The Redwood Saga

by Sahqoreyth
The Redwood Saga

Preface

The story you are about to read is a prologue to the following chapters, which are set quite a few years in the past, at the beginning. Old readers should know that as of July 2019, much of the early parts of the story have been re-written, and in my opinion, improved. New readers should know that, due to time constraints, new chapters usually take a minimum of a month to write, edit, and publish.

It is important to note that while I will attempt to make everything as 'canon-friendly' as possible in this story, I will not always succeed. If you notice any errors in my 'lore' that clash with what's established, feel free to PM me and let me know, all feedback is appreciated. Also note that much of this is headcanon, and is subject to change if Nintendo ever gives us information on areas of the world mentioned in the story.

The world featured in this story is meant to be a fusion of our world, set many, many millions of years in the future, and the Pokémon world. This will be elaborated on in the future, but for now, go forward understanding that some of the people, regions, and names may be identical or similar to the real world's. For example, Kalos may sometimes be referred to as 'France' as well, but the people living in that region don't quite remember why. It's just the name that's carved into a bunch of ancient ruins. Most people in the era the story takes place in refer to it as Kalos.

Also important to note, much of the information about the 'ancient world' is only available to these characters because of the 'PokéNet', a similar and futuristic version of the internet. When it was created again, much of the data from the 'ancient world' was lost, but not all, and between books and several websites, the people of this time know a bit about the planet's ancient history. To them, humanity's fall, and then rise with the arrival of Pokémon, is somewhat common knowledge. Again, it will be elaborated upon. Eventually.

When it comes to 'fakemon', I take the same approach I do with the lore. If it makes sense, and is likely to pop up in wherever the story is centered, you may see some headcanon friendly versions of different Pokémon enter the story, but as a rule I try to avoid making entirely new Pokémon.

Regional variants, gender variants, etc. are all potentially fair game, but again, I tend to stick with what is released. The ones in this tale are Pokémon we will hopefully see in the future, but at the present, simply do not have. Names, traits, etc. of these Pokémon are subject to change when/if Nintendo gives us info on them.

One final note; the content of this story is probably not safe for a work environment. So, read it openly and obviously at your own risk. Most of the 'mature' content will be relating to 'drugs', termed in the story as 'Leaf'. I shouldn't have to tell you what it's based on. It's kind of obvious. Any overtly sexual scenes will be marked. If I ever write any. As of writing this, there are a few moments and not-so-subtle innuendo that probably is not appropriate for people under 12, in the U.S. at least. There are also a few rather gory moments, though I typically leave most of the unnerving details of such things to your mind's eye.

So be warned, children, this probably is not suited for your virgin eyes.

With that, enjoy.

Prologue
He'd underestimated the locals when they'd told him how high the plateau was. Even with all his skill, it had taken most of the day to finally reach the top of the massive plateau, known in these parts as the 'Master Plateau'. There was a reason nobody climbed up here. The wind was too strong for most flying types, and though several of his teammates had been eager to test that, he had ultimately decided to test himself against nature instead.

Nature, for her part, was pushing back. The wind almost reminded him of Norstad, but it lacked the bitter, freezing cold. Looking around, he didn't see or sense anything for miles. He was alone, on the top of the world. He stared at the fiery horizon for a moment, and then turned his deep blue eyes back to the barren emptiness around him. This was, as promised, the ideal place to train his team. At their level, a sparse field in a forest simply wasn't going to work. They were too destructive, if they wanted to train seriously.

The wind gusted suddenly, and the man growled in irritation, one large hand clamping his black and gold hat down against his head before it could fly off. The hat itself was a throwback, to several years earlier. Most Trainers would recognize the style as Unovan. It was an ordinary Trainer hat, really. Black in front, gold in back, with the symbol of his homeland on the middle. The symbol of eternal balance, a Taijitu sphere of black and white.

His hair, as always in a constant state of 'needing a trim', curled up over the edges of the hat, and he knew he'd need a comb after he was done up here. He hated when the wind messed with his hair, but there were more important things to deal with. Training in this kind of wind was going to be a problem.

At a height of 6,5, the Trainer usually towered over most people he met. He wasn't fat persay, but if his clothes were baggy enough, he could appear that way thanks to his body type. His current attire was the opposite of baggy however, as it fit his form with a tightness he wasn't used to, and highlighted his musculature far more than what he usually wore, but only when he moved. Human-made fabric simply wasn't as comfortable as what the dragon had given him early in his training, but one simply did not turn down the attire one earned at the World Tournament.

The black and gold robe whipped wildly in the fierce wind. The same symbol on his hat was stitched onto the back of it, and underneath, he wore a plain black shirt with a green Pokéball symbol etched onto it. His pants, he'd kept unchanged, as he saw no reason to change them out, and he still enjoyed wearing the otherworldly material around his more…sensitive regions. They were black going up to his waist and crotch, as well as along his inner thigh, but the outer edge was white all the way down. As his robe was tied usually, nobody really saw his pants.

His undershirt clashed with his new attire, which he'd been told was called a 'Haori' back in Japan. Given the nature of the World Tournament, the foreign attire hadn't really surprised him. The Japanese Leagues were incredibly popular, and easy to watch. He did genuinely like the robe, which came down to his ankles, or would have, if not for the wind, flaring it out behind him. He would've felt epic if he wasn't struggling to keep his footing.

While mostly gold, by request, he'd asked for a black flamelike pattern on the bottom of his relatively new attire. An obvious homage, and a subtle reference to his not-so-secret weapon. The wind gusted again, and as he felt even his large form lifting from the ground, he decided enough was enough. He focused his mind, and let the breath build within his lungs, but before he could do anything, the wind
suddenly ceased. He exhaled softly, somewhat disappointed. He liked clearing the skies.

Ceased was the wrong word, for the wind still moved his attire with a light breeze, a credit to its strength, given that Air Lock was supposed to remove all weather effects. He looked up to see the long, snake-like form of his Rayquaza, arcing through the clouds. He was, as far as he knew, the longest on record. It made sense, for he was also the first, and therefore the oldest. Or so the dragon had told him. He gave the Rayquaza a nod of thanks, and he could've sworn the dragon was smirking at him. He had no earthly idea as to why.

After he adjusted his hat, the Trainer once more surveyed the area, and began mentally setting up locations for where his team would train, and with whom. As he reached for the camouflage patterned Pokéball, as always, in point position, a voice interrupted him mid-throw. "Hello there!" The Trainer turned, and stared the intruder down, slowly raising an eyebrow at what his sight revealed. To all appearances, a perfectly normal looking human.

Normal, in this case, was a term he applied to the general masses of humanity. Even amongst them however, this man would've stuck out. The shape of his body was round at the bottom, and thin all the way up. His first thought, by pure reflex, was how similar it looked to a bong, a glass instrument used in the smoking of Leaf, a herb this Trainer was particularly fond of, but not reliant on. Trainers the world over, particularly those with grass types, often shared it at Pokémon Centers, and he was, at his core, a grass type Trainer.

"Well well." The strangely shaped man said, "It seems the rumors are true after all. Unova's Rayquaza has a new Tamer." Alexander Redwood raised a brow at the man approaching from about a Pokéfield length behind him. He'd had his Rayquaza for years. Most people knew that. Rayquaza appeared in the clouds again. The dragon coiled his massive body in the air, resting on said coils, and watched him. Alex knew that through that dragon's eyes, his other mentors were likely watching him as well. Bunch of old crotchety bastards. He did like them, even if they drove him nuts.

"He found me worthy." Alex said as the man across from him stopped, and put his hands on his hips. His attire didn't help his oddly shaped body. His bag stuck out from his overly round hip, not unlike the slide one filled with Leaf before smoking it. Alex resisted chuckling, despite the absurdity. There was something off about this Trainer, but he couldn't quite figure it out.

He wore a robe similar to Alex's, so similar in fact, that it was uncanny. It was white, rather than gold, and a swirl of artfully woven red lines moved to Alex's right around the bottom. When the garment shifted, they appeared to swirl, almost like water, or smoke. His shirt was a plain, smoky gray, and his pants were white cargo shorts, several years out of style. Even his head fit the uncanny similarity to a bong, for his hat was white with an open top, which revealed an entirely bald head underneath.

The symbol on the hat was green, but rather than the normal leaf symbol, or even the spiky variant found in Grassium crystals, this leaf symbol had five prongs, each looking slightly serrated. He shook his head, and bit his tongue. His eyes were probably red as well, and though it was hard to see at this distance, he knew that look, the look of someone who was enjoying the highs a bowl of the Leaf gave. This had to be a prank. He was about to tell the tourist to kindly piss off, when he noticed a familiar, if a bit outdated, stone on the strap of the man's bag. A legitimate Trainer, apparently, despite his appearance.

"I assume you're here for a battle, then?" Alex smirked. He heard Rayquaza in his head, offering to
deal with the intruder via their linked telepathy. He wasn't the only dragon requesting a chance to drive this strange man off, but Alex ignored his team's mental peanut gallery, for the moment. The fact that he hadn't sensed this man had piqued his interest, something many Trainers unfortunately failed to do these days. Being in the world’s top tier of Trainer could be rather boring, and after the World Tournament, many people recognized him, but only a few actually wanted to battle. He couldn't really blame them.

The man nodded. "My name is Clarence. Grass type user. The best grass type user, I'd wager. I've beaten all the others that are of note. All except you." Alex nodded, understanding. Of course. He was here for Terra. Everyone wanted a piece of the fabled 'Yggdrasil', and his legendary defense.

"I'm not strictly a grass type user." Alex said, flaring his robe open as he began reaching for the power, deep within. He kept his eyes from flaring blue though, he had just enough for a battle connection with his first Pokémon. Clarence eyed the collection of balls on his belt with a cursory examination, but his focus was on the camouflage patterned one still in Alex's hand.

"I'm aware…your team is rather impressive, I admit, but I've seen plenty of impressive teams. You heard me, Redwood. I didn't come to this Arceus-forsaken wasteland for your Charizard. I want your Torterra." The man was smirking, but Alex pinched his brow, and sighed.

"Everyone thinks they can handle my Torterra." He said, looking up again, and then gestured at the field. "But, you're in luck. This is actually a battlefield that could handle his punishment. He might only break half the plateau."

The smirk disappeared, and what replaced it was hard to make out. Fear, perhaps? Constipation? "Break half of the Master Plateau? You're overselling, Redwood. I'm ready to buy, too much, and I'll lose interest. And then who will be left to challenge you? Who would take the risk?"

The smirk left Alex's face as well. "You incorrectly assume that the rest of my team is as wild as Shruikan. He's a dragon. Honestly, it's like you people forget what they're best known for. Ferocity in battle." The mood had shifted, at least for Alex and his team, who were connected by a series of mental links, stemming from their Trainer and forming a mental web of sorts. They did not take kindly to people who insulted members of their family. Alex kept their anger in check, however. There would be time to use it.

Before more words were exchanged, Clarence drew, and threw his own Pokéball. "Brute Root! This is the Trainer. Prepare for battle!" The Venusaur let out an impressive roar as the flash of light that accompanied its arrival faded. It was certainly one of the stronger male specimens Alex had seen, and unique in that his ten serrated-edged petals were a deep forest green, rather than pink.

A quick glance told Alex that this Venusaur, for whatever reason, was a pure grass type. There was no poison typing with it, which only further increased the strangeness of this Trainer. Pure grass type Venusaur weren't unheard of, but they were usually ancient, wild, and responsible for breeding many Bulbasaur. Such offspring would then go into the world, and usually acquire the poison typing from the pollution human cities still produced, despite their best efforts to stymie it.

"Impressive," Alex said, nodding at the Venusaur. Old memories of another Venusaur, who had, now that he thought about it, also been a pure grass type, rose to the surface of his mind. Sadness accompanied them. "I still don't think he can handle Terra, though…recall him. I don't want to hurt such a unique Venusaur. They're a favorite of mine…"
Clarence's expression shifted to a grin. "I know." Before Alex could ask what that meant, the Trainer opposite him pressed two fingers to his key stone, and Alex sighed. Evidently, this battle was happening, despite his warning. Oh well. He'd tried.

"Respond to my heart! Beyond Evolution! MEGA EVOLVE!" Clarence shouted, as his Venusaur climbed to the next level of power in a long, drawn out sequence that really wasn't needed.

"Are you done?" Alex asked, once the Venusaur was finished. It certainly looked impressive, and he had to admit he was curious as to why it radiated a familiar Stunky-esque scent from its newer, larger petals, but he still knew it was no match for Terra. Then again, he'd been wrong before.

"Saaaauuuur!" The Mega Venusaur roared a challenge that one didn't need psychic powers to interpret. Alex glanced down at his belt, feeling a twitch from Terra's ball. He'd been called out by a fellow grass type, and was more than willing to put this Venusaur in its place.

Alex shrugged. "It seems Terra wants to accept your challenge. Very well." Clarence raised a brow as his opponent gave the ball an underhand toss high into the air, and in a flash of green, a large Torterra appeared on the barren, rocky field.

Terra was everything one expected a titanic earth turtle to grow into. Like his Trainer, he had grown larger over the course of their adventures, and had to be pushing, in Clarence's estimate, eight hundred pounds. Minimum. His legs were not dissimilar to the species of tree in his Trainer's surname. Large, thick, and sturdy. His shell was massive, easily large enough to ride, or camp on. The Ash tree on said shell was set in the center, and was large enough for a pair of Decidueye to roost comfortably, and the massive spikes on the right side of the shell were mirrored by three more on the left. That, more than anything, set Terra apart from his species, though such growths weren't unheard of. Moss covered each spike, and gave the massive turtle the appearance of a Pokémon in his prime.

Despite all of that, Clarence appeared undeterred, as did his Venusaur. As impressive as Terra was, he was still just a Torterra. Terra looked back at his Trainer once he took stock of his opponent, and was seemingly unimpressed. "Torterra?"

Alex shrugged. "If you want. There's no reason to restrict yourself. This time."

"Terra." The earth turtle nodded, and then began to glow green, as a green light surrounded his Trainer, and then himself. With that, the already massive Pokémon began to evolve.

His form shifted as the light from his Trainer surged into the earth turtle, and catapulted him to the next stage of his species evolution. The white horns on either side of his head grew longer, sharper, and the green that usually covered his head became white, connecting to his new head spikes, and forming a helmet of sorts. His tail lengthened as well, and a pair of deadly looking spikes on either side of the now clubbed tip shot out, just as long and sharp as the pair on his head. Each of the stone protrusions from his shell were humming with power, once he'd finished changing. The massive Torterra roared, and slammed the ground with his tail as the light faded.

"Last chance." Alex said, smirking as the entire plateau seemed to shake. "I really don't want to injure your Venusaur. Now you know I'm not overselling. Recall him, and we'll enjoy a bowl instead. Something tells me you'd like that." He couldn't help chuckling now, this was too ridiculous.

Clarence's hand moved, by pure instinct at the offer of Leaf, towards his Venusaur's ball, and then it stopped. He grinned. "Fascinating. No Key Stone...no command...it just changed on its own. I
didn't believe it. I guess Plate Crystals can cause Mega Evolution.”

Alex raised a brow from under his hat. "This isn't exactly new information…people have been using Plates and crystals that make up said plates for this for…years, now. Have you been living under a rock?"

Clarence stiffened, and his Venusaur looked back at him. "Something like that… years, eh? Hmmm…let's just say that, where I come from, Mega Evolution in general is…a touchy subject."

Alex nodded. With the explosion of new Mega Forms had come new problems. That much energy coursing through a Pokémon, the energy of the Alpha Pokémon himself, could have damaging side-effects. Without proper mastery, the Mega Forms could go berserk, and long-term usage could even, in the case of Scizor, cause fatal melting.

