Summary

Three lost souls find each other in a slightly different world, and from that moment, become something different. No longer thieves, they find the lost, abandoned, and broken, and do what they can to make them better.

By force, if necessary.

Or, Jessie, James, and Meowth are better delinquent heroes than they ever are as villains, and end up adopting a twerp as a little brother.

Or, Ash travels with an aspiring nurse/idol/Pokemon trainer/princess, the Pokemon whisperer, and a talking Meowth (he still owes the leader of the Cerulean Gym a new bike).
James was hiding in the hedge maze.

He'd found that while Jessebelle was passionate, driven, and clever, she also had a short attention span. Used to getting her way with minimal persuasion, of solving problems with little thought, she gave up easily if success didn't come quickly.

So James, who was frail, cowardly, and not nearly as bright, had taken to convincing Jessebelle to play hide and seek when she wanted entertainment. If there was one thing he was good at, it was avoiding notice. It was the original reason for his parents acquiring Growlie, in the hopes a creature with a keen nose would be better than the servants at rooting out James’ hiding places when he didn't want to be found. It was a constant source of irritation to them that the Growlithe had proven more loyal to James than them, and was very good at pretending he had no idea where James was.

In any case, the fact that nine times out of ten, Jessebelle would give up before she found James, made the whole exercise worth it (even if the tenth time involved an unpleasant reminder of Jessebelle’s creativity).

So here he was, ducked into a tiny hollow of one of the walls, hidden behind an urn holding a flowering Berry Tree (there were servants whose job it was to pluck any berry that might appear before wild Pokemon could get to them), tucked up in a tight ball. It had been easier to fit even a year or two ago; the stiff branches were digging into his neck, leaves boxing him in so tight his clothes would be ruined when he reappeared. He was listening, as keenly as he could, for the sign of any approach, but there was only the dead silence of the hedge maze (his parents believed a well-run world involved keeping Pokemon in their place, and that place was not in their gardens).

Which is why, when someone shoved aside the urn, James yelped and retreated so fast the branches dragged across his face and clothes, leaving a familiar stinging that indicated he was bleeding, and that his jacket was likely torn. His heart was racing, though, at the sight of a figure crouched over him, red hair atop a delicate form.

But the eyes, bright blue, and smile, wide, open, were unfamiliar.

"I found you!" the child declared.

"What?" James stuttered. His heart was skipping, uncertain if it should keep panicking, or calm, finding no threat. The child looked so much like Jessebelle, they must be a relative (there was terror at the thought of there being dozens of people like Jessebelle, as there were Joys, and Jennys, a vast family of clever, cruel women).

"I found you," the other child repeated. "You were playing hide and seek, weren't you?" They rocked back on their heels, grin as wide and bright as when they’d found James. They looked up at the top of the hedges before the grin faded to a thoughtful frown; their tongue stuck out as they thought. "There isn't anyone else to find, is there?"

"N...no," James agreed at last.

"Good! Then I've won!" the other child declared. They hopped up, grabbing the urn for a moment for balance, and grinned down at James. "It's my turn to hide, then!"
"I - what?"

The child rolled their eyes. "That's how the game goes - you hide and I try to find you, and when I do, I hide. And no cheating, using Pokemon."

Having found no indication the child was going to tell Jessebelle they'd found him, James twisted around for the leverage to crawl out of the bushes, and stand, frowning as he discovered he'd been right, and his jacket and pants were both torn. A gasp from the other child, though, drew his attention.

They held one hand over their mouth, eyes wide and fixed on his face, an expression so unfamiliar James couldn't put name to it.

"You're hurt!" they declared.

"Oh, I guess." James brushed a hand on his cheek, finding a smear of blood along it. "I'll be fine."

"Of course you will!" the other child announced, "because you're in the care of Nurse Jessie!"

From the pockets of their loose coveralls, dark grey and a little stained (and the fact they were wearing something like that should have made it clear they weren't Jessebelle), the other child, Jessie, produced a handful of bandages and a small bottle of sharp-smelling liquid. They stepped up next to James, looked down at their full hands, before handing James the bandages. "Hold still," they commanded. "It'll sting a little, but that only means you'll feel better later!" They produced a bright white rag and poured out some of the liquid onto it, and then pressed it against James' face.

It did sting, but James didn't make any noise, or flinch away, as Jessie brushed the rag against what he supposed must be his cuts. The stinging, sharp and exact like needles, faded after a few moments, though, at which point Jessie took the bandages from him and, tongue stuck out in concentration, stuck them over his cuts. It took only a few moments, but when it was over, Jessie pulled back and gave a sharp nod. "There! Are you feeling better?"

James reached up to his face, finding no exposed cut, no blood when he drew his hand away. And the pain - well, it was no more than he was used to, and Jessie seemed so certain they'd helped, so he nodded. "It's fine."

"I'm glad!"

Jessie took a step back before holding out their hand. "I'm Jessie," they said.

"James," James offered.

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Jessie, as it turned out, was related to Jessebelle, a distant cousin sent to live with Jessebelle's family after Jessie's parents died (vanished, Jessie insisted of her mother, an issue James didn't press). And despite that - being an orphan, and not allowed to dress in fancy clothes or attend parties or, it seemed, be paid attention to at all by Jessebelle or her parents - Jessie was a cheerful girl. She wanted to be a nurse, or an idol, or a Pokemon master, or a princess, if all else failed.

Today was her eleventh birthday. There had been no party, as there had been when Jessebelle turned twelve three months earlier, and no presents, like the small mountain of boxes presented to James on his eleventh birthday just last week.

But she was still smiling when she met him at the center of the hedge maze (they knew its twists and dead ends by heart, by now, so they could almost run it blindfolded, albeit at the risk of
enough injury that Jessie wouldn't allow it). It was just about dusk, the shadows of the hedges casting the maze into full darkness, except for when Growlie, sitting, a warm, fuzzy shape next to James, exhaled, small puffs of flame illuminating the small central alcove with flickers of light. Jessie was in a worn pair of jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt, white with a red rose on it, somehow looking prettier than Jessebelle in her expensive dresses and three hours of hair and makeup every morning.

James hadn't been certain how to go about this, so he stood (a gentleman always stood for a lady) and shoved his hand out toward Jessie. "Happy birthday," he said.

Jessie stared for a moment. "What is this?"

"It's a Pokeball." Technically, it was a Luxury Ball; Jessebelle had spent much of her birthday party expounding on how only common trash had Pokemon in anything but the best Pokeballs. James, though, had been more impressed by the claims that the relaxing environment within the Pokeball made the Pokemon more relaxed and more likely to befriend their trainers. Not, he corrected quickly in his mind, that he was worried any Pokemon wouldn't like Jessie, just that one never knew, and he would hate to find his birthday present made Jessie sad at all.

"It's for you," he added, in case there was any confusion.

"For...me?" Jessie repeated. Her voice sounded strange, and when she looked up at James, her eyes shone with tears.

James' stomach twisted, his heart leapt, and he froze, uncertain if he should come in for a hug or back off. "It doesn't have to be, if you don't like it! I know some people don't feel comfortable with Pokemon-"

"No! I - I'd really love it. Whatever it is." Jessie stepped forward, hand pausing as it passed over the Pokeball. James lifted his hand so she could take it, turn the gold-edged black Pokeball over in her hands, examining the red band, the smooth texture of a Pokeball only used once, and not thrown. Suddenly she looked back up, face back in a more familiar expression, one of wide-eyed excitement, smiling wide, open-mouthed. "What is it?" she demanded.

"You can open it and find out," James retorted. "After all, it's your Pokemon."


With surprising suddenness, she pressed the button to release the enclosed Pokemon. James found himself holding his breath as the capture field released the Pokemon he'd spent weeks hunting for in the nearby forest, red light clearing to reveal a pink, egg-shaped creature, colored like a smiling, dimpled child, tugging at the pouch about their waist. They looked up to Jessie and grinned.

"Happ!"

"Oh - oh my!" Jessie declared. "A Happiny?"

"Piny!" the Happiny replied.

Jessie burst into tears.

James should have expected it, really. He was certain Jessie could make a wonderful nurse, and what nurse didn't have a trusty Chansey at their side at all times? And for all the smiling she did, she wasn't treated well by her cousin's family.
Still, he didn't doubt Jessie was happy with the gift, even if the Happiny made worried chirps at her until she calmed.

At last, Jessie wiped her eyes and turned to James, smiling. "This was the best birthday present I've ever gotten," she announced, which James had suspected, it being the only present she'd received since he'd known her.

"Good. It took hours to convince this Happiny to let me catch her for someone else."

"Oh, really?" Jessie crouched down to meet the Happiny at her level. "Were you worried I'd be mean?"

"No! I told her you were-" James faltered when Jessie looked up at him, eyes bright, curious. "Very...nice," he concluded.

"Happi!" the Happiny added.

Jessie smiled, a gentle expression, at the Pokemon. "I'm happy to hear that. Now, what should I name you?"

"Ppi pi!"

Jessie tilted her head, frowning a little, sticking out her tongue. "No, I don't think so. Oh! How about Mercy?"

The Happiny clapped her hands, which James took as a good sign.

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"Let's get out of here." It was James' thirteenth birthday party, and Jessie had engineered a distraction so James could find his way to the hedge maze. She was sitting at the edge of the fountain in one of the corner alcoves, filled with water scented so wild Pokemon wouldn't drink it. Because James had insisted on her attendance, she was wearing a calf-length dress instead of whatever used clothing her...cousin, or aunt, or whatever found for her. It was technically an ankle-length dress, but being Jessebelle's and a year old, ended a little below her knees. Jessie, however, wore it without complaint. The dark blue fabric was crumpled where Jessie was sitting on it, because it was a dress for standing around in, being seen in.

"You already got us out of the party," James replied. They had a good hour before anyone would look to get him to cut the cake, which was the best he could hope for.

"I meant here," Jessie replied, waving her arm expansively.

"The hedge maze? It's the only place we can avoid everybody."

"No. Here. Your house. My house. Get out into the world!"

"Oh." James stepped back, only to find he still felt like he was standing at the edge of the roof of the northwest wing tower (he couldn't remember what they had been trying to discover at the time, but how much it hurt to break his arm was presumably not it), dizzy and aware of a gulf stretched out below him. "I..."

"If you stay here, you're going to marry Jessebelle and become a useless old man," Jessie replied.

"Yes, but..."
But the world was large and dangerous. It was full of criminals and dangerous Pokemon. James didn't know how to cook or do laundry or anything he was certain he wouldn't have servants to do for him if he left home.

Jessie was watching him, eyes focused, knowing, and then she shook her head. "But what? Kids go on Pokemon journeys when they're ten, sometimes with Pokemon a lot worse than Growlie and Mercy."

But if James left, he was certain he wouldn't get to come home again. Jessie...Jessie didn't have a home, really. She had a place to stay while her cousins tolerated her, and he was certain they'd kick her out as soon as it wouldn't seem heartless to do so. James had...

James had parents who mostly ignored him, a hedge maze he used to hide from Jessebelle in, Growlie, and Jessie.

If Jessie left, it'd just be Growlie.

So James pushed his fear away, as deep as he could manage, and nodded at Jessie, putting on the bravest smile he could manage.

"Let's do it!"

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A voice filtered through the patter of rain against the top of Meowth's temporary shelter (he could hear the dry 'tink' of rain bouncing away giving way to the dull 'thud' of water sticking to the surface of the box, suggesting his shelter would shortly stop providing cover from the storm).

"Look at this!"

Faint footsteps against the pavement grew louder. "It's a Meowth. They're not exactly the rarest Pokemon."

"But he's all alone!" The first voice sounded - pained, a little watery, like the human it belonged to was going to cry. Strange. Meowth couldn't recall seeing any another Meowth out there, or at least none worth that sort of emotion.

"So? That doesn't mean he's lonely. We can't take every Pokemon you think needs a friend with us, James." That other voice was sharper, a little colder.

"But he's cold, and wet! Or will be, anyway, when that box gives in." Another few steps and a human face was peering in at Meowth, blue hair framing a slim face that was smiling at Meowth. "Hello! Am I right? Are you all alone? Or is Jessie right, and you're just a lone Meowth who doesn't need any company?"

"Ah-" Meowth paused, trying to remember how a normal Meowth would respond. A purr of some sort - how did that go? 'Ow'? Or he could just nuzzle the human's face; that was a sign of affection, right?

Meowth stood, and the human's expression shifted, into a strange frown, and Meowth froze. He'd forgotten, of course, that it wasn't just talking like a human that made him a freak. The human face vanished, and Meowth slumped against the walls of his temporary shelter. Of course. He'd hoped for a moment-

"Trained, Jessie! He's been abandoned! Look!"
Another face, framed by red braids, and frowning, deeper than the other human's, appeared, taking in Meowth's stance, his frame, and her frown...eased, somewhat.

"He is malnourished," the second human agreed. "We can take him to the Pokemon Center, and ask if he's got an owner, and then, only if he's really on his own, we can take him with us."

"Really?"

The red-haired human's face paled, expression freezing, and Meowth realized the surprised voice, the pleased, needy declaration, had been his voice.

"Um...Meow?" he tried.

Chapter End Notes

Growlie; Male Growlithe, Fire Type
Brave Nature. This Pokemon has high Attack, but their Speed is reduced.
Ability - Justified. Being hit by a Dark-type move boosts the Attack stat of the Pokemon, for justice.
Moves Known - Helping Hand, Odor Sleuth, Safeguard, Snarl

Mercy; Female Happiny, Normal Type
Quirky Nature. This Pokemon has no particular strengths or weaknesses.
Ability - Friend Guard. Reduces damage done to allies.
Moves Known - Copycat, Heal Bell, Natural Gift, Pound

Meowth; Male Meowth, Normal Type
Bold Nature. This Pokemon has high Defense, but their Attack is reduced.
Ability - Pickup. The Pokemon may pick up the item an opposing Pokemon used during a battle. It may pick up items outside of battle, too.
Moves Known - Bite, Covet, Fury Swipes, Odor Sleuth
Pokemon Emergency

Chapter Summary

Passing through Viridian City to stock up on supplies, our intrepid heroes meet a kid with a Pikachu in terrible shape. Being Good Samaritans, they make sure he gets to the Pokemon Center, and hang around, just to make sure he's treating that Pikachu well.

There's a robbery in here somewhere, and an angry Gym leader.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Meowth was sleeping on a bench near the Public Notice boards, turning occasionally to ensure every inch of himself got warmed by the sun. Sunset was in an hour, and Meowth had suffered entirely too much rain today, so he was going to enjoy every photon he could soak up.

Jessie and James were shopping; Meowth didn't join them on that particular errand because it was embarrassing seeing the two of them haggle, because it always ended in flirting for discounts, which was frankly disturbing to watch.

His ears twitched (of their own accord, one of those little reminders that Meowth might talk like a human, but was still a Pokemon, with thousands of years of weird instincts he couldn't suppress) at the sound of two familiar sets of footsteps. He turned his head just enough to see two figures, easily recognized by the vibrant shades of their hair, one magenta, the other lavender, standing by the boards. He spared the attention only to confirm the bulging bags they each carried, evidence of the success of their mission.

He closed his eyes, certain they'd wake him when they were ready to go.

"Meowth! Did you see this?"

James' voice had hit the register that meant he was particularly upset; it wasn't quite a panicked noise, but it also meant he wasn't going to give Meowth any peace until someone heard him out.

So Meowth perked his head up, coming face-to-face with a picture of himself.

Well, him, Jessie, and James. It was a blurry picture, likely taken with a camera app on someone's Gear, but their hair, and Meowth's upright posture, were mostly unmistakable. There was writing underneath it.

'Wanted - for Pokemon Poaching, Assault, and Robbery'

"Well, that kid did say he'd notify the authorities," Meowth replied. He peered at the poster a little more carefully, noting the number listed to call with any information (the number had a League prefix, meaning this was a bit more official than some other pursuits had been). "Although this isn't strictly accurate."

"What are you talking about? We did take that kid's Buneary!"
"Yeah, but taking someone else's Pokemon isn't 'poaching'; it's stealing," Meowth retorted, folding his arms across his chest. "Or 'kidnapping', I guess, depending how you feel about Pokemon's rights. You can't 'poach' Pokemon anywhere other than private property or protected wildlife preserves."

"You're both missing the bigger picture here!" James snapped. Once certain he had both Jessie's and Meowth's attention, he jabbed his finger at the poster. "This is a terrible photo!"

Meowth groaned while Jessie started trying to argue with James. Neither of them would be able to convince James the picture was anything but a deliberate slight, never mind that when the picture had been taken, James had just finished an intense battle with the most terrible thirteen-year-old boy Meowth had ever met, hair singed from an errant Ember, and that anyway, the police didn't have a better picture.

Meowth's nose twitched at the memory of that smoke-filled battlefield; as Jessie continued trying to soothe James' frazzled nerves, Meowth's nose twitched again, and another human drew near. Their skin was scorched, hair standing on end, and held a Pikachu in their arms.

The Pikachu, if anything, looked worse.

"Uh...Owth?" Meowth tried. When neither Jessie nor James gave indication of having heard him, Meowth cleared his throat. "Meow!"

Jessie and James turned, just as the newcomer slumped against the bench.

"Oh my goodness!" Jessie ran forward toward the other human, while James stuffed the poster in his pocket. "Is your Pikachu-"

"He's hurt," the other human gasped.

"We should get you to the Pokemon Center immediately!" Jessie fumbled at her waist, frowning, tongue sticking out as, presumably, she considered if she had a Pokemon on hand to help them get to the Pokemon Center quickly.

"Just give him to me," James said. "You're dead on your feet, and I know the way."

The human - the kid - hesitated for only a moment before concern for the Pikachu won out and they shifted it, cautiously, into James's arms.

"What are you waiting for?" they demanded after a moment.

"I need his Pokeball," James said. "If the nurse can't help immediately, she might need to put him back in to stabilize him."

And the kid had made their decision already, it seemed, because they didn't hesitate, handing over a Pokeball to James. With that, James ran for the Pokemon Center, leaving Jessie and the kid alone with Meowth. The kid stared after James, eyes fixed, wide, even as they swayed on their feet.

"Mrow," Meowth said, insistently, and that, at least, got Jessie to look at the kid, remember that the kid was hurt, too. She clicked her tongue.

"We should get you patched up, too."

The kid shook their head, even though it caused them to stumble. "Not until Pikachu's okay."
And Meowth could see the softening of Jessie's expression, some of the tension in her forehead smoothing out as she put a hand on the kid's shoulder. But she was a soft touch, didn't quite realize how a cruel human might care about the health of a valuable Pokemon they didn't care for.

"Well," Jessie said, grabbing the kid's shoulder to steady them. "We can get you to the Pokemon Center so you can check on your Pikachu, and then we can check on you."

The kid nodded, slumping a little toward Jessie. "And Pikachu'll be okay?"

"Better than ever!" Jessie declared, absent any evidence to support her claim, but Meowth got that, at least. You didn't tell a distraught ten-year-old their Pikachu might not make it. "Come on, Meowth."

Meowth fought back a grumble and hopped down, doing his best to keep a natural posture. The kid made a startled sound, and pulled out a bright red Gear. A stilted, robotic voice chirped out, "Meowth, the Scratch Cat Pokemon. All it does is sleep during the daytime. At night, it patrols its territory with its eyes aglow."

Meowth bit back an angry retort, because the kid couldn't help it if they couldn't afford access to a Professor's 'Dex and had to make do with one of the crappy free ones. Still, the urge to correct them as Meowth led them and Jessie to the Pokemon Center was like a fist squeezing his stomach. But because he, Jessie, and James were keeping a 'low profile' because they were technically 'criminals', Meowth had to keep his mouth shut.

Meowth was keeping his mouth shut, he got to hear the kid's whole story when Jessie asked - how Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town had overslept, how Professor fucking Oak had given a ten-year-old an insufficiently socialized electric rat, and then.

Well, Meowth was a little more in Jessie's camp now, hearing what Ash had done to keep his Pikachu - a Pokemon who didn't even like him - safe. It didn't make up for the fact that the kid had no idea how to care for a Pokemon, but.

Ignorance could be fixed; a lack of compassion couldn't.

When they reached the Center, Ash bolted to the counter, where the Nurse on duty was typing at her computer. "Is my Pikachu okay?" he demanded.

The Nurse (Joy, Meowth would bet his left paw on that), looked up, expression shifting to a mild concern, the professional sympathetic frown Meowth was certain was part of the training. "Can I see your Gear?" she asked.

"What? What about my Pikachu?" Ash grabbed at the edge of the counter, knuckles white with the strength of a grip he should have been too tired to make. "He's hurt."

"And Nurse Joy here needs to be sure he's your Pokemon," Jessie said, stepping up behind the kid, giving Joy a bright smile. "There are pretty nasty people who run around stealing other people's Pokemon, and I'm sure James was responsible and told her the Pikachu isn't his."

"Oh." Meowth, circling around Ash's feet, saw the paling of the kid's face, the widening of brown eyes that hadn't yet seen how cruel the world could be. Ash fumbled for his Gear, still open from when he'd used an inferior Pokedex to try to figure out what Meowth were like (as if Meowth couldn't tell him on his own what Meowth was like), and handed it over. Joy scanned the Gear, expression giving way to a wide smile when she glanced at her screen.

"Well, Ash, I can promise you my cousin Joy and her Chansey are making sure your Pikachu is
receiving the best possible care. You and your friends can sit down and I'll call you up when they've finished working with your Pikachu."

Ash stepped back from the counter, visibly slumping; Jessie caught his shoulders as the boy sagged, sighing with, Meowth presumed, the relief that his Pikachu would be okay (maybe. Joy was probably optimistic to anyone who came in; it must be terrible to have to tell someone one of their Pokemon had died). Jessie took Ash's Gear and more or less carried him to the couches furthest from the entrance, where Growlie was sprawled across James' lap, growling cheerily as his partner ran his fingers through his mane. Ash reached for his Gear, frowning when his hand patted at an empty pocket.

"Here," Jessie said, handing over Ash's Gear. Ash pointed it at Growlie.

"Growlithe, the Puppy Pokemon. It looks cute, but when you approach another Trainer's Growlithe, it will bark at you and bite."

Ash jerked back, tugging against Jessie, staring, wide-eyed at Growlie. "Um."

Growlie raised his head with an inquisitive huff, sending Ash another step back, nearly stepping on Meowth's tail. He yowled, sending the kid skittering toward the phone banks, and Meowth rolled his eyes, because this was ridiculous.

James apparently agreed, because he shoved Growlie aside and rose to a - crouch, the one he used when approaching injured or scared Pokemon. He gave Ash a gentle smile, the alluring one that could soothe a rampaging Mankey.

"You're not scared of Growlie, are you?" he asked.

Ash looked between James and Growlie, the latter having come to grips with being abandoned by rolling onto his back and letting his tongue flop haphazardly about. He looked back to James and then his Gear, biting his lip.

