, made an about-face, and cried. It sparked once more.

This Thunderbolt was louder, brighter, and stronger than all the others, and it didn’t end. It seemed like forever and ever, and any moment I expected the mouse to run out of juice, but the current kept coming. The bolt went straight into Steelix’s forehead.

“Steelix!” I cried. “Dig!”

He did try. He planted his face into the dirt, trying to at least bury the vulnerable spot in the muddy earth.

“Brick Break.”

Pikachu finally ceased. It wearily hopped over to Steelix and lashed out with its tail. Steelix grunted but barely acknowledged the attack. He was too busy heaving in pain. The way he was mashing his head into the dirt- it looked desperate.

“I don’t understand. What’s going on?”

I stared at Ash, hoping for answers. He stared coldly back at me.

Suddenly, Steelix’s tail lashed out. Pikachu reflexively tucked itself into a tight Protect ball just in the nick of time. It was sent flying halfway across the arena. Steelix slowly rose, ready to fight once more. A feeling of joy and relief came over me.

“Oh, Steelix! Let’s finish this! It’s tired, we only have to give it one good smash. Go!”

Pikachu recovered and bounded towards Steelix.

“Back up, defense!”

Steelix curled into a defensive posture. Pikachu skidded to a stop in the nick of time.

“Rock Slide! Above!”

Steelix dug into the ground with his tail and brought up a great heaping mass that was as much water as dirt. He lofted it into the air in Pikachu’s general direction.

“Then Earthquake!”

“Thunderbolt.”

The Rock Slide didn’t make it that high off the ground. It flowed across the field, more tsunami than stone rain. Pikachu couldn’t leap sky-high anymore to dodge it. Still, STILL! it wasn’t enough, the agile rodent slipped and slid just out of reach of the wash. It stopped a hair beyond the high point of
the flood and then counterattacked. Steelix reared up to execute the Earthquake. He was hit by the Thunderbolt at his zenith. He instantly dropped.

I gasped and choked.

Steelix roared.

Steelix grunted.

He heaved and lurched, writhed and convulsed. His eyes were clamped shut. Smoke began drifting off his forehead. It lit up again with the light of electrons.

I took an involuntary step onto the field. My mouth was agape.

“Pikachu, finish it.”

Pikachu panted and squeaked.

“Pikaaa.” It was tired. It rubbed its cheeks, clenched its eyes and teeth, and ripped off a Thunderbolt.


How much more?

Steelix used his middle section to push himself up. His neck muscles seemed limp and useless.

“Steelix.”

He looked back at me forlornly. That’s when I saw it and cringed, in disgust, shock, and fear.

“Pikachu!”

Pikachu’s Thunderbolt landed true, felling Steelix’s head to the ground once more.

“Oh my gosh.”

The same place.

The exact same place.

Over and over again.

Don’t you understand, Jasmine?

When electricity flows through metal, it heats the metal up. Pour enough voltage into the same mass of metal, and it becomes so hot it starts glowing. Steelix’s head was lit up by a white-hot pin-prick. It looked like one of the glowing ingots of iron my dad would pull fresh out of a 3000-degree forge. The size of it was very small- a golf ball, no bigger. The rodent’s accuracy was absurd.

“Steelix.”

“Thunderbolt.”

Steelix gagged and went down once more.

“Stop.”
“Thunderbolt. Continuous.”

“Stop!”

Pikachu would not relent. No matter what, it was not backing off.

Steelix shuddered under the unending stream of electricity scything its way into his forehead. I shuddered too.

The pain he was feeling, I couldn’t even imagine. It’d be like getting branded directly on the brain- a spike of heat applied directly to the cerebrum, rupturing blood vessels and zapping neurons. A crushing headache was slowly consuming his entire brain mass.

“Stop it! It’s not… it’s cruel!”

“Forfeit,” Ash said.

I gulped.

Pikachu paused, heaved, took a deep breath, and resumed. The cascade of lightning tore into Steelix. My Pokemon wilted under the stream of electrons. Then Pikachu paused to take a breath. Steelix rose once more. He let off a feeble Earthquake with his tail. Pikachu was not prepared to dodge it, and took the seismic damage full-force. That it shook off the damage was evidence enough: Steelix could no longer fight back effectively.

“What… what do I do?”

“SCHTEEL!”

Steelix used the respite to lurch forward. He threw his weight on top of Pikachu. The smaller Pokemon rolled aside, huffed, and took a running start. Its jump barely brought it atop Steelix’s body. It then plodded to his forehead and let off a Thunderbolt directly at the weak spot from point-blank range. Steelix thrashed in agony, throwing Pikachu off.

I held out my hand.

“That’s it. I… I…”

Steelix came down right in front of me. His head rolled to the side. His eye was still open. It focused on me.

“No more.” I shook my head.

Steelix’s eye narrowed. Shaking in pain, excruciating, mind-melting pain, but still, he rose to a fighting posture.

“What’s it’s take to bring that thing down? Pikachu, use Iron Tail. Wait, hold it. Get ready to use it.” Ash halted his combatant’s advance.

I laid a hand on Steelix. He was shaking, just standing there.

I tried tugging at a chink in his armor, pulling him back towards me. He resisted. He nodded forwards, towards the foes.

“Not yet?”
Steelix nodded.

I watched him go. I saw him rear up, preparing a massive Body Slam. I stared in disbelief as Pikachu launched itself into his midsection tail first, toppling him backwards. My jaw went slack when Steelix came about once more.

He can’t even lift his head anymore. He’s just crawling forward on his chin.

“Stop it. Steelix. Come back here.”

He stared at me, huffed, and continued to advance. The advance was cut short by a Thunderbolt. Pikachu stood inches in front of his face and fired every ounce of energy it could muster into the wound. Steelix whimpered.

“I said stop!” I screamed.

Ash held up a hand. The torrent of lightning waned to a standstill.

Steelix, slowly, like an old, shattered athlete who once commanded the world’s attention, but was now nothing more than skeleton of his former self, rose to his full stature. He lunged forward, readying a last desperate attack.

“I meant you Steelix! STOP!”

I could cry.

My Steelix was in such pain.

I can’t take it.

Why?

Why do you try so hard for me? I have done nothing but demand of you. What have I given you to possibly deserve this loyalty? You don’t have to fight so hard for me, not like this!

Steelix paused and turned to me.

What an idiot I was, thinking I could beat the world freaking champion. The reality is, Steelix is strong, but there’s still a gulf between us and them that I can’t cross. Even if Steelix could land some miraculous hit and win, I’m afraid of what it might do to him. I couldn’t live with myself, knowing I saved my job by sacrificing my most faithful partner.

I lowered my hand to my side.

“No more. It’s over. They win.”

My Pokemon’s expression said it all. My heart broke, witnessing it.

He wants to keep going. He doesn’t want to quit.

Steelix is ragged and falling over, his head looks like a stake of molten metal had been planted square in its forehead, his eyes are bloodshot, there’s vomit dripping from his mouth, he’s shaking violently from tip to tail, his attacks are glacial. The battle was hopeless… and he still wants to fight. Until he can no longer move, he’s going to keep going.

“Steelix, I know, I know… but… you have to stop. It’s useless. I don’t want to see you hurt yourself
anymore. Not for me.”

Steelix and I stared eye-to-eye for a long, long time.

“Come on. Return.” I glumly held up the Pokeball and fired off its laser.

Steelix dropped. The laser went over top of him, missing. I tried once more, but found a wave of splattered mud intercepting the beam. My arm dropped.

Steelix was using his last bit of strength to refuse to return to the Pokeball.

Which meant…

Don’t say it.

I didn’t have to say it. It became evident all by itself. Steelix began moving. His crawl was not towards Pikachu, though. Nor towards me. It was the sideline he was moving towards.

“Wait.”

Ash and Pikachu watched the precession with stoic faces. I trod over to Steelix, placed my hand on his hide, hoping my touch would stay him. He shrugged it off. The last little tip of his tail slithered through my fingers. It took minutes, long, anguishing minutes, for him to depart across the street and around the corner.

I could have stopped him.

I could have, should have, used the Pokeball laser until it got through.

But you didn’t. You let him go.

Your Steelix.

The Pokemon who was your identity. Just… gone.

You never knew why Steelix was so damned loyal to you, Jasmine.

Maybe you should have found out, because, apparently, that loyalty had a limit.

“Pika?”

Pikachu wearily trod up beside me.

I shivered, pivoted, and lashed out with a quick kick. It caught the little Pokemon by surprise. With a squeak the rodent scampered off.

The stupid thing.

Who knew it was so damn strong? It’s absurd. It has no business besting a monstrous Steel-Ground type.

Ash collected the frightened Pikachu in his arms.

Damn him.

I should have recognized him. I knew Pikachu was his team leader and precious partner, even back then. I knew he was going for the world championship, and I knew he had the capability to reach
that goal. So why didn’t I put two and two together all these years later?

I think it was because he never used Pikachu to battle me. Nor was it one of the Pokemon that saved Amphy. I never associated Pikachu with Ash the way everyone associates Pikachu with Red.

Well, there was also the fact that I didn’t want to even try to recognize him. After everything I’d been through, remembering Ash was just going to bring up terrible memories, and worse, incomprehensible futures. I had tried so hard to put him out of my mind, bury him in the recesses of forgotten things, and get on with my life. But no. He’s here again to rip out everything I clung to. My job. My Pokemon. My dignity. My future. Gone.

“Uh. Can I have the badge now? Or should I go see the League guy?”

“I hate you.”

“I guess I’m seeing Mr. League guy.”

“I hate you so much. You bastard.”

I shivered.

“Because of you, what you did to me, everything was ruined.”

Yes. Because of him. Because he rejected you, played you for a fool, and abandoned you. The scar on your heart was irreparable. It triggered the beginning of the downfall, the end of… happiness? No, I would not say happiness, because I was not happy even then, but of… hope. I never had hope after that day.

Now, today, when it is all laid bare, I could see so clearly his sins. The way he used me, manipulated me, and twisted my heart into a love-throbbed noodle, even as he never had any intention of reciprocating.

He never wanted me.

I clenched my teeth.

If only it were just my sense of love that had fallen victim. But no. Now it’s my job. And my friendships. And my Pokemon. And my family. And my home. All gone. All lost, all casualties of the string of the catastrophes that descend directly from that day, that exact moment, when he told me “…I have no interest in being anything but friends.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I have my own life to live. I’m sorry if I unintentionally made yours worse. I… I’ll be going now.”

“You’re sorry?!” I sniffled. “Sorry? Really?”

Ash rubbed his neck.

“I mean, yeah. I don’t like the way this turned out. I could maybe get you help from the League once I’m finished with this bet. A job in administration or something. Stone might help.”

“From those bastards? The very people who are putting me on the chopping block? The ones who call me “emotionally compromised”? Are you serious?”

“It was just an idea.”
“You have no idea—no clue—just how badly you messed up my life. It’s unforgivable. Don’t even bother saying sorry. Don’t. It’s meaningless.”

“But… I hate this as much as you. I’m in just as tough a spot. If there was something I could do—”

I marched right up to him. I snatched the collar of his shirt, gripped it with all my might.

“If you’re really sorry… then you’ll take me with you. Let me join you. I’ll go with you to Cianwood, and Indigo, and wherever. I won’t be a pain. I’ll make it worth your while. But don’t just say sorry and dump me again like I never meant anything to you!”

He put his hands on my wrist and pulled me off him. I was shocked at how little resistance I put up.

“I can’t allow that.”

“Why?” I uttered.

He was looking at me with pity.

“It’s too dangerous.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

“You’re lying. You’ve only ever lied to me… and hurt me. You violated me. You ruined me.”

Ash pulled away, wild-eyed.

“Violated you? No.”

“You did! You filthy fucking man!” I spat out.

“But Jasmine… I never touched you. You kissed me, remember? I never did anything to you. I’m so sorry. Forgive me. I’m going, I’ll get out of your life for good now.”

Liar.

A damned liar, that’s what he is. He should go to hell for what he did. I should be the one to send him there. He… he raped me. Had his way with me. Destroyed my innocence, abused and violated me, then laughed about it and taunted me with false accusations, as if I had begged for it, as if I was a wanton slut. That sin is unforgivable! I was ruined forever, body and spirit, because of this boy! He, and the rest of them, all of them, should be burned alive!

Remember, Jasmine. Remember what happened. Don’t let this pass.

His sneer. His laugh. His unbridled, violent advances.

How could you forgive that? How could you let that go unpunished?

You do remember it, right?
I clenched my eyes shut, wracking my mind for the memories that gave fruit to such terrible emotions. It was difficult, and painful.

Come on!

You began that day so innocently. You were happy and hopeful, looking forward to your meeting with Ash, tantalized by the unspoken promise made days before upon Mantine Island. You had fire and fierceness too, as you got your team together. You were going to really show him who you were and what you were made of by way of Pokemon battle, head on. Then you were going to share a precious moment on the cape, confessing your feelings, and maybe, just maybe, consummating them in beautiful, pure bliss.

No, that’s not… that’s not entirely accurate. You woke up that day stressed and harried. You were really worried about something.

It was because you were so nervous about his reaction to your confession, right? That maybe something out of your control was going to get in the way of your love, right?

No no no no. It was your Pokemon. You didn’t have them, Mother had taken them. You had to sit all day through school worried about how you were going to take them back in time for the promised battle.

Right! That’s it. And then you had the battle, and it went as expected, a tough match and a stirring effort before succumbing to his genius.

Then he asked you to the bluff, and everything was going according to plan. You met there, and then…

He heard your confession. He laughed. He made fun of your feelings. He threw you to the ground, dragged you inside, and raped you then and there. He said he was leaving town, the cops were after him but he wanted to have his fun while he was here.

I shook my head.

That was Peter. He was the one who wanted to take my virginity as a farewell gift. Ash saved you from Peter.

But hearing Peter’s plan, Ash must have thought it was a good idea. Here was a girl madly in love with him who he didn’t really care for, but he had a dick to satiate and a convenient hole in which to put it.

I remember the pain, clearly. It was wet and rainy, and being dragged through the mud and across the sand was physically tortuous.

I furled my brow.

What’s the matter? What’s wrong here?

Ash is what’s wrong! He wronged me!

No, I mean, it was sunny that day, right? So why are you remembering getting dragged through the mud?

I… that was the hurricane. When you tried to commandeer the boat and it capsized and you washed up on the beach.
So…

It’s all blurry.

Didn’t he…

No, I led him to the library room, and that’s when he forced himself on me. I thought I was ready, but I wasn’t, and he was much too forceful. And then the things he said, about me being a slut, and about how this sex meant nothing to him and he was only in it for himself, and how he saw me and women as nothing more than meat-sacks:

“…you are nothing but an impressionable nymph, something to jack him off, pleasure him, please his ego, and then dump when he’s tired”.

That doesn’t sound right. “Him”? Ash wouldn’t refer to himself in the third person. That was Mother, warning me about Ash.

She was right after all.

This bastard. Because of him, I can’t even remember anything properly. I know it was him. I know. He ruined everything. He just admitted as much, that he never loved me. Just like Morty. Just like Volkner. All these men who pretend to love me and give me their hearts in earnest, and like the idiot I am I reciprocate, just to learn that they want my pussy.

Ash… he called me a slut, and raped me, and because of that… because of that, I could never trust another man.

As much as I wanted, as much as I desperately needed the affection of a man, I just couldn’t bear to invite that kind of pain ever again.

Because of him, I was ruined. First my childhood, corrupted and poisoned, and now my adulthood, shattered and trashed.

Stop it.

IT’S ALL HIS FAULT!

Jasmine, stop it. You’re pathetic. Listen to yourself.

I can’t! I can’t stand it! I should have reported him to the police right then and there! But no, I can’t trust the police, because they’re all Mankeys the same as him! They wouldn’t believe me! I would get laughed at! Who am I kidding, they would just as soon rape me there at the station!

Shut the fuck up!

I jolted to a start.

Get a hold of yourself!

What’s going on?

You’re wrong, you’re wrong, you’re wrong!

No I’m not! Who is this anyways?!

It’s you! Your superego called, it wants its body back!
Don’t be ridiculous, I’m Jasmine, the only Jasmine.

You’re the one being ridiculous! Listen to your own ranting, you sound like a lunatic! Now calm down and think this through!

Why am I even listening to you? You’re just another part of me, right? What is even going on? Stop bothering me!

Remember what the psychiatrist said?

That woman was a complete hack.

Yeah, but she was right on one count: you let conflict and stress get to your head, and if you keep indulging in this fantasy you’ve concocted, you’re going to develop schizophrenia.

No way. I’m not crazy. I’m not making anything up.

Liar.

No!

You’re the worst kind of liar, the kind that lies to themselves. Admit the truth, Jasmine. Just admit it.

I don’t want to.

Look around you! Your career is in shambles. Your social network is in shambles. Your love life is in shambles. Your Pokemon partnership is in shambles. What good has lying to yourself done for you?! Admit the truth!

Stop it! No more! I don’t want to! I can’t!

JUST DO IT!

I looked up.

The Pokecenter backlot was completely empty save for myself. The air was getting very cold. It was beginning to bite at all the exposed areas of my skin. The sky was overcast and grey. The weatherman had said it might snow this week, a little flurry with no accumulation. It was actually a pretty bleak day. That helped, strangely.

You like it when it’s overcast. That’s comforting to you, isn’t it?

It is.

I could physically feel my body begin to relax. With it, my emotional state came to a rest as well, and my mind was allowed a measure of lucidity.

“Stop lying to myself?” I said aloud. “Admit the truth? What is the truth?”

I took a deep breath.

What was it?

Oh, yes.

I kissed him. He didn’t kiss me, or even ask for a kiss. Nothing else happened.
Nothing at all.

All this time, you’ve acted like- what? That you’d been raped? Cheated on? Scandalized? How many men have you turned away, believing they were liars and scoundrels like Ash? How many men have you punched and kicked, with the excuse that they were lecherous deviants like Ash? Good men and evil men, and everything in between, all summarily rejected, all receiving that exact line: “I’m sorry if I misled you, but I have no intention of being anything but friends”, on the premise that each and every one came of the same ilk and bore the same original sin as Ash.

And what was that sin?

What did Ash do that merited such eternal, primordial, all-encompassing contempt?

He didn’t want to date you, and told you so, in a direct, honest, and considerate manner.

“The truth is...” I took a breath. “Ash is completely innocent.”

I winced.

You’ve spent seven years blaming a guy for your issues, when he never had anything to do with them. He is innocent. As are all men. None of them ever did anything to deserve your prejudicial scorn.

“I’m at fault for everything.”

It hurts to admit, right? But now that it’s out there, you can start to heal. If you’ve really accepted responsibility for your actions and your beliefs, you won’t be held hostage by something that happened seven years ago. You can start to get better. Your life will be hard from here on out, a bitter struggle, but I know you can make it if you’re honest and try.

“If only…”

I don’t want life to be hard. I wanted Ash to like me. He’s not to blame and he did nothing wrong, but he did have the power, back then and today, to make my life easier, and he chose not to. Now I have to find some other way to make it right, on my own, alone.

Still, if only, if only…

Don’t let yourself fall into that trap again, Jasmine.

If only I hadn’t gone home that day.

No, stop.

If only I hadn’t cried and begged for comfort.

STOP!

If only I hadn’t stumbled across that damned envelope.

NO! JASMINE YOU IDIOT!

And then I remembered everything, as if it were laid out as a life-sized diorama spread beneath the midday sun. Not just what transpired that day, but also, that night, and everything that came after. The fundamental issues of my existence, and the reason why I can’t simply let it go, because of how it intertwines so insidiously with any potential path I chose from here on out.
So, no, it’s not Ash’s fault at all.

He was merely a crush, who happened into my life at a crucial moment. It could have been any guy. You should feel blessed it was one who didn’t actually hurt you. That you blamed him for everything, because you didn’t have the courage to face the real truth, is shameful. Because, you know full well-

This is all her fault.

…

“Hey Jasmine, do you remember what you decided back then? Let’s try that again.” I voiced my thoughts to the empty air.

The decision I made seven years ago. It seemed like the only way out of an impossible choice. I guess it’s time to try again, but this time, with clarity, keeping the purpose and consequences foremost in mind, and not letting distractions like “love” to get in the way.

“Steel,” I told myself.

Be like Steel.


Unloved.

Unwanted.

I picked myself up and made to head out, but paused to look upwards.

Now I remember why I found comfort in clouded skies. Melancholy - my life is so much simpler and easier, if I can just suffer through a little bit of sadness and loneliness. Sunshine and happiness is for people who were born into better circumstances, loving families. Not for me. I’ll take grim days and snow flurries, thank you very much. That’s all I can reasonably hope for.

I gathered myself and trudged towards my apartment, thinking about tomorrow and the struggle awaiting me.
Desperate Measures

Chapter Notes

Please note, the previous chapter 70 has been changed- the last section (Jasmine's rant after Ash left her) has been rewritten. If you have not read the changed section, you might want to go back first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Click!

CONFIRMED. Pokemon release authorized. Bye-bye Steelix!

I let the empty Pokeball go. It rolled across the desk, off the edge, and fell to the carpet below. I watched it go without feeling a thing. On to the next one.

You are preparing to release Electrode. This will completely revoke your ownership of this Pokemon and erase all records and registries associated with it. Continue?

Click!

CONFIRMED. Pokemon release authorized. Bye-bye Electrode!

One by one, I completed the process: Magneton. Magnezone. Prinplup. Corsola. Magcargo. Sunkern. Oddish. Pineco. Skarmory. All released into the wild, never to be seen again. Well, it wasn’t that dramatic actually. I don’t know where they all are. Like Steelix, they ran off without a peep, and I couldn’t find them. All I was doing here was erasing their registries from the PC network. Anyone with a Pokeball could go and catch them now. I imagine some people would. They’d take them into their homes, provide for them, and maybe put them to use for work or battles. They would be getting good Pokemon, I know. And the Pokemon would probably find good homes. Better than the one they left, at any rate.

I sent the last empty, ownerless Pokeball rolling down the length of the desk. It rolled right over the letter I had gotten in the mail this morning: my termination notice. It only took the League forty-eight hours to deliver it. Sort of seemed like they were just waiting to send me packing. It makes sense. And I don’t blame them. I’m a terrible trainer, I don’t deserve to be in charge of Pokemon, much less a gym facility.

So what now?

There’s other papers strewn about the desk. One in particular worried me: the late payment notice on my apartment. The bill and tardy fee were due by the end of the month, or else they would kick me out. Unfortunately, this other paper was my bank account statement, and it said I was just shy of the required amount. Of course, the bank statement was dated from before my ill-conceived trip to Sunyshore. The reality was my account had close to zilch in it. I’m broke.

I need money.

That’s reality being realistic for you, huh? Everyone needs money to pay for the basic necessities.
Breath, eat, drink, keep warm, the most basic tenets of existence, and only one of the four is free.

So the question “What now?” is pretty simple to answer. I go job hunting.

Too bad I’m a no-good, volatile, socially awkward, zero-experience, wire-frame woman with barely a high school diploma. I was not suited for the labor market. This fact was confirmed within the hour.

“Sorry, we’re not hiring right now.” – Burger Town manager.

“We’ve got openings for Christmas work, but we really need someone who can lift sixty pounds all day long. Sorry, but you don’t look like you’re up for the strain.” – Shopping mall worker.

“Do you have any experience in customer service? We really need people who can work a cashier.” – Tides department store manager.

“Five years’ experience, minimum.” – Pokecenter clerk.

“I have that, I’ve worked at the gym for almost seven,” I tried explaining.

“Eh? If you’re at the gym, why would you come here? It would be a pay cut wouldn’t it?”

“I was laid off,” I said, fudging the truth.

“Laid off, huh? Errr. Um. Yeah, I’m not sure… The center really wants folks with impeccable records.”

“I was a gym leader for crying out loud! There’s got to be something I could do here!” I cried.

The clerk stood agawk. Another clerk gently nudged them to the side. I vaguely recognized this one.

“She’s a gym leader?” the first one asked.

“Was,” the second one replied. “I think she just got fired.”

“Oh. Ouch.”

The second turned to me, putting on the most saccharine of pity-faces.

“I would love to help you,” she said. “But we’re not exactly looking for workers right now. It would take a real standout résumé to get the manager to create a special position for you, but with your situation… I don’t think you’ll cut it.”

“There’s nothing? Really? I’ll do anything… even clean up poop and wipe down the bathrooms.”

“Sorry.”

She shook her head.

I huffed and sniffed.

Everyone is turning me down out of hand. I knew it. Getting fired was a black mark. No employer was going to touch me.

She told you this would happen. She wanted you to get a college degree, for this exact reason.

Shut up!
I don’t want to hear it! I don’t care if she was right, I can’t stand to listen to her smug admonitions! That damned woman can go jump off a cliff for all I care!

I wandered around Olivine’s streets, searching for somewhere, something that looked like it would take in any tramp off the street to do menial labor. None appeared inviting. My legs hurt. I wasn’t use to walking so much.

Steelix isn’t here to carry you around.

If I had Steelix, I could do excavation and moving work, couldn’t I?

But he’s gone, and he’s not coming back. He abandoned you. Like everyone else. Because you’re worthless. You quit on him. You failed him. Like everyone else. You have no value to the world. That’s why you can’t get a job. You would fail at it just the same as your gym leader career. They’d cut you a paycheck knowing it was just welfare. No one runs a business to waste money on basket-cases like you.

Isn’t there… *something* I could do?

I entered a drug store and mazed my way through the jumbled aisles. My gaze lingered on all the chemical concoctions lining the shelves. At last I went to the counter and made my inquiry.

“Hey Jim, are we hiring?”

“NO! Send ‘em away!”

“You heard the man.”

“Okay.”

I went and retrieved a bottle of pills and took it back to the counter.

“Oh. Can’t blame ya.”

Off-the-shelf painkillers. For my feet, and this splitting headache that’s setting in.

“Err.” The clerk fiddled with my debit card. “It’s being rejected. Did your card get hacked or something?”

“It’s probably just out of funds.” I reached into my purse and found my wallet. Inside was a single 100 Pokedollar bill.

“Mmm.”

The pills were 135P.

“Hey, there’s generic brand for only 99,” the clerk offered.

“But the tax…”

His eyes strayed down to a jar of coins labeled “Donations for the Destitute”. Ashamed of myself, I reached in and took the 10P coin needed to cover the sales tax. I marched out of the store, heaving and bolting down one pill after another.

This is what I’ve been reduced to. A pill-popping druggie.
The December air was biting at me. It never gets too cold here since we’re right by the ocean, but the wind can be vicious during the winter. It was starting to get that way now. The weather man said it might even snow. I wasn’t dressed well enough for the temperature. I hugged the side of the storefronts, crawling along and contemplating a life of deprivation and homelessness, when I nearly collided with someone exiting a building.

“Excuse me.”

“Nnn.”

I looked up.

Someone I knew?

No.

Just a man. He was dressed up, I noticed. A second look and I recognized the cuts and corners of a clean-pressed military uniform. My gaze wandered to the window and the sign therein.

“Army Recruitment Center. We Want You! Enlist now! See recruitment officer inside.”

I shrugged my shoulders and opened the glass door.

He was buzz-cut, straight-jawed, and grim faced. He looked out of place in his dress slacks and pressed uniform, as if the only attire that could possibly fit his muscle-bound figure were combat fatigues. His constant scowl didn’t fit with the image of a recruiting officer either. Was this guy supposed to sell the army to me, or was I supposed to be pitching myself to him?

He kept glancing down to my paperwork and up to me. I’d spent the last hour going through their forms, taking tests, and filling out every detail of my life. All he had to do was sign off at the bottom, and I was off to basic training.

He tapped at the desk with pen in hand, grimacing his way through each line and answer. I’m sure he had already read the form twice over. His expressions read like a person who could barely contain their disgust.

“Sir?” I said at last.

“Mikan, is it?”

“Yes sir.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Enlisting,” I replied.

“Enlisting. Really. That’s funny.”

He did not look at all amused. His gruff, country-accented voice held not one shred of humor in its tone.
He went on.

“Now tell me, because this doesn’t make any sense to me. What on God’s earth possessed a scrawny thing like you to walk into my office and offer up such a meager, malnourished body for all use and abuse to the cause and corps? And please don’t say it was for the tuition, we are not a scholarship dispensary.”

“Um, to be honest sir, yes, or near enough, yes. I need money. And a fresh start.”

He nodded and even smirked, albeit briefly.

“At least you’re honest. It’s true, we do in fact pay our soldiers. Not near enough for what they do. You do understand miss, this is not a free ride nor a vacation. Service does not entail light calisthenics on the beach followed by martinis at the Heahea Officers Club. There is hard labor. There is danger.”

“I know.”

“And you want to volunteer for that life?”

“Yes sir.”

“May I ask, what exactly are you expecting out there?”

“Hell,” I said, honestly.

“‘Hell’ you say? Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“And knowing that, knowing all the brush-fire wars springing up all over the place, that you could be sent out there and fight and die on some sand dune in the middle of nowhere, not to keep your mama safe, but to keep some Ratata bastard’s mama safe, and they won’t give a flying shit about what happens to you or this country, and you still feel like this is the life for you?”

“It seems like a more straight-forward hell than what I’m used to,” I said glumly.

The officer took a deep breath. He leaned forward onto his elbows.

“Miss Mikan, I empathize. I really do. I’ve seen the worst of humanity, and I’m not dumb enough to think Nihon doesn’t produce its fair share of sad circumstances. But you got to realize. You have it easy here. This country is good, it’s at peace. We haven’t had a major war in sixty years. Out there, that “hell” you think you know and you think you’re prepared for, it will make whatever you are going through ten times worse. I’ve seen it so many times already. People join the corps because they think we fix people. But we don’t. We break people.”

“But I don’t care, I’ll go,” I said in protest. “I can’t get any worse than I am now, and I need something to start going right for once and set me on a better path. If that means breaking my body, or suffering from whatever, I don’t care, I’m willing to bear it.”

“It’s not a matter of whether you’re willing, miss, but whether you can in the first place. Right now, Nihon is not officially at war, we are not desperate for any warm body we can find. The kinds of conflicts we are fighting are demanding and exacting, and can only be done by the best of the best. When we sent our troops over to Unova to help deal with Plasma, those were special forces, guys and gals who literally carry your bodyweight around on their backs. Can you lift a hundred pounds
“No,” I answered truthfully. “But I don’t expect I’ll be joining the special forces. Logistics, or intelligence, or janitorial, something like that.”

“Miss, even our shit-shovelers have to pass basic training. You could find yourself a cushy desk job in the middle of Camp Rambo, 110 degrees outside and ducking mortar fire. Point being, there is no easy job. We have all the office staff we need, our current vacancies are for soldiers. And to be blunt, you don’t look like soldier material to me.”

“I… I…” I gasped and huffed. This was hard to hear, harder to take. I tried for my hail mary argument. “I know I’m weak, I know I’m underweight, and I know I have mental issues. That said, I have seven years’ experience handling Pokemon in a professional setting and expert knowledge in their combat training. I know the corps needs Pokemon handlers. I can do that. Read my qualifications.”

The officer sighed.

“You're not getting it. This isn’t going to work.”

“Why? Why not?”

“Because I did read your qualifications, and I checked your background, and it seems you come with some mental and emotional baggage. That’s a black flag, no pass. It doesn’t matter if we bulk you up, or beat the whining out of you, or if you’re the best damned Pokemon handler in the force. We can’t trust you to not have a psychotic no-show when combat hits. The situation in Orre is getting worse and I’m not about to send a young woman out to that hellhole knowing she’ll just die, and maybe get her squad-mates killed too. It’s an unacceptable risk.”

He took up the pen and scrawled out his judgment on the paper: ‘DENIED’.

“Miss Mikan, the cold hard truth is the corps doesn’t need you, and frankly, you don’t need us. You need a doctor, a head doctor. I can recommend you one we use, she’s pretty good.”

“No. I’m fine. I don’t need a shrink.”

“Well, I cannot do anything more for you. There’s the door. Have a good evening.”

In the end, the only establishment willing to give me an opportunity was Café le Rei, and even that didn’t work. The manager set me on bussing and dish duty as a trial run. I made it an hour before she cut in.

“Yeah, this isn’t working out.”

I couldn’t answer, I was so ragged from the frantic pace and steam-choked kitchen air.

I breathed hard, in deep breaths, trying to clear my lungs from the blistering dishwasher effuse.

“You’re just… too slow. Too many mistakes,” she said.

“I can do better,” I rasped out.
She shook her head.

“‘To be honest, I got better options waiting on interviews.’”

And that was that. After sixteen hours hitting the storefronts, combing the back alleys, and dialing through page after page of wanted ads, my initial fear was validated: I’m unemployable. I knew Olivine was in a slight recession, but I never imagined it was this bad. Even the menial labor jobs were denied to me.

“But I…”

“Here, you made it an hour, and we can’t let ya work for free. I’ll give ya a meal on the house, ‘kay?”

I numbly accepted the offer.

I asked for a panini, the only thing on their menu I liked. The prep boys whipped it up and plopped it on the table before me.

“I could make this at my house, if I had the ingredients,” I mused aloud. To think, I wasn’t even considered good enough to make a sandwich for other people.

You would botch it. Not one sandwich, of course. But by the time you made that one sandwich semi-perfectly, you would have three more customers tapping their toes with impatience. These kinds of jobs weren’t suited to you. You could never keep up with the high-precision, fast-paced service jobs. Even when you battled, you tried to slow the flow of the match to give yourself time to think. Speed is simply not your forte.

I wolfed down the panini. It wasn’t good by any stretch of the imagination, but I was hungry. Lacking any more food to consume but also lacking the will to vacate the premises, I sat and stared around. I noticed how run-down the café looked. The windowed facades were grimy inside and out, there were bits of trash sticking in the corners of frayed woodwork, and the paint was peeling off in places. The place had a faint smell in the background, meat sauces mixed with saltwater rime, not the most pleasant mixture. Every time the door swung open, the rusted joints let off an irritating screech. The place was slowly falling apart, and the owner never saw fit to make repairs. It wasn’t an old building though, it opened sometime after we moved back from Ecruteak. That’s just what happens to structures that are constantly exposed to saltwater.

Maybe that’s it. Maybe I’ve spent too long in this city, it’s rusted me away to nothing.

The door opened and more customers walked in, triggering the doorbell’s jingle. The sound triggered my memory, taking me back some months ago.

“You’re such a shrew, Jasmine,” I remember Erika saying.

That’s right. It was right here, almost at this very table, that this whole debacle began. I was unhappy and picky, and my friends were bugging me about relationships, which set into motion the chain of events that inexorably landed me on probation and now has rendered me unemployed and destitute. It seemed like an inconspicuous place for the beginning of my downfall, and was all the more apropos for it.

This place can rot and totter into the ocean, for all I care.

“Jasmine?”
“What?”

I jerked my head forward.

Erika and Morty stood in line waiting to order. The former stood stiff as a Sudowoodo. The latter was limp as a Shuppet and wouldn’t even look at me.

“I did not expect to see you…” Erika said, voice trailing off. “Wait. Wait! I am- wait up! Don’t flee!”

But I was already making my way out the door.

“Jasmine, please, can we talk?” she cried after. I turned on her.

“Haven’t you done enough?” I screamed. Erika winced. I turned on the other conspirator. “And you! Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Morty could hear me, I could tell by the way he gripped the counter until his knuckles went white. Yet he didn’t turn to face me nor say a word in his defense.

“Coward!” I yelled at him, and then sprinted away.

What the hell is he even doing here?!

Oh right, I could guess. He came to meet with Erika, bang their heads together so they could come up with a new way to screw with my emotions. Damn it, leave me alone! Those two have caused me enough grief, I want nothing more of them!

I don’t need humans to comfort me! I don’t need anyone! Just cash! If they really want to help me, just throw a blank check at my front door! Then I’ll pay off my rent, curl up into a ball, and sleep the rest of life away.

Could you really accept that, Jasmine? You’d be too mortified to settle for that kind of apology. A blank check. Really, money? Are you nothing more than a greedy self-centered bitch like so many of those asshole men pegged you for?

No damn it!

Of course not. I’ve survived too long trying to ween myself off the generosity of my friends and families, and failing. It hurts my pride. I should be independent. I should be the one granting favors and taking care of others. I want that kind of gratification, respect, and control. Dependency just makes me feel weak and pathetic, and beholden to people who could abuse me at their pleasure or dismiss me on a whim. I’d rather have it the other way around- I want to be one the one who’s relied upon, I want to be the one who’s wanted.

Jasmine, the only living being you ever had that kind of relationship with was him.

“Amphy,” I whimpered.

I checked my purse. The lighthouse key was still there, I hadn’t turned it over to the mayor’s office. They’re mad at me. They don’t want me seeing him. I don’t care. I want to see him. Even a minute will do. If I sneak in, I can see him and do- I don’t know. Something. He’ll help me through this. Even if he could not offer a single iota of material support- no, especially because he can’t do anything tangible for me- I still feel like his mere presence will help me. He is my beacon. Things become clearer to me when put into the context of “What do I have to do to help Amphy?”
So go to him. Listen to him. Apologize… maybe. Ask him about Spectra, see how the two of them are doing. See how the city stooge is taking care of him. Rejoice in all the inane, trivial comforts you love to share with him. It might be your last time- no, don’t think like that. Think about it this way, this will be the emotional reinforcement you need to get yourself back on track mentally and towards a path where you can see him again on a regular basis.

Good!

I kept this hope alive in my brain all the long way to the cape. It was a hard walk after romping around the city all day on my fruitless job hunt. Yet I reminded myself ‘I’ve made this trip in much worse conditions, I can do it again’.

Amphy.

Amphy!

I see you!

The rotating beam cut through the twilight sky. I could tell it was Amphy’s, from the pure white luster of it. So he’s on duty tonight. That means I wouldn’t be able to speak with him face to face. But we can still talk. I’ll stay until the morning and put him to bed.

I’ll do this and I’ll do that, and my head was filled with ideas of things that would make me feel better in the immediate future.

Reality was having none of it.

I got to the lighthouse entrance and tried unlocking the door. The key got stuck, it wouldn’t turn.

They changed the locks. Damn it!

I banged and hissed at the door in momentary frustration, then tried calming down and thinking of a bypass.

The door opened.

“Ah!”

“Hey. You! Hold it!”

A large man filled up the entranceway. A bright light suddenly filled my vision and dazzled me. It was a flashlight, aimed directly in my face.

“Stop! Stay where you are! Stay put!”

I realized the man was an Olivine City police officer.

“I want to see Amphy,” I said.

“You’re not seeing the Pokemon. Hands on the wall.”

“I am going to see Amphy!” I said more forcefully, patience suddenly giving way to temper. I tried pushing my way past the bulky guard. He shoved me backwards. “What are you doing?” I yelled. “I am going to see my Pokemon. I have that right. I need to. Stop it! Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me you bastard!”
My yelling increased because my repeated attempts to get around him were being met with more and more forceful physical denials.

“Stand down miss. Stand down! On the wall. Stop it. I’m ordering you stop it. You are not allowed in here. You are trespassing. Hand over the key and back off.”

“My Pokemon! LET ME THROUGH!”

My anger tipped over.

This bastard was denying me the only creature on this planet I could take comfort from. I was done being denied. I snapped.

My fist went out and struck the man square in the cheek.

The next moment, I was on the ground with my arm twisted painfully around my back and my cheek pressed against the cement. I kicked and screeched. His response was to throw his weight onto my back. My kicking stopped but my screech picked up, due to the pain.

“HQ, this is Moritomo.”

“Respond Moritomo.”

“It’s like chief thought, she came back, tried to break in. I’ve got her pinned.”

“Noted. Sending backup.”

“Thanks HQ.”

The officer clicked his radio off.

“Get off me!” I hissed.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can be used against you in the court of law. You have the right to a lawyer. If you do not have access to a lawyer the state will provide one for you.”

Oh god. Is this really happening to me?

My eyes teared up. I glared upwards, forlornly, hopelessly, at the black sky above. The lighthouse ray passed through, briefly illuminating the cloud cover high overhead.

As they hauled me towards the squad car, I craned my neck and tried getting a good view of the lighthouse upper deck.

“AMPHY!” I shouted as loud as I could.

Maybe it was my imagination, but for just a moment, I swore the ray of light flickered.

Jail.

It never, ever occurred to me that I would be incarcerated, at any point in my life.
You’re a good girl. You don’t break the law. You follow the rules.

Tauros-shit. You’ve been a wildling from the very start.

I’m the teacher’s pet. The doctor’s daughter. I’m polite, formal, a little shy, and good-mannered. Getting into trouble would be inconceivable for me.

Liar! You broke the rules whenever they didn’t suit you. You always held your own sense of justice above society’s, no matter how foolish your ideals sounded.

I’m a pretty young lady and a determined Pokemon trainer. My Pokemon partners respect me, girls depend on me, and boys fawn over me.

They all hate you, and barely tolerate your passive aggressiveness.

I can’t imagine ever finding myself arrested and charged with a crime. I know better than to do something so stupid. I was raised better than that.

You’ve always rebelled against your raising, as passively and facetiously as you could get away with.

This is just a nightmare. I’ll wake up soon.

Wake up, Jasmine.

My fingers laced through the very real and very hard iron bars of the jail cell. A guard sauntered back and forth. I was the only one in this cell, but the next one over had a sultry-looking middle-aged man with tattoos and tobacco teeth. His lecherous gaze never left my body.

At long last a pair of officers came down.

“Are you going to resist?” was their first question.

I shook my head.

“Come on out.”

They led me to an office, the nicest one in the police station, where they sat me down. One other sat down with me, the other backed off. I noticed his right hand resting on his gun holster. This wasn’t the sort of setup to put me at ease.

A third man walked in.

“Miss Hayate,” he said.

I scrunched up my eyebrows, feeling on edge.

That’s the paternal half of my surname. This wasn’t some routine addressal. Only a few people call me by my dad’s last name, and all belong to a particular group. I didn’t recognize this man’s face, but I quickly realized exactly who he was by the context.

“Judge Hawkins.”

The judge, in plainclothes, planted himself firmly in the big swivel chair. He looked as old as he was, a sixty-something man greyed and grizzled, bordering on retirement. Nonetheless, he cut an imposing figure, even compared to the young and fit police officers.
“I don’t usually take calls for petty criminals at 7:00 at night.”

“I’m aware.”

He’s telling me I’m getting special treatment.

“Trespassing, resisting arrest, assaulting an officer—what have you done young lady?”

“I was trying to see my Pokemon.”

“Ampharos is not your Pokemon.”

“His name is Amphy, he’s mine, and some piece of paper isn’t going to tell me otherwise.”

“No. A piece of paper does, in fact, decide who owns and who may see Amphy. That paper is the law, the decision of your elected official and the will of the people. You don’t get to go against all that because you feel like it.”

“But!”

“Quiet. I know you looked after that Pokemon for a long time, but in the eyes of the Mayor, you’re a danger to that Pokemon and an impairment to his duties. I have to respect his judgment, and so do you. Maybe someday they’ll give you back visiting rights, but that’s going to be a long, hard road. Right now, you have some serious charges being levelled on you. Punching Moritomo was not a smart move. Not at all.”

He’s judging you. Just look at his dress-down. Those aren’t friendly eyes. This isn’t some sympathetic intervention they’re holding. It’s what a lecture feels like, from a real parent.

“So… I know I’m in trouble. But you’re here, which means I’m not going to be locked up again,” I said, trying to muffle my cheekiness as much as possible.

“Don’t be cheeky,” Hawkins warned tersely, but then relaxed. “But yes, you’re correct, you’re not getting locked up. It would take a much bigger mess-up for that to happen. You are not above the law, but as far as the Olivine City Justice Department is concerned, you’ve got more buoyancy than most.”

I didn’t feel relieved at all.

Prison was actually sounding pretty good for a minute there. Free bed, hot meals, roof over my head, zero social interaction and zero responsibilities…

“You’re going free, this time. With some conditions. You’ll have to apologize to Officer Moritomo. You’ll need to turn over the key, and sign a binding order to stay away from the lighthouse Ampharos and the lighthouse premises for the indeterminate future. Add in a hundred hours of community service, I can cut that in half if you behave. That’ll be all. No fines, which, given your current situation, should be a relief. Do all that, and we’ll drop the charges, it won’t even go on your record. Does that sound fair?”

“More than fair,” I said. “I don’t deserve it.”

“No, you don’t,” the judge agreed. Each police officer nodded along. “But by all accounts, you suffered enough under that man to earn his eternal goodwill.”

“Is that the only reason? Was he that big a deal?” I asked, sour and overwhelmed.
Judge Hawkins leaned forward.

“Mr. Beret despised the label. Hated it. But we all called him what he was when he wasn’t around. ‘Hero’. That’s what the public calls him and him,” Hawkins said, nodding to the two officers. The seated one piped in.

“Nah. We’re just doing our job. We’re not heroes. But Beret… yeah.”

Judge Hawkins nodded.

“Beret was a man heroes called ‘hero’. He saved thousands of lives. Overseas and here. Impacted thousands upon thousands more for the better. Olivine City wouldn’t be a city without him. It would be some incorporated disaster relief zone. You were here during the big storm, right? You remember that?”

“Vividly,” I answered. “But Beret was at home sick back then.”

“That didn’t stop him from helping. The tough bastard was still directing sea traffic from his bed, giving advice and barking orders, like the mattress was his bridge. But it goes way beyond what he did that day. We lost a lot of people, but we could have lost way more, it could have been so much worse, if not for him. His plans, his people, the boys he raised into leaders, the projects he rammed through budgetary when no one wanted to stomach the cost- without him, none of that is present, and ten thousand people die in the flooding.”

“I… never guessed.”

“I’ve seen you on your Steelix, riding down the flood canals.”

I frowned.

Steelix.

“You’re a famous sight in Olivine, miss,” Hawkins said. “But did you ever consider who’s idea all those canals were?”

“Beret’s,” I guessed.

“No one else thought they were needed. He said they were vital. We pushed back, but then he reminded us of the hurricane a couple decades ago, how all our precious homes and stores were built on fields that got washed out by the ’66 storm. That got our attention.”

Hawkins shook his head.

“It’s just one detail, one story. There’s a thousand more floating around. It was an honor to serve under that man. I would not shame his memory by defying his dying wish. So you lucky girl, you get off light today. As someone who served under him too, you should have known enough to not get into this mess, and I know for sure you won’t squander the second chance he earned for you. Agreed?”

I nodded half-heartedly. Then the tears broke out. The men looked on distastefully.

“She’s crying,” the guy in the back commented obliviously.

“Not the first,” said the other officer.

“What’s wrong?” Judge Hawkins asked. “Overwhelmed? You should be.”
“I…” I stuttered for a moment. “He meant that much to everyone, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“And he expected me to surpass him. He told me. I was supposed to be his legacy, but I’m just a failure living off his echo.”

“If it bothers you, do something about it,” Hawkins said.

“Ha.” Sniff, sniff, and more sniffs. “Could I, um, use the restroom? And then, I think I get a phone call, right?”

“That’s right.”

They escorted me out of the office. I was sat before a phone. I stared at the dial. My cell phone had all my contacts in it. It’s been so long since I’ve had to do this manually, I don’t remember any of the numbers. There was only one still committed to memory.

Ring.

Ring

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Beep!

You have reached the Hayate-Mikan household. We are not currently available, so please leave a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as possible. Thanks. Bye.

I stared glumly at the desk counter.

“Of course,” I said to myself.

“Hayate, if you would.” One of the officers showed me to a room where a small mountain of paperwork awaited.

As I wrapped up the legal spew, signing away my freedom and dignity one page at a time, my heart sank lower and lower. I wasn’t being locked up and this wasn’t going on my record, but this was still a black mark on my heretofore spotless self-image. These signatures were an admittance: “This is your sin, no one else’s.”

Or really, it was just an overly officious way of the world telling me- “Your life sucks”.

As he was letting me out, the officer slipped me a card.

“You probably need this.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a mental health clinic. The judge said he won’t force you, but you better go anyways.”
“Oh. Okay.” I dumbly took the card from his hand.

It was late by the time I returned to my apartment. I dragged myself into bed and slept, fitfully at first, and gradually descending into a deep, dreamless slumber.

When I woke up, the clock read 1:15 PM, December 13th, 2012, Thursday.

I overslept. It’s okay. It’s one of the very few benefits of being unemployed.

I tossed and turned, moaned, groaned, and made all manner of guttural noises. The repercussions of everything that had happened yesterday were bouncing around inside my head. Mostly, it came back to two points: I want to see Amphy but can’t, and for me to be arrested must surely mean I’ve hit rock bottom.

“I don’t want to go the psychiatrist,” I told myself.

The last time I went had been an extremely unpleasant experience. That was seven years ago.

Just when my tumult couldn’t get any worse and threatened to spill over, it was interrupted.

Knock knock knock!

Someone was at my door.

I crept up to the window and peered through the blinds.

God damn it, it’s Morty.

What the hell does that cheating bastard want?

“Jasmine!” he called out.

I prayed for him to go away.

“I know you’re in there! Come on out! We need to talk. For real this time, face to face! Come on! Please! I’m begging you! It’s important, to me and you. I know you hate my guts, but really, what I did was all for you, you’ve gotta believe me. You saw our messages. We had good intentions, they just got carried away and… damn it, please! I’m sorry. I was wrong. I’m an ass. I just want to speak with you. Please ope-“

The door cracked open. My contemptuous, angry face glared out through the gap. His desolate, remorseful face peeped back.

“What?” I hissed.

“I… Uh… Um… I-gii-grrghgh… Errr…” and for all that penitential pomp, the wordsmith was dumbfounded.

“You came all the way from Ecruteak to mumble? Get lost!”

I tried to shut the door. He jutted his hand inside at the last moment. The door slammed onto his
knuckles, bruising them red, but he didn’t seem to mind. He tried to force his way inside, but the security chain held fast and only allowed him a view.

“Can we talk, face-to-face?” he asked.

“Spit it out,” I said, instantly tired of his contritional shit.

“I don’t want to talk about it like this. Not like this. Can we at least pretend to be friends again, for a few minutes?”

“Morty.”

“What?”

“I want one of two things from you.”

“Only one thing, and with options? Okay. That’s better than three out of three. Fire away.”

“My first preference—go jump off a cliff.”

His face skewered into displeasure.

“I’m rather fond of staying alive. Option two?”

“Come inside and fuck me.”

Compared to my first demand, my second aroused a considerable reaction in him. His face contorted in twelve directions and his body began shaking. It was like having a front-row seat to a mental patient going through seizures. That one little suggestion broke his brain, didn’t it? I can sort of see it coming around too. Of course I would never seriously let him touch me in that way, not now, not after everything I’ve been through, and most especially not after I’ve recommitted to my life philosophy of Steel. I would not have dared suggest it to him, if I didn’t know exactly what conclusion it would inevitably lead to. But it was satisfying to watch the torture it put him through en route to that conclusion.

“I can’t,” he said.

“I knew it.”

“It’s not right. I couldn’t do that to you.”

“You mean you couldn’t do it to her—your bitch. As if you give a damn about me.”

“That’s not true at all!”

“Isn’t it? Would you leave her for me?”

“Of course not.”

“Then get lost.”

“No no no! Wait! Wait!”

I hesitated a second.

Say yes, Morty!
Wait what?

Damn it, Jasmine, don’t you dare, don’t you damn well dare hope for him to recant. You are not
going to have your virginity plucked here, like this, by this bastard! That would do absolutely
nothing for your insecurity and emotional well-being. A tryst like that would only make each
magnitudes worse.

And remember what you decided.

I grimaced.

No, of course I remember.

I just want him to say yes so I can shoot him down myself. I want to see the hope drain from his
eyes, his ego shatter into pieces, and his ghost give up the coil. I want to do to him what he did to
me.

But he didn’t fall for the bait at all.

“There’s a reason I could never fuck you, Jasmine.”

“Why not? You fucked me in every other way,” I retorted.

“I’ll tell you if you let me inside.”

“No!”

“Eh. Fine. I get it. Here.”

He undid his hair band. His golden locks flowed out.

“Take it.”

He shoved the indigo-colored band through the door crack.

“Why would I want that?”

“Just a reminder that I was there, in your life. And when I’m missing it, I’ll miss you too.”

“I stand by my first request. Go jump off a cliff.” I slapped his hand and the proffered hairband
away. He reeled back. I prepared to slam the door on his face.

“I saw you in a vision,” he said.

I paused.

“You shouldn’t do what you’re about to do.”

“Throw you out of my life forever?” I asked rhetorically.

“You’ll know,” he said.

I slammed the door shut on him.

He knocked at the door.

I leaned my back against it, reach up over my head, and turned the deadbolt, just to be sure. Then I
prayed for him to go away and prayed harder he wouldn’t do something stupid like send Gengar through the walls.

But all he did was keep talking, for just a little more.

“If you want to know everything, between me and you, and me and Phoebe, come to Erika’s house. If not, then, goodbye. I did love you.”

…

“Liar,” I whispered to myself, tears welling up.

The hospital they recommended was close by, a five story collection of white marble slabs cut through with windows, a modern sort of thing. The winding corridors eventually led me to a cushy lobby with relaxing music and comfortable sofas. There weren’t any other patients around. A receptionist snapped to attention the moment I entered.

“Hello,” she said. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“Well that’s okay, we’re not very busy, so the wait shouldn’t be too long. Have you been here before?”

“No.”

“Alrighty then, if you’ll just fill out these forms, we’ll get you set up. There will be a basic physical and then a preliminary evaluation, then we can match you up with a psychiatrist. Are you good? Are you thinking of doing something harmful to yourself or others?”

“No,” I answered, even though the latter suggestion sounded enticing in the context of certain individuals.

“Okay. Here’s the paperwork.”

I dutifully filled out each page, most of it concerning my medical history and insurance. I turned it in and waited, wondering how long this process would go on for. The receptionist glowed, a smile on her face as she went through the procedures of logging my information into the computer.

“Oh, and that’s just about it. Next we’ll… oh. Hmm.” Her smile turned to a frown. She tried more things on the computer, evidently not to a satisfactory result. Her pace became frantic, and then died down to a dim resolution. She gave me a sheepish look.

“I’m terribly sorry, but your insurance is not taking.”

“What?”

Not now! What else could go wrong? Come on!

“I don’t know if you’re aware… it’s, uh, it’s been canceled. You’re not insured.”
“Oh. Okay.”

“Can you pay out of pocket? What about the Unified Plan?”

“No, I don’t have any other way to pay.”

“Ugh. Um. Well, we can’t take you as-is, we’re a for-profit center and it goes against our best practices.” She stopped and gave it a thought.

“Isn’t there anything you could do?”

“I mean, you could apply for Unified, but it would take a while.”

“Months, right? I can’t wait that long.”

“Right. That’s bad, that’s too long. Well. Sorry. We don’t take people with no plans, it would drain us and our budget is so tight already.

“That’s fine,” I said with a sigh.

“Oh!” She thought of something.

“There is a place across the block. I think they’ll take you in free of charge! They may not have experts like us, but they’re still good physicians and they’ll take care of your basic needs, diagnosis, face time, maybe basic prescriptions. Here’s their name and address.” She scribbled it down on a piece of paper and handed it over.

“Thank you.” I took it and glanced at the name of the practice. Then I looked at it again, glaring at the name written there.

An anger I had not known in seven years welled up deep within my chest.

“Never.”

“What’s that?”

“I will never go there.”

I tossed the paper on the ground and stormed out of the lobby.

That place- it’s too much. This can’t be a coincidence. This is fate. Everything is ordered. Everything is concluded. The universe is conspiring against me. Morty, Volkner Ash. Erika, Whitney, Lyra. The League. Stone. Mr. Preston. Warren and Edward. Mayor Adoch. My landowner. Everyone, all of them, are against me. They all want me gone. None of them want me around, none want me to have a good life, none are willing to allow me the freedom to live and be who I want to be or give me what I want.

Damn them all.

I stomped through the hospital halls, made it to the outer courtyard, and stared up at the sky. It was getting dark already. The skies were completely clouded over. The air was extremely cold, near freezing. I’m still in my cardigan, which was not very good cold protection for a brisk autumn day. This weather was outright winter, and I was soon shivering. There must be a reason I keep punishing myself with this foolish wardrobe choice.

Face reality, Jasmine.
I’ve already faced it.

I have nowhere left to go. Even the prisons and shrinks won’t take me.

I need money, or I’m going to starve.

No, it’s even more basic than that. You need food and shelter.

I closed my eyes, went through my options, pruned out all the good-but-impossible ones, and whittled it down to one final conclusion. The only thing left to me now—my last, desperate resort…

“All right. We can only hope,” I told myself, and set off.

And so, once again, I repeated the worst decision of my life.

I went home.

Chapter End Notes

Warning everyone upfront right now: next chapter will warrant Olivine's Explicit/Mature rating. If you find extreme content unpalpable, you may want to wait for the censored Fanfiction.net version.
Monster

It’s not accurate to say I’ve lived in this house longer than I could remember. For one thing, for the last three years or so I’ve been inhabiting a lonely apartment in central Olivine. But more to the point, it’s most accurate to say I lived here exactly as long as I could remember: the day we moved in is the earliest memory I have.

Mother held Father in her arms, I a tiny thing at their legs, gawking at what seemed like a mansion. She kept looking up to him, eyes full of hope, joy, and pride. It was one of the very few times I have seen her genuinely happy.

“This is going to be our new home Jasmine,” she told me. As if to reinforce the fact, the moving people and their Machoke helpers shuffled past carrying all of my furniture and toys. I gave the creatures a wide berth, but watched them intently. They were big, scary, and foreign to my infant self. I was enthralled.

“Choke!”

“Choke!”

“Choke!”

One picked up a box containing our dishes, a box both human movers had struggled to lift. The creature easily hefted it on its shoulder.

“Strong!” I whispered in awe.

They disappeared inside and my attention was soon diverted.

“Trees!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, trees, and a yard, all for you. For us. You can run wild all you want now,” Mother said.

We had a backyard! I was very excited about that. No more cramped apartment and sharing a bedroom with Father’s study. Everything felt big, new, and mysterious. I was at the age where the world isn’t yet ordered and clichéd, where the simplest things seem extraordinary and miraculous. A gentle shove and I was off like a rocket.

I pranced around the lawn, running laps around the house with the boundless, inexhaustible energy only a toddler can muster. Was it winter or autumn? I can’t remember, but I do remember the leaves piled up in the backyard, which I promptly nosedived into.

“Hahahaha!”

“Chhrchrrchtchrr!”

I surfaced from the leaf pile. An unfamiliar face stared back at me.

“Ahhh!” I threw my hands up in surprise.

“Frrrrt!” The sleek ermine creature threw its hands up in mimicry.

I slowly lowered my hands, not daring to breath lest this strange creature react.
“Ohhh.” I gazed into the creature’s eyes. It wavered, sometimes jerking its head about. Its banded fur tail stood stiff at attention.

“Pokemon. You are a Pokemon! Pokemon!” I shouted the word, feeling all kinds of emotions: fear, curiosity, trepidation, awe, joy, adoration, discovery. Mostly curiosity. Like any self-respecting toddler, I wanted to investigate with more than my eyes. I reached out to touch the creature. It glowered at my outstretched finger- and then lashed out.

“OWW!”

I jumped back, clutching my finger. It was bleeding.

“Pokemon is bad! Bad! Mommy! MOMMY!”

I ran to the back deck.

“MOMMY! It bit me!”

“What happened? Jasmine, what in the? Oh damn it.” She took a glance at the fleeing culprit. I stretched out my injured finger for her to coddle and make better. I got a slap on the wrist instead.

“I withdrew my injured appendage and hunched my shoulders. My eyes dropped to the ground. What did I do wrong?

“You stupid child. That was a Pokemon! What were you thinking?”

“I don’t remember when I first met Pokemon. They are ubiquitous in society; they have constantly surrounded me from the moment I was born. However, until move-in day I had only been exposed to domesticated Pokemon. I didn’t understand the difference between a trained and wild Pokemon. Mother quickly and succinctly educated me.