As he'd had something of a hand in making Mega Evolution so easily available, Alex had also taken steps to find a solution to that particular issue. It hadn't been easy, but the results spoke for themselves: a world in which a Trainer, once they had a proper bond, could Mega Evolve their beloved partner without worrying about killing them. Normally, the influence of one Trainer wouldn't have much of an effect, but after it was discovered that his method actually worked, many Trainers chose to learn it, rather than risk hurting their Pokémon. Those were the people he gladly taught the technique.

Those who only cared about using their Pokémon as a weapon, with unlimited access to the most powerful evolution phenomenon yet discovered, and there were many, had not been taught the technique. He had suspicions a few had found ways around that, but for the most part, the scum of the earth was kept from limitless power. Many countries had still opted to forbid Mega Evolution in their Leagues, but he hoped that someday, they'd change their minds. He'd travel to all of them, if he had to. Everyone deserved to battle on the same level, if they could handle such a thing.

"I understand." Alex said, finally, "But where I come from, it's been found to be harmless, now that we understand it." The problem with energy had been a uniquely crystal/Plate based phenomenon. Several Kalos Trainers had discovered that using Mega Stones limited the damage their partners sustained, enough to be safely ignored. That had, if he was being honest, been what led Alex to his own discovery of keeping the power of Arceus from melting his creations. Either way, they were still nowhere near as useful as the Plates. They could evolve any Pokémon that had the same typing as the crystal or Plate in question, and the Pokémon themselves did not require a stone, only trust in their Trainer. Such was the power of the Alpha Pokémon.

"I will admit…" Clarence said, eyeing Terra, "I was seriously tempted to take your offer. That Torterra is…well, look at him!" Terra slammed the ground again, though whether it was for effect or a result of impatience, Alex couldn't tell. Probably a bit of both.

"Impressive as you both are, it's not important. I don't care how many badges you have, or how many regions worship the ground you walk on, oh future Tamer of Arceus." Clarence said through a smirk, "I will have the battle I came for!" "Saaauuuur!" Brute Root echoed his Trainer.

Alex sighed again. They really weren't backing down. "Alright. Fine." He said, finally giving in. He turned his hat backwards, the Grassium and Groundium crystals that were a part of the strap that held the hat in place, now obvious. He gave his usual smirk as he spoke. "Don't say I didn't warn you."
The alarm rang, and he growled awake, smashing it with his oversized fist, swearing into his pillow as he heard it break. He always underestimated how hard he could hit those damn alarms. It was a problem in every region. It was either that, or use his Pokégear, which was unreliable at best. At least when it came to alarms.

His mother was already shouting about breakfast. Not a good sign, since she never cooked. Alexander Redwood rolled out of bed, half awake, and stumbled into the too-small shower in his room. It was a little cube, and he was a large man, both in height and unfortunately, weight. But that changed today.

Once showered, brushed, and de-odorized, he grabbed his green-brown hat and jacket and pulled them over his black undershirt, then pulled on his dark blue jeans. The hat fit well over his black, curled hair, even though he was desperately in need of a trim. Today would finally be the day. In this region, on the north-eastern coast of the largest continent in this part of the world, his journey would finally begin. He'd been waiting two decades for this. Though he knew he was starting way behind his own generation, he was ready.

Most of the people in Derrion Town spent their lives preparing to one day take over their family business, and contribute to society as a whole. But not Alex Redwood. When he was younger, he'd been brought to Castelia City by his parents, because the local school teacher had suggested they have him 'tested'. He was introduced to a 'Doctor Ein' who, after dazzling his parents with his Fornian University degrees in science, biology, medicine, etc, took the young boy into a separate room.

Though his memory of that time was foggy, as he'd been heartbroken over realizing his brother would get to become a Trainer, and he would not, he did recall the strange man with the strange hair putting him in front of an equally strange machine. He'd called it a Pokémeter, and claimed that with it, he could tell the potential for Training a person had. This was, according to the doctor, only one of its uses. Being somewhat shy and quiet, which was what had led his teacher to believe he had an 'issue' in the first place, Alex had complied, and grabbed the strange can-shaped rods of metal. Those, he remembered quite well. They had been pure silver in color, and had buzzed in his hands. He'd kept hold though, as instructed.

He had no earthly idea of what Doctor Ein had read on the other end of the strange machine, but the man had made a phone call, and in hushed tones, discussed his readings with whoever was on the other end. It had been a short call, and he'd heard none of the conversation. Doctor Ein had promised him that the results were good, and that he could probably be a great Trainer, with a little work. Then, they'd gone back to his parents, and Alex had learned first hand just how far a child's word went against a grown adult's.

The doctor had reversed his kind words entirely, with a smile on his face no less, showing his parents bar graphs (which had no labels for what was being measured) to illustrate his point that, according to their readings, he was unfit to handle Pokémon as a proper Trainer. Alex had, naturally, called him out on this, by explaining what had transpired in the few minutes he'd been gone, but the Doctor had refuted him with words that had more syllables than he could count, and could only guess the
meaning of. With the power of logic, Doctor Ein had convinced his parents that their eldest simply couldn't handle the power of a Pokémon safely.

Thus, his parents had been convinced he'd never become a Trainer. Pokémon were too dangerous for those with the 'disabilities' Ein had labeled the young boy with. Alex's granduncle, one Professor Gilroy Redwood, was the only one in his corner, as when the three had returned home, he was the only family member to react to the news with what Alex saw as the right response. Utter disbelief.

Though his granduncle had tried to convince his father otherwise, or at the very least have a different doctor test him, the decision had already been made. Alex would work on their ranch, and that was the end of it. Eric would take over eventually, and together, the two brothers would build a legacy to last centuries. Alex had other ideas though, and despite not having a Pokémon of his own, he'd managed to convince wild ones to battle alongside him. Sometimes. The Redwood line had produced several Pokémon Rangers over the years, and his family was quite good at bonding with the creatures. Each of them, usually, had a knack for it, but wild Pokémon were, at their core, wild. Thus, he had made it to the age of twenty four with some decent battle experience, but no team of his own.

Working on the ranch had been hard, filthy, grueling work, and after finally getting tired of shoveling Tauros dung, Alex had had enough. When he'd turned eighteen, he declared he was simply done. He'd strode into his father's office to make said declaration, and the entire Redwood Manor shook as they argued.

It was a fight that, in the opinion of most of his family members, was decades in the making. Alex and his older cousin by several years, Geralt, had shown the most promise when it came to bonding with Pokémon, according to their granduncle. Geralt had gone on to become a Pokémon Ranger, and had excelled, becoming a Top Ranger on their continent in the space of a few years. Alex knew that if he'd but had the chance to be a Trainer, he could be the best. He'd burned with the desire for a chance to prove himself for years.

Finally, his father had accepted his intentions. Being an eighteen-year-old, and by their laws, a man, he could no longer legally stop his son from purchasing his own Pokéballs. He already had several, but had resisted using them. As he had been about to enter the Unova University, and thus complete the final stage of his education, they'd agreed that if he managed to pass University, without a team, he could become a Trainer. Things hadn't been so simple, though.

Currently, he had one more year at the Unova University to finish, and to finish it, he needed a Pokémon. After two straight hours of shouting, and more than a few barbed insults, Alex's father had, finally, acquiesced to letting him have a partner. Only one. He'd said that it was a 'probationary period' and if he proved himself capable, he could get more. Victory was sweet, at least for him.

After years of saving and spending his hard-earned cash, the only benefit of being trapped on a ranch where his relatives were forced to pay him a wage or be hit with child labor laws, he was armed with hundreds of balls, potions, protein pills, and other gadgets that would help him in Unova, to the south, and beyond. He intended his journey to last his entire life, as was the case for serious Trainers, and he'd stockpiled as much as he could. He'd packed his bigger-on-the-inside bag, a gift from his granduncle, with enough items to last a lifetime. Or so he assumed. His father had no idea about his stash, but it had been impossible to hide the six custom Pokéballs he'd prepared for his main team. They'd argued over those too, but eventually decided that as long as they stayed empty, owning them wasn't an issue.
Alex looked in the mirror by the entrance of his room once he was dressed, and sighed. He was tired of seeing this fat incarnation of himself. University had been relatively easy, as he had all but memorized the Pokédex, and without a team to train, he'd grown fat over the long years there without working on the ranch. With nothing much else to do besides study, enjoy a bowl of Leaf, and play video games day in and day out, his lack of physical activity had caused him to grow. Fun as it had been, he was tired of it. He'd had more than enough lounging about to last a lifetime.

He was ready to start his journey. Now all he needed was a Pokémon. That was where his granduncle, and strongest supporter of his decision to be a Trainer, came in. As always, he'd promised to help his grandnephew when he'd heard that he was, finally, going to get a partner.

The elderly Professor knew that if Alexander Redwood was to be a Master, he'd need the right starter Pokémon. The Professor had pulled his strings, and the famous Professor Juniper, from Unova, transferred him three of their starters common to Unova's capital, namely Snivy, Oshawott, and Tepig. All exquisitely rare Pokémon that anyone would love to have.

His granduncle was waiting in the lab when Alex arrived, and he knew as soon as their eyes met, that this was it. The day had come. He was an older gentleman, though to call him that would be kind. Age had caused him to slump a bit as his spine was perpetually curved, the top of his head was bald, but he had wild, gray hair sticking out from the back and sides of his head.

He looked like a mad scientist, and with the official Professor coat, he basically was one. He got his aide's attention with a snap of his fingers, and everyone watched as the Professor's favored relative walked into the lab, towering over everyone there at a height of 6.2. Most Trainers weren’t so large width-wise, but the training he had in mind for University would take care of that.

The Professor gestured to a briefcase on a table by the lab's back wall. "Snivy, Oshawott, Tepig, this is Alex." The three Pokémon appeared as they were named, and eyed the new Trainer, who examined them in turn.

"Hmm." Alex said after looking them over, and confirming his suspicions. He had nothing but respect for Professor Juniper, but he was well acquainted with the kind of Pokémon the League gave to new Trainers. He didn't need babies or inexperienced Pokémon to learn with, as he did not define himself as a rookie Trainer. He needed a partner with some measure of life experience, and of course, potential. "These three are not for me." The three starters, doing their best to look pleasing to the eye, all pouted, sad at his choice.

"It's okay." He patted each of them, and the three young Pokémon smiled. "I have a feeling I'm not supposed to be your Trainer. You may have noticed I'm not a teen...but we will meet again, I think. Go back to your home, and you will find the ones you're destined to bond with. Then, one day, challenge me. When you're ready." The three starter Pokémon shared a look, then looked back at Alex, and nodded. The fire burned in each of their young eyes, and he knew, the challenge was accepted.

Shrugging, the ancient Professor called them all back, hiding a smirk. "Well lad, I didn't expect that. Unova Trainers are renowned for their starters." His sly gaze shifted to his grandnephew. "Why, even that girl next door has a Snivy." Alex was hard to read, but his older relative knew how to see past the stone-faced passive expression that was his default. His eyes always gave him away. They were on fire today, and at the mention of their neighbor, the flames had flared.

Alex nodded in agreement keeping his face impassive and his cheeks cold. "That she does." He
glanced at the Snivy's ball again, but shook his head. Copying her would get him nowhere, and, both that Snivy and hers were female. There were other ways to gain her notice, though.

Jessica Gladstone was, in a word, beautiful. He'd been crushing on her since they'd met during his Trainer Exam to get an ID, and once she'd moved to town, he'd wondered if fate was actually favoring him. He'd always carried a torch for her, but then, so had every other boy within their small town who had an interest in women. He had a small advantage though, as he lived nearby. She often ran barefoot through the fields of her family's land with her Snivy, and her red hair was always easy to spot. It was the color of a Charmander, as were most of her outfits, but despite that, she and Snivy made a good pair. Their eyes were almost identical.

Despite being neighbors, they rarely spoke anymore. There was just under a mile of land between her estate, and his family's ranch. The only way he'd ever even had a chance at talking to let alone befriending a girl so gorgeous, and rich, was because her older brother, Connor, was a good friend who like Alex, had shared a love of Leaf, video games, and Pokémon. They'd agreed to one day be rivals, when Connor learned why Alex had no Pokémon, and had taken to reading through the entirety of the Pokédex in preparation. As the years had passed, Connor had decided to get a leg up on his rival-to-be, and to that end he had gone overseas to Kalos a few years back. Now, Alex didn't see much of Jess, or her family, outside of their yearly Festivus gatherings.

Connor Gladstone had always been obsessed with Greninja, and getting a Froakie on this continent was challenging, to say the least. His family was rich, richer than Alex's, but their father had just gotten into the Tauros ranching business after years of owning a ranch estate, but not using it. He'd decided to partner with Alex's father, Frederick, and the two business minded men had agreed on splitting the profits of the cheese and milk their Miltank produced on their combined ranching land.

After generations of breeding, the number of Miltank had slowly increased, as did the quality of their milk, but they were more of a side-effect, as the Tauros who sired them were worth more money. Still the stronger the Tauros, the better milk its daughter made. It was this aspect of society that the Redwoods had grown rich on over the past few years, but Alex knew he would never take up his father's work. It would pass to his brother and his cousins, who also worked on their Pokémon ranch/laboratory.

Alex had always envied not being able to leave with Connor and journey with him as they'd intended, but without a team of his own, he'd never be able to leave. Thankfully, he did already have a Trainer ID. At ten, children of the world were usually tested for their aptitude at controlling a 'special research' Pokémon. Alex's had been a Bulbasaur.

They were a powerful team once 'Saur' had fully evolved during the test, and his record of wins and losses against the other novices had been impressive enough to get him into that year's top percentile. Unfortunately, his record had been scrubbed several years later, after the League got an anonymous tip, suggesting that he'd cheated. Evidently, it claimed he'd been boosting his partner with Rare Candies, and given his tendency to hide in bushes during the test, the tip appeared credible.

Ultimately, the League had scrubbed his record, but allowed him to keep the ID, as Professor Redwood threatened to make a scene if they forcibly tried to reclaim it. Given his friendship with John Crimson, legendary anchor of the Pokémon News Network, the threat had been enough for a small victory. Alex had remained Pokéless throughout his high school years, always burning for the chance to properly train his own Pokémon, and show that he was the reason they were strong, not Rare Candies. Without his granduncle's intervention though, he knew none of this would've been possible.
Despite the long years of being an odd, pitied outcast, he'd finally made it. He'd known since he was four that he wanted to be a Trainer. Today was the day he began to change his reputation for being too 'slow' to handle a Pokémon. His father had never had an issue telling everyone what the League had done, loudly, and in public. His mother had, since he'd been born, seemed to be primarily focused on his brother Eric, and she too never hesitated to explain why their eldest son, a clear and obvious natural with Pokémon to whoever saw him with them, was not a Trainer. The resulting embarrassment had created more than a few feelings of resentment, but then, he'd never been close to either of his parents. What good memories he had of them were faded and few.

"I've made up my mind, Gruncle Red." Alex said, using his nickname for his favorite relative, and looking quite pleased with himself. "I want a Turtwig." A chuckle went through the room. They'd had bets that he'd choose a turtle of some kind. Eric had trained a Blastoise over the years, and the aides were well aware of this Trainer's desire to prove his competence. As his granduncle had counseled, demonstrations would go further with his father than words ever could. This had, logically, led to Alex thinking that if he trained a bigger, better, turtle he'd undoubtedly prove who was 'competent enough to be a Trainer' and who was not. He didn't dislike his brother overmuch, he had his own parental burdens to deal with as well, but after over twenty years of waiting, he needed to make the most of this chance, or he would remain without a Pokémon until he buried his father, and by that point, he had no illusions about becoming a Pokémon Master. He didn't know how he knew, but he was convinced that waiting that long would be too long.