"No?"

"You are," James said. "I hope it's not because of what that cheap Pokedex you've got in your Gear told you."

"Um?"

James sighed and held out his hand. "Come on. Let me see that."

And Ash had clearly passed into some sort of shock, because he handed over the Gear without complaint. James poked at it for all of five seconds before rearing up, staring at the Gear. "You've got a perpetual license for Oak's Pokedex and you're using something you downloaded off the internet?"

"I?" Ash stepped back from James, eyes going, if possible, wider. Meowth growled, enough to catch James' attention, point out the kid was ten.

And James' expression smoothed back out, dropping back down to Ash's level. "I'm surprised Professor Oak gave you his research - you can learn a lot of interesting things about Pokemon using his Pokedex."

"But it's boring," Ash whined.
Meowth rolled his eyes, but James had apparently a better temper than him, because he laughed. "That doesn't mean something more exciting is true." He abruptly sobered, staring at Ash until he was sure the kid was watching him. "Besides, you want to take good care of your Pokemon, right? Your Pikachu and whatever other Pokemon you catch?"

Ash nodded, and then because he apparently thought this wasn't emphatic enough, added, "of course!"

"That's good - not everyone cares about taking care of them, just making sure they're strong." His voice went a little snide, then, probably remembering the kid they'd run into the week before, who'd called the League down on them for objecting to his training methods.

"You can't be strong if you're not healthy," Ash retorted. "Or - that's what my mom said."

"Smart woman," James agreed. "In any case, you can't take care of your Pokemon if you don't know their - habits, dietary needs, attitudes, and that cheap Pokedex you want to use instead of Professor Oak's 'Dex won't tell you any of that. For all we know, it might mislead you, making you mistreat your Pokemon because you think that's how you're supposed to act."

And that was clearly the right tactic, because after James' little speech, Ash was staring back down at his Gear, face scrunched up, worried or concentrating or both. It took a few moments (kid wasn't exactly the brightest, as evidenced by his managing to antagonize an entire flock of Spearow, who were usually content to let their flockmates deal with their own problems) before Ash looked back up at James, smiling, as he gave a decisive nod.

"Alright. I'll use Professor Oak's Pokedex, even if it's really long and boring."

James grinned and ruffled the kid's hair. "Attaboy." He tapped at his chin. "Although...I could help with that."

"What, make Professor Oak not boring?"

James snorted. "No. But while Professor Oak doesn't seem to have pre-loaded any of them on here, there are apps that can help you scan and distill this information down when you just want a blurb about a Pokemon you've never seen." He gave Ash a small smile, encouraging, Meowth guessed. "And I can also help you download some training and health apps, so you can get good advice about how to keep your Pokemon healthy and train them well."

"...Training apps? Shouldn't I figure out how to train my Pokemon myself?"

"No. Definitely not," James said, voice a little sharp. "There isn't a Gym Leader or professional trainer alive who doesn't read up on the latest training methods all the time. And if you want to keep up with them-"

"I want to be a real Pokemon master!"

James grinned. "If you want to beat them, you're going to have to read up, yourself."

Ash groaned, dropping onto the floor like a - well, Meowth guessed he was a kid. "No one said I'd have to read more than I did at school to be a Pokemon trainer."

"Well, that's life," Jessie interjected. "Anything worth doing well is worth reading an absolute fu - a lot about. But some health and training apps are a good start."

Ash handed over his Gear with little protest, and James wandered over to the front desk for
directions to the PC terminal. Ash followed a moment later, presumably to pepper James with a billion questions about the PC, the local network where the Center kept its medical data, and the internet access through which Ash could transfer Pokemon outside of the at best six most people carried on their person and, more importantly, download the apps he'd need to train his Pokemon with more than benign neglect.

Meowth decided to curl up on a couch next to Growlie (for warmth obviously; the Growlithe had no respect for personal space, and was much too slobbery for Meowth's comfort) and nap. Consequently, he had no idea how long it had been when a pleasant chime echoed through the room.

"Ash Ketchum, you can see your Pokemon now. Proceed to the observation-"

Ash bolted away from the PC terminal (what the heck was James still downloading onto that?) to the wide double doors separating the main Center off from the treatment and storage rooms. He was bouncing on his toes as a Chansey pushed open the doors.

"Chanse?"

Ash looked toward James, brow furrowed.

"Go on, she'll take you to see your Pikachu," Jessie called, from where she was browsing through Pokemon magazines, drooling over snapshots of the Pokemon Showcase finals. Ash did, and for a few moments, it was quiet. Meowth let out a quiet sigh, causing Growlie's head, which was resting on top of Meowth's stomach, to rise and fall with the movement. Sure he got the urge to help, but he could do without a clueless twerp following them around everywhere.

There was a 'ding' from the front doors, which Meowth ignored, because this was a Pokemon Center and people came into them all the time (heck, wild Pokemon sometimes came into Pokemon Centers for help).

"Well, well, well, will you look at this?" The voice was - not exactly familiar, but it set Meowth on edge, ear twitching at the drawl of it.

"A whole Pokemon Center, silent as the grave," another voice chimed in, gruffer, but no less threatening in its timbre.

"We're gonna fuck this place up," said a third. A Raticate, or another Pokemon who could talk like one. Growlie raised his head, not quite growling, but ears perked forward, alert. Meowth, who had a better grasp of how humans worked, stood, jumped down from the couch, and peered around the nearby planter to get a better look. One of the humans was a man, green-haired, eyes the color of dried blood. The other was a woman, hair a slightly iridescent blond, eyes bright as she leaned against the wall, holding the automatic door open. But those weren't really the most pertinent details regarding these two (and the Raticate peering from behind their legs). Their outfits, black jumpsuits with red and white highlights, with a prominent red 'R' across their chests, were.

Meowth sidled toward Jessie. She had lowered her magazine, and was watching the two newcomers with narrow eyes, one hand resting, casually, on one of her Pokeballs. James was edging toward the main counter, possibly to put himself between the newcomers and Joy.

Because these were Pokemon poachers, Pokemon thieves, criminals involved in any enterprise that promised a profit.

Team Rocket, the largest and most permanent criminal organization in Kanto.
"Hey, Doc," the blond said, sauntering toward the counter, "Perk up - we need help."

"Yeah, it's an emergency," the guy added with a snicker.

"Oh, of course!" Joy hit a button on her computer and looked to the approaching woman. "How can I help you?"

"Well, first, you can open up the overnight and long-term care storage system and hand over the Pokemon you're keeping there." The woman stopped at the counter, leaning in toward Joy. "And then we can talk about what else you can do for us."

"Tch tch tch," James said. "That's no way to speak to a lady."

"What?" the blond snapped, half-turning toward James. "I am a lady!"

"Oh, I agree, James. She was abominably rude."

"Hey!" the man shouted from the door. "This is a robbery; we don't have to be polite!"

"I don't know," Meowth said, sticking one hand behind his head and grinning at the guy. "You'd be surprised what a cute face and a smile can do for ya."

The man stumbled back, and the automatic doors closed on him. Waving furiously at the doors, he stormed back in, Raticate snarling at his heels. "Do you know who we are?" he demanded. "We're Team Rocket, and if you mess with us, you'll be in a world of trouble!"

"Trouble?" Jessie asked. "You're the ones who need to prepare for trouble."

"And make it double," James added with a wink.

"What are you talking about?" the woman demanded. But Meowth waved until Joy saw him, and jerked his head toward the backrooms. She fled as Jessie pointed one hand skyward.

"To protect the world from devastation."

"To spread compassion to every nation," James said, spreading out his hands.

"To denounce the evils of cruelty and greed," Jessie said, taking a step forward with a twirl, raising her hands up to her chin while taking on a wistful frown.

"To offer aid to all Pokemon in need."

"Jessie."

"James."

"We are all watching out for all that is right," Jessie said.

"Surrender now," James concluded. "Or prepare to fight."

"Meowth!" Meowth purred, "that's right!"

The Team Rocket grunts were staring, the man with a slack jaw, the woman's eyes just wide.

"The fuck?" the Raticate demanded.

"What," Meowth asked, "You got a better motto?"
"We're part of a fucking criminal empire," the Raticate snapped, baring their teeth at Meowth. "What the fuck do we need to announce ourselves like pro wrestlers?"

"You've got a uniform," Meowth retorted.

"A tacky one, at that," Jessie added, clearly sensing an opportunity to get in a shot at her opponents, despite having no idea what Raticate was saying.

"If I were you, I'd ask your boss if there's something you can wear that's less unflattering to your bust," James said.

"What are you-" the woman started, before the man snarled.

"They're trying to distract us!" he shouted.

"Is it working?" Jessie asked, batting her eyes at the man.

"Well, you've made us decide that Meowth is valuable enough to steal for ourselves," the woman said, "so there's that."

"Excuse me?" Meowth hissed. "Steal? I'm my own Pokemon!"

"All the better," the man said. "Go, Raticate!"

"Growlie!" James shouted, and the Growlithe, on alert since the moment he'd awoken, bounded in between Meowth and Team Rocket's Raticate.

"Bite it!" the man commanded.

The Raticate opened their mouth, lunging at Growlie. The jaws snapped around Growlie's paw; he snarled in reply, sending the Raticate skittering back.

"Mercy!" Jessie called, calling out her Happiny. "Pound that overgrown rodent!"

The Raticate recoiled from the blow as Mercy slammed into them, but snapped their jaws open again, only to catch Growlie in the side. He yelped, rather than whined, because with Mercy nearby, the bite wouldn't hurt nearly as much. He then braced himself, letting out a sharp bark, and bit the Raticate, a fierce snap of his jaws that sent the Raticate stumbling back with a litany of swears.

"Two against one hardly seems fair," the woman said, running her hands through her hair, before pitching another Pokeball into the fray. A Drowzee emerged, raising their snout to sniff at the air.

"Drowzee, take 'em out!" the woman commanded. The Drowzee shrugged and made a hypnotic swaying motion with...their...hands. Meowth yawned, jaw cracking, but Happiny slumped onto the ground, eyes slipping closed.

"Growlie!" James shouted, and it was a testament how far James had come from a nervous kid who shakily asked his Growlithe to start a battle, that Growlie leapt forward, reading James' intention as well as if he were a Psychic type and reading James' mind. Growlie bit the Drowzee's snout hard, earning a pained scream as the Drowzee scrambled back.

"That's quite enough of that!" the Drowzee snarled, snapping their fingers.

"Bite them again!" James commanded, but Growlie just tilted his head, confused. Or, rather, disabled. It was a nasty trick, and one that paid off as the Raticate got in another vicious bite,
leaving Growlie shaky, even as he planted his feet, ready to fight to the end.

"I think I've got things well in hand here," the woman said.

"Great," the man said, smirking. "Come on, Raticate."

"Drowzee, Dream Eater!" the woman shouted, and Jessie, seeing the Drowzee's snout bulge as they inhaled, turned helplessly toward Mercy. The Happiny yelped, twisting anxiously in her sleep as the bruises and scratches on the Drowzee's snout faded.

"Growlie, Ember!"

"Secret Power!" The Drowzee reared back and spat a blot of some acid or - something - at Growlie. He stumbled, pawing awkwardly at his face as his movements slowed and stiffened. Some sort of paralyzing attack, Meowth realized.

Before realizing he was going to have to step up and fight.

"They've activated the Pokemon Transport system!" the man snapped from the counter, where he was typing at Joy's computer.

"Then shut it down or something," the woman snapped. "Hypnosis!"

Meowth struggled through the attack again, but Growlie succumbed, leaving him vulnerable to the Drowzee's Dream Eater.

"Growlie, come back!"

"Mercy, return!"

And there was a moment of quiet, Jessie and James each frowning, thoughtful, as they considered whether it was worth risking a Poison Pokemon against Team Rocket's Drowzee. Meowth took a deep breath, unsheathing his claws. It wasn't going to do much good, but if the alternative was letting these jerks steal all of the Pokemon in the Center, he'd take the beating Drowzee could dish out..

The Drowzee, though, lifted her head, sniffing at the air again, before ducking their head down. "Something dangerous is coming," they said, uneasy. "Something powerful."

And then the doors to the back rooms swung open with a bang, revealing Ash pushing a gurney. His Pikachu was curled up on top of it, a charger strapped around his head to restore the energy he'd expended taking out a flock of Spearow in one hit. There were something like a dozen other Pokemon hanging onto the lower levels - a Pichu, a Rattata, Plusle and Minun, a Joltic, a Togedemaru-

"Get out of here, kid!" James shouted. "Come on, Cheri, I don't need a miracle, just a few good hits." His Koffing appeared, smiling lovingly at James despite the dire situation.

"No," the Pikachu growled, pushing himself to his feet, teeth bared. "I'm ending this."

"Pikachu?" Ash asked, voice shaky.

"He wants to fight," Meowth said. "Which is stupid; you're already half-dead from the last time you pulled off some last-second heroics!"

But the Pikachu ignored Meowth, looking down at the other Pokemon. "I need you to shock me,"
he commanded. "All of you. It doesn't have to be a lot. Even a little static can do it."

"What the heck are you doing?" Meowth demanded. "You can't take any more hits!"

"What, you think it'll hurt me?" Pikachu demanded. "Who do you think I am, some sort of garden-variety Mouse Pokemon?" The Plusle, Minun, and Togedemaru each nuzzled their cheeks against Pikachu's, sparks dancing across his cheek sacs as the other Pokemon retreated. The Pichu let out a jolt that sent them rolling backward, nearly off of the gurney.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ash demanded, reaching out toward his Pikachu.

"Stay back, kid or you'll get yourself killed!" Meowth shouted. "Anyway, I think - it's not hurting your Pikachu." Sparks danced up and down the Pikachu's tail as he turned toward the Team Rocket grunts.

"That's our job," the Team Rocket woman tittered. "Drowzee, Hypnosis!"

"Smokescreen!" Cheri floated past the Drowzee, trailing smoke that screened Pikachu from view even as the Drowzee waved their hands again. It left Cheri snoozing, floating in midair as they snored, but it gave the Joltic a chance to discharge a static shock at Pikachu, whose cheeks were sparking, arcs dancing between them at irregular intervals. The Rattata growled, body sparking, and let loose a Thunderbolt.

And now Meowth could understand why the Drowzee had been nervous, because the Pikachu's entire body was crackling with lightning, his eyes almost glowing.

"Hey, Drowzee," Pikachu said, smirking, "You want to see a neat trick?" He spun in a tight circle, tail snapping around to release lightning in every direction.

"Hey, there's innocent bystanders over here!" Meowth snapped, trying, and failing, to bounce out of the way as the bolts danced across the floor. But it took a moment to realize the lightning didn't hurt; it made his fur stand on end like static, and he felt - a little more alert. Cheri woke up with a cheerful, "I'm up!"

And Pikachu's cheeks were sparking with intent.

"Oh dear," the Drowzee said.

And Ash's Pikachu let loose a Thunderbolt that made Meowth's vision go white.

Some hours later, camped outside the Viridian City limits, James pointed his chopsticks at Ash. "Okay, what have we learned today?"

Ash, hunched over his dinner, face like a chastened Poochyena, looked up at James, and the worried look gave way to a thoughtful wrinkle of his forehead. "That fighting bad guys is a job for the police?"

"What?" James scowled. "No. Fu - The police are not - well, we're Pokemon trainers, we can handle poachers and thieves on our own. No, the lesson here is always be aware of your surroundings. That combo your Pikachu came up with - powering up their Thunderbolt with other Pokemon's electric power - would have been an excellent idea in the wilderness, but in a populated area - a human-populated area - is. Well. You saw what happened."

"We're just lucky Joy and her cousin transferred all the Pokemon before your Pikachu went all - Zapdos - on us," Jessie said. "And that the Pokemon Center was practically deserted, anyway.
Otherwise, people might have been hurt."

"Well, bystanders," Meowth said. "I doubt those guys from Team Rocket got out of there unscathed."

Ash gave Meowth a cautious look, biting his lip, presumably weighing the merits of asking Meowth stupid questions against minding his own business.

"Pikachu didn't hurt them, did he?"

...Or the kid was unnecessarily concerned about the well-being of criminals.

"Pft," Jessie scoffed. James elbowed her in the side before she could continue.

"People like those two are good at landing on their feet," James said. "So I doubt you hurt them too badly. But you should be very careful letting your Pokemon let loose where people could get hurt."

"Oh. Good." Ash took a bite of his food before glancing over at Meowth. "Can all Meowth talk? Or is that just you? I tried reading through Professor Oak's Pokedex, but it wasn't really...helpful."

"Well, Professor Oak doesn't know all there is to know about Pokemon," Meowth retorted from his place curled up just within reach of Jessie but still as close to the fire as he could get without being burned. "But I'm a special case. I spent months practicing making your weird human sounds."

"Oh. That's so cool! Do you know any other languages?"

"Ah." Meowth paused, looking between Jessie and James; the latter was smirking at him, like he knew something Meowth didn't. It left Meowth off-balance; he was used to keeping his...skills quiet, given how people normally reacted to a talking Meowth. But Ash was - well, probably ignorant enough not to know how weird Meowth was, and still figuring out what was normal in the world, so a talking Meowth was as strange and exciting as anything else.

"I mean, I can talk to pretty much any Pokemon."

"Big deal," the Pikachu said from his place curled up in Ash's lap. "Anyone can do that."

Meowth stuck his tongue out at Pikachu, who tucked his head back down, pointedly ignoring him. Meowth looked back up at Ash, whose gaze was darting between Meowth and the Pikachu, brow furrowed in worry.

"Is he okay? The app you got me said Pikachu could have really hurt himself, using all that electricity after he wore himself out before."

"Yeah, he's fine," Meowth assured Ash.

"Good. That's good." Ash began petting the Pikachu's ears, Pikachu chirped in pleasure, and Meowth let him have the moment; he'd saved Meowth from a lifetime of servitude to a bunch of jerks who stole other people's Pokemon.

"So," Jessie said. "I've been thinking."

"Oh?" James raised an eyebrow, while Meowth felt his tail tense. He suspected there was a little Absol in his lineage, the way his tail picked up on disaster a little bit before it happened.

"We don't have any pressing business, and Ash here - well, apps are a good way to get down the basics, but nothing beats learning from people with experience."
"What do you mean?" Ash asked.

"She means we should tag along with you and help teach you how to take care of your Pokemon properly," Meowth said.

"Really?"

"I don't know," James said, pursing his lips. "He's a kid, Jessie, and we-"

"We'll make sure he knows how to treat Pokemon right," Jessie said, voice prim, short. "You've been wanting more experience caring for different species, and you're too squeamish to catch Pokemon properly; every Pokemon you have you basically got to go with you by giving them those sad Growlithe eyes."

James sighed, looking over the fire at Ash, worrying at his bottom lip. He was right; there were a lot of reasons this was a dumb idea, but.

Well, they were all here because of a string of dumb ideas, and at least they had each other. It might be worth taking the kid under their wing, even if he was a twerp.

"Well, if Ash wants to, we can stick around and give him a hand," James allowed.

"That's awesome!" Ash declared. "You can help me learn how to train all sorts of Pokemon so I can be the best, and I'll make sure everyone knows how you taught me everything I know!"

"How magnanimous of you," Meowth said, "but right now all I want is some sleep."

The assembled humans were suspiciously quiet as Meowth closed his eyes, and then,

"Are you sure the Pokedex was wrong about how much you sleep?"

...Meowth was certain he was going to end up regretting this, but.

Well.

It was nice to have another person around who didn't think he was a freak.

---

The doctor (not a Professor, despite her groundbreaking research) didn't look away from her computer when she heard someone entering her lab. A host of monitoring systems had informed her they were coming long before they got close enough to be dangerous, if they wanted to hurt her. Not that there were many people who could be a threat to her and her team.

In any case, she was in the middle of reviewing cell samples, which had a tendency to degrade if she waited too long after extracting them.

Something slammed into the doctor's desk.

"There's your fucking 'little pickup'," a gruff voice snarled.

"Oh. Thank you, Butch."

"It's not - where the fuck did you hear that name?" the agent demanded.

The doctor gave Butch a dismissing click of her tongue. "The news. All it took was the police to
suggest there was a pair of highly-ranked Rocket agents running around perpetrating all sorts of unrelated crimes for the media came up with a nickname for you. I could use your codename if you'd prefer."

"Whatever," Butch grumbled.

"What's got you in a mood, anyway?" the doctor asked. She looked over at the item Butch had forcefully delivered, finding a discreet memory stick, small enough it could be concealed almost anywhere, undamaged, if a little filthy from whatever Butch had put it through. "It's not like you had to do anything difficult like actually find the data I needed. The program I put on here should have handled it all."

"Yeah, the computer part," Butch growled. "We had to fight off a bunch of assholes we convinced were there to steal their Pokemon."

"Did it occur to you to do this without a Pokemon battle?" the doctor asked. It was, it seemed, a sort of mental block most people had. You have a problem, you solve it with a Pokemon battle.

"No," the other agent, the one the newspapers had dubbed 'Cassidy', replied. "Because if they found evidence of a break-in, they'd scour the whole place trying to figure out what we were up to. This way, they're not looking at the Pokemon Center's mainframe, just making sure no one's Pokemon got lost."

It was a clever idea, albeit a needlessly complicated one; the doctor's program was very good at covering its tracks. Still.

"Still, you might have gone there during a slow day," the doctor said.

"We did!" Butch snapped. "It's the off-season, and the Viridian Gym's closed, but there was this twerp with a - super-powerful Pikachu."

"Hm?" The doctor looked, really looked at the agents. Their skin was scorched, hair burned, and Cassidy's eye was twitching. She made a few…rough calculations. "Thunder's a publicly-available Technical Machine," she said, "so you can't act like it's unfathomable a low-level Pokemon has access to it."

"No," Cassidy said, "that wasn't it. They had a bunch of other Electric Pokemon shock it, and then-"

"Hm," the doctor said. "There are Pikachu who are immune to the Electric attacks of other Pokemon, and can even use those attacks to charge up their own attack. Unusual, but hardly worth getting yourself worked up over."

Butch huffed, glowering. The doctor picked up the memory stick, inserting it into her computer. It took a moment before the program she kept on her personal device interfaced with the data there and began downloading, analyzing, and summarizing it.

"What's so valuable about some Pokemon Center's logs?" Cassidy asked.

The doctor smiled, feeling some of her tension lift. People whining about things, being stupid, exhausted her, but people who wanted to learn - well, they were a treasure.

"Surely you've heard the adage 'knowledge is power'. Well, the sentiment is trebly true when you work in neogenics. Medical data - genetic data - is the cornerstone of my research. Understanding the variations in Pokemon genes, how that affects their reactions to stimuli, how you might
manipulate them, is invaluable. Pokemon Centers store that data - that and more - for every Pokemon they treat. They don't release that data from their local networks without a treatment query, and trying to get through that encryption isn't worth the computing power."