“A Pokemon, Jasmine, don’t you know what that means? It is short for Pocket Monster. You know what monsters are, right?”

“Scary teethy beastly things,” I answered.

“-that will hurt you. Remember that. Are you listening? Pokemon are monsters. They are dangerous.”

“But Poochoo don’t bite me.”

Poochoo being Grandmother’s Snubbull.

“Poochoo is a trained Pokemon. Grandmother caught it. It goes in its Pokeball, which can be carried in grandmother’s pocket. Do you understand? That’s the Pocket in Pocket Monster. Pokemon that are out there,” she waved towards the backyard and the woods beyond, “don’t have Pokeballs. They haven’t been caught and made to behave by humans. They aren’t in our pocket. They’re just monsters. Get it? Understand?”

“Noooo.” I actually did, but the idea upset me. I liked Poochoo, I liked our family friends’ Vulpix, I liked my babysitter’s Cubby the Teddiursa. It seemed very wrong that those sweet, cuddly creatures
could be the same as that thing that bit me. My finger panged. I stretched it out to Mother once again.

“Mommy, make it stop hurt.”

“Don’t call me mommy. I told you to stop that. I hate it.”

“Ah- okay. Um. uhhh. Mother… fix my finger, please?”

“No.”

She turned away.

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s good that it hurts. It’ll teach you better than to play with wild creatures.”

I stared aghast at her, like ‘What?. You’re my mommy, mommies make booboos go away! Do your job! Why aren’t you helping me? Did I do something wrong?’

“Elaina! What’s gotten into you? She’s bleeding!”

“Did you know we have Furrets here? We need to put up a fence or something, I don’t want them in my yard.”

“Your daughter!”

“Yes, I know, that’s my point, the Furrets are a danger, you need to do something about them.”

Father came rushing to my aid while Mother glowered out at the woods.

To a small child, anything a parent does is sacrosanct. There is no fault in them. Any rebuff, any criticism, any negative thing at all, and blame inherently falls back on oneself. I felt guilty, even though I didn’t understand what exactly I had done wrong.

Now, to be fair and honest, the story is pretty hazy, and the particulars may not be accurate. I could have swatted at the Furret and deserved its retribution. Mother might have been harsher or kinder in her exact wording. I forget who wrapped my pointer finger in a band aid. I do remember enough that I bore Mother no ill-will for her callous treatment or harsh addressal, not in the moment.

Yet, as I look back on it, my opinion of that distant memory has grown more and more resentful. It was a portent of things to come, the first inkling that my fascination with these creatures was not welcomed within this household. I could never say it out loud, nor even allow myself to consciously entertain the thought, but deep down inside, when the lights were off and the soul was left alone to contemplate its own darkest fantasies, I began to think to myself:

“Furret was not the monster that day.”

The willow tree was bare. Its thin whips dangled like the hair of a yuki-onna. The grass and bushes were equally yellowed and dead, long gone victim to autumn’s onset. A thin layer of shriveled leaves covered the ground, still unraked. The season wasn’t responsible for the abandoned look of the place, but it didn’t help matters. The bare flowerbeds, ramshackle siding, water-stained windows,
and darkened interior did the grunt’s work of keeping up the dilapidated appearance. There was no way to be sure anyone had been there in the past month, let alone the present moment, without entering and seeing for oneself.

I wandered up to the door, raised a finger to the doorbell, and thought better of it.

*I shouldn’t have to act like a visitor in my own home,* I thought. My hand reached for the doorknob. There was a noise from inside, muffled but still noticeable. I hesitated for a moment.

Was that what I think it was?

I turned the knob, found it unlocked, and entered. Confirmation came quickly. The noise coalesced into shouts and screams.

“Sounds like home,” I whispered to myself. As usual, I plodded leftward to the study and collapsed into the swivel chair. I tucked my legs to my chest and clutched them tight. The only thing I could do right now was wait it out.

“…point of taking that job was to end the damned overtime! Why am I the one who has to accept *when I can* for an answer? That’s what you should be telling them. They’re the ones who should be begging for your time. Coming home at a decent hour should be your default, not *when you can*, *when you have the opportunity*, *when you feel like it*."

It’s not even directed at me, and yet I feel like I’m under fire all the same.

“I told you, I keep telling you, this is the best I can do.”

“Tauros-shit. Twenty years with GeoDat and I’m supposed to believe you don’t have the clout to manage your own schedule?”

“That’s right. HQ always wanted this branch to fail. They call it my pet project, they act like it’s a joke, like I’m a Captain Stern knock-off. One bad review and my funding is cut off. I’m doing the work of three people just to keep this program afloat, and by extension, keeping my job and income.”

“Is that your excuse? Again?”

“It’s not an excuse, it’s the truth. I was hoping for a little forgiveness for working my ass off to keep you in this house you love so much.”

“Good story. Did you rehearse it with Frank and Saito?”

“What’s this got to do with them?”

“Seriously? Why do you even bother lying to me. I can see you on Friend Finder. I can smell the oil and beer when you stumble in at midnight. You’re at the shop.”

“Okay, some nights I need time off.”

*Some*? Five times a week isn’t *some!*”

“Damn it, it’s not that often, but fine, whatever, what does it matter whether I’m working on or off the clock?”

“If you’re so fucking desperate to get out of the house you might as well get paid for it! At least then you might be worth a shit to this marriage!”
“Put yourself in my shoes. Would you rather go off to do your own hobbies, or come home and listen to this ear-bleed all night? Because I’m sick, physically ill, trying to put up with your nagging every single day. I need the shop. I need it to keep my sanity- to keep me going, understand? You bitch about money and overtime, don’t you realize those guys are the only thing keeping me from popping my brains out? Without them, you have no roof, you have no heat, you have no food. I have sacrificed all my life-”

“DON’T YOU FUCKING DARE TALK TO ME ABOUT SACRIFICE!!!”

Oh no, he went there. Big mistake.

“I have given just as much as you-”

“You got everything you wanted! I was the one who lost everything! Try me! Tell me what you lost! What did you give up! Because I had a career. HAD. My life is wasted because of you- for you! Your job, your hobbies, your friends, your dreams, your picture book fucking fantasy, totally fulfilled, so what the hell exactly is missing from your life compared to mine, huh?!”

“A loving wife.”

Wait for it…

Any moment now…

CRASH!!!

That sounds like the whole kitchen table being flipped over. I didn’t even flinch.

“Stop wrecking our home.”

“My home. My home! This is nothing but your damned hostel! For all the time you spend here, you act like it’s the doctor’s office, like you come here because you have to! Because you’re forced to! As if I’m not good enough for you! Spouting off about home-wreckers, go look in a mirror!”

“Wait a- that’s not true. You know it’s not true.”

“Really?! What am I supposed to think? Am I actually supposed to believe a grown-ass man like you spends six, seven, eight hours a night at a fucking workshop?”

“You damned well know the truth! How many times do I have to say it, how else do I have to prove it? I would never cheat on you!”

“Of course I know that, if only because I know you’re too fucking cowardly to risk jail!”

“Don’t call it cowardice. It’s a moral choice.”

“It’s fucking pedophilia!”

“It is a sin, and I do not act on it.”

“No, you just settled for the next best thing!”

An incredulous pause.

“I have never touched her.”
“I meant me you asshole!”

“Then why the hell are you talking about it like it’s a bad thing?! Do you actually care why I find your pancakes attractive?”

“I really don’t, and that’s the point. I don’t care how sick and twisted your mind is, I’ve put up with it.”

“Have you? Is non-stop guilt-tripping considered ‘putting up with it’?”

“You’ve sucked my toes, you’ve wacked off with my panties, you’ve gotten that sick onii-chan roleplay out of me you’ve always wanted- or don’t you remember any of that disgusting shit?”

“Yeah I’m having trouble remembering, it’s been a long time.”

“Don’t you give me that. Don’t you dare. If you wanted sex you could always come home at a decent hour. Just ask for it! I’m no slut, but I slutted it up for you and did all those perverted things, because that’s what a ‘loving wife’ does! I’m the only sane woman who would stay with a sick shit like you! It sickens me because you don’t seem to appreciate how fucking lucky you are!”

“I… God damn it Elaina.”

“God!? God!? Fuck God! There’s no sky wizard shitting glory and forgiveness from the clouds. On top of everything else, I’ve had to put up with your sanctimonious delusions. Not that I could even see how you would be in the wizard’s good graces anyhow, after all that sexual deviancy running through your head. I’m sure your father would be proud.”

POW!

Something just got punched. I perked up but didn’t hear cries of pain.

That one sounded heavy. Probably Dad’s fist. It’s amazing they’ve lasted this long without him sending her to the hospital. The opposite isn’t true, unfortunately; they passed it off as a yard-working accident.

His voice was shaking.

“There is no man on this earth who would put up with all your hate and bile for the sake of his own lust. I would rather jack off by myself than get it from you, considering the tradeoff amounts to psychological torture. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, good for me in this marriage. You mock my God, but do you realize my faith is the only thing keeping me here?! I should have been long gone by now! I should have dumped you on the street!”

“Then why the fuck didn’t you?”

“…”

“Yeah, because you’re a coward. You can’t stand being alone. That fairy tale doesn’t give you any comfort, it doesn’t ride you off, you need someone real. You need me.”

“Elaina.”

“Don’t touch me, filth.”

“I- for you I have…”
“No. You’ve done nothing for me. You ruined me. You wrecked my career. My mother was a lawyer. I’m a party hostess. I should be a professor, tenured, in-line for department head. What did I get for throwing that away? A feckless ghost of a husband who would rather prance around the night drinking and dreaming of the children he wished he could fuck than spending time with the woman who gave everything to him, the one he called “perfect”, the woman he promised to provide for and shelter for the rest of his natural life. I… I am ashamed of where I ended up. My life has been a waste… ruined… meaningless. If I’m going to have any chance of getting it back, I need out. I want a divorce.”

“Elaina… you can’t be serious. What would that fix? What would that do? You’re right, I need you-”

“And I don’t need you. You’re going to have to find a way without me.”

“Ellie, please-”

“No! Hands off! I want you out. Get out of here. Go! GO!”

Footsteps, but then a brief pause. Father’s voice spoke up.

“I thought it would come to this, someday. I thought a lot about asking for it myself. I never could.”

“So?”

“…the reason I stayed was because of her.”

“OUT!”

The kitchen exploded. Small and large objects began hitting the walls. Bangs and crashes mixed in violent, rising cacophony. The shelves, appliances, cupboards, dishes, everything loose and some things not meant to be loose, all were torn apart and scattered to every corner of the kitchen. An F5 tornado driven by pure rage consumed the entire room, wreathing the house in echoes of destruction. All the while the hysterical shrieks grew louder and louder-

“GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!”

-until they coalesced into a gargled, bestial roar. The violence continued long after the garage door slammed shut and a car revved away.

Fear filled my soul. There was a house-shaking crash, and I was sure the refrigerator had been tipped over. I panicked, looked around, and found the slimmest of defenses- a sharpened letter opener. I grabbed it and tucked it away in the folds of my dress.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!!!!!!!”

Her scream filled the whole house and my head to the point of piercing pain. It didn’t end. I didn’t think a human could hold that much air, but it just went on and on, until I had to clamp down on my ears. Still it penetrated.

“Please, Mother. Please. Stop screaming,” I whispered to myself.

The calm came quite suddenly. The screaming ended and the crashes just stopped. It stayed that way for a while- she’s gathering her breath, I guessed. Then more benign sounds, auditory signals of objects being lifted and placed down. She’s picking up after herself.
She’s never gone this far. Ever.

Usually she would stop and come to her senses long before it got this bad. Her sense of pride and self-respect would kick in, and she’d want to calm down before someone could see her and judge her. She would pick up whatever mess she had made, erase all the evidence of her tantrum, and once again assume the façade of an upright, respectable, congenial lady.

It would be difficult to hide this one, and impossible to erase the feelings etched into Father and I’s souls.

I wondered if I should even greet her. It seemed dangerous a minute before, but now that she’s halfway calm, this might be my best opportunity. I was balancing the merits of walking in and offering to help with the cleanup and whether that would earn me any amount of grace when she walked out into the foyer.

I took a deep breath.

She took a sharp turn and marched up the stairs, completely ignoring me. My breath let out. A minute later she stomped down the stairs, towels in hand. This time, however, she stepped right up to the study entry and rendered herself monolith before me.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

I shuddered.

This would have been a difficult conversation on one of her good days. Now, it felt impossible. I couldn’t answer. Eventually, she went on of her own accord.

“Are you judging me?”

I shook my head.

“Don’t. You embarrassed me. I had to explain to the Battle Tower services manager why his kitchen was completely trashed. He banned me from working a contract there ever again. It was mortifying. I’ve been disgraced in my profession before, but never for something within my control. I thought I could trust you. I was dead wrong. This mess, here,” she nodded to the kitchen, “at least it is my house. What are you doing in my house?”

I gripped the letter opener under my dress tighter.

“My health insurance was canceled,” I said. “You dropped me. Could you put me back on?” I asked simply.

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“No apology? No groveling? No begging, no offer of remorse or concession? Fuck, Jasmine, you’re as needy as your father. No, I won’t. I warned you, time and time again, and you completely blew it. I dropped your coverage because I didn’t want you thinking you had any attachment or recourse in this household anymore. You are your own woman now, act like it. Deal with your own problems.”

“I can’t. I’m finished.”

I clutched myself tighter.
“I was fired. I have nowhere to go. I’m going to be kicked out of my apartment. My friends all hate me. This wasn’t my fault. None of it. I just need somewhere to go- something. I don’t know. You were right. I should have listened to you earlier. I’ll do anything now, anything you want. I swear I’ll be obedient. Just let me stay-“

“Stop.”

I froze up.

“I don’t care what happens to you. You’re a parasite. Nothing good ever came from you. I am giving you nothing. Go ruin someone else’s life.”

She pointed to the door.

The shivering came suddenly. The global sphere of my being buckled under the weight of her accusation. It may be incomprehensible to humanity, how a woman could harbor such utter malice towards her own child, but I knew better. I knew what this woman was capable of.

Mother grew tired of my inaction. She about-faced and entered the kitchen.

I got up and plodded after her.

The place was every bit the disaster zone the cacophony promised. It felt like I was back in the aftermath of the storm. The walls were pockmarked with dents and holes, the ground was littered with literally everything. The refrigerator was overturned and a rainbow of condiments strew across the tile floor. Appliances hung out of their sockets, most had broken hinges or handles. Even the overhanging lamp had crashed, with large pieces of glass covering the dining table.

Mother was busy on her hands and knees wiping up the spilled sauces with a towel.

I gulped. It was hard to swallow.

“I…”

She shot a daggered glare at me under her shoulder. I winced and reeled back a step.

She knows.

But she doesn’t know I know.

And if you tell her?

It’s not going to change anything.

It might hurt her pride enough to force her to do something.

I looked around at the desolation, at the pure destruction wrought of her wrath.

I don’t think it’s safe to even accept her help.

You knew what she was capable of. Now you’ve seen her worst firsthand. Does it scare you?

No, not her worst. It’s not the violence that scares me most.

What then?
It’s the rationale that begets it. What most frightens me about her, is that this is perfectly justified in her mind. She wouldn’t hesitate to turn on me.

If she’s right though, and she usually is, then it’s also justifiable to return her actions in kind.

Mother’s back was turned towards me, bare and undefended. I gripped the letter opener.

“Go ahead, try it. I’ll break your arm,” she said coldly.

I froze up.

“I noticed it missing. I know what’s on your mind. If you think that little knife can do it, you’re welcome to try. I’ll be glad to send you to jail.”

My nostrils flared. I struggled, successfully, to keep my breathing under control. My hand shook as it brought the letter opener out into plain view.

Jail, huh?

I wonder if they would forgive this.

I could call it self-defense.

Or frame Father. It would be easy.

If nothing else, if my life was ruined, I could derive some final satisfaction from annihilating the life that brought it to this point.

But I took a look into her deathly cold eyes and stopped. I shook my head, tears filling my own eyes.

It would never work. She could beat me. She’s stronger than me. I threw the blade away.

“I hate you,” I uttered.

“I don’t care,” she responded.

“You’re a monster. You’ve done nothing but abuse, hurt, and neglect me all my life. Why? What did I do wrong? What did I ever do to you?”

No answer.

“All I wanted was your love. All Dad wanted was the same. Why couldn’t you give that to us?”

Mother stood up and faced me.

“Because I didn’t get what I wanted. Is that simple enough for your dumb brain to process?”

I sniffled.

I opened my mouth, prepared to ask the question, a moment from divulging everything that’s been pent up all these many years- but she cut me off with a wave. She bent over and picked up the letter opener. The small blade loomed large in her white-knuckle grip.

“I don’t love you. Get out of my house before I call the police. You are not welcome here. You are not my child.”

A shriveled husk of a child, younger and frailer in spirit than her twenty-two-years on this earth
would suggest, slunk out of the Mikan house-

-but not before slipping into the study and stealing a plain manila envelope. She opened it, confirmed its contents, and ran outside before she was caught.

The apartment opened before me like a gaping wound. Inside, the guts of a wasted, unwanted life dripped from the walls and orifices, slathering everything in its acid. Everything was burned away… all the scattered remnants of the little things that kept this wretched life going long past its due. The massed papers of probation, all that effort spent chasing a futile dream… for what? To see it now slithering up in acrid smoke, scathing my nose and my hopes, makes me want to puke. How can one put so damn much of their sweat, blood, time, and tears into an effort, and get fucking NOTHING from it?! Everywhere I turn, it's the same: the netbook, the bed, the shower, the kitchen utensils, the pictures on the wall, the pokeballs, the furniture, the air conditioning, the heating, the mirror, all burning, vaporizing into a cloud of green smoke. The basic comforts of life, what use were they? To pad the road to the grave? Worthless!

Damn it!

Let it burn! Let it all burn!

My hand swatted at the smoke, sending remnants of a toaster flying off the counter. It crashed with a frightening ring, the electrical plug sending sparks arcing. I didn't flinch. This world, this damnable world and the farcical illusion of life it offers, nothing in it can scare me anymore.

God damn it! But there is no God! Bhuddhas, Christos, Sha-rafi? Fucking legends, exaggerations, all the same hollow, worthless decoy, meant to distract from the total meaninglessness that encompasses my existence and non-existence! Arceus! Fuck Arceus! It's just a Pokémon! Even if any of these were true, even if there was an Almighty, what kind of bloody tyrant are they that they "blessed" me with this wretched existence?!

"Fuck this!"

There goes the microwave. It sank into the mire now engulfing the kitchen floor. The soles of my feet burned, the hairs of my skin stood on end.

"Fuck it!"

The knife set scattered across the roiling conflagration. I grasped my right hand in my left, feeling something skittering up the nerves. The feeling disappeared. I loosened my vice, and the strange feeling returned. I gripped harder, and it went away.

"Huh?"

I raised both hands up to view them.

A thin red line drew across the lower palm of one hand, and a smear of crimson decorated the other.

"Oh… pain."

How hilarious.
THIS is what it takes to remind me that I'm not yet in Hell?

Why the fuck am I still alive?

WHY?!

WHY?!?!?!?!

Unwanted.

You are unwanted.

You were never wanted.

Not your presence. Not your help. Not your achievements or accomplishments. What came of them? Jealousy, not appreciation; dismissal, not inspiration.

You're no good as a worker, as a boss, as a trainer, as a citizen, as a daughter.

Not even a lover.

Not even a body to fuck.

A woman's last resort, and I was useless even at that. Those who could offer me even a shred of purpose… purpose? Fuck, how pathetic it is that I cling to a word like "purpose" because "happiness" is so far beyond what is even conceivable for my future.

No, not even the pleasure of hedonistic desires, even once tasted, was allowed to me. That's how bereft and pathetic and unwanted I am.

Who's fault is it?

What the hell was the point of blaming someone, something? It was reality itself that conspired against me. I can blame It all I want, scream and rail against the unjustness of the world, but It wouldn't so much as notice a microscopic, insignificant bitch like myself. Just a piece of refuse It had forgotten to throw away. It need not even lift a finger to persecute me: it was in my very being to wither in the face of the reality of the world.

This cruel world, made manifest in the multitudes of souls, acting through them to destroy me.

Mother. Fuck you.

Most especially, fuck you.

You made my life a living nightmare. You tried everything in your power to rob me of all grace, all meaning, and all purpose. I struggled the entire way. It was useless. How can one move beyond their origin to seek happiness, when the capacity to search for happiness is denied from the very start? My dreams were strangled from the moment they were conceived, because they were based on a false premise. Happiness was not possible. Not for anyone. But even the hope for happiness was to be denied specifically to me. Just me.

Because you cared nothing for me. You denied my existence.

"YOU ARE NOT MY CHILD!"

This flower was poisoned before it could even bloom.
You monster.

Father. Fuck you.

Why even call you Father? You were nothing more than a robot who came home late and left early, and avoided me whenever we happened to share breathing space. Why the hell did you stand there and do nothing while that woman beat me and shitted on me and wringed my soul into nothingness? You cowardly bastard!

"AAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs. My wrath surged through the apartment, gathered around the living area's entrance, and launched itself like a ballistic missile down the hallway. Two photographs smoldered upon the wall before my room.

One picture, Amphy. That shitty sheep abandoned me as soon as he got his paws on another woman. Bastard.

The other picture, a family photograph, the three of us. We were all smiling. What an insult. Smiling only because we were commanded to do so by the photographer. I swiped, and swiped, and swiped. The photo rocked off its hook, slashes bisecting it from every angle.

I spit on it.

You trash! You hated your child! You're not worthy of being called parents!

I stomped on the desecrated photo. The quick sensation that crept up from my right hand was joined by another from my right foot.

"This is nothing. Absolutely nothing compared to what you put me through!"

Lop my head off, see if it hurts half as much as the pain of rejection I have received for the entirety of my life!

Erika!

Volkner!

So fucking what if I blew you off! World, you reaped what you sowed! You dumped nothing but rejection upon this soul, and you're shocked when it bore nothing but bitter fruit?! Ha!

You were never my friends. None of you. You only wanted what you could get out of me. The law of the jungle is to take and take and take and take and take and NEVER give back! Thanks for that lesson! I'll keep it close for whatever time I have left!

I collapsed upon the bog. It reached up and swallowed me. I was choking. Drowning. Whirls of blood and nether wrapped around me, solidified, and pounded me on every side. It's crushing me.

I flailed my arms. The pain from my right limbs renewed in fury.

I won't!

I won't go down without a fight! Don't think you won't come out of this unscathed, you damned universe!

Let's go to hell together!
Whatever tiny piece of you I can get my fingers latched onto, I'll drag it down. We'll spend an eternity in nihilistic nothingness- not thinking, not feeling, not being. Just nothing! You and me together!

I screamed again.

The apartment rebounded the scream as so many echoes.

All I wanted was a tiny piece of happiness. I could do without all the creature comforts. Bread and water forever, whatever. Bring on the cold, drizzling winters. Cast me into the searing sun. Take my Pokémon. I don't need this job, or money. Put before me a life of work and slavery, I'll gladly take it.

Just give me the chance to prove them wrong. Let me prove to them it could be done right. That love exists.

Love of a parent for their child.

Love of a woman for a man. And a man for a woman.

Love of life itself.

It can't be helped. Even if such things did exist, they were not to be mine. You bastards took even these simplest, most basic, most fundamentally human desires away from me.

You bastards.

Yes, you.

Ash.

And Morty.

I could have endured everything else, if only you had let me in.

But you didn't. You selfish bastards.

Self-absorbed, men who could not accept me as anything but a distraction for your own pleasure and self-fulfillment.

Likewise, every male on the planet.

You won't accept this ugly, wilted flower. You wouldn't even put in the tiniest bit of effort to nourish it back to health. Instead, you cast it aside.

Ash, like Father, a man who treats me with absolute dismissal. You didn't look twice at this flower, you passed it by. Like the rest of the indifferent world.

Morty…

You were worse. The worst. You took in this flower, put it in a pot, set it on a pedestal, set it in the sunlight. Then you fed it poison and called it nectar. To what end? To showcase your power over me, your cruelty towards me? Something to flit in front of your whorish girlfriend, to please her? Ah, good, go ahead. Impress her with your ability to knit women between your fingers. She must then think herself special, to not be manipulated and choked and mangled, and made a laughingstock of in the same way as I was.
I found your ruse. "Tank" the relationship? It's a ruse within a ruse. It's a way to mock me, and cast me away. You pretended to love me, but all the while you were planning to abandon me… to someone you knew full well would spit on me in a much more direct and vehement manner.

You damned coward. You couldn't even reject me to my face. You had to play with me the whole way through. As much for your reticence as for your sick pleasure.

Pleasure.

Hmph.

You dainted me with kisses, opened my mind and my legs to invasion, led me on and on, imbued me with a hope for sensuality, clad in trust so as not to frighten me away: the perfect trap. Sex, the thing I yearned for most. Yearned for, lusted for, hoped for, prayed for, because it would gain me everything I wanted: physical pleasure, spiritual wholeness, emotional stability, a lover who I could trust and share my life with, and a child to love and raise in happiness.

It was all a lie.

I hate men.

And Morty, of all men, I hate you the most.

Because no one was closer. No one could dig the knife deeper.

I hate you.

I truly hate you.

I hate you so much.

I hate, hate, hate you.

I HATE you.

I will continue hating you, and have always hated you, and hate you right now.

Every moment we shared… I recall every last moment, from juggling my pokeballs, to that cursed uttering of "I never said I loved you".

Did you think you could take that back? Did you think I would believe your groveling confession? If you really did love me, you would have dumped Phoebe and come to me. I needed you more than she did. But no. You didn’t mean it at all, it was a lie, another ruse to entice me back into your wretched game. You never had any intention of loving me.

The universe loves you, and gave you everything. You couldn't bring yourself to share just a little bit of that love with me?

Then I'll take it. By force. I'll show you what it's like being me. I'll drag you into my hell.

You, the object of my absolute hatred, shall bear the burden of representing the universe's imperfection.

The prison that I called an apartment finally sank into the bog of worthlessness. Precious little remained. Even the primal sludge became watery and thin, and then faded into mist, into blackness. There I was, a hate-filled girl. This hatred will consume me, unless it finds an outlet. Logic and
emotion separated and intertwined, forming a mockery of what was once a sustained identity.

The girl dressed. A school uniform was donned. The season was bitterly cold. She chose the long-sleeved blouse and thigh-length stockings to keep her arms and legs bearable. Her hair was let down, let loose over her shoulders. Her appearance was young; in this uniform she could be mistaken for a school-aged teenager.

Objects of necessity were gathered. A doorway was opened, revealing the maw of the night.

An eternity passed by.

Another eternity passed by.

Scenery floated by like paintings in a museum.

Days without sun, nights without darkness came and went, and nothing changed but the depth of hatred and the particulars of the black-washed landscape.


Ancient firs and new oaks herded neighborhoods of quaint houses between them. One house beckoned amidst the night.

Morty was alone, tending to his needs, without any immediate worries, but merely a generalized feeling of wrongness setting about the place. To banish the disturbance of mind, he began brewing tea. The kettle was filled with water and set on the stove. The stove was lit. Time passed. The mind wandered. His worries solidified into a single object, cast amidst a dark sea, lighted from far above. A woman. She would not leave his thoughts alone, he could not cast her image from his mind. He prayed for the tea water to boil faster. His cellphone beeped, making him jump.

"Jazz?" he muttered, confused.

"Sorry," the text read.

Outside-

A figure snuck upon the lawn. In one hand, an instrument, in the other a cell phone. These were placed down on the grass. The hands reached beneath the skirt. They pulled down, taking the undergarments with them, exposing the delicate spot that they were meant to conceal and protect. One foot wiggled up and outward, freeing itself of the panties. The other leg, unimpeded, kicked the article of clothing aside.

Morty, unaware, waited for the text to explain itself. For a moment, nothing came. He held the device in his hand, wondering and confused about what the single word "Sorry" portended, and whether it was right to return the text, and inquire the meaning of it. He did not have a chance to make the decision, because the doorbell rang.

"Huh?"

He went to answer the summons. The door swung open, revealing the night, and nothing else.
"Weird." His cell phone lit up, and so he turned to it, waiting for a response. The door was let to shut on its own.

"."  
"."  
"."  
"."  

An endless string of periods appeared on the display, racing towards the depths of the tiny screen, yet never reaching, never stopping.

"What the?"

The water was boiling. The steam let out a loud hiss, drowning out all other sounds.

His gaze was focused on the screen.

"."  
"."  
"."  
"."  

"........"  

"Goodbye."

Morty jolted in place. He felt it coming. He turned. Too late.

The glimpse of steel flashed before his vision.

A feeling that was neither cold nor hot but both at the same time and in such excruciating intensity tore into his abdomen. The girl did not arrest her lunge, but carried it through, bowling him over.

"Huagghh!"

He could not articulate immediately. The pain shook him in a radiant deluge of agony. He could not defend himself. It was too much to merely hold his side. Wetness flowed between his fingers.

The woman kicked his uninjured side, and his head, and his ankles. Especially his ankles. She did not want him to get up or fight her.

She leaned down. Morty gasped for air.

Without a word, she pressed his hand tighter to his wound. She did not want him to bleed out yet. His legs kicked- futile.

She cut into his clothing, buttons and threads coming apart so easily, cobweb would have offered more resistance. His chest was exposed, he realized. He tried turning onto his back. She held him down, and dug tighter into his wound. The pain surged, paralyzing him.

She spoke at last.

"Take it," she said.
What she meant, Morty couldn't comprehend.

She bent down and slashed again, undoing more layers of clothing.

A flow of air brushed against flesh that was not used to it.

He struggled, looked downwards, and saw his penis exposed.

"Take it," she repeated. The young woman, dressed as an innocent school girl, kneeled down and straddled him. He realized, by touch, that she was not wearing anything between her stockings and her skirt. The touch of lips softer than lips glanced against his tip. His body acted against his will, rushing precious blood to the organ. The woman's free hand grabbed his penis and began stroking, at first slowly, and then vigorously. Her other hand leaned down upon his chest for balance, a large and bloodied knife held upwards. The handle of the blade dug into his flesh as she leaned more weight onto him.

"Take my virginity, and I'll take your life, and it'll be fair!" the girl cried. She guided his penis into her exposed vagina. Her moist flesh wrapped around his. It moved down, down to the base. It came up, up, almost to the tip, before halting and sliding down again. The tightness eased, penetration became smoother, faster. She began riding him.

"Jasmine!" Morty choked out.

She grew furious. Her hand, fisted about the knife, slid forward. The knuckles dug into his neck. He began to choke.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" she cried. Tears filled her closed eyes.

The feeling of being filled was incredible. It was everything she imagined, and more. It was actually happening to her, at last. Pleasure. The pleasure of sex. It was exhilarating. It was joy.

Yet, joy is impossible. It shouldn't exist. It was denied to her.

So she pounded harder, trying to reconcile what couldn't exist and what existed right now inside of her nether regions. The two notions clashed violently within.

"Ja-" the man tried to gag out.

Her lower pelvic muscles were tightening. Her limb muscles were tiring. A million tiny wonderful sensations exploded all over. She wanted more. She wanted them to chain together like a nuclear explosion, running wild until it became unbearable. Her heart knocked against her rib cage, throbbing painfully, excitedly, exhilaratingly. Her hips rocked, forwards, backwards, up, down, taking on a rhythmic life of their own.

The man convulsed.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

She gritted her teeth. It was coming.

"You pervert!" she screamed.

The man shuddered. A different wetness touched her vaginal lips, undoubtedly spreading within her. The juices of the man and woman intermixed. She did not stop her assault upon his cock.

"Jasmine-"
"You damned pervert! Is this what you wanted? Is it? You can have it! You could have had everything I had! Everything! My body! My devotion! My affection! My life! But you threw it away! Like it was nothing! Like I meant nothing to you!"

Her body was on the edge of giving in and giving out. She shifted onto her heels, in order to give herself maximum leverage, and also to free her hands. She brought the knife up with both hands.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!

Her throat broke out into surreal, inhuman moaning.

Her vagina rippled around the still-hard penis. It was coming. It was cumming. The orgasm was here. Her arms and hips came down as one.

She thrust, and she thrust, and she thrust, and she thrust, and with each stab waves of benevolence overcame her, and flickers of memory passed before his eyes.

A girl and a boy struggle over each other as a sinkhole begins consuming the basement behind them.

A girl and a boy are left alone by their friends to share an ice cream dish.

A girl and a boy wage a Pokémon battle to decide the fate of a school club.

A boy secretly steals a girl's underwear and then plays the part of a hero in retrieving the item from a flag post.

A girl shrieks into the face of a boy after a betrayal of confidence brings her shame and embarrassment.

A girl is driven from a party as a boy claims she will lose her virginity within a four month time period.

A girl and a boy kiss atop a lighthouse.

A girl and a boy open themselves up to each other beside a hot spring.

A girl falls in love, and a boy hates himself for deceiving her.

A girl and a boy part ways.

…

Is this what it feels like, to die? he thought.

Is this what it was like, to feel alive? she thought.

She panted, letting her shivering body wretch in welcome agony. The humping motion ceased, its purpose fulfilled. Pure pleasure, mingled with an awesome feeling of being and empowerment, filled her womb and her mind. The fire of adrenaline burned in her veins like hot embers.

Her focus did not return for some minutes.

She could not stand, nor even keep her balance. The thing inside her vagina had gone limp, no longer supporting her. She tilted forward, her arm struck forward to keep her body upright.

It found an unwelcome sensation at its fingertips, around its knuckles, and beneath its palm. Wet,
slimy, and warm.

She looked down.

A bloody mess.

Vacant, hollow pupils stared up at her.

Jasmine screamed.

I stared down at the blood-misted image before me. The knife, the gore, the visage of the dead. The blade was dyed in bright red.

No.

No!

NO!

I blinked.

The dye vanished from the steel.

I blinked several more times.

The knife quivered in my hand, stainless, spotless, clean.

I swiveled around, panicking.

There was the door.

My apartment door. It was open. I was dressed, and had one foot on the threshold. In one hand I carried a cell phone. In the other, a kitchen knife.

"Eh?"

I spun around, expecting a body, a grisly scene, a bog of gore and acid. Nothing. A trashed apartment, broken appliances, gashed walls, nothing more.

A trick.

A fantasy.

A disturbing, evil fantasy.

I realized what had happened, and became scared.

The knife fell out of my hand. I fell to my knees. My body began shaking violently.

"No," I uttered. I uttered that single syllable many times, many, many times, before I could come to terms with myself.
What if this was fake? What if the fantasy was real?

What if I had really done that?

Is that me?

Am I that woman?

I whipped around, tripped, fell, and hit my elbows against the door sill. It hurt, badly.

Pain.

This should be real.

What then?

Then, all that, that… that… that… murder… was a protrusion of my desires onto my perception of reality.

It was what, deep down, I wanted.

That represents who I am.

I…

My throat tightened, my chest heaved, till both restrictions were choking me and leaving me near fainting. My muscles tightened. The realization was too damning, too much for my mind to take, and far more than my frail body could handle.

The words pounded my conscious like a planet-ending meteor.

I AM A MONSTER.

…

No wonder, then.

The universe is realistic.

Of course I am unwanted.

All I offer to the world is a monstrous, selfish, violent being, wholly beholden to no one's needs or wants but her own. There is no place in this universe for one who cannot live in peace with others.

Someone capable of wanting to end the life of another…

I, who am capable of desiring to take Morty's life even as I rape him and force him to take my virginity…

Such a person should not be allowed to exist.

It's okay.

It's as it should be.

Let's go.
Jasmine.

When all is nothing, that means everything—sins, desecrate desires, hatred, all of those evils, will be nothing too.

Get rid of it, get rid of yourself, and everyone will be happier. Even myself. When I am nothing, even that must be an improvement over being a miserable, murderous bitch.

Come.

Quit dawdling.

There's the door. You're ready to go. You know where.

"I’m no different than her,” I uttered in self-realization.
I was originally going to save this to be released as a multi-chapter bundle, but Ch. 74 is taking too long, so I've decided to release this one as-is.

Words passed through the night sky. Messages borne on waves of light invisible to the naked eye, soundless to the naked ear, coursed from one recipient to the next, slowly awakening them to the naked truth. One by one, each learned that the situation that had come to fruition was the one they feared the most, and they began to panic. And I, ignorant of their words and feelings, trod on towards my final destination.

Lisa: Hey Erika, I’ve got big news. Silver and Proton did it, like they said they would! Petrel is in custody. The police are willing to cut you a deal, but only if you come back to Celadon and testify against him. Please, please come home, we miss you so much. The gym is just chaos without you.

Erika: I’m a little occupied with a very worrying situation here in Olivine. Could you tell the authorities I am willing to cooperate, but I need time- a day or two is all.

Lisa: What’s going on? Is it your friend? The Olivine gym leader?

Erika: I’ve just learned that she’s failed probation and has been terminated. I’m extremely worried about her mental state. Until she’s in a stable situation, I can’t bring myself to leave her.

Lisa: That’s weird. You said she didn’t like you.

Erika: This is not a matter of a casual fling like between you and I. I have known for a long time she would never reciprocate… still, I love her. With all my heart.

Lisa: But the police aren’t going to wait too long. I don’t want to see you jailed over a crush.

Erika: If that is what must need be, I will suffer it.

Lisa: You’d go that far for her?

Erika: Yes! Oh spirits yes! Of course I wish and fantasize about a world where she could accept another woman in her heart- but if that is asking too much, I would still wish I were born a man, to be able to fulfill her desires. I wish she had been born a man, and even as I am now, my sexuality untouched, I would still fall for ‘him’ and deny my natural passions, and be all the happier for it. That is how much she means to me.
Lisa: Yeah. I guess we could all tell. You were a great flirt and nice in bed, but your heart was always elsewhere. Okay, do what you gotta do.

Erika: Was it that obvious? Ah well. You are right on one point. I made a terrible mistake, and now she will not talk to me. I cannot get in touch with her. I have a mutual acquaintance going to meet her directly, but I doubt he will fare any better.

Lisa: Sounds tough. Tell me how it goes, and also tell me when you’re coming back. I’ll try to hold off the police as long as possible.

Erika: Talk to Captain Evan Norland, he may be more lenient on my account. And thank you.

Lisa: Got it. Good luck with your girl.

Erika: Good bye Lisa.

---

Erika: Did you talk to her?

Morty: Yeah.

Erika: She said something to you? Really?

Morty: Yeah.

Erika: Well what did she say?

Morty: Basically- “Fuck me or fuck off”.

Erika: Please tell me you came up with a third option.

Morty: Not really. I tried, but she’s at critical stubborn.

Erika: Then… did you lay with her, at least?

Morty: Of course not. There’s no way she was serious about it, she would have thrown it back in my face if I tried.

Erika: So what now? Is there anything that can salvage this situation? Have you talked to Volkner?

Morty: I did. He said they met, but that’s all. He’s mad at me too, hung up on me. I guess it didn’t turn out well.

Erika: So now she is right back to her old shut-in self, except we two are now banished from her side. This is a total disaster. Could you have just refrained from fucking your girlfriend for one night?
Morty: Hey, next time we take a shot at fixing an emotionally broken young woman, let’s try a plan that doesn’t involve me cheating on my fiancé.

Erika: The plan was working, you failed at a critical moment. What are you going to do about it?

Morty: This was your idea, and it was a shitty idea to start with. Don’t blame me. And you were the one who left the damned PM open. Volkner still had a chance if all she found out was that I was with another woman.

Erika: Fine, fine, I accept the blame, but I still expect you to help me.

Morty: I’ve done all I can. I tried offering her my story if she’ll come meet me at your place, but that’s a real longshot. If she doesn’t show up tonight, I’m bailing. I’m doing more harm than good, and I better get out before she ends up like all the others.

Erika: All the others? What is that supposed to mean?

Morty: My curse. The… fuck, there’s no good way to explain it. Bottom line, if all that happens is she goes unemployed and gets her feelings hurt, she’ll be one of the better outcomes among my friends.

Erika: That sounds terrifying. Are we talking of a literal curse?

Morty: No. Not that I know of, anyways. It’s just a tendency. Like, coincidences that’ve happened way too much to be normal.

Erika: Oh. I’m afraid I am quite ignorant of the occult. Are you sure it is nothing to be worried about?

Morty: You mean supernatural stuff? No, I don’t think so. My theory, or really, my hope, is that I’m just attracted to situations and people that invite it. Seriously, I don’t want to discuss it anymore.

Erika: Does it have anything to do with your precognition gift?

Morty: Not a gift. It’s a curse, my real curse. Not a gift. How many times do I have to repeat that. And I don’t know. Seriously, drop it.

Erika: Why don’t you use your ability to figure out what is going to happen to Jasmine? Or perhaps what we could do to set her right.

Morty: Because I don’t want to. It’s invasive. Drop it already.

Erika: Very well. I am only grasping for options that we are very much deprived of at the moment. You said she might come to my place?

Morty: Yeah, if her curiosity is stronger than her disgust. Which is a big ‘if’. Like, a Jupiter-sized ‘if’.

Erika: We can only hope. I will see you here.
“We told you to keep that woman out of the lighthouse! She is not allowed inside!”

“We did, we followed orders, she never got inside the door.”

“Then what’s this about?”

“I have no idea. Maybe the Pokemon saw her outside?”

“Look, the weather is going to be god-awful tonight and we need those Pokemon on duty! Get them working!”

“We’re trying. The boy is going berserk, so we put him in his ball, but then the girl didn’t like that and clammed up too.”

“Damn it! Damn it! Alright, here’s what you do. Get in touch with the PokeCenter and see if they’re holding an Ampharos or Lantum, or maybe a high-level Starmie. You’ve got my authority to requisition whatever you find. We’ll deal with the bratty monsters in the morning. There’s a Pokemon behavioral therapist we can call, Chassy or Chandra or something. Anyways, hurry it up! If the PokeCenter doesn’t have anything, call me immediately, I’ll have to get the Coast Guard emergency deployed, and that’s gonna be a bitch.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

Morty: Hey Erika.

Erika: Yes?

Morty: Change of plans. I spotted something weird.

Erika: What is it?

Morty: An Electrode running loose around downtown.


Morty: Wild Electrodes bolting around commercial shopping districts.

Erika: …I see your point. Do you think it’s Jasmine’s?

Morty: It’s lik

Erika: …

Erika: Morty?
Erika: Are you there?

---

Erika: Hi Whitney?

Whitney: Hi Erika. What’s up?

Erika: Have you spoken to Jasmine or Morty lately?

Whitney: Yeah! Yesterday! Morty, anyways, haven’t heard from Jasmine in a couple weeks. She doesn’t answer her phone. Everything alright?

Erika: Jasmine just lost her job. I’m trying to talk to different people to figure out what went on and how to comfort Jasmine.

Whitney: I guess. Weren’t you going to hitch her with Volkner? Did that not turn out well?

Erika: It failed miserably. We’re not concerned with seducing her anymore, we just need to make sure she’s safe and sound. I’m afraid she might do something drastic now that she’s fired.

Whitney: I wouldn’t worry that much, she’s a tough girl.

Erika: That toughness might be an issue though. She discovered what we were trying to do.

Whitney: Yeah, I know.

Erika: You do?

Whitney: Last time we talked, she told me.

Erika: Oh my my. But you say she won’t answer your calls?

Whitney: Nope! I figured she was annoyed with me prattling on about Brawley. Better to leave her alone for now, ya know?

Erika: Not an option. Is there anyone who could talk to her? Or better yet, meet with her?

Whitney: Hmm. Her mom and dad?

Erika: No, not them. Especially not her mother.

Whitney: Then I’m out of ideas. Sorry.

Erika: What about Lyra and Ethan?

Whitney: They’re in Kanto. Lyra’s helping Silver with something.

Erika: The Team Rocket takeover.
Whitney: Was that what it was? That’s pretty ballsy! Hope they succeed, it would be cool.

Erika: Even so, a text message or phone call would be good enough.

Whitney: Hey, I remembered! Connie!

Erika: Her gym assistant.

Whitney: Wait a minute.

Whitney: Okay, here, I’ll dump ya all the numbers I’ve got.

Jazz’s Mom: 12-4575-325

Connie: 12-4575-1930

Lyra: 11-4390-492

Ethan: 11-3949-410

Pryce: 12-2901-1294

Erika: Oh splendid. Thank you so much. Would you try calling Jasmine again for me?

Whitney: Sure. What should I tell her?

Erika: See if she is okay, if she would like to talk to someone, those kinds of things.

Whitney: Okie dokie.

“You’ve reached the Pryce residence. My sincerest apologies, but I cannot take your call at this number. Please direct any important inquiries to Mahogany Central Hospital. Have a nice day.”

“Hello, this is Mahogany Central Hospital, how may I help you?”

“Hello, my name is Erika Hikami, I am the gym leader of Celadon City. I am trying to get in touch with a certain man, I only know his first name, Pryce, but I also know he is a-”

“Oh Pryce, yes, I know just who you’re talking about. You want me to reroute you to his room?”

“Yes please.”

“One moment.”

…
“Ms. Hikami?”

“Yes?”

“Unfortunately Mr. Yanagi is in the intensive care unit and cannot take calls. Um, his condition is not that good, so I can’t say when or even if he’ll be able to get back to you.”

“Oh my gosh!”

“Do you still want to leave a message?”

“No, no thank you, the matter is somewhat time critical, and I was actually looking for his help. If he is in that condition, it is better to not trouble him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“May I ask, what is wrong with him? Is that something you can tell me?”

“Well, the details are confidential, but I can tell you he’s in the cancer treatment center.”

“Oh my! That is terrible. We should not tell her this, it would devastate her. Well then, I hope he makes it and has a healthy recovery. Thank you. Good bye.”

“Emergency Services, what is your emergency?”

“Uh, yeah, um. Huh. Is this the right number?”

“Do you have a medical or criminal emergency?”

“I don’t know if it’s an emergency or not, or whatever. But I just got promoted to acting gym leader, and now I got this text telling me there’s been a break-in at the gym, and I don’t know who to call about it.”

“Ah, okay. That would be a remote-signal intruder alarm. I’ll patch you over to the police.”

“Thanks.”

---

Erika: Lyra?

Kris: Huh?

Erika: I’m trying to get in touch with Lyra.

Kris: That’s my neighbor. Who are you?

Erika: Erika, of the Celadon City Gym. Did I get the wrong number?

Kris: Yeah, but it’s not your fault. Lyra keeps giving away my number as hers, I get these kinds of calls all the time. She’s such an airhead, she’d be lost without her boyfriend.

Erika: Ah, that is a relief. Do you happen to have her real number?
Kris: Not on me, but if you want I can get it directly from her. We’re both in Celadon right now. Speaking of, you’re supposed to be the gym leader here, but they say you’re absent. Is something weird going on?

Erika: Yes, you could put it that way. I do not have time to explain, but maybe later. Please get me her number as fast as possible.

Kris: Sure thing.

---

Olivine City Gym:

“Hey shitstain.”

“Huh?”

“What are you doing with Electrode? That isn’t your Pokemon. She’s gonna be mad at you, as if she isn’t already.”

“Um, I’ve seen you before.”

“It’s Connie. Jasmine’s assistant. Ex-assistant. Apparently I’m head honcho until the League finds a new leader. Thanks to you, asshole. What are you even doing here? Did you trip the alarm?”

“No, I was chasing this guy through the streets. He- it- seemed lost.”

“Yeah, I know. Some of her Pokemon abandoned her.”

“What?”

“They didn’t want to face that bastard, so they scadoodled off. She told me so before she did the same thing.”

“What bastard? What happened?”

“You don’t know? You caused this whole mess with your phone call, you ought to know better.”

“Wait a minute, my phone call? You don’t mean… did the champ really show up?!”

“Came, saw, conquered, hauled off. You didn’t know?”

“I didn’t think he would get here this fast… tell me everything!”

“Why should I?”

“Because… because I’m worried for her.”

“You fucking barfbag, you’ve done enough to her. The more you get involved, the crazier everything gets. It’s a freaking hex. Just get lost already.”

“I know, but I want to try to do something good for her, anything. What happened with the champ?”
“You really want to know? She took one look at him and ran off. He chased after her. Hour later he shows back up, talks to the local League officer, and all of a sudden they say Jasmine forfeited the match and I’m the new gym leader.”

“Why did she run off?”

“Hell if I know. She was freaking out right before the battle, I guess her nerves got the best of her.”

“That’s not like Jazz at all. She wouldn’t be scared of a Pokemon battle. Like, never. Where did Red go?”

“Gone. Cianwood I guess, if he’s collecting badges. That was two days ago.”

“Grr.”

“What are you thinking? You’re not the one who tripped the alarm, are you?”

“What? No, I don’t think so.”

“Actually, stay right where you are.”

“Scuse me, miss, sir.”

“Ah! Officer!”

“Call me Jackson.”

“The intruder alarm was tripped. I think this shady guy did it.”

“I swear I’m innocent! I didn’t break in!”

“Can I ask you to sit down?”

“Right here?”

“On the ground.”

“But I’m innocent.”

“Can I go inside and check everything?”

“Doesn’t matter, you’re a suspect. And no, I need to make sure it’s safe.”

“I could just run off while you’re checking inside.”

“Look kid, don’t be an ass. Fine, come along with me, but move exactly as I say or I will use force to restrain you. Got it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Now about inside… crap she’s already gone in. Miss, you shouldn’t!”

“Guys! Officer! Morty! Get in here!”

“What is it… mother of god!…”
Morty: We have a situation.

Erika: Where have you been?!

Morty: I’m at the gym. We need to find Jasmine. NOW.

Erika: She’s not there? I’m contacting everyone I can, but no one can reach her.

Morty: Forget the fucking phone numbers, we need to blanket the city NOW.

Erika: I’m hearing sirens, what is going on?


“Hey Erika!”

“Lyra! Oh thank goodness!”

“Hi! Kris said you were looking for me?”

“We’re trying to get in touch with Jasmine, but she is being stubborn and won’t answer to anyone’s calls.”

“Huh! Maybe her phone is turned off?”

“A possibility, but we do not have the luxury to assume so. Would you call Jasmine for me and try to talk to her?”

“I can try. Does this have anything to do with Red?”

“What now?”

“Red called me about Jasmine too. I told him all about your plan and getting her to fall in love and stuff.”

“Red, you don’t mean… the world champion?!”

“Of course. He was going to battle Jasmine a few days ago.”

“That is when this all started. Might he have… do you have his phone number?”

“Sure do! 6-1564-3999.”

“Thank you so much! I will let Morty handle that conversation. Why would Red be calling you about Jasmine?”

“Um, because I’m her friend? Though not as close a friend as you, I should have made him talk to
you I guess.”

“No, no, I mean, what did he want to talk about? What did he want to know about Jasmine?”

“He wanted to know why you all were treating her special, coddling and protecting her. Morty and Whitney and Pryce. He seemed a little upset. It’s kind of weird, I’ve never heard him get concerned that way over a person. Maybe he liked Jasmine?”

“Did he? Oh well, we will see about it. Please call Jasmine right away.”

“Okay, will do.”

---

“Who is this?”

“Hey fuckshit dick, remember me?”

“No.”

“The ass who told you to stay the fuck out of Olivine? That’s me, and if I find you, I’m going to toss you into the fucking ocean. What did you do to Jasmine?!”

“Nothing. Who are you- wait. Morty, right?”

“Yeah, also known as pissed-off self-appointed Jasmine protector. Now spill the fucking beans, what did you do to Jasmine?”

“I told you, nothing. We had a battle, I won, I got a gym badge.”

“That’s fucking Tauros-shit. Did you touch her? Did you torment her, rape her?”

“No way! Why would you think that? She was the one who came on to me. I never reciprocated. It was a bad idea. If she got caught up in what I’m dealing with, she’d be in major danger.”

“Wait a fucking minute…”

*dead silence*

“You’re him.”

“I’m who?”

“The asshole who hurt her.”

“I never hurt her.”

“Years ago. You knew her from years ago! You’re the guy she kept going on about! What the hell did you do to her?”

“I told you I did nothing!”

“Spill it, the entire story.”
“Look, if I tell you, would you even believe me?”

“I have ways to tell if you’re lying. Quick, out with it.”

“There’s nothing to it. Six, seven years ago I came through Olivine on my Johto challenge. There was a big storm and Jasmine’s Pokemon needed medicine, and I happened to be in a position to help her. She sort of fell in love with me because of that. I wasn’t sure I felt the same way, and I didn’t like the fact that her feelings got in the way of our match, so I gave her badge back to her. That’s why I have to challenge Johto all over again. It was a silly crush of a young girl. That’s all. She kissed me. I didn’t force myself on her, I didn’t rape her, I didn’t hurt her or yell at her or anything. I tried to turn her down like a gentleman. Twice now I’ve had to do it. I don’t get why she still has feelings for me after all this time, but it’s weird and I can’t deal with it. If you all are still going to pillory me for something she did, I won’t stand by and take it. You keep threatening me, and I will get Stone to fire you.”

“Wait wait wait. You’re the one who took her first kiss?”

“She kissed me, but yeah, I guess that was her first.”

“You swear, to whatever god you pray to, that you never hurt her?”

“If I worshipped, it would be to Arceus, so yeah, on Arceus’ name, I swear I never hurt her.”

“But she loved you.”

“I guess. She was fifteen, I was eighteen. There were… other things that got in the way.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“That makes you sound guilty as hell.”

“It isn’t anything like that. It’s personal, and has to do with me, not her. I don’t see why she overreacted like that. It was years and years ago. We were kids. I only knew her for a month, she’s a great girl, and I bet she could have picked up a guy easy-peasy, so you’ve got to see where I’m coming from when I think it’s downright creepy that she’s bursting into tears and wanting me to take her back when we were never in a relationship in the first place!”

“You’re clueless.”

“I guess I am.”

“You have no idea what you even did to that woman, do you?”

“Lyra said she’s been depressed. If that’s my fault, it’s not because of anything I did.”

“I was really, truly expecting more. I don’t believe you.”

“You’re a psychic, aren’t you? You just said you could tell if I’m lying. See if I’m not.”

“Damn it, I’m not- Well it doesn’t matter. You’re the one person she might answer to. Where are you? Are you willing to go see her?”

“I won’t date her, if that’s what you’re implying... which is weird, weren’t you just accusing me of raping her?”
“Not date, just talk. Anything. She’s not well right now, and we need someone who can get through to her.”

“None of you can do that?”

“No. Only you.”

“Why me?”

“Because she loved you.”

“She didn’t love me.”

“She did.”

“No, she didn’t. I know that.”

“How the hell would you know? You abandoned her.”

“I once talked with her mom. I got a good idea what was going on in her head. She didn’t love me. She was looking for a way out. I was a means to an end. That’s what upset me about her.”

“Her mom?… fuck.”

“Yeah. Can I go? I’m trying to get to sleep, my gym battle with Chuck is tomorrow early in the morning.”

“You’re in Cianwood?”

“Yes.”

“Would you consider coming back here? This is a serious, critical matter, and we could really use you.”

“…damn it, no.”

“Please. I’m begging. As a human being. Don’t you care for her at least that much?”

“…”

“Please. Red.”

“My name is Ash.”

“Ash… please. You knew her at some point, you said you might have had feelings for her.”

“I never said that.”

“But if you felt anything for her… please come over.”

“…”

“…”

“Fine.”

“Okay. Can you come now?”
“I guess.”

“How soon?”

“There’s no boat this late. I’ll have to ride my Pokemon. So, it took six hours before, but that was in the middle of a storm. Four hours?”

“Four?! Fuck! Okay, fine. Let’s hope it’s fast enough. Can you try calling her too?”

“I’ll try. Don’t know what I’m supposed to say, but I’ll try.”

Morty: Who have you hit up?

Erika: Everyone. Literally everyone I can think of. Lyra and her group, the Johto Gym Leaders, all the local officials, her local friends. They have the police searching all over Olivine. Do you have any idea where she might be?

Morty: Uh. Yeah.

Erika: What about the lighthouse?

Morty: I’m at the lighthouse right now.

Erika: And?

Morty: She’s not here.

Erika: Are you sure?

Morty: I’m sure.

Erika: Did you reach Red?

Morty: Yeah. He’s the one we’ve been looking for. Jasmine had a crush on him years ago, but it went south. He claims he didn’t hurt her. I don’t believe him, but right now it doesn’t matter. I got him to agree to come back and help us. He’ll be here in four hours.

Erika: Wow. I am shocked. The culprit was the world champion all along?

Morty: Focus!

Erika: Yes. Right. Well that is one mystery solved, at least. If he is helping us, then can he reach her by phone?

Morty: Just got a new text from him…

Morty: Nope. She’s not picking up.

Erika: If even Red is being rejected, then she is not answering period. I wonder if she even has
Morty: Any word from the police?

Erika: They have already searched the gym, pokecenter, and her apartment. They said there were signs of a struggle there, but no one was present.

Morty: Damn it.

Morty: I was really hoping I’d find her here. Lighthouse guard said they arrested her yesterday for trying to break in, but they haven’t seen her since.

Erika: Ah! The jail then!

Morty: No. Called the police chief. He said they released her with a warning. Knowing her, I expected her to be stubborn and try seeing Amphy again, but she hasn’t shown up. I’m... I’m out of ideas.

Morty: Erika.

Morty: I’m really scared.

Erika: Morty, I know you’re sensitive about this. But what about using your ability to find her?

Morty: Full stop. Don’t even ask.

Erika: Yes, I know it has harmed you in the past, but we are desperate here! You know what is at stake! If there is anything that could help us, we should try it!

Morty: It’s useless. It doesn’t work like that. It has a mind of its own, and trying to force it just gives you a faulty reading.

Erika: Then we take it with a grain of salt, but that should not stop us from using it at all! Come, please! Use it!

Morty: You think I haven’t already tried?!

Erika: ...

Erika: What did you see?

Morty: Nothing.

Erika: What does that mean?

Morty: What do you think it means?

“Mrs. Mikan?”
“Who is this?”

“My name is Police Captain Langley Rekishi. I’m the Chief of Police of Olivine PD.”

“What has she done?”

“Your daughter?”

“Yes, my daughter. What has she done?”

“You knew something would happen?”

“No, but if I’m getting calls from the police in the middle of the night, I know exactly for whom they would be calling. Tell me. Has she killed someone?”

“Not exactly.”

“What the hell do you want Morty?”

“Oh thank you for picking up, thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“Please d-”

CLICK!

*Some interminable phone ringing later-

“The fuck is wrong with you?! Lay off!”

“Jasmine is in trouble. You have to talk to her. Say anything, do anything. Promise her a ring. Please. Please!”

“What the fuck! You come on and start rambling about your idiot plan again and I’m supposed understand, let alone agree, because why?”

“Listen, listen Volkner. I know I’ve done a lot of terrible things to you. You think I’m a shit friend who’s done nothing but cause you grief. But when you needed me the most, I was there for you. You swore to me. You said these exact words- ‘I can’t ever repay you for this’. You were dead wrong. You can repay me, right now, today, by doing what I’m begging for. Do this and I will call it even- no, do this and I will go all the way over and call it my own unrepayable debt. Just do this for me. For her. Call Jasmine and talk to her.”

“No.”

“What?!”

“I won’t do it. I’m sick of being jerked around. I’m sick of falling in love and then watching it blow the fuck up in my face. I’m sick of getting hurt. I’ll do anything for you, Morty, but not for that girl. She’s messed up in the head. That’s not going to end happily, not for anyone, but especially not for
me. So no. I refuse.”

“Volkner damn it, I’m begging!”

“No.”

“I… I will fucking out you. I will tell everyone about Gill. I will tell everyone about the note, and I swear to god, I will tell them you were responsible, you doggied Gill until he couldn’t take it anymore.”


“Done. Kiss your reputation goodbye. But before I click off, tell me why. For real. Why can’t you find one shred of human decency and do something stupid simple that would mean the world for another person. A girl. Who liked you.”