The Professor burst out laughing, and a few of the aides smirked behind their glasses in the background. "Turtwig! Hah! Very well lad, if you want a Turtwig, you'll get one. Though, you'll have to go out and catch it yourself."

Alex smirked. "Like I'd do it any other way." For Alex, the choice of starter was simple. His favorite clothes matched Turtwig's color scheme, and, it had a type advantage over a Blastoise, like the one his brother owned. More than that, Torterra was a strong defensive battler, and no slouch with heavy hitting physical attacks. Speed would be the main issue. He was a turtle, after all. He was also a grass and ground type, meaning their main weakness would be ice. They'd figure out a way to deal with that though. Torterra were known for their sturdiness and defensive abilities.

The Professor pressed a button on one of the lab's walls, and a doorway opened on the back-right side of the lab. Once Alex wandered in looking around, the Professor turned to his assistants, "Pay up." He said, smirking.

He knew his nephew well. Those who'd bet correctly on his choice had won a great deal of the Pokédollars. Half had been expecting him to choose Squirtle instead, so he could prove who could raise a Blastoise better, and no one had bet that he would take the Unova starters, young as they had been. The Professor had insisted on testing him with them anyways. Returning them was as simple as pressing a button, after all.

He followed his great-nephew into the side lab, and flicked the light on. "From here, I can talk to an old friend. He owes me a Turtwig..." The Professor stepped past his relative, and made the call.

He spoke softly, "John, it's me. I know I'm interrupting your favorite meal of steak, waffles, french fries, and of course Scotch, but I need a favor. Ask your people to find out where the Turtwigs are today."

There was audible sighing in the call's background as Gilroy Redwood's contact ordered the PNN's radar people to scan for Turtwigs in their area, not too far west of Bostonia. They had satellites around the world, over every civilized country, which made tracking Pokémon easy. Once a familiar
image appeared on the screen a few seconds later, he hung up the phone.

A map of the local area was on the screen. The old man pointed a gnarled finger at a forested area a few miles north of their small town. "There. Past the ranches, and into the woods by the orchards, is where you'll find your Turtwig."

Alex was already out the door, and the aides had to stop him. "Hold up lad." Professor Redwood wheezed, hobbling over to his great-nephew on his cane. "A true Trainer needs a Pokédex. And-"

"And balls. Yes Gruncle, I know. I have the balls. And I was making my own Pokédex…"

"Nonsense." The Professor interrupted, several seconds too late. "You'll have a Redwood Pokédex, and that's final. I've improved on Juniper's design. Every known Pokémon from every known region is listed here, and it updates as new regions are catalogued. I expect you to catalogue at least one region. Unova hasn't been finished yet you know, though we pretty much know what lives here by now. Go catalogue it. Heh. Do my job for me!"

The old man cackled and wheezed through another laugh as his relative took the Pokédex with a sigh. His granduncle's only aspiration was making sure his Leaf jar was over seventy five percent full. As he looked the device over, he was still somewhat impressed. It would remain to be seen if the 'improvements' were actually beneficial, but he doubted they would get in the way. Once the genius known as Bill had figured out how to link every Pokédex the world over via the PokéNet, the database of known Pokémon had quadrupled in a night, as Trainers the world over linked up. New information on more than a few species entirely foreign to Unova, and most League friendly regions, had flooded in, and had only kept growing. He could use his own once it was finished, but this would do. For now.

Alex was out the door again, Pokédex in hand, as he power-walked towards the woods, and soon found himself damp with sweat in the summer heat. He pushed on though, as being sweaty was going to become a regular thing. That was how it had been with Saur, and that was how training would be with whoever he found in the woods. He was a large man, many would say fat, but that was only because he'd spent so long on the sidelines, learning and eating and lounging. He knew his future would be full of intensity…so he had taken this brief time in his life to relax. Now, he would finally prove himself, and lose weight in the process.

After over twenty years of watching the Pokémon world advance to ever more ridiculous forms of competitive battle, he had, of course, planned his team for his own challenge. He wasn't a kid, and he didn't bother going after the first Pidgey or Starly he saw. He had a focus, today.

In other countries like Japan, ten-year olds might have been cautioned against going into the areas where Pokémon lived alone, but this was not necessary for one who had been educated at the regional University. The fact that he'd often played in these woods also helped. The Pokémon he passed as he finally made his way into the natural forest glanced at him curiously, but otherwise ignored the human.

Even Beedrill avoided him. The first thing he'd been taught was how to walk through the woods without angering a Pokémon, and even if you did accidentally wander into the territory of a mean one, they usually softened once you offered a berry, and then quickly left. This didn't always work, but none of the wild ones here bothered him today.

Despite what some might think, wild Pokémon were very clever. As long as you didn't anger them,
they would typically ignore you. Especially if they sensed you had no Pokémon of your own with you. Alex had never had a problem with these woods, and he knew many of the Pokémon in this forest, even some that were considered meaner.

As a child, he'd often played here when he'd helped out at the Torterra orchards, to the east. The Torterra had always let him climb their shells to pick fruit, even the grumpy old ones who didn't like to be bothered. They were kind, but also powerful. They had once even driven off a gang of thieves, who were obsessed with stealing fruit for some reason, that had all used fire types.

Their power had awed Alex, who until that point had wanted a fire type as his first Pokémon. He still did, just not as his first. He'd find a Charmander eventually, they were absurdly popular requisitions on the Trading Network after all, but he would start with a Turtwig, and train him to be as powerful as the Torterra in the orchard had been. The very earth had shook with their power. That was the kind of Pokémon he needed on his team.

To the Pokémon of this forest that might have considered joining him, as they spied the previously lacking bag and Pokéballs, it was obvious that this human had a focus, and no matter how badly he wanted that Nidoran pair, or the healthy green looking Caterpie he saw on a nearby log. He went deeper, ever deeper, until he discovered a place, a round, bare hill, where he found his prize.

Lying beneath an enormous Oak tree were several sleeping Turtwigs. "Finally..." he said, panting from the hard hike and the summer heat, and now properly, thoroughly, damp from sweat. He'd underestimated just how out of shape he'd gotten in the three years of no farm work. As he uttered the words, he knew what he would awaken. Their mother. While it was true some Pokémon liked to live on Torterra's shell, the females usually kept theirs empty, for their eggs. It was the easiest way to determine an adult's gender.

The mound rose from the ground, and slowly one massive, unmistakably female eye met his gaze, and looked him over. He bowed low. "Great Mother Torterra. I wish to train one of your young ones. I need a partner."

He stayed perfectly still as the great beast regarded him, and he didn't flinch as hot air was expelled over him, almost knocking his hat loose. Then, finally, she went back to sleep, shaking the very forest around her as she burrowed into the ground. Once more there was only a great tree on a round hill, the rest of her was completely underground, giving her more nutrients than she could ever find by grazing at her size and speed.

The young Turtwigs ran towards him, all eager and understanding that this was their chance to be trained, and not given out in a lab either, caught in the wild itself. Very rare, for a new Trainer, but not unheard of in parts as rural as 'northern Unova'. Alex scratched their chins and shells, but as he looked them over, he knew immediately which one would be his.

The small turtle had watched, and waited to judge whether Alex was a worthy Trainer or not. The others were adorable, and he gave each one another friendly scratch, but he knew the large one would be his. This was his partner.

He was the largest Turtwig, and the only one to have walked over to him patiently, before regarding him, and nodding, agreeing that he was worthy. Alex smirked, even as he consoled the others. They were all a bit young still, but not the larger one. He was ready to be trained.

The small turtle had watched, and waited to judge whether Alex was a worthy Trainer or not. The others were adorable, and he gave each one another friendly scratch, but he knew the large one would be his. This was his partner.
Pokéball he'd picked specifically for his Turtwig, at no small expense to his personal cash. He had a ball for each of his future party members, and gathering them all had taken most of his life. Such things were expensive after all, and he'd been given a lecture about finances after buying each one of them. Now he would make his family see why they'd been worth it. Before today, his parents had considered them a waste, since he would 'never own a Pokémon under their roof'. That was fine with him. He was eager to leave.

He'd obtained a Premier ball, a ball with water designs, one with fire, a purple looking one that would hold his psychic type, and a Timer ball that would hold his dragon type. His proverbial Ace in the hole when his future Torterra couldn't cut it.

The small turtle nodded, pressed the center button with his large nose, and swirled into it in a flash of green light. It shook once, and then the button faded from its blinking red to a plain white. He stared at the ball for a long time, not quite believing what had happened. He finally had his own Pokémon. It was two decades overdue, as he'd literally been asking for one since he was four.

Finally, the attempts at bullying would end, the strange looks, mixing between pity and disgust. He knew he was still weird, one did not simply change a lifetime of exclusion, and the habits it had formed, in a day. But it was a step in the right direction. One he'd been itching to take. A wide smirk appeared on the passive face as he stood, and tossed the ball. It came right back to his hand, with the accuracy of a homing Pidgey.

Alex smirked as the Turtwig formed from the emerald colored light, glanced around, and then blinked. Evidently entering and exiting was weird, but he didn't seem adverse to the ball, at least. "Well done. I name thee Terra. Together, you and I will be the best. Like no one ever was." He smirked, recalling the line from one of his favorite shows as a kid. "Are you with me?"

Terra had, up until this moment, been a lazy Turtwig, unwilling to do much more than sleep and eat and learn from his mother. Watching over his siblings had always been tough enough, especially in the wild, but he'd always felt as if he was destined for something more. He'd had little interaction with humans, as his mother had warned him to stay away from them, but this one, she had liked the scent of. She had never, to his knowledge, given a human more than an uninterested glance before moving on and ignoring them entirely.

This human was different though. Similar to his kind, in some ways, but there was more to this new sensation than a matching color palette. As soon as he'd entered the ball, he knew they were bonded. Now, he felt this human's fire, his drive to climb to the very top. Their bond would last the rest of their lives. They were both big, and a bit overweight, but together they would grow into something truly powerful, as their adventure carved their power from their pudgy starting forms. Terra nodded. He could picture himself as the mightiest of his kin, and this was the Trainer who would take him to that height. Every instinct he had confirmed it.

"Very well." Alex nodded, smirking. "Someday, you will be regarded as the strongest Torterra on the planet…but for now my friend, we train. It's a long road, a hard road, full of ice, fire, and obstacles you won't be able to handle alone. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Twig!" was the reply he got from the large Turtwig. He hadn't hesitated in answering.

With that, they said their goodbyes to his family, and headed for home. As they walked, Alex reassured his stoic friend; "Now you know the way to your mother from your new home. If you can get to our home, you can go find her. Whenever you wish. Just let me know beforehand, hmm?"
That made the little turtle grin, and nod. He hadn't looked worried, but the reassurance had helped ease his nerves. Anyone would be nervous leaving home, but it turned out that he wasn't really all that far from the home he knew.

His new home wasn't bad either. He'd have to grow truly massive to feel cramped in a place like this, and he liked the way his Trainer and his family smelled. He could tell what his mother had sensed with one sniff, now. Each of the humans had an inherent kindness to them, though as he met the older ones, he sensed their kindness had, for whatever reason, dulled. He avoided those humans in his usual aloof manner. There were too many faces to remember at the dinner table that first night, but the other Pokémon that were allowed in the house were friendly as well. He didn't notice how quiet the humans were, nor did he think it abnormal, as this was his first real interaction with them.

The only Pokémon that hadn't been friendly towards him was the Blastoise that eyed him the entire time they ate, not with malice, but with something that seemed like high expectations. Beyond staring though, the cannon turtle did nothing. He could tell when another Pokémon wanted to battle, though. Someday, he guessed, they would both have the chance. He looked forward to it. It was clearly a powerful Pokémon.

Terra spent all night playing with the others, as all but one of the humans he sniffed and greeted quietly admired his size, and when they were done, he followed his new Trainer to his room, all the way to the top of the house. Stairs were a new experience for him, and he knew immediately that he would come to loathe them. Then again, they would only be an issue for as long as he remained small. When he was grown, he could crush them at his leisure with feet as big as his mom's. Everyone in the house soon knew when Terra went up, and when he went down, as he practiced stomping on every single step.

Alex had shown him a place on the floor to sleep, no doubt comfortable, but Terra waited until his Trainer was in bed, and then joined him. Alex didn't mind. Grass types preferred warmth, and the soil on his Pokémon's back smelled wonderful. He cuddled his Turtwig close, and even though he woke up with dirt stains on his sheets, he didn't mind. He had a Pokémon. Nothing could ruin his good mood. Indeed, even his cousins were astounded at the shift in personality. He'd avoided most of his family as a rule, preferring to either climb atop their barn and 'cloud gaze' or 'star gaze' as the case sometimes was, but now, the passive face bore eyes that didn't stare at the world with irritation. Instead, they were on fire.

Weeks passed, and summer soon began to end. The new pair had trained hard in the brutal heat, but sunlight was something grass types loved, and Alex had had his little turtle absorb as much of it as possible. It was going to be a hard winter. Then, finally, his final year at University began. Alex quietly trained his new Turtwig over the winter months. Having obtained him in August of that year, their combined training took place in the coldest months, in the coldest part of that continent. Their training was, in a word, intense. Most Trainers didn't push their partners so hard, but Alex had explained his situation to Terra. They'd both agreed then, they would need to work so hard, they'd feel like they were on the verge of death after each session. It was the only way to advance as fast as they needed to, as fast as possible, though naturally they balanced this extreme exertion with well-earned days off sprinkled in between.

They did everything together, he and Terra. Schoolwork, what little was left to be done, and then graduation of course, where he was likely to be the only Trainer in his year not to have a fully evolved starter, or a full team. His parents had been furious when he was told he'd have to go another year to finish two classes that required at least one Pokémon, but Alex didn't mind. He wasn't paying, the government was, though there was quite a hefty fine for needing more time to finish a
degree than the University said was needed, and that, came from either students or their families. As much of an allowance as he'd been given, six digits were yet out of his range. As it was their stubborn refusal in allowing him a single Pokémon that caused this unnecessary extra semester, he felt the fine was well earned karmic justice.

As expected, once he had a partner of his own, he excelled at battling. He'd started at the bottom as Terra, while large, was still young, and needed to train. Naturally, the twenty-four year old showing up to challenge kindergartners had seemed more than a bit odd, though the awkwardness had lessened once their teachers saw how well he handled the young ones, and of course, heard his reason for visiting them in the first place. After that, Terra had grown rapidly. Once at University, they were mostly focused on battle tactics, like coded commands that made it hard for an opponent to guess their moves. Terra learned them easily, as he and his Trainer could communicate with about 90% accuracy. The training had helped with that, though. The turtle had learned that humans often needed a very obvious nudge in the right direction for comprehension, but once they understood, they could usually grasp whatever he was trying to tell them.

Alex had never talked much at University in the years he'd gone, never made many friends outside of classes really, or rivals for that matter. He was just the large, dumpy looking kid with the equally large and dumpy looking Turtwig. He didn't battle publicly to show off. He didn't boast. Most of the time, even with his size, he went unnoticed entirely.

He'd rarely bothered raising his hand in class, unless the teachers demanded an answer of him. He usually answered right, and yet remained quiet all the same. He trained alone in the woods around the campus almost every day, always leaving his spot and moving deeper into the great forest whenever he heard other Trainers his age approaching. The reason he didn't battle was obvious, at least to him.