"You could have sent us anywhere," Cassidy replied. "So why Viridian City? The boss doesn't like us making trouble too close to his home base."

"Viridian City is the gateway to Indigo Plateau," the doctor said. "Almost everyone who goes to the League Conference passes through there - trainers, Gym Leaders, Professors. So, short of hacking into the League itself, which would attract far too much attention, the medical logs from the Viridian City Pokemon Center are the most complete data we can get on the strongest Pokemon in Kanto."

A pained sound came from behind the doctor; Cassidy tensed, one hand going to her belt. The doctor, though, rolled her eyes.

"Oh, don't worry about that." She tapped a key on her computer, sending a flood of sedatives - of two types of sedatives (one much more important than the other) - into the bloodstream of the current focus of her research. "There haven't been any incidents since Cinnabar. It's quite docile."

"It seems a lot of effort for one Pokemon."

The doctor sighed. Every time she thought a member of Team Rocket understood, they proved how short-sighted they were.

But that was fine. They'd understand, someday.

They all would.

---

Misty stood at the edge of the caution tape surrounding the Viridian Pokemon Center. She'd expected - well, she didn't know what. The kid who'd stolen her bike, who'd destroyed her bike, had been headed toward Viridian City. And now-

"Hey." Misty grabbed the shoulder of a passing police officer.

"Miss, you're going to have to-"

Misty flashed her Gym badge, which made the officer shut up, at least. "Look, I ran into a kid heading this way with a Pokemon in bad shape, and I just wanted to make sure he got out alright."

The officer nodded. "Well, they set up a temporary Center in the local Mart."

"Thanks." Misty stalked to the cheery Pokemart and found Joy (second cousin to the Joy who ran the Cerulean Pokemon Center) struggling with the cables of a PC. "Hey."

"Oh, hi! Um, if you need assistance, my Chansey should be around here somewhere, but otherwise, it'll be a few minutes."

"No, my Pokemon are fine. I wanted to check up on someone I think might have been headed to the Center." She showed her badge, already feeling a little less skeevy for throwing her position around because that bike was expensive, damn it! "He had a Pikachu who was in pretty bad shape-"

"Oh! Ash Ketchum! Yes. The Center got attacked by Pokemon thieves and he helped me get
everyone's Pokemon over to Celadon City."

"Thieves? It looks like someone tried to blow up the building."

"Ah. Well." Joy shrugged, before waving Misty in closer, and when she next spoke, her voice was quiet. "I said the thieves did that, but, well. He was trying to help. And he did, but."

Ash Ketchum, it seemed, was a walking disaster area. From bikes to Pokemon Centers to who knows what else.

She doubted he could pay to repair an entire Pokemon Center, but at the very least, he could replace Misty's bike. As soon as she caught up with him, at least. If he'd passed through Viridian City, he'd be heading to Pewter City next.

...Right through the Viridian Forest.

Why did it have to be bugs?

Chapter End Notes

Unnamed; Male Pikachu, Electric Type
Rash Nature. This Pokemon has high Special Attack, but their Special Defense is reduced.
Ability - Lightning Rod. The Pokemon draws in all Electric-type moves. Instead of being hit by Electric-type moves, it boosts its Sp. Atk.
Moves Known - Electric Terrain, Growl, Slam, Thunderbolt, Volt Tackle
Chapter Summary

Ash gets ready to face his first Gym Leader, and is forced to confront some of the weaknesses in his Pokemon team.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

James was just touching up her eyes when Meowth poked her leg. By long practice, she didn’t startle, but did glower down at Meowth, who should know better than to interrupt either of them when applying makeup.

“What?” She demanded.

“Sooo...how are we explaining this to the twerp?”

“I wish you’d stop calling him that; he thinks you don’t like him.”

“What?” Meowth crossed his arms, face crinkling in thought. “I wouldn’t let him tag along with us if I didn’t like him.”

“Then tell him,” James retorted. “In case you haven’t noticed, Ash is...straightforward; he likely hasn’t noticed all your little feline demonstrations of affection.”

“Which is exactly my point!” Meowth retorted. “I can promise you’re gonna confuse the heck out of him if you don’t explain.”

James rolled her eyes, but didn’t reply. Meowth had a point; Ash was - well, not stupid. Ignorant, certainly. Riding the high from catching his first Pokemon, an unsuspecting Caterpie James had taken to thinking as Felix, Ash had tried to use that same Caterpie to fight a wild Pidgeotto.

Following that near disaster, Jessie had sat Ash down and set him memorizing type matchups.

“Types aren’t everything,” she’d acknowledged, “but it’s best to know what might give you an edge in a battle. Or, of course, what might make it harder.”

And James had to hand it to Ash - between studiously reading on type matchups, asking Jessie endless questions about his Pokemon's health, and routine morning training, he was taking this more seriously than most ten-year-olds. He was off on one of these training sessions while Jessie took a bath, and James made herself up.

"Hey, Jess...um. Miss?"

James turned; Ash was standing at the edge of their campsite, eyeing her warily. Pikachu, perched on his head, sniffed once before determining James wasn’t a stranger, and therefore not worth worrying about, and dropped his head back onto Ash's hair.

James rolled her eyes. "It's me, Ash." When Ash continued to stare at James with wide eyes,
uncomprehending, she added, "James."

"But James is a - um. I thought James was a boy. That you were a - what?"

James sighed. Meowth was going to be so smug about this; in fact, she could see him sticking his tongue out at her. "I am a boy - sometimes."

"Um." Ash's forehead wrinkled as he considered that. "I didn't think that was something that changed? My mom-"

"I can assure you, doesn't know everything," James said smoothly. "Presumably if she knew more about Pokemon care, she would have made sure you knew it." And the mention of Pokemon gave James an idea. "Here - give me your Gear." Ash handed over his Gear automatically, and it took James only a moment to find what she was looking for. "Here."

Ash frowned at the Gear. "This is a Pokemon."

"It's Castform," James said. "A Normal-Type Pokemon who changes their form - and type - based on the weather. There are a couple of other Pokemon like that."

"Who change type based on the weather? Is that what happened to you?"

James sighed, because Ash was distressingly literal-minded sometimes. "Well, no. I'm more like - Shaymin. You won't see much about them, but they're a little scruffy thing that can sometimes stretch out and fly. Just whenever they feel like." She sat back, braced by he hands behind her, taking a moment to imagine the freedom of the few Pokemon she knew who could just - change themselves.

"But you're not a Pokemon."

"Aren't I?" James retorted. At Ash's confused look, she laughed. "No, I'm not, unless the scientific community decides otherwise."

"Well." Ash sat down across from James, still watching her carefully. "Um. Your hair looks nice."

And James - who'd packed the delicate blond wing very carefully when she'd bought it in Celadon City, smiled at Ash, because someone had clearly told him girls liked hearing their hair looked nice.

"Thank you. Now - um, for various reasons, I need you to call me a different name when we're in Pewter City."

"Is this like when Pokemon evolve?" Ash, who, sweet as he was, had a one-track mind.

"No, it's more like - secret identities. I generally go by Lucy."

"I can still be Ash, right?"

James winked at Ash. "If you want."

"I wouldn't try a pseudonym unless you're sure you can remember the new name." Jessie, hair twisted into a tight bun, dressed in a long, high-necked blue dress, patted Ash on the cheek as she passed to stick her dirty clothes in her bag. "Though if we had to, Ashley would be a nice nom-de-plume."

Ash frowned at Jessie's back. "Why would I need to pretend to be a girl?"
Jessie shrugged as she stood. "The number of people who've mistaken James for someone else without some sort of wig just because she had on a shirt with adequate padding would shake your faith in most people's intelligence." When Ash's frown didn't fade, she sighed. "People won't think you're Ash in disguise if you look like a girl. I don't know why, but it works."

"O...kay." Ash shook off the discussion, clearly relegating it to wherever he sent information that wasn't about Pokemon, and looked back to James. "We're going to the Pewter City Gym today, right?"

"Hopefully," James agreed. "Jessie?"

"Give me five minutes and we can get on the road."

It was slightly less than that, because while Ash didn't ask if they were ready every ten seconds, he did stand at the edge of their camp closest to the road, nearly vibrating in excitement.

Which James supposed she understood; the milestones of a Pokemon journey were monumental - your first Pokemon, your first capture, your first evolution. Your first gym battle. She hoped it went well, although given the composition of Ash's party, she had her doubts. She wondered, idly, if she could have 'mistakenly' led them to Cerulean first and given Ash the easy victory with that Pikachu.

It was too late to worry about that now, though; this close to a Gym, any open Gym, Ash was lost in his fantasies of winning the Pokemon League Championship, being named the greatest Pokemon trainer in the world, and whatever else normal 10-year-olds dream of. James kept just enough of her attention on his chattering to ensure she didn't miss anything important, and the rest on their surroundings. They didn't pass any cops on the way to the Gym, just an old man selling rocks by the side of the road (not jewels, evolutionary stones, or even interesting rocks).

And then...there was the Gym. A square-fronted building that looked as if it had been built by stacking huge rocks atop one another, only the words 'Pewter Gym' carved into the stones giving any indication it was a building of any import at all. Ash broke into a run at the sight of it, but was brought up short by Jessie, who'd had the foresight to grab the collar of his jacket.

"We check in at the Pokemon Center first," she ordered. "You're not sending your Pokemon into battle against a Gym Leader without getting a clean bill of health."

Ash did, but spent the entire fifteen minutes it took Joy to pronounce his Pokemon fighting fit sitting in the corner glaring at his Pokedex, presumably thinking he was being rebellious. With Meowth sitting next to Ash to keep him out of trouble, James scanned the newspapers in the Center. There wasn't any ongoing coverage about Jessie and James, the attack on the Viridian City Pokemon Center by Team Rocket soaking up most of the 'Pokemon poaching' news.

In less ominous news, the Global Police had signed off on the proposed Constitution of Ryme City, freeing the city from the authority of the Pokemon Inspection Agency and any League. Jessie, James, and Meowth had talked about Howard Clifford's utopia before and debated joining the citizens of Ryme City, where Meowth could live more or less as he wanted. They'd bowed to Meowth's skepticism, though, and set Ryme City aside until there was some proof the concept worked for its Pokemon citizens. But it was good to keep an eye on things.

"J - Lucy! I got my Pokemon, and Jess - Renee says we can go to the Gym!"

James nodded approvingly at Ash's corrections and set the newspaper aside.
"Well, if Renee says it's alright," James agreed. "Let's get you your first badge."

Jessie picked up Meowth to prevent the Pokemon from limiting the speed of their journey across town, because it was clear if it took any longer than necessary for Ash to get his Gym badge he would explode.

The Gym wasn't busy (the last League Conference had just finished, so people weren't in a hurry to collect badges); there was, however, a man standing next to the door to the Gym. The man was dressed in a neat brown suit, worn, unremarkable, had dark, close-cropped hair, and bright blue eyes peering at them through bottle lenses. His skin was pale, pink in the day's bright light, and he was smiling. His gaze shifted quickly from Jessie to James and then, briefly, to Ash's feet, before meeting Ash's gaze.

"Here to face Brock for the Boulder Badge?" the man asked.

"Yeah!" Ash agreed. "I'm going to be a Pokemon master someday."

"Ah," the man replied, eyes skipping, again, to Ash's feet. "And to do that you want to catch every Pokemon, collect a full set of badges, and win the Indigo League Conference. Hm! Badges mean nothing to one who would be a Pokemon Master. You must understand Pokemon in a way no other person does. Look to every Pokemon you meet, to every trainer you meet, for what wisdom they offer."

He smiled through the entire speech, even as Ash stepped back, retreating almost behind Jessie (James didn't blame him; she'd prefer Jessie between her and trouble than not). Meowth's nose was twitching, which could mean anything.

"Um. I can still go into the gym, right?"

The man laughed, a high, tittering sound. "Oh, of course! Mind, from what I've seen, you are light-years from beating Brock!"

And at that, Ash's timidity vanished, as he stepped out from behind Jessie, hands clenched at his sides, face wrinkled in focus. "I don't care how long you think it'll take to beat him, I'll do it! And beat all of the other Gym leaders! And be a Pokemon Master!"

Ash stormed past the man, while Pikachu stuck out his tongue at him. Jessie shrugged and trailed after Ash, James hurrying after them both. Ash was standing just inside the Gym, face red, breathing hard, when James joined them. Jessie was rubbing his back.

"-can't?" Ash was asking. "I was looking at Dexter and it said less than five percent of trainers ever make it to the League Conference."

"Well, that's an average," Jessie replied. "That includes everyone - every kid who's got no idea what they're doing, every lazy as - jerk who thinks it's an easy way to get money. You've got us to help you train and keep you on task, which puts you ahead of a lot of other people."

"And you've got a lot of determination," James added. "A lot of people who never go to the Conference were trying out competitive battling as a hobby. Having the drive, the motivation, to stick with it, puts you way ahead of a lot of other people. With a real goal and decent support, your odds are more like - one in four, at least."

"But who cares about odds?"

The Gym was dark, not much visible beyond the entrance, a circle of light at the edge of the empty
space beyond. At the declaration, a gruff voice that echoed through the Gym, lights snapped on, giving James her first glimpse at the Pewter City Gym. Boulders and larger outcroppings formed a varied terrain, and even the ground was covered in stones. A young man stood at the center of the Gym, sturdy, dark-haired, eyes squinted against the sudden brightness. He was wearing a green vest, sturdy trousers - workman's clothes, really. But it made sense - Gym leaders were experts in a particular type of Pokemon, and leveraged that into professions that supported their communities.

"If you're here to challenge me for the Boulder Badge, it's because you have rock-hard determination, the type that doesn't care about the odds!" Brock declared. "Are you here for the Boulder Badge?"

"I am," Ash replied.

"No, come on," Brock said, "let's hear a little enthusiasm. You want to be a Pokemon Master, right?"

"Yes."

"So are you here to challenge me for the Boulder Badge?" Brock repeated.

"Yes!"

"Good!" Brock grinned, and turned to cross to the far end of the rocky field. "What's your name?"

"Ash Ketchum."

"Challenger Ash Ketchum versus Gym Leader Brock!"

James yelped, falling into Jessie at the new, unexpected voice. A kid, shorter than Brock, with similar spiked dark hair and what now seemed to be a permanent squint, had one hand raised above their head.

"The challenge will be two on two - the challenger need not choose their Pokemon beforehand, but using a third Pokemon will disqualify them! Each Pokemon will fight until their trainer or I acknowledge they are unable to battle. Do you understand?"

"That kid looks like you - like your brother or something!" Ash protested. "How am I supposed to trust him to be fair?"

"Forrest wants to take over the Pewter City Gym someday," Brock replied, steady, as the kid, Forrest, folded their arms, glowering at Ash. "They've already passed the Junior Licensing Exam, and know any complaints against them could jeopardize their chances."

"Oh." Ash looked over at James, who gave him a shrug. She couldn't say whether Forrest was trustworthy, only that Brock was correct that the Pokemon Inspection Agency wouldn't look kindly on a prospective Gym leader who showed their sibling any favoritism. Jessie, though, gave him a thumbs up as she grabbed James' shoulder to set them both down at the six or so rows of benches overlooking the stadium.

"You honestly think they're trustworthy?" James asked.

"Nah," Meowth muttered from Jessie's shoulder. "We're just planning on raising a big stink if they do anything remotely hinky." He grinned at James before turning back to the field. "Of course…"

Ash didn't have much of a chance, no matter what Forrest did. Brock was a Rock-type trainer, and
a lot of Rock type Pokemon were also Ground types, and that combination left Ash with a host of weaknesses and no good offensive options.

"I'll start with Geodude," Brock announced, tossing a Pokeball into the field.

There was a moment and then a tinny voice from Ash's Gear. "Geodude, the Rock Pokemon. This Rock/Ground type is common to mountainous areas, and difficult to distinguish from normal rocks."

"Checking a Pokedex in battle?" Brock asked.

"Is that not allowed?"

"There's no rule against it!" Forrest declared from the side.

"I'm just surprised," Brock said. "Not many people want to let Gym leaders know they don't know everything there is to know about Pokemon. So, tell me, from what you know about my Pokemon, who are you going to send out?"

"My Butterfree!" Ash tossed in a Pokeball, allowing his Butterfree to manifest, fluttering above the battlefield.

"Not a bad choice," Jessie muttered. "They're immune to Ground type attacks, at least."

"Geodude, Tackle!" Brock commanded, and the battle was on. Butterfree was nimble enough to avoid a few charges from Brock's Geodude. But no battle was won on defense alone, and Ash knew that.

"Butterfree, Stun Spore!"

"Good boy," Jessie muttered, as Ash's Butterfree scattered powder across the battlefield, causing Geodude to start moving jerkily, paralyzed.

"Harden!" Brock commanded, and his Geodude crossed their arms, strengthening their defense.

And then Ash made his first mistake.

"Gust!"

"Ooh," Jessie said. Ash's Butterfree flapped his wings to throw a controlled burst at the Geodude. They weren't immune, but even a decently-powered Flying attack wouldn't do much against a Rock type.

Or...normally.

The wind battered the paralyzed Geodude around, and, Ash, sensing weakness, called out, "Again, Butterfree!" The further battering from an unfamiliarly powerful attack left the Geodude moving slow, dazed, so all it took was another tackle to knock the Geodude to the ground. Forrest raised their arm. "Geodude is unable to battle."

"Hm," Brock mused, recalling their Geodude. "Your Butterfree's more than I expected. But I think you'll find my next Pokemon more of a challenge. Go, Onix!"

Thirty feet of boulders strung together into a serpentine form roared as they materialized on the battlefield. Butterfree withdrew, letting out an anxious chitter.
"Use another Gust!" Ash called.

Brock, though, folded his arms and smiled. "Rock Throw." They slammed their tail into the nearest outcropping of rock, sending everything from pebbles to boulders flying at the Butterfree. He tried to dodge, bright enough not to need Ash's guidance to do so (James reminded herself to mention it helped to do so anyway - it built trust, showing you cared), but there were too many rocks, and Butterfree went down with a squeal.

"Butterfree is unable to battle!" To James' eye, Butterfree probably could still fight, if Ash encouraged him, but not without risking serious injury. Her esteem for Forrest rose a tad; some Gym leaders might allow things to continue beyond that point.

Ash recalled Butterfree, frowning, but standing a little taller. Confident, James supposed, from the minor victory. Eyeing Brock's Onix, though, she mused the next step was harder. If she were forced to choose, she'd choose the Pikachu. Electricity might be useless, but a Flying Type against a Pokemon who knew Rock Throw was dumb.

"Pikachu! Go!"

The Pikachu leapt from Ash's shoulder with a cheerful warcry as the Onix coiled back, watching. Waiting to see what the Pikachu could do. What Ash would have the Pikachu do.

"Pikachu, Thunderbolt!" Ash cried, and James winced. But she couldn't do anything for him now; every trainer had to experience this for the first time at some point. An unfamiliar Pokemon whose Type you didn't know, a special move or Ability.

Or in this case, not realizing Onix was a Ground Type, as well as Rock. The lightning danced across the Onix's rocky skin, leaving no injury as the Onix snaked forward, roaring. They were nimbler than they looked, something James hadn't had much opportunity to see; but with a simple slap of their tail, they knocked Pikachu into the air, catching him within the coils of their form. And James looked away, because she knew it was over. If Pikachu were fighting an Arbok, or Bulbasaur, there'd be a chance. But from here, all Pikachu could do was shock, which couldn't possibly hurt the Onix.

"Kachu!" he cried, anyway, trying to electrocute the Onix, to no effect.

"Pikachu!" Ash cried. He looked to Brock, to Forrest, and then back at his Pokemon. Pikachu let out another shock; Ash, hands tight at his sides, dropped his head, looking away. "I...give up," he muttered.

"The challenger has forfeited! Brock wins the battle!" Forrest called. They sounded cheerful about Ash's failure (although, James reconsidered, seeing Forrest shoot Brock a thumbs-up, they might have just been excited about their brother's victory).

Ash, though, was another story, holding his Pikachu in his arms (the little thing letting out a mournful 'Chuuu' every once in a while), eyes on the ground, all the way back to the Pokemon Center. James trailed behind, trying to communicate with Jessie through meaningful looks how they should handle Ash's loss. Neither of them had tried for the Indigo League, so even though James was certain there were at least eight other Gyms Ash could try, she couldn't quite imagine how he felt.

Ash gave Joy a terse nod at her welcome, and then threw himself into a chair at the furthest corner of the room. James hesitated, Jessie pausing just behind her.
Meowth, though, had a cat's sense of things, and sauntered over to hop up onto the chair next to Ash. James shrugged at Jessie and followed; just as they approached, Meowth poked Ash's leg with a claw.

"It's not the end of the world," he said.

"Be nice," James chided.

"I was!" Meowth protested, turning around to look up at her, eyes wide, innocent. "The kid's got another shot at the Boulder Badge if he wants, and even if he fails again, there's - what, a dozen other Gyms he can try?"

"But what if I fail at all of those, too?" Ash demanded, hands pressed against his knees, eyes still down, hat pulled over them, and James had a sneaking suspicion if she pulled it away, she'd see tears in those eyes. "I don't know anything about Pokemon, and I didn't know what Onix would be like, or that Pikachu couldn't hurt them at all-"

"So what?" Jessie demanded.

Ash jerked his head up, eyes wide, and, yes, glimmering at the corners with tears. "What?"

"So what if you're terrible and don't know anything? You get back up anyway, and go back, and try again! And you keep doing that until you win, or-"

"Maybe tone it down a little, Jessie," James offered, and Jessie spun on her, eyes blazing with the inner fire that had given her the courage to drag them both out into the world. James jerked her head toward Ash, whose chin was quavering a little, and Jessie fell a little, shoulders shifting back, one hand going to fiddle at the end of her hair (braided down to her waist instead of her preferred sweep of a ponytail).

"Sorry if I got - loud," she said, softly. "I just mean - you shouldn't give up just out of the gate because of one failure."

"But you saw Pikachu out there - there's no way he can beat Onix!"

"That isn't...necessarily true," James said, automatically. It earned her a curious look from Jessie and Meowth, and a hopeful, wide-eyed, tentative smile from Ash, which was an unfair expression to throw at an unsuspecting woman.

"Do you really think I can win?" he demanded.

And James took a moment to think. She could tell Ash the few ideas that had crossed her mind. But…

He was shaken, worrying about his ability to stand on his own two feet.

So she lay a hand on top of Ash's head, tilting it up so she could give him a gentle smile. "Absolutely. And if you do some reading, and use your head, I bet you can come up with a way to win yourself."

Ash's mouth opened for, James guessed, an automatic retort, before he let it close, frowning as he looked away from James toward the main part of the Pokemon Center.