“Liked me? She was willing to sleep with me, Morty.”

“She what? And you refused?!”

“I was not going to fuck damaged goods.”

“Damn it Volkner, for once in your miserable, cowardly, loser life, you had only to listen to your dick and all this would have been avoided!”

“I’m not like you, Morty. I can’t take pleasure from dicking random strangers anymore. She doesn’t love me, she was using me as a rebound, from you. What the hell do you think would have happened after that? An emotional meltdown, that’s what. I’m done, I’m out, leave me the fuck alone.”

“… Volkner, you dial Jasmine, this instant, or I will murder you. I am dead serious. She needs you.”

“Why should I give a damn about that girl?”

“YOU, OF ALL PEOPLE, SHOULD KNOW BETTER! SHE IS GOING TO KILL HERSELF!!”

“Tagger Three, do you copy?”

“Tagger Three copy.”

“Progress on PSP?”

“Going smoothly. All vessels accounted for. Slow traffic tonight, I don’t think this is going to be an issue until 0600 patrol.”

“Yeah, so, uh, we got a request from base, they say they need a S&R shore side.”

“S&R too? Busy tonight. Coordinates, situation?”

“Possible base jumper, directly off the lighthouse bluff.”

“That’s not a survivable drop.”
“They know that. Get a skimmer out there anyways, recover any bodies you find.”

“Acknowledged. Check back in a half tock.”

They all gathered in the main hall of the gym, everyone who they could muster, whether present in body or as electronic avatar, all the people who had touched the life of the former gym leader named Jasmine Elaine Hayate-Mikan. They stood in shocked silence, some grieving, some shaking in anger- at themselves, at the universe, at their friend- and some just stared listlessly into space. They had seen the large red letters whose meaning could not be misinterpreted. If there ever was a message to break the will and soul of others, this was as humiliating and damning as could be conceived.

The minutes and hours ticked on, no word came back from the army that patrolled the street, looked into every crevice and known haunt, and still came back empty and hopeless. Each radioed call, each text message, brought the same nothingness, and like the grains of sand slipping from a cracked hourglass, subtracted little by little the faint hope carried by each listening soul, never to be returned.

It was late, very late, when the last message came in:

“This is Chief Rekishi, calling off the search for tonight.”

Four souls most keenly heard those words, and reacted in their own ways to its meaning.

A blonde-haired man with a scarf slammed his fist into the wall, drawing blood from the knuckles.

A black-haired man with a ball cap stumbled in, confused and exhausted.

A dark-haired woman in kimono hunched over, clutching herself and convulsed with tears.

A fair-haired woman wearing a cardigan stared at the written message on the wall in stony, indignant silence.

…

I WAS NEVER WANTED HERE. SO I’M GOING TO END IT. FAREWELL.
A Gym Leader's Farewell

I want to be wanted.

I want...

Well, it doesn’t matter anymore.

I paused and looked behind me, briefly marveling at the sight that came to view. My footsteps were etched upon the sidewalk. An uneven line of black blobs trailed off into the distance, surrounded by a faint layer of crystalline white. The layer was growing invisibly, moment by moment added upon by motes descended from the milky sky. It must be past midnight, but the street was eerily aglow, as if the ground and sky were emanating moonlight. The scene was something I never expected to see in my lifetime.

It was snowing. In Olivine.

How cruel. Olivine never gets snow. The city is too near the coast and the ocean breeze usually moderates inland temperatures. Snow was one of the few things I missed from living in Ecruteak. School would be cancelled, and all the children would run out and make snowmons and throw snowballs at each other. I remember Morty being a good shot. If I could only go back and redo it all- I don’t think anything would change. I would still be where I’m at today, right now, doing what I’m bound to do. But it would be nice reliving those happy memories.

I sighed and resumed my lonely march. The streets of Olivine were empty and mostly silent. The flecks of frost filled the space between townhouses and eventually began floating into my eyes. I ignored the irritation as best I could, until it became too difficult to see and I was forced to wipe my eyes. It was not very cold at first, but as the snowflakes melted they wet my cardigan and robbed my skin of warmth.

I should just do it here. Just lie down and curl up until I’m taken by the cold. It was tempting, but I knew it wouldn’t work. My body doesn’t know better, and would keep going on until some idiot stumbled over me and dragged me back to the hospital.

No, I won’t be stopped. It has to happen. This isn’t a cry for help. I will remain true to my reputation to the very end- the Iron Clad Gym Leader of Olivine City does not act in half-measures, nor does she accept pity.

The townhomes fell by the wayside, making way for isolated businesses and houses. Then they too stopped appearing and I was surrounded by short, stunted trees. Their boughs were beginning to glisten with the flurry deposits. I trudged onward still. My head was bowed. The crystal flakes fell upon it, on my back and shoulders too. Individual snowflakes felt like Walrein-sized loads set upon my crown, weighing me down. My steps came slower, the puff of snow from each footfall became smaller and more tepid. They stopped altogether upon reaching a division in the sidewalk.

The trees gave way to open space. Gently luminescing hills rose to my right, split by the brightly shining outline of the Battle Tower. On my left the world was dark and utterly empty. There was no snow to reflect the moonlight and illuminate that great black void. Far below, the reason why sounded out: crashing waves, sloshing waters.

Before me a great long bridge stretched out, dividing the night in two: on one hand the city I once loved, on the other the ocean I once secretly dreaded. My destination lay at the point of their meeting.
I began my last, longest sojourn across Crescent Bay Bridge with a huff and embittered, frozen tears.

“Hey Hayate!”

“Hello Mr. Beret!”

“Skipping huh? You’re lively today. Where’re you off to?”

“The Cinnamon Shop!”

“Their buns are pretty tasty aren’t they? Get me one.”

“Yes sir!”

A hop and a hop and away I went, down the narrow street and past the gym. Storefronts advertising everything from oddball electronics to specialty cushions to generic pharmaceuticals crowded in on either side. I looked both ways, found a break in the traffic, and dashed across the road and down another side street. Auburn Lane was so pretty this time of year. The street and sidewalks were separated by planters with fireball shrubs, which were blooming. Their little flowers looked like vermillion fireworks set against the deep crimson foliage. Little kids weaved their way between the bushes, screaming and laughing, while worried mothers struggled to haul bags of groceries after them. Aromas such as Jayoo Spice and MacAdoo keel wafted out from the many exotic eateries Auburn Lane was known for. At the far end sat The Cinnamon Shop, my favorite bakery.

“Oh Miss Jasmine! Nice to see you here so soon again!” sang the clerk Briel. She was such a nice old lady. I didn’t even mind the long line, because it gave me a chance to watch her work. It was a mesmerizing, I thought, the way she danced among the racks of bread and glazed buns with so little effort and so much grace. It was no wonder, she was a ballet dancer in her younger years.

“Two cinnamon rolls, a stack of brown spice bread, and a can of Kanto lentil mix, please!”

“Here you are my sweet nymph!”

I giggled and received the goods.

“Ah! Wait one second! I need three cinnamon buns!”

“Not a problem, take them all, them all!” Change plopped onto the counter, and a third delicious pastry entered the take-out bag. I thanked Briel and hurried out.

The reason for the third bun was waiting upon the gym lobby desk.

“Amphy, guess what I got.”

“Mampher!” Amphy held up his paws to his mouth. He must have smelled the buns before I even walked in the door.

“Yes!” I handed him the bun. It vanished nigh instantly into his greedy gullet. He leapt on me and wrapped me up with a big hug to show his appreciation-

“Oh no you don’t!” - which I knew was a pretense to stick his nose into the bag and try to filch the
other buns. I spun the bag away from his prying snout.

“This one is for me! You wouldn’t want to take mine away, right?”

Amphy shrugged, and then pawed the bag twice. Two buns, he was saying.

“And the other is for Mr. Beret. You wouldn’t want to take his bun, would you?”

Amphy curled into a frightened ball. His head shook vigorously in the negative.

“Good boy. I’m going to take challengers now. Mr. Beret is counting on me, I can’t let any weaklings through to him!”

“Ampher!”

“Sure you can! I hope you’ve been practicing that Thunder Bolt!”

“Amph amph!”

We walked side by side into the main arena.

“Steelix, avenge Amphy!”

“SCHTEEL!”

The Iron Tail came down and knocked the Blissey silly. The pink blob went rolling back to its master, an overly spunky country lady. Trainer and Pokemon stood agape at the monster who had just vanquished them.

“I woulda coulda tooka on that other duder if’n I known you had that’n bad bad-boy under yer heel!” she exclaimed. The pair went back to the lobby to heal and recoup. I tended to the injured Amphy. Steelix lowered his head, showing concern.

“Owww!” Amphy jerked away from my touch. A big black bruise was swelling up on his forearm, the result of an Egg Bomb barrage.

“You really should have listened to me when I told you to zap them! You could have done it. You’ve just got to believe in your own power.”

Steelix nodded in affirmation. Amphy lowered his head.

“Maybe instead of telling him he can do it, help him practice it first.”

Ed moseyed up with his Scizor in tow.

“Oh Ed! Nice to see you. I was wondering where you were.”

“Nice to you see you too. I had to finish a mock entrance exam.”

“Eh? Oh really?! But graduation is years away.”

“Can’t be too prepared. I’m aiming for Kanto Medical, after all.”

“Ah. That’s a lofty goal. But, I think you can do it.”
Ed grinned. He had the look of a guy who would be admitted to the nation’s top medical university: Clean-cut, jet-black hair combed back. Formal slacks and blazer over a white collared shirt, all neatly pressed and wrinkle free. His jaw was shaved and smooth at every angle. Underneath all the trappings was a fit body, hints of a daily exercise regimen. You could be forgiven for mistaking him for an adult instead of the sophomore high schooler he really was.

“Did you get your results back?” I asked.

“No, it’ll be weeks.”

“Right. How silly of me. Still, I think you’re going to do just fine. I predict top ten percentile.”

“Heh, percentile?” He looked amused. “If I’m not top ten overall, I’m retaking it.”

Ambitious!

And driven, and courteous, and smart, and handsome. His parents were wealthy, and even if he inherited nothing, I’m sure there will be riches in his future as well. There is nothing recommending against him. Whichever lady catches his eye will be a lucky one.

How about you, Jasmine?

No no no no no no! Of course not! I’m shy and stupid and rash, and I obsess over trivial things like video games and Pokemon! I wouldn’t be a good match for him at all! Besides, he’s never given me any indication he sees me as anything but a colleague.

He was tilting his head, staring me down with his usual bemused look reserved for close friends. Probably trying to decipher the awkward blush-face I was putting out.

“Has it been busy today?”

“Very.”

“Okay then, I better start putting in my time. How about you give Amphy and Steelix time to rest?” He patted Amphy on the head.

“That might be a good idea.”

“Oh, and see those two in white caps over there?”

“Yes.”

“They’re Rocket recruits, they were sent here to prove they could join the big boys. I saw them using some strong ‘mons way above their competency, most likely borrowed. Don’t fight them. Let me handle them, okay?”

“I think I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me, I have Steelix.”

“If you insist.”

“But thank you for worrying about me.”

“Hey, I can’t help but care.”

Ed shrugged.
He is nice to a fault, sometimes.

Beret bellowed at the pair of us to get back to work. A line of trainers awaited, their Pokemon ready for battle.

Well, the Rocket newbies were nothing to worry about. They had a Nidoking, Tentacruel, Kangaskhan, and Rhyperior between them, but they had no clue how to control them. Ed easily took out one, and I managed to outlast the other. All told, only four trainers beat us the whole day, all adult professionals seeking their 7th or 8th gym badge. Beret did not relinquish a single badge to them. It was a splendid day for the gym.

My mentor called me into the office afterwards.

“Yes sir!”

He bade me take a seat in front of the desk. I hesitated.

“Sit,” came Beret’s stern order. I didn’t hesitate a second time.

This is unusual.

“Jasmine.”

Another unusual occurrence. He’s using my first name. What’s going on?

Beret slouched into his chair, looking so much less the indomitable captain he once was and more like an old geezer.

“I called you in to tell you something, something you’ve probably already guessed. I’m getting old.”

“Uh, yes sir, you are.”

That’s pretty self-evident, right?

“I’ve spent twenty years serving this city and running this gym. Twenty more years on the sea serving our country. This might sound selfish, but I’m ready to start serving myself.”

“No one would call you selfish, sir, after everything you’ve done.”

“They better not. The point being, though, is I’m going to retire. The missus wants to see Peruna Beach. I’m thinking that’s a good idea. Be nice showing her the place I helped save. It’s a resort town now. Last time I saw it, it was all rubble and starvation. Would be nice replacing those memories.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea sir. However... why tell me? This seems like general announcement material.”

“Because you’re going to succeed me.”

My eyes popped, my jaw dropped.

“But-but-but-but SIR! I’m not- I’m- I am in no way qualified for this position!”

“Rattata’s ass you aren’t! I’ve met exactly one person with more pride in what they do than you, and
he earned a Parliamentary Medal of Bravery. And I’ve never met a single person who loves their Pokemon more than you. You are THE most qualified person for this position. And I won’t stand for a refusal. This is your job.”

“I’m not of age,” I protested.

“That doesn’t matter. I’ve made arrangements.” Mr. Beret readjusted himself, leaning forward. He had already set everything up, hadn’t he? How could I refuse? There were only eight such positions in the region, thirty-two in the whole nation, representing the pride of Nihon’s Pokemon trainers— it was an honor to be nominated for a gym leader position. I was receiving that honor before graduating high school!

“Thank you sir. I’m grateful you have such faith in me.” That particular thought welled me up with joy and pride. My mentor and godfather was willing to pass on his legacy to me. I was wanted. “I accept.”

“Damn right. Hehehehehahahahaha!” Beret burst out into a great peeling laugh I had rarely seen or heard. “You’re in for it now! Blast, finally free of all that damn paperwork! You’ll do a fine job! Go on, that’s it for today. I’ll give you the details when it comes time. Don’t tell anyone. Eh, I guess your parents are fine to be in the know, but no one else.”

“Yes sir.”

“That’s all. Dismissed.”

I rose, bowed, and twirled about in my rush for the door.

“One sec.”

“Sir?”

I twirled again to come about-face.

Mr. Beret had a devilish look on his face.

“You can tell Ed too.”

“Oh.”

I lowered my eyes.

“Make that an order.”

I narrowed my eyes, nodded, and departed. Mr. Beret kicked back and began spinning around in his big armchair, radiating a maniacal, all-knowing grin.

We stopped in front of Cherub Park’s entrance. Rather, Ed stopped me by grabbing my wrist. He hadn’t said a word for the last three blocks.

There was a fresh breeze in the air. We both took a deep swallow of it. Olivine was dressed in autumn’s colors, here more vividly than anywhere else. The old cottage houses lining the street were cream, mahogany, and black. They contrasted well with the swirl of gold, crimson, and burgundy of the deciduous foliage. Leaves floated down like a flurry of ticker tape. It was gorgeous, honestly. Yet, I couldn’t help but pay attention to the most gorgeous sight of all, the manly face that was
staring intently back at me.

“I’m applying to Olivine University.”

“Huh?!”

“I’m going to stay here for college.”

“But...” I was confused. “Did you fail the mock exam? It was only practice, you have years to get a better score!”

He shook his head.

“But why? Kanto Medical is so much better! Olivine would be a waste for you.”

“It wouldn’t be a waste at all,” he insisted.

“I don’t understand.”

“I want to stay here and help you run the gym. It’s going to be hard managing it as a teenager, no matter what Beret tells you.”

“But that doesn’t help you at all! Go to Celadon, you’ve earned it.”

“I don’t want to. I want to stay here.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you.”

I felt dizzy. He had to help me open the front door. I leaned on him as we entered.

“Knock knock! I’m home!” I called out.

“Here.”

Mother sat hunched over papers in the study to our left. She was still dressed from work, professional dress and tights. Her eyes strained through glasses to read what I assumed were student essays.

“You a brought a friend home? Unusual.”

“Mother, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Hmm? A boy? Let me see him.”

She got up and met us in the foyer. Her gaze raked Ed up and down, putting the poor guy into a wilt. When he confessed his feelings, he hadn’t bargained on getting dragged home and shown off to the parental units like a trophy.

Look mommy, look what I won! Isn’t he so pretty and cute and handsome?! Teeheehee!

“Madam. Um, I’m Edward Kurosawa.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Dr. Elaina Hayate.”
Ed was practically shivering. I stifled a giggle. He’s so nervous! He shouldn’t be.

“Ed, huh? I’ve heard some about you.”

“Good or bad?” he asked.

“All good, which makes me skeptical. This daughter of mine rarely has so much to say about one individual. Care to join us for dinner? I have a lot I would like to ask you.”

“Uh... sure, I can do that.”

I grinned at him. He sort of caught on and gave me a half-grin back.

“Good. Great. If you please, would you take care of the Pokemon? Feed them and such, I trust you know how.”

“Yes madam.”

“Jasmine, may I see you in my room?”

“Huh? Okay.”

Mother led the way upstairs. I handed over my Pokeballs to Ed and told him where to find the Pokefood. There was a crack-sound, followed by a joyous roar from the living room.

“Is that baseball?” Ed wondered. He ventured into the family room, and soon enough the house was filled with the excited conversation of a pair of sports fanatics.

“He follows baseball?” Mother asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“He and David are going to get along great.”

She led me into her bedroom suite and closed the door behind me. She motioned for me to take a seat on the bed while she went to get something from the bathroom.

“I take it you’re dating?” she asked aloud.

“I... ha. We just confessed, today on the walk home.”

“Really?! Are you sure you’re into each other?”

“I’m sure. To tell the truth, it was a long time coming.”

I’m so naïve and insecure. Ed’s confession had taken me by surprise. I had so thoroughly ignored the signs and convinced myself he was too good for me, it never occurred to me we could ever be a couple. Yet, his words had unleashed a flood of emotions in my heart I didn’t know were being bottled up there. This was all I ever wanted. I feel blessed... if only Mother gave her approval too, it would be perfect.

She returned and sat beside me on the bed. One arm wrapped around my shoulder.

“It’s your first crush. Don’t be so reckless assuming this will be your last.”

“But- I don’t want to think like that!”
“No, of course not,” she said. “Realistically, though, you two won’t last.”

“Mother you’re such a downer!”

“Heh. Sorry. Not sorry. Whatever. No matter how it ends, enjoy it. Love is what makes everything else worthwhile. Literally, our purpose in life is to propagate life, and love is what facilitates that. It’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“Mhmhm.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“Thank you.”

“Is he a good young man?”

“Very.”

“Respectful?”

“Very.”

“Does he have a future?”

“He was on track for Kanto Medical University, but he decided to try for Olivine instead so he could stay with me.”

“Oh! Why would he give up Kanto? You should follow him to Celadon. Heck, if you tried really hard, you could make it as well. There are Pokemon trainer scholarships.”

“I can’t. I’m going to be Olivine’s Gym Leader.”

“You say that, but...”

“Beret is retiring. He’s already ordered me to replace him.”

Mother held me back at arm’s length and stared me down. Her eyes were incredulous.

“You’re only fifteen.”

“Nonetheless.”

She quivered, then closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I would say don’t go deciding on your whole future so early, but—“

“I love my Pokemon.”

“I know. Amphy, Steelix, Magneton, Magnemite, Graveler- they’re all wonderful creatures. I’m grateful they’ve kept you company. I know your father and I can’t spend as much time with you as you’d like.”

“It’s alright. I know you care.”

She squeezed me.

“A boyfriend. Exciting, isn’t it. Nervous?”
“Yes.”

“Have you kissed?”

My cheeks burned fiery red.

“Still to come, huh?” Mother leaned down and planted a kiss on my bare forehead.

“It’s like that, but better.”

“Mmm. Can’t wait.”

“And Jasmine, remember what we taught you when it came to this point.”

“Nothing under the skirt,” I recited.

Mother smirked.

“Yeah, about that... I know you think you’re a good girl and Ed’s a good boy, but your father and I know how young minds function. If it so happens you can’t contain yourselves... please make sure to use this.”

She handed me a small wrapper.

My definition of “burned fiery red” was in need of a critical adjustment. My flustered body quivered from foot to crown and back down again. My imagination began going supernova. Mother laughed as she got up and headed out for the door.

“Mother,” I said collecting myself, calling out to her before she left.

“Yes dear?”

“I love you.”

“Silly.” She strode over and rubbed her hand through my hair.

I think, a long time ago, there may have been a point where such a future was possible. Somewhere along the branches of the infinite nexii there was a node that, had the universal fold converged on one reality and not the other, a normal, happy life could have been mine. The dream that unfolded in my mind was so vividly realistic I could cry from the pain of touching it. Its contours were known, its details aligned with what had been possible, and but for the placement of a few vital atoms would have been my past, and my present would be one with a future. In fact, it might have been a great number of deciding points that led to this reality. A change to any one of them would have led to a different outcome.

Why had it come to this?

I thought back through it all.

Three men heard my desperate cries for affection, and in spite of their carnal natures, all three refused. If one had but cared enough for the pleas of a woman, or even stooped low enough to take
her in solely for his own benefit, that would have been enough. I can see why each failed, and how even a consummated relationship would have eventually soured, but still. It would have been enough.

There may be a man out there still, an acceptable male willing to take me in- but I think I’ve gathered enough of a sample to know that the fault lies on my end. I would destroy any relationship on my own with my own inevitable follies. Perhaps that’s why they turned me away. Their excuses were excuses, and the real reason is that they did not want to become the victim of my vampiric personality. My pride, my stubbornness, my insistence on demanding everything of them and giving nothing in return, my exacting standards and disproportionate retribution for deemed slights- it would have been torture to them. I would have become a burden to them.

It would only be transferring the burden of my suffering from one bearer to another. The original recipients had long sought to cast it off.

A man and woman chose to have a daughter, but then raised her with the care associated with a trash receptacle. One parent heaped upon the girl active hatred and resentment, the other bore nothing but indifference. It was as if they had foolishly bought into the fairy tale of a traditional family, and only too late discovered the sacrifices associated with it. Many discover this burden and bear it as best they can, with a strained smile at times, but believing the suffering was worthwhile. The way my parents approached parenthood was different. They gave in wholly to the suffering, which to me says that they rejected the very core meaning of the endeavor. They did not believe having a child was worthwhile. They resented their circumstances. They did not want it. They did not want me.

I tried to change their minds. I worked hard to be accepted, but people don’t change who they are on the inside. “If I was a better daughter, someone they could be proud of”- thoughts like that crossed my mind often. It never worked. Whether their standards were beyond human reach, or they had resolved long ago to accept no amount of effort whatsoever, it didn’t matter and it was never enough. I gave up trying to impress them and struck out on my own path, to see if I could find a way to want myself.

Yet no human can survive on their own, and I’m the kind of girl who could never validate her own existence. Mr. Beret helped to briefly fill that void, but then he died. I tried positioning myself in their role, as caregiver and parent, by way of my Pokemon. That was stripped from me as well, and besides, I could never gain the affection I craved in the proportions I craved it. Parent-child relationships are inherently one-sided.

My career, my love life, my family life, my social life, my self-image, all were in shambles and none provided me the validation I needed to feel whole and assured. Right now, I can’t conceive of a place in this world for myself. It felt impossible. It was as if I was playing a round of musical chairs, and every seat was taken. How could I go on as I am? I am unloved, and have no hope of being loved.

No! No no no!

Yet then, even then! I could have still gone on. Happiness is not a physical need, people can live without it.

Yet, the way all of these facets have failed me has left me a husk of a person, a complete failure, incapable of holding any kind of independent existence. I can no longer feed or shelter myself. I would die for the utter lack of ability to sustain myself.

No. Even then...
Someone would take me in and hand me off to the state, to be cared for in some asylum or alms house.

So why are you doing this?

I scrunched my eyes shut and conjured the horrific image. My fears were confirmed once more. Morty’s eviscerated body was repugnant and horrid and morally indefensible- but then the memory of him, what he did to me, and the future he robbed from me, set off a twinge of wrath within me. I was attracted to that criminal scene. It satisfied me. It felt right and just. Then I realized my own thoughts and grew disgusted with myself.

This is what those circumstances have led to.

This is why it must end.

Because, I can foresee many possibilities where I continue on and “survive”, but I see no possibility whatsoever for a happier ending than what I face right now. Every future only holds more and worse suffering, and most include violent, unconscionable acts in their course.

In other words, it's not getting better, and the possibility that I would take out my misery on others is a near certainty. That would be wrong, and I have to prevent it.

Be plainer, Jasmine. Why are you doing this?

Because I was brought into this world to unloving parents. They abused and neglected me.

When I tried to please them, they rejected me.

When I tried pursuing my passion in other areas, like Pokemon battling, they interfered, and it came to nothing.

I tried entrusting myself to boys, hoping a relationship would make me feel better, but they rejected me too.

Of every path, every choice, every possibility that could lead towards a more positive future, and the one that led me to the worst possible outcome was the one that happened. The universe was structured to make this happen. The collision of a trillion trillion atoms led to this exact moment, and no other reality was possible, because the laws of physics are deterministic. We are slaves to cause and effect. I am a victim of God.

I crumpled down onto the snow.

All these dire thoughts consumed my mind, infinite justifications expounding like so many commandments pounding my conscience with their imperiousness. Yet, I wanted to resist. Even after the entire universe set its dictates against my existence, even when the seeming Almighty had declared Its will that I cease my heart- even now, I can’t justify it. I’m selfish. I want to go on. No matter how insane it is, or how much it hurts, or how guaranteed the inevitable ending is- I still don’t want to give up.

Then the manila envelope slipped from my grip and fell onto the concrete.

I grimaced and took it up. The metal pins holding the fold in place were worn. I undid them and emptied the contents out onto the street. Shakily, because the cold was biting into my hands, I took up each paper in turn.
These were my old records. My immunization shots. My doctor visits as a baby. My first drawing. My preschool report card.

And then...

I gripped the last two papers. My eyes wandered over the top sheet’s contents, reaffirming once more what I had read dozens of times before, but could never quite believe.

“Jasmine Elaine Hayate-Mikan.”

“Female. Weight: 5.7 lbs.”

“Eye color: brown. Hair color: brown.”

“Health: suboptimal. Recommend ICU.”

My body shook. My breath slowed to a standstill.

“Birth Parents: Father: David Peter Hayate. Mother: Elaina Tohru Mikan.”

I winced, letting go of my birth certificate and letting it drift to the snow.

... 

I really am her daughter.

What she did to me... what she put me through... what she tried to do to me...

I am just like her, and so, I know, I would do those same things to others.

I glanced at the last, final paper, but could not bear to read it. I knew well enough what it said.

“Mother... I can’t make that choice. I can’t. I can’t. I can’t. It’s impossible.”

And this is the only way I will never have to make it.

I go now to commit my body to the abyss, where my soul has long since departed, in the hopes that the world understands and learns:

No human lives but for love.

No human suffers but for lack of love.

I do not want to cause more suffering. For me, or for others.

...

So, this is farewell.
The End...
Epilogue

Life is sure something, isn’t it? We are born, we grow up, we do some things, and then we die. The particulars are all over the place, but that’s the gist of it, isn’t it? Where do we come from? Where do we go? Is there something else, an afterlife, a greater meaning? A lot of us hope so, but the proof is never quite as solid as many would want it to be. So, above all else, life is a mystery. Sometimes a person is snuffed out before they really get to experience enough of it to make a conclusion. Others are lucky and get so much time they actually get old and tired of seeing it, and are just ready to move on.

This is not a story about those kinds of people. It’s about the rarer case, the sadder case. It’s about a person who did come to a conclusion at a young age, and that conclusion led them to a sad end. As far as I can tell, the entire point of the universe points towards one ultimate meaning: survival. Life exists to beget more life. The one sure way to face death without fear or regret is to believe in an existence greater than yourself, and the most intimate and immediate existence beyond yourself are the souls you bring into existence, the children you birth and raise, and to whom you entrust the future. That’s the real dream. That is the triumph. In the game of survival, life is an abiding victory.

So a person who goes directly against that meaning, a person that wants to end their own life- I can’t imagine anything more tragic.

We do not enter this world alone. At the very least, we will have our mothers. That seems to me by design. In reality, we have more. Our fathers, and grandmothers and grandfathers. Siblings, cousins, and aunts and uncles. These are the inherent blood ties. They can’t be severed, no matter how much we might sometimes want to. Your mother will never not be your mother, and your father will never not be your father, and your child will never not be your child- so love them, always. These bonds will be as good or bad as you make them, and you can’t unmake them- so try to make them good.

Then the relationships we forge through the process of living. Friends form the basis of our emotional well-being. Comrades and coworkers help the collective goal of survival, to ensure our basic needs, wants, and comforts. Leaders provide guidance and stability. They all form a web of interdependency that extends across the planet. Without it, we all probably perish. Our food networks rely on working with one another, trusting one another, and caring for one another on a basic human level.

And then, there is the closest, dearest bond: that between lovers. This affliction we call love has a stranglehold on our psychology to the point hardly no human being can escape it. It exists to facilitate that fundamental purpose, procreation. Yet humans are not plants, passively and dispassionately reproducing via spore method. We come together, we grow intimate, we grow dependent, and we beget a child, and we raise that child together, the combination of ourselves. The process of bringing new life is so special that our very DNA is wired to treat that one specific person in our life as a relationship beyond all others, a treasured connection fueled by lust, love, and deep wellsprings of caring.

All these connections serve to demonstrate that we cannot exist alone, physically. Our minds are geared towards that necessity, and have made our mental state dependent on that as well. Our emotional wellbeing is a reflection of the physical realities we face. It is our primal interface with the universe.

This then is the lesson:

If we value life-
If we love the experience of experiencing things-
Feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, hearing, touching-
Creating memories-
Feeling emotions-
Learning about the world-
And each other-
And ourselves-
If this is at all important to you-
Then you owe your ability to do all of these things to the effort of others.
And in turn, you should do your part to further others’ ability to experience life as well.
Which ultimately means, our lives dwell in the hands of others.
So please, I beg of you all. Help one another, and seek out those poor souls who have given up on their own desire to go on living. Their lives are in your hands as well. Be there for them. Love them.
Because...

“Love must be given for it to be received.”

You know, this simple truth never occurred to me.
All this time, everything I’ve been through, I only ever thought about myself, and the love that I thought was being denied to me, and I cursed my existence, and resolved to end it. I was so selfish. And so, in the bitter cold, with snow falling all around, I stepped out onto Crescent Bay Bridge, hopeless, wholly prepared to fling my life into the waves, with no one and nothing to stop me...
... and found someone already there, eyes downcast, staring into the abyss...

...and on the wrong side of the railing.

“...Ethan?”
“Ethan?”

He perked up at the sound of my voice. His head slowly turned around and looked back over his shoulder.

It was him. I wasn’t making a mistake. I wasn’t imagining things. His form, his posture, his clothing, his unkempt hair and boyish face were all exactly as I remembered. Everything was the same – except his expression. That was familiar for a different reason. It was the same expression I would see in a mirror at this very moment. Mouth agape, eyes wide, brow furled, cheeks red and wet- an anguished, lost-looking soul stared back at me.

I was caught in shock. It took me many more moments than a rational being should take to comprehend the situation, let alone react or assess it.

Ethan was dangling over the edge, body facing outward. His shoes toed the concrete lip, while his hands reached behind him, gripping the railing. His knuckles were white, and his fingertips were trembling. The cold might cause him to lose his grip at any moment. The sea churned one hundred and twenty feet below. At that height, the water’s surface would be as hard as concrete. Even if he survived the impact, it would knock him unconscious and he would drown. And if by some miracle he stayed conscious and afloat, the near-freezing water would kill him with hypothermia before he could make it to the shore. Falling would be certain death.

Why, then, was he perched like that, in such a dangerous position? It didn’t make any sense to me. Until it did.

Ethan isn’t here to stop me. He’s here for the same reason I am. That look in his face confirms it.

He wants to end his life.

The realization set me gasping for air. I winced from the pain in my chest. I then realized I hadn’t taken a breath since spying his form under the lamplight.

“Heh.” He let out a curt sigh and turned back to staring down at the sea. “Figures, you’re the one they sent to stop me.”

“I’m not,” I answered.

He didn’t reply.

“I’m not here to stop you,” I repeated.

“Why are you here then?” he asked.

“I came here to jump. I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. I’m not kidding,” I insisted.
He shrugged, and then slumped down. His fingertips slipped by a fraction. For a long time, he said nothing and did nothing, but just kept his head bowed. I began to wonder what was going through his mind. Probably the same thing going through mine. I inched closer to the railing, being mindful to keep the distance between us the same. My hands came to a rest on the steel. He noticed.

“If you’re going to jump... do you want to do it together?” he asked.

“No. That would be too cheesy,” I answered.

“Ah.” He nodded. “I guess I’ll go first.”

I took a deep breath.

Ethan rose up and tensed. His body twitched nervously.

I braced myself for his flight.

It was harrowing, waiting for him. I listened to his breath, convinced each one was going to be his last. Yet, moment after moment came, and he didn’t budge. He kept breathing, and kept his head bowed, and kept looking into the water, and mainly, kept his precarious position. I was afraid of moving or saying anything, lest it be the trigger that prematurely sent him off.

Why are you afraid of that, Jasmine?

This feels very weird. Like I’m intruding into this immensely personal, intimate moment in Ethan’s life- his last. Do I have any right to be here? Do I have any right to interfere?

Why would you want to interfere?

I don’t know.

Something has felt off within me the moment I laid eyes on him.

Ethan’s body shook. Then came the meekest, leastest motion, but I saw it plainly: he flinched.

I couldn’t help it, I spoke up.

“Hey. Do you really want to die?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey. Hey Ethan.”

“Huh?”

“Could you hurry up and decide? I’d like to jump too, and I’d like to be alone when I do it.”

“You’re really going to jump?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

He paused a long while before replying.

“I don’t want you to follow me,” he said.

“Nn.” Of all the things to say... this is so... so... so... awkward!
“I think you should come down then,” I said.

The boy twitched, stuttered, and sidled side to side, as if wanting to obey but not having the motivation to do so. I simmered with impatience. This boy was getting in the way of my goal, and I wanted him gone, one way or another.

“Come on!”

He twisted around. The sudden movement caused his foot to slip. His whole body slipped out of sight. My heart jumped. A scream ripped out of my chest.

“Ugh.” His hand was still there. I rushed to his position and leaned over. His other hand waved in my face. I grasped it with both of my own. Ethan was struggling. Below, one foot was toeing a fold in the bridge siding, the other was dangling in midair. I heaved with all my strength and weight, pulling his arm back towards me. It was painful, and hard, and there was no hope my dilapidated upper body strength was going to successfully haul him over the rail. Yet, it was enough to raise him a few critical inches. His loose foot found purchase on the ledge. He relaxed a moment, then pushed up, hoisting himself fully over the railing. His body collapsed in front of me, his back against the right side of the guardrail at last. I sat down myself.

Even after we regained our breath, it took some minutes of staring sheepishly at one another for the conversation to start. He kept eying me with a look of expectation, as if I was supposed to cajole or reprimand him. Not that I could.

“I wasn’t lying. I’m not trying to save you or anything,” I said. “It just felt weird and wrong waiting for you to go ahead of me. So, um, if you’re not absolutely sure you want to die, if you have any kind of hope you can cling to, please leave. I want to be alone when I... you know.”

“I can’t leave,” he said.

“What? But why? Are you still thinking of going through with it?”

He frowned. “You better not be lying. It’s really rotten to say something like that just to try to stop me.”

“Huh?” What is he going on about? Is he still hung up over that? “I’m not lying to you. I really was going to jump, until you appeared and made it awkward. If you don’t believe me, then I’ll just have to make it quick.”

I steeled myself, rose, and bolted for the railing. I couldn’t reach it, a force had caught me by the wrist and was pulling me backwards. I looked over my shoulder to find Ethan holding on to me and not letting go. His expression had changed. There was something else there now besides anguish.

“Hey Ethan. Let me go.”

He shook his head.

“I want to die,” I said plainly. “You seem really unsure about the whole ordeal, but I’m not. I made up my mind. If you want to cry to someone about your feelings, you can find Erika and Morty at her rental place, they’ll comfort you. So let me go. Leave me. Let me die in peace.”

Ethan’s grip on my wrist tightened.

“As if... as if...” he sputtered. His emotions were as plain as the topography of his face- the soft contours of grief stretched and tensed into the hardened wrinkles of anger. “As if I could let that
happen!"

“Ow. Hey. Hey, no!”

I struggled, so he put both hands on me, gripping me by the shoulders.

“I really did want to die! But you just had to say the one thing... the only damn thing... that could get me to stop! So don’t fuck with me! Don’t tell me you want to kill yourself unless you really mean it! And if you do mean it... if you... you...” He clenched his teeth. Tears streamed from his eyes. “How could I kill myself knowing you’d do the same?! I don’t want anyone else to get hurt, especially not you!”

His grip slackened, enough to pull myself free. The way was clear, I had the space to dart for the railing. The sea beckoned.

But I wasn’t thinking about that anymore.

I was lost in a forest of my own thoughts, none of which pertained to the ocean or my own existential crisis. They were of baser, more immediate things, like: “Why had I scooped up this kid in my arms, and why was I holding him so tightly, and why was he sobbing uncontrollably into my chest?” And “How did he get here? What caused him to lose all hope? Was it worse than my situation? Was it a coincidence we came to the same place at the same time for the same purpose?” Speculative thoughts too, with simple root questions but endless, infinitely branching answers, like, “What now? What do I do? With him? With myself? What do I make of all this? How do I feel about it? Do I still want to die? Do I want to let him die?” And most of all, the one question I kept asking myself but could not wrap my head around or figure out the meaning of, because I was that daft and dumb, was what exactly did he mean by “especially not you!”.

With all these myriad thoughts and questions and feelings swarming my mind, I could not make sense of anything, could not cope, and gave up.

So I shrugged my shoulders, sighed, and asked the only coherent question I could think of in that moment.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ethan’s eyes clenched shut, and he nodded.

Step 1: Talk

We walked away, side by side. We trod off the bridge, past the outskirts, and into the city proper. The air was very cold, but the wind died down as we moved away from the coast, and it felt like the snowy atmosphere somehow insulated and warmed us. Our pace was steady, slow, and unsure. I didn’t always stay on one path, but meandered here and there, sometimes to his left or right, sometimes into the street, sometimes clear to the other side. He kept a monotonous march down the sidewalk. I kept glancing at him, but he wouldn’t make eye contact, so my gaze went everywhere else- the street, the trees, the clouded sky, the shop windows. When we talked, it was awkward, muttered, and shy, until it reached a tipping point and bubbled out all at once. Then it would go silent for a while and we would wander onward some more in contemplation. There were equal turns, where I told him all about myself and what was going on with me, and he told me everything that led to his standing on the wrong side of the railing, and gradually we got to understand each other’s situation. Yet there was also the definite feeling that something was being held back, that the depths
of sorrow were still not enough to crack our deeper-still mistrust in our fellow human beings. Of course, for me, I could not bear to tell him what my mother did to me, tried to do to me, or what my deepest fear was. For him, I quickly learned what his deepest fear was— to be cast out and alone— but not what made him so sure he was going to suffer that fate.

It was kind of a mystery, an unknown-yet-familiar-feeling vulnerability, that helped me forget—how to put it—um... Let’s say I didn’t feel better. Everything that contributed to that self-destructive impulse was still there inside me. By talking to him, though, all those feelings stopped being such a massive weight on my consciousness. They felt massive, present, but... weightless. Like I could stop caring about them for the moment. It was a strange feeling. Was it melancholy, maybe? Kind of like, it’s okay to be sad. I’m used to it, I’m comfortable with it. That’s how I used to feel about my life, before this latest torrent of miseries fell on me. So perhaps talking with him, and learning about another person who was as miserable and desperate as I was, even to the point of wanting to end their life as well— I guess it helped my comfort level with misery recalibrate to a higher threshold.

So, in an imperfect, bittersweet, roundabout way— talking with Ethan made me feel... better.

And I think I was doing the same for him. I couldn’t be sure though. But I hoped I was.

“So was Lyra cheating on you?” I asked.

Ethan shrugged.

“I don’t think so. Not like, in the sense of having sex with Silver kind of cheating.” His shoulders drooped even more. “The feeling I got was, she always preferred him and wanted to be with him. I was the backup plan until he became emotionally available. I guess he finally opened up.”

“Oh. That’s cruel.”

“I can’t be mad at her. Or him. What am I supposed to do? Rage against her? What do you do when you love two people?”

“You pick one,” I said.

“And what is the guy who doesn’t get picked supposed to do?”

“Move on,” I answered.

Ethan nodded, grimacing.

“Yeah, that’s what they say is the right thing.”

“But it’s not that easy, is it?”

He shook his head.

“Was Celadon a pretense, then?”

“No. Silver does have business there. He’s trying to shut down the old Team Rocket admin and take his assets. He wants to turn Team Rocket into a legit political machine, change the world with it. I think he’s kind of nuts, but he has a good heart, good intentions. Lyra will make sure he doesn’t go overboard. She’s like that.”

“She never struck me as having a lot of common sense though.”

“Nah. I mean, yeah, but...” Ethan stumbled through his choice of words. “Lyra has a good sense of
right and wrong. She won’t let Silver turn into his father, is what I meant.”

“Ah.”

“She’s precious. They’re perfect together. I- I don’t deserve her. I’m not ambitious. I’m not a leader. I’m not cool or collected. Silver is all that. And he’s not a deviant, like me.”

“Deviant?” My inquiry was met with silence. I pressed a little more. “May I ask, in what way?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Obviously not. But if you don’t want to tell me-”

“It’s a fetish thing! Don’t ask about it!”

Sigh.

“I understand.”

A few more blocks on-

“I had NO clue that’s what she was talking about.” Ethan was beside himself with apologies. I had just explained Erika and Morty’s plan to him. “I’m so... I would have warned you, told you if I thought... you know how Lyra can be! She was like, it was nothing, a bit of fun, like even you were in on the act. I didn’t realize they were straight up lying to you! And I had no idea Morty had a fiancé!”

“How much did Lyra really know?”

“She said it was a game for Morty to get in bed with you, then she said it was a quest to figure out your dark secret.”

“A quest to figure out my dark secret,” I repeated incredulously.

“Her exact words,” he replied.

“My dark secret isn’t very secret at this point, is it? Red dumped me, twice, it hurt, that’s why I am the way I am.”

“Really, Ash hurt you?”

I stared at him, nonplussed.

“I was there,” Ethan said, a bit tenderly.

“Do you remember?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Can you tell me, what did it look like to you, us two?”

Ethan cocked his head, then bowed his head, then went silent for a while. I had time to muse his silence, and also mull the past. The memory didn’t come easily, especially anything that happened before our final meeting atop the lighthouse bluff. It bothered me that I couldn’t remember it clearly. When I was staring Ash in the face a few weeks ago, it was crystalline, every moment of it. Now, not at all. All my hatred and anguish was built on a silty base of haze and vagary.
Ethan was to my right, looking right. We passed a storefront window. I caught his face in the reflection, and it looked like he was crying again, or trying to. He caught me looking at him, and snapped to.

“Do you really want my opinion?”

“Yes. Your honest opinion,” I said.

“I thought it was pretty clear. You were infatuated with him, like a schoolgirl.”

“Ah.” Well, that was obvious.

“And he was in love with you.”

Ah!

Eh.

So... someone like Ethan could see it too.

“I don’t get it. From the way you say it, he actually liked me even more than I liked him!”

“Yeah.”

“But he was the one who turned me down when I confessed. Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“I have an answer. I’m just not sure it’s the truth. I don’t trust the one who gave it to me, and I don’t trust Ash’s corroboration.”

“Could it be, you don’t want to believe it?” Ethan asked.

I nodded.

“What is the answer?”

“I’d rather not say. It’s in the same vein as your secret.”

“Ah. It’s sexual,” Ethan murmured, more to himself than aloud.

Despite myself, my thoughts started lurching out.

“Because, if I believed her, if I thought she was telling the truth, he really didn’t love me at all, despite every sign he did. And if I were to believe that, I would have to blame him as a man. So by my logic, he hurt me because he was a man, and so all men would hurt me. I truly, sorely did not want to think that way.”

“Jasmine, seriously? You acted exactly that way.”


Ethan took the gesture gracefully, or nonchalantly, whichever.

“I guess that means deep down, you really did believe her. We’re talking about your mother, right?”

I nodded and sighed.
“Actually, the truth is- I respect her. And for most of my childhood, I wanted to make her happy. And still, to this day- I want to be like her,” I admitted.

“But she’s pure evil,” Ethan said. He didn’t need my ten minute rant that constituted a fraction of what that woman had perpetrated upon me (stories had already filtered down from Lyra), but he got it anyways.

“It’s hard, it’s really hard to explain my feelings for her. The best thing she ever did for me, is inexplicably tied with the worst thing she ever did to me.”

“That’s... what?” Ethan asked.

“That’s my secret. That’s what I can’t tell anyone.”

“Why is it a secret?”

I hesitated before answering.

“I told someone once, a professional whose job it was to be empathetic and understanding. They told me,” I paused again and gasped for air.

This memory still upsets you, doesn’t it?

Even in a state like this, in this zen moment of sharing and understanding, this knowledge still makes you want to dart back to the bridge.

You just might be broken forever, Jasmine.

Nonetheless, I blurted out the rest.

“They brushed it off and said it wasn’t a big deal. But it’s not. And if the shrink could say that to me- I don’t trust anyone to empathize.”

“Oh. Mmm.” Ethan nodded along.

“Do you get it?” I asked.

“Yeah. I do.”

“Do you think that’s unfair?”

“No.”

“What do you think about me being this way?”

Ethan bobbed his head.

“Um, well. Maybe, one day, we’ll get to a point where we can share with each other our secrets.”

“Ewww!”

“Ehh?!”

Does he not get it?

“That’s not an equitable trade,” I asserted.
“A what?”

“Your kink is not something I need to know. Like, ever. It’s not something worth trading MY secret for. Gross. Now I see why Lyra dumped you.”

Ethan made a face, a Gyarados-like scowl of shock and disgust.

“You’re a jerk,” he said, appalled. He tried pulling away. I grasped his hand and brought him back to my side.

“I kid. Half. I’m half kidding.” Now he’s befuddled. “If we got to a point where our secrets don’t matter, when I feel like I could accept what happened and figure out how to deal with it, I’ll let someone know then. Maybe you. You seem trustworthy, and caring. I can respect that. But for kinky stuff, that’s kind of... I wouldn’t trade your kink for my secret. Mhmm.” I nodded, smug in my self-assertion. “It’s not even the same currency. What I would share is my darkest, most perverted sexual fantasies for yours. That’s a trade I would make. If we got to a point of trusting each other. Which I doubt we will, but just laying out the groundwork.”

Ethan went silent for a long while. Long enough for us to reach the bay park. We had been walking for a long time now, and the benches promised a welcome respite. I sat down and tucked myself in. Ethan wasn’t as tired and wandered up to the railing overlooking the beach.

Was that a little rough? I guess I was feeling a little too candid and jovial for a moment, probably the result of trying to suppress the pain of that memory.

I never want to remember that day.

Well, it was that same day, right?

The one Ash dumped you.

It was so painful, listening to him nonchalantly destroy every ideal of intimacy I had built up over the course of a month. Yet, it was a childish pain, nothing that should have caused lasting damage.

No.

It’s what came after.

That night...

You went home and found mother, and then found the manila envelope.

Stop! Focus on something else!

Is it a folder or envelope?

I tried recalling its shape and had difficulty, until I realized the item in question was still with me, crumpled up in my coat pocket. I took it out.

It’s attached on three sides, so it can’t be a folder. But it’s larger than the envelope you stuff a letter into. But I think envelope is the right answer.

Does it matter? It’s what was inside that mattered- all my birth documents, and that damned letter addressed to Mother and the damning truth it contained.

I shook my head.
Quit it! Just forget the whole subject!

Ethan was quietly staring back into the ocean, arms resting on the rail, leaning over it. It was a six foot drop into a grassy terrace, so I wasn’t worried about him falling or leaping. Still, he wasn’t responding like before. Did something I say get to him? Was I rude? I come off as rude all the time, don’t I? And Ethan is kind of a sensitive guy after all. I hope I didn’t hurt him.

My concern bubbled over. With my legs sufficiently rested, I got up and walked over to him.

“Hey Jasmine,” he said as soon as I appeared beside him. “What kind of relationship are we going to have after this?”

I tensed up, surprised by the question. “I don’t know. I imagine, friends, like before, but different.”

“Different, huh.”

“Because...” How to put this delicately. “We know what the other tried to do.”

“Suicide,” he said bluntly.

“Yes.”

“You really wanted to die.”

“I did.”

“You weren’t there to stop me.”

“I thought you were in Celadon.”

“You wanted to die.”

“Yes,” I answered again.

He has trouble accepting that fact, I think.

“Why?” he asked.

That burden that felt so weightless and celestial for the past hour? It’s come back, a little. The cold air suddenly felt cold again. When I could bring myself to answer, it came slowly, but coherently, to my own surprise.

| Step 2: Admit to Everything |

“Because of everything that had happened to me, I believed it was impossible for me to find happiness. I did not want to live if I could not be happy. When I am unhappy, it is agonizing for me, and destructive for everyone else. I told you I want to be like my mother, but my mother is a terrible person who wreaks misery on everyone around her. I don’t want to want to be like her. I just know that, inevitably, I will be. That seemed like a very sad, hopeless future for me. So I decided to snuff it out before it became a reality.”

“Mmm.” He nodded in understanding.

“If you’re worried... I think the impulse has passed. I think I’ll be fine. At least, I’m alive.”
Sure, sure, Jasmine, sure. Tell yourself that.

I’m not telling myself, I’m telling him, for his benefit, so that I don’t worry him.

“And what about you? Are you going to be alright?’”

“Let’s keep going,” he said.

We walked, and did a lot less talking. Just bits and pieces, nothing so dramatic as what came before. Something changed in Ethan’s demeanor, and I can’t say I liked it. When he did volunteer information, it was informative, but not reassuring.

He had two older siblings and both parents, happily married, for a family.

“Why don’t you go home? Ask them for help?” I asked.

“He wouldn’t understand,” Ethan replied.

‘He’ - hmm.

“What about your siblings?”

“Not in Johto right now. Not that they’d... meh.”

“Friends?”

“Lyra and Silver were it.”

“Your Pokemon?”

Ethan lurched, like I had just knifed him in the gut.

“I don’t deserve them.”

“I don’t see why not.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

And so forth. He’s not as forthcoming as before.

We talked a little more, and each conversation turned more banal than the last, until we at last reached the most banal of all subjects.

“Does it snow much in Olivine?”

“Rarely.”

It had accumulated somewhat. My shoes crunched a bit into the frost with every step. It wasn’t too deep, it’ll be melted and gone by tomorrow night, I’m sure.

“Where are we going?”

“The gym, I guess.”

“We’re almost there.”

“Yeah.”
We were, in fact, there. The massive building stood across the street. Its’ industrial architecture was not as impressive as its size, but it served as a recognizable landmark amongst all the other light commercial buildings surrounding it. The lights were glowing from inside. A police car was parked in front.

“What’s up with that?” Ethan asked.

I sank my chin into my chest.

“I left a message on my way out. Guess they caught on pretty fast.”

“Let’s get you inside,” he suggested.

“No.” I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

Firstly, I wasn’t about to march inside and face the music. Not ready for that yet.

But secondly, I couldn’t leave it like this.

“I think I’m missing something. About you, Ethan.”

He grimaced.

“Ash hurt me, but he didn’t hurt me so badly it made me want to die. I told you how that was only a part of the puzzle. My job, the betrayals, my mother, myself, it was a bit of everything combined that got to be too much to bear. You understand that right?”

He nodded.

“You do understand,” I repeated. Another nod. Good. “So that should mean you can relate, which also means you’re going through the same sort of situation. Ethan, may I ask, was it really Lyra dumping you that made you want to die?”

“Yeah. That’s it. That’s all it was.” His answer was curt and voice huffy and bitter. There was no way that wasn’t a lie. He was hiding something. I wanted to press him on it, force it out of him.

But why?

Because it’s not fair. I told him as much as I could bear about myself, I feel like he should reciprocate.

Yet why should he? And why do you care?

Because, because, because... I don’t know. I feel like, if I lose his interest, if I lose him, I’ll be right back at the bridge. I didn’t jump because there was at least one person who cared enough to not want me to go through with it. I can’t let this chance meeting peter out in vain.

“I don’t believe you,” I said.

Ethan’s gaze veered away. This was hard for him, I know, but it was needed.

“Ethan.” I stepped in front of him and directly faced him. My hands went to my hips, my back stiffened, my head tilted, and lips tightened. It was a posture I used often to make people pay attention. It worked once again. Ethan reluctantly met me eye to eye.
“Your sexual deviancy... are you gay?”

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Step 3: Listen

Ethan actually *smirked*.

“If only,” he said.

He took me by the hand and led me around the gym perimeter to the practice court and the bench I knew so well. We sat side-by-side and I waited for him to speak up.

“This is hard for me,” he said.

“I know,” I said.

“No you don’t.”

“Then I guess I don’t know.” A momentary pause- “I’m staying here until you tell me.”

Ethan fidgeted and tensed all over. After all this, even now, he’s too afraid to open up. I wondered if this impasse would go on for minutes or hours, or forever and he would never work up the courage to share his true feelings. This is how humans work, after all- by fits and starts, imperfectly, impatiently, and stubbornly broken- but it was getting annoying. I thought of prodding him, but didn’t want to jolt him into clamping up. My hand settled on his thigh, thoughtlessly, but the little touch seemed to work. When he did start talking, the subject was a bit unexpected.

“Your mother sounds really harsh. I guess that makes sense. You said she’s a doctor, right?”

“Well, she earned a doctorate, but that’s not her job,” I corrected.

“Well, okay, but still, she’s a professional. It takes a certain kind of personality to succeed in fields like that. It makes those people good at what they do. But it doesn’t make them good with other people. Especially their family.”

I think I see where this is headed.

“What does your father do?” I asked.

“Guess,” Ethan urged.


“No. Try again.”

I wracked my brain, seriously considering the question. By the bare hints I’ve gotten, Ethan’s relation to his father is similar to me and Mother’s. For me, it seemed like my very existence was the root of our problem. For Ethan, he’s alluding to his father’s occupation as the root of theirs. What job would alienate a father and son? I first guessed ones that would take the father’s time away, but it seemed like there was more to it than that. Something that would shape the way his father treated him...

“Military officer,” I guessed.
“Wrong. Think more judgmental.”

“More judgmental? Then, police officer.”

“No, but close.”

“Lawyer. A prosecutor.”

“Worse.”

What could be worse?

Oh! He practically gave it away!

“Judge.”

Ethan hung his head and clenched his fists.

“Did I get it right?”

“You think it’s easy being the son of the Honorable Luther Hibiki, Chief Magistrate of New Bark Town?” he asked, drawing out the full and proper title with the solemnity of a courtroom deputy.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “It must be hard. He’s a powerful man, who commands a lot of respect, I expect. Even from you, right?”

I thought back to my relationship with Mr. Beret. Is that what Ethan was going through, just, without the cushion of Beret’s squishy hidden heart? No, he’s shaking his head ‘No’.

“Yeah, he’s like that, but that’s not it. It’s about his job, who he is, what he does. He judges, and he condemns. Not just criminals. Us too. His own children.”

To hear Ethan’s voice crack made me shudder. Unconsciously, I inched closer to him.

“It’s not like I wanted to go on a Pokemon journey. Not really. I love Pokemon, I love the freedom I get goofing off with them. They’re my best friends. Battling is fun. I got to see a bunch of cool places. But you know... I didn’t run away from home to have an adventure because I wanted to. I didn’t have a choice. I was forced out.”

Oh.

Oh my.

My suggestion earlier— that was more insensitive than I imagined. And I’m dreading what I’m hearing, because of what it’s leading to. My fingers clamped around Ethan’s leg. He was staring down hard at his own fists.

“My secret, my... kink, whatever you want to call it. Who I am. I wish I wasn’t. Because, when dad found out—after all the trouble sis caused— he wasn’t going to tolerate it. If I couldn’t fit into his... box... I didn’t deserve to live under his roof. Jasmine.” He said my name aloud suddenly, stiffened up and turned towards me. “I told you it’s hard sharing this. I don’t mean it like I’m scared or shy. It’s not like that. It’s like this. Opening up and admitting anything is wrong with me at all is a sign of how pathetic I am, in his eyes. In their eyes.”

He groaned and lifted his hands to the sky, then grabbed his head.
“I don’t know how to deal with it. Just crying for help makes it worse. I’ve even roped you into my pity party. That’s what he calls it. Ethan’s pity party. You must think I’m pathetic too, hearing this.”

I was filled with a feeling the likes of which I hadn’t ever really known for a human being. Yet I’ve felt it far too often, far too keenly, for the likes of Tyko, and Skarm Skarm, and Steelix, and Amphy, to mistake it here.

I wrapped my arms around Ethan and drew him in tight.

“I didn’t realize,” I said, mumbling into his shoulder. “I do know. I know that feeling. That exact feeling. I was mistaken, your secret is the equal of mine. I think. It doesn’t matter what it is, the pain comes from what it did to you. And mine to me. I won’t press you anymore. If you can share, share. If you feel like sharing makes you pathetic, I won’t judge you that way. I can’t. If you still feel that way, it’s alright, I won’t make you.”

Ethan cracked a wry, grim, perhaps a little relieved grin. He held onto my arms and squeezed tighter.

“You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“I’m saying that expressly to make you feel better. Does the fact I’m trying to comfort you mean nothing to you?”

“It is nice,” he lamely admitted.

“You are pathetic. But Ethan, I think you’ve only ever known people who’ve held that against you. I’m not in a position to do that. I’m a big fat hypocrite you should know. I hate people being dishonest with me. I’m the most dishonest person I know. Would you be willing to deal with me being that way?”

“Sure,” he answered.

“So, if you show me your real self, then I won’t mind. Even if it’s ugly or pathetic, I have an easier time accepting that than being condescended to by a fake face of politeness. If all you want in return is someone to always treat you well no matter what they truly feel, than I think I can manage that.”

“That’s not what I really want.”

“I know, but that’s what I’m offering. And honestly, I think what you really want is this.” I resumed my hug and tightened it, locking the poor boy up in my arms and bosom.

“Mmm. Yeah. Thanks. This is good enough for now. It reminds me of mom.”

“I’m not your mother, silly.”

“I wouldn’t want you to be.”

“Ah.” Choice words.

He sighed.

“It’s cold,” he said.

“Yeah. Are you warm enough?”

“Yeah, but you...”
“I’ll be fine. Do you want to talk some more?”

“Nah. Not now.”

“Later?”

“Maybe.”

“I want to know more about your father.”

“Don’t ask. It’s not that interesting a story.”

“But it is to me.”

“Meh.”

On our way here, most of Ethan’s conversation had centered on Lyra and Silver, but this thing of his, the fetish, and how his father reacted to it— that seemed to be what drove him towards the bridge more than anything else. I truly wished I knew what it was, but I have no right to force it out of him, not me being the way I am.

Ethan had proposed a tit-for-tat. I think he doesn’t trust me because I didn’t take him up on that offer and made light of it. That was a mistake, I think. I should have opened up while I was still vulnerable. Now the moment has passed and I’m exhausted and scared again. Someday, maybe, when I’m better-situated, I’d like to come back to it. If there was anyone in the world who could listen to my story and not scoff at it, Ethan might be it.

“Let’s go inside,” I said. He groaned and resisted, but eventually followed.

I chose to walk in the back door, hoping to avoid attention for as long as possible, not knowing what sort of greeting I might get, or from whom...

Step 4: Care

My god.

Had I a god.

I stepped into the cavernous gym, and was awestruck.

There are so many people.