Terra had, over the course of endless hard hours of training during the long semester, become a powerhouse. They had started the day he caught him, and hadn't stopped. The road had been long, and cold, and there were plenty of times one of them had wanted to quit, but they had managed to come through it, and now, it was going to pay off.

He and his Trainer had taken multiple vitamins each day, and over the remainder of his school year, the both of them grew physically strong. Terra did not evolve, though he could have gone straight into a Torterra if he so desired. He even learned Earthquake from a Tyranitar they met in the mountains north of campus, but that was his second best kept secret.

When they did battle those persistent Trainers, who sought them out after hearing the whisper of a rumor about their supposed strength, they always won, or at least ended things with a draw when their opponent had a type advantage. Alex had figured out early on how to counter for fire moves, at least. Ice remained a weakness, and he knew as Terra grew bigger after evolving, and slower, they would be even harder to dodge. For the moment though, the lighter form of a Turtwig made dodging Ice Beams much easier.

When they won, instead of taking their opponent's money, pride, or Pokémon, he made them swear not to tell anyone else where he trained. Many blabbed anyways of course, to their girlfriends, or boyfriends, as the case sometimes was. It was hard to track him down twice though. He and Terra often moved miles away from the campus. Having only two classes meant several days off in a row, and often, they could go leagues away from anyone, and train as hard as they dared. Having grown up in a place that was little more than fields and forests, he was quite used to camping as well.
Though he very obviously walked into the woods with his Turtwig, and came out hours later, exhausted and sweaty, nobody made the connection between him, and the supposedly 'super strong' Trainer in the woods. Mostly because nobody could believe that a kid that large with just a Turtwig could be that strong.

The people who oversaw his dorm knew about his training habits, but they respected his wish for privacy and stayed tight lipped, or at most, pointed the more insistent Trainers into the woods. Even as a dorm student he was quiet, content to sit around and play video games, and watch TV with the volume low when he took an occasional day off.

He never disturbed anyone, never had parties, occasionally invited unregistered guests, but they were always respectful, and were Alumni themselves. What friends he did have it seemed, were older and already had jobs in their chosen fields, their dreams of journeying around the world crushed by the hard reality of financial concerns. Alex had always flown under the radar, but he knew he would eventually be thrust into the spotlight. The graduation exams were always public. His would be no different.

It was when he overheard rumors of a 'strong Trainer in the northern woods' as he devoured hashbrowns in the Mess Hall that he knew he needed to stop battling the few people who managed to find him. Someone had talked, despite his asking otherwise. For what he had in mind, he needed to stay unknown until graduation. The more people who knew how strong he and Terra had become, the harder their test would be. The faculty pretended to be above the local campus gossip, but he'd been at University long enough to notice the difference in difficulty during Final Exams for Trainers with a reputation. His needed to be as easy as possible, since he only had one Pokémon.

Though the strength of this 'mystery Trainer' was supposed to be impressive, he was glad when nobody seemed to believe it. Every Trainer claimed to be strong, and those who didn't were often ignored. His teachers had an inkling of course, they could spot talent and strength when they saw it, but he never showed off, even in class. Mostly because he was always exhausted after his days of training, such was its intensity.

Though his original plan hadn't called for them, Alex had added weight vests for both himself and Terra after they had stopped a rampaging Tyranitar from devastating the campus, and still managed to remain incognito. Their strength had plateaued, and they still needed to be stronger for what lay ahead. The weight vests never came off, even in class. Terra wore them too without complaint, though not at all times, as he was still growing. The added strain would be worth it soon enough.

Though the training had a positive effect on Alex's weight, the vests made him seem just as heavy as he'd always been. He didn't care. He needed to reawaken his muscles, and push them to be stronger. Everything he felt, he knew Terra felt just as much, if not more. For him, he could handle the soreness, and the difficulty of breathing with so much weight on. In time, he hardly noticed it.

The final exam of the University, for Trainer majors at least, consisted of an intense test that forced the studying Trainers, and their partners, to go through a rigorous set of exams with their Pokémon team, to demonstrate what they had learned. When Alex had shown up to his advisor's office with only a pudgy Turtwig in his party at the start of his final year of University, his advisor had actually facepalmed.

His parents had been consulted. The Dean was informed. Alexander Redwood could not fail University. The Redwood Lab would be even more disrespected. He was his family's chance to erase the 'stain' his granduncle's reputation had left on their name in the science community. In his father's opinion, it was the only good that could possibly come from him being allowed to become a
Trainer. If he could manage to discover something, anything really, that other Trainers had missed, that would be enough.

Eventually, at a meeting of all interested parties, he told them all to, quite literally, piss off. He stated that he would pass any test given to him with his Turtwig, and just his Turtwig. As his father had demanded when they agreed he would finally be allowed a Pokémon. He felt more satisfaction than he should have when he saw the patriarch of the Redwood clan turn red with anger. None of the University staff had known that little factoid, nor had they realized just how long Alex had gone without a Pokémon. It was embarrassing, to say the least. What kind of parent denied their own flesh and blood a Pokémon partner?

His advisors and the Dean were against his decision, but his teachers supported him. They had watched this young man show up to every class for almost six years without a single ball on his belt, or even many friends. He had a knack with Pokémon that was obvious to anyone with eyes, and they were all aware of the role he'd played in calming a rampaging Tyranitar. He'd done that with naught but a Turtwig, and all in his first year of actually having a Pokémon. He could handle the exams with just one.

His parents had remained quiet, letting the educators bicker. Alex knew his father expected him to fail, he'd said as much, and had only the lowest of expectations. Alex intended to smash through them with the ferocity of a Woodhammer, and not look back. Though, in the face of his son's evident skill, the elder Redwood's preconceived assumptions about his son's ability to handle a Pokémon were finally starting to shift. The University's educators were some of the best trained mentors in the world. If they were impressed, his firstborn must have been good. For the first time since Alex was a child, his father quietly wondered if he'd made a terrible error.

It was one such teacher, who had been responsible for dealing with the repercussions of the Tyranitar that had wandered onto the campus several months past, that spoke up for Alex, and managed to sway the Dean's mind.

So be it, he'd thought. He would face the trials with Terra, and the entire University would watch in awe as he beat every single challenge he faced. His only stipulation for the trials was that during and after each one, he could give his Pokémon a potion of unrestricted strength, and an Elixir to restore Pokémon Power to his moves.

His request was granted, and with it, Terra demonstrated how strong he was. Alex had been stockpiling supplies for years bit by bit, and now his patient use of his allowance was helping him tremendously. Terra seemed to have leveled many times during the early tests, but never evolved. The crowd always waited, but the large Turtwig never began to glow. He never even had to use all his moves. These were no small challenges, and often it required entire teams, the use of moves like Vine Whip, or Water Gun, or Ember, basic moves, but moves that Alex and Terra simply did not have.

Despite this, Alex made good use of his early education from his granduncle, namely by way of utilizing the wild Pokémon present on the courses with neither Ranger Styler nor Pokéballs. They made up for what Terra simply did not have, but Alex knew once his team was assembled, and trained, a test like this would be nothing. He'd studied up on what he'd need to be a Trainer since the time he learned to read. He was prepared.

He ran the obstacle courses, and Terra was right along with him, as the crowd watched in disbelief. Nobody could fathom how a Turtwig could do so much. He swam, jumped through hoops of fire,
endured man-made blizzards, simulations of pouring rain, swamps, grassy plains, etcetera, etcetera until finally, the two of them made it through.

It was designed to simulate every possible terrain Trainers might encounter in the world, and he had passed through each of them, Terra never wavered either. There was a fire burning in their eyes that not even the coldest ice could blow out.

Finally, the time for battle came. Needless to say, by this point, those who already competed had left. But those who stayed seemed impressed. His trials certainly took longer than most others, but the judges waved the need for a time limit, given that all he had was a Turtwig. Terra's unassuming appearance had done much to get them this far. Nobody expected him to be strong.

Going in with only one unevolved Pokémon was hard enough, they had decided early on. But now, that was over. No more items. No more elixirs. Terra was given one more chance to heal completely, and an hour's rest before the final battle. That was normal, however. The final battle was, more or less, what Trainer majors were graded on most harshly.

Terra took two hours to recover, but the crowd's enthusiasm for seeing him reappear died off once it became clear he hadn't evolved. They really wanted to see him become a Grotle, at least, but Alex knew forcing him to adapt to a new body mid-challenge was a bad idea. It simply wasn't yet time to evolve him. He had a plan, after all.

His opponent was selected from the heads of the department that oversaw the student's training in a specific aspect of Pokémon. Breeding, cooking, battling, contests, whatever a person wanted to one day be, their final test was given in the setting that would best test them and their abilities.

When asked what his 'focus' was going to be, Alex had simply written, on the first day he had come to the University without a team, 'Pokémon Master'. His first counselor had thought that was a joke. So had the second, and third. The fourth took him seriously, but passed him on when he refused to capture a full team.

It had taken him a total of six counselors over the course of his education to finally help him focus on what he would need to be a master. Four out of six of them had simply said, "He needs Pokémon." Before passing him along. Thus, the head of the Trainer Department had become his counselor in his final year, and had sighed in relief when he finally presented his Turtwig.

At least he had brought one Pokémon. That was improvement. Though the Department Head felt some guilt in judging him once he'd learned of the strange circumstances the boy had grown up with. Not allowing someone so obviously talented to have a Pokémon was sheer stupidity, in his opinion. He'd called Gilroy Redwood the night before to ask about it, and had gotten a proper tirade. He'd tried, evidently, to help the boy, but risked eviction in doing so. Out of curiosity, the older man had looked up the scrubbed record, and that had been the final nail in the coffin. There was potential here. A Trainer like Alex was rare, and only came along once or twice in a generation. He'd been certain after the twins, as well as Nate and Rosa, Unova had produced its last Champions for a time. But this kid, with proper guidance, would likely reach the same heights. If given the chance to excel, and, if that fire in his eyes stayed burning. The fact that it had survived a childhood that must have been an ordeal was a good sign.

It was the opinion of most of the staff that Alexander Redwood would never graduate, when they saw he'd brought only a Turtwig to the challenge. Yet there he was, clad in the filthy robes of a graduate who'd made it through the first half of the challenges. He handed the customary robes off to
the University staff as he entered the final stadium beside his Turtwig. He was in his training clothes now, and to call them worn would have been generous. But, he'd started the year with them, and he would be damned if he wasn't going to finish it in them as well. He smirked, and gave the crowd a small wave, before letting his weight vest fall to the ground. Moments later, Terra's joined his. They shared a look, and nodded. It was time.

As he stepped onto the final battle field, his counselor did the same. He was an older gentleman, a silver fox some would say, and he had also been the man to replace Grimsley. Today, he wore the robes befitting the Head of the Trainer Department. He'd even shaved, and trimmed his gray beard short. He addressed the crowd. "This has been…without a doubt, one of the most nerve-wracking graduation challenges I, personally, have ever witnessed. A year ago, young Mr. Redwood came to me, without any sort of Pokémon, and claimed his major was in being a Pokémon Master."

The crowd laughed. Alex adjusted his green and brown hat to hide his face, waiting patiently. The advisors always gave a little speech, but he knew his would be long and embarrassing. You didn't fly in the face of tradition without getting gently mocked.

"But then, Arceus be praised, he told me he had 'a plan'" The Counselor continued, using air quotes, "A 'plan' that consisted of finding the ideal team that could take on and react to any type of Pokémon his opponents would use, and counter them with super effectiveness. Obviously, I was skeptical. I thought he would be another failure, another lost cause, education wasted on a rich child with a famous name. Then, after we decided to trust each other, he told me exactly what he was aiming for."

This had the audience's attention now. Especially the staff's, many of whom were his former counselors. They had always wondered why the head of the Trainer Department had taken on that lost cause personally. He hadn't fought at a graduation challenge in years.

Men his age, with his position, usually stayed retired. And most students avoided them, because they were likely to have powerful teams. "I decided to trust what he told me. You can see the fire in his eyes, and I saw it too. So, I gave him a chance. I trusted in his vision, because in it, I saw the same brilliance that his granduncle possessed when he came through this University as well. And now… he has beaten all of our expectations. One test yet remains."

Silence filled the entire campus. Anyone who paid attention to school goings on was watching now. Either from the bleachers, or the common rooms, the cafeterias, and even most dorm rooms. This battle would be on all of them. Department Heads rarely, if ever, battled.

They were considered at the Elite Four's level, and often the Elite Four of a League would retire to universities like this one, there were always exceptions of course, like past Champions, but generally the strongest Trainers took to teaching the next generation once they were over a hundred years old. Humans lived much, much longer than they had in the past, and passing on the previous generation's knowledge only became more difficult as their race's lifespan increased.

The counselor looked across the battlefield, a standard, league official affair, that had no rocks, trees, or other environmental hazards. It was designed for exceptionally powerful Pokémon, so they could fight their hardest and duke it out with their opponent blow for blow without fear of ruining the stadium. "Young Alex, are you ready to complete the first part of your 'plan'?"

The old man's smirk reminded him so much of his granduncle's. He was quite tired of old men underestimating him. This was the start of his journey, the first step that would prove to all of them
that they were wrong…or crush his dreams of being the best to dust. He'd waited twenty years for the chance to own a Pokémon and prove he was more than capable of being a Trainer. He would not lose.

Alex had a mic too, though he hadn't wanted it. He answered the old man with a smirk. "I was born ready. This is my first step…I've waited too long to waste this chance. I want to thank you, sir. When I become the world's strongest Trainer, I'll make sure everyone knows the Fist of the Earth started me on that path."

The crowd murmured softly. It was one thing to claim to be the best, anyone could do that. Coming from someone who had just soloed a Final Exam with a Turtwig, it was almost believable. Most in the crowd smiled softly, shook their heads, or chuckled. He was a good Trainer, nobody watching could deny that, but World Champions were on an entirely different level. Some did see what the Department Head saw, however.

This Trainer had the drive, the fire, the iron will needed to climb to that highest of peaks, and at that moment, it is said, he gained his first followers. They didn't yet know it, of course. They thought they were alone in their appreciation of his fighting spirit, but over time they would find each other, and unite, as many did, around the appreciation of a famous Trainer.

His counselor responded, pulling a Heavy ball from his own robes. "An admirable goal, as I told you before. But before you can attain it, you must go through me…with naught but that Turtwig. Come, young Redwood. Show me your strength! Go! Tyran!"

The crowd stared as the largest Tyrantrum they'd likely ever seen was called onto the field. He was massive…but noble. He had a dignified bearing, worthy of a king. And, he was colored blue and white, which only made him look even more impressive. Unique coloring usually indicated a powerful Pokémon. When owned by a Trainer, anyways.

Alex swore quietly. As Terra trotted onto the field and took his position, the massive dinosaur looked at his partner as if to say, 'Really?'

His Trainer nodded. "Yes Tyran, you are fighting the Turtwig. Don't worry, it's stronger than it looks. Do not restrain yourself…because he won't." The great beast nodded. A Charizard might have hesitated in unleashing its power on a smaller, and probably weaker, Pokémon but Tyrantrum had no such reservations.

It had been a king in the ancient world, a force of untamed destruction. A pseudo-legendary. Alex, for his part, knew all about Tyrantrum after having a fascination with them when he was younger, like literally every other child.

In this era, they were of the rock type, like all revived fossil Pokémon. But back then, they had been full dragons. The additional typing hadn't really weakened Tyrantrum as a species…but it did make their weakness to ice doubled. Just like a Torterra's.

But Turtwig didn't know any ice moves. It didn't have to. Rock types were notoriously weak to grass and water, but not fire, and Terra had plenty of grass moves. The two Trainers shouted simultaneously, "Head Smash!" "Energy Ball!"