"You don't need an answer this minute," James said. "We should get lunch, and figure out if we're staying in the Center tonight."
"We are," Jessie insisted. "They have running water here."

James huffed out a laugh; they might have become adept at surviving wherever they needed to, but each member of their little band had one trapping of civilization they couldn't stay away from. For Jessie, it was luxurious showers; for Meowth, it was radiators; and for James... wifi (there was just so much to know about the world, and it was easier to find it with an internet connection).

She went to the desk to confirm there were few enough people in town that they could have two rooms (one for the girls and one for Ash and whatever Pokemon refused to sleep in Pokeballs), while Ash glowered at his Gear and Jessie stalked toward the showers.

Ash was distant all afternoon, having muttered exchanges with the clipped electronic voice of his Gear (Dexter, the Pokedex, James supposed), and, once Pikachu was out of Joy's care, the Pokemon himself. Jessie laughed a bit to James, but...it raised James' estimation of Ash just a little bit, again. Ash wasn't trying to figure out how to use his Pikachu to beat Brock's Onix - he was working with his Pokemon to help Pikachu beat Brock's Onix.

"You think the twerp's gonna get it?"

James flicked Meowth's ear, making it twitch. "Stop it. Call him Ash, or the kid, if you think using a proper name would kill you. And...maybe. He's determined, I'll give him that." What plan Ash came up with would say a lot about him. Using Tail Whip to punch through Onix's physical resistance would be James' preference, after magically having the money to afford a Technical Machine to teach him Grass Knot.

"Lucy?"

James looked to Ash, who had his hands clasped in front of him, loose, watching her warily.

"Yes?"

"Do you think...you could help me teach Pikachu how to use Iron Tail?"

And that was the sort of trainer Ash was. Faced with an obstacle, he was going to grind away until it wasn't an obstacle anymore. Even if it took (James ran a quick estimate) a week, he'd keep pushing.

And he did. Ash and the Pikachu both pushed themselves that entire week - Ash slapping his hand into boulders alongside Pikachu's attempts to strengthen his tail, working the full recommended six hours, eating iron-rich foods ("I'm not going to tell him not to eat vitamin-rich food," James told Jessie when she tried to point out Ash eating that wasn't going to help Pikachu), and getting plenty of sleep ("because if he tells his mother I'm letting him get no sleep she'll kill us," James explained).

And six days later, they were back at the Gym. The weird man with glasses was there, too, grinning when he saw Ash.

"Back again?"

"Yeah!" Ash cheered, punching his hand into the air; Pikachu calling 'Piika!' along with him. "I'm ready for Brock this time around and I'm going to win!"

"Ready for Brock?" The man let out his strange giggle. "Who's to say he isn't ready for you too, young trainer? Even as you grow, so too do your opponents!"
"Who cares?" Ash demanded, raising at fist at the man, a gesture that could have been threatening if he weren't ten and like four feet tall. "Me and Pikachu worked our butts off for this! So we're not light-years away from beating Brock anymore!"

He stormed past the man into the Gym; it was only because James was so close as she passed by, following Ash, that she heard him mumble, "I didn't say you were."

"Brock!" Ash called. "I'm here for my rematch!"

The lights snapped on as James entered, and there was Brock, arms folded, looking as inscrutable as he had before. "I see you've returned. You understand, young man."

"Young man? He's got like five years on the kid," Meowth muttered.

"If you fail to beat me again, you can't return to the Pewter City Gym until after the next League Championship."

Ash gave a sharp nod, standing tall, determined. And James may have spent the better part of a week training just to give Ash an edge, but seeing his expression, that of the Pikachu perched on his head, she didn't doubt Ash would win.

"Forrest?" Brock called. After a moment, he pulled out his own Gear. "Hold on a moment? We've got a - oh. Well, bring them all down." He looked to Ash, shrugging. "Sorry; family emergency. But if you'll give us a minute or two-"

Nine children, including Forrest, stumbled into the arena. Forrest shooed eight of them toward the stands opposite Jessie, James, and Meowth, before hurrying to their own position.

"Brock will fight the challenger, Ash Ketchum," Forrest huffed, one hand braced against one of the tall boulders. "Two on two - the same rules as before. Ready? Go!"

"I choose Geodude!" Brock called.

"Butterfree!" Ash released the bug Pokemon, clearly hoping for a repeat of his last battle. "Go! Use Gust!"

"Dodge it!" Brock shouted, "and get in close!"

The Geodude ducked behind a rocky outcropping to avoid Butterfree's attack.

"Butterfree, again!"

James frowned as she watched Butterfree throw Gust after Gust at Brock's Geodude, and as the Geodude kept ducking behind rocks to shelter them.

...A closer shelter each time. Brock had said to get in close. James bit her lips. She shouldn't give advice during a battle - let Ash learn to think on his feet.

"Go Brock!"

"You can do it!"

Still, James though, as Brock's siblings cheered him on, she could do something.

"Go Ash!" James cried. She glanced sidelong at Jessie. "Come on - give him a little encouragement."
Jessie rolled her eyes. "Knock him dead, kid!"

Meowth groaned from the bench beside them. "Not that much encouragement."

Ash was watching the field intently, feet planted apart as if he needed balance (was he pretending he was on the field?). And James wondered...if Ash were paying more attention than she thought.

"Butterfree! Stun Spore!"

And the Butterfree rose just as Geodude leapt at him, spiraling out of the way, paralyzing spores falling from his wings.

"Nooo!" Brock's siblings (save Forrest) cried in unison.

Brock just shrugged. "Nice save, kid. Geodude - Self Destruct."

The Geodude glowed, a blinding white light, for a single still moment, and then exploded.

Dust and rock flew away from the source, and James heard the pained cry of Ash's Butterfree. It was a good plan, really. The Butterfree had an attack that was effective against his Rock Types, and Onix wasn't fast or small enough to hide from his attacks. Sacrificing Geodude to take out the Butterfree didn't put Brock in a worse position than he'd been in the last battle.

As the smoke cleared, James was unsurprised to see Ash's Butterfree on the ground, dazed, wings fluttering weakly.

"Butterfree is unable to battle! Geodude is unable to battle!"

They each recalled the Pokemon, and for a moment, it was quiet. "I hope your plan wasn't for your Butterfree to fight both of my Pokemon," Brock said, "because if so, the battle ends here."

"It isn't," Ash replied.

Brock shrugged. "Well. Let's see what you've got up your sleeve. Onix!" The rock snake roared as they smashed through a pile of rock.

Ash pointed straight at the Onix. "Pikachu, go!"

Brock grinned. "I hope you've got a better strategy than last time. Onix, Bind!"

"Stay out of their way, Pikachu!" Ash shouted. "Wait for your opening!"

"Yeah, knock that pile of rocks out!" Jessie called.

James smiled. They'd practiced all week - Pikachu knew what the plan was. So it gave Ash an edge, keeping the details quiet in front of his opponent. Pikachu dodged left, right, pressing forward each time, relying on his dexterity where Brock's Geodude had the terrain's cover. And each time the Onix lunged, Pikachu was just out of their reach, until-

"Up there!" Ash called; Pikachu leapt to a small platform, to another, and was suddenly a few meters off the ground and leaping at the Onix. They roared, swinging their tail around to slap at Pikachu's.

Pikachu's tail glowed, taking on a silvery gleam, and slammed into Onix's.

The Onix's tail whipped back from the impact, the Onix growling uncertainly. They'd felt that.
"Again!" Ash commanded, and Pikachu darted around Onix's retreating coils to twist around and slam into their center mass. The Onix howled, stone cracking from the impact. James winced; they'd both known Iron Tail's particular advantage against a Pokémon like Onix, but the erosion of their defense was still a little painful to watch.

"And-

"Onix, Earthquake!"

Onix pulled back, lifting their body to hurl it against the ground. And this could end it - Pikachu couldn't take a Ground Type move like that-

"Into the air, Pikachu!"

And again, Pikachu leapt between two, three, four, perches, and just as Onix hit the ground, Pikachu launched himself from a platform ten meters off the ground. James' teeth chattered at the impact of the Onix with the ground, and rock pillars cracked and collapsed around the Onix.

Pikachu, though, was safe, soaring toward the Onix, tail silver, eyes bright. "Pika…" he called, twisting in the air, tail absorbing the energy of that turn along with the momentum of Pikachu's fall, "Chuuu!" The Pikachu's tail slammed into Onix's head, sending the other Pokémon reeling. Pikachu hopped back, paused, and looked back to Ash. "Pika?"

"Great job!" Ash cheered. "Now-

"Onix is unable to battle!"

Ash stopped. Pikachu froze. And Ash looked to the Onix, who was sprawled, unconscious, on the Gym floor. A moment later, they were surrounded in red light, and then gone. And a slow clapping echoed through the Gym. Brock strode across the arena, still clapping his hands. He was smiling wide.

"Congratulations, Ash," he said. "I can see you thought hard about this battle - about my Pokémon's strengths and weaknesses, and your own. You found a tool that helped you beat me. So it is my pleasure to present you with this." He stopped a few feet from Ash and pulled a small grey pin from his shirt. "The Boulder Badge. It is proof you've defeated me in battle."

"R - really?" Ash wavered a little in place, and James was on her feet, scrambling down toward him. A battle could be exhausting, she knew, so if he was going to faint-

"Of course!" Brock paused, looking down at Ash, and his smile shifted, went a little soft. "Is this your first badge?"

Ash nodded, and it was then James reached him, seeing the tears gathering in Ash's eyes. "Yeah," Ash clarified, wiping at his eyes. Pikachu ran into his ankles, tugging at his pant legs, and Ash smiled down at the Pokémon.

"Hey, you did good," James said. She didn't have siblings, so she didn't expect it when Ash crashed into her, arms wrapped around her waist and face pressed against her chest. "Um." She looked up to Brock, who was…grinning again.

"Your brother did a great job," Brock said, "which is only natural for someone who has such a beautiful, talented older sister to help him?"

James couldn't help the blush; she and Jessie didn't spend a lot of time looking for love, so she
didn't flirt much - or at least not seriously (getting discounts on meals and getting out of trouble was just business). Still…

"I'm flattered, but I'm - definitely too old for you," James replied. She patted Ash's head; he was still...yes, sniffling into her dress.

"Well, regardless, you are always welcome here!" Brock declared, through and over the rejection in a moment. "And another gift for your victory." He held out what looked like a CD in a case, and James felt her heart skip a beat.

"Is that a Technical Machine?" she asked.

"Rock Slide," Brock said. "A useful Rock Type move, and one many different types of Pokemon can learn."

"That's worth a lot of money," James whispered. But more importantly, you could teach Pokemon moves with it in a fraction of the time it took to tutor them. There were old artifacts that were said to do much the same thing, but people nowadays mostly used these discs and specialized computer equipment. If Ash's Gear was advanced enough, there were apps that could let him use TMs with that, in the field.

"Yes, a valuable tool to help you on your way," Brock replied.

"Okay, thank the man," James said to Ash. "And let's get your Pokemon looked at, huh? We've got a while to go before Cerulean City, right?"

The door to Brock's office (little more than a table, a phone, and the reports he had to file with the Pokemon Inspection Agency) slammed open. Brock saw a glimpse of Forrest before a girl stormed in and slammed her palms against Brock's desk. Red-haired, green-eyed, and furious, glaring down at Brock.

"Ash Ketchum!" she snapped.

Brock smiled; he'd been impressed by Ash's determination - and ingenuity. Trainers didn't often think of how to dodge field moves like Earthquake. He bet the kid would go far.

"Hey!" The girl snapped her fingers in front of Brock, startling him from his reminiscence. There was something familiar about her, Brock mused. "Has he been here?"

"I'm not really supposed to-"

"I'm a Gym Leader, asshole!" the girl - Misty, Brock realized - retorted, "And that kid stole and ruined my bike."

"Really? He didn't seem the type."

"Whatever," Misty growled. "Obviously he's been here."

"Yeah. They're headed to Mount Moon - the kid's sister was telling him about Clefairy-"

"I really don't care," Misty replied. "Ugh, I do not have time to be chasing him across the whole fucking - wait." She turned to Brock. "You said they're going to Mount Moon?"

"Yeah?"
Misty's expression morphed to a smile - a wide, nasty grin. "So the next Gym they'll run into is in Cerulean City."

Saffron City was a wonderful place to live.

Everyone said so.

The streets - wide, straight roads - were always clean.

Silph Co. employed lots of people - good, steady jobs, not just for scientists, but for all sorts of workers.

And they had a Gym. One of the best Gyms. Probably the strongest Gym Leader there was.

So people had lots of reasons to be happy.

People were always smiling here.

Because Saffron City was a wonderful place to live.

Everyone said so.

So it must be true.

Chapter End Notes

Male Butterfree, Bug/Flying Type
Bold Nature. This Pokemon has high Defense, but their Attack is reduced.
Ability - Tinted Lens. The Pokémon can use "not very effective" moves to deal regular damage.
Moves Known - Gust, Sleep Powder, Stun Spore, Tackle
Deep Waters

Chapter Summary

The fight for the Cascade Badge is bound to be easy, so Ash spends some time beforehand helping his Pokemon pick out names.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The twerp - Ash - wasn't asleep, otherwise he would have fallen off of James' back. He was, however, drooling sleepily into James' neck while James carried him. The Pikachu had commandeered Jessie's head, where he was sprawled, exhausted, which left Meowth walking. He tried to keep it in perspective; they could have died in Mount Moon. Still, the humans' legs were a lot longer than his.

"I wish I'd been able to catch a Clefairy," Jessie sighed.

"No way I'm letting a pink blob that knows Metronome on the team!" Meowth snapped. "You saw what they did back there - what was that move, anyway?"

"I bet Dexter knows!" Jessie suddenly chimed, taking a quick step toward James, who swatted her back.

"Let the kid sleep, he and the Pikachu are exhausted," James growled. Jessie fell back, scowling. To belabor the point, perhaps, neither Ash nor Pikachu shifted or made a noise during the entire exchange. "Besides, I recognize it - it's Draco Meteor, the most powerful Dragon-Type move currently known."

Meowth snorted. "Well, if it has to do with Dragon Types, of course you know it."

James' face flushed red. "I just - remember seeing the move before."

"Of course," Meowth soothed. "Anyone who spent an entire year watching nothing but videos of Lance's League battles, interviews, lectures, would know a lot about Dragon Types."

"I was seventeen!" James wailed. "Jessie had that crush on those pop idols and you don't make fun of her!"

"I didn't replace the background on my Gear with a picture of them," Jessie retorted with a grin. She paused, crouched, and waved at Meowth. "Come here; my head's occupied, but I can carry you."

Meowth darted into her arms before she could change her mind, and settled into her grip bonelessly as she stood. He sighed as she kept walking, a gentle rocking that threatened to send him to sleep.

"We're not stopping long in Cerulean, are we?" Meowth asked after a few minutes. "I mean, twerp's got an Electric Type."

"They could have a Quagsire," James replied, thoughtfully. "That's a nasty shock to throw at
someone, but Gym battles aren't supposed to be easy. But yes," he agreed, "I don't expect it to be hard."

"Good," Jessie replied. "Kid deserves a break, after Pewter City. And Team Rocket, ugh!"

It was quiet again, a few minutes, and Meowth, drowsing against a warm body, sky bright and clear, the buzzing of Bug Pokemon on either side of the road, nearly fell asleep.

"We're going to have to tell him eventually," James said, voice low. "Explain, at least."

"I don't see why," Jessie retorted, chest huffing against Meowth. "It doesn't have anything to do with him."

"Yeah, but what're you going to do if we - you know?" Meowth demanded. "Send him hunting for Legendaries while we-"

"Saw a Legendary once," Ash mumbled into James' shoulder. "Dexter said it was Ho-Oh."

All three of them fell silent. Meowth tried once or twice to reply, but found he had no words.

"Ho-Oh, really?" James finally squeaked out. "What did Dexter have to say?"

"Dunno," Ash replied. "It was a long article, and didn't know it could be interesting yet."

"Well, then, how about we look it up when we get to the Pokemon Center?" James asked. "Does that sound fun?"

"Mhm."

Meowth tried not to snicker, but it just slipped out. He shrugged at James' glare, unrepentant. "What? If you didn't aggressively parent every lost pup or abandoned chick we find, we wouldn't make fun of you for it."

"He already has parents!" James hissed.

"A mother, anyway," Jessie offered. "But she's like a three-week hike back that way. No, it's fine. Obviously, if I'd known we'd be adopting every stray we came across, I would have prepared myself before I rescued you from your dreadful fiancee-"

"It's not every stray," James said, though his voice was a little pained, resigned. "And besides, you love Fangs."

"I never said I didn't. But you have to admit, it's that nurturing streak that got us-"

"Got us what?"

Jessie snapped her mouth shut at Ash's voice, which was much more alert after his impromptu nap on James' back.

"Got us an adorable little tagalong," she replied in a lilting voice, skipping over to swipe Ash's hat and ruffle his hair.

"Give that back," he said, flailing for the hat and nearly falling; James stumbled, and Meowth tensed, ready to leap out of Jessie's arms if it looked like he'd fall on them. But James steadied and Ash shoved his hat back on his head.
"And besides," Ash continued, "if anyone's tagging along, it's you three; I'm on my Pokemon journey, and you're just."

"Keeping you out of trouble!" Jessie said.

"Fat lot of good that did," Meowth piped in, earning him a flick on the ear from Jessie.

"We can't be held responsible for the actions of criminal enterprises!" she said, haughtily. "Now come on - I want a good shower after that stupid mountain and the adorable Pokemon someone won't let me catch."

Ash didn't appear to be tired anymore, peppering them with questions, and, with only a little prompting, explaining how in the aftermath of Pikachu electrocuting a murder of Spearow, Ash had witnessed a glittering rainbow bird soaring through the clearing skies.

He didn't move from James' back, though, arms around his neck, legs hooked around his waist. And James didn't move to dislodge him until they reached the outskirts of Cerulean City and Ash dropped, bolting toward the side of the road. Meowth turned his head around; the kid was standing at the edge of the river running alongside the road - but more importantly, the cavern entrance half-submerged in the water. There was a sign on the side of the entrance, worn but words bright and clear: 'No Entry Except by Rank 8 Trainers or League Officials'.

"What's that?" Ash demanded.

"Hm," James murmured, and after a moment Meowth realized he was stumped.

"It's off limits, is what it is," Jessie said imperiously. "So we'll leave it alone, alright, kid?"

"Aww," Ash groaned, but went quietly as they arrived at Cerulean City. Meowth had never been, but the billboards advertising the Cerulean City Gym seemed odd, at best. James, too, looked at the signs with suspicious eyes. Ash, of course, was just excited to see the colorful advertisements showing Water Type Pokemon frolicking in their natural habitat, if a hundred-meter pool could be said to be a Pokemon's natural habitat.

"Look, J-" Ash paused, mid-word, glancing between Jessie and James. "Er. Should I call you fake names?"

"Mm, no," Jessie decided. "Things have likely cooled down; if we mix up our hair a bit at the Pokemon Center, there shouldn't be any trouble."

Ash nodded, before pointing at one of the signs. "Did you see? They have tours! Do you think we could go on a tour of the Gym?"

"I don't see a reason why not," Jessie replied, although she glanced at James, who nodded. Ash grinned and kept forward, pausing at a community map so they could get to the Pokemon Center. But Meowth...pondered. He had to keep quiet a lot, unless he wanted to act like a normal Meowth, and that left him with a lot of time to think.

And it was clear there was something odd about the Cerulean City Gym. Ash broke into a run when they found the Pokemon Center, beating the four of them (including the Pikachu) there by nearly a minute. When they arrived, he was listening intently to the Nurse Joy, nodding every few seconds.

"-blocked off to prevent unwary travelers from stumbling into a powerful Pokemon's den, but because the areas became effectively protected from most human interference, they eventually
became Pokemon sanctuaries." Ash glanced, grinning when he saw Jessie and James.

"Hey! Nurse Joy was telling me about that cave - there's supposed to be really strong Pokemon in there, so only the very best trainers are allowed to go there. But there's also a whole lot of other Pokemon being protected by those strong Pokemon. So after I get all my badges, I'm going to come back and catch some really powerful Pokemon."

"I cannot believe you're so excited to run around a damp cave after what we've just been through," Jessie grumbled. She smiled at Nurse Joy. "Hi, can we get a couple of rooms here?"

"Mm." Nurse Joy glanced at her computer. "I can let you have one - the Cerulean Gym's just introduced a new routine, so everything's a little crowded."

"As long as there's hot water, I'll take it." Jessie set her own Pokeballs on the counter. "And if you could take care of my Mercy and Fangs, that would be delightful."

Ash was unusually quiet as they dropped their things in their assigned room, waiting until the door was closed to speak up.

"Should I - am I supposed to have a name for my Pokemon?" he asked.

"Um." Jessie looked to James, who rolled his eyes and sat on the twin bed he'd surrendered to Ash for their stay in Cerulean.

"There's certainly no rule," James started. "But there are benefits. Obviously, you can easily distinguish your Pikachu from other Pikachu if he has a name. And for some people - giving your Pokemon a name helps you bond - shows them you're invested in who they are."

"Pfft," Meowth muttered; there was quiet for a moment before Jessie flicked his ear.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Meowth stretched out on the other bed, yawning. "It means names are a human thing. Calling your Pikachu 'Joe' or 'Bob' or whatever isn't gonna mean anything to him. Most of the time we call each other, well names like 'my brother', 'my girlfriend', or 'that fat Meowth over there'. The closest thing we get to names is like, if you're really known for something. Fangs and Mercy are pretty chill with their names - you got a good sense of what they want Pokemon want to think of them."

"And - what about Growlie?" James asked, voice a little quiet. "Hesitant. Meowth resisted the urge to groan, because it would just upset James - but Meowth hadn't expected his nap to be interrupted by talking about Pokemon's feelings.

"Well, dog Pokemon are different from the rest of us - very domesticated. People pleasers, you know? He thinks he's special because you gave him a name." Meowth probably would have lied to make James feel better, but the Growlithe loved James more than probably anything else in the world, so it worked out.

"Hm. So do you think I should ask my Pokemon if they want names?" Ash asked.

"After I get a good sleep," Meowth said. "Just because I can talk doesn't mean it isn't exhausting convincing a tribe of Clefairy not to sacrifice an innocent paleontologist to their Moon God."

So promptly an hour later Ash tugged at Meowth's tail (he'd grudgingly admitted a light tug was the least upsetting way Ash could wake him up). The twerp was sitting on the floor, eyes bright, smiling, his Pokemon settled or sitting on him.
"Can you talk to them now?" he asked.

Meowth bit back a groan, and stretched, easing himself awake, before walking to the edge of the bed. He looked at the Butterfree first.

"Awright, I don't know if the twerp told you, but he's thinking of giving you names-"

"The blue one calls me Felix," the Butterfree replied.