The police officers, I knew by the patrol car that they would be here. I did not expect Captain Rekishi himself to show up. Connie was the most logical and least surprising occupant as well, she would be the one to open the gym and discover the message.

Yet they were specks in a crowd.

Alongside Connie were my other former subordinates, Janina and Ted.

There was the Pokemon Center crew, headed by Nurse Nana and Doctor Maveli.

Nearly every shopkeeper in a block’s radius were present, Briel chief among them.
People I once knew, but had thought had long since forgotten me: old classmates and teachers, Beth’s parents, Port Authority Chief Gatto, Mr. Beret’s fishing crew, the Woolward Ranch handlers, Mark the vice superintendent of the power plant, and so on.

People I barely recognized, or didn’t know at all: the Battle Tower security, dock workers, fire fighters, random Pokemon trainers.

Oh the Pokemon! At least one for every two humans, and of all shapes and sizes. The biggest was a Gyarados. Not just any sea brute either, it was Beret’s old Gyarados! The smallest was a trio of Magnemites. I looked and looked, but sadly, none of my former monsters were among them. One gave me a hard spit-take and then chills- it was an Amphanos, but it was not my Amphy.

Then the true surprises started catching my attention.

Whitney!

Oh gosh, even Whitney came here?

Chuck as well, and Clair, even Falkner.

And Volkner.

VOLKNER?!

The young man looked groggy, unshaven and unkempt, as if he had just endured a painful trip. I suspected it was- the only possible way to explain his presence was PC-network teleportation, which isn’t safe for humans. That he would endure the pain, after what he said to me, and I to him... unbelievable.

All the gym leaders sat in a gaggle on the bleachers, talking quietly to each other. I did not see two particular gym leaders in their midst.

Then my attention was wretched away once again.

“Ash.”

I choked up.

He was slouched against the office-side wall, working his phone with one hand and rolling a Pokeball around the ground with his other.

He came back.

Why? Did someone tell him, make him, or did he come on his own?

The same goes for everyone here.

A hundred people, there must have been that many, or more.

I drifted through them, attracting no notice. I felt like a ghost walking through their own funeral. It was so heart-wrenching. All these souls, turned out in the dead of night, some from far away, some crying, some dejected, some despairing, many doubtless spent and wasted from hours of searching, all wishing and hoping-

...for me.
Was I truly wanted this much?

Did I touch this many lives?

I don’t know what I could have done to deserve this.

I wanted to die. I really did. I didn’t mean to scrawl those big red letters and reap filthy joy from their sorrow. I never intended to witness this sight. I’m ashamed. How could I face them? What could I say? What will they say?

They did care. If only they had shown up earlier, I wouldn’t have-

I paused.

If I hadn’t decided to end my life, if I hadn’t gone to the bridge tonight-

I turned back, looking for my companion of the last few hours.

“Ethan? All these people were searching for u-”

“JASMINE!”

Her shriek pierced the gym air, and I froze stiff upon hearing it.

No.

No no no no no.

Of all the people. The one I didn’t want was...

The one who would never...

I started crying as she bolted towards me.

She lunged and battered through the crowd, a tornadic force that parted the sea of humanity and parked itself over my brow. I expected a pain on my cheek, and it came, stinging. I did not expect the slap to be instantly followed by a tight, vice-like hug. The embrace felt utterly foreign coming from her. She released and set me back at arm’s length.

“Don’t you dare do this to me. Not ever. Not even as a cry for attention,” she said.

“Mother,” I uttered.

It took some moments, but the crowd came round to the notion that their prodigal daughter had come back to them, safe and sound. They stood in awe, some weepy, some joyful, most tired and broken but glad. A small, hearty cheer went up. Those in front whispered the good news to those behind them, and the truth spread to each corner like a wave of relief.

I didn’t feel relieved at all.

“I’m back.”

“I see that. But are you sorry? For making us all worry?” she demanded.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I... understand that I caused you all worry.”
“That’s not going to cut it. Apologize...” Mother bit her lip. “Never mind. You came back on your own, that’s the best I could expect. Let me look at you. Did you hurt yourself?” She turned me about, observing every angle of person. “You’re freezing. Your coat’s drenched. Take it off, put mine on.” She undressed and redressed me in a warm, dry jacket. It felt physically nice.

“Follow me. I’ve got to tell the police we found you. They ransacked the city looking for you. Where the hell were you?”

“Crescent Bay,” I answered absently.

“That’s miles from here! You walked all the way? Where are your Pokemon? Where is Steelix?”

“Gone.”

“Damn it, I thought, at the very least, they would keep you from doing something so stupid.”

“Mother, please.”

She wasn’t listening, she was already conferring with Captain Rekishi. I had a moment to breathe and recuperate. In that grace period I spotted two people I hadn’t before, in the corner of my eye.

So they were here after all.

The two humans I knew cared for me- but in such a twisted, warped way that it ended up hurting me more than helping me.

Erika was the picture of anguish. Her eyes were bloodshot, and her hands and arms were shaking. She tried dashing towards me the moment she spotted me. A strong arm wrapped around her and held her back. Morty’s grim face shook, telling her “No- we don’t deserve to speak to her”.

I turned back to the one who caused me infinitely more grief, and yet whose claim to my company could not be denied.

Mother’s face was indescribable. Every time she glanced back towards me, I was filled with dread witnessing it. So many perturbations signaling how many millions of contradictory emotions crossed it, I can’t guess nor count. It was her rage and happiness and pride and sorrow and regret and admonition and admiration all at once, with none held back or moderated.

On this very night, this woman, this monster, had rejected my existence and threw me out of the home I had asked to share in the depths of desperation. And now-

“You’re coming home with me,” she declared.

“But-”

“Don’t complain. You’re coming.”

I don’t understand you, Mother.

Why-

WHY?! Why did you come look for me? Why take me in now?! Was this what it took to make you care? Must I really ransom my life to earn your love?

I wondered if it was even love that summoned her here, or motivated her newfound care in my well-being. Her words weren’t supportive evidence.
She looked at the writing on the wall.

**I WAS NEVER WANTED HERE. SO I'M GOING TO END IT. FAREWELL.**

“You should come back here in the morning and clean that.”

“Okay.” I answered. She didn't let up.

“You didn’t need to do this. It was the wrong thing to do. Crying for attention with death threats is wrong, even if it’s your own life. Jasmine. Jasmine. Do you understand? Please, this is torture for me. Please don’t do this to me. Help me.” Mother’s voice was exasperated, terse and torn, pleading in its tone. As she spoke, her grip on my shoulder grew tighter and tighter until it hurt.

*I was helping you. I was getting rid of myself, like you wanted, like you always wanted.*

“I wasn’t,” I choked out.

“It’s not funny,” she said.

“I wasn’t faking it,” I said.

She gave me a pained, contemptuous look. Like “I don’t believe you.”

“We can talk about it at home. Not in front of all these people.”

I hung limp and cold as she hugged me again and then guided me by the shoulder towards the front exit.

I spotted Morty again. He had made his way around the crowd, making a beeline for my companion of the last few hours. Ethan had hung far back, away from everyone else and was generally ignored. Morty said something to Ethan, who responded with something short. The blond gave me one last, long glance before rounding up the gym leader circle and heading out. I frowned watching them go. Morty, Volkner, Erika, Whitney- they are good, decent, loving human beings. Just, terrible friends. I want to forgive them. I want to try. I don't know if I can. Maybe I should just wish them well and stay apart. That’s going to be hard if I’m a Johto gym leader- ah. I’m still fired, aren’t I?

There’s a future I don’t want to have to face, still waiting for me, still grinning its evil, patient grin. Knowing I had all these people to support me didn’t make that ominous threat any more bearable. Some people cheered and gave me a sign of good will, but most hung back.

Ash unexpectedly appeared. His face betrayed nothing, he said nothing, and for a moment I thought he would do nothing. He was a stone statue. I couldn’t muster the energy to feel irritated at him, even if he probably came to gawk and awkwardly excuse his callous behavior. I went to brush past him. He held out his hand, as if to give me something. I received it without any expectation. He then withdrew, a shadow amidst the forest of souls. I looked in my palm.

It was my badge, the Mineral Badge.

Ash. You bastard.

I didn’t need this back.

Ah, well. Whatever. It was gratifying. He knows what he did was wrong, even if he’ll never have to answer for it. It’s best if I just forget him again.

No. That won’t do. Remember him, but without emotion. Something that happened. A lesson
learned, no more.

Mother finished speaking to the police, who then had their turn with me, and I gave them a very stunted version of what had transpired. They filled out their report and again referred me to mental services that I couldn’t afford. The crowd filtered out. I craned my neck, searching for the most prominent figures in my life, but couldn’t spot them. Morty and Erika were gone. Whitney too. I think everyone saw Mother grab a hold of me and decided to give us room. The situation was too delicate to be swamping me with attention, and for that I was grateful.

There was one person I did wish to see, and did spot him with much effort.

Ethan watched everyone pass by, and then quietly slunk out the back door. His figure was framed in the doorway for a split second, and then disappearing for good. In that fleeting moment, I thought he appeared terribly alone. I didn’t have time to contemplate or reach out to him.

Mother led the way to the parking lot and her car, being very careful to keep me within arm’s reach at all times.

She doesn’t need to worry. I’m not going to run away.

I’ve not decided anything.

Nothing has been fixed.

I’m still depressed.

I still feel like despair incarnate.

I don’t want to die, but I don’t know how to go on living.

The world seems very indefinite and murky right now.

Ah. Well. Whatever.

Let’s see where this path goes, and if it’s death waiting for me, I won’t rush towards it this time.

The car rolled through the snow-lit night in gentle silence. Mother wouldn’t look at me. Not because of any feelings, good or bad, towards me, I knew. It was so she could concentrate on driving in the bad weather. That’s how she was, practicality before emotion. I meant so little to her. I was surprised she was at the gym at all. Why was she there? Why even bother showing up?

Mother, I don’t understand you. Even if I am just like you.

Therefore, I don’t understand myself.

I leaned my head against the frosted glass of the window. Olivine passed us by, street by street, house by house. The rhythm lulled me to thoughtfulness.

If you really are going to live, no matter what, in spite of all the miseries that will come, then today was full of new memories you will have to keep- harsh, painful memories. Knowing that, I want to focus and keep fresh those parts that weren’t all that bad. Things like seeing everyone in the gym, being aghast at how many people cared enough to come search for my suicidal self. Seeing each one- Captain Rekishi, Doctor Maveli, Connie, Janina, Ted, old high school classmates, even the people who I had wronged and had wronged me- Ash, Erika, even Morty, even Mother...

They did this for me.
What have I done for them?

What must anyone do, to be wanted?

What must...

But Jasmine...

Isn’t it the other way around?

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 

It was there, in the gloom of the night, sitting in the passenger seat of Mother’s car, staring out into the phantom abyss, that I finally understood.

“Love must be given for it to be received,” I whispered.

It’s so obvious, isn’t it? But it’s not obvious at all.

It means, someone has to give love in order for anyone to receive it.

It has to start with someone. One person has to be the first to give.

Someone has to make a sacrifice so others can be happy.

It’s not a bargain. That person might never get anything in return. It might, in fact, never amount to anything at all but a cold, thankless, miserable existence.

How would that person feel?

How would they react, if all they do is give and sacrifice and suffer, and others greedily take and covet and prosper, returning nothing, not even praise, not even thanks?

The person who could carry that burden-

I glanced at Mother.

I closed my eyes.

Mr. Beret’s scowl appeared.

I opened my eyes. My memory swirled back to the gym, seeing everyone there, all the love I had received.

Undeserved.

I remembered the lone figure slinking out the back door.

I had everyone. He had no one.

Who will love him?...

Step 5: Love

...I will.
I will love him.
That will be my purpose.
That will be my burden.
That will be my sacrifice.
That will be my reason to live.

I opened my phone and looked through the numbers. There he was. Dialing his number...

It rang until the final beat, but at the last second, it clicked live.

“Who is it?” came his weary voice.

“Ethan. It’s me, Jasmine.”

“Hey.” A very tired, very forced ‘hey’.

“Ethan, I have a question.”

“Nnn.”

“Are you still thinking about killing yourself?”

“...”

*Hesitation.*

“... Yeah.”

I steadied my voice first before speaking.

“I would like to talk to you again. May I meet you at the Pokecenter tomorrow morning?”

“Yes.”

There was no hesitation in his answer.

“Alright. I’ll see you there.”

“’Kay.”

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Step 6: Say Goodbye.

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“Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

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...And A New Beginning
Chapter End Notes

So, everyone-
I hope you enjoyed this chapter. It has been the culmination of everything I have been writing towards for the past five years. This is not the end of Olivine, but it is the path to the end. And I would like to talk about that path.

My real life situation is not ideal for writing fanfiction. Honestly, I have the spare time. However, seeing where I'm at, that time is always better justified spent on other things, getting my life on a more sustainable trajectory, helping me reach certain goals, etc. As example, as I finish and submit this chapter, I should be asleep and resting for work which I'm scheduled to be at in five hours. I think that demonstrates the love I have for this story and sharing it with you all, but also some of the difficulties involved in writing it. To say nothing of the writer's block I encounter nearly every chapter now - I want the release candidate to be perfect! (it's anything but, but still...) How I justify to myself continuing to write a fanfiction about a child's game that will never earn me a living wage is this - it's groundwork for a piece of original fiction that I'm in the process of planning and rough-drafting.
So with these things in mind, I'll answer some common questions:
1) "Is Olivine Romance done?"
A) No.

2) "Are you going to stop writing Olivine?"
A) No, but for the above-mentioned reasons, expect multi-month gaps between chapters to become the norm.

3) "How much longer is Olivine?"
A) We are starting Part 5 of 7, meaning 3 parts remain. They won't be equal length. We're about 2/3rds of the way through my planned narrative. Call it 100-120 total chapters, ballpark.

4) "Are we going to find out Jasmine's secret?"
You might have already guessed it; if so, kudos. If not, it won't be explicitly stated until the very end.

As always, I welcome feedback and reviews. To be very honest, I love in-depth analysis, guesswork, and questions even more than praise, so I love that kind of stuff and please submit to your heart's pleasure. I also don't mind criticism and outright flaming, but would prefer specific, detailed attacks (and most preferably directed at the text, and not my own person, and certainly not other readers or 3rd parties).

Olivine brings me joy to write. I'm a sucker for catharsis. I like reading my own works. I hope I will endure and continue it all the way to its conclusion, and right now, that is my intent. Thank you for reading and experiencing this fic along with me.
“WE’RE SOOORRRRY! I SWEAR! WE LOVE YOU JASMINE! PLEASE PICK UP! COME ON! I LOVE I SWEAR I LOVE YOU! COME TO GOLDENROD, I’LL TAKE YOU TO A HOCKEY GAME THERE’S A BUNCH OF CUTE BOYS WE CAN HOOK YOU UP! I DON’T UNDERSTAND MORTY IS SUCH A LOSER YOU DON’T HAVE TO THROW YOUR LIFE AWAY BECAUSE OF A MAN-WHORE LIKE HIM!!! WE CARE SO MUCH ABOUT YOU PLEASE SAY SOMETHING PLEASE PICK UP THE PHONE! I’ve got ice cream. It’s vanilla, your favorite flavor. FOR THE LOVE OF ARCEUS I LOVE YOU AND DON’T WANT TO LOSE YOU!”

Whitney’s voice boomed out of the phone’s speaker and splintered my eardrums. This wasn’t just a voice message either, she sent a whole video, the better to put her typhoon-strength waterworks on display. She reminded me of a kid I once knew who went berserk after someone trashed her favorite Poliwag collectible plushy. They literally flooded the boy’s locker room by hijacking a fire truck.

Wait a minute.

That was also Whitney.

“Enjoying your pity party?” Mother surprised me, leaning over my shoulder. I jumped, startled.

“Mother!”

Pity party.

There’s that phrase again.

“I told you I wasn’t doing it for attention. I really was going to kill myself,” I said bitterly.

“Tauros shit. I know you. You’re too headstrong. If you were serious you would have gone through with it. Where are you going?” Mother crossed her arms.

I was huffing and fuming. At Mother’s insensitive remarks, yes, but also the fact that it was 7:15 in the morning and it already felt like I was late for my promised meeting. This was the one tardy mark I swore not to receive. Yet, as soon as I made a move towards the front door, a block of iron interceded. Trying to push past her didn’t work. Nor did struggling, as she caught me in a vice grip.

“Quit. Quit- cut it out! You’re not going anywhere!”

“I am too! I have to go! Right NOW!”

“Sht- stop- Jas- damn it! STOP!”

She wrestled me to a standstill.

“I’m not letting you go out just to prove me wrong,” she said.
“I’m not going to kill myself!” I retorted.

“Are you even listening to yourself? Let alone me! Good grief!”

She grabbed me by both wrists, spun me around, and pinned my arms against my back.

“Ouch! You’re hurting me!”

“It had better hurt.”

She leaned over me, pinning my head against the staircase railing.

*Arceus, this woman is strong!*

It’s absurd, she too short, too skinny to be overpowering me like this.

“Fine!” I yelled. “Let me go! I give, I give!”

I relaxed a moment to give her the impression I was surrendering. She wasn’t fooled at all. As soon as I had leeway, I tried bolting for the door. She caught me by the neck and slung me back down on the steps. My field of vision went through a whirl before coming to rest on the foyer ceiling.

Damn it, it’s like the bad old days, right before I moved out. My back hurt from the impact, my arms ached from being twisted, and my neck felt like someone was choking me. Oh, yeah, never mind my feelings. Those weren’t totally clobbered at the moment or anything.

“I don’t get why you’re so damn insistent on offing yourself elsewhere. It would be easy enough to just slit your wrist in the bathtub. Do you hate this house that much?” she asked bitingly.

“Would you honestly want to clean up after me? Your own messes are bad enough,” I replied.

“Ah, yes, the kitchen. That’s my vested interest in keeping you around, I’m going to need help cleaning it up.”

“Why should I pick up your mess? I’m the victim here.”

“No, you’re not. You’re the cause. You will be hel-”

That remark ticked me off- I lashed out with my feet, trying a Double Kick. She deftly batted them aside and returned a single kick to my midriff, completely knocking the air out of me. After that all resistance ceased. She stood over me, glowering, until I recovered. What was amazing is that through all of this, she seemed so damn calm, never raising her voice.

“Why do you have to be the kind of parent who made me want to kill myself?! I choked out, trying badly to repress tears.

“Why do you have to be the kind of daughter that makes me wish you had the guts to go through with it?”

“I was going to. I was at the bridge.”

Memories of last night haunted me. There was no real sleep between then and now.

Mother grunted. She pulled me up and rough housed me into the study chair. I couldn’t face her, so instead looked around. The old cabinet to my right caught my attention. It was worn and the paint was splintering off. I could still see the repair work, the awkward nails and globs of glue, where the
broken shelving had been put back together. Seven years ago, was it?

I wonder if she would notice the envelope missing. She hadn’t said anything about it. She had hardly said anything at all since we got in the car. Probably because we were all too tired last night. Now, however, came the reckoning.

She folded her arms and leaned against the entryway sill.

“Why do you claim you were going to kill yourself?” she asked in a level, clinical tone.

“I was going to kill myself,” I insisted.

“Why?” she repeated.

“Were you not listening last night? I told you.”

“Morty dumped you. So what. I told you that would happen. Your friends dumped you. Friends are expendable. The League fired you. It was a shitty job. You’re getting evicted. You can live in a shelter. Those aren’t reasons to commit suicide Jasmine. Do you see why I think you’re being a lying little attention whore?”

I lowered my eyes, glaring out from under my brow.

“If you thought I was lying, you wouldn’t have come to the gym.”

Oh that got to her. I could see her neck veins bulging and her lips curling.

“Do you care whether I live or die? I think you do, you’re going through an awful lot of trouble to stop me.”

I want her to slap me. I want her to scratch me, scar me, break my arm. Something I could finally bring to the police and show them “Here! Proof! Child abuse! Book her damn it!” But she didn’t take the bait.

“Cut it out. Tell me the truth.”

Oh? What if I told her the truth? But she already knows the truth. Telling her would be redundant, useless, lost on her.

Yeah but she doesn’t know I know. Would airing it out make her back off? Would it incite her? Would it shame her into becoming a decent human being? I doubt it. I shook my head and decided against it.

“I don’t have a future. That’s why. Even with your rotten circumstances, you had Dad. I have no one. I don’t even have Amphy. They took everything from me. EVERYTHING. And by ‘they’, I’m including you, Mother. Especially you.”

“You’re blaming me? Guess what. I don’t care. What happened next?”

“You don’t care. At all. That I tried to kill myself. And you’re one of the ones who drove me to it.”

“What did you expect, a hug? A kiss? It’s going to be alright? I’m sorry? What’s to apologize for? If I did, would you forgive me? I regret nothing I’ve done in the last twenty-four hours. You’re responsible for your own actions.”

“I would.”
“What?”

“I would forgive you.”

“You say you would forgive me- is what you mean, right? Words, Jasmine, words. There’s no way I could say sorry and mean it, just like there’s no way I could believe your words of forgiveness.”

“No. I would. I would believe them,” I insisted.

“Tauros shit.”

“Because I look up to you, and respect you, as a woman. I would believe you.”

“Naïve,” she muttered. She stepped back and paced around. Her guard was down.

“There was someone at the bridge,” I said.

“What?”

“You thought I chickened out? Right? That’s not what happened. I went to the bridge to jump off, but someone was there, and we talked, and it made me reconsider. And I need to go see them again, soon. It’s important.”


“The Pokecenter.”

Mother stared at me in silence. I shifted, with no reaction from her. I got up, she continued fixing her gaze on me but didn’t move. A tentative step past her, and nothing. Was this real? Was I free to go?

“I’ll drive you there,” she said.

Ha. Ha. Hahahaha. You’re kidding. ‘Free’ is such a relative concept.

“Would you be sad if I died?” I asked.

The car rolled to a stop at a red light.

“I would be angry,” she answered.

“I thought you wanted to get rid of me. I thought you didn’t care if I died.”

“We’re long past that point. You’re my daughter.”

“You said I wasn’t,” I pointed out.

“You are.”

“I’m an adult. You don’t have any legal obligation.”

“That doesn’t matter!” she snapped.
This woman...

She hates me.

She cares about me.

Two completely opposite, totally conflicted feelings.

This conundrum isn’t new to me. Her words of this morning only reaffirmed an observation I’ve made many, many, many times before. I know part of the picture, but the thing that eluded me, that I couldn’t wrap my head around, was the “Why?”. There was ample reason for one feeling or the other, to love me or to reject me, but not both, not at the same time. I wish I could understand. I wish I could bring myself to ask. There are so many things I wanted to know from her, her thoughts, her reasons, what led her to that point and that decision, and just maybe asking and sharing between us could make everything better. Then I weighed that against the slim, but real, possibility that voicing these questions aloud would cause her to plunge the car into oncoming traffic, and held my tongue.

“Okay. Now what?” We had parked in the Pokecenter parking lot. Mother remained in her seat, hands on the steering wheel. “Are you going inside?”

“I think so, yes.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I would rather you not.”

“A. I’m not letting you wander off alone. B. I want to meet this person.”

“It’s a boy,” I said.


“Someone I’ve known for a while.”

“What is this, another crush? Do you have feelings for him?”

“No, Mother. It’s not like that. I told you, I was going to jump. I really was. Do you believe me?”

“Sheesh. Yes, whatever, let’s say I believe you.”

I took a deep breath and looked her in the eye.

“I didn’t get the chance. I found him on the bridge. He was already there, he was trying to jump, he was on the edge. I stopped him. I don’t know why. But now he’s very messed up in the head and I care about him and I’ve decided it’s my job to watch over him and stop him from trying again. Do you understand now?”

“That is... not unbelievable.” She leaned back and stared blankly ahead. “Assuming you’re not making it up- and it does sound like a piece of fiction, but-”

“I’m telling the truth,” I said.

She nodded.

“I think you are.”
She does?!

“Now you believe me?”

“It doesn’t surprise me because of who raised you. He really rubbed off on you.”

That’s really weird. She’s much calmer than I expected, after all the vitriol that came before. She got out of the car. I followed suit.

“I want to meet him.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I want to make sure this boy isn’t playing you for sex.”

“That’s! No! No, Mother!”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t need help, just that he might be thinking of this as an opportunity. Inside your panties.”

“Mother that’s rude! And no, I really doubt that’s on his mind. And lastly, I don’t think someone like you should talk to him, it could set him off.”

“So he’s emotionally unstable.”

“Yes. To put it mildly.”

“A head-case.”

“That’s not putting it mildly,” I grumbled.

“And you’re going to play therapist for him.”

“Essentially.”

Mother got behind me and gave me a push forward. I looked at her bewilderedly.

“What?” she asked.

“You’re not going to say, “I don’t care! Do your own thing. Get out of my house!”?”

“You’re free to stay over for a few nights.”

“What about the fact that he’s a boy. That you don’t want me seeing? Or screwing?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“That he might rape me?”

“Well if you’re walking in fully informed, it’s not really rape, is it?”

I stared at her, glowering and confounded.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“I can’t help but feel this is the exact sort of situation you would yell at me for and forbid, so it feels strange that you’re encouraging it, and I’m scared.”
“Oh, you should be. You should be,” she said, menacingly, jokingly.

I pursed my lips and waited for a more reasonable response.

Mother raised her hands.

“Okay, fine. I’m curious. I want to see how you will handle this, if you can deal with someone as fucked up as you are without breaking. It’ll be interesting to know what you think, after being put in my position.”

Ahhhh. So that’s her angle.

It’s a cynical one, but as long as it keeps her cooperative, I’ll take it.

“Please stay back a bit, give us some privacy.

“Is that him?”

She nodded to a droopy, dark-haired boy slowly dragging his feet out the front door of the Pokecenter.

“Yeah, that’s him.” I sighed.

Mother tilted her head.

“Reminds me of David. Kind of cute. You do have my terrible taste in men.”

“Ethan!” I waved and went out to greet him. He perked up and took one solitary step in my direction. Mother, thankfully, held back and watched from a distance.

“Jasmine.”

“Ethan.”

I looked him over.

He was wearing the same clothes from last night, shaggy field pants, black shirt, red sweatshirt. He smelled. Apparently, he hadn’t taken a shower since we parted. His eyes were baggy and blinking. His hair was disheveled and oily. His shoulders were slouching and crooked. All in all, I’m not too sure of Mother’s assessment.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Eh.” He shrugged.

“Do you feel alright? Physically?”

“Kinda sore. The beds in the center aren’t that great.”

“What about food? Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

“Have you eaten?”

“A cereal bar.”
“That’s not much.”

“It’s okay.”

“Do want something more?”

“No thanks.”

“Do you have anything else to wear? That doesn’t look warm enough.”

The temperature was warm enough to begin melting the thin layer of snow on the ground— and not much warmer than that.

“I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you fine fine?” I asked, with emphasis.

“I...” He shook his head.

“Ethan, I know it’s indelicate to start off with this, but I’m very worried.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve decided I don’t want to jump anymore.”

That brought out half a smile.

“And it’s because of you. So will you make me a promise?”

“What is it?” he asked.

“If you don’t, I won’t. If I don’t, you won’t. Understood?”

He inhaled, deeply, and let it out slowly. Then he nodded.

“Let’s go somewhere to talk.”

“Who is she?” Ethan asked, having noticed the lady staring intently at us.

“That is... Mother,” I said like a criminal confessing.

“Isn’t she the reason you were on the bridge?”

“Ahhhhhhaha. Yeah.”

“The same person who hit you when we got back?”

“Yep. It was more of a slap, but yes, that was her.”

“What is she doing here?” Ethan asked nervously.

I didn’t want to tell him the full truth, it might scare him.
“Well, I kind of did put up a suicide note on the side of the gym wall. I’m not entirely at liberty to go where I please right now. I was lucky to be able to come see you.”

Ethan kept glancing over my shoulder towards Mother. I looked over to see what he was seeing. The woman was *smirking*.

“She’s not going to follow us, is she?”

“I think she is.”

“That- um. I don’t like that.”

“Sorry, but I can’t do anything about it.”

“She looks like your older sister.”

“I can’t do anything about that either.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” he said.

I couldn’t help but crack a smile.

Was that a flirt? If Ethan’s flirting, we’re miles ahead of expected progress.

“Enough about Mother. Ignore her. What about you? Let’s find someplace and sit down. I want to know more about what’s going on in your life.”

“Okay.”

The spot we ended up finding was the exact bench Ash and I had conversed at a few days ago. At first Ethan took a seat and I stood facing him. Then I remembered what it felt like with Ash looming over me and thought better. Ethan saw my intention and quickly wiped the bench clear of snow with his sleeve. I curtsied and took my seat next to him. We settled in. Mother found her own seat across the field. She got out her phone and began tapping through it, apparently bored and content to just keep tabs on my location.

I tried gathering my thoughts to figure out what to say, but it was Ethan who spoke up first.

“Do you want to know why I was at bridge?”

“Ahh! No, I wasn’t planning on asking,” I replied.

“Oh.” He tilted his head down.

“I wanted to know more about you.” He frowned, a “say what?” expression. “I mean, we’ve technically known each other for years, but I never got to *know* you. I’d like to rectify that.”

“But knowing someone doesn’t happen just by chatting,” he said.

“You’re right, but that’s how it starts. So let’s start.”

“Okay,” he said, shrugging. “What do you want to know?”

...
especially one with as many adventures as this kid, could be condensed into one three hour conversation. Yet it was a good start, a fine cliff notes edition that filled out the bare outline I had from previous encounters.

His full name is Ethan Aurelius Hibiki. His middle name is an old word for “Gold”, which some people from his hometown call him as a nickname. He is twenty years old, turning twenty-one this February. His favorite food is sushi, his favorite color is red, his favorite holiday is Summer White Day, and his favorite subject is history. He loves science fiction and weird, cerebral stories about the unknown. He enjoys indoor and outdoor activities equally. His ideal day would be sleeping in late, hunting wild Pokemon in the morning, swimming in the afternoon, and then watching movies or playing video games until late at night. He’s been travelling on his Pokemon journey since he was thirteen, more or less nonstop.

There was more. I won’t bother relating everything, as much of it was mundane, interchangeable anecdotes and trivia that would bore you. What I’ll relate are the important bits, the things I knew would be most difficult for him. Or so I thought.

It turns out, once he starts feeling safe, Ethan is actually kind of prone to oversharing.

“I’m not sexist. I swear I’m not.”

“As I recall, you very first words to me were “Hey there sexy lady!”.”

“I thought I said “cute girl”. ”

“No, it was definitely “sexy lady”.”

“That is not how I sound when I say it.”

“It is too.”

“Is not.”

“Is too! Do I need to get a voice recorder?”

“Mmph.” He huffed. “Okay. But it’s not like, you know, I was trying to hit on you. It didn’t seem like a big deal to me back then. It was supposed to be a compliment. Every girl was a sexy lady to me, and I thought I should be honest.”

“It rubbed a lot of women the wrong way.”

“I figured that out.”

He rubbed his cheek, as if remembering an indignant slap to the face from long ago.

“You’re saying you were just being immature.”

“I get it, it feels like I’m casing you for sex. It was wrong. I’m sorry. I never meant it like that. But, I just... it upsets me.”

“Hmm?”

“New Bark Town, out in the country, my school buddies, my family, the girls- no one took it seriously when I was growing up.”

“I think that’s because girls were too afraid to speak up,” I said. “You’re from a conservative area,
“Girls don’t have the freedom to speak their minds.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think it’s just that.” Ethan spread his arms wide, pantomiming a hug- or a bubble surrounding him. “People’s personal space is growing bigger. Emptier. We’re all getting paranoid about intimacy, afraid to get hurt, afraid to hurt one another. Human touch is becoming taboo. I have trouble coping with that. Growing up like I did, if you acted the way we do now, you’d be considered a sociopath.”

“No! Really?”

“Yeah. Like, the girls would complain all the time about the guys who grabbed their boobs and hinny’s, but then you see it’s those same guys they start making out with and dating. The guys who say “I’m too nice for that!” and keep their hands off? They’re the weirdos, the anti-social losers.”

“But that is so backwards!” I mulled it over. “Is that why you acted the way you did? You didn’t want to be a loser?”

Ethan sighed.

“I had trouble fitting in like that. I didn’t want to hit up on girls. It just felt like I had to, in order to fit in. And you know what?”

“What?” I asked.

“I liked it better that way.”

“You did? Even though it was so hard on you? Even though you thought it was wrong?”

“Yeah!” Ethan nodded and smiled. “It was awkward and embarrassing, and there was always drama- but we got to know each other, and you could make friends. We weren’t afraid to get a little dirty, emotionally. Hurting someone’s feelings didn’t get you a lawsuit. It wasn’t fake. It was fun.”

“When you put it that way- it sounds like my middle school.” I thought back to my years in Ecruteak. “Morty always bullied me, sometimes in really perverted ways. But, I guess that never made me hate him. It was fun, and funny, and I gave as good as I got. Was it different because we were kids? Or because views have changed?”

“Don’t know.”

“Right now if a guy stole my panties, I wouldn’t think of him as just a jerk having fun. I would see him as a sexual predator. I think it’s because we’re adults now, and everything is more serious. We have to act our age, we have to be respectful of others.”

“I do, I am,” Ethan insisted.

“I know that. You’re a different person from back then. I thought you were very mature at the summit, it surprised me.”

“But do you think it’s better?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Ethan bowed his head.

“If acting mature and respectful is so important- why am I so damn depressed? Why can’t I make any friends anymore?”
Whereupon Ethan’s point hit me like a Bullet Punch to the head.

“I... uh... mmm.”

Ethan turned to me.

“I’m ugly on the inside. And weird. And crude, perverted, and needy. Do you really want to get to know me? Are you sure you won’t get disgusted?” He turned away. “That’s what I have to worry about, all the time. Do I open up and be honest with people? Then something happens- I blow my temper, or say something sexual or mean, and they get scared and turn on me. So I tell myself I’ll be more restrained, I’ll be nice and respectful. We all talk and have a nice time and swap Pokenav numbers. Then I never hear from them again. There’s no way to win. I feel like I’m in a cage, with all these rules, all these rules about how I have to act, what I can say, what’s okay and what’s taboo.”

“Do I want to be a prude or a slut?” I murmured.

“Huh?”

“It’s like that for you, isn’t it? I had different people telling me what to do with my body, and calling the opposite side some nasty things. It’s kind of the same for you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah!” He pointed at me. “So you’re a girl, and it’s either “prude” or “slut”, like you said. Just replace that with “loser” or “creep” for boys. And they expect us to magically hit a sweet spot. It’s not fair! It’s fucking—”

For a moment, Ethan’s eyes lit up and he was animated and livid. The moment faded, though, and he settled back down. I sensed his argument in his own actions. He could probably go on ranting about this subject, but was too worried of coming off as a screeching sexist in front of me. It’s okay. I appreciate his restraint, and he got his point across. What he revealed helped me understand his fourteen-year-old-self better, and some other things about his relationships.

He recovered and offered an “Excuse my language,” as way of apology, which told me even more about the man he had become.

Later on:

“It didn’t sound like you had a touchy-feely family, though.”

“Mom is. Sis is. Bro isn’t. He takes after Dad. Actually, no, he’s the least touchy-feely one of us. Dad would bear hug and rough me up, and he liked to drag me aside for “man talks”. Bro was more, eh, like he wanted to make an island of himself.”

“*Man talks*?” I repeated, interested.

Ethan scratched his head and glanced aside, clearly embarrassed. Mr. Hibiki was a big part of what sent Ethan to the bridge, any little info on that relationship felt important and worth exploring.

“He would drag me on fishing trips or wherever and sit me down and give me long lectures.”

“About what?”

“Oh, different things. His expectations for me, mostly. How I was supposed to act towards women. Listen to my elders. Obey my superiors. Don’t steal, don’t abuse power, don’t lie, things like that. Stand up for myself. Speak clearly, and louder. He always complained I was too quiet. Don’t cry in front of others. Dress nicely, take pride in your appearance. Pretty much, How to Be A Man, courses
“I see. It sounds like he was very hands-on with your upbringing,” I said.

“When he could spare the time, yeah, sure. It wasn’t so bad when I was little. He was pretty cool to me back then. I won all the “My dad could beat up your dad!” arguments. He had more time to spend with us, and our problems were pretty simple. It was when we started hitting puberty that things got complicated and—” Ethan paused. “Bro got the brunt of it. Then Sis did her thing, and— eh. By the time it was my turn, Dad was fed up and just didn’t want to deal with me.”

“So then...” I said, trying to draw out more information.

“I told him I wanted to go with Lyra on a Pokemon journey. The next afternoon, my room was packed up. All my toys and junk were thrown in the trash. My backpack was just sitting there ready to go. He wouldn’t even speak with me face to face. Left a note on my bed.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t want to say. But I’ll add, the note had 500,000 Pokedollars inside it.”

“Ah. Basically, don’t come back,” I paraphrased.

“Nnn.”

Ethan stared off wistfully.

“I should have followed David,” he muttered.

“Who?”

“Bro.”

“Your brother’s name is David?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow! That’s my dad’s name! What a coincidence!”

“Something in common. Hey! But I bet that’s all they have common,” Ethan said.

“Aloof, vacant, barely-even-there?”

“Never mind, they’re just like each other.”

“Where did he go that you wish you had followed?” I asked.

“The military,” Ethan answered.

“Oh! Oh.”

“Army rangers. He enlisted as a JUCO officer, got promoted to full commission. It’s pretty cool, he says he can’t tell me what he does or else he’d have to shoot me. Not sure I believe him, but I want to, it’s what I tell others.”

“Well I see why you couldn’t turn to him, if he’s based somewhere far off.”

“Blackthorn, but it’s not like the miles matter as much as the culture.”
“Hmm? Why would that be a problem?”

“He’s military, I’m civilian. Different ways of thinking. We love each other, but we don’t see things the same way.”

“Oh. I get it.”

All the things that Ethan is afraid of being seen as, it’s not like an army officer would be any more sympathetic of compared to the general public. It would be the opposite, I wager.

Hmm. What would an army officer and court justice look down upon?

Was Ethan a criminal? Is his fetish illegal?

Wait a minute, there’s something off about that supposition. Ethan indicated his father and brother didn’t see eye-to-eye.

“But you said your brother bore the brunt of your father’s... attention...?” I stated. “I don’t understand. An officer in the special forces sounds like something your father would approve of. That’s an accomplishment, isn’t it?”

Ethan shook his head.

“Not good enough. Dad’s the seventeenth Hibiki to hold the Chief Magistrate or Chief of Police position in New Bark Town. His dad and his dad and his dad all graduated from Sherbert Law. The army isn’t what Bro really wanted, he wanted to become a rock star. But Dad was going to railroad him into law school. Enlistment was kind of a copout, even if it was probably the only way he could escape. Dad couldn’t complain in public, it would look pretty bad for his career.”

“Is that an elected post?”

“Yeah.”

“I see. He can’t badmouth his son doing something so patriotic without losing votes.”

“Exactly.”

“What about your sister?”

Ethan turned aside.

“That’s way more complicated,” he said, and refused to elaborate.

My intuition kicked in.

“Does it have anything to do with your fetish?” I asked.

Ethan pursed his lips.

That’s a yes.

“Yeah, she knows what it is. Thanks to her, Dad found out,” Ethan admitted.

“Oh. My. Gosh.”

“She’s... Sis is weird. Really weird. Even compared to me. She’s difficult to handle when she gets
into one of her moods. If you want the gist of what happened: Dad has different rules for boys and girls. Bro left on his own. I was forced out. For Sis, it wasn’t “My way or the highway!”. He tried to keep her home, he tried to “fix” her. It didn’t work. At all. It kind of blew up, in a big way, even beyond the family. Dad lost jurisdiction on a big test case because of something he said to her in public. That infuriated him. The drama went nuclear. By the end, we were all wasted and sick. I tried reaching out to him for help, and he didn’t want to deal with me. He said I was sick in the head.”

“What about your mother?” I asked.

“I love her. I swear I love her with all my heart. But she’s a doorknob. She doesn’t put up any resistance to Dad, whatsoever.”

“And because of your father, it wouldn’t be safe to see her anyways.”

“Don’t do that,” Ethan said.

“Hmm? Do what?”

“I know what you’re thinking. Why didn’t I try to contact someone, anyone, before going to jump. It’s not that simple. Don’t try that angle.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Just don’t!” he said, half-yelling.

“Fine, I get it. Wrong approach. But if you put it that way, it just makes me want to know what’s really eating at you. Help me understand.”

Ethan grunted in displeasure. I poked him in the shoulder.

“Damn it!” he exclaimed, batting my offending digit away. “You want to know why I can’t be open? It’s because I find it hard to believe anyone would really, truly care, if they knew me for what I am. I’ve never met a single person who found out who didn’t abuse me in one way or another.”

-thereupon we spent approximately twenty minutes of basically him accusing me of “You don’t care!” and me retorting “Yes I do!”. When next the conversation turned productive, I managed to steer it towards his former girlfriend.

“I’m so sorry. It was my idea. It’s all my fault.” One apology left his lips after another. I stared increduously, on the verge of anger even, upon learning the truth.

How could he?

How dare he!

This ignorant ass of a buffoon! The world is better off without him! I truly mean that! The fiendish naïveté of his actions are beyond compare! Witness his confession, hear his crime!:

“I convinced Lyra to become a Pokemon Trainer.”

Thanks to this clueless Aipom, the monstrosity known as Lyra Kotone was unleashed on the Johto League, and nothing and no one has been safe since.

“That girl’s Typhlosion has put five Pokemon into the hospital!” I exclaimed.

“Fifty-four,” Ethan corrected.
“Fifty-what?!"

“We never told you about the Safari Zone incident, did we? With the Chinchou superspawn?”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Ah, I’ll save that one.”

“Did she hurt them on purpose?” I asked, a little scared.

“Well it was that or die to a Gastro Acid flood.”

“Yes, well. The point being! Such a scenario could only come to fruition because of the existence of that toadstool-capped demon!”

“And for that, I am profoundly sorry.”

“You must have known her for a long time.”

“Since we were six—”

“Wow! That’s younger than I thought.”

“-months old.”

Mouth. Meet. Floor.

I gawked at him, stunned.

“Since you were babies?!”

“Yes.”

“That is taking the doomed childhood romance trope too far!”

How was I supposed to measure up to that?! Lyra had a twelve year head start on me! I’ll be thirty-four before I know him as long! Thirty-four! An old hag!

“Does Lyra know your secret? I would assume so, seeing as you two were- um, err.. uh... “adult-gaming” with each other.”

“Know my secret?” Ethan glanced up, checking his memory. “She might be the reason I have this kink in the first place. Huh. Never thought of it that way. She was one of the only people who didn’t outright reject me for it. Not that it mattered in the end. But I guess I forgot that I never had to out myself to her, she was there when it started. So yeah.” He faced me again. “She knows.”

“I was worried, you know,” I said.

“About what?”

“The after-party, in Goldenrod. She was using your secret as leverage to get you to dance. I can understand not wanting to share a deep secret. Even if the person doesn’t straight up reject you, they can abuse your trust and use it against you. That’s been one of my worries too.”

Relief washed over Ethan’s face.

“I’m glad. Not many people get that,” he told me.
“It was terrible of her,” I went on. “I want you to know I won’t do that. Or well, I’m not perfect, I might do it by accident, but I’ll give you collateral to make sure the meltdown is mutual. But if you feel like you can’t take that risk, I understand, and it’s better if I don’t know. Whichever way, I don’t want to become your next Lyra, I don’t want to be such a horrible person that would drive you to suicide.”

Ethan frowned, displeased.

“It’s not like she was a malicious bitch,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Oh. But I thought, after all she put you through...”

“Stop.”

He held his hand up for silence.

“Jasmine. Let me be clear. Lyra is not evil. She’s just a moron.”

Ah!

Well.

Okay then.

Perhaps I overestimated Ethan’s infatuation with the girl.

“I don’t hate her. I don’t blame her. She’s smart, even a genius in some ways, and just painfully ignorant in others. She didn’t understand the implications of what was going on. For her, my secret was no worse than an embarrassing habit, like “picking your nose”.”

“Oh I see. She is simply a complete and utter ditz,” I stated.

“Exactly,” Ethan agreed.

“May I ask, did you care for her?”

“Yes.”

“And she for you?”

“She did. Our relationship was rocky, granted, but I don’t think it was anything malicious that did it in. I can’t blame her for what she did, it’s as simple as her loving one guy a little more than another.”

“Maybe that was for the best,” I said. “When I met you at the summit, you were handsome looking, patient, and modest, nothing like what I remembered. I thought you had matured, but now I’m not sure. It seems to me, knowing more about it, that trying to date Lyra was more than you could handle, and it was wearing you down. Hear me out. When you’re depressed because a lover dumped you, I tend to think it’s because you put that lover on a pedestal. That’s why you tried so hard to keep her. That’s why it was so painful losing her. Was that the case?”

“No.”

He denied my supposition.

“I never thought she was the girl I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Losing her hurt because she was all I had. She was family when my own family was disintegrating. She was a partner when
everyone else thought I was too weird to hang out with. She would have sex with me even knowing my fetish. She- what?”

“Um. Nothing.”

“You’re making a face.”

“Is sex really that important to you?” I asked.

“I am a guy,” he said, as if that was an answer.

“Do you need sex to be happy?” I asked.

“What kind of question is that?”

“Well, I’m here to try to help you feel better and not suicidal,” I said.

He blushed.

“It’s not like I need it. But if we’re just talking about what would make me feel better- it would help, a little.”

“Okay- but don’t expect it from me,” I said.

Ethan frowned.

“Of course not! We’re not dating.”

“You’re not even thinking about it?” I asked.

“Jasmine...” He squirmed.

“Are you sure?”

“No!”

That was emphatic.

Ethan sat silently for a few minutes while I gave him room to recombobulate.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last. “I don’t know how to deal with that topic right now. I can never tell how comfortable someone is with talking about it.”

“Apology accepted. Ethan, are you worried that me being a girl is going to be a problem here?”

He nodded.

“I’m worried too. Mother,” and I nodded to the lady across the lot, “she was saying you’re just going to use me to get laid. A pity-fuck.”

“Never!” he cried out.

“I want to believe you. I’m going to trust you. You’re fine if this never develops beyond friendship, right?”

“Are you my friend?” he asked.
My mouth dropped open a bit. I clamped it shut, and then slowly nodded in the affirmative. Ethan beamed.

“That’s more than I hoped for.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t need a lover right now. Sex has caused all sorts of problems for me. It’s a nightmare.” I lay a hand on him. “I still want to be the kind of the friend you can open up to about sex. Eventually, anyways. Don’t try to bury your sexuality or ignore it. I know it’s what drove you to the bridge.”

“Another time, though, right?” Ethan begged.

“Sure. With one exception. There’s something I’ve been incredibly curious about since I heard of it.” Ethan was getting goosebumps, scared stiff in anticipation.

“What kind of sex involves chocolate milk?” I blurted out.

This has been bothering me ever since Erika mentioned it. And by bothering me, I mean in the “between-the-thighs” sense.

“Well, ah, eh, uhhhh... You see, you drip the chocolate all over her vag, and then lick it up, then kiss her so she can get a taste, and uh I don’t like that look you’re giving me Jasmine.”

I buried my luminescent face in my hands.

Moving on!

I mentioned friends, and he confirmed that he had no one besides Lyra and Silver. Sure, there was a whole gaggle of acquaintances, but no one he was particularly close to.

“From now on, consider me inside your circle, alright?” I said.

“But we barely—”

“Just do it! I’m going to take care of you. Trust me.”

“Fine, fine.”

What came after was a long narrative about Ethan, Lyra, and Silver, and their amazing, chaotic journey across Johto. He told me the most bizarre stories I’d ever heard, half of which I swore were blatant lies.

“Lyra was attacked by an imaginary Entei created by a swarm of Unknowns to be a mommy to this little girl, who was actually a dream figment of a teen girl who was an orphan, and we had to set her free by fighting like five different versions of her in a crystal tower. I battled the eighteen-year-old. She was hot.” Ethan said this with a completely straight face.

“I don’t believe you,” I said flat out.

And so on. I was a little interested when he started talking about Silver, the strange rivalry he and Lyra got into, which morphed into a close friendship between the three of them. There was another unbelievable story about battling a Godjira-sized Tyranitar on a ship and then one about a resort-vacation on a space-bridge. It struck me how much affection Ethan had for Silver. We dipped back into talking about sexuality, briefly.

“When I asked if you were gay, you kind of said you might, or wished you were?” I ventured.
“Does that have anything to do with Silver?”

“No! Nah! Nuh-uh.” He shook his head vigorously. “I said “If only”. I’m not gay. But if you asked a fujoshi, me and Silver would sure look like a couple. Lyra liked the idea.” He sighed in exasperation. “Even if you count- meh. Never mind. If I was gay, Dad would still hate me. It wouldn’t change anything about my family. But-” Ethan paused, anxiously staring at me.

“Go on.” I waved for him to come out with it.

“Boys are so much easier to get along with than girls.”

I giggled.

Then sighed.

Then frowned.

“I feel the opposite,” I said.

“It’s got to be a gender-specific thing,” he insisted.

“Probably,” I agreed.

“I wouldn’t be worrying about what other people think, or how to find a partner. I wouldn’t feel ostracized by absolutely everyone. It would make things bearable. But I’m not gay. I don’t think I can be happy without a girlfriend.”

“Sorry to tell you, but I think you wouldn’t be happy being gay either. Relationships don’t come any easier for homosexuals. I know from experience.”

Ethan tilted his head questioningly.

I bit my lip.

“Someone I know. Not me,” I told him.

“Nnn.”

The topic meandered after that.

There was one story which absolutely perked my interest, one I had heard about before, but hadn’t gotten the full telling.

“Can you tell me about going to Mt. Silver and finding Ash?” I asked.

Ethan grimaced. He nodded, went still, and then looked at his watch. “I’m getting hungry, and it’s a long story.”

“Oh.”

Stamp “Disappointment” across my billboard forehead.

He must have seen my reaction and figured it out.

“The super-short version: Ash said he was going to the mountain to train for the world championship. Oak and Stone figured out he was just camping out and sulking. Some political thing.
Oak tasked Blue, Green, me, Lyra, and Silver to go and fetch him. It was hard hiking all the way up there and we were pissed by the time we found him. He didn’t want to come back. We kind of had to threaten to beat him up and carry him back with us. He roped us into settling it like Pokemon Trainers, one-on-one battles. I was last in the lineup and barely got a lucky win. A month later he’s hoisting the trophy and Stone has got him under his thumb.”

“Do you know Ash’s deal with Stone?”

Ethan shook his head.

“Don’t have a clue.”

Conversation then turned to a topic that made both of us happy: Pokemon battles! We shared stories and tips in exhausting detail. It was actually exciting for me. Ethan wasn’t just a good trainer, he was a smart one. He broke down tactics in precise detail in places a guy like Morty would skim over with generalities.

“So it’s hyperbolic versus parabolic firing solutions, right? You’ve got to make sure the opponent is on the tangent and your own Pokemon’s center of mass is on the focus, or else the ranging shot won’t hone the fire for effect, it’ll miss by, like $1/2\sin X$. That’s in radians.” -as one example.

Which all led to my final, ultimate topic of the day:

“Am I helping?” I asked him, out of the blue.

“Huh?” Ethan regarded me with wonder.

“Do you still feel suicidal?”

Ethan’s shoulders lowered, as did his expression.

“I don’t know,” he said. “A little,” he added. “Why do you ask?”

“If I said I’ve seen enough, I’m done here, would you try to kill yourself again?”

We had been talking so long, and were really getting into it, that I think both he and I forgot what led to this conversation, and what it was for. He was not pleased to be reminded.

“You said you wouldn’t,” he said sharply.

“It’s a hypothetical. For me, to get a sense of where your head is at.”

He shook and bowed said head.

I might have ambushed him with this question.

His answer made apparent the difficulty he was grappling with.

“It’s always like this,” he said. “You said, “Isn’t there someone you can go to?” And I told you it doesn’t work like that. That’s because I feel fine as long as I’m talking with someone, getting attention and whatever. It’s when we’re done, when I have to leave and be alone again, that it comes back- the doubt. The wondering if I did right, if I made a good impression, if I had fun, and if so, why doesn’t it last? Then it always morph into that- the feeling that everything good in my life is behind me, and I’ve got nothing to look forward to, just Death sitting and waiting for me.”

“So it’s when you’re alone-?” I said.
“-is when I feel most depressed.”

I see. I see. This makes sense, and it feeds into my final point, the one I hoped would work to stabilize him, even when I’m not around to baby him.

“Ethan, I know you’ve been hurt by a lot of people. Let down and emotionally abused. I can’t tell you whether you should reconcile with each individual one or remove them from your life. I can tell you that the more people you love and let into your life, the more chances you’ll have to spend time with them. But maybe that’s not a good solution for you. You can’t be around others 100% of the time, and quite frankly, I’m no better at making friends than you, so I empathize there. Maybe you need medication. But there is one thing I think could help, but you have work to do if you want to benefit from it. Something you are at fault for. A mistake you and I both made, but I think it’s not too late for you to rectify yours.”

“What?”

“Those you hurt, and who need you, and can be by your side for the times everyone else has departed.”

“Who?” he asked.

“Your Pokemon.”

Ethan blinked, rapidly, and I realized it was the prelude to tears. He bent over his knees and began breathing heavily.

“I don’t-”

“It doesn’t matter whether you deserve them or not!”

“But I-”

“When you were talking about Heracles and Azu and Flurry, I could tell. You don’t feel like your Pokemon belong to you. They’re not your pets. They’re your friends. And you feel like a worthless human being and you’re worried about their opinion of you as if they were human beings. Am I right? I know I’m right. That’s a beautiful sentiment, but it’s wrong. You’re not their friend. You’re their trainer, their parent. They look up to you and rely on you. You have to go to them and make up with them. They can be the stopgap you need when others have abandoned you.”

“Ah.”

Ethan’s eyes were downcast.

“Let’s go. Come on.”

“I...”

He wouldn’t budge on his own, so I grappled his wrist and tugged him off the bench.

“Where are they?” I asked.

“Inside the PC,” he said. That’s super convenient! We can go inside the Pokecenter. I pointed to the building for the sake of my inquiring mother. She waved us on and went back to her phone.

I prodded, pushed, and jerked him inside, collapsed on to the couch for a breather, and then went back at it for round two. He didn’t exactly fight me, but remained dead weight the entire way to the
PC terminal.

“Bring them out.”

“Which ones?” he asked.

“All of them.”

He cringed.

“Do it!”

“I don’t...”

“Ethan!” I spoke up. He jerked his head, coming eye to eye with me. “Don’t make my mistake! I let all my Pokemon go, I won’t ever see them again! I feel like an idiot now, it makes me sick, it makes me want to go and jump into the sea again. Don’t make me feel bad for you and your Pokemon too!”

At that, he gave in.

“Okay. It’s kind of embarrassing, but I guess I can try. For you.”

“For them,” I said, correcting him.

So, as he entered the commands and withdrew the creatures one by one, I stood back. This wasn’t a moment meant for me. I needed to give him room. In backing up, I accidentally bumped into a body.

“Are you done here?” she asked.

It was Mother.

“Not yet,” I answered. “Are you in a hurry?”

“I’ve got a meeting in one hour. A lawyer I’m trying to hire.”

“We should be done by then,” I said.

“I recognize him,” Mother said. “He’s been around here sometime, hasn’t he?”

“He was there when Ash came.”

“Did you fix him?” she asked.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

“That’s not my job. That’s their job,” I said, while pointing to the reunion of trainer and Pokemon.


They sat around him, heads bowed, his as well, sniffling and cooing. In mumbled, unheard words Ethan spoke to them, and they listened in various capacities. Aibo was the most excitable and danced
around in frustration. Azu was the most direct. She clobbered Ethan ineffectually over and over with alternating fists, her face puffed up and pouting. Ethan looked like a sack of potatoes, taking the weak-hearted beating without resistance. This only seemed to make Azumarill more upset. Suddenly, he rushed forward and gathered her up in his arms. The waterworks began in earnest, from her, and from him, and all the rest, all at once.

Ethan was not the greatest Pokemon trainer, and he didn’t catch and train the strongest Pokemon. Each of these creatures were there not because they were good in battles, but because he liked them, and formed a bond with them through the circumstances that led them to one another. They were his closest friends. It tore me up, trying to imagine what they were going through right now. I couldn’t fathom why Ethan would want to abandon them. It wasn’t like my situation. I was a terrible trainer, a terrible person, even to my Pokemon. He was so kind and honest with his Pokemon. He did deserve their companionship, and it struck me as baffling and tragic that he would throw that bond away. I wish I could know what was going through his mind when he made that decision.

There’s something there.

This is more than embarrassment over a perverted fetish.

It’s more than the wrath of an overbearing father.

Whatever it is that’s afflicting him, it made him want to abandon his precious partners, whom he was so close to.

Something is wrong with Ethan, on a fundamental level, and I’ve only just started to scratch the surface.

I closed my eyes.

You have no job, Jasmine. Nothing else to do. All the time in the world to figure him out. Learn from Erika and Morty’s example, don’t try to trick or force him into divulging himself. I know it’s hard, when the world has treated you like trash (a glance to my progenitor behind me), but you must act with kindness. Be patient. Be tough. Be honest and open. Listen. And don’t stop trying.

I checked myself. Then let out a faint smile.

These aren’t my own words. They were given to me from someone far stronger and far wiser than me. I hope I know I haven’t heeded them very much, especially these last few months. I hope I can start now.

Ethan was swamped in hugs from all his Pokemon.

I’ll save you from yourself, Ethan. I promise.

Aibo began pulling at Ethan’s hair and putting him in a chokehold, rough-housing, and I knew the reconciliation was complete. I don’t know what Ethan said to them before he left for the bridge, if he said anything at all, but it’s possible the simple-minded creatures don’t even understand what had almost transpired. If so, maybe it’s for the best if they stay ignorant. I’ll need to gain their trust, quickly, because I want to have them look out for any more suicidal behavior from Ethan for me.

The boy patted Aibo and let the monkey down. He walked over to me.

“Thank you. For making me do that. I needed it,” he said. He said this while staring at Mother with obvious fear.
“Mother, this is Ethan Hibiki,” I said by way of introduction. He shakily raised his hand to greet her.

“She said by way of introduction. He shakily raised his hand to greet her.

“Your would-be jumper pal?” she said, brushing away the offered handshake. The boy winced. “Why should I let you see my daughter?” she demanded, speaking directly to him.

“Uh. Um. I’m sorry, if I offended you,” Ethan said.

“I don’t want an apology, I want an answer.”

Ethan looked helplessly at me.

“Don’t look at her,” Mother said sharply, raising her hand in front of my mouth, stifling me.

“Because she saved my life,” Ethan answered.

Mother transfixed him with that laser gaze of hers, relenting only briefly to take a turn drilling me, and held our wits hostage for an unbearable amount of time.

“You’re not lying, are you?” she asked, rhetorically.

“No ma’am,” Ethan answered nonetheless.

She snatched his hand up and raised it above her head. Her other hand worked his sleeve down below his elbow. I only just now noticed the bruising and scrapes afflicting his forearm. It must have been from the time he almost slipped over the edge.

“You were favoring one arm,” Mother explained. “Where did these come from?”

Ethan glanced at me. I nodded, encouraging him to tell the truth. If he was dishonest here, I doubt we would be able to see each other again.

“It was at the bridge. I was holding onto the edge, and slipped. I got twisted. Your daughter saved me. She pulled me back over the rail.”

Mother tilted her head and pursed her lips. Then she let Ethan go. He was grateful to have his limb returned, rubbing it tenderly.

“My name is Dr. Elaina Mikan. I am your rescuer’s mother, and if you hurt her, if you touch her, if you do anything that makes her think of killing herself again, I will also be the one who sends you to jail... or worse.” She leaned right up into Ethan’s face, eyes locked to his. “Do you understand?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Jasmine, let’s go.”