The massive Tyrantrum charged the ridiculously small Turtwig, its head glowing with the power of
the old world. But Head Smash was a rock type move, and even with the lack of recoil damage, it
was still weaker than grass. Terra's Energy Ball stopped it cold, and as with most move locks, the
type advantage won.

The king of the prehistoric Pokémon went down hard, and got up slowly, unable to use its tiny arms
to aid in standing. Still, this was a Pokémon that had seen many battles. He had been the Department
Head's first Pokémon. The massive dinosaur eyed the small turtle with new respect. He'd seen
Pokémon that were small and powerful before, and that Energy Ball had hit him hard. He would not
underestimate this one again.

Alex's final challenge was listed as a 1v1, no substitutions, no items. Just two starter Pokémon, and
the Trainers who raised them. Having the type advantage had been sheer luck for Alex, but even if
this had been an Aurorus, Terra could've won. They needed to win here. Everything they'd practiced
for culminated here. Losing was not an option.

They had trained almost hourly for the better part of a year, in one of the coldest areas on the
continent. Ice bothered him less after enduring it for so long, though it still did quite a bit of damage.
The key to this victory would be the powerful moves Terra had learned quicker thanks to putting off
evolution.

"Again!" Another Energy Ball slammed into the rising giant, but it seemed to not affect him at all.
The crowd gasped. Tyran's eyes were glowing red. He was a king, a power unmatched. Leader of a
team that had been in the Elite Four, and had held that prestige for many years, before retiring to this
position. He would not be outdone by this whelp with a simple thing like type advantage.

Terra winced. Tyran's roar had actually been Hyper Voice, a powerful attack from any Pokémon,
but not nearly as damaging as their opponents hoped it would be. "Now Terra! Razor Leaf barrage!"
Terra nodded.

His job was now to avoid taking damage, and use his considerable Pokémon power, enhanced by his
Trainer's carefully hoarded stock of PP Max, to unleash a steady stream of Razor Leaves at his
opponent. He had plenty of power for this beast. The first flurry seemed ineffective, but both Alex
and Terra saw that they were indeed cutting the large Pokémon deep. His counselor attacked then.

"If Razor Leaf is the best you have, you'll never be a World Champion. Ice Fang!" Tyran was
already attacking, but for the benefit of his student, he called the move anyway. That too was a part
of the tradition. Graduates always got to hear what move their superior opponents would be using. In
this way, they had a chance to beat them, and thus the next generation would become stronger than
the last. As it had always been.

If Alex felt a twinge of dread, he didn't show it. This Tyrantrum had not been revived then, he had
been bred. That was the only way he could know a move like Ice Fang. Dragons, especially part
rock types, did not do well with ice normally. Tyran's fangs glowed a frosty pale white. He did the
math. Accounting for level and type advantage, plus the inherent strength his dragon typing gave
him, this move would almost certainly take Terra out with one hit.

"Scenario Gamma!" He shouted, and Terra nodded. Coding patterns of attack or defense with key
phrases wasn't unheard of... but only serious Trainers ever managed it successfully. You had to have
a smart Pokémon to do it, and that Pokémon had to remember the plan exactly.
Terra had studied each of their patterns for almost a full year now. He knew what he had to do, as they had expected this kind of thing to happen. One hit from this much larger opponent, and he was done. This was the moment all the evasion training paid off. But he needed more than just evasion, he needed an edge.

The plan Alex had called for relied on Terra's judgement as well, so he used a different move from the Razor Leaf barrage. The earth shook, and the entire stadium field was crushed and made unstable as Terra dodged the icy fangs of his opponent and ruined the terrain with an Earthquake.

Both Trainers, seeing what was happening, were raised into the air on metal platforms. They avoided the Earthquake, but one accidental hit to the supports, and they would go down hard. Now it was a real challenge. Once more, the campus shook, and Terra gave what must have been a smirk to his larger, angrier opponent.

Tyran's charging speed was now useless, and he had to smash through boulders that crumbled under his weight just to move effectively. The blue scaled beast snarled, growling low as he eyed the tiny turtle. He decided then that he'd had enough of playing around.

Terra, for his part, had no such movement problems. His smaller form was faster, and he jumped through the debris with the skill of one who had run through the woods many times, dodging roots, trees, rocks, and generally speeding through the harsh mountainous terrain.

Tyran was effectively trapped in one area, and he was not happy about it. His fangs tore through rock uselessly in his rage, giving him something stable to stand on, if one could consider gravel stable.

"Enough!" his Trainer called. Tyran had wasted many valuable Ice Fang uses on the environment. Without that move, he could very well lose. "Crush the area around you with your feet. Let him come to you!"

A novice Trainer with a newly evolved Tyrantrum might've been ignored with a beast that angry, but Tyran and his master were not novices. The great beast began crushing the large upended boulders around him, making the immediate area flat enough to stand on. All the while, Razor Leaves slammed into his rocky hide. He ignored them.

That was what Alex counted on. The practice of gauging a Pokémon's health with bars on a screen had been discontinued several years back, and now gauging how much damage was being taken was left to the Trainer's Pokédex.

A far cry from several decades earlier, nowadays every Trainer had an encyclopedia of Pokémon knowledge. Any new information was added from thousands of sources, and the vast number of known Pokémon species was always growing. With so many Trainers cataloging them, many Professors believed they would soon, at the very least, have a visual record of all of the non-Legendary species in their world. The Department Head's eyes weren't on his Pokédex however, and Terra's leaves were easy to miss, small as they were.

Switching to long range once more, another Hyper Voice slammed into the Turtwig, who shook his head and looked a bit wobbly. "Terra!" The Turtwig snapped to attention, the damage ignored now. He'd just been brought to half health, by Alex's Pokédex estimate. "Finish him."
The Turtwig nodded, stopping his ceaseless dodging through the field of boulders, and charged at Tyran. The great beast let him come. His fangs glowed with frost, and one way or another, both Pokémon knew this would be the deciding moment.

Terra charged, eyes closed, at the great beast as the ball of green energy formed in his maw. Tyran lunged, and roared in frustration as he missed yet again. Terra had leapt under the massive Pokémon now, and Tyran had expected him to jump back, or to the sides, not under him. Terra's Energy Ball swelled as he wove the power into a condensed ball, and fired it, slamming it into the giant dinosaur's throat. Tyran flinched, tiny arms reaching in vain at the painful wound.

"Frenzy plant!" Both Tyran and his master blinked. There was no way a mere Turtwig would know that kind of move, but Terra had already stomped his little feet into the ground, drawing the power of one of the 'elemental Hyper Beams' into his body. It wouldn't be as strong as, say, a Torterra's, but with all the damage Tyran had taken thus far, this was the end.

The crowd watched, amazed, as a series of massive vines rose from the ground at the Turtwig's command, and slammed directly up into Tyran's body. The massive dinosaur went flying, falling before his master on the other side of the field. Everyone watched it struggle to rise, twice, only to finally fall. If he'd been able to use his arms, he might've gotten up again. As it was, he was too drained to move, and gave in, fainting. The damage from the Razor Leaves had added up.

The platforms lowered once more, and Alex made his way through rocks, vines, and rubble to his advisor, on the other side of the field. Terra met him halfway. The two opponents shook hands amidst the roars of the crowd, and those roars only grew as he took his diploma, and raised it, victorious. Students who lost, and they usually lost, were judged on their battling technique, and given a pass/fail rating that was lenient for most majors, except anything to do with battling.

Facing the challenge with only one Pokémon had all but guaranteed a failure in the judge's rating of battle strategy. Students who won, however, not only automatically graduated, but went on to do whatever they had studied for with a battle record that counted one official League-recognized victory. The examiners here were considered some of the best, and many had served in Unova's Elite Four under N at one point or another. Such a victory could get a Trainer a spot in almost any gym in Unova.

Yawning wide, Terra slumped against his Trainer's leg, and Alex smirked down at him, patting his head. "You were amazing. I told you, and now I have proof. Together, we cannot be stopped."

He recalled Terra for the first time in weeks, letting him rest in his ball for once, and left the stadium. The murmuring crowd of his peers met him with cheers, handshakes, phone numbers, and challenges to battle. He returned what handshakes he could, and refused almost everything else. Several random numbers ended up in his Holociever anyways, and he didn't rightly know how they got there.

The heat of the new summer finally faded into the coolness of the night, and after dropping Terra off at the local Pokémon center, he attended what must have been maybe his fifth actual 'Uni party' at the behest of the small circle of friends he'd made. It was the last party of his last year. He figured he might as well go.

It was exactly as it had been the last four times. Music that drowned out the chance of any intellectual conversation. Men and women who were so drunk that, if you paid attention long enough, you could guess their major based on intoxication alone. People who enjoyed grinding on each other, and
called it dancing.

He'd never really seen the appeal of any of it. The obnoxiously loud music did nothing to stir a beat in his oversized feet, and while he could actually dance, he simply didn't. If he had a decent song on, he could easily move with it, but the loud, obnoxious music here, a favorite of his generation for some reason, did nothing for him. The lyrics were garbled, repetitive, and derogatory of Rangers, a profession he had nothing but respect for.

He didn't quite know how he'd remained anonymous at the party after his apparently awe-inspiring victory, but his natural tendency to avoid eye-contact had helped. That is, until some idiot found a microphone. He knew the voice, and groaned into his cup of what he hoped was alcohol of some kind. It tasted too fruity to be sure. He'd hidden himself rather well by a fake tree planter in the back of the crowded room, and kept to himself. Given the lack of light and plentiful beverages, he'd expected to stay anonymous. At least until the Leaf circles started popping up. But those always came later.

Jon was also a Trainer major, and thus had many of the same advanced classes with Alex. He had a thing for black and yellow Pokémon, and was almost the entire reason that Alex intended to find a golden Shinx, somehow. He wanted a Luxray on his team, and he'd get one someday soon if he was lucky.

Jon liked Pokémon, and they shared many opinions on them. He was generally pleasant to be around, but alcohol can make an idiot out of even the brightest mind.

"Heyoooo!" He slurred into the mic. Boos followed as it shrieked, and he waved them away. "I jusht, I jusht wanna shay, Redwood, man…wow. What a match. Give it up. He'sh back there in the…the corner…being all aloof and shit. Give it up!"

After a few attempts at pointing, he finally singled Alex out, who took one last look at the window, before being mobbed once again by handshakes, phone numbers that were usually missing digits, and requests to battle.

"I can't battle, Terra is resting now." He kept repeating, explaining multiple times to blank, drunken faces that yes, he really did only have the one Pokémon. They either didn't believe him, or found that 'totally lame'. These were his peers. The future.

The rest of the party was a blur of much of the same, and eventually he left. He found a group of grass Trainers as he wandered away from the center with his rejuvenated Turtwig, and spent the night enjoying the hallucinogenic Leaf smoking that grass Trainers so often enjoyed together.

The next day he made his way home, after packing his car, alone, as Terra rested in the sun. He was pretty sure the little Turtwig was fine, but he let him rest anyways. They'd had a long year. Now they would go home, and the real journey would begin.

Meanwhile, back on the Ranch…

The Snivy picked her head up, glancing out the enormous ranch-style window of her Trainer's house as a flash of green light caught her gaze. "Ivy." She squeaked, getting her Trainer's attention.

"What is it Serpi?" The flame haired head of her Trainer appeared next to her, looking out the window. Her Trainer had the same eyes she did, the superior look of a Snivy. It was why they had
bonded. She too came from a line of her species that was considered to be one step from royal. There
was no doubt that she would one day be a Serperior. Thus, she had been named for that eventuality.

"Char!" The more annoying and more recent addition to her master's team, a female runt of a
Charmander from the Charific Valley in Johto, jumped up next to them as well. She was the same
shade of red-orange that her master's hair was, and they matched perfectly together, as her master
often dressed in flamboyantly red colors as well.

Serpi was jealous of their newest team member, but knew deep down that her bond was the stronger.
She was the first. She always would be first. Across the field, at the smelly neighbor-boy's farm,
there was a commotion. Jessica blinked slowly, staring out the window. Another green flash lit the
area, and Serpi's eyes narrowed. Much like how electric types could speak over distance with their
element, grass types had similar methods of communicating. The pudgy Turtwig was trying to get
their attention, for some reason.

The flame haired woman was younger than twenty-four, but looked to be graduating early, thanks to
her father's influence at the University. Right now, however, was her summer break. She had, of
course, been against coming to such a remote part of the region for a whole summer, as their family
usually went to places like the Kalos region or Alola. It was as she squinted across the grass that she
saw one of her neighbors. Then, she saw the familiar jacket. It was Alex, then. According to his
brother Eric, he'd been obsessed with little more than training since he'd gotten his Turtwig.

He had, in actual fact, just finished University. She'd seen the battle of course, but hadn't quite
believed it was the same overweight, quiet, shy kid she'd lived next to for so long. He was a good
friend, fun to talk to, but he always smelled of Tauros, and was a bit too overweight for her tastes.
Kind as she was, like most women, appearances mattered, and were often deal breakers, or makers.

Or at least, that's what she'd thought. She watched him again, with a Turtwig just as large and a bit
pudgy as him, fire another Energy Ball at an old stump that he had moved into his yard years ago,
claiming it would be where he trained his first Pokémon, a Turtwig.

It seemed his 'master plan' was finally becoming reality. Before her Pokémon could blink, she was
up and racing across the hills towards him. There was something in his stance, the way he ordered an
attack, that had her intrigued, and after watching that battle…well, what girl wouldn't be interested in
a Trainer like that if they were right next door?

She couldn't quite understand it though, and needed a closer look, in person, and not on a screen. As
she got her improved view, she gasped lightly. From a distance, he had looked as overweight as
ever, but she had failed to notice exactly when he'd gotten his first partner.

They had trained for months, and now, Turtwig was strong enough to have mastered the Energy
Ball, an advanced move by all counts. They had both been training hard it seemed, and after that
battle, their strength was obvious. With that strength came muscle, and it was no longer fat that filled
out his brown-green shirt, torn and dirty from constant activity and training. He didn't have the body
of a rancher anymore, but anything was better than being comparable to a Snorlax.

Alex's Turtwig was similarly changed. Where once he'd been pudgy, he now radiated bulk that was,
to an experienced eye, muscle. His head leaves had grown large as well, and his shell was deep
brown, and cool to the touch. As Alex saw the flash of red running towards him across the stretch of
mowed grass that separated their houses, he smirked. This, was the other moment he'd spent his life
waiting for. The moment where he showed the girl next door that he was actually a decent Trainer.
Unlike her brother, Jess had never quite believed that he would make a good one. Thankfully, she knew when she was wrong. Taking down an Elite Four level Tyrantrum with a Turtwig had to require some measure of skill. And luck.

He and Terra shared a look, and after a moment, Alex nodded. For this particular moment, they'd put their training vests back on, as neither had been sure the Snivy would see his signaling. They let the vests drop with a satisfying thud into the dusty ground of the ranch. Over the years, science had finally condensed the many weight-training items into one perfected vest that could raise every stat with the potency of a final evolution. The drawback was a loss in speed and movement, as well as power. Attacks were weaker, but could be used more often. It was perfect for training.

Alex glanced towards the flash of red racing over the grass towards them, and after a brief stretch, he nodded at his partner. "Energy Ball! Again!"

Terra responded instantly. The stump blasted apart, just as Jessica's Charmander and Snivy caught up to her, panting. A life of luxury had left them with little real endurance, as their Trainer would rather dress them up than battle with them, most of the time.

They stared in awe at the Turtwig before them. He was so strong, so bright, he almost glowed...he was glowing. Light shone forth from within him, and he cried out as the blinding spiraling power of evolution took over, finally transforming his child form into that of a Grotle. It was almost as large as a Torterra, and just as deep voiced.