"Yeah, but-

"I like the blue one," the Butterfree said, flapping his wings, a threat display if Meowth had ever seen one, given he could scatter poisonous spores over people with a single motion.

"Okay! Jeez." Meowth shrugged at Ash. "Looks like James accidentally named the Butterfree himself - he likes the name 'Felix'."

"Felix, huh?" Ash rubbed the top of the Butterfree's head. "That's a great name! Okay, Felix!"

Felix's antennae flicked smugly; Meowth resisted the urge to stick out his tongue at him.

"Okay! Pidgeotto next!"

Meowth looked at the Pidgeotto; the bird was a little standoffish, he'd found, even if she liked Ash (it was prejudice, he knew, birds acting like cats just wanted to eat them, when Meowth preferred nothing more than a meal that was already plucked, chopped, and simmered in a delicious sauce).

"Hm, I don't care what he calls me, as long as it's fast," the Pidgeotto said, before Meowth could even ask.

"Oookay," he drawled. When Meowth looked back, Ash was watching him intently; he yelped and took a hurried step back. "What?" he demanded.

"Do you think I could learn how to talk to Pokemon?" Ash asked. "I mean, you learned how to speak to humans…"

"Huh." Meowth thought about it a minute, while Ash looked on, frowning, albeit gently. "Hard to say. Pokemon don't talk the same way humans do. A lot of their talk's - intention, shades of meaning. Like, Pokemon mostly understand what humans mean when they talk to them, so it's not impossible to do it in reverse. Most humans get the hang of understanding their actual partners - the Pokemon they travel with the most - without much effort. I don't know. It might take a knack."

"Well." Ash looked down at Pidgeotto. "A fast name. How about Speedy?"

"No," Meowth declared. He knew the Pidgeotto didn't care, but he wouldn't put up with running around with a Pokemon named 'Speedy'. "If you want fast, how about Sirocco?"

"What's that?" the twerp and the Pidgeotto asked in unison; they twisted around, startled, to look at each other while Meowth tried not to laugh.

"It's a really powerful wind - like enough to rip a house to shreds." The Pidgeotto flared her wings a little, and Meowth could see her imagining throwing a Hurricane down on a battlefield, tossing her foes out of the way like they were errant leaves.

Then she threw her wings up. "You tell him to call me that!" she demanded.
"Yeah, uh," Meowth looked back up at Ash. "She likes it. I'm not sure she'll answer to anything else, but I could take a shot if you-"

"No. If it's what she wants to be called, I'll call her Sirocco." Ash held a hand up to Sirocco's wing. "It's an awesome name."

He looked back at Meowth but paused, reaching up to lift the Pikachu off his head and hold him at arm's length, squinting at him. "You really think I could learn to understand Pikachu?" he asked. "What if I can't?"

"I don't know - maybe it just means your bad at languages. If you put in the effort, though, I totally bet you will."

"Hm." Ash set the Pikachu down on the bed next to Meowth. "Well, how about I ask Pikachu about his name, and try to see if I know what he's saying, and you tell me if I'm right?"

"Fuck yeah!" the Pikachu cheered.

"He says-"

"Yes, right?"

"More or less," Meowth hedged (they were supposed to be watching their language around the twerp, he was sure).

"Okay!" Ash leaned forward, eyes narrowed as if to take in every detail of the Pikachu. "Alright, Pikachu, I bet you've been listening. We're trying to decide if you want a name other than 'Pikachu', so I want to know what you think."

"Hm." The Pikachu tapped his chin. "I've done some pretty amazing stuff since we got together - I think my name should make people know that - right off the bat." He waved his hands as he explained, Ash peering at him intently. He was silent a few moments after the Pikachu stopped talking, before nodding.

"He wants a really - special name, right?"

Meowth felt a rising spark of respect in his chest. He hadn't mentioned how it was only people who'd had the same Pokemon for years that Meowth had seen talk back and forth like they understood each other. Sure, the twerp was missing the nuance, but…

Well, the kid was something special in a lot of other ways, it shouldn't have surprised Meowth to find another.

"More or less. He wants something to really - highlight how awesome he is."

"Yes! Awesome!" the Pikachu agreed. He turned to Ash, snapping one hand into his arm. "I have felled a thousand furious beasts, conquered the storm, overcome a creature who could withstand the wrath of Zapdos themselves!"

"Um-"

Ash nodded. "You beat - those Spearow, and Team Rocket, and Brock's Onix."

"Conquered the storm, he says," Meowth clarified.

Ash's mouth dropped open. "Oh." Frowning, he picked up his Gear. "Hey, Dexter, what sort of
name should I give to a Pokemon who conquered the storm?"

"A Pokedex isn't really programmed for something like that," Meowth said, only for the Gear to reply, speaking over him.

"Legendary trainer Susanoo was called the 'Conquerer of Storms' and 'Thunder God'. Commanding a team consisting of a tamed Thundurus, Rayquaza, Zapdos, Raikou, and his partner, Zeraora, he famously brought an end to a hurricane that threatened his hometown of Shalour City. In battle, he was said to lend the strength of his own soul to his Pokemon."

"Oh. My. God," the Pikachu whispered, ears down, awed or cowed by the description. And then punched one hand into the air. "Yes! Make me Susanoo, Thunder God!"

"I mean, I could name you 'Susanoo, Thunder God', but it's a little long to shout if we get separated."

The Pikachu ('Susanoo', Meowth corrected himself) froze; after a moment, he lifted his gaze toward Ash. "Did he-?"

"I'm sorry - you don't like it?" Ash asked.

"No, you got it - pretty much perfect," Meowth said, feeling a little dazed himself. Sure, the kid was trying, and it wouldn't have been hard to figure out the Pikachu liked the name 'Susanoo', but-

Well, maybe he had a knack.

So the Pikachu was now Susanoo (Thunder God), and the rat was insufferable about it. Meowth went to sleep early rather than put up with the Pikachu perching imperiously on Ash's head as if he were the god of thunder.

Things were better in the morning from Susanoo's end, but Ash was up before dawn, either because he was going to get his second badge today or because they were going to tour the Cerulean City Gym and learn all sorts of exciting secrets about how Gyms were run.

The vibe was only interrupted when they reached the ticket booth of the Cerulean City Gym and the ticket-seller looked down at them with bright blue eyes enlarged by bottle lenses.

"Ash Ketchum," the man declared, face splitting into a wide grin. "I see you won your Boulder Badge."

"Yeah!" Ash replied, flipping one side of his jacket around to show off the badge pinned to the inside. "And now I'm here for a Cascade Badge."

"Hm," the man said. "It might be a little more difficult than you thought to actually earn that badge."

"Huh?" Ash looked at Susanoo, perched on his shoulder, and Meowth could almost hear him thinking that getting the Cascade Badge shouldn't be hard at all.

"Well, let me put it this way," the man said. "If they refused to see you at all - would you let them dismiss you?"

"Can they do that?" Ash asked.

"No," James replied. "Anyone who did that would risk their Gym losing its commission."
"Then what he said!" Ash said, pointing to James. "I'd tell them they'd lose their commission if they did that!"

"And what would you do - if they did the reverse?" the man asked.

"The reverse?" Ash's face scrunched up in thought. "What do you mean?"

"Think of it as a puzzle just for you," the man said, tearing off five tickets and handed them to Ash. "And see if you find an answer - it could be the difference between you becoming a true master or not."

Ash nodded, once, sharp, and then punched at the air. "Alright! Let's go - this is going to be awesome!"

"I want my money back," Jessie grumbled as the group settled on the benches overlooking the enormous pool in the Cerulean City Gym. It wasn't quite as impressive as the posters made it look, and the brochure about the so-called tour didn't seem promising.

"Shush - the kid's excited," James chided, tugging Meowth out of her lap and into his own. "And Meowth's looking forward to the show, too, isn't he?"

Meowth glowered at James but didn't protest. Not being much of a swimmer, he didn't see much of Water Type Pokemon - or at least the fishy ones, so this was a novel experience. And the Water Flowers of Cerulean City were good performers, if a little more focused on flash rather than substance (if Meowth were in charge - well, first he'd ditch the humans, no one was here to see scantily-clad women).

So it was a nice show, but by the end Ash was practically vibrating, so they were out of their seats the moment it was over, shoving through the crowds to reach the Water Flowers as they gave out handshakes and autographs.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" He pushed at last through the front row of people. "My name is Ash Ketchum and I'm here to challenge you for a Cascade Badge."

"Oh, aren't you sweet?" one of the women - the blonde one - said. "Of course." She clapped her hands, and a Seel clambered toward them, a small box in his mouth. She picked up the box and flipped it open to reveal a tear-shaped badge. "Here you go, young man - a souvenir from the Cerulean City Gym."

The crowd behind him was clapping, but Ash was still, staring at the badge in the Gym Leader's hands. It took a few moments before he said, "I thought - we were supposed to battle?"

"Oh, who has time for that?" the blonde retorted. "Go ahead. We're one of the most popular Gyms in Kanto, you know - people will be so impressed."

"But-" Ash's hand reached up, spasmed, retreated. "I don't-"

"Oh my god. I'm gone for what, two weeks, and you're already turning this place into a laughingstock?" A red-headed girl just a few inches taller than Ash stormed from the crowd, pointing at the blonde. "Daisy I understand, but I thought you, at least, had a little sense, Lily."

"Hey!" the blonde and the redhead behind her chimed in unison.

"We're in charge," the third of the Water Flowers (blue-haired) said, hands on her hips, "so we get to say how this Gym is run."
"No, the **Pokemon Inspection Agency** gets to say how this Gym is run, and if they find out you've just been *handing out* badges, you'll get fined, or we'll get shut down!"

"But Misty," the blonde whined, "battling is **hard**."

"Besides," the woman with blue hair said, "this crowd isn't here for boring battles, they're here for the Water Flowers, the Three Sensational Sisters of Cerulean City! Aren't you?"

The crowd cheered and applauded; the small redhead (Misty?) glowered, one eye twitching.

"I don't *care*," she snapped. "You aren't giving that kid a badge. He's a thief and a vandal and a - a *public menace*!"

The three taller women drew together, peering at Ash carefully.

"Wait," the blonde said, "do you *know* him?"

"Does our little Misty have a *boyfriend*?" the taller redhead cooed.

"No! That jerk stole my *bike* - and then totally trashed it!"

"Hey! I needed it to get to a Pokemon Center - my Pikachu was really hurt!"

"It's not *our* fault your bike couldn't withstand my full power," Susanoo retorted. Meowth bit back a snigger; that rat really *was* full of himself. The people behind them were chattering, and there was an uneasy note to their voices. It didn't sound like *anyone* was going to win this fight if the two of them kept sniping at each other.

It looked like it was up to Meowth to save the day, as usual.

"Hey, why don't you folks settle this with a Pokemon battle?" Meowth called; Jessie startled, giving him a wide-eyed glance. He put a hand to his mouth and winked at her.

"That's a great idea!" someone else called. "This *is* a Gym, isn't it?"

"For how good the shows are, the battles here must be *amazing!*" another said.

Misty looked a little bewildered, eyes darting around the crowd, but Ash - well, he was grinning, excited that this appeared to be ending in a Pokemon battle after all.

"Whoever that girl is-

"**That girl?**" Misty shouted, spinning toward the voice. Her eye was twitching again - kid seemed to be under a lot of stress. "I happen to be Misty, the *fourth* Sensational Sister of Cerulean City, and the *permanent* leader of this Gym. So you-" she pointed at Ash, "aren't getting *this-*" she swiped the box out of the blonde's hands, "unless you defeat *me*. And if you lose, you're going to pay me back for my bike!"

"Well, you heard it here!" the blue-haired woman, clearly someone who knew to capitalize on an opportunity for attention, called out to the crowd. "Today only, a special premiere event - a battle between our *fantastically* accomplished Gym Leader Misty and brave challenger - hey, kid, what's your name?"

"Ash Ketchum-"
"Ash Ketchum!" The crowd cheered, a raucous noise. "Now everyone back to your seats!"

As people began dispersing back to the stadium, Meowth saw a vicious grin flash across Misty's face. It could be nothing, but…

Well, Ash wouldn't back down no matter what Meowth said, and James had taught him well enough he could think on his feet.

But he still couldn’t help feeling the girl had something up her sleeve.

"So," Misty said, "since my sisters think this Gym should be a place for showmanship, I'm thinking we won't have a normal battle. I mean, don't bother agreeing - I'm in charge here, and as long as my 'battle' is 'an appropriate test of skill or ingenuity in the handling of Pokemon', I make the rules."

They stood on platforms - islands, really, set up in the pool. They were a little wobbly, but Ash doubted he was in danger of falling in (he could swim, anyway).

Misty held up two Pokeballs. "So here's how it's going to go. Each of us picks one of our opponent's Pokemon - at random, by picking their Pokeball, and that's the only Pokemon your opponent can use. Pick wisely!"

"Pika kachu!" Susanoo chattered from Ash's shoulder, clearly confident he could beat anything Misty had ready. But Misty might not pick Susanoo as Ash's partner; she'd know better than anyone how powerful an Electric Pokemon could be against Water Pokemon.

Ash pointed to the Pokeball in Misty's left hand. "That one!"

"Ooh," Misty cooed. "An excellent choice. For me." She released the Pokemon inside, the red light growing expanding, expanding…

Until a massive serpent, blue, face gaping in a permanent scowl, thrashed in the water next to her platform. Ash stared a moment before pulling out his Gear.

"Gyarados. The Atrocious Pokemon. Evolving from Magikarp through a process still poorly understood, some theorize that they evolve in response to shifts in the magnetic fields of the Earth. Both a Water and Flying Type, they are quadruply weak to electricity. One of forty-four known Pokemon capable of the mysterious process known as Mega-Evolution."

"Now," Misty said. "Let's see your Pokeballs so I can pick Gyarados' opponent."

Ash reached to his belt and froze.

Because Susanoo's Pokeball was in his backpack at the Pokemon Center.

Ash looked up at Misty, whose smile was wide. Knowing. She'd seen him carrying an injured Pokemon in his arms rather than putting him back in a Pokeball - she'd known - or at least suspected.

"I'm waiting," she said, a lilting, sing-song voice. Ash grit his teeth and held up his two other Pokeballs. He couldn't figure out which one would be better - Felix had proven himself capable of ignoring natural resistance to his attacks, but Sirocco was fast.

"The one on your left," Misty said. Ash sighed and released what turned out to be Sirocco. She fluttered in a circle around him, sizing up Misty's Gyarados.
"Excellent choice, if I do say so myself," Misty drawled. "We'll be starting in just a minute or so. Before that - Gyarados, fetch!" She tapped the top of her head, and the Gyarados dove underwater, snaking across the field in two twitches of their tail, before erupting out just in front of Ash.

"Pi!" Susanoo snapped, cheeks sparking.

The Gyarados lunged, snapping at Ash; he fell back as Susanoo released a Thunderbolt. But the Gyarados was already gone, swimming back toward Misty's platform. She patted the Gyarados' face as they bent down, and then reached up to her head, settling a - red and white hat atop it.

A very familiar hat.

"Hey! That's mine!" Ash shouted.

"Of course it is," Misty replied, flashing him a wide grin and a 'V' with her fingers. "So your job in this challenge is to get it back. You can give up whenever you want, but if your Pidgeotto faints, it's over. Ready? Go."

"Sirocco! Get my hat back!"

Sirocco trilled in response and launched herself forward, diving for Misty's head.

"Hm, no. Gyarados, make a wall!"

The Gyarados turned, thrashing at the water with their tail as their mouth widened and blasted out a crackling beam of energy that whipped the water up until it rose in a series of tightly-spinning waterspouts. Sirocco fell back before she hit the twisters, fluttering helplessly at the edge. A moment later, the Gyarados burst out from beneath the twisters, mouth snapping at Sirocco.

"Back!" Ash shouted. "Stay up, out of their reach!"

Sirocco soared up, circling the closest edge of the pool.

"Gyarados - Thunderbolt." Lightning gathered at the Gyarados' mouth.

"Sirocco - dive! Dodge!" Sirocco dove in a weaving pattern, successfully evading the blasts of lightning from the Gyarados' mouth. "Quick Attack!" Sirocco's form blurred; she smashed into the Gyarados, sending them flinching back.

"You're not going to win that way," Misty taunted. "Bite!"

"Evade!" Still moving fast from her Quick Attack, Sirocco just avoided the snap of the Gyarados' teeth, flying up even as she had to avoid a few more Thunderbolts. And Misty was right - just staying out of Gyarados' reach wasn't going to win him the match-

But neither was fighting them.

"Sirocco! Dive!"

Misty laughed. "Come on; you're not trying the same thing again, are you? Gyarados - Hyper Beam."

Energy built in the Gyarados' mouth.

"Roll to avoid it, but keep moving!" Ash shouted.
A blast of light seared from the Gyarados' mouth, and Sirocco spun, just avoiding being caught in the blast. And if Ash had wanted her to attack the Gyarados, the dive would have been a waste.

"Through the twisters! Quick Attack!"

"What-"

Sirocco blurred, and even with the force, the speed of her move, nearly didn't make it through the still-raging winds between her and Misty. But then she was in still air, and the Gyarados was turning, sluggish, and Sirocco dive-bombed Misty without any further prompting.

And then his hat was in her beak, and the crowd exploded into cheers. Misty stared at the Pidgeotto soaring up away from her for a blank, startled moment, before shrugging.

"Looks like you won," she said.

They made a bigger deal about it than Brock had, leading Ash to a podium and pinning the Cascade Badge to his jacket to the crowd's applause, but then Misty grabbed his wrist as the spectators began to leave.

"Nuh-uh, we aren't done here."

"Aren't you? You said he only had to pay you back if you won the match." Jessie's hand landed on Ash's shoulder, and she was probably showing Misty her teeth - easy to mistake for a smile. "And he won."

"She's got you there," the blue-haired sister said, sidling up next to Misty. "Come on, forget about it. There'll be other bikes."

Misty's face went through a few weird expressions before she growled and threw up her hands. "Whatever. You do what you want." She stormed off.

Misty's sister gave Ash a gentle smile. "Anyway, it's tradition for Gym Leaders to give trainers a gift on winning a badge, so here you go." She handed Ash a slim disk.

"A Technical Machine?" he asked. "What's it for?"

"Bubble Beam," she said. "A very pretty move - but a useful one, too. Congratulations, Ash!"

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Daisy looked up, startled, at the clink when Misty set down her badge.

"I quit," Misty said.

"What?" Daisy demanded. "You can't quit! This was the biggest show we've had in weeks! Apparently, people really like watching Pokemon battles! If we have a new segment where you fight challengers for the crowd."

"I don't care what you do," Misty replied, "but I'm out of here."

"Hm." Daisy stared down at Misty's badge, lips pursed.

"I filled out all the dumb paperwork," Misty said.

"Look," Daisy said, "not that I'm forbidding this or anything, but - you really shouldn't do things like drop everything to chase after a boy."
"A - what? I'm not chasing after - this is about my bike! The only way I'm getting anything out of him is if I beat him, and he's not coming back here for a rematch anytime soon."

Daisy sighed. "Alright. Do whatever you think is best. Just call in every now and again, and tell us before you get married."

"Aggh!" Misty slammed the door on her way out, because Daisy was a jerk and a tease and didn't understand anything. Least of all that if Misty were to stand a chance at beating Ash, she'd need to train in earnest. And the fastest, easiest way to get that training was working to qualify for the Indigo League.

So she grabbed her handy fishing rod from her room, packed a few essentials in her bag, and was on her way to Vermillion City before sunset.

Koga shoved a section of roof aside, and finally found the challenger. "He's over here!" he called. His disciples called back in acknowledgment before breaking off their own searches. It had been worrying for a few minutes, even if it wouldn't have been Koga's fault if the challenger had died.

The man was bruised, dusty, and, dazed, eyes failing to focus on Koga. "Did I win?" he asked blearily.

"Of course not!" Koga retorted. "For one thing, you lost control of your Machamp. For another, you destroyed my Gym. And for another-

He grabbed the man, hauling him up to his feet, and quickly patted him down, scowling when he found what he was looking for. Koga pulled the vial out of the man's pocket, a now-empty glass bottle with a red 'R' stamped on the outside.

"This isn't an X-Attack, is it?" Koga asked. "In fact, it doesn't look like any approved formulary. So, how about you tell me about this - 'R', and I'll consider not recommending you be banned from the League altogether?"

Chapter End Notes

Susanoo (Thunder God); Male Pikachu, Electric Type
Rash Nature. This Pokemon has high Special Attack, but their Special Defense is reduced.
Ability - Lightning Rod. The Pokémon draws in all Electric-type moves. Instead of being hit by Electric-type moves, it boosts its Sp. Atk.
Moves Known - Electric Terrain, Growl, Slam, Thunderbolt, Volt Tackle, Iron Tail

Sirocco; Female Pidgeotto, Normal/Flying Type
Hasty Nature. This Pokemon has high Speed, but their Defense is reduced.
Ability - Keen Eye. Keen eyes prevent other Pokémon from lowering this Pokémon's accuracy.
Moves Known - Gust, Quick Attack, Sand Attack, Tackle

Felix; Male Butterfree, Bug/Flying Type
The Pokemon Poachers

Chapter Summary

Ash's new friend has a poor opinion of Pokemon poachers, which is a problem for Jessie and James.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I'm not dead. If you follow my feed, you know I've been finishing my Self Determination series; now that that's done, I'm ready to get back to work on my other series, including this one. I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oh, hey," Meowth (it had taken forty-five minutes of arguing before Ash had agreed to just call him Meowth) drawled from atop James' head, "it's more bloody forest. Surprise!"

"If we ever get to Galar and Ash figures out how rude that word is," James chided, "you're going to have to stop using it."

"I promise you, the twerp's learning worse language from the - Susanoo," Meowth retorted. "Rat's got a mouth on him, and that's saying something, coming from me." He perked his head up, by the way he shifted on James' head. "Hsst. I think I hear them."

James rolled her eyes (she hadn't been the one chattering), but stopped moving. After a moment, quiet except for the chatter of the Bugs and other various Pokemon filling the shaded paths beneath the rough, wide-branched trees of the paths between Cerulean and Vermillion City, Meowth tugged at James' hair.

"Watch it," she warned, but moved slightly left, the direction Meowth had tugged. "Some of us can't just lick it back in place."

But Meowth just settled back on her head, purring gently (on the largely correct theory that James didn't have the heart to chide a sleeping cat) as James walked. After a few seconds, she heard Ash's voice piping through the woods - a shout, but excited, not worried. She didn't change her gait, following the telltale sounds of Ash in battle.

"Hm. Sounds like the twerp's having fun," Meowth rumbled.

"I've been given to understand that's sort of the purpose of Pokemon battles," James replied.

"Never really saw the point, myself."