Ethan reached out.

“I’d like to talk to her some more, ma’am,” he asked gingerly.

“Oh you may. In a bit. I’ve got to get some things straight with her first.”

“No sex.”
The commandment left her lips the moment we had privacy.

“What?” I said, taken aback.

She stared at me, not deigning to repeat herself. I took a breath.

“‘We’ve already talked about it, Mother. This isn’t romantic. We’re not going to fuck. Our relationship is based on basic human contact. I’m trying to help him get better. That’s all there is to it.’”

“And I approve of that,” she said, surprising me. “Quite frankly, I don’t care if you fall in love with him, or if this turns into another one of your self-immolation episodes. But no sex, got it?”

“Why do you think you have a say in the matter?” I asked grumpily.

“As long as you’re living under my roof, I control you. Got it?”

I wrinkled my nose and glared at her.

“It’s for your own good,” she reiterated. “The state you’re in, you can’t afford the consequences. You’re worse off than I was when I had you.”

I balled my fists.

“I know you’re pissed at me. Too bad. You should be thanking me. I’m not going to try to bottle you up this time, it’s like clamping a fist around a firecracker. If we’re lucky, this will fizzle out on its own.”

“Mother, no, that’s not a lucky scenario. That’s a damned awful scenario.”

“Are you listening?” she said, bemused.

“To every hurtful, snide, belittling word, yes!”

“I’m saying you can see him, and do whatever you want except sex. I already have a good idea what he wants to talk to you about. It’s not what I want for you, but I don’t give a shit anymore. Go knock yourself out.” She folded her arms.

“How do you know what he wants?” I asked, confused as hell.

“It’s so obvious.” She shook her head in disappointment. What the heck am I missing?

“Do you have transportation?” she asked. “I have a meeting I need to go to. You’re free to go and gallant with him if you have a way home; otherwise, we need to leave.”

“I’ll walk if I have to,” I replied.

“Suit yourself. Sunkern will be waiting when you get home,” she said mysteriously and departed.

...Sunkern? What about Sunkern?

I scratched my head and pondered the oblique reference to my least familiar Pokemon. Minutes later, my confusion was cured and my awe and respect of the intellect of the woman who bore me renewed.
Ethan stared at me, the earnestness of his suggestion still hanging in the air. We sat opposite one another in the Pokecenter lobby. Mother had departed. I was aghast. He was expectant.

“It’s worth a shot,” he added.

“But I...” I stuttered out.

“It helped me,” he said. “Why not you too?”

“Because I... I was... I’m not... I don’t deserve...”

“I don’t think any of us deserve anything. But... if they want you back, are you going to be a cold-hearted monster and refuse them? It’s worth asking, isn’t it?”

I sputtered and mumbled myself into uselessness.

Ethan’s eyes were downcast, staring at his knees. He looked guilty.

“It was selfish, what I did to them. They don’t even realize it. I don’t deserve to be their trainer, but they don’t even understand that. They only see good trainer and bad trainer, happy trainer and sad trainer. They think I’m good and they want me to be happy. It was hard to face them like that. I still don’t know if I can be that person for them. But I guess- I’ve got to try, right?”

“That’s right,” I said, nodding. “And it will be hard, but I’ll be there right beside you, to help.”

“But it’s the same for you, isn’t it? I don’t want you to help just because you want to piggyback off of our relationship. That won’t make you happy. It’s like me trying to be happy with Lyra and Silver being together. You should be happy with your own Pokemon.”

“It’s not that simple, Ethan,” I cried. “I didn’t just abandon them. I released them.”

Ethan was taken aback.

“You mean, from the Poke-registry?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Ethan crumpled into a slouch.

He had this wonderful idea: his reconciliation with his Pokemon was such a beautiful, tearful, joyous, bittersweet affair, why should he alone get to experience it? In short, he wanted me to make up with my Pokemon. There were several big differences, however. Firstly, he had simply ditched his Pokemon in the PC, whereas I had angrily driven my Pokemon away. Secondly, he had simply ditched his Pokemon in the PC, whereas I had released them from the Poke-registry. None of them belong to me anymore. They were free to wander the world, and for all I knew they had scattered to the four winds. Even if I thought I could reconcile with them, there’s little chance I would ever get the opportunity to do so.

Ethan contemplated the situation for a bit.

“You know,” he started. “I, um, had some dealings with released Pokemon. When we beat Team Rocket, some of them lost their right to own Pokemon. The officers wouldn’t let us release their Pokemon, though. We had to find adoptive parents. You know why?”
“Why?”

“Because the officer said tamed Pokemon don’t integrate back into the wild very well. They’ve lost their feral instinct. They’re more intelligent, but they’re no longer familiar with the wilderness. And our morality rubs off a bit on them. They don’t have the stomach to kill another Pokemon for food, which is a death sentence if they’re a predator species.”

“That makes sense,” I said.

“So Pokemon who’ve been abandoned or released— they don’t run away. They usually linger around places they’re familiar with. Most of them are recaptured by other trainers.”

“Oh. Okay. Then you’re saying—” I said, thinking faster than my words could convey.

“—your Pokemon are probably hanging around Olivine,” Ethan finished.

“In places they’re familiar with.”

That’s what Mother meant when she said Sunkern would be waiting for me at home. Sunkern was Mother’s favorite, she spent the most time with Mother helping her with catering parties. She must have already made her way back to the house.

Then that means, the most probable place for my team leader, was...

I sniffed.

To think.

I was so dead set on releasing them, so convinced I was the wrong person to be leading them. The sheer anxiety, and sadness, turmoil, anger, and apathy that consumed me when I clicked the Pokeballs one by one, destroying the bonds I once held immutable...

They were gone. I had believed that, and was trying to avoid coming to terms with it, lest it wretch me apart.

Now I’m thinking of riding atop his head again, feeling the rush of wind in my hair while guiding him this way and that, feeling his firmament beneath my fingertips, his reassuring mass— and I realized I would do anything to get him back.

“Let’s go,” I declared.

“Okay.”

We got up.

“Ethan, I really doubt this is a good idea. I don’t know if we’ll find them, I don’t know if they’ll accept me back. I hurt them. It was an ugly, evil side of me I showed to them. They just wanted to comfort me, but I rejected them.”

“Eh.” Ethan shrugged. “Is it going to be okay, then? Do you not want to try?”

“No. I will.” I pulled him after me. “It’s like you said, I should try. It’s up to them if they want me back. I was the one who rejected them, it’s on me to ask for forgiveness. So let’s go and give it a shot.”

Ethan smiled. “I’m glad. After all, I just can’t imagine a Jasmine of Olivine without her Steelix.”
“You doofus.” I grabbed his hand and tugged. “Come on, we’re going.”

“Where to?”

“The quarry.”

Well I said I could walk, but that was being naïve. I collapsed after a mile. I still hadn’t recovered from last night’s sojourn. Ethan offered to have Mantine carry me. I accepted, reluctantly.

“Man man! Ti ti mananati!”

“He says you’re not heavy at all,” Ethan told me.

“Oh, thaaanks. Where’s my sandwich?” I grumbled.

“Where is the quarry again?”

“It’s just beyond.”

We took a familiar turn.

The world opened before us. Battle Tower and the mountains on our right. The sea on our left. A chasm below. A narrow road divided the three vistas.

“-Crescent Bay Bridge.”

Ethan held his breath.

We’re back so soon. Ugh.

Ethan strode up to the railing, very near the spot I found him last night.

“Don’t!” I shouted, instinctively steering Mantine towards him.

“Ah! Sorry.” He took his hands off the rail and took a step back.

“Don’t scare me!” I said.

Ethan shook his head.

“I didn’t mean to.” He continued walking, slowly and surely. I made a point of dismounting and walking the length of the bridge beside him. It made my calves burn like hellfire, but I forged on at least that far. We stepped over the jointing at the far end and took a deep, relieved breath.

It felt good, symbolic even, putting that bridge behind us.

“Jasmine,” he said my name aloud.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been thinking.”
“About?”

“What made you save me?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. I shrugged and looked back at the bridge. “It felt wrong not to.”

“You know you made it really hard on me, right?”

“Mmm. So?”

“Dying was the easy way out. Now I’ve got to live,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” I insisted.

“But the future is kind of scary. Scarier than death. I still feel that way. I can’t promise I won’t try something when you’re gone.”

I took a hold of his hand.

“You have three options, Ethan. You can find the place you belong. You can change who you are to fit into society. Or you can struggle on unhappily. Notice which option I didn’t mention?”

“Death,” he answered.

“That’s right. Because it’s not. Because I’m not going to let you. And if me being here is good enough in this moment to keep you going on, then just imagine our next meeting, the next time you feel like hurting yourself. Imagine the scolding I’ll give you. And if you think you can run away to hell, you’re an idiot. I will chase you down, I will make that hell a fluffy cloud heaven compared to what I’ll do to you. Fire and brimstone. Lava. The Seven Cities of the Deranged Agonies. Fwoosh! Waaaah! Aaaaah! (insert melting-man pantomime) Got it?”


“Ethan, I care about you. Because I have nothing else. Don’t doubt me. Please.”

He grinned. Was that what he needed to hear? He reached over and held my hand.

“Nah. You’ve got to have better than me to hang on to. Let’s get your Pokemon back.”

“I’m serious! Ethan! Woah! Hey hold up! This is not how it’s going to work, I lead, you follow! Got it? Hey! Grrr! Get back here!”

We arrived at Crescent Bay Quarry.

Sunkern was accounted for. After that, I only had one faint clue as to where any of the others would be. This was it. If he wasn’t here, our quest would dead-end.

Ethan trotted about, taking a look around. I stood at the crater edge, listening.

It was silent. There was not a soul around.
This quarry was initially a marble yard, chopped at geometric angles for building material. Then they discovered a layer of shale subcutaneously deposited underneath the marble. A geologist once told me it was an unusual formation, the old-earth mineral layer must have folded over the newer carbon-rich layer sometime in the last five hundred thousand years. The shale was too poor quality to be worth extracting, so the mining company eventually closed up and abandoned the place. However, for certain rock-munching Pokemon, it was perfectly fit for a nutritious meal.

“I would send Steelix here for his meals,” I explained.

“They eat rocks, right?”

“Well, yes, but it’s not the rocks they’re feeding off of, it’s the fossil fuels inside the rocks. Oil, natural gas, coal, that’s where they get their energy.”

“Oh. Cool. But I don’t see Steelix anywhere.”

“He’s here,” I asserted.

“You sure?” Ethan scanned over the whole quarry, some ten acres wide and eighty feet deep. There was not a sign of a living being anywhere around.

“Where? I don’t see him. How do you know he’s here?”

“Because there’s nothing out here.” I pointed to the giant pit in the side of the hills. “It’s completely quiet.”

“That’s your clue?”

“It’s not supposed to be empty,” I explained. “There should be other Pokemon here, Geodude and the like. The only reason for it to be so empty, is if something big and mean came and claimed the place for itself.”

I began walking down the ramp towards the quarry floor. Ethan followed, warily. He had Mantine and Heracles out.

“You’re not worried?” Ethan said.

“Why should I be?”

“Well you did say you hurt your Pokemon. What if they’re angry at you? Azu wailed on me, but she didn’t put any muscle into it. If Steelix...”

I thought about it for a moment.

“Oh crap, you’ve got a point!”

Why was I so confident that Steelix wouldn’t pound me into dust the moment he saw me? I’d just blown away twelve years of trust between the two of us.

“It’ll be all right,” I insisted, unsure of my own words.

We reached the center of the quarry. Square cut boulders, the size of cars, were strewn here and there around us. Old broken crates and construction equipment littered the ground. There were trails of stone broken apart, places where something had been tunneling underneath.

I’ve come back for you!”

No answer, no sound. We wandered a bit further. Ethan climbed a jagged boulder for a better view.

“I see some tunnels,” he said. “Do you want to check inside?”

“Not a good idea, but we might have to- Ethan. Ethan!”

“Huh?”

I raised my arms, cautioning him.

“Come down. Very slowly.”

I was facing in Ethan’s direction, but not staring at him. Ethan was confused, but did what I said. Very slowly, very deliberately, he picked his way off the boulder. I did not move a single inch.

The boulder’s eyes pierced through me. Its heavy, lime-laden breath accosted my nostrils. I could barely breath.

“You’re dirty,” I said to him.

“SCHHHHTEEEEEEEEL!”

I was bowled over by the force of the roar. My ears rang. In an instant Ethan and his Pokemon interceded between me and the iron leviathan.

“Herc, get ready!”

“Hold it.”

I reached over Ethan’s shoulder and pulled myself forward.

Steelix rose from his resting position to his full height. He was large enough to douse my entire body in shadow. A shake of his segments sent a cascade of white marble dust swirling around me.

“Hey Steelix. It’s time to come home. You need a bath,” I said to the Pokemon.

BOOM!

Steelix’s multi-ton tail came crashing down on the ground. A small Earthquake popped my feet an inch off the ground. I barely caught my balance, only then to have shivers sent quivering up my spine. I steadied myself.

“I guess you’re mad at me. Why? Because I forfeited? There was no way you were going to beat Pikachu. It had your number. If you want to blame someone, blame yourself. You weren’t good enough to beat an Electric-type pipsqueak a fraction your size.”

BOOM!

Steelix’s tail came down on his opposite flank. This Earthquake was stronger. I stumbled down onto one knee before recovering.

“Jasmine, is this really a good approach?” Ethan asked nervously.

“Steelix! Stop throwing a tantrum! It’s been you and me for a decade. We’re going to put this behind
us. It’ll be that time we talk about when we say “We’ve had worse”. Got it? So come back.”

Steelix growled. His teeth ground together like an industrial rock crusher.

“Return!” Ethan had loaned me a plain Pokeball on the way out the door of the Pokecenter. I fired its recall laser on Steelix. The beam had the effect of a laser pointer- i.e. no effect whatsoever.

Ah shoot. Recall lasers don’t work on Pokemon you don’t own. Force of habit.

“Steelix, you hold still and don’t make a fuss, okay? I’m going to throw this at you, and you aren’t going to resist. Got it? Here I go!”

I wound up and tossed the Pokeball at Steelix’s head. Its aim was perfect.

A blur, a boom, and a crash ensued. I was bowled over by the shockwave. The impact was mere feet away, it was enough to throw me back ten feet, and much farther than that if not for Mantine interceding. I lifted myself off my rescuers fins, irritated but jittery.

Steelix had Iron Tailed the Pokeball. When he lifted his tail up, evidence of the Pokeball’s existence was reduced to a few splinters of plastic and circuitry.

“SCHTEEL!” he roared.

I stumbled forward. My legs were shaking. Sweat riddled my brow despite the cold weather. I held my hands to my chest just to feel my own heavy breathing. This was far more violent a reaction than I expected.

This was my Pokemon... right?

The same Steelix who had been by my side, fighting, struggling, living together, for all these years? Why was he being so stubborn? Did I hurt him that badly?

“Steelix, you know how I feel about apologies. Don’t make me,” I warned.

The great big Pokemon huffed and tensed.

“Look. I promise things will get better. I will be a better trainer, a better person, and I won’t give up anymore. I won’t let you down. I’ll find a way to let you fight those unfair monsters so we don’t have to go through that humiliation ever again. So come back to me. Wait! Steelix!”

He was backing off. He slithered a few yards away, and was about to turn his head.

“What do you want from me?” I begged.

Steelix roared, an inarticulate cannonade of anger and displeasure. There was no sense in his opposition. He simply hated me.

I reached a hand out to Ethan. He dutifully complied, handing over another Pokeball.

“Steelix. Steelix. Steelix. Do you remember when we saved Amphy from the storm? How you braved that high tide and nearly drowned? And remember how I went out onto the harbor in that dinky boat and got tossed overboard? I risked my life for Amphy, and you risked your life for my love of Amphy too. I promise,” I said, grasping the ball tightly, clutching it to my heart. “I feel the same way about you. So please- please- please- come back to me. I need you. I want you.”

Steelix stared at me dead in the eye. He turned back about to face me full on, and rose up to his full
height. His form was regal, monolithic, and strong. His attitude was stubborn, prideful, and self-assured. He had the heart and will to match his brute physical strength. This was the embodiment of who I aspired to be. If only I could...

“Steelix. I love you.” I lofted the Pokeball up towards him.

He snatched it from the air with his jaws and crushed it into artificial pulp.

“Steelix! SCHTAAAA! RAWWWRGH!”

I tried not to flinch. It was impossible not to, when his tail came whipping around, digging a trench between me and him a full three feet deep. Then, as if to ram the point home, he crashed into the earth with his full weight. A Fissure rent the earth between us, cracking the trench apart and opening a yawning chasm. I gaped at the canyon now separating us. It must have been as deep again as the quarry itself, and wider than a car lane. I couldn’t jump over that.

“Is that how you really feel, you big dumb lump of scrap!” I shouted. “Fine! Get lost! I’ll find another Steelix! One who isn’t afraid to-” I caught myself mid-sentence.

Steelix was still there, still staring at me. His tail wavered in the air, ready to strike again. A long, low growl emanated from his gut. I craned my head back and forth. He met my eye regardless, never looking away.

“So that’s the way it is. I understand.” I turned to Ethan, who looked petrified by the ordeal. He was hugging Heracles from behind, wet terror crossing his face.

“Do you still have a death wish?” he asked.

“Come on.”

I marched across the quarry, back up the ramp, and beyond. As I departed, I kept glancing back to confirm my suspicion. Steelix never left his spot. His gaze traced my movement all the way up the ramp and to the rim. Before I left, I pointed a lone finger at him.

Ethan huffed alongside me.

We ended up on the coastal road, overlooking the ocean. I stood stiff with my hands on my hips.

“Sorry,” Ethan said.

“For what?”

“That it didn’t work out.”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged.

“You don’t need to apologize. In fact, I wish you would apologize less. “Sorry” is just a word, it doesn’t help,” I told him.

“Then what else do I say? I feel bad that you couldn’t get Steelix back, and it was my idea. Of course I feel guilty. I’m just a useless sack of shit, like always.”

I whipped around and punched him on the shoulder.
“OWWW!”

“Ow!” I shook my now-bruised knuckles. “More like sack of bones.”

Ethan winced and rubbed his shoulder tenderly.

“I deserved that,” he said.

“Yes you did! But not for what you think.”

“Is it safe for me to ask?”

“It is.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“You were demeaning yourself. Ethan, I told you, I’ll tell you again. I am a sack of shit. You’re just a simple loser in comparison. Don’t ever feel like you need to belittle yourself in front of me. I want to see the best of you.”

“But...” He gawked helplessly. “Steelix,” he uttered out.

“I’m okay,” I insisted.

“But that was your team leader. Your partner. Your first Pokemon.”

“Third. Voltorb, then Geodude, then Onix.”

He slapped a palm to his face.

“You know what I mean! He was important to you, but he rejected you. I can’t help it. I wish it had worked out, I wanted to see you two together again.”

“You misunderstand,” I said, beaming.

“Huh?”

“That wasn’t a rejection. That was a challenge,”

I turned about to face the quarry. I cupped my mouth in my hands.

“DO YOU HEAR ME STEELIX? CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!”

My voice rang across the coastal road and down into the shale pit. A reverberating roar shook the mountainside in answer. A smile crossed my lips.

Comprehension dawned on Ethan’s face.

“When I first caught Steelix, Onix then, he gave up without a struggle. I don’t really understand why, but he became my Pokemon willingly. What Steelix was saying back there is this- I don’t get that luxury this time. I have to prove myself to him. I have to do it the hard way, and catch him like any other wild Pokemon.”

I grimaced.

“But there aren’t many level-seventy wild Pokemon running around Johto. This is going to be hard. Really hard. All considering, it might be the toughest Pokemon battle I’ve ever faced. Because I’ve
never had to go up against a real challenge without Steelix, ever. He pulled me through countless, countless battles. Now Steelix is my opponent.

I need to get my team back together. This is going to take all of them combined.”

Ethan dipped his head, smiling.

Genuinely smiling, not a half smile, not an ironic or faint smile. If only for this moment, he was happy.

“I’ll help you,” he said.
Adventures in Electromagnetism I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We lounged in Café le Rei’s booths, which were quite comfortable. I chomped on a half-edible panini, Ethan enjoyed his fish filet. A single sheet of paper, rescued from a trash bin, and a pilfered pen lay on the table between. Inscribed on it was the List.

“That’s twelve Pokemon,” Ethan noted.

“Three are accounted for,” I added. “Steelix is residing in Crescent Bay Quarry, as we just saw.” I tapped my finger on his name.

“You sure you don’t want to use my Pokemon to catch him?” Ethan asked.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I don’t think Steelix will stay and fight if he sees me trying to cheat.”

“Is it really cheating?”

“Steelix would think so.”

Ethan’s face is saying what his words won’t: Do you not want my help?

“I feel like I owe this to Steelix. He’s been too good to me all these years, I need to prove I deserve him. I know that’s not what you want to hear.”

“I don’t want to be useless,” Ethan admitted.

“Don’t worry about it. Besides, I need to get all my other Pokemon back anyways, and I will need your help to catch them. One pesky brat in particular.”

“Okay. So who else? Who's first?”

“Mother told me Sunkern is back at her house. I'll just grab her when I head home tonight. No need to worry about her.”

“That’s two. The third is...” Ethan tepidly pointed to the last name on the list.

“I’m not ready for that one,” I said meekly.

“Mm.” He nodded in understanding.

“That’s nine that are MIA.”

“Eight.”

“Eight?”

“Eight.” Ethan’s finger slid up to another name on the list. “Morty told me they found one of your Pokemon at the gym.”

“Electrode!”

Of course, of course!
That dumb Pokemon wouldn’t leave me even if I tried to murder it.

“Great! A lead!”

“Should we go to the gym?”

“Um, hmm.” I thought about it. Fuzzy memories of class schedules played across my mind.

“Nope! We have to go to the university.”

“The university? That’s a leap…”

“I’ll explain why on the way. Come on!”

Olivine University has its main campus sitting on the Bronze Sand River, just north of the Battle Tower. The hurricane flooding had wiped out most of the older historic architecture, so most of its buildings were newer space age complexes. Even seven years on, they were still busy with reconstruction, mostly focused on terraced planter beds and pedestrian pathways. There was a conscious effort to make the terrain more navigable for wild Pokemon, with aqueducts and sprint holes woven in between the human commodes. I spotted wild Wooper and Sentret traversing their respective lanes. As for the humans, the students were amassed around the library and study halls, exhibiting various stages of insanity and despair. Finals week, you see.

It didn’t take long to get to our destination, especially with Mantine putting in the work as my personal mount. On arrival Ethan hurried to give me a hand down from Mantine’s back.

He’s getting better, I noticed. He had an eager expression on his face, and his actions were animated. Unless, of course, it’s like he said and he feels fine as long as he’s with others. If this is just a brave act, no wonder no one foresaw his suicide attempt. I took his proffered hand and alighted on the campus quad.

“So why the uni?” Ethan asked.

“You said Electrode was at the gym, right?”

“Yeah. Actually, it was your gym trainer that found it.”

“I thought so. They wouldn’t allow a Pokemon to stay at the gym, so someone would have to take care of Electrode. That would be Connie, my assistant- ex-assistant. If I remember correctly, she should be in class right now.”

I led the way to the engineering complex. It was the most majestic building on campus, very large and clean, with an impressive tower and deck made to resemble a ship’s forecastle.

“Olivine was built on sea trade. This is where we train all those shipbuilders,” I explained. “It’s probably more sacred than any church or temple in the city.” I made a beeline for the side entrance.

“You seem familiar with it. Been here much?”

“Dad comes here often for work. Some of the students intern for his company, and the professors run analysis for him.”
“You haven’t really told me much about your dad,” Ethan noted.

“There isn’t much to say. He’s my dad, he’s never around.”

“Yeah, but I’ve noticed, you call him “Dad” but don’t call your mother “Mom”.”

I bit my lip.

“Well, he doesn’t hit me if I speak improperly,” I said. Wanting to avoid the subject, I tugged Ethan towards the corridor marked “Engineering and Research Facilities”. Connie, as I recall, was doing a pre-grad project on maritime platform architecture. The back of the building had an indoor complex of Olympic-sized swimming pools, where all manner of experiments were built and tested. This was indeed where we found Connie, and shortly thereafter, Electrode.

“Jasmine! Shit! I was freaking out last night! Where the hell have you been? What’s been going on? If there’s something you need to get off your chest, I’m your girl. Don’t be afraid, hit me up!”

I waived down her concerns. She looked tired, with saggy eyes and disheveled hair. Her hands and arms were dirty with engine grease. Her work suit hadn’t been washed in goodness knows how long. She must not have been getting any sleep, let alone down time. I felt guilty thinking I was probably the cause.

“It’s okay. I’m actually here because I heard you might have Electrode. Do you know where it is?” I asked.

“Sure do! Figured you’d want it back. The Poke’s right inside!” She rapped the side of what looked like a submarine suspended over a pool of water.

“Wow.” It was rather big, compared to a truck or van.

“The Gyorg 1.2! It’s a submersible drone, used to fix underwater stuff, like the legs of an oil platform! This thing is so cool, I’ll actually get to design the 1.3 if I get into the masters program!”

“Huh. Fascinating.”

“Electrode is inside, it’s helping me find an electrical leak. Electrode! Come out! Someone’s come to see you!”

“Troda? Troda?! TRODE!”

“Hi!” I meekly put up a hand to greet my old Pokemon. I was greeted back with a Volt Tackle.

“Troda troda troda trode! Troda troda troda trode! Troda troda troda trode! Troda troda troda trode! Troda troda troda trode! Troda troda troda trode!”

I tried getting up, but could not, the living oversized Pokeball tackled me from every angle, relentlessly showering me in affection.

“I’m glad to see you too.”

“Feisty,” Ethan commented.


“Ethan,” he corrected.
Connie duck-faced.

“Electrode! Electrode! Settle down!”

The bouncing ball would not listen.

“Ethan, Pokeball, please!”

“I only have two, don’t break this one!” he said, handing over a generic Pokeball.

“Connie, I, uh, released all my Pokemon. Did you recatch Electrode?”

“Say what? You did what?! Bad idea, girl, majorly bad idea. I knew you were unstable- should have intervened. Mmmh. Shouldn’t have left it up to Erika and Morty. That was a pretty shitty move by them. God, are you feeling alright? I wish I had done something. Jasmine say something, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Focus!” I exhorted.

“Oh yeah. No, I didn’t know. Electrode’s free as a U232 neutron. You’re free to take it back. Enjoyed the company while it lasted.”

“Thank you.”

I nodded and faced my former Pokemon.

“Electrode, it’s time to return. I need you to help me find and catch the others.” Electrode perked up.

I tossed the ball.

Electrode dodged.

I took a deep breath and planted my cheek into my fist.

“Electrode. Don’t do this to me.”

I retrieved the Pokeball. Figuring I wouldn’t risk missing again, I went to touch it directly to Electrode’s forehead, like a baseman tapping a runner out in baseball. Electrode stared up at me expectantly. I steadied myself and reached out.

Electrode slipped back a yard.

I lunged. Electrode bounced away, just out of reach.

“Electrode. What do you think you’re doing?” I made as if to wander over to Connie, spun, and flung myself. Electrode was much too fast. I contorted and twisted around, but the creature managed to spring off the ground, off my shoulder, and onto the submersible in successive jumps.

“I don’t get it. Electrode! Do you not want to come back to me?” I asked.

“Trody!”

“What does that mean?” Ethan asked. I shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

“Trody trody trody! Trod!” Electrode waggled in place for a moment, and then bounced its way off
the submersible and towards the back end of the hanger. I thought it was escaping for good, but just
as it reached the exit, it turned around and resumed waggling.

“Okay, maybe it’s just overexcited to see me. Maybe it wants to go back together, no Pokeball,” I
ventured. I took one step towards it, hoping Electrode would scurry back towards me. We had done
this before, it running off only to bound back to me, repeatedly, in a kind of yo-yo game. Not this
time. As soon it saw me advance, Electrode vanished through the exit.

“I’m not sure what to make of this.”

I sighed and slipped on the wet concrete. Catching myself, I went to the nearest wall to lean on.
Connie came beside me.

Ethan perked up.

“May I take a look?” he asked, gesturing to the submersible.

“Don’t touch anything!” Connie shouted. Ethan proceeded to ignore her order and began climbing
all over it, accompanied by Aibo.

“Boys will be boys,” she said. “Anyways, I’m about to leave, got a meeting to get to. You’re going
to be okay, right?”

“Huh?”

Connie wasn’t looking at me. She was cleaning her tools and taking off her utility garments.

“When I saw that message, I was like, “Damn it!” I was scared, Jasmine. I knew you were serious
about it. You don’t half-ass things like that. When the chief called off the search, I was... thought that
was it. You coming back seemed like a miracle.”

“Oh well.” I shrugged and averted my eyes.

“I’m an engineer. I don’t believe in miracles. Not divine ones, anyways.” Connie tilted her head
towards Ethan. “Is he the miracle?”

“Ah. That’s what you’re wanting to know. Um...”

“Not a coincidence, right?”

“What?”

“I was the only one who noticed. I told the others. You two walked in together last night. We all
assumed he joined the search and found you.”

“No, no no no,” I said. I pointed to my chest. “The truth, and it’s going to sound weird but I’m not
bragging, but the truth is I’m the miracle.”

Connie glanced from me to the boy and back, awe and confusion striking her face.

“Care to share?”

“No. Not now, anyways.”

“Right. Understandable. Annoying, don’t like it, don’t think it’s healthy, but it’s you. Good ole
uptight Jasmine. At least it means you’re back.”
“I’m only so far “back”. I still got fired, I’m not going to be gym leader anymore. How is the gym, by the way? Are you in charge?”

She shook her head.

“They tried to make me take the head gig temporarily, but I can’t, not with finals. I think they’re just shutting down badge battles until they fly a replacement in from headquarters.”

“I see. And also, how are you doing?”

Connie perked up, finally looking at me.

“You want to know?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She seemed taken aback by the question.

“Seriously?”

“I do.”

She took a deep breath, and I fully expected her to unload on me, to enumerate a laundry list of grievances that could all trace back to my person. Except Connie couldn’t get over the fact that I asked the question in the first place.

“Jasmine, you like, never ask that question. It’s weird. Are you really Jasmine? Did you die and get replaced by an alien or something?”

“I’m me, I’m here, I’m asking all the same.”

“But-”

I took her by the shoulder and pointed her towards the submersible. We bore witness to an adult male straddling the vehicle, clutching the dorsal pod like a steering wheel and making starfighter noises.

“I have to be the miracle. That means I have to change, and put in the effort to care about others.”

“Uh. He’s...”

“It’s okay. Him acting like that is actually a good sign,” I told her.

“Boys are just not good for you Jasmine. Morty and Ash and all the rest, they just hurt you and send you to dark places. How’s he going to be different?”

“Honestly? I don’t know that he will be. But I’m going to try again. And it’s not exactly what you’re thinking. We’re just friends.”

“Sure. Sure. That’s what you always say.”

“But really, what about you? How is class? How is Seth?” I asked.

“Stressful, but good. Seth? We broke up.”

“WHAT?!”

She shrugged her shoulders.
“I thought you two were lovey dovey inseparable!”

“Apparently not.”

“Did he hurt you? You were so good together, he loved you so much! Or I thought so...”

“Oh, yeah, he was great to me,” Connie said. “And to Carol. And to Lilian. And especially to that stacked gal from his temple youth club. Renee, that’s her name. Damn she’s got like-” Connie mimed a pair of inflating balloons on her chest. “Like, I’d need to design structural support for those babies. Anyways, if the fuckboy wants those, he can have them.”

“That’s awful!”

“It’s no big deal.”

“But you were so close for so long. This makes me feel terrible. I lost it over that idiot Morty, but you were going through the same thing.”

“Stop.”

“I...” I don’t want to cry. I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to bawl over how pathetic I am, that Connie can handle a simple heartbreak and I can’t.

“It’s okay! I’m not a wimp like you. I can handle it. Come on.” She finished cleaning herself and grappled me in a hug. “Go chase Electrode. Seems like you need it.”

“Ah. Um. Thank you for watching over it.”

“Yeah yeah. Good to see you alive. Call me. Got to go now, I’m late.”

“Right.” I nodded. “Ethan, we’re leaving!”

Ethan jumped off the submersible and scampered to my side. We strode off towards the exit.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I sort of figured. There were a lot of people in the gym. You’ll be doing a lot of that, right?” Ethan said.

“Right.”

I could sense it. Ethan didn’t wander off just to play submarine captain. He wanted to give me and Connie space.

“I wish I had more time to talk with her. She was one of the few people who never really betrayed me. I should have... I should have gone to her.”

“Why not now? Oh right, she had somewhere to be.”

“And so do we. Did Electrode run off?”

“Nope.” Ethan pointed outside.

Electrode was doing laps around a plant bed. It spotted us exiting the engineering building and zoomed away. Well, not away, but out of reach.
“It’s making a game of it,” Ethan said. “You go one way, I’ll go the other.”

“Yeah, sure. Hey Ethan.”

“Hmm?”

He seemed excited by the prospect of chasing Electrode down.

“Let’s have fun!”

And I thought to myself, this might be Electrode’s true purpose in playing chase.

I went on a dead sprint directly at Electrode. Ethan slunk off, making his way sneakily through Patrons Park. I could never hope to catch up with Electrode, but the idea was to keep the Pokemon’s attention on my pursuit and ignorant of Ethan’s flanking maneuver.

It didn’t work.

I didn’t anticipate Electrode using Spark to launch itself on top of the miniature monorail system bisecting campus.

Ethan and I met under the elevated rail, gasping for air.

“Uh, hi?”

Connie reappeared.

She gazed upward to find a gleeful Electrode making faces at us.

“What are you doing? Didn’t you have a meeting?”

“Yeah, I’m on my way,” she answered. “You two seem like you have your hands full.”

“Right.”

At that moment, the monorail tram slid by at high speed. Electrode never saw it coming, and was knocked clear off the track and thrown a dozen yards away.

“See ya!” I waved and went skittering off.

Electrode wasn’t hurt or even fazed. It rolled down the walkway, around the law library, and past several wind turbines. Ethan and I gave chase until we were out of breath. I more so than him.

“Huff huff huff! I - uh- I ugggh.” My legs are killing me.

“You know, humans have one thing going for us, physically, over most Pokemon,” Ethan said.

“What’s - hufff - that?”

“We’re champion long distance runners. We’ve got a lot of stamina. Why don’t we try running it down?”

“That’s not- I don’t think Electrode will run out of stamina so soon.” I recalled the time it had clocked a home-to-Battle-Tower sprint in under six minutes. “Maybe if we had a week.”

“Ah, right.”
“The principle, though. That seems sound. Hey Ethan, have Aibo chase it.”

“Aibo’s not fast enough.”

“Yeah, but if we keep following. When Aibo gets tired, use, um, Friar, then Flurry.”

“Oh yeah! That’s a good idea.”

I outlined my strategy.

“Your Pokemon don’t get tired when they’re traveling in their Pokeballs. Electrode is faster than any of us, but it can’t keep going full speed forever. We can use a relay system to run it out of juice.” Ethan beamed. I took his idea and made it workable.

Or so we thought. Wrongly.

“Aibo, no!”

“Arrooo awoo!”

So it turns out Electrode is a championship-caliber Frogger player, you know, if Frogger was played with a real eight lane highway in the middle of rush hour traffic. My former Pokemon zipped through the crisscrossing vehicles with ease.

Aibo the Aipom is not a championship-caliber Frogger player. Nor even a decently skilled Frogger player (I stand corrected- Ethan later informed me Aibo is indeed good at arcade games, however, this was not an arcade game, it was life and death). In the rush to catch Electrode, he darted out onto the highway as well. He made it to the median, barely, saved by the space of six screeching, horn honking inches from an oversized SUV. After the near-death experience, Aibo lost all nerve and sat on the lip of the concrete.

“Aipuu…” He started crying in fear.

“Just hold it right there,” Ethan cautioned.

“Aibo!” I called. “Get out Flurry’s Pokeball! Toss it to the other side of the highway!”

Aibo didn’t listen to me. Ethan repeated my order, for the same non-result. The little Pokemon was too scared to do anything. In the end it took myself mounting Mantine to float over the traffic and retrieve the poor monkey with my own hands. Electrode was long gone. We recuperated at a commuter bridge some two blocks out of the way.

“I think we lost him,” Ethan said.

“No such luck,” I bemoaned, pointing to the distance. A series of Flashes and Sparks caught our attention. Electrode passed us by, putting on a lightshow atop a school bus.

“You’re kidding.”

“Is it showing off?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Come on!”

“Where is it going?”
“North! Get Friar out!”

Despite our best efforts, Electrode continued to elude us. Every time we thought we had it cornered or gassed, it would go into overdrive and zip away. There was no catching the creature.

“Yo.”

But funny enough, we kept catching Connie en route to her meeting.

“ Seems like you’re having trouble there.”

“It’s being a jerk!” I huffed.

I then looked around.

“We’re kind of far from where we started. Hey Connie, are you following us?”

“Me? No. Why would I be doing that?”

“You always liked snarking at my misadventures,” I said.

“I can’t help it. You get into the dumbest shit. Like that time Tyko stole the remote. That was a pain in the ass. Funny, but not fun. I bet Whitney doesn’t go through shit like this.”

“You would be surprised.”

“Would I?”

“Have you ever seen a battle arena just fly away?”

“Yes,” Connie said flatly.

“Uh huh... Anyways! Since you’re here, would you mind helping us a little?”

“I told you, I have a meeting. And you’re not my boss anymore.”

“Nnn. Stingy.”

She started walking away. I skipped up to her side.

“Hey Connie. Question. Was I good boss?”

“Pfft. No. You were an awful boss. Worst authority figure I ever had to deal with. A real, legit pain in the ass.”

I bowed my head in dismay.

“Kind of a killjoy too. Always down on everything.” Connie paused, glancing up. “I guess that’s not fair. You were always so depressed but it never felt like you wanted to show that side of yourself. And you being super critical, it could get annoying, but it’s not like- hmm.”

“Like what?”

Connie fished for the right words.

“Like you ever held a grudge against anyone,” she finished.

“Yeah, but that’s not a grudge. Malice, okay, sure. You’re critical, we get that. But at the same time, you’re really forgiving. You give all those clowns third and fourth chances for no damn reason. Like, it takes *them* actively hating you to split you apart.”

I mused upon Connie’s insight for a moment.

“It must be I’ve been desperate for attention, or something like that.”

“Attention? No, not you. You’re too shy to be an attention whore. But I did get the sense you wanted their approval. Yeah. Their good graces. Yeah, that’s the way to put it. And honestly, everyone just saw you as so harmless because of it. That’s why we put up with it. We felt sorry for you.”

I tucked my chin in.

“Hard to hear that, huh?”

I nodded.

“I’d say something like ‘Don’t take it personally’, but it’s obviously really personal isn’t it? But if it helps you, it also meant this: you weren’t a good boss. You were a *great* boss. You got shit done. You kept us together. You didn’t let others’ big egos bury you, nor did you ever hurt the cry babies’ feelings too much. They may have fired you, but in my mind, you’re still a Leader.”

“That’s...”

“Come on!”

Ethan waved for me to continue the chase. Electrode wasn’t paying attention, sunning itself amid an array of solar panels. Or no-

“Argh!”

It was just feigning. Ethan tried a dashing leap, but landed with his face in the ground. Electrode dodged away at high speed. It stopped thirty yards beyond, facing us and bouncing its merry head (body? torso? figure?) off.

“It’s mocking us,” Ethan grumbled.

“I’ll see you around,” Connie said, and waved us goodbye.

I put my fingertips to my temples. This was going to require strategy.

“Friar. Out.”

“Friar!”

Ethan called his Noctowl to the fore.

“Who is your best Pokemon for wide-area attacks?”

“Flurry, probably.”
“Blizzard?”

“Yeah.”

“Excellent! Alright, give Flurry’s Pokeball to Friar. Have Friar go airborne.”

“I get it!” Ethan beamed. “But we’re going to need a ground side distraction.”

“Something that will get Electrode’s attention without making it scamper away,” I elaborated. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I’d say an Electric Pokemon would be best for getting Electrode, but I don’t have my Chinchou on me.”

“I don’t have mine either.” Duh.

Ethan swiveled his head around.

“Anyone have a Pokemon on them? An Electric type?” he called aloud.

I winced and blushed.

Getting help from strangers is not what I had in mind!

“Got a Pikachu,” said one guy.

“Voltorb work?” said another.

The two students offered their Pokeballs up. It was only then did I notice we had attracted a small crowd.

“Are you all following us?”

“Yes Miss Gym Leader,” said the Voltorb owner.

Yikes, they even know who I am!

“You’re trying to catch that Electrode, right?”

“Yes, but it’s very fast.”

The students were surprisingly willing, and lent their Pokemon freely.

“Here Trody Trody Trody!” I called out. I held my hands out to the borrowed Pikachu, Pichu, and Voltorb. The Pokemon, as instructed, started a game of Light Volley Ball.

“Do you want to play?” I asked earnestly. Electrode perked up, but didn’t move. It looked like a trap, surely. The question was whether Electrode was smart enough to realize this was not the trap. The threat was hovering two hundred feet above it, in the form of an imminent sky-bombing Blizzard.

“Trode!”

“Fwurrr!”

I jumped. It happened so fast!

Flurry the Froslass came striking down like a piece of fiery hail. She was followed by a swirling
cone of snowflakes. On impact the snow blew apart, as if a car-sized snow globe had been shattered on the turf.

“Now!”

Because of course Electrode would sense the danger and erect a Light Screen at blinding speed. We had made contingencies for that.

Don the Donphan and Heracles the Heracross jumped out from their hiding spot behind road barriers. They proceeded to use twin Earthquakes, ripping up the turf in a parallel fault lines. I noted they were careful enough to make their terraforming shallow and avoid underground wires. Heracles’ berm wasn’t that high, however (likely due to being a non-Ground type), and I worried Electrode would jump over it. Electrode did not, it opted for the most logical exit, straight away between the two barriers.

Which is when Ethan sprung his final, brilliant trap.

“Wobbles!”

His Porygon, Nes, dropped the Camouflage cloak that allowed him to get around Electrode. What was revealed was not just the boy, but his Pokemon Wobbuffet as well. Electrode ran directly into the punching bag. My Pokemon bounced backwards in recoil, but only so far.

“Shadow Tag success!” Ethan yelled.

“Trode?!”

Electrode tried veering away, but was caught like a coin to a magnet. It was stuck on top of Wobble’s elongated shadow and subjected to the cursed escape-preventing ability.

“Now, you’re getting in your Pokeball,” I declared. I grimaced while make the short journey to my former partner. With a smug smile, I brought the Pokeball directly down on its forehead.

I was too smug.

“El! Ec! Troooood!”

For a moment I thought Electrode exploded. Except it wasn’t the kamikaze attack, which would incapacitate the escapee and get it recaptured all the same. No, this was a blinding Flash attack. It disoriented me, Ethan, and all his Pokemon. More importantly, it erased Wobbuffet’s shadow. Shadow Tag’s hold vanished for a split second, which was half a split second more than Electrode needed to zoom off into parts unknown.

“Unh. Not fair.” I uttered while watching the rapidly diminishing spherical figure.

“Do you want to maybe give up?” Ethan asked. “We could come back later with some of your other Pokes.”

“No.” I shook my head. “We’ve come this far. Our best chance is like you said, tire it out. We give Electrode a break, we’ll be doing this all over again, forever.”

“Right. So, got another plan?”

“Just keep at it for now.”

I took Ethan’s hand and marched onward. Funny, I didn’t feel so tired anymore, and the cold wasn’t
a big inconvenience. Perhaps it was adrenaline. I was going to pay for all this excessive activity later, surely.

“There!” Ethan pointed.

Electrode, as per its routine, had not disappeared entirely, but remained just beyond my Pokeball-throwing range. We gave chase, and off again Electrode flew. We ended up near the hills at the outer edge of campus.

“Wow, this is beyond coincidence,” came a voice.

“Connie!”

“Hi. Again.”

“What are you— you are following us!” I cried. “Don’t tell me! You did catch Electrode! You’re using it to prank me! This is revenge for last night, isn’t it?!”

“You’ve got to be the one pranking me,” Connie insisted.

“We’re just chasing Electrode!” Ethan butted in.

“And I’m just on my way to a meeting! You keep showing up!”

“A meeting? What kind of meeting?” I thought to ask, probably much too late.

“Just a get together.”

“I thought you meant with a professor or something.”

“Nah, it’s personal,” Connie replied. “We’re supposed to meet at the Applied Energy Center.” She pointed to the last big building at the edge of Olivine’s campus. It was nondescript, like all the other buildings, except with noticeably fewer windows. Strangely, it was also the direction Electrode was hopping towards at the moment.

“Could it be?” I wondered.

“Is Electrode leading us somewhere?” Ethan continued my thought.

“To the Energy Center?” Connie finished.

Now that’s a fanciful idea, and an utter coincidence.

“If you’re headed to the same place, might as well walk along,” she said. Ethan and I nodded. We set out at a steady gait. Electrode took notice. It would take a few hops, look back to ensure our leisurely pursuit, and then resumed its travel. That seemed to confirm it. This whole time, we were being led on. To where and to what, I could hardly guess.

“So, if I may, who are you meeting?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Eh. I told you about Seth, but honestly I’m not too put off by it. He was kind of a dick to everyone besides me. Not someone I could see marrying.”

“Oh, I see, it’s a guy. A new boyfriend?” Ethan ventured.

Connie threw up her hands.
“Uh. NO.” She looked offended. She shook it off. “Sorry. It’s not like that. We just met. Just someone I talked to, wanted to talk some more to. That’s all there is to it.”

“I see.”

There’s something nagging at my mind about this. It’s all too convenient...

“When did you meet him?” I asked.

“Last night, while we were out searching for you.”

“Oh. That’s, um, really, um.” Okay, it’s one thing to open up to Ethan, he knows exactly what I was going through. Bringing up the “I tried to kill myself” topic around others is much more of an emotional minefield.

“Hey, look at the bright side. He’s easy to talk to. Helped me when we all thought you weren’t coming back. Don’t know if this turns into something, but if it does, I’m not complaining.”

“So you literally just met.”

“I didn’t really expect to have two spare wheels for my date, you know,” Connie dryly remarked. “What’s a bicycle with four wheels called, anyways?”

“A quadcycle?” We both stared at Ethan.

“Really, where did you find this guy?” Connie whispered to me.

“You don’t want to know.” I told her. “So your guy, he has a name, right? If he was in the search party, I might know him.”

“Yeah, it’s-”

“Jasmine?”

I froze right up.

It was a man’s voice. One known to me. One with meaning to me.

I stopped short and drew a sharp breath. He strolled up towards us, shoulders slouched, perhaps trying to mask his great height.

“Hey there!” Connie waved excitedly.

Ethan paused in his tracks, staring between me and the approaching figure.

I called out in disbelief. “Volkner?”

He scratched his head and looked to Connie. His mouth gaped, like he wanted to say something, but had no clue what to say, what was even appropriate.

My eyes went wide. I gasped, the words not coming, so I simply pointed.

“Connie, um. I didn’t know you’d bring Jasmine along. She and I- It’s probably not a good idea. That stuff I told you about last night, there’s more to it than- Jasmine are you alright? And you kid, you seem... Connie? What is the matter with you all?!?”
I tried warning him. I tried, but the words wouldn’t come out, and my insistent pointing was not conveying the message.

You see, Electrode was hurtling towards us from the direction of the Energy building—followed closely by a literal tsunami wave of electrified metallic orbs.

Volkner at last got the hint, turned, and stared at the oncoming apocalypse.

“Oh right, about that,” he said sheepishly.

“MAG! NE! TON! ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZT!”

I closed my eyes.

“Not again.”

Chapter End Notes

Filler chapter, sort of. Adventures in Electromagnetism was originally going to be a 2 parter, but now it's a 3 parter. I wanted to split the first half up into two and push this out, because the next chapter has something that is going to be tricky for me to write, but the payoff will be big for you all.

Also, I rushed this chapter out, and might need to do another grammar pass on it. Please let me know if you see spelling or grammar errors.

Lastly, thank you all for pushing Olivine past 500 kudos. Ecstatically looking forward to the big four-digit milestone.
I threw up my arms to protect myself. Static shocks nipped at my hands and head. The atmosphere had become a whirl of metallic cylinders, screws, and electric discharges. I braced for the impact, and it hit soon enough. The mass of bodies slammed into me from all the directions. For a few seconds I was being crushed airless. What little breath was in my lungs was popped out in one short scream.

A jolt of motion ran through the flurry, as if something had activated. The weight pressing down on my body lifted, but not the electrical stings and shocks. I dared to open my eyes.

They were Magneton, Magnemites, even a Magnezone here and there- and every single one of them was floating motionless in midair, with every last eye sprocket staring directly at me. I was surrounded. Somehow, it was not as creepy as the audience of pervy men I’ve sometimes endured.

“Um, okay?” I dared take a step backwards.

One Magneton stirred. It hummed and began shaking. Tiny bolts of electricity began flicking off its magnetic pincers. The creature suddenly shook and spun wildly. It halted to a dead-stop just as fast. There was a flash, and a coil of lightning flew outward in three directions. The coils hit three nearby Magneton, who in turn underwent the same strange ritual. Within seconds the entire population was linked together by crackling chains. I was caught in a web of lightning. Retreat, as I saw, would require a difficult series of maneuvers. I gaged the best way to proceed, tested my arms and legs, and despaired. At full health, in good weather, I could somersault through this web, I think, but not in my current winter-numbed, lead-limbed state.

“Electrode?” I called out.

“Troder!” came its voice from beyond the network. I couldn’t make my Pokemon out.

“Is this what you were leading us to?” I asked.

“Trody trode!” Affirmative.

“Let me guess, then. Magneton and Magnezone are here in this bunch.”

“Trody trode!errrr.... lectro!”

“Hmm?” I’m confused. It’s saying both yes and no?

“What do you mean?”

“Trode lectro!” Yes no.

That doesn’t make any sense!

I slipped one foot forward. The Magneton followed me with their eyes, but made no other movements. They seemed like they were locked in place by the electrical chain. There were quite a few hovering low to the ground surrounding me, denying me room to crawl underneath the web.

How do I get out of this?
“Boys?” I called aloud.

“Jasmine!”

“Jasmine!”

Both answered. They were nearby. I caught some movement over my shoulder.

“I’m trapped here.”

“Can you jump?”

“Huh?”

“Can you jump?”

I tested my legs. Nope, too sore.

“No, I can’t!” I said.

“Shoot.”

“Maybe if Mantine carried her?”

“It’ll be fried.”

I could barely hear them over the constant crackling. They seem to be devising a rescue.

I’m kind of tired of being rescued by others, though.

“Electrode, come here.”

Electrode bounced between the chain, gleefully ignoring the zaps of electricity as it burst through one link after another.

“Hey Electrode, can you, um, eat me?” I asked.

“Troodelectroo?!?”

“I know you can store things inside you like a pokeball, I’m asking can you store me and carry me out of here?”

Electrode rolled pitch-wise in place, showing it was thinking about it. It jumped right side up, indicating an answer.

“Troderode... Elec lectero.” Yes, but...

It bounced in very deliberate fashion and made panting gestures with its mouth.

“Oh. Got it.”

Electrode can store me, but as a living being and as a mass very near its carrying capacity, I wouldn’t last long before it had to spit me out. Electrode mimed a swallowing and then a spitting motion. It was showing me the interval it could hold me for.

“Less than three seconds.”
Not enough time to clear the web chain.

Still, if the boys are planning what I think they are, that could be enough.

“Ethan! Volkner!”

“We hear you.”

“If the reason you want me to jump is what I think it’s for, I have a way. But you have to give us a very clear countdown, okay?”

“Roger, tell us when you’re ready!”

I bent down to Electrode.

“All right buddy, this is going to require very precise timing. You have to eat me and then bounce up high, immediately. Got it?”

“Troda!”

“Ready!” I shouted.

“Right. Going in Five! Four!”

I stood stock still and bit my lip.

The air above us was somewhat clear of electric chains and metal spheroids.

“Three!”

Electrode screwed its eyes together.

“Two!”

“God. If you’re out there. I might be meeting you soon,” I said. I hope not.

If worse comes to worst, even if we screw this up, it won’t kill me. I think.

“One!”

“Now!”

I didn’t see anything.

The first sensation was whiplash, like a rollercoaster reversing Gs on a dime. The second was drugs, but magnified tenfold, the kind that screw with your head. Then my stomach started feeling like it was twisting inside out. I hallucinated things, as if my organs were on the outside of my body. At first I thought it was abstract images conjured from synaptic neurons randomly fired, but no. These were actual, crystal clear views of my innards.

Weird, I thought. But not gross, strangely.

Then the pain hit. Everywhere, all at once. It was like the prick of a needle, aimed at every pore on my body.

Whiplash again, and blackout.
Then it was over.

I lifted my head. I was laying on my side. What I saw reminded me of an old first person shooter
game, the level where the nuke goes off in space and fries all the lights and aircraft. Combusting
chunks of metal were falling left, right, and center, some dangerously close to my prone position. A
blur leapt to my aid and knocked the most dangerous ones aside.

“Troder!”

“Is it over?”

“Not yet.” Connie appeared before me, stooped down, and helped lift me to my feet.

“Yikes, what did you do? You’re blue!” she exclaimed on seeing me.

“Help me out.”

She did so. The way wasn’t quite as clear as I expected. Many Magneton were still conscious and
keeping up their electric web. Thankfully the vast majority of these live Pokemon were above head
level. Connie helped me duck under them and out to safety. Good thing, too, because soon after we
escaped they started moving. The Magneton began oscillating in coordination. Their formation
resembled a sphere, then a star, then a wave, then a tornado. It began roving around and eventually
disappeared behind the Energy Building.

I sat myself down on a low wall. Ethan, Connie, and Volkner joined me. A sigh of relief made its
way down the line of humans, and then Donphan guffawed to round it out.

“Thanks, Don,” I said.

The Pokemon huffed in response.

To explain, briefly: while I was tripping out inside Electrode, Electrode was jumping a few yards
into the air. At that moment Ethan had ordered Donphan to Earthquake, which knocked out most of
the low-flying Magne’s and disrupted their electrical web.

“So...”

“That was interesting.”

“I’ll say.”

“Meh. I’ve seen weirder.”

We all turned to Connie.

“What? This is your gym, every other day, Jasmine.”

I sighed and turned to Volkner.

He had saggy eyes, and his cheeks were distinctly tinged with blue. The veins in his eyes were
bulging out unnaturally. His gaze kept lingering towards direct eye contact, then realization set in and
darted away to focus on something else.

“Hello Volkner,” I said.

“Jazz.”
Eh. Morty’s nickname for me. I’ll let it pass.

“Care to explain?”

“Look, Morty said you- well it felt like I had to. If there was a chance I could help, because of what happened in the past, I didn’t want to repeat that- and-”

“The Magneton, Volkner. Explain the army of Magneton playing slinky on the Energy Building roof.” Which is indeed what they were doing at the moment.

“Oh! Shit. I’m sorry. I thought you were talking about yesterday, but- Right. So, Magneton. Guess what, it’s our old pal EMSA.”

Volkner fell into the more comfortable topic of wild Pokemon control and electromagnetic biophysics. His demeanor eased up. He launched into a long-winded explanation of EMSA (ElectroMagnetic Sensory Attraction) for the other two, while I dazed off.

His face was a wreck. His body language too. I bit my lip and balked. I was in Electrode’s hyperspace for a few seconds, and it felt like a trip through every theme park ride back-to-back and compressed into three seconds. It is not safe for humans. Three seconds will knock the wind out of you. Ten will straight up knock you out. Thirty will put you in a hospital, and ninety seconds will kill you.

“Volkner,” I said, interrupting him.

“Yeah?” He paused to listen.

“How long did it take for you to get here?”

“How long? Here?” He took a moment to process the question.

“When you teleported here through the PC network. How long were you in hyperspace?”

Volkner stared straight at me.

“Twenty six seconds,” he said.

Ethan grabbed my hand. I found him staring wide-eyed at Volkner, frozen in fear and awe. Ditto for Connie. They both knew what that meant.

“You get it, don’t you?” Volkner said. I nodded. “Can we talk about this later? Deal with them first.” He nodded towards the Magneton, which were currently forming a ladder into the sky. It was tall enough that I couldn’t gage of what multiple it towered over the Energy Building by.

“Sure,” I said. “Also, I think, one of those Magneton belongs to me,” I added. I checked with Electrode. A bit of whispered back and forth confirmed my theory. Magneton, my Magneton, was present in that horde. Magnemite, on the other hand, was not. A shame. Still, silver linings. I came here expecting to find just Electrode, and netted one more of my Pokemon in the process.

Now to go and get it.

“I released my Pokemon into the wild, but I decided I want to recatch them,” I explained to him. “So, what’s going on? Why is there a rampant horde of Magneton? EMSA alone can’t be the culprit.”

“There was an uncontained electromagnetic outburst from a top secret experiment inside there. It attracted a huge horde of wild Magneton to the place and caused them to go crazy. Somehow the
university president figured out I was qualified and available, and she called me over to try and fix this mess. Can’t do much without Jolteon or Electivire, though.”

“So it’s a working date?” Connie said.

Volkner tensed up. Is he blushing?

“It’s not like, a date exactly. I thought you might be interested. Or could help, if you have an Electric type.”

“Negatory. But if you want, I got my Azumarill, Bronzor, and Weepinbel on me. I could build something to catch them all in pretty quick,” Connie offered.

“That could be useful. A Faraday cage?”

“Yeah, we can do that. Do you need it Tempest standard, or...?”

“No that’s not necessary. That’s for EMP nukes.”

I hid a small grin. These two. Just maybe.

“And then we’ve got to pick out Jazz’s from the lot of them,” Ethan added. I ribbed him.

“What?” he said.

Volkner looked our way. “She doesn’t like that nickname,” he told Ethan.

“But you just used it!”

“That was on purpose.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

We’ve got a lot to talk about later, apparently.

They say the best plan is the unspoken one. Well let me subvert that right now. Ours was a complex plan that took deep into the afternoon to set up.

First, Ethan’s Pokemon were used to guard the perimeter and prevent stray Magneton from escaping. All except for Don, who was to rove around the interior and knock out any stray Magnemite or Magnemzone with Mud Shot and Bulldoze. This part of the plan worked perfectly.

Second, Connie’s Bronzor and Weepinbel worked together to create a long cord of metal-coated vines. Azumarill than wove this cord into an intricate net and folded it over into an igloo-shaped housing.

Third, Volkner rammed a metal pole into the ground at the center of the igloo. Electrode used Thunder Wave on this, charging and polarizing it, which charged and polarized the igloo.

Lastly, we simply waited.

The Magneton eventually made their way over, first individually, then in trios, then in one massive
swarm. They threw themselves upon the igloo until their bodies were stacked three deep and the sunlight was nearly blotted out completely. We four humans stood inside, huddling and waiting with much trepidation.

“We’re safe, right?”

“Perfectly,” Volkner said.

Electrode’s Thunder Wave lacked the fine-tuning needed to dispel EMSA from the Magneton. The best it could do is attract them to the cage and hold them here. After a while of inaction, the condition should dissipate on its own.

“Cool!” Connie said as we explained it. She then pestered Volkner for the technical details.

“Warm,” Ethan said. “All the electricity is heating up the air.” He fanned his hands and fingers out to the wall of Pokemon.

“Don’t touch them,” Volkner warned.

“I know I know.”

It was getting warm. The December air gave way, not entirely, but as if a furnace had been opened and its hot air been left to billow over us. It was a very pleasant reprieve from the winter cold.

“So we just wait?”

“Yeah. Now, you tell me, which one is your Magneton?” Volkner gestured to the mass.