But Alex didn't seem to notice. "Well done Terra!" He ran and hugged the enormous beast, who shared his enthusiasm. They had followed his plan then. Train until he learned Energy Ball, and then evolve. Even the name Alex had picked was the same. But recalling the battle, Jess wondered. If this Grotle knew an attack like Frenzy Plant, he must've mastered Energy Ball a long time ago. He'd used it during the battle, hadn't he? So why evolve at this exact moment?

"You really did it..." she whispered, "You're...actually following your plan?" Turning as if just now noticing her, he smirked, and gave a nod. As always, he was covered in dirt, though that was to be expected when one was training an earth turtle. Up close, that intensity in his gaze awoke something inside her that had been sleeping for all the years they'd been neighbors.

He would've always been perfect if he'd just lost a bit of weight and gained some much-needed social grace, but now...now he was holding her eye contact. This was not the same person she'd grown up next to. Who'd been a friend of her brother's, more than her. While the Leaf-smoking gamer had been amusing to tease, teasing was all she'd done. She'd assumed it was harmless. It wasn't like he was pining for her, or anything.

Evidently, finally getting a Pokémon partner had changed the former ranch hand more than she'd expected. At the very least, he had her attention, which of course had been the point of their little light show.

She grinned. "Well, if I recall correctly, the next stop is for Leo, the Luxray."

A smirk cracked Alex's normally impassive expression, and Terra nodded. "Aye. Now we find him. At the mall. My instinct leads me there." He arched a brow to Spockian heights. "Care to join me?"

She smirked at him, then shrugged. "Why not. Lead the way."

And lead he did. For once, from behind, he didn't look like a lumbering Snorlax. There was purpose
in his long stride, and a straightness to his back. Definitely not the same Alex. Gone was the awkward ranch hand. Now, he was a Pokémon Trainer.
Mall Town Showdown

Mall Town, Southwest of Bostonia - Northern Unova Region

The mall was crowded with hundreds of people, and the two rich kids blended well among them. Or rather, Alex did. Jessica stood out completely thanks to her hair and her looks, drawing the attention of literally everyone who saw her.

He had forgotten how noticeable she could be among normal people. He saw her confused look as she noticed the various and multicolored Unovans walking past them staring at her, and he leaned in to whisper in her ear, and explain. "They're not used to seeing someone as alluring as yourself. Though it could be the fiery hair." He had a newer shirt on now that was brown, with a green Pokéball on it, under a black jacket that had a useful, but thin green hood. It was proper travel attire for a Trainer. A graduation gift from his Gruncle.

"I think you're imagining things. People attractive enough to catch an entire mall's attention only exist in dreams." She said, smirking as she scratched her Charmander under her chin.

"Then may I never wake." He muttered, as he looked around for the store he'd driven down here to find.

His new color scheme more or less matched his future Torterra, and with a few more battles, he'd finally have one. There was no reason to hold off evolving anymore, as he'd caught Jess' eye and successfully asked her out, more or less. Just as he planned. He'd imagined this a thousand times, actually experiencing it was something else entirely. He still couldn't quite believe it had actually worked. The hot day had an almost ethereal quality to it, as if this was yet another of his daydreams. He expected to wake at any moment, and realize he was still a Pokéless outcast.

They'd come to this town, a fair number of miles south of their home, for the enormous mall that served as a hangout, movie theater, and shopping center for the many sparsely populated towns north of Unova, but too far from Bostonia to make a day trip. Thankfully, in their society, business tended to thrive, and Mall Town was no exception. It was a place to do business, and had enough 'rural charm' to entice city folk into making the trek out. The result was the massive mall they were now strolling through. If you couldn't find what you were looking for here, it was fair to say it probably didn't exist, such was the variety of stores.

His purpose here was multifold. Find the Shinx he'd seen on the Pokéstore's site, train up his Grotle into a Torterra, get his Shinx some experience if possible, and impress the girl next door who, as she looked around at the many shops, holding her Charmander, took his breath away for a moment. It was as she looked back at him, smirking, that he realized he was staring. Her Charmander blinked up at him, and made a soft noise. He scratched her chin, and the small red-orange Pokémon shivered in delight.

The poor thing had been a runt, rejected by her mother, and given to the Charific Valley's keeper to hand to the Professor of Kanto. But they hadn't wanted such a small Pokémon for their potential Trainers, and so eventually, Jessica's father had been convinced to buy the small burning lizard while they were on vacation that year in Johto, living in their Goldenrod City Apartment, or so Jess had told him. She'd originally wanted a Torchic or Fennekin, but after seeing the fire lizard on the adoption site, she knew she had to help.
It had either been that, or releasing her into the wild where the laws of nature would have likely seen her dead before long. Such things were avoided these days, however. The world was connected like never before, for Pokémon at least, and there was always a sympathetic heart in the world that would take in a runt or a stray who needed a home. Transportation only required a Pokéball.

Hearing how she'd saved the little Charmander was what had made him realize that this neighbor of his was the one. Sure, he had eyes for her long before that, any guy would've, but that was the proverbial nail in the coffin.

"She really likes that when you do it." Jess said, frowning slightly. "Like, more than when I scratch her. Why do you think that is?"

He winked. "Magic fingers." She rolled her eyes, but the faint blush was there, on the pale cheeks. Before he started awkwardly staring once more at perfection incarnate, at least to his smitten eyes, he forced them elsewhere...and they landed upon exactly what he'd been looking for. For a moment, he put the ever-distracting thoughts that had driven human procreation for millions of years in the back of his mind.

"There." He stopped, and touched her arm, fighting down the instinctual thrill in his pants from feeling her skin. He might've been a bit loopy from the Leaf they'd had before coming in, but he could've sworn he felt a slight buzz of...something where his rough fingers met the soft, warm skin. If she had a similar reaction, it didn't show. He pointed across the way at the Pokéstore, where they sold unwanted and highly desired Pokémon alike. There, in the window, was a bored looking Shinx, colored gold and black. Just as the Pokésite had promised.

A quick PokéGoogle search on the PokéNet for a special Shinx had given him the store's location, and he had been lucky to be close enough to make the trip in a day. It was fitting for today though, as it was quickly becoming the luckiest day he'd ever lived. When Jess had heard how near his next partner was, she hadn't backed out, and the car ride had certainly been pleasant. He wished he could've let Terra out, but there was no way he would ever fit in a car again, so big was he after putting off evolution for so long.

As far away as the mall was, it wasn't really that unusual for the people of his town to go there, as their town was pretty small and remote. It didn't even have a PokéMart, as it was primarily ranches, which meant a few local stores trying to ignore the technological revolution, and a train station that charged absurd prices for tickets, because they could.

He hadn't wanted to use the train though, he knew the reaction to his companion would be similar, if not worse on a crowded metal tube. He knew her Charmander wouldn't like it either.

Jess hadn't seemed to notice, but he could tell the little fire lizard hated cramped spaces. The entire car ride, she had been twitchy, until he'd managed to calm her by scratching her under the chin, a sweet spot that most Charmander shared.

The bored looking Shinx was licking his paw when he looked up suddenly, on instinct, and met his new Trainer's eyes. And from that moment on, they knew they were bonded. The cat gave him what seemed like a smirk. Alex returned it. Yes, this was definitely the one.

Alex didn't even blink at the exorbitant price tag on his new Shinx, who had been reserved for another, until Alex offered a sum four times larger that he would pay right then and there.
His deal was graciously accepted. He could tell his father it was a charity donation, which it essentially was. Any Pokémon store could run itself on what he'd paid for years, and open additional branches as well, but they could easily afford the cost. Plus, after years of being denied a Pokémon and used for nearly free labor on the ranch, he was more than due a few thousand. His allowance had been pitiful, especially compared to his relative’s, but it had been enough. But none of that mattered anymore. This Shinx was his. He lifted the electric kitten into the air, and eyed him, before setting him on his shoulder. The cat purred against his Trainer's neck, and his hair flared as electrical current moved through it.

Jess watched, amazed, at how easily he'd bonded with a new Pokémon. The ones from the store usually had an issue of some kind after being mistreated by their Trainers. The only real problem their world faced was people who abused Pokémon, that hadn't changed. All it took was a mindset that viewed them as tools, or 'lesser' beings because their brains weren't as advanced as humanity's, and people could justify using them for anything.

But for every Ghetsis, there was an Alex, it seemed. This Shinx did not have a defect however, as he was one of the store's ideal Pokémon, with a price tag only the rich could ever hope to afford. He was proud, and already strong enough to make sparks of his own.

He was put inside Alex's Premier Ball, and appeared in a flash of blinding light that made him sparkle when he was called from it. The entire mall watched, noticing the display. Just as he'd planned. Someone would surely want to battle a Shinx like his. He knelt down to the gold and black cat, petting its fur, and then checking his hand.

"I'm going to call you Leo. What do you think? Do you like the name?" The Shinx blinked at him, then tilted his head, and nodded once. It would work. "Good!" Alex said, standing and looking around the crowded mall intersection. They were surrounded by people and stores. There was no way he'd go unchallenged.

"Yo, bro! Jess!" A voice called out, and Alex suppressed a grimace. His brother. Eric. The brothers had always been rivals, and unlike Alex, he'd gotten a Squirtle when he was young, and had grown up alongside it. Alex had no illusions about who the favored son was, and he'd decided that he didn't much care. He'd show his parents his worth as well, eventually, but it wasn't his main goal. Buying a Shinx with their money was more than enough of a snub to them, especially with that many zeroes on the price tag.

He looked back to his brother, and knew that though he only had primarily water types, he was a skilled Trainer, and had been battling much longer than Alex had. Still, water types were weak against both electric and grass types, and Alex knew that though Leo was young, he'd still be a valuable partner after he'd benefited from a few Technical Machines.

Eric primarily trained against the other water types their cousins had, while Alex had trained Terra in the harsh northern mountains to grow a resistance to his weakness. Now, the brothers would see which training style paid off more.

"Eric." Alex said, meeting his brother's gaze, "My new Shinx and I, along with my Grotle, would like to battle you."

"Aha." Eric responded, sarcasm creeping into his voice. "The plan is in motion then?" His eyes darted from his brother, to their gorgeous neighbor, and Alex nodded.
His brother was his opposite in every way, short where he was tall, deathly thin where he was literally big boned, straight hair where his was wavy and curled at the edges. The younger brother had caught Jessica’s eye for far longer than the elder brother had. Yet he had never pursued her.

Kindness was one thing they had in common, along with a love of Pokémon, but Eric was always busy researching on the few occasions the Gladstone siblings had wanted to hang out and enjoy a bowl of Leaf. Alex knew his childhood had been no picnic either. Being the favored son destined for greatness was almost as rough as being the futureless farm-hand.

Almost.

From the day they'd been old enough to talk, they'd been rivals. In video games. Sports. School. Friendships. They clashed over and over, and often Alex was the one who would lose. Thus, Eric had become the more popular brother with an affinity for water types, and a Squirtle to go with it.

Eric was studying to become a Professor, and even their granduncle was impressed by his scientific mind. He claimed Alex had a similar mind, but Alex was too focused on his grand plan for the future to bother with contemplating what he might do if he ever achieved his lofty goal of becoming the next World Champion. But his granduncle had always told him to aim high, so he wouldn't end up disappointed.

Being able to even make it to the World Tournament was an ordeal on its own, or so his granduncle had told him. But it was one he was willing to endure. Nothing could be worse than living in a world of magical creatures, and not being able to bond with one as a proper partner.

Eric was thin, thinner than most because of an eating disorder. He didn't even have muscle on him, which once more made his brother look fatter by comparison. He was garbed similarly, but in blue, and together, the three of them in green, blue, and shades of orange and red on Jessica's part, represented the three starting type colors quite obviously. People were staring.

Alex raised his voice, and Leo's new Premier ball towards his brother. Leo watched his Trainer. Eric had always been more popular, considered the 'better' Trainer in the Redwood family. Now the onlookers they'd managed to pique interest in would see otherwise. He had no doubt that several of their peers were here today as well. It was early summer, and the day was perfect. If he managed a win, word would spread like wildfire.

"I challenge you, Eric Redwood, to a battle. Outside. Bring as many Pokémon as you like, and substitute as many times as you wish. I will do the same, and I will beat you." Eric raised his eyebrow to Spockian heights.

"With two Pokémon, you're going to beat my entire team? Yea right, bro. Fine. I'll meet you outside. Smell ya'." With that, he walked off, and some of the milling crowd watched with interest, following the younger Redwood outside. The majority of the others watched him and Jessica, but mostly Jessica. She was gorgeous, after all. The Charmander only added to her charm.

Her looks were unmatched, but she had, at least to his knowledge, never really used them. The boys had certainly tried, of course. But trying to tie her down was like trying to tame the wind. There was only one way to attract a free spirit like hers, and that too, was part of his ultimate goal.

"Are you sure about this, Alex?" She asked, frowning. She doubted his chances. Eric had always
been better at battling. Alex was good at calming Pokémon, but he was a new Trainer. "You know you'll probably lose, right? This is your first battle out of school. Against a full team. Maybe you shou-" He cut her off.

"No. This is perfect. I couldn't have scripted it better if I was in a play. The showdown that was always meant to be." He smirked. "I've waited a lifetime for this battle. I worked hard for my power, and my team. Now, I will take them on the first step to victory!" A few people sarcastically applauded his enthusiasm in the background.

Jessica nodded. "If you're sure…" Now she felt confused. He had certainly impressed her with the battle against the Trainer Department Head, and his Turtwig evolving on schedule, but Eric had been training far longer. His Blastoise was surely much stronger than any Grotle.

"And I'll lead with Leo." That got everyone's attention.

"You're leading a rival battle with the Pokémon you just got?" She said, staring in disbelief.

He nodded. "Leo is my partner now, I trust him completely. I have the proper TMs for him, too. He won't let me down." With that, he strode off, and began loading the disks into the Technical Machine.

A few bright flashes later, while walking no less, and a dazed little Shinx stumbled into the sunlight of the parking lot. He knew many moves now. How to manipulate electricity in ways he'd never known, but knew were far stronger than his sparks had been.

"Are you ready Leo?" His new master asked.

The young Shinx came to grips with his newfound knowledge. He had the power. He would use it, even if he ended up fainting. There was something about this human, something that made him want to fight with all he had. If he did that, he knew he would still feel satisfied, even if they ended up losing.

He nodded at his new Trainer, and growled at the figure in blue, who spoke then, "Really? Are you sure you want to lead with the one you just bought?" Alex nodded.

"Fine!" Eric called, drawing his own ball, a blue affair covered in water drops. "Don't bitch when dad finds out you spent that much money on a painted Pokémon."

Alex rolled his eyes. He had, of course, checked for paint on the Shinx, but had found none. He seemed to genuinely be golden furred. Fate, it seemed, was with him. He eyed Eric's ball and sighed at its' similarity to one of his own. He didn't have a Mudkip for his yet, however.

"Go! Draking!" A Kingdra appeared across the small battle field, to the side of the parking lot. Dozens of townies were watching now, and there were a few laughs as they saw the former fat, awkward kid with his tiny Shinx walk up to battle a well-known water-type expert.

"Even with type advantage, he has no chance." Someone whispered. "I know" came a reply. "The dragon typing will make it too tough for a Shinx. But Alex Redwood never listens. He'll learn the hard way. Amateur."

"I don't know, didn't you hear how he graduated?"
"Later. You shouldn't buy into rumors."

Jessica sighed, looking down at her Charmander. "At one point Chari, I would've said the same thing." She said, speaking too softly to be heard. After spending most of the afternoon with her neighbor, she was slowly realizing that this was who he'd been all along. She should've listened to her brother when he'd said he had potential. Connor had an eye for those kind of things.