"Ah, but think about it." James reached up and tugged Meowth free, cradling the Pokemon in front of her when he flailed, until he settled against her chest. "If you battled, you could get stronger, learn Pay Day - and then we'd never worry for money again!"
"Hey, I found twenty dollars when we were leaving Cerulean City!" Meowth protested. "And I didn't even steal it or anything!"

James idly scratched the top of Meowth's head, earning a purr. "Yes, you're a valuable member of the team, and your financial contributions are greatly appreciated. Still - Meowth are said to bring their companions great wealth."

"You met the twerp because of me," Meowth retorted. "Being close to a big-league Pokemon champion's bound to be worth something. 'Oh, how'd you win all the Pokemon Leagues, Ash?' 'Oh, yeah, I just learned everything I know from Jessie and James, expert coach and breeder.'" His voice was just as scratchy mimicking Ash as it was the rest of the time, but James bit back a snicker. Meowth could get - snippy about his impressions.

"Alright," James agreed. "You've bought us a ticket to easy street - presuming we stick with the kid all the way to the Pokemon League."

"Two or three championships, tops," Meowth added.

"Aw, man!" They arrived to a high, wooden wall, practically a stockade, marking off the area around a brightly-colored tent. The gate to the stockade was open, a sign over the gate declaring the place 'A.J.'s Gym (not sanctioned by the Pokemon League)'. A digital scoreboard displayed 98 'Wins' and 0 'Losses'. After a moment, the Win count ticked up to 99 with a bright ringing.

A few more steps brought them into the compound, where a neat (if amateur) battlefield housed Felix, sprawled across the dust, while a Sandshrew trilled at a stocky, green-haired boy. Ash was sitting on the far end of the field, staring at Felix with a distant, dazed look on his face.

"How'd you do that?" he asked. "Dexter said Flying Pokemon should have an advantage against your Sandshrew's attacks!"

The green-haired boy shook his head, smirking. "You want to be a Pokemon Master, and you can't even figure something like that out? Maybe I shouldn't even bother with the League, if you're the sort of opponent I can expect."

Ash growled, stopped from scrambling to his feet to attack the other boy (the eponymous A.J., James presumed) only by Jessie's hand on his shoulder.

But James' eyes were on something else entirely.

"James," Meowth whispered.

"I see it," James muttered, keeping her face impassive as she ambled toward Ash. But her spine was tense, and free hand clenched, and it was all she could do to keep from attacking the boy right there.

Because, hooked prominently on A.J.'s belt, was a coiled whip.

You couldn't overcome a Pokemon's weaknesses without rigorous training, and training you did with a whip wasn't 'training'.

It was torture.

(There was another reason she didn't attack - James knew her type matchups, and Poison and Fire were a poor match against a Ground type.)
Still, the thought of leaving Ash here to learn anything A.J. had to teach made her sick.

"Did we lose this one?" James asked, stepping up next to Ash. She could see Jessie's far hand, which was clenched tight, as well; she'd seen the whip, too. Jessie looked up and gave her a tight smile, and a nod.

"Yeahh," Ash moaned. "Felix! Return!" He stuck Felix's ball at his belt before rolling up to his feet, smiling at James, a genuine expression, even if he had to scrub at his eyes a little. "A.J.'s Sandshrew is really amazing!"

"I bet. How about we find a place to set up camp, and you can tell me all about it?"

"Aww - I was going to see if A.J. would give me training tips."

"That is definitely not in the schedule," Jessie replied. "If I have to spend more than another 24 hours in this forested hellscape I'll scream." She turned, tugging Ash around after her. She gave James a wide grin as she passed, grabbing her shoulder with her free hand. "See you later, weird forest gym leader!" she called.

Her eyes narrowed at that, making clear to James, who was much closer to her than A.J. and closer to eye level than Ash, that it was a promise.

Ash was still over-excited when they set up for camp half an hour later (a little early, but they needed to be close, even if James didn't want Ash exposed to A.J.'s version of training), so after basic treatment from Mercy and Jessie, she set him and his Pokemon running laps around the camp.

"Sooo," Meowth drawled as he settled with them in a small circle next to the fire, "how are we doing this?"

Jessie, Mercy settled in her lap, shrugged. "Like we always do."

"Sweep in, monologue about the rights of Man and Pokemon, sweep out?" James asked. "I'm partial to just stealing in and out in the middle of the night. No fuss, and a whip?"

"I was more concerned with how we deal with the twerp," Meowth said. "We probably don't want his first felony to be at ten."

"I was thinking you keep an eye on him," Jessie replied. "Babysitting?" Meowth demanded.

"Sitting around next to the fire," James retorted. "No heavy lifting or running."

"Hm." Meowth stretched out, carefully spreading out his claws. "You make a persuasive argument," he said.

"Good," James replied, "because you don't have a choice."

Ash woke when a light flashed across his eyes. When he forced them open, it was still dark - a little chill, except for the Pikachu pressed against his chest, whispering, 'Chuuuu' with every exhale.

"Put that damn thing out," Jessie hissed. "You'll wake him." She clearly thought Ash was asleep, or she wouldn't have used that word.
"I'm sorry," James protested, shifting himself (there was a lower pitch to his voice that Ash had come to associate with James' days as a boy) to block most of the now-faint light falling across the camp. "This forest is an absolute nightmare. And someone didn't want to carry the Sandshrew."

"Well, someone got kicked in the shins before the knockout gas kicked in," Jessie retorted.

"And don't think I haven't noticed that's my nail polish!" James hissed in reply.

"S - shrew…"

Ash tensed, unconsciously tightening his grip on Susanoo, who 'chuued' weakly. That voice, probably the Sandshrew James had mentioned, sounded dazed. Confused.

And James had told Ash to always get a wild Pokemon checked out at a Center before releasing it from its Pokeball.

"We have to get out of here," he whispered.

"Pika?" Susanoo asked.

"That's not their Sandshrew," Ash said, voice stuttering as his heart rattled in his chest. He remembered something like this in the Pokemon Center in Viridian City, his pulse racing and breath coming short when the Pokemon poachers had threatened him and Susanoo.

...The other Pokemon poachers, he corrected himself.

"We have to get out of here," he repeated, grip tightening as Susanoo began twisting in his arms. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Pipi Pikachu Pika-pi!" Susanoo shouted, kicking out to leap from Ash's arms. His cheeks sparked as Jessie and James turned toward them, eyes wide in confusion.

"Wait, no-" Ash said, a moment before Susanoo unleashed the lightning, a thunderbolt that filled the camp, catching Meowth along with Jessie and James. Ash scrambled to his feet as the humans dropped to the ground, twitching from the aftershock, trying to remember where he'd put the potions in his bag, when the Sandshrew threw James' arm off of them and bared their teeth at Ash, hissing.

(He'd learned this lesson in Pewter, just forgotten it in the heat of the moment. Ground types were immune to Electric attacks.)

"Hey, calm down, I'm on your side!" Ash protested, holding his palms out because you were supposed to do that to show you were peaceful, right? "Susanoo, tell them we're not with them - or we're with them, but we're not with them. We didn't know they were kidnapping Pokemon!"

The Sandshrew seemed to be listening themselves, because they hunkered down, claws dropping as they let out a mournful, "Shreww."

It didn't take a genius to figure out what that meant. "Don't worry," Ash said, "we'll get you home." He turned in a quick circle, trying to remember what direction they'd come from. "Somehow."

"Pika-pi!" Susanoo shouted. "Pika chu chu ka chu!"

"Right!" Ash scooped up the Sandshrew, stumbled to his bag, yanked on his shoes, and ran. It didn't matter what direction he picked; Jessie and James didn't know these woods any better than
he did, so away was the most important direction. Susanoo ran at his feet, chattering angrily about
the untrustworthiness of cat Pokemon, while Ash kept his eyes on his feet, desperate to avoid
tripping.

"Sasa shrew!" the Sandshrew chattered.

"I am watching out for-

Ash didn't finish his sentence because the ground vanished underneath him, sending him bouncing
down an uneven slope, cradling the Sandshrew against his chest. The impact of rocks and roots
against his body were sharp, painless (but they would hurt later, he knew), but unending, until all
sensation stopped, a moment of weightlessness as he soared off the edge of another cliff.

Ash plunged into a cold, dark world, so turned around he couldn't see what was up and what was
down. He opened his mouth, and realized in a panicked moment that he was underwater, water
forcing its way in with a rush. He scrambled, flailing for any purchase, any way out.

Something yanked him down or up or over - he couldn't say. Ash opened his mouth in another
scream; water already filled his lungs, so there was little more effect. But then the world changed -
gravity pulled down on him, and he coughed as water flowed from his nose and mouth, and
something tugged him sideways. There was pressure on his shoulder, pinpricks of pain in his flesh,
and a chanting sound.

"Shrew shrew shrew shrew..." The words were meaningless, a chant to focus the Pokemon as they
swam through an environment that should have left them powerless, carrying a boy three times
their weight.

"Pika-pi!"

Ash jerked his head around, looking for the source of the shout. "Susa-" He broke off, coughing,
forcing the Sandshrew to tighten their grip, claws digging into his shoulder rather than lose Ash to
the water.

Something grabbed around Ash's middle, his shoulders, and lifted him free of the water. He landed
on solid ground, where he began to cough and retch, spitting out water but still unable to breathe.
Something squeezed his chest, forcing water out, again, again, and then he was simply coughing,
wheezing on the ground.

"Pika-pi?" Susanoo whined carefully next to Ash.

"I'm fine," he gasped, twisting around until he saw the flash of yellow and could drag Susanoo
close. "Thanks to the-" He bolted upward, sending Susanoo tumbling to the ground. "Where's the
Sandshrew? I said I'd get them home-"

"Bulba!" A green rope - a vine - descended, wrapped around the Sandshrew like a harness, settling
the Pokemon on the ground. And then a blue-green creature stepped forward, a little less than
twice Susanoo's height, although maybe half that was taken by a large green bulb on their back.
Ash fumbled for his bag, soaked through, but found his Gear still functional. He flipped it open and
pointed it at the creature.

"Bulbasaur, the Seed Pokemon. The energy its bulb gathers from the sun provides it nutrients that
allow it to grow. The bulb is a part of its nervous system, and removing it will kill the Pokemon."

Ash frowned at Dexter's summary. Now that he was reminded, he recognized the Pokemon as one
of the ones Professor Oak had offered to beginning trainers, one of the ones Ash had missed out on.
"Saurrrr?" the Bulbasaur asked the Sandshrew, who began waving their arms, pointing between Ash and Susanoo.

"San shrew and sand sandshrew, shrew rew sand!"

And the Bulbasaur's eyes narrowed as they stomped their feet, growling. "Bul bul saur, baaa, bulbasaur!"

Ash sighed and let himself fall back onto his back. He didn't know where they were, but the Bulbasaur was no friend to poachers, given how angry the Sandshrew's explanation had made them.

"Bulba!" the Bulbasaur snapped, shoving at Ash with vines whipping from the base of the bulb. They shoved him until he was on his side, and then beat at his back until Ash began coughing again.

"Wha-" Ash started before another coughing fit. This took longer, but his lungs felt clearer, afterward.

"Bulbasaur, bul bulba," the Bulbasaur explained, vines tugging at Ash's shoulders. And it sounded nice - a house with a person who could make sure he hadn't broken anything, and a bed to sleep in.

"Yeah, lead on," Ash mumbled, though he remembered so little of the trip that he suspected the Bulbasaur carried him the rest of the way. He woke to sunlight filtered through gauze curtains, a soft mattress and clean white sheets pulled over him. Bandages littered his body, which smelled of a heavy herbal scent, and everything hurt. He blinked against the sunlight and looked around; his heart skipped a beat when he didn't see yellow or a crooked tail.

A knock came at the door, which opened a moment later. A woman, probably around Jessie's and James' age, dark blue hair tied back with a headband, dressed in denim coveralls, a dark long-sleeved shirt, stepped inside.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Where…" Ash squinted, finding the memories of the previous night foggy, indistinct. "There was a Bulbasaur, and they said - there was a house?"

The woman stepped to the side of the bed, pulling out a small pen which glowed when she pushed a button on it. She clicked her tongue. "Can you look at me, please? I'm not much of a human doctor - I'm not even a Pokemon nurse - but I've got plenty of experience. And it sounds like your head got a little scrambled when you fell in the river."

"Um, but we are in, like, a...Pokemon sanctuary?" Ash asked.

"Oh, yes!" the woman agreed. "My name is Melanie, and this is the Hidden Village. It's a sanctuary for injured Pokemon."

"Why would you need a sanctuary?" Ash asked. "There's a Pokemon Center in every city in Kanto."

Melanie tilted her head at Ash. "Well, first of all, a lot of smaller towns have someone like me - not a full nurse, but with a bit of experience - in case the nearest city is too far away. And second, this is a sanctuary for wild Pokemon."

"O - oh." Ash considered the declaration for a moment. It made sense, that some people would
want to help wild Pokemon without forcing them into Pokeballs. "Is that Bulbasaur yours?"

Melanie chuckled. "Bulbasaur is his own Pokemon," she replied. "He guards the village from poachers and anything that might prey on injured Pokemon."

"Pika-pi?"

Melanie turned to the door, where a small yellow form peeked through, tail twitching behind him. "Come on in," she said. "This little guy was awfully worried about you."

But Ash only had eyes for Susanoo, who launched himself onto the bed and into Ash's lap, butting his chin. "Pi pika-pi pi pi kachu," he chattered, tail swiping behind him, sending jolts of static whenever it brushed Ash's hand.

"I'm fine," Ash said, before glancing up at Melanie. "Am I fine?"

"Yes," Melanie replied. "I mean, I'd prefer if you stayed a few days - or went to a hospital - to make sure you don't get sick, but you didn't break anything."

"You see?" Ash rubbed one of Susanoo's ears.

"I have a phone, if you need to call anyone," Melanie said. "Your parents, traveling companions-"

The memory of the rest of the night slammed into Ash, a choked breath escaping him. Melanie, with the instincts of a doctor, if not the education, hurried to his side. "Are you alright?"

Jessie and James with a captured Sandshrew (unusual in that they had overcome their weakness to water, could swim while carrying a half-drowned child behind them - surely valuable to buyers like Team Rocket), the flight through the forest. The fall.

"Yeah, I - my mom expected me at a Pokemon Center close to Vermillion City today. I should call her so she doesn't worry."

"Were you traveling with anyone?" Melanie asked, after a beat of silence. "You're lightly provisioned for walking to Vermillion City."

"No, I'm - fine. I lost - some of my supplies in the river," Ash replied, his tongue stumbling over the lie. He ran a finger along Susanoo's head, a gentle pet as the Pikachu butted his stomach worriedly. He'd been ready to do this alone at the start, but now that he'd had support, had friends with him, only to have it torn away, left him feeling lost.

"Chuu," Susanoo murmured, and Ash jerked back to himself, looking down to meet those dark, unblinking eyes. He smiled at Pikachu, turning his idle petting into a real scratch at the base of Susanoo's ears. Because he wasn't alone if he had his Pokemon - Susanoo, Felix, and Sirocco. "Is there a town nearby? Somewhere I can replace them?"

"Oh - oh, don't worry, sweetie," Melanie replied. "I've got some extras I can send with you, and I'll just replace them the next time I resupply."

"I…" Ash blinked, and when he opened his eyes, his vision was blurry. He wiped at his eyes, which came away wet. Ah. He was crying. He wiped at his eyes, unable to hide the sob. "Why...are you being so nice to me?"

Melanie reached out a hand, before retracting it, leaving Ash hugging Susanoo to his chest. "It's what any decent person would do."
Like Jessie and James had, taking his Pokemon to the Center, and after, traveling with him, advising him, supporting him, even though they had no reason to.

(Except they did. His partner had a power almost no other Pikachu possessed, knew moves that the Pokedex confirmed meant he had an unusual lineage. And they'd shown no interest in traveling with Ash until they'd seen Susanoo in action.)

The thought of Jessie and James (and their traveling companion, a Meowth with a unique talent and intelligence) reminded Ash of the thing that had sent him fleeing through a dark, unfamiliar forest, and he looked up at Melanie.

"Do you know - about a boy who runs a...gym, I guess, except it doesn't really give out badges?" Ash asked.

"A.J.?"] Melanie asked. "Of course. He's been training out there for - six months or so."

"Do you know how to reach him? We have his Sandshrew. He's probably missing them."

"You must have battled A.J., if you recognized his Sandshrew," Melanie said. "Unfortunately, if you ended up here, you were going in the exact wrong direction to find him. But she's a remarkable Pokemon, his Sandshrew. He met her here, in the Hidden Village. She'd been badly hurt by a Vileplume, and he wanted a strong Pokemon. He had his eye on Bulbasaur, actually, but Bulbasaur believes his place is in the village, protecting the sick Pokemon. Sandshrew, though...she saw something in him. Something - she saw in herself, I think. A drive. He wanted to win the Indigo Cup, and she wanted to be strong. They used to spend hours sitting under the waterfall up the river."

She was smiling fondly, and with the description, Ash could imagine the Sandshrew shivering under the cold while A.J. sat next to her, staying out in the dead of winter, and whatever they'd need to do to help her resist Grass-type attacks. Pokemon and trainer, braving the elements together, forging the bond they'd need to fight in sync. The thought of Jessie and James, of anyone, trying to sever that bond, made Ash shiver, hugging Susanoo closer to him.

"There's breakfast in the kitchen," Melanie said, "and I'll start looking for the additional supplies. I'll run a checkup after lunch, and again tomorrow morning, and if you seem fine, there's no reason you shouldn't be able to leave."

Ash nodded absent-mindedly and sat there, quiet, for more than a few minutes. At last, Susanoo nipped at his fingers, a sharp, 'Pika' reminding him to eat. So he clambered out of bed, still holding onto the Pikachu as he found his way to the kitchen.

The Bulbasaur was there, using his vines to pour out Pokemon food into various bowls. When he saw Ash, he turned, offering Ash a smile.

"Bulba!"

"Oh! Um. Hi. I guess you help out around here."

"Bul bulba, sa saur bul," the Bulbasaur said, setting the bags and bowls down and ambling over to butt his head against Ash's ankles. "Bul aaaa bulbasaur!"

"Pi pika-pi," Susanoo retorted, smug, as if he hadn't dismissed Ash at first, hadn't been forced to reevaluate after the confrontation with the Spearow.

"Thanks, I guess," Ash replied. "But I didn't do much - I just knew them stealing A.J.'s Sandshrew
wasn't right. Susanoo did more than I did. I just fell into the river."

The Bulbasaur shook his head. "Bulba!"

Anyone could have done it, he seemed to think, but Ash was the one who did. It was a poor rationale for calling someone a hero (or something like it, he thought; paying attention to pose and tone made it relatively easy to get the gist of what a Pokemon meant, but it was hard to avoid translating in his head, even if he had to fill in the blanks).

"Well, uh. Anytime."

"Basaur!" The Bulbasaur grabbed the bowls and trotted out a low swinging door set in the kitchen door, leaving Ash and Susanoo alone.

They ate together, the meal absent the chatter Ash had grown used to, the hurt from that loss somehow worse than the betrayal (that he wanted them back, even knowing what he knew about them).

But he worried on it, because it seemed...if they were Pokemon poachers, they should have been with Team Rocket. None of it made sense, and there was no one to make sense of it for him.

He was better that afternoon, no signs of illness and lungs clear, but he slept uneasily, and woke the next morning with a sense of worry. It plagued him through breakfast, through helping the Bulbasaur bring food to the other Pokemon, so it was almost a relief when two figures, topped with lavender and red, walked out of the woods, a Meowth walking upright at their feet.

"That's them," he muttered to the Bulbasaur, who growled low in his throat, vines closing in, tense, against his side.

Jessie stopped first, grabbing James' arm to stop him when he kept going. Jessie's hair was a mess - ungelled, dirt smeared into it (as if she hadn't had time to wash it since she'd collapsed a day and a half ago). James' eyes were red, tired, and Meowth was - tense.

"I...didn't want you to find out this way," Jessie said haltingly. "But if you just let me explain-"

"Explain what?" Ash demanded, hands clenched at his side as he took a step toward the trio. "That you steal other people's Pokemon? People's friends and partners? Is that why you came along with me - to steal Pikachu?"

"Of course not-" Jessie started.

"Of course we did," James said. "At first."

"What the hell?" Meowth demanded. "Why did you tell him that? Now he's never going to trust us!"

"No," James snapped, taking another step toward Ash, gaze fixed on Ash's face. "If we want him to trust us, we can't have any more secrets. So yes, Ash. When we met a boy with a Pikachu who'd nearly drained himself to death, who had no idea how to care for Pokemon, we were ready to take him from you. And then we saw - how much you cared. How sincerely you wanted to do right by them. Not just your Pokemon, but every Pokemon. Ignorance is no excuse, but it can be corrected. Cruelty cannot.

"We aren't Team Rocket, stealing Pokemon in the hopes of selling them, or using them to further our schemes. We take the unwanted, uncared for, abused Pokemon. We release them to -"
sanctuaries, foster homes, places they'll be given all the care they deserve. So when we found a boy who trained his Sandshrew with a **whip** - what other choice did we have?"

"You could have asked," Ash said.

James took a step back, red-rimmed eyes widening. "Asked…"

"Asked the Sandshrew!" Ash snapped. "Your Meowth can tell you what Pokemon say! He could have told you what Melanie told me - how much they cared for each other."

Jessie shook her head, baring her teeth. "No - you can't train a Pokemon to overcome weakness without...torturing them."

"She wanted to be strong," Ash said, gritting his teeth. "She wanted someone who'd help her do that. And instead of figuring that out, you too**k her!**"

All three of them were staring, now, mouths open, quiet. Until Meowth (of course) spoke at last.

"Hey, uh, the twerp get this right?" He wasn't looking at Ash, anymore, but the Sandshrew.

"Shrew," she snapped, folding her arms across her chest.

"Huh, that. That one's definitely on us," Meowth said, rubbing at the back of his head. "Seriously. Absolutely our bad."

"What - that's it?" Ash demanded. "'Our bad'? What kind of apology is that?"

"The sort you make when you make a mistake," James said. "We...wanted to do good, Ash. You **have** to believe that."

"We're so sorry," Jessie said, bowing low.

And Ash - wanted to believe them. Wanted to know the training advice, the jokes and stories around the campfire, and the care they'd shown him, was something real. He wanted to believe he wasn't stupid, hadn't been fooled by a trio of conmen (sort of).

He looked down at Susanoo, who was eyeing Meowth warily (and they were friends, he thought, so Susanoo might have felt the betrayal as keenly as Ash did). And then at the Bulbasaur, whose job it was to protect this village from poachers.

"Bulllll," he was growling, low and threatening. But not sure. Like Ash, he was wavering. James was good at heartfelt, Ash thought. But that would be true if he were sincere or a faker. There was no way for Ash to know for sure if James were telling the truth.