“I don’t know. Even I can’t tell them apart.” Magneton have no biological differences; 99% of all Magneton are 99% outwardly identical. The only way to tell for sure was to use internal markers.

“Once they calm down, I should just be able to call out, and mine will come running. Floating. Hovering. Levitating.”

“Locomoting,” Ethan said.

“Yes.”

Connie gave me and Ethan a look, very much like the look I had given her and Volkner.

We waited and waited and waited some more, and eventually the skittishness and sparks died down. The Magneton began falling off and floating about. When the last one detached itself from the Faraday cage, we stepped out.

“Oh, do your thing Jazz.”

I took a deep breath.

“Magneton! Magneton, it’s me Jasmine! Come on, I’m taking you home! I’ve got batteries for you to snack on!”

To my delight, Magneton emerged from its brethren and floated right over to me.

“Magneton!”

“Magneton!”
I smiled and raised my arms to greet it.

“I’m so glad you came back. You don’t hate me, do you?”

“Magneton,” it responded in its clear, monotone voice.

“Good. Okay, we have Electrode, and now you. We’ll go home, collect Sunkern, and that will wrap it up for today. Three out of twelve, not a bad haul, I think.”

“Magneton.”

“I know, I know. We’ll see everyone soon enough. Let’s go.” I turned back to the group and began marching homeward.

“Magneton.”

“Yes.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Hey, don’t go getting uppity because I haven’t been around for a few days.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

“Magneton.”

It’s okay! I’m back, I’m here, I’m fine, calm down already!”

“Jasmine,” a voice called out to me full of anxiety.

“What is it? And Magneton, I thought I-”

Oh dear.

Oh sh-

“MAGNETON!”

They were crowding in on me, all of them. All ten of them.
“Magneton? Um, no, I mean, just my Magneton. All the rest of you, I can’t take care of this many Pokemon. Go back to the junkyard! My Magneton, you remember me, right? Come out of there-eek! Get away!”

Three Magneton had been encroaching a little too closely. On hearing me screech they quickly scurried backwards. All the rest bowed, as if... as if they were ashamed? But none of them are going away.

“Magneton, the one who’s been with me for ten years, come here!” I ordered.

All ten hovered forward. Then they eyed one another, began zapping one another, and began tackling and sparking angry sparks at one another.

“Stop! Ethan, get Donphan ready!”

“Don!” Donphan heard its name and prepared a Bulldoze. The group of Magneton settled down immediately.

Ethan figured it out first.

“They all think they’re your Magneton,” he said.

Which lit the lightbulb in Volkner’s head.

“Ethan’s right. EMSA can, uh, yeah- it can mess with the bio-magnetic networks in a Magneton. Magneton store memory kind of like a flash drive, with intermixed magnetic longitudes. If the synth wave attenuated-”

“Non-engineering majors answer, please.”

Volkner smirked. Is he looking down on me? Connie seems to be following along easy enough.

“EMSA mixed up their memories. Your Magneton’s memory leaked out via magnetic waves, and now they all think they’re Magneton.”

“That’s what I said,” Ethan said.

“I was just trying to give you the scientific reason.”


“No, it should fade in a day.”

I glanced at the sky. The sun was nearly touching the tree line.

“We don’t have a whole day. What should we do?”

Volkner shrugged.

I looked to Ethan and Connie for ideas.

“Maybe take them all home?” Connie suggested.

“I only have two Pokeballs,” Ethan said.

“Just have them follow you.”
“If this were my own apartment, sure,” I said, “but with Mother- I don’t think that’s a possibility.” Memories or no, these were wild Pokemon, and I didn’t want them following me around in a swarm. Who knows what could happen when the EMSA wore off? It could be bad news in any given place, it would definitely be bad news in her house.

“No. We need to find out which one is my real Magneton. Volkner, is it just memories, nothing else?”

“Just memories. Internal physiology should be unchanged. Things like nature, genes, abilities, even learned moves should be the same.”

“Learned moves and abilities?” I asked, wanting more info.

“Yeah,” he said. “They might think they know one of your Magneton’s moves, but it’ll be obvious when they try to use it. If it’s not in their own repertoire, their magneto-pathways won’t support it, it’ll backfire. It’s like muscle memory for biologicals.”

“Ah, great! So we can just test them one by one for all the moves a wild Magneton wouldn’t know and my Magneton would!”

“That should work.”

We all nodded. This will take just a few minutes.

“Let’s label them,” Connie suggested.

“Good idea.”

She broke out a chalk marker and quickly went through them writing big yellow digits on each of their bodies. I counted them out, reciting each number to each Magneton. They picked up on their coded identifies quick enough. The Pokemon seemed eager to participate. If the memories were that crystal clear for each of them, then they all must want to prove they’re my true companion- and of course, that the others were frauds.

“Gosh, it’s hard to keep them in order.”

The group was floating all over the place, some bumping in to one another.

“Volkner, could you help, yes here.”

“So what do we look for?”

“I’ll explain in just a bit. Magneton number one! Number One! Come here!”

Number one was picking a fight with Number Nine. It was actually stuck to it, and had to be pried apart. I took note.

“Number One!”

“Ton ton ton!”

“Magneton! First, can you please use Thunder Wave on that bush?”

“Ton!”

The Magneton labeled with #1 let loose. The slice of electricity struck true, coating the plant in a
shimmer of electrified wave patterns.

“Ah! Lucky! It’s this one!” I exclaimed.

“Just like that?” Volkner said, concerned. Ethan beamed. Connie jumped.

“Yes! Magnemite don’t learn Thunder Wave naturally, remember? You have to teach it to them with a TM.”

“Hold on hold on!” Volkner cautioned me. “Yeah, I remember you taught that to me. But I did my own research, and it turns out you were wrong.”

“Wah? No! I’m right!”

“You’re wrong.”

“How am I wrong?”

“It turns out, every Magnemite learns Thunder Wave, it’s practically the first Electric type attack they learn. The thing is, their Thunder Wave is sort of weird, it’s immature. As a Magnemite gets older and stronger, its Thunder Wave naturally increases in power, more and more, until it morphs into a whole other attack. A Spark attack.”

“Ohhh!”

“You sure know a lot about Electric Pokemon,” Ethan said, vaguely grumbling.

Volkner lightly pounded his chest. “I’d better, I’m the Electric type specialist of Sunyshore Gym.”

“Hmm. So Thunder Wave alone isn’t a tell,” I said. Then the idea struck me. “Or isn’t it? Based on what you said, a wild Magneton should have Thunder Wave, if it’s young, or Spark, if it’s mature. Not both at the same time. Only my Magneton would know both.”

The others nodded in agreement. It made sense. My Magneton lost its natural Thunder Wave when it upgraded to Spark, and then gained an artificial Thunder Wave from the TM I used on it. Unless we’re in the weird situation where some of these others were not, in fact, wild Pokemon- I checked with Volkner.

“The site manager said they’re all wild. Except yours. What’s it even doing here, by the way?”

“I released it.”

“Why? Oh...” He realized the answer before I was forced to say it aloud.

“No time to get into that,” I said, turning on Magneton #1, who was beginning to float towards a rival.

“Number One! Okay! Use Spark!”

The Magneton in question began to light up-

But I didn’t see what it did next, because the entire world lit up.

“The hell was that?!”

We dropped to the ground.
“No! No no no no!” I cried.

Something like a rainbow had passed through, igniting the air with a crackling, ethereal luminescence. It made my ears pop and skin tingle, but otherwise I was fine. The Magneton, however, went berserk on contact.

“Damn it! It’s the experiment. The asses don’t have it under control yet.”

“They’re getting away!” I yelled.

The others were distracted by a dazzling light radiating off of the Energy Building. I was more concerned with the Pokemon, who were spinning around like Bahtois and spewing red and blue sparks. I jumped on the nearest and clutched it close to my arms. It shook violently and sent zaps into my chest, but I ignored the pain. My attention was on the rapidly dispersing group.

“One two three four... five,” I counted. Then they were gone. “Ethan, are your Pokemon still guarding the perimeter?”

“Huh? Yes ma’am.”

“I’m not a ma’am, but good.”

“Yes miss.”

The Energy Building grounds were semi-surrounded by planters and terraced walls, there were only a few points of exit or entry. With Ethan’s Pokemon on guard, we could at least confine them to the near vicinity.

“Dang. I’m sorry, I got distracted, they’re all gone.” Volkner was apologizing. Ethan was busy climbing up a solar panel scaffold to get a better view.

“They’re all over the place,” he said. “But I think I count ten, they’re not leaving. They’re chasing each other.”

“Got it. That’s actually good. Volkner, if you could,” I said. The young man gladly took the Magneton from my arms. I rubbed the places it had zapped me. They felt sore and painful. Probably have minor burns there.

Connie strolled around.

“Want me to catch them?” she asked.

“Not in this state,” Volkner advised. He himself was struggling with the afflicted Magneton. It couldn’t be contained for long.

“Look at that,” I said, and pointed.

“Huh?”

Bzzzt! It sent another shock into Volkner’s arms. He cried in pain and let the Pokemon go.

“Hey!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. That one isn’t mine.”

The others gazed at me.
“It’s electrical aura had a red tint. That means it’s slow, slower than mine would be.”

They continued to gaze at me, as if I were crazy, or genius, or both.

“I’ll explain.” I did so. “Here’s the plan,” I then said, and explained it all (now we come to the unspoken plan that’s guaranteed to work!).

“Got it?”

They nodded, now looking at me with certain knowledge of both my craziness and genius.

“Okay, go out and recon! Tell me everything you find out.”

They dispersed.

The Magneton Logic Puzzle!

I assembled all the information as it came in using a stack of napkins and Connie’s marker. The clues went thus (after some translation and expansion from my hasty, crude handwritten notes):

1) Magneton have blue or red tinted electrical auras.

2) The auras are tied to their speed. Magneton use their electromagnetic energy to hover and move around. Below a certain speed threshold, this energy has a red shift. Above it (approx. 80 speed) it has a blue shift. It’s related to the Doppler effect. The aura can be hard to see, and only when the Pokemon discharges electricity.

3) My Magneton has a blue aura.

4) I counted ten Pokemon, with five blue auras and five red auras.

5) The one we caught, Magneton #4, had a red aura.

6) My Magneton’s ability is Magnet Pull.

7) Magnet Pull works passively. If two Magnet Pull Magneton approach one another, they will repel. If one Magnet Pull Magneton approaches a non-Magnet Pull Magneton, they will attract. If neither Magneton possess Magnet Pull, no interaction will be apparent.

8) Wild Magneton do not know Spark and Thunder Wave. It’s either/or. Only my Magneton can use both.

That was all the information I related to our team before they headed out. I gave them ten minutes, which should be just enough time to correlate data and go catch the culprit before the sun set. The field reconnaissance started trickling in via text message:
9) One individual used Zap Cannon, another used Electro Ball. As far as we can tell, they were unique—only one Pokemon knew each, the other eight Pokemon did not know either attack.

10) My Magneton does not know Zap Cannon or Electro Ball; the above two users are therefore wild.

11) Two individuals outran the pack, assumed to be the two fastest. They did not attract each other, but could not tell if they repelled or were inert. One shot an Electro Ball at the other.

12) Magneton #4 is attracted to exactly three that are faster than it.

13) #10 is the fifth fastest of the entire group (there was clear separation).

14) The fastest and slowest know Thunder Wave.

At this point the group scattered and it was harder to make full set comparisons.

15) #4 is faster than two that repel.

16) #1, #2, #3, #5, and #9 all have Thunder Wave, as demonstrated when they blasted each other ineffectually.

17) Of the five Thunder Wave users from clue 16, two had blue auras and three had red auras.

18) #3 is faster than #4.

19) #7 is faster than #1.

20) #5 is slower than #1.

21) #6 is slower than a pair that repels one another.

22) #3 and #9 attract.

23) #6 and #10 repel.

24) #3 is slower than the Electro Ball user.

25) A Sturdy Magneton has a red aura.

‘What?! How do you know it’s Sturdy?’ I texted Ethan.

‘It tried get away. Don used Earthquake stop it. Didn’t faint, so prob not Mag Pull.’ he replied.
‘Don’t do that! If they’re fainted, we can’t get any info from them!’

‘Ok.’

26) #2 is slower than #4.

27) At least one of #7, #1, #6 is slower than #4.

28) #9 and #10 attract.

29) #5 is slower than two other red aura Pokemon.

#5 must be really slow then, and definitely not my Pokemon.

30) The Electro Ball user is faster than #10.

31) The one with Zap Cannon has a blue aura, is slower than the one with Electro Ball and attracted to it, but faster than #6 and #2.

32) #1 has Signal Beam with three different shaped beams.

“What’s this about different beams?” I shouted to Volkner, who was nearby.

“Three pronged beam, one squiggly, one swirly, one zig-zag,” he shouted back. “What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know. Probably has to do with the number of original minds?” I shouted back.

33) #9 has Sonic Boom.

“That’s common. My Magneton knows it.”

‘Yeah but is yours’ REALLY strong? Like blows-out-windows strong?’ Connie texted back.

‘Yes, that’s not unheard of.’

‘Kay. Coz someone gonna have to fix that.’

Yikes. I hope that wasn’t my Magneton, but then again, it did sound like a Sonic Boom Burst. I made a mental note to keep an eye on #9.

I almost missed the next clue. The others are so fast at texting, it’s difficult to keep up. Especially when they want an answer, since I’m not only slow but insist on using proper grammar.
34) #6 or #2 (can’t tell which) repels #3 but attracts #7.

35) #4 and one slower than it attract.

36) #4 knows Spark.

37) #3 and #9 have opposite color auras.

38) #7 is faster than #1, #6, and #9.

39) #1 and #9 attract.

40) A blue aura Magneton is between #4 and #8 in speed, but couldn’t tell who was fastest and who was slowest of the trio.

Well wait a minute, if #4 is certainly red, and this unknown Magneton is blue and in the top half in speed, then #4 is the slowest and #8 is the fastest of these three. Silly Volkner, this one was easy.

41) #9 is attracted to two others and is slower than both.

42) #6 has a Signal Beam. One unified beam, no variations.

43) The Zap Cannon user also has Spark.

‘It got fed up with missing.’

44) #4 and #6 have Spark.

45) #2 and #3 have Flash.

46) #8 has Thunderbolt.

47) #3 has Mirror Shot.

48) #10 has Self Destruct and knocked #4 out.

49) #3 knocked #1 out with Supersonic.

‘Ok stop. This isn’t useful info!’ I texted to the whole group. ‘Come back.’

The four of them returned and huddled over my notes. The two boys showed signs of electrical burns. Ethan especially.
“I tried to catch one,” he explained.

“You knucklehead. Don’t do that. And what’s with the battle reports?” I asked. “They aren’t that useful, all those attacks are generic, any Magneton could have them.”

“They stopped chasing each other around and just started attacking,” Volkner explained. “I’m guessing it’s Highlander out there, there can only be one.”

“But I’m not interested in who’s the strongest, I just want my old Magneton back.” I looked out and spotted two Magneton lying on the grass, immobile.

“Well,” he said, shrugging, “I don’t think you’re going to get any more useful info out of them now.”

I furrowed my brow.

“Any last bits to relay?” I asked, hopeful for something, anything.

“I think #10 has a Brave nature,” Connie said.

“Are you sure?”

“Not really, it just acted that way.”

I don’t think my Magneton is Brave, but I’m not absolutely certain, and Connie might be wrong.

“I checked #1 when it was knocked out. It has different sized magnets, all the left side magnets are bigger than the right side ones,” Ethan said, looking as if he’d found a sure-fire case-breaker.

“That doesn’t tell me anything,” I said. Ethan deflated.

The sun was beginning to set. The Energy Building grounds were already covered in shadow. All or most of the Magneton were fainted, victim to their own EMSA-induced paranoia. We had two Pokeballs, and I wanted to save one for Electrode. All considering, unless I wanted to haul all ten Magneton along home with me, I needed to make a decision soon.

I combed through the clues and began writing up a chart. The other three pitched in with advice, but most of the brainwork was up to me. It took more time than anticipated. The daylight gave out completely, to be replaced by electric floodlights. Eventually some of the Magneton began stirring. Answers began clicking in place, one by one and faster and faster, but not fast enough. So many unknowns, so many blank spaces! I was so anxious to solve the puzzle before the Pokemon could wake up and run away, my hands were shaking. Hopefully it can be solved with the given information.

Hurry, hurry!

One Magneton shook itself, got up, and began meandering in slow ellipses.

Almost! So close!

“And then... but both of them... grr!”

I was down to two, but there was nothing to differentiate them.

“Ah!”

I hadn’t thought of that!
Of course, of course, that reduces it down to one single possibility-

“I think I’ve got it. Ethan, Volkner, Connie. Let’s go look for Magneton number __________.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the special surprise I worked so hard on. See if you can figure out which of the ten Magnetons is Jasmine's!
*hint: you will need to look through older chapters for one last critical clue.
“I think I’ve got it. Ethan, Volkner, Connie. Let’s go look for Magneton number three!”

“Three?!?”

“Yes, number three,” I insisted.

“I can’t figure it out,” Connie said.

“It’s number ten,” Volkner insisted.

“I got it down to three and one, but there’s nothing to distinguish them,” Ethan said.

I held up my hand for silence.

“All but one, ten, and three are eliminated for being too slow or having the Sturdy ability,” I said first to Connie. “Number ten can’t be it because it has Zap Cannon.”

“But, I thought that was three.”

I led him through the charts. He didn’t get it, and I didn’t get why he didn’t get it, until we came to an important bit of applied logic.

“Numbers one and three have Thunder Wave, confirmed. Zap Cannon user has Spark, confirmed. My Magneton doesn’t have Zap Cannon, but should be the only one with both Spark and Thunder Wave. Therefore, the Zap Cannon user cannot have both Spark and Thunder Wave, and having Spark, should not have Thunder Wave. We’ve reduced the Zap Cannon candidates to these three already, and of these only ten is eligible. Thus, ten is disqualified, leaving only Ethan’s two guesses.”

“Ah, okay,” Volkner said, comprehending.

“But the last two are identical,” Ethan added.

“Yes, by our metrics. But you yourself supplied the final critical clue. Number one’s Signal Beam.”

“Your Magneton has Signal Beam, right?”

“Yes, it should- probably. As best I can remember, Morty taught both Magnemite and Magneton Signal Beam in preparation for the Warren fight- or maybe younger Magnemite knew it before then? Either way, it’s not the possession of the attack that’s the clue, it’s the execution. You said number one had a split Signal Beam with three different colors.”

Ethan scrunched his brow. “That’s right. It’s weird, right? It’s not the usual way Signal Beam works.”

“That’s because it’s a result of three different minds shooting off their own version of Signal Beam. Magnemite evolve in one of two ways: three individuals fusing into one formation, or one individual fissioning into three bodies. Younger Magnemite fissioned, its Signal Beam would be uniform and singular. Therefore, by process of elimination, number three is my real Magneton!”

I circled the third entrant in our chart in bold red, and then held the napkin up in triumph.

“Good job, girl. Better go find it before it flies off though,” Connie said.
“Ah, you’re right.”

It was entirely dark now, with only the overhead lamps providing illumination.

We jogged out onto the lawn. Some students were out playing strobe-light tag. On questioning, they pointed out the location of a few Magneton they had spotted.

“Magneton!” the others and I called out repeatedly. One eventually came to us. A quick check revealed it as number seven. I found another one, but it ignored my call and floated off.

“Magneton number three! Number three Magneton!” I shouted repeatedly.

“Do they even know their own numbers?” Connie wondered.

“You were the one that marked them.”

“It’s not like I told them.”

“There!”

A trio of Magneton had gathered near the front walkway, bathed in light. In the middle was our culprit, the number “3” clearly marked on its shell.

“Magneton!”

They all perked up.

“Number three! Come here!”

The two not marked with the “3” obeyed. The desired individual did the exact opposite- it began running away.

“What’s the matter? Number three, return this instant! No, not you two! You’re not mine, get your brain states right!”

The incorrect pair hugged me tight with joyous squints in their eyeballs. The EMSA clearly hadn’t worn off for these two. It was annoying and unhelpful.

“Hey, help me!” I shouted. Connie and Volkner each pulled one Magneton off of me. Ethan barked an order to Don. The Ground type spun ahead of real Magneton and used Mud Sport to build an earthen wall across the path. Number three screeched in displeasure. We threw off the unwanted Pokemon and raced to surround the runaway. En route, a hypothesis popped into my mind.

“That’s why it isn’t listening,” I said to myself.

Magneton number three turned about, hissing off electrical shocks at Connie, Ethan, Volkner, and myself in turn. I took a step forward, raising a red marker.

“Zzzzt! Magzzzt!” It whined and tensed up.

“Magneton! Three Magneton!”

Its eyes twisted away from me. I took a look at it, and it did seem possible for two eyes to twist around and read the number written on the third orb’s surface. So it probably does know its designated number, which means it isn’t ignoring me out of ignorance.
“Okay. Everyone, distract it for me.”

My companions were equally spaced around Magneton. Connie waved her hands. Volkner reached out threateningly. Ethan made a wonky face. The three simultaneous actions diverted Magneton’s three eyes. It was just the opening I needed. I lunged, marker in hand. It only took a single well placed stroke.

“Got it! Step back! Back up!”

Magneton let off a Spark, forcing us to back off. I paused and held my breath. The Pokemon whirled about, facing us each in turn and making sure we were sufficiently warned off. It then took the opportunity to check on the damage inflicted by my marker.

“Mag?!?!”

“Magneton number eight! Please return!” I held up our last Pokeball.

“Mag mag! Mag MAG!” Magneton, without hesitation, threw itself into my arms. It was a load to hold up, but I bore it gladly. Electrode appeared and joined in, bowling me to the floor. My Pokemon jumped and played all overtop me like a pair of Growlithe puppies. Round, artificial, electrified puppies.

“Hahahaha!”

“Hey. Nice.”

“Have’n’t seen that in a while.”

I peeked out from the pile of spheres. All the humans were staring down at me with bemused looks.

“What?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve seen you laugh.”

“Ah. Guess so.”

Something good happened to me. Because I let others help me? I don’t really want help though, I want to be the help. But to be useful, I could use my Pokemon, and to get my Pokemon, I need to accept help. It’s a whole cycle of favors and kindness, isn’t it?

Mm, yes. But cycles need to be kick-started. Remember your vow, Jasmine.

“What was that thing with the marker?” one boy inquired.

“Oh, yeah, did I ever tell you about Magneton’s quirk? It has a pathological hatred for odd numbers. It won’t answer or acknowledge them.”

“I knew that,” Connie said. “So changing its number from 3 to 8 did the trick, huh? Your Pokemon are all just as weird and stubborn as you. I guess it’s true, a trainer’s personality rubs off on them.”

“Does that make your Pokemon a bunch of potty-mouths?” Volkner asked her. She play-punched him in retaliation.

I took another look at my Pokemon.

MY Pokemon. They were mine. They belonged to me. And I to them. It felt so torrid and shameful
to be thinking that way, after all I’ve been through, after all I did to them. Still, I loved the feeling. As a trainer, I was back.

The boys gave me a hand up. They looked relieved.

I’m not better, by any means, but this small reunion brought out a wisp of hope— that someday I might be. Or at least, I can get back to where I was a few days ago, before I marched home and...

My shoulders drooped and the smile sloughed off my lips. Ethan noticed. He tilted his head.

“It’s about time I headed home,” I explained.

They kept coming up with excuses to put off the inevitable. Connie had some last minute work to finish on the submersible’s software. Volkner wanted to tour the engineering department, then the student rec center. They begged me to come eat with them. I was hungry and accepted, and we ended up at a nearby pizza parlor. I had no money, but Connie insisted on paying for me. Then there was the matter of getting some more Pokeballs to fit my Pokemon into. Battle Tower was nearby, and Connie thought it might cheer me up to watch some late night matches. We wiled away a couple hours in the spectator rooms watching mid-level battles. Conversation was light and easy. At the gift shop, Connie not only purchased the extra Pokeballs, but also a pair of Thunder seals to augment them.

“That’s really not necessary!” I told her.

“Not going to hear it.”

Electrode and Magneton were caught and registered to my name. They were hungry too, so I had to surreptitiously tap a fuse box to let them charge. We gathered in the lobby, mulling different ideas that would undoubtedly take us past midnight.

“Okay guys, I can’t put this off any longer. She’ll get mad at me if I stay out too late,” I said.

“One sec.” Volkner stepped in close. “Can I talk with you alone?” he asked earnestly. Ah, it’s time for that conversation. I assented. We began walking off towards the ballroom. I noticed another figure following me.

“Um...”

Ethan paused mid-step.

“It’s another one of those times,” I said. I expected him to nod understandingly and back away, but he hesitated. “I think Volkner wants to talk to me alone,” I said for clarity.

“Yeah but...”

“But what?”

Surely he understands, so why is he tugging at my cardigan?

“He’s a guy,” Ethan said. “You said he abused and manhandled you.”

“Ah.” I looked over my shoulder. Volkner was staring at us with concern.
“It’ll be okay. I can handle this.”

The look of worry and anxiety didn’t leave Ethan’s face, but he did let my cardigan go.

Volkner led me through the ballroom and onto the enclosed veranda. There was couch seating overlooking the practice courts. A trainer and his Dewgong were practicing Ice type attacks on target dummies. We both took a seat, and, unwilling to face one another, idly watched Aurora Beams and Blizzards rip through target balloons.

Volkner was silent, still, and unresponsive. Was he too shy to open up the conversation? Well, no matter. I knew what I wanted to ask about, and so I spoke first.

“Twenty six seconds in hyperspace,” I said.

He grunted.

“There’s a reason they don’t move humans through the PC networks. It’s beyond dangerous. You should know that.” I frowned. “You do know that.”

He mumbled, but did not speak up.

“You didn’t have to come. It wouldn’t have changed anything anyways. Why did you?”

“Eh.” A shrug.

“Volkner! Why did you risk your life for me?”

“I was worried,” he said at last.

“And?”

He closed his eyes.

“You’re like Morty, aren’t you?”

“In what way am I like that idiot?”

“You’ve got a knack for sensing what’s going on in someone’s head.”

“Hmph!... Maybe. I think it’s obvious in this case.”

“So I’m that easy to read?”

“You’re easy reading,” I affirmed.

“So the ‘and’ is... I’m sorry. For what I put you through back in Sunyshore. It was wrong, it was disgusting, it was everything bad in me coming to the surface. It wasn’t really me, wasn’t the guy I want to be.”

“You don’t actually feel sorry, do you?” I said.

He bowed his head. “Just like Morty,” he muttered.

“Those were your true feelings.”

I thought back to my own emotional outbursts. Often, we only reveal ourselves when the heat of the moment strips away the mask of civility and fear of consequence. He can’t pretend he didn’t mean
those things he said to me.

“Yeah. That’s how I felt back then. But how I feel changes, all the damn time. When I asked you out at the summit, I did like you. Sunyshore, I hated your guts.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I can’t ever do the right thing anymore.” He shook his head in self-doubt. “When Morty called me, hearing what was going on- damn, I felt guilty. Real guilt. The others, they don’t understand. I did. I do. I’ve been there. Thinking I could’ve lost another friend out of my boneheaded inaction-” He held his face in his hands. He was choking up, choking down the beginnings of a sob. I put my hand on his shoulder. It seemed to help. He continued. “I didn’t think I could save you. But if I got the chance to talk to you, I thought I could apologize. Make things right. I wanted to at least try to help. I never did anything to try to save Gill. That’s what got him. It was my fault. I couldn’t live with myself after that. I was so damn close. Then this... If I had done nothing for you and let you die, not even Morty could stop me from pulling the trigger.”

He reached over and lightly grasped my thigh. It didn’t seem like an attempt to grope me, but a plea for human contact. I obliged and placed my hands over his.

“Jasmine, if you need me, I’ll do it. I’ll be your boyfriend. Or, whatever you want me to be.”

I glanced to him, and found him earnestly gazing at me. Sincere, tired, honest eyes met mine.

He’s serious about this.

I took his hand, lifted it, removed it from my lap and deposited in his own.

“I want you to be my friend,” I said to him.

And as I expected and welcomed, relief gushed from his eyes and washed down through his face and body. His form, slouched and stiff, relaxed but also lifted upright. A deep breath eased out from his lungs.

I collected my thoughts and began sharing them.

“In Sunyshore, we were both being honest about our thoughts and feelings. I don’t regret anything I did or said there, or any time before. You have nothing to be ashamed about either. That was us being shaped by our circumstances. Circumstances change. We live, we suffer, we learn, and maybe the next time we do better. Perhaps, if I had accepted your feelings at the summit, or you had accepted my pleas at Sunyshore, all of this could have been avoided, and we would have been a happy couple. Things would have turned out alright for you and me.” I bowed my head. “But there’s someone who needed me far more than you or I ever needed anyone, and thanks to all this suffering, I’ve been given the chance to help him before it’s too late. That’s my duty now. It’s not something that was forced on me, but I’ve decided it for myself. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Volkner looked like he wanted to cry tears of joy, but his manhood stopped him just short. I smiled, for him.

“Volkner, I would like you to do two things for me, but they’re actually for your own sake.”

“Listening,” he said.

“First, sometime, maybe not now, I want you to tell me about Gill. I want to know everything that led to you falling for me at the summit. Oh, and if you would, everything you know about Morty too.
So that’s two things, three things total. And the middle one is a selfish request, I suppose.”

“The last one is?” he inquired.

I stood up, leaned over, and took his hand. Together, hand-in-hand, I led him back through the veranda, the ballroom, and the connecting corridors. I stopped him just short of the lobby doorway. By signs and mimes, he understood we were to keep silent and covert. I peeped my head around the corner.

Ethan was talking casually with Connie. She seemed to be leading the conversation. Her body was animated and flighty, sometimes waving her hands or gesturing, then wrapping herself in her own embrace. Her face was alight.

Volkner’s head appeared above mine, his gaze parallel to mine. I whispered to him.

“You like her, don’t you?”

He gulped and nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Is it just a crush?”

His shoulders slouched.

“Probably. I mean, we just met.”

“Do you think she’s cute?”

“Yes.”

“Does she think you’re cute?”

“Yes. At least, that’s what I take “I like men with your style” to mean. She said that to me.”

I nodded, content.

“Then that’s enough. I know you, and I know her very well, and I think you two will get along just fine.”

“But she’s here in Olivine, and she’s got a boyfriend, and...”

“They broke up, and she’s about to finish her undergrad. Sunyshore Polytech has a nice post-graduate school for engineering, right?”

“Tops in the nation.”

“Mention that to her.”

“Okay.”

I pulled Volkner back around the corner.

“Listen, Volkner. My third request is this. I want you to be happy. I want you to live for yourself. You deserve it and you need it. You’re not the kind of person who can handle sacrificing everything for others’ sake. That’s me. I have a spine, I’m the iron-willed maiden. So don’t worry about me or
feel guilty over me, and just focus on you and Connie. She’s a very easy woman to please. Hug her, kiss her, tell her nice things, and don’t ever ever cheat on her.”

“I can manage that.”

“Oh! And amusement parks, she loves roller coasters.”

“Got it. I’ll be sticking around for a while, I guess. So Kinji World, after her finals? Does that sound like a good idea?”

“Oh yeah, it does, she likes visiting Goldenrod too.”

“Thanks. For everything,” Volkner said with a soft smile. I reciprocated.

We went out into the lobby together. Ethan perked up immediately and showered me with whispered, worried questions. I reassured him that everything was fine, that Volkner didn’t try to come on to me or give me a fuss about our past engagements (which is technicality not true, but I didn’t want Ethan to have the wrong impression), and that he needn’t worry about anything other than himself. Volkner engaged Connie, and I noted how virtually the first lines out of his mouth were about her plans for graduate school (silly Volkner, you really are hopeless at flirting! You should have opened with the Kinji World idea!) Nonetheless, Connie soaked in his clumsiness just fine, and soon enough they were lost in geek-speak conversation that went beyond my level of comprehension.

Connie drove us to our respective stops for the night. First up was Ethan at the Pokecenter.

“So, until next time?” he said.

“Twelve hours,” I told him. “Can you manage that?”

“Mm,” he responded with a nod. He kept glancing at Volkner.

“Ethan, focus on me!”

“Focusing.”

“I’ll be right back here in twelve hours. If not, come to this address, sneak in the backyard if you have to: 15 Willow Branch Circle. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled him close, so that our brows touched. “Got it?”

“I do!” he exclaimed.

“I care about you and want to see you again. I have a lot more things planned and you’re part of those plans. I’ll be really upset if you’re not there in the morning, okay?”

“Okay,” he murmured.

“You’re not brimming with enthusiasm.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking! I can take care of myself for one night. I’m not a kid.”

“You’re the guy who isn’t a kid that desperately wishes he could be.”
“Nya nya nya-” he made faces at me. “But really, I’m worried about you. You have to go home to her.”

I sucked in a deep breath. It was cold, near-freezing air, as cold as the thoughts that Weedled into my mind at Ethan’s reminder.

“I’ll survive... Eh. Ugh... Like I said, you might have to come to me. It was a good day, right?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s going to be bad days to come. But hopefully, not tomorrow.”

Ethan shrugged.

“Good night.”

“Night.”

That was tortuous. Volkner said I had good intuition, but I have no real idea about Ethan. What’s going on through his mind, and how will he handle this tiny separation? Why was he being so annoying about Volkner? Could he be jealous? There’s nothing to be jealous of. I saw him watching Volkner and Connie, it’s got to be obvious by both words and actions that Volkner’s attention is for her and not me. And why should he be wary anyways? We’re not exactly in a relationship. Is Ethan clingy? Is he coveting my mere attention, if not my affection?

I watched him as we rolled away, and noted how he watched us back, all the way until we were out of sight.

The boy is a basket case, that’s for sure. I worry for him.

It was out of the way, but Connie insisted we drop me off before Volkner. I understood she wanted more private time with her newest toy. We rolled to a stop before Mother’s house. I was surprised when Volkner also got out of the car.

“You don’t want to meet the parents, trust me,” I told him.

“I had one more thing to tell you. I’m staying at Erika’s place, actually.”

“Oh?!?”

“Erika has your Oddish,” he said.

“OH!!!”

Oh no...

It felt like December just bypassed all my layers of clothing, skin, and non-existent fat, and settled in my chest cavity.

“Yeah. I didn’t know you’d released them, we all assumed the shrub had run off on its own. Erika had the idea it came to her looking for help. She’s taking good care of it.”

“I see. Thank you for passing that along.”

I guess I have to confront that disaster-in-the-making sooner than I wanted. Not tomorrow though. Dear me, I need a break from these heart-wrenching conversations.
Volkner gave me a look of sympathy, doubtless knowing the hardship he had just deposited at my feet. He hugged me and then got in the car. Connie got out, told me to hang tough, and also gave me a hug. They drove off into the night. I was left all alone.

“Not alone, never again alone,” I said aloud. I brought the two Pokeballs out and released them.

“Magmum?”

“Trudy!”

They were tired and groggy, and only bounced along in single hops whenever I made a step. Their whole weary attention was fixated on me.

“Ectrooooder?” Electrode asked.

“He’s not here. We have to recatch him, just like you two. He’s being much more stubborn about it though.”

“Tro.”

“Magmugmagmuton?” Magneton sidled up to my shin.

“Yes. I won’t leave you this time.”

“Ton ton?” Magneton indicated the house. The two seemed to be cowering away from it. They remembered who inhabited it.

“Don’t be afraid. I need your support. Now and going forward.”

“Troda!”

“Zzzton!”

They braced themselves and put themselves forward, showing they had my back. Back, key word, they were a good two feet behind me as I slumped towards the front door.

“Well, we’ll see how this goes.”
Mother's Challenge

With the benefit of the morning sun’s illumination, I discovered that the kitchen was in far worse condition than I thought. There wasn’t a single material item in the entire room that wasn’t destroyed or displaced by Mother’s wrath. The only thing that could be said to be in proper order was the trash can, it being centrally located and already overfull. Everything else was destruction more complete than the hurricane, relative to the scale.

I tip-toed through broken and scattered dishes and food containers to reach the fridge. It was lying on the floor. I tried lifting it, put my back into it, and couldn’t get it even one inch airborne.

Good god.

She had flipped this appliance over, all by herself. The rage-given strength of that woman was unreal. I looked over the rest of the heap. It looked like she had already mopped up the milk and other liquids and picked up the meat and vegetables, basically everything that would spoil. The rest was cooking wear, dry food, and miscellany. This was now my chore.

“Sunkern? I’ll tell you where she is after the kitchen is picked up.”

That was my compulsion.

I don’t understand why I have to clean up the kitchen. It was her mess, her temper that caused it. I’m not even the proximal cause, it was dad who set her off. This is so unfair.

I found a broom and began sweeping a clear path to the important foci of the room: pantry, counter, garage entrance, foyer entrance, family room entrance. Then I began the arduous task of picking through the junk, throwing away the broken and wasted and sorting the still usable. It was an hour in when I realized this was going to be a multi-day task.

I got my phone out, but then bit my lip.

Is this okay? Will I get in trouble? Will he be okay with it?

I was up all night, worried about him. He seemed a bit out of it when we left, and I’m not settling for the idea he was worried about me confronting my mother. A frightening idea had gripped me: that Ethan would try to kill himself if I ever pushed him away or abandoned him. I think, in the short term, that is indeed the case and I’m prepared to handle it. The worrisome part is that it might continue to be the case indefinitely, that I would never make any progress with him and continue to have to be his crutch for the rest of our natural lives. I didn’t want that at all. I wanted him to get better and be able to stand and live for himself, and eventually I want to be free to decide what to do with my own life as well.

I’ve got to figure him out.

Ah, yes Jasmine, like all your friends tried to figure you out- how did that turn out?

I’ll use their example and learn from it. I won’t lie or manipulate Ethan or push so hard to turn him into something he’s not. Hopefully. Erika was desperate and Morty was a fool. They knew what they were doing was stupid and risky but they did it anyway, because they didn’t see any other way. That was the limit of their imagination. What were my limits? What harm could I do to Ethan without realizing it?
I shook off the foreboding feeling creeping over me and quickly typed in a text message.

‘Meet me at my place. 15 Willow Branch Circle.’

“Send.”

There was no reply. Not in the customary five minutes, not in an hour.

It was closing in on eleven o’clock and I was getting sickly worried. I took a break from picking out trash to check my phone. No reply. I dialed his number, thinking a direct call would get a response. One ring sounded out.

The line went live.

“Ethan?”

The line went dead.

“What was that?”

I tried redialing.

“The number you are calling cannot be reached at this time. Please hang up and dial again.”

I stared at my phone.

What the heck is going on?

Something struck the window.

“Was that a bird Pokemon?” I wondered aloud. I took a Pokeball out of my pocket.

It happened again. I saw it, some very small object hit the glass.

I opened the door and walked out into the backyard. It appeared empty. I scanned around carefully but couldn’t make out anything.

“That’s funny.”

I turned around to make my way back in-

“ARCEUS!”

I almost screamed. It was more of a hacked-up cry.

“Ethan!” I furiously whispered.

He was crouched on top of the roof, acorns in hand.

“How did you get up there?!”

He craned his neck.

“Is she here?”

“Who? She?”
"Your mother."

"Yes! In her room!"

Ethan recoiled.

Oh I get it.

"Ah. Um. Meet me outside the garage. There’s a side door."

I went inside, quickly filled trash bags, and made like I was delivering them to the garbage bin in the garage. I opened the side door and looked around. Ethan floated down in the talons of Friar the Noctowl. I pulled him inside, shoved him into the storage closet, and then lunged in after him.

"You said I had to sneak in," he explained.

"You should have texted me first!"

"Oh. Ah. Sorry."

He flat out forgot to text me back.

"I was so worried! Don’t do that to me!"

"I was worried about you!"

"Don’t be!"

"Don’t tell me not to be!" he retorted. "Your mother-"

"She’s fine. It’s fine. I didn’t get in trouble."

"Even after we kept you so late?"

"She was asleep. She didn’t talk about it at all this morning, just wanted me to do chores." I had the distinct feeling that she really didn’t want to be bothered by me. Something else, probably Dad, was preoccupying her.

"So... what’s the point of me coming over? Am I allowed to be here? Would she get upset?"

"The point is to keep you where I can see you. I have no idea. Probably."

He stuffed his hands into his sweater pockets and frowned. Oh. Awww. He’s pouting.

"Do you really have time for me?" he asked.

"I’m making time for you. Sit there and I’ll get you some food." Not everything in the kitchen was unsalvageable, and Mother will hopefully assume whatever goes missing was just thrown away. The real problem was that Ethan did not want to sit tight. He followed me out into the garage proper.

"Go back and hide! Do you have any idea what kind of hell I’ll be in if she catches you? You want to see me again, don’t you?"

"It stinks in there. It’s stuffy. It’s cold. I can hide out here in the garage."

"Mother is in and out all the time! She could come in here any moment! She’ll think you’re a burglar!"
Ethan inspected his hands. “Do I look like a burglar?”

To be honest, he looked like a vagrant teenager. I’d wager he would be mistaken for a prankstering teenager playing hide and seek before being mistaken for a criminal.

“She knows your face. She’ll know exactly why you’re here. If she finds you sneaking in under her nose... dang it, just get back in the closet. Or go hide in the bushes.”

“It’s too cold.”

“You’re just full of complaints.”

“You’re just trying to get rid of me.”

“I’m trying to figure out how to ditch my janitor job so I can spend time with you while safeguarding future chances to spend time with you!” I growled. “Give me a second to think up a plan. Please.”

Ethan nodded slowly.

I wonder if she would-

“You said you were getting me food, right?”

“I told you-”


“GRRR! Not one literal second you idiot!” My anger piqued. I threw a punch to his jaw, albeit a half-hearted one with my non-dominant left hand. He didn’t even flinch, but stuck his tongue out at me.

“Meh. Your tsundere punch is weak.”

“That’s because I didn’t put my back into it!” I shouted.

I clenched my dominant right hand into a solid fist and wound up.

“UNITED KINGDOM OF SMASH!”

My knuckles burrowed into his cheek. The force of a thousand volcanoes rose from the earth, pulsed through my square legs, uplifted my spine of steel, turned the inexorable wheel of my shoulder socket, blazed along the razor’s edge of my arm, and impacted with full might and fury into Ethan’s petulant face. The kid flew backwards through the air like a burning meteor, crashing into the shelves and sending debris flying in radial arcs. The garage rang out with the sound of explosive violence.

Yet, with garden implements falling all around him, the boy managed to keep his feet. He stooped a bit, shoulders hunched, panting, pained, but nonetheless, still standing. He casually wiped a single drop of blood off his lip.

“Heh. Not bad. I was waiting for a good challenge.” He took out four Pokeballs. “Time to break out that technique.”

“Oh no!” I cried. “What are you hiding?!”

Ethan raised his hands, forming a ninja seal by crossing his pointer fingers.
“Shadow clone no jutsu!”

The Pokeballs popped open all at once. In a dazzling shower of sparks and flashes, four more Ethans appeared. The quintet of boys took up fighting stances. I gawked, then groaned. The extra four Ethans were identical to the original, except for the plastic line-like eye and mouth openings indicative of a certain perverse creature.

“Heh. As if that’d intimidate me.”

“Pyroar Combo!” the Ethans yelled. The clones charged.

I began my dance. Duck the first fist, Low Kick the one going low, grab the one going high. Fling him into the backup. Chop left, chop right, skip over the leg sweep. Vault backwards onto the car’s hood. Kick five times rapid to stop their coordinated attempt to mount the car.

One scrambled up onto the canopy and caught me from behind. I cartwheeled over his grasp and landed a Cross Chop to the back of his neck. *Its* neck, actually. The transformation failed and the Pokemon fainted. It was a Ditto, of course, and this one flopped at my feet. I kicked it into another attacker’s face, then used the momentum of that kick to spin me off the car and into the middle of the garage. Three more Ethan-Dittos lunged at me.

“I am a leaf on the wind. Watch me soar.”

I back flipped to the wall and picked up a rake. The cement became my dance floor, the room became my rave. I was a song and a whirlwind, a symphony of sweeps and swipes that filled the air with glorious stinging wrath. The clones stood no chance. A whack to the face, a low sweep, a back end block, parry, parry, snap off the ground to ricochet into the chin, and then a full force reverse riposte to take them all down- it was over in seconds.

Ethan, the real Ethan, stood with his back leaning against the wall, hat low over his eyes, smirk consuming his lower face. He mocked my efforts with a slow, polite clap.

“What else you got?!” I shouted, waving the rake in his direction.

“We’ll have to get exotic. Okay!” Ethan took up a martial arts stance. He cupped his hands behind him, as if to charge up an Aura Sphere.

“Kaa-”

No.

“Mee-”

Fucking.

“Haa-”

Way.

“Mee-!”

He suddenly lunged towards me.

“Haa-Rock!”

“Paper!” I dropped the rake, caught his flying fist with my open palm, and used my free hand to flip
him clear over my head. He landed with a thud on the cement floor and then poofed out of existence. No, wait.

“Another Ditto!!”

“Flash Step!”

“You!” I whipped around, but the real Ethan, having passed himself off as one of the injured Dittos, kept on my back.

“Vulcan Pinch!” His fingers sent a shiver of ice down my exposed neck. I started losing consciousness. “Psst. Nothing personal, kid,” he said with a smug grin.

Blackness. Darkness. My mind is giving out. No... It can’t end this way! I have too much pride to let a lowly male take me down!

“RAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

“Oh no!” Ethan recoiled in terror. “Have I unwittingly unsealed her inner beast?”

“JASMINE ANGRY! JASMINE SMASH!”

The hulking monstrosity that I had become turned on Ethan. His feet were blurry circles, churning like a Doduo’s but somehow not moving their owner a single inch forward. I caught him by the torso, supluxed him, and tossed his body like a rag doll into the garage door. That must have hurt him, but apparently not enough to finish him. He rose once more. My anger increased tenfold. I let out a guttural roar.

“There’s only one way to end this.” Ethan took up a one-legged Folded Crane Style Praying Stance. “Zero Hand Style: Love Conquers All.”

I pounded the ground and launched myself at the foe.

“Tengen Topper! Gurren Lanzer! Giga! Head-butt! Breaker!”

My scream rang out as I closed the gap in the blink of an eye. My prey was right there before me. Rage colored my every thought and emotion. Nothing could stop me.

“Sike. Human potential, bitch.” Ethan pulled out a flashlight at the last instant and lit it up in my eyes. Its glare overwhelmed my vision. I thrust forward, completely blinded. It was my sense of touch, not sight, that told me Ethan had narrowly ducked between my legs and avoided obliteration.

“Click. Panty shot.”

I regained my vision. Ethan was on the floor, clutching his phone tight. The image on its screen had him enraptured.

“Hey. Hey. Was it worth it?” He gulped as a hand took him by the collar. I raised him bodily into the air. An enraged woman truly has the strength of a Rhydon. Don’t mess with her.

I drew my free fist back.

“Any last words?”

“Oppa Gangnam Style.” Ethan nodded his head downwards. My eyes involuntarily followed. A Smoke Bomb lay directly underneath me, detonator ticking.
The blast sent my skirt flying. There was nothing to see underneath it but smelly, noxious green gas. My dignity was the last thing on my mind, however, as I coughed and sputtered away from the cloud. Ethan took the opportunity to dash towards the outside door. In a moment I was on top of him, and soon we were reduced to slapping and pulling at each other like little brats.

“Jerk! Twad! Pervert! Peasant!”

“Pipsqueak! Runt! Munckin! Cutie!”

“Grrr!”

“Arrrgh!”

“Ououou!”

“Raaah!”

We were tearing at each other’s faces when, very suddenly, all the air in the garage was vacated. An aura of doom descended upon us. I heard the sound of knuckles cracking. My body instinctively tensed.

“Super Moves. Serious Series. SERIOUS DISCIPLINE!”

WHACK WHACK!

Ahhh!

It hurts! It hurts! It hurts!

I clutched my head, an infantile whine emitting from my chest. Tears, not of joy or shame or sorrow or any such emotion, but of pure, unadulterated pain, wept down my cheeks. Ethan beside me writhed in similar agony.

“The hell are you two doing?!” Mother yelled down on our heads.

She wouldn’t get a proper answer for several minutes as our brains rebooted. Nonetheless, her stare down would not relent. I rubbed the bump on my forehead while scavenging for any appropriate answer. No fib seemed sufficient to placate her.

“I asked him over to help clean the kitchen. I needed the help.”

A half lie, half truth, I decided on.

Mother eyed me. She’s giving me that expectant face, but I was at a loss as to what to do or say.

“Um... Yeah.”

“So get to it,” she said sharply.

Ethan and I sheepishly made our way past her.

She bought it!

Or rather, she’s okay with Ethan coming over... as long as he’s helpful? That sounds like Mother. Need to stay on my guard though. This is what she calls “leverage”.

“Don’t forget this mess,” she added, waving to our brawl’s aftermath.

“Yes ma’am,” Ethan answered. We reversed course and began picking up the yard implements. This was quick, and soon enough we were off to the real disaster zone. Mother watched over us long enough to confirm we were working, then wandered off.

Mother had already picked up the perishables, and my morning’s progress consisted of the area around the dining table. That left the junk counter, pantry, and cooking area to be picked up. All the cookware had been ripped out of the cabinets and tossed clear across the kitchen, sometimes ending up in odd places. I found the rice pot wedged in behind the stove. The dry food was mostly limited to the immediate area around the pantry door. A carton of rice had spilled out across the floor like a miniature avalanche off Mt. Silver. I began picking the rice up in scoops, then grain by grain, and depositing them in the pot.

Ethan gingerly probed the perimeter, picking up bits and pieces of trash and unsalvageable equipment destined for the garbage bin. He looked a bit bewildered, even scared. There were holes in the drywall where she had punched through, either with tools or her bare fists. Pieces of the carbon-board countertop were chipped off. Long gashes from knives streaked across the walls and ceilings. The tipped over fridge seemed to especially alarm him. It’s one thing to be told about that woman’s fury, it’s another to witness its wake.

It didn’t surprise me at all, though. I was used to it, inured to it. Seeing me calmly go about the chore of cleaning it up must have reassured Ethan. He noticed me diligently working and quickly settled down, picking through the pantry debris field alongside me. Kneeled down in tandem, picking out waste, sorting, collecting, putting away or throwing away- it was the most relaxed I’ve been in days.

“You hide your power level well,” he said.

“Don’t you dare tell anyone,” I said back.

“Ah. Heh.”

...

“Yours seems pretty high.”

“It’s over-”

“No.”

“Okay.”

...

“Let me guess. Shonen?”

“And shojo, and seinen and josei.”

“You’re quite the omnivorous otaku.”

...

“Do you keep up with anything?”

“No. Not enough time. Maybe one or two a year.”
“Games?”
“SimKingdom.”
“That’s really old.”
“I like it.”
...
“Your Halloween costume was cute. Do you cosplay often?”
“When I can.”
“What characters?”
“Erm... kind of ones you wouldn’t know.”
“Tell me.”
“I mean, it’s embarrassing.”
“Why?”
“Different reasons.”
“Like?”
“Well, for one, I’m not good at costume-making, so they look bad.”
“Do you have pictures?”
“Not on me.”
“One example. Please.”
“Um. Okay. There’s this villain of a series I really like, Bonedruid. He’s got kind of a steampunk armor, but mine was made of paper mache.”
“I see.”
...
“She laughed at it.”
“Ah.”
“Said I looked cute.”
...
“You wanted her to tell you that you looked cool.”
...
“My dad does armor smithing.”
“Seriously?”

“It’s his hobby. Well, he makes a lot of different things, but part of it is replica samurai and knight armor.”

“That’s neat.”

“Just saying. If you wanted to get better.”

“Mmm. I’ll think about it.”

...

“Oh, okay. Let’s cook this for you.”

*stomach grumble*

“And me too.”

I cleared a space on the counter and set up the rice pot. One scoop, two scoop. On third thought, add one more, Mother might want some.

“No meat, sorry.”

“That’s alright.”

“And Pokerations, if you want to feed your Pokemon.” I was surprised Mother even had these.

“Thanks.”

We cleared out the rest of the pantry as steam started hissing from the hole in the rice pot lid.

“Yum.”

No butter, no salt, no teriyaki or curry sauce, but Ethan dug in like it was the best rice ever. That, or he was putting on a show for me.

“It’s just rice,” I said, loading a fork and stuffing some in my own mouth. My tongue confirmed that it was completely ordinary and plain, nothing special at all.

“Anything tastes great when you’re hungry,” Ethan said. He tucked away ball after ball, his chopsticks flying from bowl to mouth in a blur.

“Chopsticks?”

“I found them.”

“They’re my dad’s.”

“We only used chopsticks at home.”

“Traditional family. Like Erika’s.”

“Yeah. Yours too?”

“Dad’s not really from a traditional family, he just likes old-fashioned stuff. Mother is all modern.”
Ethan glanced around the room.

“Hmm?”

“A modern girl would do this, huh?”

“No. Just a psychopath.” A broken, pitiable one.

“You sure you’re safe here?”

“No. I’m not sure.”

“You could stay at the Pokecenter.”

“I’d rather you stay here.”

“Can I?”

“I don’t think so.” In all likelihood, no.

I thought some more.

“My apartment rent is overdue. But I still have a couple weeks before they throw me out. You could stay there.”

Ethan’s eyes lit up. He nodded along. The idea appealed to him.

“Do you trust me?”

“Trust you? With what? My apartment? What’s there to trust you with?”

That’s an odd question.

“Just, a guy in your place.”

“I’m not there, so why would it matter? Are you planning on tearing it apart? Or what?”

“Never mind.”

“Were you thinking of something perverted? I don’t have any dirty panties left over there.” I said this half-jokingly.

Ethan actually blushed.

“Oh god. Were you actually thinking of that??”

“No! I’m not a panty sniffer!” Regardless of the truth or lie of his words, the idea was definitely eliciting a reaction in him. Great! Now I bet he would do it, just because I mentioned it!

“I don’t really care,” I said.

“That’s not my fetish,” he insisted.

“I mean, I don’t care if it is or isn’t, or if you do it or don’t do it.”

My line of reasoning: if he wants to stuff my undies up his nose and wank off, that’s one more incentive to not kill himself. I’ve got to use everything in my arsenal at this point.
Ethan went deathly silent. He put the empty rice bowl down and went back to cleaning.

“Ethan?”

“I don’t want you to think of me in that way,” he said over his shoulder.

DONK!

“Ow!”

My karate chop fell square on his head.

“Baka.”

“What was that for?”

“You’re doomed. I already think of you in that way.”

“But-” he stammered and turned around to face me. He held a pile of glass shards in his palms, but they started slipping out like grains of an hourglass. The boy looked so helpless.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not Lyra. You don’t have to put up such a macho virtue act for me.”

He frowned.

“I’m no saint myself,” I said.

“I know, but yours are all anger and depression related.”

“No. I’ve got embarrassing fetishes too.”

THAT got a rise out of him. He twirled like an Aipom and scampered into the pantry to hide his face.

“Help me finish this.”

It took three more hours, but together, working steadily, we made it through. The kitchen was by no means pristine, but it was as clean as we could make it. One last task remained. I looked at my scrawny arms, then Ethan’s surprisingly also-scrawny arms.

“Gonna need a Pokemon.”

“Heracles, come out.” Heracross emerged.

“Fridge,” Ethan and I both pointed in unison. The Pokemon instantly understood. Using his super strength, he lifted the fridge and tipped it to its proper upright position. The kitchen shook as it thudded back into place.

“Have a P-bar,” Ethan said, throwing the ration to his strongman. Heracles gratefully took it and promptly chomped down.

“All done.”
Mother traversed the room, inspecting every corner and edge. Her finger ran across the counter, coming up spotless. Yes, I remembered to wipe down, mop, and dust. Even the door frame and hard-to-reach cabinet tops. She inspected the fridge and pantry, and even the inside of the oven. The only evidence of her tantrum was the wall and counter damage, and I couldn’t fix that.

“So?”

“It’s good work. You work hard when you’re motivated.”

“And my motivation? Where is Sunkern?”

“Here.”

Mother pulled out a Pokeball from her jacket pocket. It took a moment, but then the implication hit dawned on me.

“Who’s Pokeball is that?” I asked.

“Mine,” she answered. “So yes, Sunkern is my Pokemon now.”

My breath began fuming from my nostrils.

Control yourself Jasmine. She’s not spitefully stealing your Pokemon away. This is a negotiation.

“So I cleaned the kitchen for you. It was your mess, that should be payment enough for Sunkern,” I said.

“It’s payment for staying in my house,” she countered.

Control yourself, Jasmine.

My fingernails dug into my palms, the byproduct of tightly clenched fists.

“Calm down,” Mother warned.

Don’t lose your temper on her. Be the bigger girl.

It’s damn hard though. She’s holding my Pokemon hostage and raking me over the grater for it.

“I’ll give Sunkern... or well, this Pokemon back to you. You just have to do what I say.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“You won’t like it. But it’s for your own good, so I need to do it this way. Understand?”

“What is it?” I demanded, loudly.

“I don’t mind you getting all your Pokemon back together. What I do mind, and what I will not allow, is you getting back into battling. I want you to give up on being a gym leader, or a trainer, or any damned combat sport involving those creatures.”

“Sunkern, please,” I said, extending my hand.

“You’re willing to give up battles?”

“Of course.” A total lie.
“I don’t trust you.” She flat out doesn’t buy it. She walked to the back patio door and opened it. A wintery blast of air billowed over us. It was one of those cold, windy, sunny days. “Let me convince you,” she said.

“What are you thinking?”

“I know you’ve got Electrode and Magneton back. We’ll do this your way. A battle.”

Wait... what?!

I mouthed my disbelief. Mother strolled outside into the backyard. Ethan and I hurried to follow her.

“Rules. Standard clauses, no items, no limits. Your own Pokemon, no borrowing the boy’s. I win this battle, and you have to do what I say. You win, you get your Pokemon back.”

Incredulity rising.

Sunkern was the weakest member of my team. I have two of my offensive powerhouses. Does she realize, with standard clauses, it’ll be a two on one match? Is she serious? I refuse to believe she is this ignorant. There’s something amiss here.

Yet, given the terms, I can’t back down.

“I won’t accept unless I know the stakes. What do you want? Besides giving up Pokemon battles. I can’t accept that.”

“I know,” Mother said. “I’ve got something else in mind. You won’t refuse it, I think.”

“So you won’t tell me.”

“Only if you accept this match.”

DAMN IT!

I know what she’s doing. This is her preying on my pride- as a Mikan, and as a Pokemon trainer. She knows I can’t resist the challenge, and she knows I won’t renege on the terms. This is my sphere, my domain, and if she can beat me at my own game- there’s no way I could refuse. Especially with the match rigged in my favor.

“I accept.”

I stepped out onto the yard.

“Ethan, you too. Be a judge for us. I don’t know every rule.”

Ethan toddled up to the patio edge, completely unsure of his presence amidst this feud.

“It’ll be alright,” I reassured him. “This has nothing to do with you. Probably.” I wondered for a moment if her condition was related to Ethan. Unlikely, given her allusion to my gym leader career earlier.

“It’s not me I’m worried for. She’s got something up her sleeve, doesn’t she?” Ethan said.

“Yes, obviously. She’s brilliant, and a hard worker. I bet she used the time we were cleaning the kitchen to come up with a strategy.”
I reached inside my coat. A pair of miniaturized Pokeballs wiggled between my fingers. Electrode and Magneton. The latter should be able to withstand any attack and one-shot Sunkern in return, no matter her strategy. I can overpower her. I’ll lead with Electrode, see what she has cooked up, and then finish it off with Magneton’s Flash Cannon.

“I’m not going to underestimate you.”

“It won’t matter,” Mother claimed. We held up our respective Pokeballs, clicking them to full-size and readying to launch them.

“Okay. Jasmine, ma’am. Just remember, when I say a Pokemon’s out, it’s out. Uh, this isn’t a real arena, so try keeping the damage contained. We’ve got no shields here.”