"Charmander. Char?" Came the response from the bundle in her arms. Jess grinned. "You're right. Let's do it." She looked up, grinning, and Chari raised her little arms as well, for her master, as she was holding her up with them. "Go Alex! Go Leo! You've got this!"

Alex and his new partner turned at that, and the crowd quieted. He met her gaze from under the hat, where she saw the last hint of his hesitation fade. She was cheering for him. Her. The girl he dreamed about constantly. She believed in him, and that was all he needed. He smirked, and turned the hat backwards. Eric rolled his eyes, but some of the more enthusiastic gawkers whistled. There was fire in the amateur's eyes, and the veteran Trainer was coming off as entirely too confident. At the very least, it would be fun to watch.

Leo felt his master's surge of confidence, and sparks radiated from his fur. He'd battled before, but this…connection he felt now was new, exciting, and most of all, powerful. He was ready to give this battle everything he had. He had to prove he was strong too, if he was going to face down his sire someday. With this Trainer's help, he knew he could do it.

He growled at the much larger, much stronger Kingdra, the water dragon shivered at the look of ferocity in his eyes. Leo knew he might go down…but these humans would remember how strong he had been against a superior opponent. Alex nodded to his oldest rival, and the battle began. Eric shouted at the same time his brother did.

"Hydro Pump!"

"Thunder!"

The crowd gasped. These two certainly weren't using novice gloves.

The Kingdra sprayed at the Shinx, but to no avail. It dodged the water stream easily, taking only minor damage, and getting a bit wet. Which, of course, only made its attack stronger. Electricity bristled over its fur.

"Shiiiiinx!" Thunder burst down from the sky, and hit the water and dragon type head on. It winced, taking significant damage, and began panting. Leo grinned, baring his tiny fangs. The crowd, and especially Eric, looked stunned.

"Again!" Eric shouted, eyebrows narrowing as his attack was dodged and countered with too much ease. His Shinx was moving with speed his species just wasn't supposed to have.

"Dodge!" Came the cry of Alex, and Leo did so, his small, nimble form helping him miss the water completely. "Thunderbolt!" There was another cry from the small lion-like creature as a flash of golden electricity arced towards the Kingdra, hitting it squarely on the chest. It winced again, but powered through the hit.

"Smoke Screen!" Alex smirked as the area filled with dark clouds, pouring from the Kingdra's snout, and obscuring all vision of the fight in seconds. The crowd mumbled, displeased.
"Wait for it Leo…" Alex said, softly, "Use your ears…and then dodge." The Shinx obeyed. Someday, his eyes would be able to pierce clouds like this with ease, but for now, he relied on pure battle instinct. There was a sharp inhale, followed by the sound of a torrent of water.

Leo jumped, dodging it once more. "Now, Thunderbolt the direction it came from!" The little Shinx responded immediately, as if he and his Trainer had been partners for weeks instead of minutes. The Kingdra cried out in pain, and as the smoke faded, the mighty water type fell, fainted.

There was a stunned pause, before Eric shouted, "Draking! Return!" Alex's smirk widened. He had checked the Shinx's recorded level, and discovered that it had been kept from evolving for quite a while. They would need that power boost in this battle, and as Leo glanced at him, he nodded. The time was now, it seemed.

The crowd's eyes were on Leo. He was growling, panting, and electricity sparked across his form. Now the fun began. "Do it!" Alex shouted as Leo cried out again, and evolved before their very eyes with bright spiraling double helix shaped energy that always appeared when Pokémon evolved. "Luuux...iooo!" Came the new, deep roar.

The little Shinx was gone. In its' place now stood a fearsome looking cat that looked ready to keep fighting. And keep fighting it did, taking down two more of Eric's water types, a Gyarados, and a Poliwrath. By the end of that however, Poliwrath's fighting type had drained the newly evolved Luxio with a swift low-kick that nearly knocked him out. The only way he'd even managed to weaken Wrath was with Thunder Wave, and several lucky rounds of paralysis. He was panting hard after using his fourth Thunder to finally bring the martially skilled water type down.

"Take a breather, my friend, and well done. You, are going to be one of my strongest." Looking tired and proud, Leo returned to his ball, and rested, satisfied that he had demonstrated his worth to this blue Trainer, and the crowd.

Pokémon were a lot smarter than many people realized, and when you insulted one by claiming it was overpriced and weak, you had to expect it to try and prove you wrong. Even if the win against Wrath had been mostly luck and timing, taking down a Kingdra and a Gyarados was nothing to sneer at.

Eric called out from across the field, and his voice had a tinge of anger to it. He hated losing, especially to Alex. "Now you have my final three to deal with, Brother! They will beat you, and your novice Pokémon!"

Alex smirked, and raised the ball holding Terra. "Try it." The calls came out simultaneously. "Terra!" "Aurora!" Grotle appeared, in all his large, earthy glory, and across the way, an Aurorus, a prehistoric and revived ice and rock type, appeared across from him. The crowd made an 'ooo' sound. Ice beat grass. Hard. Eric smirked, some confidence returning to his stance.

Terra didn't flinch, but his Trainer did. He hadn't expected an ice type yet. Oh well. He was part rock, too, just like Tyran had been. Terra would adjust the plan as required. "Terra. Just like last time."

The Grotle nodded, and waited for the inevitable. He wasn't as agile as he'd been this morning, but his legs were much stronger. He just had to keep moving, and remember his footwork. He'd likely only manage one jump this time, though. He was much heavier.
"Ice beam!" The long-necked creature shot forth a powerful beam of frost that was sure to one-hit poor Terra. Or rather it would've, if he hadn't sprung to the side at that moment, and slammed the field with his feet as he landed, causing a massive Earthquake.

The entire parking lot shook, and the field was in chaos, as was Aurorus, whose Ice Beam had been disrupted by the massive attack. The damage it took wasn't the issue, it could've followed Terra with its attack and ended this quickly, but now it was dazed, struggling to recover its footing. It had never been in a battle like this, and Alex realized this must've been the newest addition to his brother's team.

"Do it!" Alex called, "Energy Ball!" The Grotle's mouth glowed green, and the condensed ball of grass power, at least twice the size it had been when he was a Turtwig, smashed the frilly dinosaur hard. It whimpered once, before fainting.

Eric had counted on a difference in type giving him the win, but had forgotten his opponents type advantage, as well as his level. He had no excuse either, as he had been around to watch most of their training at the end of last summer. The crowd cheered. Eric however, was red-faced and rapidly losing his patience. When had Alex gotten so good? And how had a turtle Pokémon dodged an Ice Beam?

"Vapor! Come!" Eric shouted angrily after hurriedly recalling his ace in the hole, brought down by a well-timed type disadvantaged move from a turtle Pokémon. Vaporeon was a water type that could learn ice moves. But it was still a water type. Eric wasted no time. "Aurora beam!"

To which his brother responded, "Energy ball!" The two attacks met in mid-air, and the aurora beam pushed through, but was skewed by the sheer power of the Energy Ball it had collided with, the spin of so much condensed grass type energy altered its trajectory, and it slammed into the ground beside Terra, a credit to the strength of this Vaporeon.

Terra's attacks had been trained against genuine blizzards of the north, but a type advantage was a type advantage. "Razor leaf!" The follow-up was quick and brutal, as hundreds of razor sharp leaves came through the smoke of the attack collision, and hit the Vaporeon hard.

"Acid Armor." Eric said, regaining some measure of composure. Alex hadn't used Frenzy Plant to one-hit his Vaporeon, something he had to do if he wanted Terra to have enough power for Blastoise. Now, he played it careful.

"That won't work. Razor Leaf barrage!"

"What!" Eric cried. Hundreds of leaves shot from Grotle's back, twice as many as he had made when he was a Turtwig. Each of them slammed home against Vapor's Acid armor, whittling it down to nothing.

Terra, meanwhile, never looked healthier. In the water, Acid Armor was very hard to beat...but on land, especially a parking lot battlefield in the summer, water types were at a disadvantage. In this much sun, grass types were incredibly strong.

Alex finished the Vaporeon with a swift Energy Ball follow-up that smashed through his brother's hastily chosen Hydro Pump. Had he gone with Ice Beam, he might've won right there, but he wasn't on his game anymore. He never lost to Alex, not like this.
As Eric reached for his trump card, Terra began to glow. The entire crowd, save Jessica, but Eric included, shouted "Oh, come on!" One evolution was rare in a battle. Two was just unfair…but this battle never specified against that in the rules.

And now a healthy, freshly evolved Torterra would face off against a Blastoise. Eric's predicament did not look favorable…until he realized that ground was also weak to ice. Looking across the field, he knew Alex knew it too. One Ice Beam…and that would be enough to finish this Torterra.

It would be the attacking power of Blastoise against the natural defense of a Torterra, with type advantage. No, things were definitely not set in stone. Torterra could endure fire, but not ice, when freshly evolved. His shell was still new.

"Ice Beam!" Eric called, confirming his brother's fear that, yes, he had indeed taught his starter that attack. Terra was too big to dodge now, too unused to his bulk. He was massive, even for a member of his species, and while that was a sign of his strength, it would also make him unable to move quick enough to dodge. He was a veritable tank, now, powerful defense against most attacks, even fire, but ice was even more of a threat.

"Take it!" Alex shouted as the Blastoise powered up the attack in his maw. He got a few glances from the crowd. That was just cruel, forcing his Pokémon to struggle against its major weakness.

"Terra! Scenario Alpha." The giant tortoise Pokémon nodded, and trusted his Trainer. He hunched down to brace himself, watching the Blastoise as it powered up the attack. He'd glared at the grass turtle for months. Finally, they had a chance to battle properly. The Ice Beam launched, arcing across the field, and slammed home. It was too fast to dodge, even if he'd still been small.

They waited. The entire parking lot was silent. Finally, shivering, Terra stood, and snorted through the smoke of the colliding moves. He was seemingly untouched, and smirking, as was his Trainer. They had planned for this, of course, and as planned, learning Protect had been a smart choice when he'd evolved earlier.

His attributes were maxed from all the pills and vest training, and he had only just become a Torterra. The heights he would reach with his new strength were limitless. All that hard training up was finally paying off, it seemed. Terra would never be as quick as he had been that morning, but the trade-off was worth it, as his power now exceeded the strength of his brother's Blastoise by quite a margin. His type advantage all but assured a victory now, and the counter-attack was his.

"Now…Frenzy Plant!" The massive earth tortoise stomped on the ground, and the battlefield shook under his feet. He was larger now, dwarfing most Torterra on record, by the Pokédex's calculations, and Eric knew he was done if an attack like that hit.

"Dodge!" he cried in vain, but his Blastoise was too slow and defense heavy, like Torterra, to dodge. And unlike this Torterra, he had never been trained to take grass attacks, let alone the most powerful grass attack a starter could learn. He had spent his days fighting other water types.

He tried to grab the giant roots as they slammed into him, but they overwhelmed the cannon turtle, and knocked him back onto his shell, sending him crashing through the chunks of debris upended by the roots to the feet of his Trainer, fainted.

Blastoise didn't actually weigh all that much, but his bulk was deceptive. Terra on the other hand, full
grown as he was now, had to be pushing eight hundred pounds. There was a low buzzing murmur through the crowd until Jessica blinked in time with Chari.

"He…he won…HE WON!" She shouted after whispering. She cheered loudly, and the rest of the crowd followed suit. "He did it!" "I don't believe it!"

"I guess he did have a solid plan after all." "Seems the rumors from the University were true." All the remarks he knew he'd hear and more filled his ears, and Alex smiled at his partner.

"Amazing, as always, my friend. Rest now. You've earned it." He put his first Pokémon's ball away, only to find himself face to face with the girl whose eyes made his heart stop for an entire five seconds.

She was grinning ear to ear, and he couldn't help but blush. He mumbled something, scratching the back of his head, and seeming for a moment like his old self. Jess raised an eyebrow, and he became increasingly more aware of the crowd around them.

"I couldn't have done it without you." He managed. A few catcalls came from the peanut gallery, as well as a few whistles. She blushed as well, and let her hair hide her face. Her Charmander looked up in confusion. Her cheering really had helped…so why was she suddenly so shy?

Jess looked up again, but Alex was already walking towards the car, whistling to himself. Off to, if she remembered correctly, find a Mudkip. Everything else had gone according to his plan, the plan he had shared when they had spent one lazy summer day smoking hallucinogenic plants together. Why wouldn't he stick to it now?

The words "Could they BE any more obvious?" came to her ears from the dispersing crowd, but she paid no mind. Eventually only she and Eric were left. It was rapidly becoming obvious to both of them as to which brother she preferred. That, and Alex was her ride out of here.

Her own brother had always said that it was likely she'd end up with one of the Redwoods after their fathers had become so entwined in business and PokéGolf. She blinked down, embarrassed. She'd always said she'd preferred Eric…but now, she was realizing that she had been more focused on his cool demeanor and reputation, rather than who he was as a person. Something she often did when it came to men, it seemed.

She made a note to change that, with Alex at least. Even if he did become a Champion among Champions, she had to remember the person under all the fame that would no doubt follow him. In the span of two days, he was going from a complete unknown in this area to a respected Trainer. She could only imagine where he'd be in another year, at this pace.

"I…I knew he would do it this time." Eric looked up, sighing first at his fainted Blastoise, who he had mistakenly called 'Squirt' when it was just a Squirtle. He'd gotten Squirt ages ago. He should've been able to beat a Torterra.

He looked up at Jessica. He'd never really pined for her the way he knew his brother had, but seeing her preference now only disheartened him more. "He had that look…the same look he had the day he came up with that plan of his, and chose his team…I was just a stepping stone on the way to his prize."

The fire-haired girl blinked at the boy her age, clad in blue. "Prize? What prize?" Eric looked at her, then nodded slowly. He hadn't told her yet. That part had changed.
"The reason he fights so hard." Eric stood, brushing his knees, and retrieving his fallen two hundred pound turtle. "The reason he gets up in the morning. The reason he ran with his Turtwig through rain, heat, and apparently even snow. The reason behind his drive to be a Pokémon Master." Eric smirked, and patted her shoulder as he headed back into the mall, and then the Pokémon Center.

Jessica stood silently, holding her runt of a Charmander, and watched her neighbor stride away with his camouflage pattern ball holding Terra, surrounded by new admirers peppering him with questions. He was rapidly becoming used to it.

Had she been younger, she might've mistaken Eric's words, or denied them, but this was too obvious. Had he really been in love with her this whole time, Jess wondered. She would need to review everything they'd done or said. He was quiet, so she figured that meant what little he had said must've been important. She had no idea how right she was.

She put Chari back in her ball for the ride home, choosing instead to pet Leo, who certainly didn't mind it. After a potion and an elixir, he was feeling much better, and Alex decided to let him spend some time free of confinement. He knew that those stores were usually cramped, even though they did their best to accommodate the many strays and abandoned Pokémon they ended up with.

As Leo felt the female's soft hands, he purred loudly, and rolled on his back, in her lap, offering his belly for a rub. Human standards of beauty were foreign to most Pokémon, but even a Magikarp would gladly be touched by a girl like this one. The clever cat eyed his master as he steered the strange machine that ran faster than he could. If this was the mate he was after, Leo certainly didn't mind her. She smelled wonderful.

And to emphasize that point, he purred against her lap the whole ride back, not noticing that she was fighting down a blush under her crimson locks. Leo wasn't used to his strengthened electrical current yet, and he was tickling her with his purring in all the right places. Despite herself, she kept petting the Luxio. Once they got back to the Redwood's combined ranch and lab, Alex recalled his newest addition, not noticing Jess' flushed face either.