Ash would have to just.

Decide.

"Pika-chuuu," Susanoo said, and the Bulbasaur perked up, looking toward Susanoo.

"Bulba?" he asked.

"Pika-pi pika kachu," Susanoo replied.

And the Bulbasaur took a step toward the trio. "Saaaaaaauuuuur," he growled.
"What was that?" James asked. "I didn't like the sound of that."

"Well, Susanoo says Ash doesn't know if he can trust us," Meowth said. "And the Bulbasaur, well. He says the kid could trust us if he had some way to keep us in line. I think he. Ah. Might be volunteering."

"No," Ash said. "I don't want to be watching them all the time. I want to know that my friends are real." He looked up to James and took a deep breath, steeling himself. "So. You're gonna take A.J. back his Sandshrew, and you're going to apologize."

"What?" Jessie demanded. "We'll all be arrested!"

"Pika ka chu chu pi-pika chuu," Susanoo said, sticking out his tongue at Meowth.

"What did he say?" James demanded.

"He says they don't throw Pokemon in jail; I'd probably end up in a circus," Meowth drawled, though Ash was sure there was some nuance Meowth wasn't translating, one Ash wasn't quite getting.

"You don't have to," Ash said. "I can take the Sandshrew back myself, say I found her in the woods, and you can go wherever you want. Without me."

"Oh," Jessie said.

"Yeah," Ash replied. "So. What'll it be?"

"Do you think the kid has any Pokemon other than that Sandshrew?" James asked as they sidestepped the traps and pitfalls that surrounded the Hidden Village.

"Given what the Sandshrew is capable of," Meowth grumbled, twisting to find a comfortable position in Jessie's grip (and failing - he was bruised all over from the fight), "I don't want to see what else he might have."

"You could have used Mercy," James sniped toward Jessie.

"Why? We weren't going to win, and Mercy is a lady, and a lady only finishes fights," Jessie retorted. "Besides, in case you forgot, winning the fight wasn't our goal. It was a show of good faith, so the kid would trust us again."

They were quiet a few more moments before Meowth decided to ask the question. "And...why are we doing that, exactly? The twerp doesn't need the sort of problems hanging around a couple of poachers would get him."

"Come on, Meowth, don't make me say it," Jessie whined.

"I like the kid, too," James said. "And he's right - we fucked this up. We need some perspective."

"Perspective schmerspective," Meowth muttered. "We need a fucking conscience, someone with the firepower to keep us in line."

"And it all comes back to the Pikachu," Jessie mused.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Meowth snapped out.
"It means none of this would have happened if the kid weren't lugging around something like out of the stories my mother used to tell me," Jessie said, dreamily. "The legends."

"The Pikachu's insufferable enough without him hearing you say shit like that," Meowth said. "But...you feel it too?"

"Feel what?" James asked, glancing between the two of them.

"I don't know - it's an instinct thing," Meowth said. "I thought it was a Pokemon thing. Like how Pidgey can always find their way home. Sometimes, when he's got just the right expression, or is doing crazy shit like trying to rescue a cartful of Pokemon from Team Rocket, there's a - weight around him. Like the whole universe is paying attention."

"And what does that mean?" James asked.

"Hell if I know," Meowth retorted. "But I bet the Pikachu felt it."

"Ka CHUUUUU!" They froze for a moment, before the humans started running, jolting Meowth's perch.

What they arrived to was Susanoo crouched, panting, at the edge of the village, cheeks still sparking, while a form made of red light was sucked into a Pokeball. It landed and rocked once, twice, three times, and stilled.

"Yeah!" Ash shouted, punching the air and jumping. "I caught a Bulbasaur!"

Meowth smirked against Jessie's chest. He'd felt it. The Pikachu had felt it. And he was certain that the Bulbasaur had felt it, too.

Most of the people, and Pokemon out of their balls, had hurried outside at the distant boom, about ten minutes ago. Joy, of course, hadn't left her post. If there were a problem, someone would tell her, and she would work on getting the Pokemon out of here (they'd had emergency training refreshers after Viridian City, and Joy prided herself that she'd managed the best response time in the drills).

So it was quiet for the moment, except for the hum of the machines.

Until something heavy landed outside the front door. A man stumbled through the door, a Charizard half-draped over his shoulders. "We need help!" he called, which spurred Joy into action. She hurried to the two of them, spraying a potion along visible cuts in the Charizard's wings. When she turned to examine their torso for more serious lacerations, she froze.

Because she knew the man. She hadn't noticed at first, because the blue uniform, like something an old-world military would make for parades, was scorched and torn, and his red hair was full of dust, making it gray. Red eyes were wide, frantic.

"Is he going to be okay?" Lance demanded.

"If you can get him into his ball, we can complete preliminary scans and treatment more easily," Joy replied.

"Yeah, yes," Lance said, tugging at his belt. "I couldn't - we needed to get to land, first." He recalled the Charizard and handed over the Pokeball. "But he'll be alright, right?"
"I'll do my best," Joy replied. "You know that. But I don't like making promises."

After preliminary treatment, it took an hour of surgery before the Charizard was out of the woods. There were burns, frostbite, contusions, mild necrosis, and even the telltale branching rash caused by Fairy-type attacks. It was as if Lance had taken on two or three entire teams of Pokemon with just his Charizard (or maybe the Charizard was the only one he'd left out of their Pokeball).

When she stepped out of the operating room, Lance was on the phone, muttering.

"Ah, Lance?" He turned his head. "Your Charizard will be fine."

"Oh, thank you," he breathed, tension flowing from his face, a smile brightening it. "We'll talk later," he said to the screen, hanging up and crossing to Joy.

"I can take you to see him," she said.

"In a moment," Lance replied. "I have something you need to know - that you need to make sure everyone who comes through this Center knows. I'm closing off the Seafoam Islands."

"The - which ones? One of the cave systems?"

"No, all of them," Lance said.

"What - why? A lot of trainers use them to build up their teams - Water Pokemon especially - before Cinnabar. People are going to be upset."

"Better than being dead," Lance replied.

"Dead?" Joy took a step toward Lance. "I saw your Charizard - you must have run into a lot of strong Pokemon in there, but it doesn't mean-"

"One," Lance said.

"Pardon?"

"I met one strong Pokemon," Lance repeated. "All the damage it took you an hour to heal - to begin to heal - was done by one Pokemon."

"Still-"

"And not just one Pokemon," Lance continued. "It was one attack - nearly took down the entire roof on us."

"One - are you alright?" Joy asked. "The clinic is just around the corner."

Lance jerked his head, winced, and then paused. "I...don't know," he said slowly. "Things were...strange in there. But rest assured, whatever's out there - I will not risk any other trainers meeting it."

Chapter End Notes

Male Bulbasaur, Grass/Poison Type
Brave Nature. This Pokemon has high Attack, but their Speed is reduced. 
Ability - Overgrow. Powers up Grass-type moves when the Pokemon's HP is low. 
Moves Known - Leech Seed, Razor Leaf, Tackle, Vine Whip
Chapter Summary

When Ash finds a Charmander apparently abandoned to the elements, he confronts the cruelty of some Pokemon trainers, and the nature of the bond between Pokemon and trainer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lightning rent the sky, and a moment later, thunder rocked the landscape. Jessie was in front of their group, sprinting just ahead of Susanoo, Ash just at his heels. James was bringing up the rear, ostensibly because he was carrying Meowth, but Jessie was certain he was making sure they didn't lose track of Ash. They were all soaked, caught off guard by a rainstorm that hadn't been supposed to start for another few hours, and the darkness the heavy cloud cover brought with it. By Jessie's estimation, they were ten minutes away from the nearest Pokemon Center, if they could keep up the pace.

But because they were traveling with a ten-year-old boy, that plan was ruined almost the moment Jessie thought it. James yelped behind her, and she turned just in time to see Ash stumbling off the side of the road, Susanoo trailing after him.

"Ash? Now is not the time for sight-seeing!" Jessie snapped. "And I promise, whatever Pokemon you saw, we can come back for it when it's dry!"

It was a fruitless attempt, but Jessie had to make a show of it - hoping that if she said stuff like this enough, it would stick and Ash might make sensible decisions on his own. Luckily, Ash slowed before he reached the actual woods at the side of the road, holding a hand down to keep Susanoo from approaching too close to the exposed rocks Ash had found. They stood ten feet high, full of ledges and shallow depressions, which is why Jessie hadn't originally seen what had drawn Ash's attention. Mostly concealed from the road, an orange Pokemon was curled under an overhanging rock, tail tucked up against their side and bright blue eyes turned toward the road.

Ash already had his Gear out, so the tinny voice of Dexter (Jessie hated that she'd taken to thinking of a program that read a Pokedex out loud as a member of their little party, but the name was a little funny, even if it was dumb) was chattering as James drew up next to Jessie.

"Charmander, the Lizard Pokemon. The flame at the tip of its tail is an indicator of the Pokemon's health and mood. If the flame dims or goes out, it is an indication the Charmander needs immediate medical attention."

Jessie was certain it was that declaration which drew all their attention to the Charmander's tail, a flickering flame that was barely hot enough to steam when the wind blew stray raindrops onto it. The Charmander was obviously hurt or sick already, and the rain wasn't doing it any favors.

"We should get it to a Pokemon Center," Ash declared, reaching for a Pokeball.

"Absolutely," James agreed.
The Charmander, however, didn't agree, as they slapped the Pokéball away with their tail when Ash threw it.

"Hey! We're trying to help you!" Ash shouted, before throwing his Pokéball again, only to be rebuffed again. His expression crumpled in concentration, eyes narrowed. He looked hesitantly at Susanoo, at which point James laid a hand on Ash's shoulder.

"No," he said. "They're weak already."

"But-" Ash turned back to the Charmander, and Jessie didn't need to see him to know his eyes were wide, teary. "They're hurt."

"Awright," Meowth grumbled, shifting in James' grip until he could climb onto James' shoulder. "Looks like it's time for Meowth to shine. Hey! Flamebrain! The twerp's trying to get you to a Pokemon Center for help. He'll let you go right after if you want-"

"What?" Ash asked.

"Mander!" the Charmander snapped. "Char charma mander cha!"

Meowth, who'd been scowling at the Charmander, straightened, stiffening as he grabbed James' hair for purchase. His expression was slack, eyes narrow. "Oh. Come on, guys, let's go," he said.

"Pipika!" Susanoo protested, jumping forward. "Pika-pi kachu pi pikachu pika!"

"Charrr," the Charmander growled in reply.

"Hey, whoa! How about we don't pick fights with sick Pokemon?" Meowth snapped at Susanoo. He tugged at James' ear, then. "And come on."

Jessie, James, and Meowth had gotten as far as they had because they trusted each other, listened to each other. So Jessie didn't protest, and James tugged Ash around to follow as he returned to the road.

"What-" Ash started.

"It'll wait until we're dry," Meowth said. "So let's get to the Pokemon Center first."

Jessie picked up Susanoo, who made only a token protest, and Meowth returned to James' arms, allowing them to run the rest of the way to the Center.

Meowth, though, was quiet the entire way, and Susanoo was, too. Jessie couldn't see Meowth's expression, but Susanoo was angry.

Correction: he was furious. His cheeks weren't sparking - he'd been made to understand that stray electric shocks weren't welcome in their little group - but his ears and tail kept twitching, and the 'chuuu' he kept muttering sounded threatening. Jessie wasn't certain he wouldn't go back to fight that Charmander on his own. Asking him wasn't likely to be productive, as she didn't possess the bond Ash and Susanoo had forged, and wouldn't get even the gist of what Susanoo might say.

So she let her curiosity simmer until they burst into the Pokemon Center, dripping wet, and secured a single room for the three (or five) of them. James had decided conversation would wait until everyone was dry, sending Ash off to take a shower and put on fresh clothes first (James would make a wonderful parent someday, a conclusion Jessie hadn't made until she'd seen him aggressively care for Ash's safety, well-being, education, and nutrition, as if Ash were a
particularly needy species of Pokemon). So it took about an hour before they were all warm and dry enough to settle down in the common area to discuss the Charmander. James had abandoned their usual flamboyant clothing for a loose blue hoodie and brown sweatpants that was so neutral in presentation it had to be deliberate - they were too tired for gender right now, they'd declared after their shower.

"So," James said, glowering at Meowth, who'd settled on James' lap because that particular pair of sweatpants were the warmest piece of clothing any of them owned. "Care to explain?"

Meowth sighed and let his head loll to the side. "The Charmander already belongs to someone. His trainer went on ahead and he's waiting for him to come back."

"Pi pi pika kachu!" Susanoo barked, causing both Ash and Meowth to wince.

"Yeah, we know it pisses you off," Meowth muttered, rolling his eyes. "Susanoo, Thunder God over here, thinks any trainer worth a Pokemon's time wouldn't do something like that."

"Pika-pi ka pika-chu!"

Ash's cheeks flushed as he ducked his head down and hugged the Pikachu to his chest. James grinned and leaned over, poking Ash's shoulder.

"And what is our illustrious Susanoo, Thunder God, saying about this?" they asked.

"He says Ash wouldn't do that. Ash wouldn't leave his Pokemon behind for anything."

And Susanoo had a unique perspective on that, having watched Ash face down a murder of Spearow to protect him. But Jessie was certain, the way Susanoo was, that he'd do that for any of his Pokemon. Correction, she thought, recalling Ash fighting all three of them to return the Sandshrew they'd kidnapped to her owner, Ash would do that for any Pokemon, period.

"Well," Jessie said, "whatever their reason, I'm sure they headed back as soon as the thunderstorm started." James narrowed their eyes at Jessie, and she just shrugged in response. Of course she was lying to Ash, but they couldn't track down that trainer and force them to retrieve their Charmander, and they couldn't liberate a fire-breathing lizard who didn't want to be caught. She really hoped this wasn't going to require them to help Ash cope with the realities of death; she hadn't signed up for that particular experience when they'd taken the kid under their wings.

"Hey," James said, reaching out around Ash's shoulders and tugging him next to them, Ash's head resting against James' shoulder. "It'll be okay, I promise."

Jessie rolled her eyes. She understood James' desire to shelter Ash from the less pleasant parts of the world, but lying to him was bound to make things worse. Ash didn't need more reason to distrust either of them.

And Jessie would have been right, ultimately, if they hadn't heard a fragment of conversation from a group of teens sitting around a table near the entrance to the Pokemon Center.

"-Pokemon that weak, I'd just get rid of it!" a voice called. Ash jerked upward, away from James, while Susanoo's whole body went stiff.

"I couldn't do that," another voice replied. "She's so cute. And she follows me everywhere whenever she's out of her ball-"

"If it likes you that much, you can just tell it to stay somewhere until you come back, and then you
don't," the first person said. "It'll get the hint eventually."

Ash stood, silent, Susanoo scrambling to the ground rather than be dropped. Ash was looking at his feet, hands clenched in front of him, and for the first time since she'd met him, Jessie couldn't tell what Ash was feeling. He walked around their couch; Jessie stood to follow him only when she saw him approaching the table with the teens.

"Hey," Ash said, causing them to look up from their conversations.

"What's up, kid?" a white-haired kid dressed in plaid and jeans, asked.

"We passed a Charmander on our way here," Ash said. "He was out in the rain and wouldn't go anywhere when we tried to get him to a Pokemon Center. Is that your Pokemon?"

One of the teens, sunglasses perched on top of their messy blue hair, dressed in a pink T-shirt and the most unfashionable fringed vest Jessie had ever seen, clicked their tongue as they leaned back in their seat. "Maybe. If it looked like the weakest Pokemon you've ever seen, it was. It was dragging me down - I nearly didn't get my Cascade Badge because of it, and they practically hand those out."

"So you abandoned your Charmander out in the rain?" Ash asked.

"Hey, if it's staying out in the rain just because I said so, it's dumb as well as useless," the teen retorted.

"He's not dumb or useless," Ash said, voice quavering, hands clenched at his sides. "He respects you. He trusts you enough to stay out there even if it's hurting him."

"What do you know about it?" the teen demanded, voice lilting, mocking. Their friends were watching him with wary, sidelong expressions, especially the one who'd been extolling the virtues of a cute Pokemon who followed them everywhere. Ash, for his part, was still shaking; he was bright enough not to mention the talking Meowth who'd translated for him (or Ash's occasional ability to vibe with even strange Pokemon well enough to get the gist of what they were saying).

"I know there's no such thing as a weak Pokemon," Ash retorted, and James lunged up from their seat, pushing past Jessie just as Ash continued. "Only trainers who don't know what to do with them."

It was a sentiment James had espoused in the past, and something Ash had apparently taken to heart, if expressed in the blunt way that came naturally to children.

The blue-haired teen's face twisted into a sneer, baring their teeth as they grabbed the front of Ash's shirt, tugging him forward. "I'm an excellent fucking trainer," they snarled. "So how about you apologize before I kick your ass?"

"That won't prove anything." James, almost close enough to physically pull Ash away from the confrontation, looked past the two kids, who had turned toward the new voice. A kid not much older than Ash, if that, was standing next to a couch on the other side of the Center, where they'd until moments ago been sitting with a group of around half-a-dozen glamorous teens lounging on the furniture. Several of them were grinning as the kid strolled forward, hands in their pockets, smirking at the scene of Ash moments from being assaulted.

"I'm at least twice the trainer Ash there is," the kid bragged. "His Pokemon were already bossing him around when he started out. So what's beating him going to prove?"
"I'm just as good a trainer as you are, Gary!" Ash shouted.

The exchange, while finally putting a face to the childhood friend Ash was committed to beating when he finally reached the Indigo Conference, also suggested Ash probably had fonder memories of Gary than his treatment might have warranted.

Gary shrugged, spreading his hands as he glanced away from Ash. "You can say what you want, but this guy…" He glanced up at the teen, expectant.

"I'm Damian," the teen said, jerking a thumb at his chest. Prideful, showy, and unwarranted, Jessie decided.

"Well, Damian clearly thinks otherwise. So you wanna prove to everyone you're a great trainer?" Gary asked. "Beat someone who matters."

Damian stood still for a moment before letting go of Ash's shirt and stepping away. He clicked his tongue, dismissive. "I don't have time to fight babies," he muttered. "I'm going to the room," he said to his friends, stalking from the main room without another word.

Gary waited a beat before smirking at Ash. "You're welcome," he said.

"I'm not a bad trainer!" Ash snapped at Gary, stepping into the other boy's space. "I've got two badges already and I've caught three Pokemon-"

"I've got twelve," Gary retorted, folding his arms against his chest. "And I've just gotten my third badge."

"Well - my Pokemon are ten times better than yours!" Ash shot back, "so I win!"

Gary snorted and reached out to pat Ash's head. "Sure, kid. I guess we'll see, if you ever make it to the Indigo Conference."

Ash bristled, reaching out to poke Gary's chest hard. "You're two months older than me!"

Most of the rest of the people in the Pokemon Center had turned away from Ash once it had become clear a teenager wasn't actually going to be beating a ten-year-old, so the only actual witnesses to the continuing argument were Jessie, James, and one of Gary's friends, a pretty blond in a miniskirt who was now hovering behind him.

Gary shrugged again. "Someday you'll understand the difference a few months can make in maturity."

"I'm plenty mature! Right, Jessie?"

Jessie held up her hands to ward off any attempt to drag her into the argument. "You're both ten," she replied. "So if your friend wants to sit with us-"

"Hmph," Ash snorted. "I bet Gary thinks he's too good for us."

"I'm sure I could find some time if you wanted advice from the best trainer from Pallet Town," Gary said, jerking his chin toward the couch where Meowth had apparently decided to go back to sleep.

"I don't need any tips from you to become a Pokemon master!" Ash said, folding his arms in front of him. "Jessie and James are better teachers than you anyway, I bet."
Gary's smile twitched before he shrugged. "You're going to wish you took me up on that offer, kid," he said. "Meanwhile me and my fans need to get dinner. Smell you later!" He joined his friend (fan?) and headed back toward the cluster of teens.

Ash scowled after the other boy before turning back to Jessie and James, the latter of which was still hovering just out of reach.

"Gary's such a jerk!" he complained.

"That...is definitely a thing you think," Jessie replied, unwilling to agree with Ash's assessment. Gary was abrasive, to be sure, but there had to be a reason Ash remembered them being friends. And - Gary had agreed to spend time around Ash.

But ten-year-old boys were weird, so it wasn't worth thinking more on it. So she helped herd Ash back to their couch, watching as his irritation at Gary faded, replaced, slowly, by his anger at Damian. But even that seething anger faded into what was most important - the welfare of the Charmander.

Leaning up against James, Ash ran an idle hand along Susanoo's back, staring at the Pikachu with distant eyes Jessie was certain weren't taking in the sight of the Pokemon. "Is there anything we can do?" he asked.

"Pika-chuuuu," Susanoo replied mournfully, a declaration that needed no translation. However Damian had earned the Charmander's loyalty, it had clearly stuck with the Pokemon. Ash's worry over the Charmander cast a pall over their evening, which should have been taken up by planning for Ash's impending fight against Lt. Surge at the Vermillion City Gym. Ash was subdued, quiet, which Jessie took to mean he was coming to terms with the fact they couldn't do anything to help the Charmander.

That conclusion later served as proof that she hadn't yet come to understand what sort of person their traveling companion was.

The rain hadn't stopped when Ash eased his way out of the front door of the Pokemon Center, but it was lighter. A wet chill still lingered in the air, causing Ash to shiver as he hitched his backpack up on his shoulder and started out on the road. It didn't take too long to find the rock where they'd first seen the Charmander, and took only a moment to confirm the Charmander was still there, the flame on his tail weaker than it had been before.

James had confirmed the stories Ash had heard weren't true - a Charmander didn't die if their tail went out. But at the same time, a Charmander's tail didn't go out if they weren't dangerously cold, ill, or dying. And the Charmander was shivering in his sleep, tail pressed up close against his chest, either to keep his tail or body warm. Ash's chest hitched at the sight, and the anger he'd felt when Damian had laughed about his Pokemon waiting in the cold and rain for him to return sparked back to life.

Ash fought the feeling down before he approached the rocks. He hadn't yet been able to understand a strange Pokemon the way he could Susanoo, but he'd gotten - intention, attitude, and one thing he'd learned was that Pokemon read the same thing, so being upset around a Pokemon put them on edge, even if you weren't angry with them.

The Charmander's nose twitched and he raised his head before Ash could get within arms reach. Ash paused, crouched, holding his hands up.
"Hey," he said. "Remember me? Don't worry - I'm not here to catch you or anything. No Pokeballs, see?" He pointed at his belt, the brown one his mother had sent with him in case he ever went somewhere and didn't want to have Pokemon with him.