“Noted,” Mother said.

“I’m good,” I said.

“Okay. Ready?” Ethan looked to each of us. “Begin!”

“Electrode!”

“Sunflora!”

SUNFLORA!

“Sunflora!”

Sunflora emerged from Mother’s Pokeball.

“You seriously-!”

“I did. Safeguard.”

“Wait, hold up!”

“No. Deal with it. Growth.”

“You evolved her?!?”

“Jasmine! Fight!” Ethan shouted.

“Absorb.”

Before I had even registered the situation, the opponent had already set up and attacked. Electrode didn’t care about the context and dodged automatically. The verdant globes of Absorb splattered on the grass Electrode had just vacated. The popping noises from their impact snapped me to attention. My mind transitioned properly into combat mode.

“Electrode, Thunder Wave- cancel- the Safeguard- Light Screen instead!”

“Troder?!?!”

Electrode tried, but its Light Screen proved too weak. Sunflora’s Absorb passed right through it and imploded on Electrode’s shell. There was nothing it could do to do to stop the healing spheres returning to Sunflora, taking Electrode’s vitality with them. Or so I’ve always assumed... This is worth a try.
“Growth and Absorb,” Mother commanded.

“Electrode, next time you get hit, race towards Sunflora!” I ordered. It understood, but opted for the preferable strategy of simply dodging the next barrage of Absorb pellets.

“Thundershock.” Let’s see what Sunflora’s special defense is like.

Electrode gritted and pumped out an electrical shock. It arced across the yard and toasted the grass Sunflora was standing upon. The sunflower Pokemon seemed indifferent. I take it Electrode’s level advantage is not enough to overcome Sunflora’s type resistance.

“Mega Drain,” Mother commanded. Sunflora piped up and began hurling out larger, slower bulbs of energy.

“Dodge.” Electrode didn’t even need to dodge- it was so fast it could blatantly outrun the projectiles. Sunflora was shooting off in volume now, creating what would be a bullet hell arcade game for Electrode, if the bullets had the velocity of underinflated helium balloons. It was lazy work for it to flicker between the green globes.

“Mix Absorb and Mega Drain together,” Mother said. The bullet storm became more complicated. The faster Absorbs zipped between the larger Mega Drains, creating a difficult to discern attack pattern. Nonetheless, the mixture reduced Sunflora’s firing rate and Electrode was able to cope.

“Got it.” I nodded.

This didn’t seem so dangerous.

“Sunflora is too slow, it hasn’t moved at all. Electrode, Sparking Tackle! Aim from up above!”

Mother was showing her inexperience. All Grass-type absorbing attacks are affected by gravity. Their aim and velocity was affected by the angle of fire; a vertical trajectory set them opposite to the Earth’s gravity, weakening them. Electrode bounced high and came crashing down. Sparking Tackle was my choice of attack: it was a special combo that fused Electro Ball’s speed differential power boost and Spark’s blunt physical damage. It suited Electrode’s capabilities perfectly.

Yet, at the last sliver of a second, Electrode broke off and smashed into the ground. It rolled to a defensive stance and then quickly bounced away. I took a second to see and register what my Pokemon had reacted to.

“Giga Drain,” Ethan said aloud. Larger than Mega Drain, faster than Absorb, and these in particular were orbiting Sunflora like shields, ignoring gravity altogether. I counted them up. There were ten basketball-sized globes. That was Sunflora’s limit, it couldn’t create anymore.

“Grass Knot.”

“Jump over it!”

Too late. Electrode stumbled for a moment over the sudden protrusion of roots.

“Fire.”

The first Giga Drain launched. It was accurate and swift, and hit Electrode square on. The amoebic plasma of the globe congealed around Electrode. It then shattered into fluorescent pieces which scattered across the ground.
My Pokemon gritted in pain. We had no stamina gage, but I’d guess Electrode had lost half or more of its HP.

“Electrode, roll and dodge.”

“Again.”

Giga Drain number two fired off. The angle was uncanny, hardly any arc at all. Gravity’s drag was being negated on these spheres- how?

“Sunflora!”

“Again.”

Electrode warded the second Giga Drain off by peddling mud into its path; it avoided the third through sheer maneuver, but it was close.

“Not telekinesis. Not energy transfer. Thermal buoyancy?” I wondered aloud. Electrode narrowly dodged the fourth, fifth, and sixth Giga Drains. Each time the projectiles closed the margin of inaccuracy, getting the gap down to inches. It was Sunflora, I thought, that was getting better at predicting Electrode’s movements. She’s anticipating and firing ahead of the gap.

“Electrode, backtrack! Erratic dodge!”

“Volley.”

“Floraaaa!”

Three Giga Drains came flying in in triangle formation. Electrode couldn’t outrun or dodge them- I grit my teeth expecting the worst. Yet Electrode heard my command and applied it perfectly according to the tactical situation: it broke to a dead halt. The Giga Drain orbs exploded upon the grass around my Pokemon, all misses.

A glance to my opponent- Sunflora was alone, no more green orbs in sight.

“Electrode! Charge and Sparking Tackle.”

“Troder!”

Wait a minute.

Six plus three is nine. There were ten.

“Watch out below you!” I shouted.

Electrode canceled its Charge and swiveled towards the grass beneath it.

“Cancel float.”

AH!

The tenth and final Giga Drain crashed down from above. It splattered on Electrode’s topside and seeped into its body. Nutrients squirted out and ran along the ground back towards Sunflora.

“Electrode...”
“Troder...”

“Is able to battle!” Ethan shouted.

Still up! Yes!

“Forget it all! Run in and Explode!” I commanded.

Electrode dug into the grass and launched itself. The gap between the two Pokemon was a bit large, fifteen yards maybe, and Electrode’s fatal mistake was attempting to cover it in one leap. It fell a few yards short. Roots burst from the ground at its landing point and whipped upwards, ensnaring Electrode’s body. My Pokemon tried bouncing forward and igniting, but in vain. Even as light rays encased its body, Electrode was being pulled backwards, away from its target. The subsequent blast was terrific and violent, but relatively harmless to the sunflower Pokemon.

Ethan waved his hands to signal a knockout. His frown matched my frown- this could be going better.

“So that’s what Grass Knot can do. Hmm. Buoying the Giga Drains with a localized Sunny Day actually worked. Interesting.”

Mother had a very clinical expression on her face, as if securing half her victory meant nothing to her. She was performing analysis mid-match, applying her keen intellect the same way she would towards any other professional pursuit. I shouldn’t have been surprised by her skill, but I was, and it made me angry.

“You had two Pokemon, correct? One more to go. Let’s get this over with,” she said.

Let’s get this over with.

The nerve of this... amateur!... as if pithy hours of study could match my years of experience!

“Magneton!” I let out my second Pokemon and checked it over.

I wanted to lead with its most powerful attack, Flash Cannon, but was worried about possible countermeasures. Let’s test her out with something she’s never seen before.

“Mag, Code 4!” I commanded. “No messing around this time!”

“Ton ton ton!”

Magneton initiated a Sonic Boom Barrage. It started with Supersonic on itself. The confusion discombobulated its electro-pathways and distorted its projectors. It followed this with Sonic Boom; the internal changes split the sonic waves into three bursts, then three bursts again. Nine parabolic sonic shockwaves flew at Sunflora.

“Absorb and Leech.”

The Absorb pellets pushed through the waves of Sonic Booms. They were fast, Magneton was slow, Sunflora wasn’t moving at all, and every attack hit its target. Sunflora was bent backwards to the ground like chaff in a hurricane. Magneton flinched in anticipation, though not in pain. The damage was so little I couldn’t even see the returning sap spheres.

“Got her.”

“Floral!”
But not out.

“Once more!”

“Sunny Day.”

Sunflora lit the air up around her with a bright glow from her face. The atmosphere responded by shimmering in kind. The thin layer of snow around Sunflora completely melted.

“Ton!”

Magneton snapped and flipped over— the consequence of self-induced confusion. It still fired off the Sonic Booms, at least some of which struck Sunflora.

“One more time, I think. Magneton!”

“Synthesis.”

Sunflora absorbed light and heat from the air around it, restoring its health. Magneton shuddered once more, as if an Absorb had hit it. My Pokemon righted itself and fired.

The Sonic Booms hit true.

Sunflora healed with Synthesis.

This repeated several times. Sunflora’s condition never got worse, no matter how many Sonic Booms struck her. We weren’t making any headway, she was somehow out-healing the damage.

I checked my Pokemon.

Leech Seed saplings were stuck to the surface of its lower right body. That and the sun-boosted Synthesis was a formidable healing combo— but was that enough to out-heal Sonic Boom Barrage? I felt like I was missing something and allowed the process to repeat several more times in order to confirm.

“Solar Beam.” Mother finally ordered Sunflora to go on the offensive.

“Magneton, duck!”

Except Sunflora didn’t fire the photonic beam anywhere near Magneton. Mother’s hand directed her aim upwards, directly above her.

“Huh?”

The beam struck overhanging tree branches.

“Why?”

Why?

My brain was racing and my focus couldn’t keep up. There were too many variables to think about.

“Grass Knot,” Mother called. She’s not waiting for me to figure this out.

Magneton floated over a clawing protrusion of roots, zapping them as it retreated.

I’ve got to slow this down.
“Magneton, back off.”

Wait. Leech Seed, Magneton can’t stall this out.

Mother had fried the tree branches above Sunflora, why?

How much damage could she heal, versus how much could Magneton dish out?

How do I get some fatal damage on this plant?

All these questions raced through my cortex while I was still trying to keep track of the Pokemons’ actions.

“Metal Sound,” I decided on a course of action.

“Renew the Sunny Day,” Mother ordered.

“Flora! For a forry forry florry flora!”

The plant Pokemon happily complied.

Magneton unleashed a grating screech on Sunflora. It connected, lowering her resistance to energy attacks.

Sunflora’s reeling, let’s think this through.

Leech Seed piggy-backed on the fast Absorb bulbs. Sunny Day boosted Synthesis’ healing potency. She had been using Sunny Day to increase Giga Drain’s buoyancy, giving her finer aerial control over them, but she ran out of those thankfully. Finally, I had figured out, Sunflora had silently Ingrained herself. That’s where the Grass Knot roots were coming from. The tree branches above Sunflora were laden with snow; Mother had Sunflora preemptively clear them off before I could make use of it as an improv Avalanche. There was no way to wear Sunflora down, not without Toxic. It would take overwhelming offense to knock her out.

Mother smirked.

I could barely resist a grin of my own. I’ve been overthinking this. Her defenses are down. Her healing is too strong for chip damage to work. There’s nothing else to it but attack with everything we’ve got.

“Magneton, if you can- Flash Cannon,” I commanded, hand outstretched.

Magneton hummed in acknowledgment- a loud, affirmative hum. It had confidence, it could do this. All right!

Its six magnets hummed in unison. Distortions in the air indicated a trio of electromagnetic fields coalescing. At their junction, specks of light began flicking in and out in spiral pattern, concentrating around a singular subatomic point.

I formed my outstretched hand into a gat gun and pointed it at Sunflora.

“Bang.”

My thumb came down.

The energized particles shot off like a high-powered railgun.
Sunflora scrunched inward.

The shot was virtually instantaneous. The silver bullet registered in my eyesight as a single streak connecting the two Pokemon. The explosion was a splatter of atomic residue that radiated out behind Sunflora in a cone. The victim was engulfed in an opaque flash.

“Floral”

She... survived! Shoot!

“Magneton, prepare another Flash Canon.”

“Earth Power,” Mother ordered.

NO!

The ground ripped up around Magneton’s position. Roots burst out, parting the earth and clearing the way for a thermal vent. A solar-powered earth-borne surge of energy erupted from the hole, creating a small volcano underneath my final fighter. Magneton screeched in pain.

Melted snow turned to mist, which quickly engulfed the battlefield. Ethan held up his hand, halting further fire until both combatants’ status could be ascertained.

“Floro...”

Sunflora emerged first. She was weak, her stalk was bent over and bruised, and her petals were ripped up.

Magneton emerged second. Its underside was blackened, but otherwise looked able to continue.

“One more of either attack,” Ethan remarked.

“You taught her Earth Power?” I asked.

“I did,” Mother answered.

“Florry flora!” Sunflora beamed with pride. It twisted and waved at its current trainer. Mother offered a small, encouraging smile in return.

“Please bear it one more time,” she told the Pokemon.

“You would go so far-” I muttered.

“What’s so extraordinary about it? I’ve worked with Sunkern all her life, you’ve barely payed attention to her.”

“You don’t even like battling!”

“Nor do I like police states or war, but when violence becomes necessary, I won’t back down.”

“You’re a hypocrite, then,” I told her. “You lash out-”

“At those who deserve it,” Mother cut me off. “These creatures don’t deserve the pain they inflict on one another. Not for our amusement. We humans should be above this behavior. It’s uncivilized and grotesque. Sunflora! I want to teach Jasmine a lesson. I won’t ask you to fight again if you can finish this.”
My body clenched up.

If only this *bitch* would understand. What these Pokemon fight for, the violence they inflict, is far more noble than any blow she’s ever rained down on my innocent head! She truly is a hypocrite!

“Magneton!”

“*Ton!*”

“Time to finish this. Flash-” but I stopped short.

Sunflora waved in the wind, lapping up the sunlight with a bright and beaming smile on her flower-face.

She was enjoying this. She was happy.

This battle was for me to take her back- but it’s obvious here, in this moment, something that should have been obvious from the start. Mother was... right. Not her ugly diatribe against Pokemon battles. No. The first thing she said. About Sunflora being hers more than mine. I ignored Sunkern for the longest time, thought of her as too weak to bother training or evolving. A few days with Mother had done more for her than a decade under my care.

“Root and Earth Power.”

“Flash Cannon!” I shouted.

Sunflora had snuck a small root around one of Magneton’s screws. It tugged, throwing off Magneton’s aim and forcing the Flash Cannon to prematurely fire. The errant particle cannon sliced across the yard, cutting through snow and grass and terminating in Sunflora’s lower torso. The root also kept Magneton from escaping the second Earth Power eruption. My Pokemon was doomed.

Sunflora survived- our conversation had afforded Ingrain the time to heal Sunflora just a little bit, just enough to absorb the glancing blow. Magneton fell to the ground, its triplet eyes clenched shut.

“That’s the battle,” Ethan uttered. “Mrs. Mikan wins.” He had his eyes on me, full of devastation.

I bowed my head as I recalled Magneton.

This was my fault. I underestimated her. I underestimated Sunflora. My weaknesses were exploited. My experience worked against me. And at the end, when the battle was mine to have, I hesitated. I forgot that the stakes were greater than Sunflora’s ownership. My freedom was now forfeit.

I teetered across the yard, to stand and then kneel before Sunflora. I took her leaves in my hands.

“You did well. Congratulations.” I glared at Mother, bitterly, over her head. The glare softened. “I guess I don’t mind if Mother takes care of you for a bit. I’m not exactly in the best situation. How do you feel about it?”

Sunflora laughed and fluttered her leaves in my face. She didn’t mind, she preferred it this way.

“I’ll try to become a trainer worthy to take you back,” I told her.

Sunflora began singing- “*Lalala la la la la,*”- ripped herself up from the ground, and began dancing around Mother. I reluctantly joined them.

“Inside,” Mother said sternly.
“You’re awfully good at a sport you detest,” I stated. She ignored me.

“You, too. Have you eaten?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Sit.” Mother rapped on the kitchen table. We children took our seats. Mother disappeared into the den. Sunflora followed her like a pet. It took a minute for her to return.

“I can’t believe you lost,” Ethan whispered.

“Type disadvantage,” I whispered back. “I thought my levels would make up for it. Nope.”

“You’ll be okay?”

“Mother was right. Sunkern was more her Pokemon than mine. I’m just worried what she wants out of me. She might break us up? Or some other evil.”

“She mentioned you being a trainer. Does she not want you to have Pokemon?”

“Not exactly. She just doesn’t want me to battle with my Pokemon.”

“Why?”

“You heard her. She thinks it’s a violent and barbaric sport. She hates it.”

“That’s not true. It’s not barbaric. Everyone likes it, even the Pokemon.”

“Convince her, not me. But…”

Ethan and I both tilted our heads, thinking the same thing. She hates battling, but she’s both very good at it and was willing to denigrate herself to engaging in it, all to control me. What the heck did she have in mind?

*Boom!*

Mother dropped a stack of massive books down on the tabletop, startling us. The surface shuddered under their weight.

“What are those?” I asked. Mother leaned down on top of the stack.

“You’re not going to give up battling just because I tell you,” she stated.

“That’s right.” There was no way I was going to abide by her demands if they became too extreme, my pride be damned.

“Jasmine, as your mother, I want what’s best for you.”

“Damned way of showing it,” I muttered.

“Shut up.” She leaned down into my face. “You’re twenty-two. Past the age I need to coddle you.”

“You never coddled me in the first place.”

“SHUT UP. You’re a mental disaster and nonfunctional in society. Homeless and unemployed. A wreck. I will not keep you in my home forever. I can’t take care of you forever. I’m not your mommy. Do you get where I’m going with this?”
“Just let me jump from the bridge already.”

Mother delivered a one-inch death punch upon the table. The books jumped, Ethan and I jumped, the table jumped. This “shut up” message went unsaid.

“I want you to take care of yourself. Your trainer hobby is never going to support you. You need a stable, respectable job. To that end, I will shelter and support you until you graduate college.”

I sat up stiff. I needed to take a deep breath. The very idea of it...

*College.*

*Holy crap.*

Mother patted the book stack.

“What are?” Ethan asked.

“Prep manuals for the entrance exams. I want you, Jasmine, to get into Olivine University. You can have Sunflora back when you’ve been accepted.”

“What would I even do with a degree?” I wondered aloud.

“Anything you want. As long as it supports you. Ethan, if you want to date my daughter—”

“I’m not—”

“I suggest you do the same.”

I think we spent entirely too much time arguing about little details after that, discussions about housing, tuition, coursework, and so forth. Yet the main point went uncontested. The reality of my position settled into my conscious. I was slowly, passively accepting my fate.

*I’m going to college.*

Maybe. I eyed the spread of books before me. Mother had holed up in the den to work on legal stuff. Ethan sat beside me, perusing the textbooks.

“Your Mothers’ harsh, but it’s not a bad idea,” he said.

“That’s why I can’t refuse it. I’m just upset that I’m not choosing it for myself.”

“Goes against your pride?”

“Yeah.”

I closed my eyes.

“College,” I said out loud, testing the word against the still, cold air.

“University,” Ethan said.
“Heh. I don’t know. It’s been awhile since I did anything academic. I wonder if I can get a scholarship from my gym work? I don’t know. What kind of degree would I even get?”

“Pokemon Studies,” Ethan suggested.

I smirked.


“Conservation and Wildlife Management. Every uni teaches it.”

“Ah. That’s right.” There was an army of Poke-rangers patrolling the national route system and keeping Pokemon populations in check. “Or Pokemon Industrial Applications.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right up your alley!”

“Or I could aim for an MD.”

Ethan grimaced. I smirked. It was laughable, right? But it would make Mother happiest.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’ve got to get accepted first. And I’m not giving up getting all my Pokemon back. Let’s take a look at- ugh.”

The textbooks made my head spin. Long-forgotten chemical and algebraic formulas swam before my eyes, ones I never properly learned in the first place. Reading it randomly made my brain hurt. I tried skipping to the front, where the book’s methodology was systematically laid out. It had thirty-three sections. This is going to be a long term commitment. I had time. The entrance testing was in April.

Alright, Jasmine, steel yourself. This is Mother’s challenge.

“What about you?” I asked.

Ethan flipped through another textbook. “I don’t think so.”

“College not for you?”

“Nah, I think it would be fun. Always heard how much fun all the school clubs and dorm parties were. Just, Dad would never pay for any uni that wasn’t his alma mater. And I’m not smart enough to get in there.” Ethan frowned. “I’d still get in, but only because Dad has so much influence.”

“Take out loans!”

Ethan groaned.

We sat in silence for a while, reading. Evening set in, and the kitchen got colder. My back became stiff. I stood up to stretch.

“I’ll ask Mother to take us grocery shopping and then give you a ride back to my apartment. We’ll meet up again tomorrow.”

Ethan nodded.

“Ethan.”
He kept reading.

“Would you... be interested in this? Coming to college with me?”

“Mmm.”

“Ethan.”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not very definite.”

“I’m... well, if I could.”

“Come on.”

“I don’t know if I can do it.”

I propped myself up on his shoulders. Then I tried lifting him up by his armpits. Failure, I’m too weak.

“Can push you, but you have to stand up first.”

He responded by slumping over even further, staring intently at the textbook.

“I’d like you to join me. I wouldn’t know anyone at Oli, and I have a hard time making new friends. Does it not interest you at all?”

“I mean, sure.”

“You’re worried about money?”

“Yes.”

“Loans. Grades?”

“Yes.”

“Test prep. Motivation?”

“Yes.”

“Me. What else is holding you back?”

Ethan shrugged.

“I think you could prove your father wrong, if you get a degree and a good job. It would show him you can be successful even if you don’t follow his exact path.”

Ethan waved me off.

“I’m actually feeling a little relieved. This feels like a challenge. Mother knows me too well, taunting me with a task. That works. I want to prove I can do it. I don’t know what works for you.”

“Carrot and stick,” he said offhand.

“Fine. Stick. If I make it into university and you don’t, we won’t get to hang out together and you’ll
be alone again. Carrot. You make it in and we can keep hanging out. Wasn’t that little scuffle in the garage fun?"

“Heh.” Ethan let out an involuntary laugh.

“So don’t you want to get into that again? All the things we could geek out over together. It’ll be fun. I will make your life worthwhile.”

“Meh.”

His head leaned further into the textbook, almost hidden now. He wouldn’t look at me.

This is frustrating. It’s not that he’s arguing against me, he’s simply not engaging the argument in the first place. As if he wasn’t even listening. Rude! Don’t be a typical man, Ethan!

“Ethan!” I said sternly.

“When did you own an Arcanine?”

“What?”

Um... huh?

“Never,” I answered.

“Then what’s this?”

Ethan held up an old photograph. I took it in hand and checked it out.

“I found it in the textbook,” he explained.

The picture showed a young lady patting a full-grown Arcanine on the back, the pair standing at attention for the photographer. The girl appeared fifteen years old, and also, in every facet, down to the cheek bones, hair tone, gauntly arms, delicate frame, and modest fashion sense- a virtual clone of myself. It was me. Except it couldn’t be.

“I never owned an Arcanine. I don’t remember this photograph.” I glanced at the textbook, then reached over Ethan and flipped to the inside cover.

Printed 1985.

“This isn’t me.” My eyes lit up in realization. “This is Mother.”
“Morning!”

I called into the hollow shell of my apartment unit. There was no immediate answer. Signs of occupation did exist, however—footsteps, bumping noises, muffled cries, and other aural cues of the sort. They came from the bedroom. I marched to the closed door and prepared to barge in as if I owned the place (which I did (no you don’t, you rent it, and your rent is in default, idiot!...)), but thought better at the last second.

What is he doing in there?
Do I really want to know?

I waited a few seconds, then lifted my knuckles to the door and knocked.


“Your landlord.”

“I’m broke.”

“Then I’m coming in to confiscate everything you own.”

“That’s not much. I can’t give you anything worth anything. Not even my virginity. Don’t have that.”

“Madam Five Fingers doesn’t count. I’m coming in.”

I opened the door and stepped into the bedroom.

Ethan sat in the bed, naked except for a blanket covering him waist down. His eyes were drab and pouty, his hair was disheveled and sticking up, and his back was bent out of shape. An altogether sorry sight.

“I’m not a virgin. I’d be better off if I was,” he said with a pout.

“I know that, and I agree with that. It was a joke.”

“You need better comebacks.”

“Also agreed. Are you wearing anything under there?”

Ethan’s hands balled into the covers. He slowly shook his head in the negative, cheeks aflame.

“I sleep in the buff,” he explained.

“I’m going to close this door and count to sixty,” I said. “Countdown commencing.”

I did as I said. When I re-entered, the sight of a boy dancing around in circles on one leg greeted me. He had briefs on, one leg in trousers, and half a t-shirt over half his head, though I can’t vouch for the right limbs making it through any of the right holes.

“Do you want help?”
“I got it!”

I closed the door and counted from sixty to one hundred and twenty. I re-entered.

“I’m cool!”

He was indeed. Fully dressed, standing tall and proud, and- wait, how the heck did he get his hair combed and gelled? Never mind. I began an inspection tour of my bedroom. Everything seemed to be alright, though it’s been a few days since I was last here. If anything, it seemed like it was tidied up a bit, except for one noticeable article of clothing.

“Say Ethan, you weren’t up to anything in here last night, right?”

“Ahhh. Nope. Sleeping. That’s it.”

I eyed a pair of my panties on the ground, halfway kicked under the bed.

“Right.”

I couldn’t look him in the eye.

Hey, Jasmine, you put the idea in his head. Don’t bitch at him just because he acted on it!

I glanced at him.

Gosh, he knows I know. He’s blushing and contact-shy.

I sniffed the air.

It didn’t smell any different.

“You sure this is okay?” he asked nervously.

“It’s fine. Just keep it this clean. I’m fine with you sleeping here and... well, doing whatever.”

“Oh.”

Hahaha! (that’s my silent giggle) You just got permission from a girl to fap away in her bedroom! It’s almost as good as sex! Lucky boy!

Anything to keep his mind off the abyss.

I wonder though. His abyss was his sexual insecurity. Would this somehow make it worse? I shrugged, not feeling mentally prepared to address that so early in the morning. Ask him later. Today, we’ve got work. Starting with a debriefing.

“So did you ask her?” I queried.

The poor boy practically jumped out of his socks.

“That wasn’t fun, you know,” he said.

“But did you?”

“No.”

“No? Why not?”
“I lost my nerve.”

“You got scared.”

“I correctly predicted I would be met with hostile resistance!” he claimed, fist-to-heart.

“Did you get anything out of her? At all? Don’t tell me you two just sat there the entire ride.”

“In complete silence.”

Cold, Mother, that’s real cold.

Context: I asked Mother to drive Ethan to my apartment last night. She assented, telling me only to “not expect a taxi service” going forward.

“It’s a mystery to solve, then, right?” he piped in.

“Right,” I nodded.

I recalled yesterday, our discovery of the photograph and subsequent confusion...

It was of my mother, that’s for certain. The resemblance to myself was uncanny, but not exact, and I had no recollection of anything resembling the pictured scene. Ultimately, it was the date on the back that gave it away- July 5th, 1982, eight years before I was born. By my math, Mother would be fifteen years old in the picture.

The question then became, ‘what was Mother doing standing beside and petting an Arcanine?’

“Was your mother a trainer?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“A family pet?”

“Not that I recall.”

“A zoo visit? A service Pokemon?”

“Look at the background, it’s in front of a garage.”

“Huh.”

It was a little thing, this picture, and probably had an innocuous explanation, and I could’ve easily talked myself into dismissing it. Except the way Mother commanded Sunflora during our battle, it seemed too natural to her.

I made up my mind to ask her.

“Where’d you get that?” she replied. “It was nothing, just a friend’s family pet I used to play with. Throw it away.”

She was lying.
I could tell, and it was unnerving how physical my sense of her lie was. Like a bug crawling across my brain.

Mother wouldn’t have kept it so long, like some kind of heirloom, if it was “nothing”. She wouldn’t have tensed up on seeing it. She wouldn’t have told me to throw it away. This wasn’t “nothing”. This was a piece of her past, of which I knew nothing about.

“It’s bugging me, because she lied to me. Not just about the picture. About her whole childhood. She said she was never a trainer, never had a Pokemon battle... but even the smartest person in the world doesn’t do what she did with Sunflora with zero experience. That Arcanine was *her* Pokemon. I’m sure of it.”

I cradled the picture between my fingers. It was a strong Arcanine, I could tell. Its haunches were ripped, its belly was lean, and its mane and tail fur were glossy and bright. Like ash from a fire, the whiter the fur, the hotter an Arcanine’s flame was. This one’s fur was a single shade darker than pure snow. Yet Mother, young as she was here, looked completely at ease. There was familiarity there, in the way her fingers curled into the creature's mane.

“What would she hide this from me? Did something terrible happen to her? To Arcanine?” I wondered.

All the things she’s done to me, and I’ve often questioned *why*. Yet lacking any sort of clue and fed the blandest of origin stories, I’ve always had to settle on the answer, “That’s just the way she is.” This might be the first clue to explaining Elaina Mikan, the person. A hint as to why she- if only I knew...

*Do you really want to know?*

I do.

*Are you sure?*

Yes!

*Jasmine, think. No matter what this turns out to be, nothing can excuse that woman’s actions. There is no value in searching for a reason to even sympathize with her. What she did... was unforgivable.*

Still...

I glanced at Ethan.

“What do you think?”

Ethan shrugged.

“You could go chasing the answer down. Could be fun. Could make her angry,” he said. I sensed his gist.

“No. No. Maybe someday. You’re right.” Ethan grinned. “I’d like to get my Pokemon back first. I’ll focus on that.”
“Right,” Ethan nodded.

Why do I get the feeling he just doesn’t want to risk provoking the walking, talking volcano?

“I’m not scared for myself,” he said, as if reading my thoughts. “I’m scared for you.”

“Oh.” I take it back.

“When you’ve got your team to back you up, I think you’ll have the confidence to really face her down and bring up everything that’s between you two. Ah, and she wouldn’t hit you if you’ve got a Steelix, like, physically behind you.”

“Good points, all.”

“So on that note, who’re we going after next?” he asked.

“I’m feeling ambitious today. Three places to check. With good luck, we’ll net three of my old Pokemon.”

“That’s great!”

He took to that enthusiastically.

“Got your Pokemon?”

“Some of them.”

He held up three Pokeballs.

“Who’s here?”

“Aibo, Heracles, and Azu.”

“Good enough. I’ve got Magneton and Electrode. Here.”

I threw a heavy winter coat at him. One of dad’s leftovers. It didn’t fit that well, but he did resemble my father a little bit wearing it. Once we were both fully bundled, I outlined the day’s itinerary for him.

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We were after three different Pokemon today, searching spots they had previous affinities for. The first stop was near the harbor.

The clang of steel instruments rang in the background. Bits of sparks and metallic chaff flickered off grindstones and anvils. Heat poured out of crucibles, overwhelming the winter air and quickly drawing sweat from my coat-wrapped skin. The smell of fossilized wood filled my nostrils. It was a hard place, a masculine, industrial place. The kind of workspace my dad always yearned for, but could never make a living in.

This was the machine shop of my father’s company, responsible for constructing all of their maritime exploration equipment. Dad came here often, sometimes for work, mostly for the hobbyist armor-crafting side-racket they had going.
“If it isn’t the spitting image!” Foreman Dozuma cried aloud on spotting Ethan. Ah, so I wasn’t the only one to see the similarity.

“Feels like David’s come back! Or his son. Never had a son, did he? Shame. Wanted one, he always said. Haha! If it isn’t the daughter he got instead!” Dozuma said on turning to me.

I frowned.

“Ah don’t pout. He always says, you’re the tomboy he deserved.”

I cocked a brow.

“That’s a weird way to put it,” I remarked.

“Aw girlie, don’t be that way. He meant it nicely. It was on him, a joke on him. He didn’t deserve a son, he said, but the universe tried hard to make it up to him, the way it served you up.”

“I don’t really appreciate being likened to a piece of chargrilled meat.”

Dozuma laughed, a big bellowing laughter where his cheeks bulged out like a Raticate but his eyes kept staring intently at me. The few times I’ve met this man, he never ceased to wear on me.

“So what can I do for ya? Looking for your pops?”

“No. For a Pokemon, actually. Magcargo. Have you seen it?”

“Keh! You’re looking for one and the same. That smoker he’s always bringing around?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yeah, it was here,” Dozuma answered. My eyes lit up with excitement. “But it’s gone now. Both of them. Hayate-san collected the Poke and the both of them tamped out- two days ago, I think. Too bad. Enjoyed the little bubble. Was trained real well, made the melt run like a drop o’ mercury. Best armors we ever made.”

“Ever do samurai armor?” Ethan inquired.

“Do we? Ha!” Another face-popping laugh. “We’re the “official” outfitter of Lord Nabunaga himself!”

Ethan perked.

“The Nabunaga?”

“Yo!”

I nudged Ethan.

“Explain.”

“The Lord Nabunaga. You now...”

“From history books?” I asked. As far as I know, our country’s nobility died out during the Restoration Period, a hundred years ago.

“The, um, the reenactment. They do historical reenactments of Nabunaga’s famous battles and court
meetings. It’s part of the Summer White Festival.”

“Ah! So that’s it. Yeah, I sort of knew that.”

I really didn’t. I’m a nerd, not a history buff.

“You seem interested there, son.”

“Well, ah, yeah, a little bit.”

“Care to drop in, learn a few things? Always lookin for new members to the club. Gotta keep the membership up.”

Ethan held up his hands in protest.

I patted Ethan on the back.

“He’ll come by tomorrow,” I said. Ethan’s befuddled, shocked face turned on me. Dozuma grinned from ear to ear.

“I got off today, but tomorrow I have to study all day. You’ll have more fun here. Do something cool! Make new friends!”

Dozuma nodded eagerly.

“It’s not like we’re all old farts. There’s a few boys your age. Come on by!”

“Uh. Okay, sure.”

Dozuma put a finger to his lips and beckoned us over to a side closet. A peep around, making sure no one was looking, then he unlocked it. Inside was a veritable treasure room of armor and weaponry, of styles from all over the globe. “Don’t touch, but go in and have a quick look.”

Ethan could no longer hide his boyish curiosity, and tiptoed in like a brat in a toy store.

Dozuma-san (he did like the old honorifics) crouched beside me.

“David wasn’t doing well. Looked real down. Did something happen?” he asked me in a whisper.

“Domestic trouble.”

“Yeah, we know that, but this seemed a bit...”

“It’s the end of it,” I said.

Dozuma nodded, understanding. “Bout time. He was suffering, long time. Ah, well, that’s rude of me, not considering your feelings.”

“It’s fine,” I said, holding up a hand. “I’d just like to know where they went? I’m trying to collect Magcargo.”

“His parents, I think. He said he was gonna take time off work.”

“Okay. Okay. Thank you.”

That actually wasn’t helpful. I don’t know where my paternal grandparents live. I haven’t seen them in-

I counted it off on my fingers.

Twelve years?!

I curled my counting fingers into tight balls until the shaking stopped.

“Imagine suiting you up in that, Aibo!”

Ethan came out of the locker with Aipom in tow. He was waving excitedly at all their future plans. The boy noticed me.

“Hey, Jasmine, you know they’ve got an original sixteenth century samurai set in there?! It’s waaaay cooler than I thought!” He calmed down by a little bit. “Thanks. Thanks a lot. I...” He scratched his head and glanced away. “You’re doing a lot for me.”

“Whatsoever’s necessary,” I said. “So, how was last night? Did that feeling come back?”

Ethan deflated a little.

“Eh. Um. Eh. Uh.”

I waited patiently for the meaningless syllables to start forming coherent words. My patience was rewarded:

“It did. But it wasn’t exactly the same.”

“Oh?”

“It’s like it regressed, kind of. Like I went back to how I felt before I started feeling like screwing it all.”

“And that was?”

He clamped shut on me, and no amount of patient waiting elicited further information. I shrugged, sighed, and led Ethan away. Aibo trailed after us, and I could have sworn it was staring at us intensely, but it kept glancing away whenever I turned around. Dozuma-san waved us goodbye as we departed the shop.

Our second stop was fruitless and rather boring, so I’ll simply summarize it. Theory: Magnezone was near the power plant where I evolved it. Reality: it was nowhere to be seen and the power plant staff knew nothing about it. Damn. On to the third and final stop on our tour today.

“Sorry you didn’t find Magcargo,” Ethan was saying.

“It’s alright. I know he’s in Dad’s hands, so I’m relieved. And I have a vague idea where they might be, and even if I can’t get there, I can always wait for him to come back to the house or his work. It’s
not impossible to track down. Just hard. Just tedious.”

I frowned, and my mind drifted off.

“Something bothering you?” Ethan asked.

“It’s nothing.”

This is nothing new, right Jasmine? For him to not be there when I need him. It’s like, Dad, where are you? I need you to be here. Say something. Do something. Be a father. Be a husband.

Get her to stop hitting me! Daddy!

“So then, where next?”

Ethan’s voice shook me out of my trance.

I pointed up a hill, to a sizeable, thickly-grown lot. Between leafless hedges and trees a low brick building could barely be made out. We weaved between the underbrush and came out onto a small parking lot. It was not overly full or empty, and a few people walked in and out at regular intervals. It was a peaceful place.

“Togu Light Elementary,” I softly announced.

“A school?”

Ethan headed towards the front door, but I grabbed him by the sleeve and led him around the side. The back of the elementary school went on for some ways, split at regular intervals by compartmented patios. Each one led into a classroom. The windows were covered in decorations, handcrafted paintings and construction-paper contraptions. A Magnemite sticker made me smile, faintly, a Mareep one made me bite my lip. Noises came from within, the chatter of excited children spilling out from beyond the glass. It was almost time for their winter break. Christmas and New Year’s was coming. It was near the end of the building that my ears perked and I caught the sound that I was searching for.

“Stop. Quiet,” I warned, grabbing Ethan.

“Wha-?” I hushed him.

It came floating through the air like a sea breeze, quiet and indiscernible at first, then another step and it was suddenly crystalline clear and unmistakable. Its harmony was surreal, its tune beautiful. Like the thrum of a zephyr wind through a forest of harps. I tilted my head to one side, caught the melody full in the ear, and melted.

Hers was a rare talent, even for her species. That’s why I named her like I did.

“I hear it,” Ethan whispered.

We inched closer, but by gestures he understood to not make a sound or make a sudden movement. We crept up to nearest barrier separating the patios.

“A la la la laaaa, lauauualala.”

I took one peep around the corner, confirmed with my own eyes the source, and then hid back around. My body felt weak. Tears bubbled up. I collapsed against the wall, barely catching myself and sliding to a seat. I glanced up into the sky, taking note of the blue-painted space and all the wispy
clouds. It felt like each note was a wave of happiness washing over me- but not my happiness. Another’s.

Ethan stared, at a loss. I nodded for him to take a look. He did so, for quite a bit longer than I did. When he came back around, I beckoned for a lift. He helped me up, and we snuck away as quietly as we had come.

“I saw an old lady, lots of kids, and Corsola. Was that not your Choir? Was that why we didn’t go in?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head, wiping tears away. “That was her. That was Choir.”

“Why didn’t you take her back?” Ethan asked.

I shook my head. How do I even begin to explain this?

“Ethan, um, is there any adult you look up to? Someone you’d call sensei?”

Ethan shrugged. “Not really anyone close. Elm, but he’s more Lyra’s sensei. Lance is Silver’s. I never really had one.”

Aw. How sad, and yet, how fortunate. He doesn’t know that anguish. I think, it might have made it easier for him, this stupid, innocent child, to contemplate the darkness when he’d never felt its passing firsthand. I have. This is one gap that might be hard to relate to him.

“That old lady, the teacher- that’s Mrs. Beret. My mentor’s widow.”

We made it back to the Pokecenter, letting the cold bite of the walk clear my mind and settle my emotions. Bitterness, pride, guilt, sorrow- the gremlins that tore at my mind- the transit gave me the space to put them back in their cages. But not vanquished. My mood turned wistful. It was in this state that I led him to the couches of the Pokecenter lobby and started divulging my tale.

“My mentor, Mr. Beret, I’ve told you a bit about him.”

“Yeah. I met him that one time. He was pretty strict.”

“Ah. Oh right, do you remember Mrs. Beret?”

“Can’t say so.”

“She shouted at everyone about something, like a busted washer or something?”

Ethan wracked his memory.

“Maybe? But you were saying, I get it, that was her.”

“Yeah. Anyways.” I leaned my head down on the couch cushions. “That was her. Mr. Beret was my mentor. In a lot of ways, he was the father mine wasn’t. Well, he never really was all lovey-dovey
like a dad should be. My dad was like that. Lovey-dovey. But he wasn’t around for the parts when I
needed something besides lovey-dovey. When I needed a father, not a friend. Beret was there. Was
there. Was.”

Ethan raised a hand to my shoulder, hesitated, let it quiver there in its sincere but tepid desire to
reassure. I settled the matter by lifting my shoulder to meet it. His touch evolved into a slow back
massage as the story unfolded.

“Beret got cancer, and the cancer got him, but he was a soldier to the core, and went down fighting.
It took three years. Hard, harrowing years, for him, and especially for his family. Me too. That time
was the worst. That’s probably the closest I came to wanting to die before now. I was having such a
hard time, with school, my future, my mother, and then the one human being I respected and cared
about was being stripped from me, one cell at a time.

I know we were all doom and gloom over it, but never Beret. He wouldn’t allow it. He cared for me,
and made me know it. Everything I know about being a leader, about running a gym, and about
trying to keep my head held high- he beat that into me over those three years. It felt like he used up
all the rest of his lifeforce to push me forward.

I can’t help but feel sick from it- that I would squander what he tried so hard- ah... but I thought it
was all a waste anyways, if he couldn’t be there to see me.”

I needed a minute to calm down again. Ethan continued his massage, and scooted closer, I suppose,
in case I needed a hug. I held him off for the moment.

“I was his child, it felt like. And, well- the thing is, Beret had children, two sons. Both in the military,
one navy, one air force. They came off rotation to help him, but he sort of ignored them. It wasn’t a
happy relationship, at the end, between them. Mrs. Beret blames me. She accused me of robbing her
husband from his wife and kids in his final days. We used to get along, but after Beret passed away,
she got meaner and meaner towards me.” I smiled, a gracious expression. “I looked up to her. She
was fiery and independent and stubborn and always shouted her mind. She didn’t take crap from
anyone and wouldn’t let anyone disrespect her. But being on the receiving end of that attitude felt
awful. It hurt. I thought I could be there for her when she needed someone, but she ended up pushing
me away.”

Those were the darkest days. When I was fifteen and Ash and Mother all happened, that precipitated
the decline. But Beret dying and leaving me alone, that was the cliff. That dropped me into the ravine
of despondency and antipathy towards everyone and everything, especially romance, that Morty
found me in a few months ago.

“You’re not to blame, I think.” Ethan said.

I nodded. “Of course not. I don’t feel guilty. It was Beret’s decision, not mine. But the fact of what
she was saying, was completely true. Beret used his dying years to raise me, and neglected his own
family. I can’t agree with her vendetta against me, but I do understand it, and I can’t blame her for it
either. I think the best I could ever do, is leave her be, and not be an eyesore in her life.”

“And Choir?” Ethan asked.

“When we did get along, Choir would sing for her and her kids. She loved Choir. We would all sing
together. It’s a happy memory between us, I think. I hope. Not enough to overcome her loss, but
maybe, it’s something I can leave behind that isn’t completely filled with despair for her.”

I made good on that nonverbal hug offer, and pressed into Ethan’s chest.
“Choir was never cut out for battling. I want to make sure, this time around, that the Pokemon I own are good at what I intend to do with them. Fight.”

“You still want to battle? What about your mother?”

“Even if I go to college, I’m not giving up my battling career just because she says so.”

“Choir’s not good enough for fighting?” he asked.

“She could be. If I really trained her. But it would be a waste. She’s a singer. That’s her gift. She should be with people who enjoy her for what she’s best at, and raised by those who can nurture her talent and appreciate her for it. I could never give her the time and attention she deserves.” I clung to Ethan all the harder. “I’m a bad trainer, Ethan.”

“You’re not.”

“I am. A very bad trainer. I neglected all my Pokemon, in one way or another. All for my own goals. All to cover up my own insecurity. Some didn’t mind, some could handle it. But some deserve better. They need a trainer who appreciates them for themselves, and can provide a role for them that they love and excel at.”

“Your Magnetons... Electrode? Steelix? They love you don’t they?”

“Yes!” I lifted off Ethan a bit, and fixated him eye-to-eye. “That’s what I’m getting at. Those are my Pokemon I love the most, who are good and strong and not only can win battles for me, but love fighting and winning battles with me. I want to give all my love to those Pokemon. And since I want that, I don’t have all the time and care necessary for the Pokemon who can’t fight... who shouldn’t fight. Sunflora. Choir. Am-a-aa-aaph.” My voice sputtered out.

Ethan pressed my head to his chest before the rest of the lobby could see my tears.

“There’s always exceptions,” he said.

“I’m a hypocrite too.”

“Yeah. We established this. Hypocrisy is overrated. Just do the right thing. And I guess, you are. If you think Choir’s happier singing for schoolchildren- well, she was your Pokemon, and you ought to know what’s best for her.”

“Ah. That’s what I’m counting on.”

“You’re a good person.”

“Ah. Eh.”

We stayed like that for a while. As I was disengaging and putting together plans for the rest of the evening, a voice called out. Someone pointed me out, and a trio of policemen came over to our couch cushion.

“No need for alarm, Miss Mikan.” It was Chief Rekishi. He seemed in a bit of a huff, but was forcing a polite smile to greet me with. “You’re not in any trouble. I’d like to request your help, in
“All right. I’m listening,” I said.
And so I heard him out.

...this is probably the only place I’ll get to say this, considering what comes next. Now I’m not usually one to skip ahead in the story, but I feel like it needs to be said here, while we’re on topic, and before other matters consume the narrative. And don’t take it like it’s that big or weighty a matter, because the truth is, I mostly feel guilty about this because I don’t feel all that guilty about it. I didn’t put in a serious effort, I didn’t think too hard, look too hard, cry too hard about it. But just to let you know, I did search, but I never did find Pineco.

I hope you don’t blame me. After all, with what comes next, my remaining Pokemon... things just got harder and harder.
Police Chief Rekishi motioned us inside the Pokecenter’s back office. We five filed in: him, myself, Ethan, and two more police officers. One was wearing a different uniform, I noticed, not of Olivine’s police force.

“This is Officer Golding, and this is Captain Tora, on special assignment to us.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Captain Tora said, tipping his police cap.

Rekishi, old and grizzly but not yet greying, deferred the conversation to the captain. The latter was younger, dyed-blonde, soft features, an up-and-coming hotshot if I were to guess. He kept forcing a smile.

“I’d like to assure you Miss Mikan that you’re not in trouble. We really just have a small favor to ask of you.”

“And that is?” I asked.

“I’m told you’re good friends with Celadon’s Gym Leader, Erika Hikami. Is that right?”

My stomach lurched. Of all the reasons for the police to approach me, that was the one I least expected- perhaps because I had tried so hard to put Erika out of my mind. It was too difficult a matter to contemplate.

“I was,” I answered.

“Was?”

“We’re not on the best of terms right now,” I said carefully.

The officers shared worried glances.

“Would it be impossible for you to talk to her?” Tora asked.

I thought on it.

It was an inevitability, given Oddish, so I shook my head. “It would be hard, but not impossible.”

“That’s a relief.”

“What’s this about? Why would the police be interested in Erika?”

“Please sit.”

I did so. Ethan wandered round and took a seat beside me. Likewise, Chief Rekishi took the desk chair. Tora stood firm and Golding leaned against the door. It was the chief who directly addressed me.

“Erika Hikami is wanted for questioning in connection with felony criminal offenses.”

“What?”

A flat ejaculation of disbelief escaped my mouth.
“Olivine PD has been given orders to extradite Miss Hikami back to Celadon when possible. She has been linked to an ongoing investigation into organized crime.”

“Oh. That.” I remember now. She mentioned something of the sort in her Skype dialogue with Morty. Was she in trouble? Could she be jailed?

“Team Rocket, you mean,” I said. Both senior officers nodded.

“Has she ever confided any information to you about Team Rocket? Anything at all? Or done anything that made you suspicious?”

“I don’t know how to answer that,” I said. Things did come to mind, but it took a few seconds to assemble them. Meanwhile, I was weighing the desire to protect my friend from arrest against my burning desire to pay her back for her betrayal.

“Just tell her the gist of it,” Rekishi urged. Tora accepted the suggestion.

“If you’re worried about your friend, I want to assure you that we are too. This isn’t really aimed at her. We’re after this man.” Tora laid down a photograph. I took it up.

“I know him!” I yelled. I recognize this guy! It was the nasty asshole who assaulted us that one night in the park! The drug peddler!

Tora’s eyes lit up in excitement.

“Is he a Rocket?” I asked.

“Until a week ago, he was the most senior active member of Team Rocket, essentially their boss. His name is Petrel Lambda, and he was a vile menace to all of Nihon. Thankfully, he’s been apprehended.”

“Oh that’s good.”

“You recognized him, though. Have you met or...?”

“He attacked me and Erika at one point. I used my Pokemon to scare him away,” I said.

“When was this?”

“Summer of 2006.”

Tora’s gaze was getting wider and brighter by the moment.

“Are you familiar with the Hightower Park incident of that year?”

“Do you mean the silver-leafed Oddish? Yes I-” and I hesitated. Was it right? Would I get in trouble for divulging this?

‘Tell the truth, Jasmine,’ I heard Beret’s advice come calling from the past. ‘The truth will never harm you in the eyes of the just’.

“I was the one who relocated the Oddish.”

At that, Captain Tora practically jumped in the air.

“It was YOU?!”
I folded my hands in my laps.

“Erika told me about the Oddish being used as fuel for the drug trade. I felt terrible for the creatures. I really love Pokemon, you should know. I knew it was against the law, but I couldn’t stand by and let them be exterminated by one side or the other. So I used Steelix to move them and the rock they relied on to a safe place.”

“So that’s... oh damn, oh damn, this fills in so many blank spots in our investigation. Thank you. May I ask where you moved them?”

“I left them in the care of someone who would absolutely not abuse them,” I said.

“Well, sure, I believe you, but we need to know, for the investigation’s sake,” Tora insisted.

Rekishi interceded.

“If you’re worried about the Pokemons’ well-being, they won’t be euthanized, I promise. Nor will any action be taken against whoever is caring for them, as long as it’s shown they haven’t been used for further drug manufacturing.”

I gulped.

“Doctor Hikami. I relocated them to his estate.”

“Hikami’s father,” Tora said with a smile of relief. “That’s good to hear. We’ll check in on that. Even if we wanted to press the matter, the Prime Minister would have his back, we can’t touch him. Thanks a bunch. This clears up a lot. It’ll help us tremendously.”

“What does this have to do with Erika right now? Why is she in trouble?” I asked.

Tora was furiously typing out texts on his phone. He paused, resumed a serious face, and answered my question.

“Petrel destroyed all the physical evidence before we could catch him. He’s also killed, run off, or otherwise silenced most of the witnesses. We’re having trouble putting together a case against him. We were hoping Erika would testify against him. Except, you see...”

“Erika has been uncooperative,” Rekishi said bluntly. “When asked to come in, she fled here instead. She refuses to answer our calls or court summons. If she persists, we’ll have no choice but to assume she’s a willing accessory and order her arrest.”

Oh no. This is serious. Very serious. Far beyond what I imagined.

“What did she do?” I asked.

Tora and Rekishi eyed one another.

“What crime is she suspected of?” I asked again. They wouldn’t answer that.

“How can I help if-”

“Please, Miss Mikan. We’re going to offer her a plea deal. No charges and a guarantee of safety, in exchange for her testimony. We suspect she’s a victim in this too. If you care for her, please convince her to cooperate. We don’t want to have to resort to force.”

I weighed Mr. Tora’s words. It made sense, it appealed to me. There was but one nagging doubt in
“Why won’t you answer my question?” I asked, head bowed, bracing for their reply. Silence. The two men were stone-faced, unwilling to answer. Then Officer Golding, quiet all this time, finally spoke up.

“She’s the one who harvested the Oddish for Moon Dust.”

I sat in the lobby, vaguely watching a blur of Pokemon trainers come and go. Faces of many shapes and contours flicked in and out of focus, none stirring any sort of emotion in me. Pokemon as well, of all kinds, and these did spark recognition and flashes of attached feelings. A Grimer brought out distaste, a Pidgey a familiar sense of place, a Voltorb the joy of pranks humored, and so forth. The humans talked with one another, and talked with their Pokemon, and to watch them all so easily going on with the business of their everyday relationships filled me curiosity. That is, the sad, self-pitying curiosity that begs “Why them? Why not me? How do I gain that?”

I knew this wasn’t going to be easy. But I thought it wouldn’t get any harder than it already was. It’s too cruel, moving the goalposts over and over, and just when I think I’ll cross it, I discover a poisonous swamp laying across the other side. As hard as I imagined this reconciliation was going to be, now I have to face the question “Do I even want to?”

You must become stronger, Jasmine. Strong enough to lift yourself from the mire of your own turmoil, and then shoulder another’s burden as well.

His burden, sure, I was prepared for that. But all of them? Even the ones who hurt me? Who hurt others?

Yes.

At what point can I even say “No! Enough!” then? Must I bear even strangers? Criminals? Demons?

As many as you possibly can. You needn’t forget, or condone, or even forgive. But you must extend the hand of help, to give them the way out of the doom if they choose to accept it. It’s not a matter of whether they deserve mercy. It’s whether they’re willing to earn it.

After all, whatever did you do to earn his love?

Beret... his kindness was always conditional, but never his love.

Ah. This is going to be so hard.

This argument and its particulars played through my mind until I became numb and was reduced to watching people and Pokemon drift by. Like this Prinplup.

Wait a...

“Tyko?”

The Prinplup continued its march across the lobby.

“Tyko!” I said, raising my voice. The Pokemon abruptly halted mid-step.
“It’s you, isn’t it? Tyko! Tyko!” I shouted repeatedly. The Prinplup turned in a full circle and began running. I leapt from my seat and gave chase. It wasn’t difficult, her evolution had robbed her of that infamous rug rat dexterity of hers. She cornered sharply and pressed between people.

“Tyko come here!” I belted out while dodging living obstacles. “I want you to come back! We’re-ugh, excuse me- we’re putting the team back together!”

The Prinplup scooted to a dead stop and suddenly launched herself backwards, directly into my chest. I was bowled over.

“Tykooo!” she cried, and I could see joy alighting in her eyes.

This is impossible. I’m dreaming, right? Another one of my episodes? Or I’ve mistaken a Prinplup... but no. She’s squirming with giddiness and hopping excitedly in just the same way as my Prinplup.

“Tyko! I’m so glad to see you! Where have you been? Are you okay? Are you fed? Oh-”

Tyko vanished in a shower of sparkles. My arms clamped around thin air. Then, slowly, achingly, they clamped harder, around my chest.

A trick. It was a trick after all. There was no way my Pokemon would suddenly appear out of thin air before me.

“What must I do?” I mumbled to the air.

“Jasmine. What are you doing?”

A man’s voice. Ethan, I mustn’t let him see me like this- except that’s not Ethan.

I raised my head and stared. It was an unfamiliar man with a Pokeball in hand, its light aglow from a recall. Wait. Is that where Tyko went? Was she real after all?

He offered a hand to raise me up. I hesitated.

“Who are you?” I asked.

The dark hair, cut short and slicked back, the angular nose and jaw, the gaunt shoulders and neck, the plain casual suit. This was no man of my recent memory. Yet the way he said my name was so full of familiarity, it wasn’t a mistake.

“Don’t you remember me?” he asked with a small smile.

“Edward,” I uttered.

Café Tottery was less than busy. We sat across from one another. Stony silence filled the space above the table. I fidgeted for the tenth time, waiting and praying for reinforcements. They arrived, tardy as expected.

“Hey, Jasmine, there you are. I got your text, but it didn’t say which side of the street Tots was on. Oh. Uh. Huh? Hi? I’m Ethan.” Ethan stared awkwardly at the (to him) stranger. As if just remembering etiquette, he held out a hand.
“Sit down Ethan.”

The boy took his seat beside me.

The polite ease with which Ed had been staring at me instantly turned to wariness on taking in Ethan. He ignored the offered hand.

“A lot’s changed, I hear. You especially,” Edward started the conversation.

“Who is this?” Ethan whispered to me.

To Edward: “Yes. A lot.” To Ethan: “Someone from a long time ago.”

“I remember you,” Edward said, addressing Ethan. “You were there back then, during the hurricane. So your name is Ethan?”

“Yeah. I’m-”

“Don’t talk to him,” I warned. Ethan puffed out his cheeks in protest, but complied. Edward sighed with annoyance.

“There’s no need to act like that. I’m not a bad guy.”

“What are you even doing here? You’re supposed to be locked up.”

“You heard about that little incident?” Edward asked innocently.

“Little? Ed. I heard every detail. “Little” is not how you describe rape. “Incident” is not how you say jail. How are you here? How are you free?”

“Not you too, Jazz,” he said, shaking his head.

I bit my trembling lip. That he would use that nickname...

“Don’t believe everything you hear. It’s really terrible, what rumors and lies can do. Conversely, it’s amazing what a good lawyer can do. You’re right, I shouldn’t be here, but Mr. Sezzazine is amazing at his job.”

“Don’t be flippant! You’re a convicted rapist! How the hell are you- never mind that, why the hell do you have Tyko?”

“I am NOT a rapist,” Edward spat out, anger vivifying his voice. His fist came down on the table with a thud. Ethan and I stared on with surprise, bodies rigid. Yet, by his next sentence he had already regained his composure. “I never touched those women without consent.”

“Women? She was a little girl.”

“She was a teenager who lied to me about her age. I think you would understand, Jazz, not wanting to be vilified for simply trusting another person’s word. It was a bad decision, and I regret it, but it does not mean I am a bad person.”

“And the other girl? Explain the one with bruises and scratches.”

“An opportunist, emotionally unstable, and I hate to cast her in this light, but she did lie to get me convicted: a pain-loving masochist. She wanted me to ‘rough her up’, in her own words.”
“How can I believe you? You talk about trust but what you’re saying sounds too convenient and I have no reason to trust you.” I folded my arms.

“You can trust me by the fact that I’m here and not in jail,” Edward said. “It was my word against theirs, and I lost. If it was just up to words, I’d still be in that filth pen. Thankfully, they found out what kind of ‘victim’ Azusa was when Mr. Sezzazine caught her trading sex to the prosecutor.”

Edward leaned back.

“I’m out on bond, waiting for a new trial, if it even gets that far. Sezzazine says they’ll probably drop the charges.”

I scrunch up my nose in disgust.

This reeks of egoistic self-indulgence.

“And Tyko?”

“The Prinplup? I found her snooping around the back of the gym and decided to catch her. Quite frankly, I’m surprised you two had a connection.”

“Her name is Tyko, and she’s my escaped Pokemon.”

“Escaped? That can’t be true. She wasn’t digitally tagged.” Edward brought out an Ultra Ball and placed it on the wood table with a click. “Care to tell me the truth?”

I stared Edward straight in the eye.

“I accidentally released her, and would like her back,” I said coldly.

“Accidentally? Try again.”

“Give her back,” I answered.

Ethan tilted his head.

“We didn’t leave on good terms. And for that, I’m sorry, and I was hoping you wouldn’t hold a grudge.”

“You made the entire school think I was a Pokephile.”

“Kids tend to exaggerate. Again, I’m sorry.”

“An apology doesn’t even begin to make up for it. Edward, at the hot springs, you-”


“Assault doesn’t need touching.”

“I was emotionally compromised at the time and vented my feelings. I was immature. That’s in the past.”

“If it was bygones, why’d you sick Warren on me? Why lend out your Pokemon to ruin my career!!”

“What? That’s not what I gave that blowhard my Pokemon for. I was told he was trying to impress
you and win you over. You were made out to be haughty and arrogant, and needed coaxing down. I felt sorry for him, until I got out and learned the whole truth. Again, I apologize.”

My gut twisted. I gasped for the words to express myself.

“Hmm?”

“You think you could’ve helped Warren, like Morty helped you? Did you not remember how that turned out?”

“Something about you prancing through a lobby naked.”

“That you two took photos of, and released on the net!”

“I did no such thing.”