The Charmander stared, gaze steady, for a quiet minute, before lowering his head to rest on his front paws. Jessie had taught Ash a little about caring for Pokemon, and the glazed look to the Charmander's eyes brought to mind worrying discussions about fever, illness, and scary words like "life-threatening". He wasn't certain the Chamander really understood him, but Ash kept talking as he approached the Charmander.

"I understand that you care about your trainer," Ash said. "And since he told you to wait for him, you're going to stay here. But your tail is - it's almost gone out, which Jessie said means you're sick. Really sick. So."

Ash unzipped his bag, just enough to remove a bag of Pokechow (a small one - used for emergencies, when they couldn't acquire more varied food for his Pokemon) and a shallow dish. He put the dish next to the Charmander, sheltered from the rain, and poured some food into it. "Jessie said Pokemon who are sick should try to eat to keep their strength up, so I brought you something to eat. And…" He struggled for a bit to pull out the canopy for the one-person tent he'd been lugging around for ages, and to set it up, finding the rocks were uneven and lacked most of the features necessary to anchor it. The end result, though, kept the spitting rain off of both of them. The Charmander made a sound like a purr before he shivered again and sneezed. Ash jerked a hand back the moment he noticed he'd reached out toward the Charmander. Instead he unpacked the last item he'd put in his backpack - both sweaters his mother had sent with him, and his winter scarf. Ash folded one sweater up and stepped right next to the Charmander. "You can't be comfortable, sleeping on that rock," he said. "Can I pick you up for a second? I've got a blanket for you."

The Charmander lifted his head again, giving Ash a slow blink before rising to his feet with a quiet grumble. He was sick, Ash decided, and disoriented, but didn't protest when Ash lifted him up against his chest and lay the sweater out on the rocks. And even though Ash knew the Charmander would be warmer if he could keep the Pokemon against his chest, he was unwilling to push his luck, and set the Charmander back down almost immediately. He did, however, drape the scarf over the Charmander, folding it over enough to form layers. The Charmander was still shivering, his tail necessarily exposed to the elements (but not the rain anymore, at least). And it wasn't what was making the Charmander sick - it was a sign, a symptom. But watching it, seeing that fading flame, Ash couldn't hold back if there was anything more he could do to help the Charmander. So he draped his second sweater over the Charmander's back, folding it over so only the Charmander's nose and tail were still exposed. And then he sat on the small shelf just below where the Charmander was resting. He heard a quiet "charrrr," more an inquisitive sound than an actual question.

"I know you're going to wait until your trainer comes back," Ash said. "I know I can't change your mind. But I couldn't bear it if you got hurt waiting out here alone. So we're going to wait together."

"char," the Charmander murmured, and Ash couldn't be certain, not with how disoriented the Charmander was, what he'd meant by it. But it sounded - thankful. Maybe even content.

Ash was cold, now a little wet, and still worried, terrified that if he fell asleep, he might wake to find the Charmander hadn't recovered. But the stress of the day, the run, the arguments, and the worry that had pulsed through him with every beat of his heart, had left Ash exhausted, and so, despite his every intention, at some point between looking at the Charmander to reassure himself that the flame was still burning, and looking up at the full moon, Ash slipped into unconsciousness.
His dreams were strange, disjointed. Gary was there, he thought, and a pair of voices screaming - wordless cries that chilled him. He dreamed of a Pokemon gym, empty of anyone else - human or Pokemon, and illuminated only within a few feet of Ash. When he looked down, he had two shadows, one tall and one short. Two red lights blazed within the shorter shadow, and a mouth opened to reveal vicious, bloody fangs.

"Four gifts for those who die," the shadow howled at Ash.

And Ash woke.

Bright light beat down on him, and although Ash's butt was numb and his back ached when he shifted, he wasn't as cold as he'd expected. When he shifted, his hands caught on something, and when he looked down, he found James' blanket, the faded red one Growlie favored, draped over him. James had claimed Growlie had imbued the blanket with some of his own fiery nature, and finding himself wrapped in the blanket after a long night, Ash could almost believe the claim was true.

Something shifted in Ash's lap. "Piii," Susanoo murmured, turning around to shove his head further against Ash's stomach. Ash smiled down at the Pikachu, fondness warring with worry that Susanoo would be mad with him.

"The twerp's awake." Ash jolted at the familiar voice and looked up slowly to find Meowth staring at him from next to a campfire just out of reach (and maybe the fire had done more to help than the blanket, but Ash would always remember the blanket, first).

"You alive, kid?" Jessie was sitting next to Ash, gaze fixed on him, steady, and a little intense, and he squirmed under the attention. She might not be his mother, but Jessie had his mother's number, and he knew none of them would have been happy with him sneaking out.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Thank goodness," Jessie breathed, scooting close enough to pull Ash into a loose hug. "James was frantic, and I was worried sick. My complexion's going to take days to recover."

"O - oh," Ash replied. This somehow felt worse than if Jessie had yelled at him. "Where's James?"

"Asleep," Meowth replied. "We were watching in shifts in case you made a run for it again."

"I didn't run for it," Ash protested. "I wanted to help the - Chamander!" He leapt to his feet, turning to the rocky ledge on which the Charmander had been sleeping. Ash must have been still half-asleep, or the rocky area had a weird setup, because for a moment, he thought he saw two shadows stretching away from him. Then the moment was gone and Ash searched for where he left the Chamander -

The little ledge was empty, and Ash's heart plummeted. He'd tried - done everything he could, short of forcibly catching the Charmander, to help him. It should have made a difference. It should have saved the Charmander, so he could - come to terms with the fact Damian had abandoned him and go find other Charmander to live with, or be accepted as a student by a wise old Charizard.

"Mander!" Ash's head jerked up to the top of the outcropping, where the Charmander was standing, head and tail both stretched up to the rising sun. His tail was burning steadily, swaying as he waved it back and forth. The Charmander must have sensed Ash's attention, because after a moment he looked down at Ash and chirped happily. Ash's heart jumped, and he found a smile on his face he couldn't fight down.
"You got better!" Ash cheered, earning a "Cha!" from the Charmander. And for a moment, Ash felt a sense of accomplishment, a flutter in his chest at the fact that he'd helped.

And then everything fell apart.

"Seriously? It was raining buckets last night. I guess that means you're stronger than I thought."

Damian was standing at the edge of the road, hands stuffed in his pockets, his friends standing about ten feet away. His sunglasses were down on his eyes, but he was grinning at the Charmander.

"We're heading out," Damian said. "There's still some room on my team, if you want."

"Char?" the Chamander asked, everything in his plaintive tone, his tense posture, making clear this was everything he'd been hoping for through the cold day and the long night, for Damian to return exactly as he'd promised.

Ash hadn't sat through the night with the Charmander in the hope the Charmander might choose to stay with him. He'd known how deep the Charmander's loyalty went, how desperate he'd been to see Damian again. Certain that Damian wouldn't return, he'd done everything in his power to make sure the Charmander survived long enough to realize that, to find somewhere else he could thrive.

But it hurt to see the Charmander so pleased for a kind word (almost) from his trainer. Damian had been willing to let the Charmander die when he'd thought him weak. Only the sign that the Charmander was tenacious enough to hang on through the cold and rain had bought Damian back. But it wasn't Ash's place to argue, to tell the Charmander he was choosing wrong.

"Pika!" Susanoo was crouched between the camp and the road, tail and ears erect, sparks dancing along his entire body. "Kachu ka pipipi pika ka-chu!"

Damian smirked at the furious Pikachu, glancing over at Ash. "Is this the Pokemon your friend said had you whipped right off the bat? You might want to call it off before I decide to teach it a lesson."

"He's saying you're the one who needs to learn a lesson," Ash said, feeling buoyed by Susanoo's faith in him. "He said - no Pokemon is strong by themselves. They're only strong when someone holds them up when they're weak."

"What?" Damian scoffed. "Your Pikachu didn't say all that."

"He did," Ash insisted, finding his hands in fists at his sides. He'd wanted to hit Damian back at the Pokemon Center, and he still did.

"There's no way you know what that Pikachu said."

"I know what he meant!" Ash snapped. His heart was racing, and he was breathing hard, and oh, he wanted to punch Damian so hard (he wanted a Hitmonchan to do it for him).

Damian was glaring at Ash now, and Ash couldn't be bothered to wonder exactly what he'd done to upset the older boy. And then Damian cracked his neck and grinned.

"You want it for yourself, don't you? Sitting out here yelling about how I'm a bad trainer - it's annoying. I don't even really care about that thing. Surviving one night on its own doesn't make it strong, not really. Maybe a few more nights like that might toughen it up-"
"I'll fight you for him," Ash said, stopping Damian mid-sentence.

He stared for a moment before bursting out laughing. "Fight me? Your friend Gary seemed to think you wouldn't be much of a fight."

"Gary doesn't know everything about me," Ash said. "So? Are you going to fight, or are you scared?"

Damian scoffed. "Fine. I'll fight with my prize Pokemon - and you fight with the Charmander you seem to like so much. You'll see how much of a weakling it is. And when I win, it's coming with me."

"And if I win...he can come with me if he wants," Ash said.

It wasn't about the Charmander, he knew. He was angry, hated seeing someone be so cruel to Pokemon. He wanted to prove something, even if he knew the Charmander was going to end up with Damian no matter what.

"Sure," Damian said. "Hey!" he called to the Charmander. "That kid's in charge for this battle! I wanna see how strong you've gotten."

The Charmander hadn't taken his gaze off of Damian during the entire conversation, so nodded at the command. "Char!" He hopped down and scrambled to Ash's side, giving Ash a wide grin. Ash couldn't quite read him, but the Charmander had to like fighting - he couldn't imagine Damian wasting any time with a Pokemon who wouldn't fight at all.

Everyone cleared out a space for them to fight. Jessie, Meowth, and James (woken at some point during the argument) were being oddly quiet, for which Ash was thankful. He didn't want to explain himself, didn't need them asking questions or giving him advice.

Not even when Damien tossed out a Pokeball, releasing a green, froglike Pokemon with a yellow swirl along their stomach and a long blue antenna curled into a tight spiral. Ash pulled out his Gear, even though he knew a part of what it was going to say.

"Politoed, the Frog Pokemon. Their song has a hypnotic quality that can cham other Water Pokemon, put people to sleep, and hurt or even kill other Pokemon."

It was a Water Pokemon, meaning Ash was at a disadvantage even before taking into consideration the Politoed's song.

"Ready?" Damian asked. "Hypnosis!" The Politoed let out a warbling, angry cry. The Charmander swayed on his feet, but shook himself after a sharp moment, reminding Ash he was in charge.

"Try a Scratch or - I don't know what other moves you know."

"Char!" the Charmander agreed, scurrying forward, avoiding a Bubble Beam from the Politoed as he closed in, leaping at the Politoed with claws stretched wide. The Politoed took a hurried step back, catching the Charmander with a quick pair of slaps that sent the Charmander reeling. "Try to slap it with your tail!" Ash cried. Some Charmander could learn Dragon Tail, he thought he remembered (he offered a quiet thanks to James' obsession with Dragon Pokemon). But the Charmander hadn't, as he waved his tail at the Politoed, mildly scorching the opposing Pokemon as the flame collided with them.

"Bubble Beam!" Damian retorted. "Tell me you know Water Pokemon have a natural advantage against Fire Pokemon - that Charmander's tail isn't going to do much good."
"Of course I know that," Ash replied. He tried to remember any moves the Charmander might know that might help against the Politoed, but couldn't recall any. "Try to Scratch again!"

The Charmander swiped at the now-close Politoed, scoring a hit that sent the Politoed hopping back to put some distance between them.

"Use Swagger!" Damian called. The Politoed gave another sing-song cry, which made the Charmander stumble, moving vaguely. Swagger confused its target, Ash recalled, but made them stronger.

"Focus!" he called. "Try another Scratch!"

The Charmander stumbled again, waving his claws, accidentally slashing across his own arm. Damian laughed and called, "Surf."

The Politoed spewed out a torrent of water, flooding the battlefield. They skated along the cresting edge of the wave, slamming into the Charmander as they passed.

"Come on!" Ash pled as the Charmander struggled to keep his feet. "Damian thinks you're weak, but I know better. There's no such thing as a weak Pokemon."

The Charmander was breathing hard, tail dimmed - not to the degree it had been when Ash had found him the night before, but a clear sign he was weakening. But flames were licking along his mouth each time he exhaled, and Ash remembered the special ability possessed by most Charmander.

"You can do better than Ember," Ash said. "And right now, even though your opponent is strong against your attacks, you're stronger."

The Charmander took a deep breath and spat out a torrent of flame to match the Politoed's wave - a Flamethrower that the Politoed couldn't avoid. And though the Politoed's type helped absorb some part of the attack, they didn't escape unscathed, skin burned as they leapt out of the line of fire.

"Do you know Fire Spin?" Ash asked. "Because now would be a great time to do that."

"Charmander!" The Charmander spat out a line of fire that encircled the Politoed, flames leaping high enough that the Politoed couldn't leap over them.

Damian scowled as the Charmander took another breath, readying a Flamethrower. And then his face shifted to a smile, a grin so similar to the expressions of the Team Rocket members Ash had met in Viridian City he almost flinched back.

"Perish Song," he commanded.

The Politoed lifted their head high and let out a high, warbling song, something that chilled Ash to the bone. He saw one of Damian's friends covering their ears, and the other spectators rubbing their arms or huddling together, the song clearly as unnerving to them as to Ash. The Charmander, though wailed as if he were in pain, and the Politoed swayed in place, legs shaking as they continued the song. It took something out of them, continuing the song, and Ash felt a moment of hope that maybe the Charmander could hold out longer-

"Perish Song's a great move!" Damian shouted over the noise. "Every Pokemon who hears it faints when they listen to it too long!"

"Cover your ears!" Ash commanded, and Damian laughed.
"It doesn't matter! It's heard the song already!" Damian retorted. "Watch - they've got three seconds. Two, one."

And the wall of fire fell away from the Politoed as they fainted.

Ash looked to Damian, confused. "What…"

"I said every Pokemon who hears Perish Song faints," Damian said, shrugging. "Even the Pokemon using it."

"Why would you use it, if it made your own Pokemon faint?" Ash demanded.

And Damian smirked. "Because I said I'd let you take my Charmander if you won. And a double knockout isn't a win."

"Char," the Charmander growled.

Ash snapped his head down, and Damian swore. "What the fuck? How did it-"

"There's a well-known phenomenon among the most successful Pokemon trainers," James said from the sidelines. "When a Pokemon and their trainer are close - truly in sync - the Pokemon can push themselves beyond their normal limits. Push through poison and confusion because they can sense their trainer's distress. Find the strength to make powerful strikes to end the battle faster. And sometimes...even survive attacks they shouldn't be able to."

"In sync?" Damian demanded, spinning on James. "It's my Pokemon! He met it last night!"

"Does it upset you?" James asked. "That your Pokemon was so starved for affection that the barest show of concern gave him the strength to survive what none of your Pokemon could have? That Ash was right - that a Pokemon is stronger for having someone care for them? Or is it that you lost?"

"Fuck this," Damian snarled, recalling his Politoed and turning back to his friends. "Let's get out of here. Do whatever you want with that little freak. I don't care."

The Charmander had been standing tall at Ash's feet, staring at Damian with a bright gaze. But at Damian's words, his posture faltered, shoulders slumping, and the Charmander let out a quiet "charrr," a mournful sound that shattered Ash's elation at the win, leaving him as cold as the Politoed's Perish Song had.

"Charmander?" the Charmander asked, stepping forward. And Ash could understand it, now, all the emotion bound up in that question. He'd proven he was strong, proven he was better than Damian's best Pokemon, so couldn't understand why Damian didn't care.

Damian kept walking away, and it struck Ash suddenly.

That Damian couldn't hear. Didn't know what his Pokemon was saying to him.

"Answer him," Ash said, and Damian paused, turned, one eyebrow raised.

"What?" he asked.

"Your Charmander asked you a question," Ash said. "Answer him."

"Are you still on this 'understanding Pokemon' crap?" Damian asked. "Do you want me to play
along? Ask you what it said? Fine - what did the Charmander say?"

"He asked if you're really such a piece of shit that you'd see a Pokemon fight so hard to stay with you and still be willing to turn your back on him." Meowth stood and ambled to stand next to Ash, smirking at Damian's slack-jawed stare. "Because he didn't stick it out for Ash. He did it for you."

"What the fuck?" Damian whispered. "What the absolute fuck?"

"Okay, seriously, watch your language!" Jessie snapped.

But Damian was ignoring her, all his attention on Meowth, and the Charmander.

"You're lying," he said to Meowth. "You're just a - freak of nature, and you're trying to fuck with me-"

"Char!" the Charmander snapped. "Man mander char char!"

"He says you're the dumbest asshole alive if you can't understand," Meowth continued, folding his arms in front of him. "All he ever wanted to do was be near you. And all you ever saw were - flaws. Everything that didn't match up to what you thought the perfect Pokemon should be. Well, I've got news for you, buddy - there's no such thing as the perfect Pokemon! Your Politoed isn't strong because she's got good genes or whatever - for whatever reason she thinks you're worth fighting with her whole strength for."

"Flaws?" Damian asked. "Of course I saw flaws! You say there's no such thing as a perfect Pokemon, but there sure as fuck is such a thing as a weak, useless Pokemon! I don't have any use for a Pokemon that needs to be coddled and told I love it to be strong - it should be strong on its own! So yeah, maybe I wasn't ever going to be coming back for the Charmander - because it couldn't take a fucking hint and leave on its own."

"Cha?" the Charmander asked, and Ask knew the tone of that single syllable needed no translation. He held his breath, uncertain what would happen next, what the revelation of Damian's true colors would do to the Charmander.

"Char," he said suddenly. "Char char man mander char mand. Char der!"

Meowth snorted. "He says - well, a lot of shit I don't want to translate - because we're trying to protect the twerp's innocence. You want to be the best - but you aren't going to be - not even close. The twerp's gonna steamroll you, presuming you even make it to the Indigo Conference."

"Pft," Damian scoffed, turning away. "Whatever. You two fucking deserve each other. Come on, let's get out of here."

No one protested this time, and Damian was gone before Ash could seriously consider punching Damian as a farewell gift.

But there was something more important than Damian. Ash dropped down to crouch next to the Charmander, letting his arm fall before he could reach out to the Pokemon. The Charmander was staring up at Ash, gaze - stern, steady. Resolute.

"You didn't really - say anything about it," Ash said. "So I want to ask. Does all that - about thinking I'm a better trainer than Damian - do you want to come with me?"

The Charmander smiled - not a smirk or a grin, but just a wide-open smile at Ash. "Char!"
Izumi hummed to herself as she pushed open the door to the Pokemon Tower. It held a strange place in Lavender Town culture - sacred and profane, a tourist attraction and a place to lay restless spirits to bed.

The song, too, was strange. She had known it as long as she could remember, although her mother and father swore they'd never heard it before.

Izumi, too, was strange. It wasn't unusual for children from Lavender Town to start their journey out with a Ghost Pokemon, but she never caught anything but ghosts. She couldn't explain why, except for the feeling that they needed her. Or that she needed them. The Lavender Town Gym was cursed, but every few generations, someone tried to start it up again. She felt the knowing looks of adults whenever she came back to town.

But she wasn't here for them, and wasn't here to start up the gym again.

She was here, as she always was, for the dead.

It was a foolish sort of folklore that Cubone were all orphans, crying for their lost mothers. They were fascinated with bones, though, and hunted down skulls that were the right size for their heads.

But Cubone were predisposed to grief in a way most humans were not. So the tales of a Cubone howling in the upper levels of the Pokemon Tower had summoned Izumi, though no one had asked for her help. The Pokemon Tower didn't close, but most mourners left as the sun went down. Some mediums and psychics remained, meditating on the dead.

The ghosts, too, remained.

They never left.

Normally, Izumi wouldn't have bothered with Repel. She didn't fear Ghost Pokemon the way others did, and had a knack with them. But she wasn't interested in wasting time finding her way to the lost, mourning creature in the tower.

The dead could afford to wait. The living could not.

When Izumi stepped onto the next-highest floor of the tower, she felt a chill. There was a Cubone there, cowering in the shadow of a headstone, wailing at irregular intervals. When Izumi stepped toward them, a voice, not sound, but a voice speaking to the soul, rang out.

**GET OUT**

Izumi shook her head and stepped forward, at which point black mist flooded her vision. Something - a mass of shadow - loomed toward her.

Izumi closed her eyes, focusing her spirit, and then opened them again.

A Marowak hung in the air before her, translucent, and eyes blazing with fury. They drifted toward the Cubone, who screamed, tucking their head down to avoid the ghost, and the Marowak screamed in frustration.

"Please stop," Izumi whispered to the ghost, who turned, raising a ghostly club of bone. "Please." The Marowak lunged at her, heedless of the plea, forcing Izumi to roll aside and grab at one of her Pokeballs.

"Go, Trevor," she called, releasing her Phantump. "Magical Leaf!"
The Marowak threw a ghostly club at Trevor, who evaded it with a flip before hurling a spray of leaves at the Marowak. The club curved around and flew back, catching Trevor on the side of his stump.

"Horn Leech!" Izumi called. Trevor swiped at the Marowak, draining a portion of the force animating it. The Marowak cried out, angry, but fearful, and Izumi saw her chance.

"Please stop!" she shouted. "Your child can't see you - they're frightened because you're so angry!"

And the Marowak - paused. Looked down at the cowering Cubone. And their eyes...softened. And as the Cubone continued to cry, the Marowak did, too, understanding the truth - that in death, they had lost the ability to even reach out to their child, as their shadowed visage brought only terror.

Rather than watch the misery play itself out in front of her, Izumi closed her eyes and began to sing. Neither the words nor the melody mattered. It was her power, her spirit, that had the power. But the song helped to focus, helped her to reveal the spirits of the dead to the living.

"How far will you go as you continue to walk? The wind asks me that, and I stand still..."

When the Cubone finally saw its parent as they were - a pale reflection of the creature they'd once been, their terrified cries died out as they stared at their parent with wide, startled eyes. Izumi had only ever seen the expression on others' faces, the awe at being reunited, for even a moment, with someone they'd thought lost. But she treasured it.

Most spirits found their peace, eventually. They didn't become Ghost Pokemon. As much as Izumi cared for them, the world didn't need more Ghost Pokemon. So she was as happy when she could, as when she could not, give a ghost some measure of resolution, of peace.

It did, however, leave the question of what to do with the orphaned Cubone, who continued to stare up at her, starry-eyed, once its parent's ghost had vanished.

...Well, people always told her to diversify her team.

Chapter End Notes

Valiant; Male Charmander, Fire Type
Naughty Nature. This Pokemon has high Attack, but their Special Defense is reduced.
Ability - Blaze. Powers up Fire-type moves when the Pokemon's HP is low.
Moves Known - Scratch, Ember, Flamethrower, Fire Spin

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