“Morty told me everything!”

“Morty must be lying.”

I seized up.

Would Morty lie about this to me? Was Morty the offender after all?

There’s no reason for me to dismiss the accusation, but in my gut, between the two men, I feel like Morty was the one who would take ownership and judgement face first, and Edward here would be the one to try to protect himself.

“I don’t have any reason to trust anything you say to me, at all,” I said forcefully.

Edward eyed me for an uncomfortably long time. His fingers wrapped around Tyko’s Ultra Ball and rapped upon the table in an indiscernible pattern. His breath was short and terse, as if he was barely keeping in check a terrible temper. I returned his vehement countenance with one of my own, never backing down.

“You don’t know what it was like for me, after Indigo. I had built up my entire life, my entire future, with you in it. For a long time after you rejected me, I hated you for shattering that future, and I hated myself and called myself a fool and a child for falling for you.

I’ve backed off that thinking. I feel like what I did was admirable, in a naïve, romantic sense. To fall in love young, to put your entire heart and soul into an unrequited relationship, to foster and nurture it with pure thoughts and hope beyond hope it might someday come true... It was a gamble I lost, but I can’t help but feel it was the right gamble, because the prize was too good. Better to have tried and lost, than to live with the regret of never having tried at all.

Now I’ve been through this ordeal, got falsely accused and been lucky to have my life back, and I’ve realized the only stupid thing I’ve done is try to replace you with some lying hoes who don’t even measure up. I want to move past it all. I want a fresh start, and a new gamble, a girl who I can love with all my heart and won’t lie or let me down. I’ll be more patient this time. I’ll go to Kanto University like I should have, build myself into the kind of guy worthy of that girl. I can still have a good future.

As for you, Jazz- I have no more feelings left.”

He got up, stretched, and picked up the Ultra Ball. I was a single moment from jumping on his back
and tearing his hair out, but he paused and turned around.

“I don’t hate you. So here. Call it a gesture of goodwill.”

Edward set the Ultra Ball down on the table and walked out of the diner.

I couldn’t breathe until the door shut behind him. At that instant, I snatched up the Ultra Ball and unsealed it.


“I can’t believe it,” I whispered. “You’re really back, in my arms, just like that.” I nuzzled my face deep into her slickly feathered forehead.

“I take it you didn’t like him, but he doesn’t seem like a bad guy after all,” Ethan finally spoke.

“I’m not sure. I’m not sure,” I repeated. It seemed too good to be true. But Tyko was most definitely here, my Tyko, and she was mine to hold and train and nurture and play with and love. What could possibly explain this miracle? Edward’s sincere charity? Or a ploy or game of some sort?

“You met him, once upon a time,” I said.

“I did? Was he around when I first came here?”

“Yes. He was my fellow gym trainer and high school classmate. He had a crush on me, but he was slow to tell me, and didn’t confess until it was too late. I did like him, but I wasn’t prepared for a relationship then. Too much stress. Too much baggage. What I went through with Ash, I didn’t want a repeat. And he and Morty played a dirty prank on me right before he confessed, which didn’t help.”

“So he’s another one of those Ash casualties. Guys you rejected because Ash rejected you.”

I shook my head.

“Not Ed. Ed was maybe the one guy who could’ve won me over then, if he’d kept his cool.” I ruffled my hand through Tyko’s smooth feathers, indulging her needy tendencies. “I turned him down because of all the things I was suffering, and because of the prank. But I think he could’ve persisted, maybe, like Morty tried. Instead, he blew up and shouted me down, screamed vile things to my face. Then after, he put out nude photos of me on the internet, spread rumors about me, and got me blacklisted by all the school cliques. He was despicable. Even recently, we’d found out he had been convicted and imprisoned for raping two girls. That didn’t stop him from using his Pokemon to try to get revenge on me through that cooltrainer Warren.”

I held Tyko up in the air. She was lighter than I expected. Had she been losing weight? Was she okay?

“But if he hated me so much, why would he just give Tyko to me for free?” I wondered.

Ethan held up a hand.

“You’ve got a serious answer?” I asked.

He nodded.

“The way he looked at you, and at me- I think that was jealousy. I also think he was lying about not
caring about you anymore. He still wants you, and he thinks handing Tyko over might start the process of winning you over.”

“Huh.”

Tyko blew a bubble out of her nose.

“Yes, you’re cute,” I said to her. “Well I’m glad he tricked himself into giving me bubble-butt back, but I can’t fulfill his wishes. I told Morty he was lightyears away, but Edward needs a wormhole into the past. What he’s done is beyond the pale.”

“Say, Jasmine.”

“Yes?”

“If Edward really was sorry, though, and really did want to turn over a new leaf. Would you forgive him?”

I contemplated the question.

Then I shook my head.

“I know I should say yes. I just don’t have faith. I think you’re right, he probably does want to win me back. But if my love is going to be the condition for his apology, he’s not getting it.”

I thought it over a moment, new comparisons coming to mind.

“That would be like Morty or Erika asking me for sex. It would be absurd and revolting at this point.”

“I see.” My arms were getting weak. I offered Tyko to Ethan, who took her up in his arms and began throwing her around like a theme park ride. She held out her flippers and spluttered out a farting noise, and I realized it was the Prinplup equivalent of airplane noises. The sight brought a fond smile to my face and warmness to my chest.

“I would forgive them all, but they have to earn it.”

You’re not superhuman, Jasmine, you’re not Christos with a heaven’s worth of mercy and forgiveness to hand out willy-nilly. You can shoulder one poor soul’s folly. This one’s. The rest will have to show they can help me help them.

I remembered Volkner.

There’s one who did it. It’s not impossible.

Erika and Morty- I remembered the look of anguish and guilt on their faces, back at the gym when we returned from the bridge.

I think it’s possible. Their fear of losing me was real. They did care. If they cared enough, they’d find it in themselves to change.

I just need the fortitude to accept them.

But, I’m not that strong yet. I can only handle one at a time.

“Ethan, I need to ask a favor.”
“You don’t need to ask. Just order. I’m sorta your tenant and don’t have money for rent. Got to pay you back somehow.”

“You’re funny. Yes. So. I was told Morty and Volkner were staying at Erika’s place. I, uh, don’t want to speak to the former right now. Not for a while. For reasons. But I do need to talk to Erika, quickly.”

“December 21st,” Ethan said, reminding me.

That’s the deadline for Erika. The policemen told me she needed to present herself to Celadon HQ by then or else face arrest.

“That’s right. I’m on a deadline.”

“Understood. It’s a scouting mission: isolate foes, divide and conquer.”

“Yes, essentially.” Ethan gets me. This is so easy to convey to him.

“The reason you don’t want to talk to Morty, is it because he was the one most responsible?” I shook my head.

“He’s a major part, but no, not the principal. The “play with Jasmine’s emotions to get her to open up” plan was- I actually have to go speak with the mastermind. But even that’s not-” I drifted off. Ethan’s eyes widened, then slackened in understanding.

“It goes deeper. To your secret. And her,” he guessed. I nodded.

“He saw me at my most vulnerable.”

“I get it. I’ll go. It’s getting late, so, maybe I should go tomorrow morning?” he said.

“That’s right. If you can arrange a meeting for tomorrow night or the day after, depending on my side, that would be best. And it should give you something to plan and look forward to, so you don’t get depressed tonight.”

“Heh. I actually have things to think about myself now, I don’t think I’ll be moping around tonight.” I perked an eyebrow at him, but he only responded with silence and a goofy grin.

“Alright, let’s go. Tyko, I know you want home, but I want to check you in at the Pokecenter first, to make sure you’re healthy.” Tyko clacked her beak.

Ethan and I said our goodbyes, hugged, and departed.

The road back to the Pokecenter was ablaze with the setting sun’s light. Pedestrians with their Pokemon out littered the streets, and it felt great to be one of them. Tyko was bouncing back and forth and making a downright nuisance of herself, but it didn’t matter, I was okay with it. It was like our best days together.

“You know, you’re still a rookie as far as my team is concerned. You’re still junior to Voltorb and Magneton, so you better not get any big-headed ideas.”


“Eh?! You want an apology? Fat chance! You know I never say sorry.”
“Pringles. Prinkidoo. Plop.”

“Well I’ll say this much, I won’t ever abandon you lot ever again. Unless you steal the remote and lock it to opera again. Then your ass is hitting the road, birdo.”

“PRIIIIIIINPLUPE!”


We made it to the Pokecenter with time to spare in the day. I was contemplating how I would get home and wishing I’d brought Ethan back here to lend me Mantine.

“A taxi? Ugh. You’re lucky. You don’t have to go home and meet Mother. She’s a real slave driver.”

“Tyk a ko?”

Like you?

“Yes. Now imagine the tyrant who I cower to. That’s the queen bitch awaiting me. But you get to overnight here in the comfy PC stasis, dreaming lovely dreams.”

“Pooploop!”

“You know, your syllabary sounds an awful lot like “poop” every time you say something.”

“Poop.”

Proceeds to fart.

As I’m carrying her up to the desk.

With her butt in my face.

“I deserved that. Say, you only just met him, but what do you think of him?” I asked her.

“Prinpoop?”

“Yes, Ethan.”

“Tyk.”

Affirmative. She approves.

“Tykoo... tik prin prin plupaloo.”

“Ah...”

Yeah...

“Tyki?”
She twisted her head around, and I kissed her on the forehead.

“Yeah, he is kind of sad. We’re working on it.”

Even in his happiest moments, it shows up on his face, and in his motions, and his voice. He’s so fragile.

“See you tomorrow, bright and early. You can help me study.”

“Hello! Oh it’s Miss Jasmine! It’s been a while, glad to see you! How may I help you?” Nurse Lucy (I think? It’s not one of the Joy clones) said to me as I approached the desk.

“Hi. I’d like to store Tyko here and run a full health diagnostic. The low priority doesn’t cost any money, right?”

“Yes, that’s right, but it will take eight hours to complete.”

“That’s fine, I’ll be back here sometime tomorrow to pick her up.”

“Okay. Pulling your account up... hmm. There’s a notice, but... ah it’s nothing, it won’t affect this service.”

“That’s my gym position, isn’t it? I was canned.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry to hear that. You were always so nice to the Pokemon, they really loved you here, even the ones you beat. This does mean you’ve lost some privileges, so be aware in the future.”

“Certainly.”

“Alrighty then!” The violet-haired nurse reached for Tyko.

“This is goodnight.”

“Tykoo!” I tapped the Ultra Ball to her forehead, and she disappeared in a shower of space-time efforia.

“Here you go.”

The nurse (it is Lucy! I spotted her nametag) took the Ultra Ball and began tapping information into her terminal. She set the ball into the insertion slide and-

“Ah. Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

“It’s not going in.”

“What’s the matter?”

“The terminal won’t accept the Pokemon.”

“Why not?” I asked, fearing for Tyko’s health. A virus, maybe?
The nurse stared incredulously at the computer.

“Is this, um, is this your Pokemon?”

“Yes, of course it is!” I said.

“It says it’s not. The computer says it belongs to an Edward Kurosawa. Miss Jasmine, you wouldn’t be stealing a Pokemon and passing it off as your own... would you?”

Physical sensations overcame me, like a Grimer hatching in the bowels of my gut and set to work consuming the rest of my innards.

“He didn’t,” I whispered, fear and loathing and all the attendants of betrayal washing over my conscience.

A wave of a hand caught my attention from the corner of my eye. I turned around.

At the Pokecenter door, standing lean and relaxed, was Edward, a gentle and disarming smile upon his face. He threw me a salute, as if to say “I’ll see you around”, and then vanished as quickly as he appeared.

I snatched the Ultra Ball from Nurse Lucy’s hands, and gripped it, grinded it, willing it to snap to pieces and yield up MY Pokemon.

“Edward...” I muttered under my breath.

YOU BASTARD!
I hunched over the kitchen table, a study guide opened under my nose. The numbers and symbols blurred together into an incoherent jumble of sorcery. I love science but math was never my strong suit, and I originally gave up the idea of going to college when confronted by calculus. The proposition of having to learn this arcane language left me in despair. Not existential despair, like before, but merely the banal, all-encompassing-yet-ultimately-shallow despair of the hopeless student. You may be able to empathize.

Tyko sat across the table. She slapped her fins together.

*Wake up!*  
*Focus!*  
*You can do it!*

I moaned, lifted myself off the book, took up the pencil, and resumed the work.

“There are more ways to kill oneself than jumping,” I muttered.

I felt a weight looming over my left shoulder. Mother leaned over me, set her hand down on the table, and peered at my progress.

“You’re getting there. Slowly, but that’s to be expected. You took too much time off school. See. This is where you messed up, for integration you need to raise the power and divide,” she said, pointing out the blunder in my current work.

“I’m not good at math,” I bemoaned.

“You’re not good at anything until you practice it. Keep going.”

“*Tyke! Ko!*” Tyko agreed. Mother peered up at her.

“This one’s new.”

“I traded for her a few months ago.”

Tyko was herself thumbing through a textbook.

“She can read?”

“A little.”

Tyko saw that she had an audience and started to show off. She began scribbling, in big jerky numerals, the long division method I had taught her this morning. Mother actually smiled and nodded approvingly.

“I like this one. She can stay in the house. A Water type shouldn’t make a mess. And she seems to have a good head on her.”

“She’s smart enough to handle a battle as a trainer,” I said proudly.

“That’s not impressive. Now long division, for a regular Pokemon- 25.11 repeating, that’s right- *that*
is impressive.” Mother withdrew her presence over my shoulder. She strode around and rubbed the receptive Prinplup on the head.

“Just because you got a fluke win with Sunflora doesn’t mean you can dismiss battling like it’s brainless,” I said.

“But it is. It’s a worthless sport, from the very premise. It doesn’t take a genius to order brutes to do what brutes do best.”

“Is that what you called Arcanine? A brute?”

Mother shot me a glare and then... walked out.

I sat agawk.

I... won.

I won?! I won an argument with Mother?!

Arceus!

She’s gone? She’s really out? She’s not fetching a knife or large blunt object to come breach my vitals with? No comeback? No revenge plot?

I waited, and waited some more, and when nothing happened I stealthily darted to the foyer to spy what she was up to. Nothing. Up the stairs, to her door, and I found her folding laundry. The confirmation was surreal, enlightening, and vexing all at the same time.

I had an arsenal of barbs to get under her skin, and she mine. We regularly hurled these accusations back and forth, and the net effect was always to simply enrage the other and escalate the situation until something, usually violence or my cowardly exit, abruptly ended it. This was entirely new. This one word silenced her and sent her out of the room, with no retaliation.

In other words:

I found her weakness!

On the other hand:

What the hell could have happened that could crack this titanium terminator of a woman? Whose Arcanine was that? Hers? And if so, what happened to it? Why is it gone? And why has she never told me anything about it? It’s a mystery!

Yet my one and only avenue for investigation was banished from this property. He hasn’t come home at all. Nothing new.

How could I use this against her?

This was the question I pondered as I continued studying.

Some time after that the doorbell rang. Mother reached the front door first, checked the window to determine the visitor, then walked away.

“It’s for you.”
I opened the door to find the despondent face of Ethan staring back at me.

Wait. Not merely despondent.

“What happened?!?”

He shrugged. His left eye was blackened and swollen.

“I got into a fight,” he confessed.


“In the medicine cabinet, right where it’s always been!” she shouted down from the second floor.

I brought Ethan to the kitchen table, set him down, retrieved the medical supplies, and began tending to him.

“Who did this?”

“Edward.”

“You idiot! You fought Ed? What the heck were you thinking?”

“Well, that text you sent was pretty angry.”

I grimaced. Earlier in the morning I explained the situation to Ethan over text messages. It never occurred to me he would take action on his own. This idiot. This absolute idiot! There’s no way I can leave him unattended.

“Is Tyko okay?” he asked.

“Prinny! Tyk!” Tyko revealed herself from under the table.

“Ah. Aha. There you are.” He scratched her under the beak. Then winced, as I applied iodine to his wound.

“Explain it all to me. What did you do?”

“Well, I got afraid for Tyko, and angry at Ed, so when I saw him again at the Pokecenter I sort of... got confrontational. He shoved me. I hit him. He kicked me back. Then the others jumped on us and I got lectured for starting a fight. Then Edward stepped in and got me off the hook, said he didn’t want to press charges. That guy is so fake. There’s no way he forgave me. He’s planning something.”

“Yes, I know that, but that doesn’t mean you can start a fistfight. You said this is from a kick? To your eye?!”

“Yeah, he knows karate. I didn’t expect that. I could have taken him, if I’d known.” Ethan took a proffered iced cloth and clamped it to his brow. I helped hold it in place with one hand and wiped off the excess fluids with the other.

“It’s not about if you could beat him. How would that help?” I asked. “He’s Tyko’s legal owner. He can demand her return at any time, and the authorities would back him.” My throat tightened up, as did my fingers around Ethan’s forehead. He took notice. “This is my fault. I’ll think of a way to fix it. You don’t need to risk yourself for me.”
“I don’t mind,” he said.

I frowned. Of course he doesn’t mind.

“Ethan. Please. What I want most from you right now is for you to take care of yourself.”

That little bit of appeal silenced him. It didn’t take much longer to set a bandage around his brow.

“Ma’am,” Ethan said aloud.

I turned to find Mother staring at us.

“That’s not studying,” she remarked.

“Don’t care. I’ve got something important to deal with right now.”

“I think I’ve got the gist. You released all your Pokemon, and some of them got caught. And this one got caught by someone who doesn’t want to turn her back over to you,” Mother surmised.

“That someone is Edward Kurosawa.”

“Oh! That Ed!” Mother’s face lit up in recognition. “I liked him. I would’ve let you date him, if you weren’t being so damn difficult back then. So what’s the story? Obviously you got Tyko back, physically.” She motioned at my Pokemon.

“Edward said he’s letting you hold her because he wants you to trust him,” Ethan relayed. “But then he told me he doesn’t trust you, so he’s keeping her on his register. He won’t turn her over until you do something for him. I asked him what, he wouldn’t spit it out but just gave me a shitty grin, so then, uh, the fight happened.”

Mother’s face wrinkled in judgment at the last part.

“Mother. It’s not what you think. The Edward you knew is gone. Now he’s a spiteful asshole and a convicted rapist, and he’s holding my Pokemon hostage.”

“Rapist?”

Mother’s demeanor changed with that one word.

Her condescension and critical eye melted away. There was concern, fear, maybe even a little bit of care for my being, mixed in her expression and tone. This softened stance was evident as she quizzed me about the particulars. In short order the entire situation was divulged to her.

She pondered for a moment.

“I would catch and record him doing something in violation of his bail. I think that’s why he backed away from the fight, he didn’t want any attention from his bail officer.”

“Ah!” “Okay!”

Ethan and I perked simultaneously.

That is an awesome idea!

“We could use it to force him to hand over Tyko’s ownership!”
“But how do we bait him into violating his bail conditions? We don’t even know what they are.”

“Right. But I’m sure we can think of something. Thanks Mrs. Mikan! I mean Doctor Mikan,” Ethan said.

“Sure. But later. Dinner’s in half an hour. Jasmine, you keep studying until then. Ethan, be useful, feed the Pokemon.” Mother then leaned in close to my ear.

“Call this a peace offering. Don’t mention that Pokemon to me again,” she warned under her breath.

The next half hour could be something approximate to a normal family life. I earnestly studied. Ethan kept the Pokemon entertained. Mother made dinner. Nothing belied the friction between us three, nor the many stressful issues bearing down on us. When we sat down to eat, it felt surreal and unnatural.

Jasmine- is this that foreign to you? What everyone else takes for granted, you feel like a guilty pleasure, an unearned reward. It’s supposed to feel good. Why can’t you accept it as something good and wholesome, if transient?

Because she is a part of it.

On cue, Mother found a way to turn the occasion to her own agenda. She began drilling Ethan about his character, his history, his family, and his beliefs. He tried to tightrope his way through the subjects without divulging his deeper issues, but Mother picked him apart in no time.

“You’re at odds with your father, aren’t you? You’re not living up to his expectations,” Mother guessed. Ethan fell sheepishly silent. “He doesn’t approve your little Pokemon adventure, does he?”

“That’s not it,” Ethan said.

“So he does approve? You’ve got his permission?”

“That’s not it either. It’s more complicated. Or simpler? He doesn’t give a damn what I do anymore, since I can’t live up to what he wants me to be.”

“And that is?”

Ethan went silent again, but this time he didn’t look away. He was staring coldly right at Mother, or so I thought. Did he see his old man in her?

“Ethan doesn’t want to be a lawyer,” I inserted. “Hibiki has no respect for anyone but lawmen. Even his oldest son, a special forces officer, was cast out. The man is far too narrow-minded.”

Ethan nodded along.

Mother sipped at a glass of water.

“Do you still want his approval?”

“I’d like it,” Ethan admitted.

“But you don’t want to give in to his demands.”

“Right.”

“Which means you selfishly want him to change his mind.”
“And it’s not selfish of Hibiki to want to dictate his son’s career?” I said in Ethan’s defense.

“Jasmine, please. I’m talking to Ethan.”

“Ethan’s in no condition to speak for himself, Mother.”

“It’s okay. I can handle it,” Ethan said to me. He spoke to Mother. “It goes beyond whatever job he wants for me. It’s more than that. It’s the kind of person I have to be. The man he expects me to be. A manly man. A grown man. You know- Adult. Assertive. Confident. But I’m not like that. I feel like I’m just a boy, and I’ve got fears and worries like anyone else, but that means I’m a limp loser in his eyes.”

“No weaknesses allowed, huh.” Mother leaned back. “Is it something about yourself that your father won’t accept?”

“Yeah, that’s sort of it.”

“Is it sexual?”

“Errr.” Ethan blushed.

“Are you gay?”

“No ma’am. I like women.”

“Are you transgender?”

“No! I’m very fond of my dick, thank you!”

“Something else then. Listen, I don’t need to know what you’re into, but trust me- if it’s not one of those two things, it’s not a big deal. A fetish can be kept in the bedroom and have zero effect on your interactions with the rest of society. I have personal experience with this. It’s like a condition, it’s manageable with a good mindset and reasoned approach. Stressing over it isn’t healthy. People will always judge, but that’s why we have a right to privacy.”

“It’s my father though. It’s not like I could keep it a secret from him, and once he found out- he didn’t care about privacy or anything else.”

Mother tilted her head.

“Assuming your father isn’t a toxic religious ass, then your fetish- he didn’t think it was healthy for you. I wager he was only trying to help you in the way he knew best. Now you’ve made me curious.”

“I’d rather not say.”

“Do you know about it?” Mother asked me.

“Don’t ask me!”

“It’s just a yes/no question. Has he told you?”

“No, he hasn’t it.”

“So it really is affecting you,” she said to Ethan.
“Yeah.”

“Enough to make suicide threats.”

“Mother!”

She set her glass down.

“Ethan, could I talk to you alone?”

“Sure,” Ethan answered.

“No. Don’t,” I immediately spoke up.

“Jasmine, stop. I need this, and I insist,” Mother told me.

“The last time you cornered my friend-” I blurted out, before realizing I didn’t actually want to say aloud what had piqued my fear.

“Oh. Yes, it’s just like that time. Perhaps even more serious this time. Ethan, follow me.”

Ethan complied.

I huffed and pouted, and implored Ethan with my best imploring face, but Mother’s wordless command was stronger. The two of them drifted away like condemned and executioner.

“Not this time,” I told myself. I couldn’t stand around doing nothing. I crept through the house, searching for Mother’s chosen interrogation chamber. I heard words coming from my own bedroom, and quietly leaned in and put my ear to the door to listen in.

“-true?”

“Yeah. All of it.”

“Who was really going to jump? You or her?”

“Both. Both of us.”

“Fuck.”

Something struck the wall, probably Mother’s fist. Then came the sounds of heavy footsteps pacing back and forth across the floor.

“Why would she want to kill herself?”

“Because her life fell apart, and you didn’t help her.”

“Hell no. I am not at fault. That was her own choice.”

“Sorry. Um. Sorry. I’m just telling you what she told me.”

“I can’t believe she would... fuck. Why does she do this to me? What did I do to deserve this? Damn it. Sorry. Never mind that. This has nothing to do with you. You were trying to jump too. Tell me the truth. Why did you try to kill yourself?”

I tensed up.
“I... didn’t want to live.”

“Obviously. Why? Give me details, reasons.”

“Ah. Sorry. I don’t think...”

“Do you want to hang around my daughter or not? Because if you’re going to hurt her- by killing yourself, or threatening her- I’ll have you jailed. I’ll have you thrown into a miserable shithole so deep and dark you’ll never see the light of day again and you’ll wish you could die. So answer me!”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“She’s listening.”

CRAP!

A rockslide crashed through the room and blew the door open. I toppled to the ground at her feet.

“Do you not understand what “private” means?!” she shouted at me.

“Why the hell do you care about me so much if you hate me so damn much?!” I screamed back at her.

She grabbed me by the wrist and hauled me to my feet.

“Ethan,” she called out, and forcibly swung me into view of the young man. “What is this girl to you?”

“A... a friend,” Ethan stammered out.

“Are you going to hurt her?”

“You’re the one hurting me,” I huffed.

“No,” Ethan said.

“How can I trust you?”

“I would never hurt her,” Ethan said.

“I don’t just mean beating or raping her. She’s gotten attached to you, and if you go and do something stupid like killing yourself, it’ll be even worse than attacking her directly. She gets emotional about these things.”

“In that case, ma’am- you should have more faith in her. I wouldn’t hurt myself, if it would hurt her. That’s how she talked me off the railing.”

Mother let go of me. My arm fell limp to my side.

Ethan was shaking, visibly, head bowed, tears beginning to well up. This was not the submission of a fearful child, but a grown man reduced to his fragile core.

“You care for her,” Mother spoke.

Ethan nodded.
“Even before the bridge.”

Ethan again nodded.

Mother turned to me.

“You weren’t lying about wanting to kill yourself,” she stated.

“Why won’t you believe me?” I asked her.

“I didn’t want to.”

I stepped back, caught by surprise.

She put a hand to her brow.

“You have no idea how much I gave up for you. Don’t go throwing your life away. You’re all I have to show for this shitty existence. God damn it... fuck. There is no God. Don’t insult me.” She lurched into the hallway outside, strangely exhausted.

She leaned against the wall en route to her own bedroom. Without turning, she spoke up again.

“You two can do whatever. Go have fun. Be stupid. Fling your Pokemon at one other. Fight. Have sex. I don’t care anymore. Just don’t ever tell me you regret it. I’m too tired. I can’t keep caring. I can only tell you how to avoid my mistakes- I can’t stop you from making your own.”

She drifted another few feet towards her door. Then another stop, a pause, and she turned around and glared at us over her shoulder.

“Scratch that. Ethan, don’t fuck her. I mean it.”

With that, she clambered down the last bit of hallway and disappeared into her bedroom. I quickly and quietly ushered Ethan into my bedroom, then shut the door behind me.

“What did she mean, you cared about me before the bridge?” I asked.

“It’s getting a little late. I should go,” Ethan said, avoiding the question. I frowned, then shrugged and accepted his aversion.

“No. You’ll stay here, it’s too cold and you don’t have a car,” I told him. I went to the closet and took out a spare heap of blankets and pillows. “Sleep on the couch downstairs.”

“But your mother...”

“She won’t mind. Not tonight.”

“What is wrong with her?” he asked.

“I have a good idea, but I don’t want to say.”

“Why not?”

I dumped the blankets at the door and stared at Ethan.

“That’s my secret.”

Ethan’s perplexed gaze did justice to his confusion and amazement.
“Yeah, that secret. Something happened around my birth, and it’s ruined this whole family ever since. When I found out, I wanted to die and I wanted to murder her. It’s made me feel like crap, worthless, useless, unable to control my life or future, unable to even have a proper future. I’ve been fighting that feeling every single day since.”

I dropped myself full-prone onto the bed.

“But I didn’t really think- ah, I’m not that dumb. I did think it. I just never wanted to acknowledge it. But what Mother just said there, it’s made me own up to it. She’s gone through hell because of that secret too. It really sucks, because there was no good solution for her. From my own standpoint, that is.”

“I don’t really get what you’re talking about,” Ethan said.

“Please don’t think about it. I’m just babbling.”

“You’re not.”

“Pretend I am?” I implored.

“Sure.”

“Ethan.”

“Yeah?”

“I think I know what she asked you. What was your answer?”

Ethan went to collect the blankets.

“How do you know?” he asked me back.

“Remember Ash? Back then. She caught him and asked him the same thing. So what did you tell her?”

Ethan smiled.

“It’s a secret.”

A pillow went flying at his face, which he skillfully caught.

“About that... there’s something I want to talk to you about,” he said. “But I don’t want to stress you out while you’re still trying to get your Pokemon back.”

“Okay. Fine. Tsk.”

“So about your Pokemon; I did talk to Erika. She wants to see you too. Wednesday. At Peridot Park, ten o’clock at night.”

“At night?”

“Yeah, at night. She said you’d know where it was. She also said she wanted it to be just the two of you, no one else.”

“Ah! Huh. Okay. I’ll think about it.”
Ethan collected all the bedding together and made to depart.

There was a lot to think about. I checked the clock. It was only eight o’clock, so there was plenty of
time to think about it. Too much time. Wednesday was three days away. No need to waste the rest of
the evening stressing over that. Mother, Tyko, Edward, Ethan... I need a break.

“Are you really going to bed?” I asked.

“Aibo! What are you doing out?”

“Apopoo!”

Aipom was out in the corridor, making long faces at its trainer.

“Come on, not now. Jasmine? Eh, I was going to stay up. Probably play on my phone.”

“Dad’s got old samurai movies, if you want to watch something. Together,” I suggested.

Ethan’s face lit up.

“You sure?”

“Sure. I mean, I kind of like the fantasy stuff myself, but if you want to watch a historical one...”

“Compromise. Does he have Shinobi Vow?”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s watch that. Aibo, no! We’re watching movies. It’s too late to be goofing around.”

“Pooooo.” His Pokemon growled, upset.

The rest of the night was good. I sunk into the couch, as did Ethan. Tyko squirmed into my lap, and
Aipom latched onto Ethan’s shoulder. We ended up giggling, then snarking, then completely riffing
on the over-the-top ninja movie with lightning-dragon samurai and frog shinobi. Like, there was no
way a Greninja was historically accurate, they’re not native to Nihon at all!

Long after the movie was over and our idle conversation drifted off to nothing, my mind was not
quite ready to go to sleep. I checked Ethan. He was already checked out, as was his Pokemon. I
crawled out of the covers, reluctantly, and trudged back upstairs to my room. It would be a hassle
trying to explain to Mother what we were doing if she caught us snuggled up on the couch together
in the morning.

Haaa.

What if we were like that?

I shook my head.

Mother would turn this place into a nightmare if she caught us. Besides, Ethan was right. Let’s get
my team back together first.

“Tyko. Tyko. Hey Tyko. You wouldn’t go back to Ed if you weren’t forced to, right?”

“Prin!”
“Thought so. He doesn’t care about you. Okay. First up, figure a way to steal you back from Ed. Second, tear Erika a new one and steal Oddish back. Third, find the others. Fourth, deal with Mother and her Jasmine-goes-to-college fantasy. Fifth and final... sort out Ethan’s feelings.”

I went to bed with one last quaint thought:

*There’s really no difference... between “care” and “love”.*
“Operation is go.”


Location: Olivine City Pokemon Center.

Target: Edward Kurosawa.

Objective: Covertly observe target, collect information pertaining to motivations and methods, obtain compromising intelligence.

I walked into the lobby while bundled up in a heavy parka courtesy of dad’s wardrobe. My hands were buried in the pockets, and my face was half-covered by the wool-lined hood. It was stiff and cumbersome, but necessary for my disguise. It appeared to be working, as evidenced by the local Nurse Joy, who’d I met many times before, walking right by me without a second glance.

I located the target. He was sitting lazily at the one of the tables by the windows, appearing spaced out and doing nothing in particular. Unaffiliated parties crowded the operational space- it’s a typical busy Monday morning for the center. Weather was fair.

Mission progress: Challenging.

As far as I could tell, nothing was happening, but on account of the crowd and noise I couldn’t be certain that what I could tell was all there was to be told. Every vantage point was occupied, and I had to move constantly just to maintain a visual on the target. There was a danger in doing so, however, in that my movements might become noticeable and tip Edward off. Audio observation was outright impossible.

My phone buzzed.I was getting a message from Ethan.

You’re being tailed.

Plant by reception counter, Chatot.

I peeked about and confirmed the matter. The chatterbox bird Pokemon was indeed perched in the branches and staring intently at me.

Switch places, I texted to Ethan.

I went out, passing Ethan on the way. He was in heavy disguise as well, wearing a full snow jacket, flappy-eared cap, and scarf. He had also stuffed his coat with extra cushioning to make himself look fat and donned a pair of reading glasses. The Chatot didn’t notice the switch and dutifully followed my lead out of the building. I headed for our operational base inside Tots Café and settled into a booth. The Chatot waited for me to order a meal (breadsticks, because I’m broke) and then flew away.

“Tyko, what’ve you got for me?” I spoke into my phone.
I’m so proud of her! She’s even learning to write! Though her grammar is nonexistent and vocabulary needs refinement. Still, this information she’s relaying is interesting. The Chatot spy didn’t belong to Ed?

“Physical description?”

KO! MURKROW HAIR. PHANPY SHIRT. PIPUP LEGS.

Chatot incoming, I messaged to Ethan. Black hair, grey coat, blue pants.

I see her. She’s sitting down with Ed.

An accomplice?

Looks like it. Pic inc. Recognize her?

My phone was primitive, and it took a minute for the picture to download. It took as long for me to recognize the woman pictured, I hadn’t seen her since 2008, four years ago.

Chiba. An old classmate and fellow gym trainer.

It was my former assistant Janina’s older sister. I recalled she and Ed were friends, although I never got any hint they were closer than that. She and I weren’t particularly close back then. It’s possible Ed is simply reconnecting with old acquaintances, but her Chatot’s behavior seemed less than innocent.

Crap. I’m caught too.

I looked across the street. Ethan’s mummified form came stumbling out of the front door of the Pokecenter, chased out by an angry, overbearing Quagsire. He came waddling over to the café and teetered inside like a frightened Pipup scampering back to its mother. I took him in my arms, patted him down, and pulled off his cap and scarf.

“They’re onto us,” I told him.

“It’s okay!” he said, revealing a beaming smile.

“Good news?”

“I made it pretty obvious I was there. They’ve got the place on lockdown. Half a dozen lookouts. We’re in a full-blown espionage war. But they’re not so bright. They got so focused on me, they didn’t spot the Dittos.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask where you got so many Dittos from.”

“Loooong story. They’re technically Professor Elm’s. I’m just holding them hostage.”

“Ethan! Please don’t tell me you’re in trouble with Professor Elm.”

“Of course not!”

“Thank goodness.”
“I’m in trouble with Professor Oak.”

“Gah!”

Ethan leapt up to a triumphant stand while force-projecting a guilty, goofy grin.

“The important part! Ditto is disguised as a trashcan right behind the enemy’s table and has my phone on one-way speaker mode. We can listen in to their conversation now!”

I rested my chin upon my entwined fingers, striking up my best villainous Gendo pose.

“Excellent.”

I placed my phone face-up onto the table.

“Tyko, keep a lookout,” I spoke into the device.

KO! she responded.

“Where is she stationed?” Ethan asked.

“With Friar atop the bank.” As agreed to earlier, Ethan’s Noctowl and my Prinplup would run strategic surveillance and close air support, using Mother’s old cell phone for communication.

“Okay. You ready? Let’s listen in.”

I opened a channel to Ethan’s phone, careful to mute our side’s input. The voices came through surprisingly clear.

“-off our backs.”

“Yeah, I know right? You weren’t kidding about her being a jealous snitch.”

“Ah, really, don’t put it that way. She’s just stressed from losing her job. When she settles down and accepts reality, I think she’ll be more reasonable.”

Edward’s voice.

“You keep defending her, despite everything she’s done to you?”

This I definitely recognized as Chiba’s voice.

“We practically grew up together. We were very close. I can’t help but feel sorry, even a little responsible, for the way she turned out. If I had maybe been a little more forceful back then, she wouldn’t have gone crazy. Right now she’s surrounded herself with bad apples like Morty, and they’re indulging her psychoses. If we broke her away from them, maybe she’d come round.”

Edward sounded so congenial and reasoned here. It would sound so compassionate, if it weren’t dripping in lies. What a slimy Arbok he turned out to be.

“Yeah, okay. I see! I understand. But it’s not like it’s your fault. You don’t have to bend over backwards to fix her.”

“You’re right. I’d rather forget about her and leave this place behind.”

“What’s stopping you?”
“Ugly little details. My bail says I can’t leave city limits. I have to respond to probate check-ins. My finances are under watch, my holdings too. Can’t catch new Pokemon. Things like that.”

“How rough.”

I poked at the screen urgently.

“What was that he said?” I whispered to Ethan, despite the fact that there was no chance Edward or Chiba could hear me.

“I see. That’s why you needed my help, with your Prinplup and Scizor,” Chiba said.

“You’re a life saver.”

“I can do more, if you need.”

“I’m fine right now, but maybe in the future.”

“I don’t just mean what I can do at work.”

“Heh. You’re really interesting.”

Ethan and I listened on, but the conversation devolved into coy flirting between the two, with no more relevant information for us.

“Does he really have a thing for Chiba?” I wondered.

“He’s leading her on. He’s not really interested in her,” Ethan said with confidence.

“Eh? You can tell?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you’re both guys?”

“No. It’s the same spiel I’ve seen other guys use on girls I liked.”

Ethan’s gaze drifted away.

“So... what we gleaned is that Ed is using Chiba’s work connections for something. And that he’s not allowed to catch Pokemon? What’s up with that? They mentioned Scizor and Tyko in there too. Hmm!”

“Research time?” Ethan suggested. I nodded.

“Meet back here in one hour.”

An hour later...

“Chiba is a network administrator at the Pokecenter,” I announced. It took tracking through several links of old high school acquaintances, but the info was worth it.

“Johto law limits Pokemon-related activities while imprisoned or on bail,” Ethan said.

“Ah!” The metaphorical lightbulbs began to light up.

Ethan started listing the details.
“Crime bosses were using their Pokemon to continue their business while they were locked up, so Johto law put down restrictions. When a person is taken into custody, their Pokemon is also confiscated. Then they either get put into the PC network or released to the care of relatives, depending on the crime. While the owner is incarcerated, the Pokemon are not allowed to be traded or handed over to another person’s ownership. If released to a relative, they’re not allowed to engage in certain activities, like Pokemon battles. If kept in PC stasis, they’re not allowed to be withdrawn. This continues up until a remand hearing, which I checked court records, for Ed was three days ago.”

The lightbulbs are chaining into a nuclear reaction of realization.

“But Warren used Ed’s Pokemon against me while he was in jail! And he must have caught Tyko before his hearing!” I counted the days out in my head. “Never mind, it’s technically possible he caught her after that. But an earlier catch is not ruled out either, and Chiba did mention Prinplup, so... He did definitely break the law! Why hasn’t he been caught? Unless Chiba...”

“The authorities rely on the PC network database to detect that sort of thing.”

“Is it automated?”

“Not that I could tell.”

“Which means someone would have to check the records manually.”

“Your “friend” Chiba would have access to those records as an admin.”

“She could give the police a false report.”

“Or just change the data herself.”

DING DING DING!

“Tampering with the Pokemon League PC network is probably against the law,” Ethan said.

“It’s actually a really big deal,” I said, bringing my old Gym Leader education to the fore. “Those databases, all the info about when and where the Pokemon are stored and withdrawn, are closely tied to the PC hyperspace addressing system. Which means if someone messes with them, they’d have access to the Pokemon themselves. You could steal them, or cut off their address node and leave the Pokemon stranded in hyperspace. It’s really super serious stuff. Ed and Chiba could get in huge trouble here.”

“Oh! Wow! We could use that info to force him to turn over Tyko.”

“Or else face the full wrath of the Pokemon Enforcement Division.”

“And he’d definitely be in violation of his bail.”

“And get reconvicted for the rape charges!”

“There’s no way he’d risk all that!”

“But wait!” I said, throwing up a finger. “Two things!” I added. “First, we have no real proof! Secondly, what is he planning, that he would do all this? Ed sounds like he has a cheat code to get out of his conviction, why put that in jeopardy?”

“He’s up to something for sure,” Ethan agreed.
“If only we could find out. Ah! Eh. Ugh. Never mind.”

“What is it?”

“If we could look at the database, we might get proof of their tampering. I know someone who’s good with computers and owes me a debt.”

“Awesome! Let’s go get them.”

“The problem is, this person is sort of worse than Edward.”

“Who?”

“Peter.”

“Who?”

“Proton.”

“Oh.” Ethan nodded in recognition. “Oh!” Then dropped his jaw.

“Yeah.”

“This sounds like fun.”

Peter’s dirty grin beamed out at me from the video screen. He was letting his natural hair grow out, but some of the teal dye was still there, icing the tips.

“So you’ll do it?”

“Yeah. Why not.”

“For free?”

“Yep.”

“And you won’t use the opportunity to steal Pokemon or do anything else illegal?”

“Girl, listen, what you’re proposing is already illegal.”

I huffed.

“All we’re trying to do is find proof of someone else’s wrongdoing. That’s it. I won’t allow you to use it your advantage or cause more harm. That would defeat the purpose. This is part of your penance. You owe society, and you owe me. Got it Peter?”

Peter held up a fist and started counting off on his fingers.

“First off, don’t call me Peter. Proton’s my real name, got it changed in court.

Second, I don’t need your attitude or your permission, I could hack the network any time I pleased.
Third, you don’t decide my punishment.

Fourth, I said I was sorry, I never said I owed you anything.

Fifth, you’re still proposing hacking the PC network, which is fucking illegal, no matter how cute and righteous you are about it.

So get off your high horse, girl.”

I was very near hanging up. Ethan intercepted my hand and motioned for me to allow Peter to continue.

“That said, I’d do this for fun. And I do feel sorry for how I treated you-”

“You tried to rape me,” I said bluntly.

“Yeah you and a bunch of other girls.”

INITIATE DEATH GLARE!

“Ah, that didn’t come out right. Revert revert. Uh, point is, I am trying to make up for it, playing the white hat, doing things the right way. And you’re in luck! We don’t have to go breaking any laws. You think they’d just let me go free to do whatever I like? I’ve got my boss right here. Yo!”

“Silver?” I said.

“What the hell are you up to?” came a gloomy voice.

That’s not Silver’s voice.

Peter leaned back, giving us a view of the room beyond. There, in the middle of a non-descript office overflowing with computer equipment, was an all-too recognizable figure.

“Lance!”

Lance the Dragon Master. Former Elite Four member. Former Johto Champion. Former Pokemon League President. The man who fought Team Rocket across the world and razed the old, corrupt league system to the ground. Proton’s “boss”.

“Who is that?” the Dragon Master asked.

“An old school mate. Jasmine, say hi.”

“Jasmine Mikan?”

“Yes,” I answered aloud.

Lance glanced over from his station.

“I saw that you flunked out of Gym Leader Probation. I was disappointed.”

Lance turned back to his own work without further comment or interest. I felt stung.

“Hey boss, Miss Jasmine says she thinks she’s sniffed out someone falsifying records. Wants us to help her track it down. We’re gonna have to break into some secure networks. Do we have a go?”

“Yeah yeah.” Lance waved his hand, as if to shoo us away.
Peter resumed his position in front of the screen.

“See? That’s how you do it the right way.”

“Why are you working for Lance? Like- how is that possible?” I asked.

“I’m serving a twenty year prison sentence, except I don’t actually have to stay in prison as long as I help Lance and Silver track down the rest of Team Rocket,” Peter answered.

“Oh I see.”

Silver did tell me he was trying to depose his father and repurpose his criminal empire for some other high-minded goal. And I recalled that after Lance was ousted from his dictatorial reign as League CEO he was assigned to the League’s Enforcement Division to take down Pokemon criminals and terrorists. Peter’s role made much more sense. Ethan nodded at me, having already comprehended the situation.

“I just can’t see you working for the good guys,” I said to Peter. “How do I really trust you?”

“Aside from Mister Cross over there breathing down my neck? Well, let’s just say there’s a real woman I’m trying to impress.” Peter smirked- or if I’m reading him right, a grin of fondness. It put me a little at ease. He’s in love. Love is good. People do stupid things for love, but also good things. What matters is that they tend to do it wholeheartedly.

“I don’t know about Proton, but I trust the Dragon Master,” Ethan said.

I crossed my arms.

“Fine. Fine. We do this, no mistakes, no mischief! Alright, how fast can you get us the info?”

Peter leaned back, giving off an entirely-too-mischievous look on his face.

“Here’s the kicker. I can’t do shit on my own. You’re going to have to do some grunt work too.”

“Huh?” I cocked my head.

“Careful, don’t drop the grill.”

“I won’t.”

I popped the vent cover out, set the pulley system in place, hooked it to my harness, and then lowered myself.

I emerged into a large, dark room full of towers. There were sixty-four of them, arranged into an eight-by-eight grid, each reaching almost to the ceiling. They were clad in steel cages, and the interiors were crammed with humming, blinking server blades. This was the Pokecenter’s datacenter,
where all the PCs of western Johto fed into. It is here, inside these machines, that our precious Pokemon are kept safe and sound when not out and about. I was approximately in the center of the array.

Let me restate that. I’m hanging upside down from the ceiling in a skintight ninja bodysuit, shivering and freezing my ass off, surrounded by sixty-four supercomputers, and I can’t see a damned thing because of the ski-mask over my face. The radio transmitter in my ear is beating with synth-psych music, and I’m having trouble breathing through the fabric.

“Proton, was this really necessary?”

“Absolutely. You look bombers,” came Peter’s reply through the earpiece.

“I concur,” Ethan chirped in.

The boys were following me via hacked security video feed.

“It’s cold,” I complained.

“It’s rather hot, actually,” Ethan said.

“Aipopo!” Aibo concurred.

I growled in irritated response to the trio of lewdness.

The past half hour hadn’t been very fun or sensible.

I’d been stuffed into a skintight booty suit, ostensibly to shield me from “electrostatic trip alarms” but I’m sure was truly for the boys to ogle my near-naked body. Then I’d been handed a bunch of high-tech burglar tools and shoved into an air vent, with instructions I barely comprehended and a mission that seemed suicidal.

“Each major city has a server farm in their Pokecenter that stores all the data for the Pokemon stored in the PC network. Security is pretty stiff, you can’t get the data remotely. You’ll have to sneak in, hook up my sniffer chip, and that’ll let me hack in and retrieve the data you guys want. Oh yeah, the whole place is rigged with alarms and usually guarded, so, heh, ever want to be a ninja?”

The answer, as I woefully discovered, was “Yes”.

Back to the present:

I swiveled around on the suspended rope and planted my feet against the nearest computer tower. Simultaneously, I reached over my head to grip the next tower. My body formed a bridge between the two computers, spread eagle and completely, nakedly exposed.

“You two are going to pay for this. I swear.”

“Not gonna lie, I’m getting a boner right now,” Peter said.

“With your balls,” I added.

“It was completely necessary. You’d never fit through the vent in regular clothing, and the anti-static material won’t trip any electrostatic alarms. Getting to see you pseudo-naked is just a bonus for us boys. Though I prefer girls with a little more meat,” Peter explained.

“Would you shut it already! And I thought boys wanted skinny.”
“Not Halloween-costume skinny.”

“I think she’s fine,” Ethan countered.

“Need something to cup in the hand, minimum. Like it doesn’t have to be coconut-sized, just apples at least. Hell, I’m okay with clam shells, but we’re talking sand dollars here.”

“Peter!” I hissed.

Ethan’s line crackled for a moment, betraying hesitancy.

“Ethan, so help me, if you joke about my breasts—”

“But why would I? Flat is justice.”

“YOU’RE DAMN RIGHT!”

I immediately winced, conscious that my outburst might have been heard.

“Okay, lewd imagery aside, I need you to concentrate, the window’s coming up.”

“Got it. This one, right?”

“Yeah.”

I turned to the server just above my head and caught ahold of the lock on the cage door.

“The green tool, slip that over the lock.”

I picked out a tool from the utility belt on my waste.

“That’s the blue tool.”

“I can’t see!”

“That’s the green and blue one. Get the green one.”

“What good is color-coding them if they’re multi-colored?!”

“Hurry.”

I did. Tried. Succeeded, barely. The cage door came open. Peter directed me to a motherboard and had me unplug a specific set of wires and replace them with a chip I had brought with me. This was not an easy task with wall-climbing suction gloves donned, dangling on my back from a scaling rope, and looking upside-down at the circuitry.

“Got it,” Peter announced. The sound of rapid keyboard clicks came in through the earpiece. “So what I’m doing here is hijacking the server updater while it’s vulnerable from a scheduled maintenance check in order to patch in a backdoor that will allow me to bypass the infrastructure firewall. I needed a physical connection to the hard drive because there’s assembly-level security checks built into the motherboard I can’t beat remotely.”

“I don’t really understand any of that,” I said.

“If you did, you’d understand exactly why you’re there and stop whining about it. Noob.” The keyboards clicks halted.
“What’s going on?” I asked.

“There’s another layer of security I wasn’t expecting.”

“Are you good or not?”

“I’m fine, it’s just basic encryption, got to wait for my alg to crack it. Man, League takes PC Network security seriously. Harder than some intelligence agencies. Thank those fuckers in Unova. League IT’s been a pain since they got zero-dayed by those goons.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re a coding wizard. How long do I have to hang here?” I asked.

“Seventy percent more.”

“Seventy percent is not a unit of time.”

“Percent is percent,” Peter answered unapologetically.

I gritted my teeth and hoisted myself up the line. I could wait atop the tower instead of hanging here and getting my waist choked like a corset.

“Twenty. Ten. Zero. We’re done. I’ll have the data feed up in minutes.”

“Good. I can get out of here.”

“By the way, there’s a guard Pokemon in there. And it’s spotted you.”

Before I could even react, a flash lit up the room. A bullet of silvery particle energy cleanly sliced through the rope, and my hoist gave way. I fell straight onto the floor matt. The pressure sensor registered my weight, and the alarm sounded. Lights blared, klaxons rang, and an angry, Flash Cannon-hurling sentinel hovered ominously over me.

“Well shit.”

“Did it ever occur to you that Lance has no direct command over local Pokecenter security? That maybe I don’t want to go to prison for trespass and hacking?”

“It’ll be okay. I got away with it.”

“If “getting away with it” means becoming the League’s keyboard slave, I don’t fancy replicating your experience.”

“So biting! So harsh! You haven’t changed at all, Jasmine.”

“I hope to God you have, Proton,” I retorted.

“Well I’m legit helping you right now, so any complaints about my past behavior would seem rather untimely. I managed to make the alarm look like a faulty sensor, so if you can exit there before they come investigate, you should be clear.”

“Ah thank you so much. Because I was so very worried about the police and not-”
Flashes of silver energy bounced off the ground beside me. I cowered all the tighter to the computer tower. Whatever machine or creature was set to guard the server farm was currently raining Flash Cannons onto my position. The energy bullets splattered on the ground to my left and right, flashing off superheated sparks that showered my arms and sides.

“IT’s okay. IT’s okay,” I told myself. “Proton, can you see it?”

“Nope. IT’s just off camera,” Peter said.

“Ethan, how’re we doing outside?”

“I spotted Chiba heading into the back. She might sense something’s up. Edward left. Friar and Tyko are tailing him. Aibo get off! Not now!”

“Can you get the Dittos to follow Chiba?”

“No. Not the Ditto. But I think I know who can. Come on. Hey!”

PEW! PING!

That Flash Cannon hit the tower in front of me. From my right! The guard is moving!

I darted to the next tower over. Flash Cannon bursts impacted upon the infrastructure around me. From their brass tone I deduced they were of the Stun variety- weak enough to not endanger the computers, but strong enough to give me a concussion.

“I’m a little low on options here!”

“I’m hurrying! But I’ve got a probl- hey! Stop! That’s-” Ethan’s line abruptly cut off.

“Can’t help. Ooo this is good stuff, great data. That’s it, reel it in!”

Grr. Peter’s useless, distracted by his own nerdery. Ethan can’t get here fast enough. I have no Pokemon on me.

“What is even firing at me?!” I shouted. I then launched myself to the next tower over. The shadow of the guard followed in parallel, launching multiple projectiles as it went. I twisted on one foot, and was nailed right in the sole of my upraised foot. I grit in pain and shock and inadvertently stepped down on the injured heel. The pain shot right up through my leg and paralyzed the entirety of it. I collapsed against a tower.

“Oh this is interesting. Jasmine, next tower over, would you? The one right in front of you.” Peter instructed.

“What the hell do you want?” I started crawling. More bullets rang out around me. I clasped the caging and dragged myself up to the rig.

“What nowwwwarrgh!” It got me! All over my back and shoulders! Gengars that fucking hurts! I clasped my backside and, through touch, discovered a dozen painful welts. Must’ve been a Mirror Shot.

What kind of guard Pokemon would use that?

“Give me a moment. Just ah- yeah, there we go. Get that cage open.”
Despite the pain, my arms still functioned. I had the lock picked and the door opened in no time. Yet, the humming of the guard Pokemon was now practically on top of me.

“See the red and white wire? Big fat one.”

“No!”

“Take off the mask.”

I did.

“I see it!”

“Unplug it.”

“Got it.”

“ZOONNNN!” The guard didn’t like that. Sparks of electricity ignited all around me, and I braced for the expected shock of an Electric attack. It didn’t come. The open computer box and its exposed motherboards were my hostage. I was safe from-

PEW!

“GYAAAA!”

The Flash Canon rang off my shoulder. My right hand went limp.

“No! I can!” I switched hands to my left and yanked the wire with all my might. It came undone. Then I was yanked off the computer by two metallic pincers and flipped over.

“Ah!”

The guard was, in fact, a Magnezone.

“Magnezone?” I called out.

No way. It couldn’t be.

Peter buzzed in my ear.

“Incoming. Three. Two. One.”

Magnezone glared down on me, and there was no mistaking its intent. I wasn’t going to like what happened next.

A bright, luminescent light filled up my chest. The air crackled and rang shrill. The Magnezone before me whined. This wasn’t its attack.

It was a release!

The shower of hyperspace energy coalesced into a dish-shaped form, right above the two of us.

“ZONE!”

It came down, hard, and tackled the Magnezone into the floor.

“You’re welcome,” Peter said, smug as a bug.
“You’re kidding,” I said.

There’s no way this guard Magnezone was mine. It was a professional Pokemon in the security detail of the Pokecenter, highly trained, highly specialized, not a task they would entrust to a strange Pokemon freshly caught off the street.

Yet it wasn’t that reasoning that led me to believe I had not found my lost team member.

Rather, it was because MY Magnezone was now ripping THAT Magnezone a new diode!

My heart leapt in my chest.

“Magnezone!”

“Zoner!”

It acknowledged me!

The size and angles of its poles and blisters- the individual identifying marks of a Magnezone- were exactly as I remembered. This was mine! My Pokemon!

“Alright! Magnezone! You ready?”

“Zonn!”

The pair were locked in each other’s pincers, using electrical, magnetic, and brute physical force to grapple with one another. Mine was on top and had the enemy pinned to the ground, but couldn’t leverage itself into a finishing blow.

“Okay, on my mark, Super Sonic! .....Mark!”

The Pokecenter’s Magnezone had no counter. It took the ringing sound waves directly to its core. Its eyes screwed backwards in their sockets.

“Now Focused Thunder!”

All the air crackled. The towers lit up in an eerie, ghostly blue glow. Tendrils of lightning traced across the metal surfaces and gathered at our location. Power was being visibly drawn from the electrical grid surrounding us. It grew, it built up, it concentrated and distilled.

Guard Magnezone recovered from its confusion and twisted its poles upward to meet the threat. It managed to project two Light Screens, one on each pincer and growing rapidly. Yet, a tenth of a second too slow.

The Thunder fired. Corralled by Magnezone’s magnetic fields, it lit off straight down, not as a coil or tendril of lightning, or even a singular jagged bolt, but more as a laser of free electrons. They seared into the opponent’s eye and through to its nervous cortex. The pair of Pokemon dropped to the ground. The top one, mine, hummed in jubilation. The bottom one went dead as a blown lightbulb.

“I can’t believe it.”

Peter chimed in.

“I found your name attached to the thing. It doesn’t have a current owner, just listed “Intransigent”, whatever that means. You good?”
“Not really. Magnezone, help me.”

“Mag mag.” Magnezone lent me a magnet-pincer to help me to my feet.

“Intransigent means a PokeRanger caught it and handed it over to League care. Usually for wild Pokemon causing trouble. It’s still technically ownerless.”

Meaning I can catch it, as soon as Ethan brings me a Pokeball!

And right on cue, the door to the room opened and Ethan stepped through.

“Aha! We’ve got everything we needed, and a surprise! Look Ethan look!”

I showed off my Pokemon with wide open arms, and then promptly toppled on top of it. It was cold and hard like a Magnezone should be, and I loved it for it and hugged it dearly.

“Yeah, awesome! We’ve got more issues. That girl is going to be here soonish.”

“How long is soonish?” I asked.

“Seconds?” Ethan said with a shrug.

“Okay. Grr. Toss a Pokeball over here.”

“Yeah, about that...”

A Pokeball came flying. I reached out with my one good arm to catch it, but it was a hair too short. The ball tapped against Magnezone’s metal surface, opened, and sucked the creature inside. With my support dematerializing underneath me, I fell rudely to the floor.

“Ethan! Why’d you catch it?!”

“I didn’t!”

“Chiba!”

“Jasmine!”

The young woman appeared in the doorway beside Ethan.

“That’s MY Magnezone! You can’t have it!”

“No it’s our Magnezone! What the hell are you doing in here? Why is Magnezone knocked out? Edward was right, you did break in, just like he said you would! Magnezone, catch them! Magnezone?”

I lunged for the Pokeball. Too far away. Crap!

Chiba shoved Ethan aside, who was sputtering and out of sorts. The woman rushed to the Pokecenter Magnezone’s side.

“What did you do to Magnezone?!”

“Why’d you catch Magnezone?!”

“What the heck are you talking about? It’s right here!”
“Not that Magnezone, the Magnezone in the Pokeball! That Pokeball!”

“What Pokeball?”

“That one!” Then my eyes went wide with disbelief.

“Stop!” Ethan cried.

“I don’t know what Pokeball you’re talking about!” Chiba shouted.

The ball had disappeared.

“Get back here!”

Where did Magnezone go?!

“Peter?”

“Behind you.”

If not Chiba, then who... what?

“Put that down!” Ethan ordered.

I twisted around-

“Aibo!”

-to find Aibo the Aipom with Pokeball in tail-hand, standing atop a freshly caught Magnezone, and a fierce, barbaric grimace on its monkey-lipped face.

“Did Aibo... just catch... a Pokemon?”

Aibo grabbed Magnezone’s antenna and screeched.

“Oh sh-”

**Aibo’s Magnezone used Thunder!**

Chapter End Notes

UPDATE 6-29-2019:

I can't deliver on my promise. Just this one chapter this month. Sorry.

Explanation:

Last month I laid out a plan for the next few chapters. I wrote one chapter, but then decided to move the Aipom/Magnezone arc up. I effectively had 1.5 chapters worth of rough drafts finished, and so I thought I could deliver on 3 chapters in June. Unfortunately, as I've written these chapters, I kept adding scenes and then realizing the scenes are better suited for later in the work. The end result is that I now have a lot of good writing, but it's not all suited to the current plotline. So I've got more writing and more rewriting to do.

So bad news: Only 1 chapter for June.

Good news: 1 chapter for early July. Possibly 3 for the month.
I should really stop promising things. I'm terribly sorry. This one scene I'm working on has ruined all my plans. For the curious, it involves a conversation between Jasmine and Lance.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!