"Seems he likes you." She yelped, and nodded, hurrying out of the car into the cool night air of summer. Alex blinked once, and then shrugged. He'd understood a long time ago that trying to figure out everything women did was, at best, a hopeless battle. There were some things men just simply could not grasp. This was not one of them, but as usual, he was too distracted by her presence to pay attention to the flush in her face, or the discolored damp spot on her skirt.

"S-so," she stammered, before realizing that he hadn't noticed what she'd been doing the entire car ride. A thick skulled Torterra really was the perfect partner for him. "What's next? A Charmander? Mudkip?"

He stretched, yawning. "A nap. And then maybe a Mudkip tomorrow. There's a small swamp out to the west that supposedly has some. Which means mud, bugs, and tons of Wooper hitting me with Water Gun, for fun."

She giggled. "I think I'll skip that adventure then. But you'd better come show me once you catch it!"

He shrugged. "I wasn't planning to come back here for a while. I was going to challenge the Unova League this summer, starting tomorrow."
She blinked. "The Unova League? As in...facing all eight gyms, and then the Elite Four?" He nodded, as if that was a perfectly normal thing that normal people did against the hardest League in the world.

Most Trainers challenged a few gyms to prove they could battle well, and then found a position in a gym with a steady pay check, and a team with a specific type. Almost nobody went the whole way, and for good reason.

The Elite Four of Unova were notoriously strong, with varied teams, and even Legendary Dragons. Or so the rumors said. She believed them. Champions earned their titles, and Unova had five. Jess shook her head, brushing her hair from her face. The flush was gone now, the cool night air had done its job.

She rolled her Serperior-like eyes at him. "Only you would think you could run around the entire Unova region in one summer."

Alex shrugged, saying, "It's been done before. I could do it in a week with a flying type. The capital isn't that large."

She nodded. The Trainer who'd brought down Team Plasma for good had done it in a similar period of time, and became Champion for good measure. Now he and the Trainer who had beat the Legendary Dragon Tamer known only as 'N' during Team Plasma's first incarnation were in the Unova League, smashing all hopeful challengers down to size with their Legendary dragon types.

Alex yawned again. "Well...I have an early start tomorrow. Thanks for coming with me. I guess I'll see you around. Maybe at the end of summer, I can catch you before your last year at the University."

"Yea, maybe..." She couldn't tell if he was just tired, or not interested anymore. She had noticed the numbers many of the girls were giving him back in the parking lot. It was the thing to do when you met a Trainer with obvious skill.

He surreptitiously watched her, the words of both his Gruncle and his friend Nick coming back to him then. Naturally, they had given him womanly advice. *Play it aloof*, he thought, *play it aloof. Not too aloof. Just the right amount of aloofness.*

"Or, you could come with me." He smirked as he decided to trust his instinct, and say what came naturally, as he'd done all day.

She blinked. What. "What?" she asked, but he was already strolling into his garage, ducking under the door before it fully opened, and then closing it again. She sighed, and began the walk to her house. No way was she going to let him start a journey on a note like that.
Another Mud Slap followed the first, but it might as well have been a raindrop for all the damage it caused Terra. "Gently now…ram it with your head!" Terra rolled his eyes at his Trainer. How did one 'gently' ram something with a head like his?

He did what could, and held back, but the Mudkip still went flying, skipping across the swampy water, and whimpering. Alex was already swimming to it, ignoring the stink and the grime. He recalled Terra at the last minute.

"Should've used Leo..." he mumbled, taking the sinking form of the fainted Mudkip into his arms. Its family watched him with muted anger. "I'm going to heal him!" He told them, hoping they understood. "I'm going to fix him up, and then I'll be back to return him. You have my word."

They let him leave the muddy waters of their swamp, and Alex sprinted towards the nearest Pokémon Center, knowing that hearing the little Mudkip wheeze was not a good sign. He fed it a Max Revive. It seemed to breathe a little easier, but stayed fainted.

"Hang in there, little guy. The nurse will fix you right up." And so, she did. So focused was he on the Mudkip that he didn't see the flame-haired girl waiting for her tray of balls next to him. "Nurse! This Mudkip! He's hurt bad."

She set the tray down behind the counter, and took the young Pokémon from the man's muck-covered arms. "What did he battle?"

"My Torterra..." He said, somewhat guiltily. "I told him to go easy, but...I guess he's too strong now. I...I miscalculated. I'm sorry." The nurse sighed, and took the Mudkip into the back part of the center. He saw a hand out of the corner of his eye, reaching in vain for the tray of Pokéballs.

"I've got it..." he mumbled, grabbing the tray with his long arms, and sliding it to whoever was just out of his vision. He was laser-focused on the doorway. Did it usually take this long?

"You always had a longer reach than me...but given that you're covered in swamp, I could've gotten it myself..."

Alex blinked, just realizing how nasty he was. Jumping in a swamp wasn't very hygienic. He knew that voice though, could pick it out of a crowd with ease. He turned, and immediately blushed. "J-Jess! I-I... I didn't know you were out here. Today." He forced himself to calm down. He hadn't expected that seeing her would unnerv him this much.

"Well..." She twirled a lock of hair, and batted her eyes at him obviously. She found the whole situation a little amusing. The Mudkip was essentially a baby, but Alex would still try to catch it. Another influence from her brother, who had the same idea. Pokémon raised from near-infancy ended up stronger. "After yesterday, I had to follow you..." She paused, her own face turning crimson. "In a totally friendly, not stalker-ish kind of way! I mean, who would do that, just follow a random boy from town to town all over the world? Not me, no sir!" She grabbed the tray with her balls, and avoided the large swampy hand print.
There was a third ball with the others now, and she busied herself with putting them back on her belt, her long shoulder-length hair hiding her face.

"I could think of worse traveling companions…" He blinked, not even realizing what he was saying. She stared at him. He stared back. If he was going to say it, he was going to stand by it. Couldn't backtrack now, even if he wanted to. The doors to the back of the center opened again with a familiar ding.

"Your Mudkip is resting. The bones are set and healing. He should be ready by tomorrow morning. Will you be staying the night?" Alex nodded, attention once again drawn to Pokémon and not Jess.

She couldn't really blame him though; the worry was evident on his face still. Was his Torterra seriously that strong? Most Pokémon who were made to faint in the wild were caught, but that Mudkip had been seriously hurt…and hadn't he said it was going easy?

"Very well." The nurse said, pretending to be unaware of the obvious attraction between these two. They seemed shy, despite their age, which made some sense. Most of the novice Trainers around here were big on the knowledge one gained from years of study from the University, but had far less experience in real life situations on the road.

"Since you two are...friends, I can have you share a room. Is that alright?" she continued. They both nodded absentmindedly, before they realized what they'd just agreed to.

"I-I mean, uh, that is, if you want to share…" Alex mumbled quickly. Perhaps the old Alex wasn't completely gone yet.

Jess smirked at him. "It's fine...just like when we were younger, and we stayed in the barn with the Tauros and Eric."

He rolled his eyes. "You were more interested in Eric than myself or the Tauros…" His voice dropped, as he mumbled, "Hopefully that won't be the case this time…" She looked at him suspiciously, not catching the last bit.

"Good!" The nurse said, cutting off the chance for a potential argument, "We're almost booked up for rooms. Lots of Trainers around here." That piqued both of their interest.

"Trainers? Any looking to battle?" Alex asked, hiding his eagerness.

The nurse nodded. "Tons. We have a tournament system here for Trainers. You're all mostly beginners, so it's usually balanced."

As the last stop between the north-eastern region of the country and Unova, this center was indeed a hot spot for new Trainers who were heading south, to Unova, or coming north from there, usually in search of Pokémon, or the University campus.

Trainers from Unova were usually in their early teens, but the mixing of older and younger people often led to book smarts being exchanged for knowledge of the road. Most Trainers from their home didn't know what kind of Pokémon were around here, but the younger Trainers often did, as their youthful energy gave them the drive to constantly scour the woods, lakes, and grass for every type they could catch. Alex's thoughts were on this tournament however, and on Terra, and his power. Probably better to use Leo.
"So how about it, Pokémon Master?" He looked up, to see Jess put on a fiery red hat, and turn it around with a smirk. "How about we tag team?" He blinked once, twice, a third time, then nodded.

"Terra is a bit strong…but Leo could use the exercise." She nodded as well.

"I'll be using all of mine. Including my new Piplup." He raised a brow. "What?" she said innocently. "I like Piplups. They have happy little feet."

He smirked. "Alright. Luxio and Piplup. What a team. Let's do it." It wasn't long before the tournament was set up. The Trainers gathered were more than willing to have a double-battle system once the two of them made it clear that they intended to battle as a team.

Seeds of romance, teen angst, and inexperience both in battle and love filled the air. No novice Trainer would give up the chance to gain valuable experience from a unique situation, like a double battle. Alex took the chance to clean as the newbies gathered around. He frowned, as he saw an unusual amount of bug specialists. Naturally, since they were supposedly all novice to intermediate level here, their teams were likely full of six different Caterpie, Weedle, or evolutions thereupon. He suppressed a grimace, and made his way past the bug lovers, couples, grass Trainers, and even a small troupe of bikers to the redhead waiting for him. Leo's glare had kept the bolder male influences away while he'd scrubbed the muck off his clothes.

Alex had lost his angst years ago thankfully, and already knew how to battle as well as, he liked to think, an Elite Four member. Given his unbroken win record thus far and with Trainers on the way out here, he thought that was justified. Then again, he had used his Torterra most of the time, who only kept getting stronger. Poor Leo had been all but sidelined since their victory. He came up beside the redhead and her Piplup, and gave Leo a thorough neck/chin scratch that set him purring. Once Alex stopped, the cat stretched, then looked at his Trainer.

"I'm sorry I ignored you most of the day my friend…but Terra was on a roll." "Luxio!" Was the response. "I think I can make it up to you though. How would you like to battle in a tournament?" The Luxio grinned, and sparks flared over his gold and black fur. "Perfect. We'll train you up, and we can also help Jess here with her team as well, alright?" Leo glanced at her for a long time, examining her with those smart, golden eyes. He finally nodded, and she released her breath.

"I thought for sure he'd refuse…he's a loner, you can see it in his gaze…you know, his eyes are as intense as yours lately..." Jess spoke quietly. Ignoring her for once, Alex instead petted his friend's golden fur, smirking at the soft buzz of electricity that went through his hand as he did. He didn't mind it anymore.

"Together, we will be unbeatable." Jess couldn't tell if he was talking to her, or his Luxio. Or both. She sighed. Some things would never change. He cared for Pokémon, all Pokémon, it seemed, almost as much as he supposedly cared for her. Now that she looked, the signs were a bit obvious. Yet somehow also endearing.

She had recalled all the times he had saved her bacon in the past, from a rampaging Tauros charging at a Miltank it wanted to breed, to saving her from a pair of malicious Poliwhags. One of which his brother had captured. "Do you still have that scar on your arm? From Wrath's Peck attack?"

Alex blinked at the seemingly random change of topic, but smiled at her anyways. "Umm. Yes. It's a scar. Those don't heal, you know."
She shrugged. "Stranger things have happened."

"I never thanked you, did I?" She said, putting a hand on his shoulder. She blinked at it in surprise as she felt a very noticeable buzz.

It was probably just Luxio's current of low energy running through him to her now, but just touching his shoulder seemed to set her entire body abuzz, much as she had been on their car ride home. Her thoughts turned lewd, and her gaze grew distant. Something about Leo's electricity just felt...really nice. Or maybe it was his Trainer. It was probably both.

"You did, actually." He said, smirking. "But I appreciate the sentiment all the same." She blinked, trying to clear her head as he spoke. This was not the same boy she'd slept next to as a ten-year-old. He was grown now...and so was she. How would they ever share a room?

"Our first opponents are coming..." She said, half distracted.

He nodded, glancing up into her eyes, and seeing the same low, golden glowing spark of electricity there as well. In an unexpected show of boldness, he took her hand, and then stopped petting Leo. The low hum of his electricity flowed between them still, back and forth. They were connected. She smiled at him, and didn't pull away. He reconsidered a thought from the previous day. This was rapidly becoming the luckiest day of his life. Though he was more of a rational-minded man, he offered a small prayer to Arceus that his luck didn't end any time soon.

The Luxio and Piplup strode onto the battlefield, one of many around the Pokémon center that was little more than a few lines in the grass and dirt. Personality wise, they appeared similar, despite the difference in gender and species. Both proud, both loners, but both respectful of the other's strength once they won the first round with a pair of one-hit KOs on a Roggenrola and a rather surly Hoppip. They could even cover for each other's weaknesses.

Hands still clasped together, the two battled together flawlessly against every pair they faced in the hastily configured tournament, which lasted long into the night outside of the Pokémon center, until finally there were only two teams left.

The fighting had taken hours, but now, after some Trainers had gotten a full eight hours of rest after being knocked out early, the tournament was ending and the sun was just starting to rise. They'd had a few intermissions of course, but the double-battling had quickly become a long, drawn out process as most of the Trainers had teams full of similar Pokémon of the same species, and if their opponents couldn't knock all six out too quickly, the battles could last as long as an hour, two, if both pairs of Trainers all had the same setup to their team.

Teams full of Pidgey and other such common, unevolved Pokémon were what took up most of the early hours of the tournament, and everyone had cheered when the last Unovan novice with such a team had finally been knocked out.

The night had been cold, but Leo's energy never faded. Nor did his Trainer's. Piplup eventually became exhausted however, so Chari had come out in her stead, and gained some much-needed experience. Here, at the final double battle, they faced a pair that had three Pokémon between them that they could use, just as Alex and Jess did. Terra had been deemed too strong by everyone when he'd tried to use him to give Leo a breather, which left Leo, Chari, and Serpi.
Terra had been denied, but Leo had gained the rest he needed to recharge, and fight with restored Pokémon Power. He'd usually just used Bite, and had Chari finish them off. The little runt had grown, the amount of experience she got from getting the KO was incredible. The fact that her Trainer had put an Experience Share device on her also helped. He didn't wonder where she'd gotten it. Her father was an accomplished Trainer in his own right, and, they were filthy rich.

Chari was normal sized now, after all the battles, and as the last one ended, she evolved, confirming her status as a runt. Her skin barely changed in tone as she became a Charmeleon, and she still looked smallish, but no less ferocious.

Charmeleon Trainers were dangerous, literally playing with fire. After a counsel of those who were once more awake and present, Chari was deemed too dangerous to have fight in the final, lest she go berserk on evolution energy and experience, and evolve straight into a rampaging Charizard.

Jess saw the sense in their precaution, and gave her exhausted, and over-stressed Charmeleon runt a break. She needed time with her new body before she could fight safely.

"Very well." Jessica said, cutting through the crowd's murmur as she recalled one of her strongest Pokémon. "I will use my Serpi." That got their attention. Everyone knew Jess had a Snivy, so the rumors said at least, she had arrived at the center with it by her side and everyone had seen how their eyes looked similar, but had she finally bothered evolving it, and removing that ever-stone it had?

Appearing in a tornado of leaves came her Serperior, looking every bit as dignified as the last Caesar had. But this one had a female grace and a Trainer with those same knowing eyes.

Alex gaped. "You…you evolved her too? How?" Jessica winked at him.

"Couple Rare Candies, and no ever-stone. Servine isn't really her style, tiny feet, and only half as long a body. She wanted to go straight into her final form, like Terra did, and now here she is." Alex blinked at the blatant admittance to using Rare Candies. Two probably wouldn't be a big deal, it was only considered 'illegal' when five or more were used prior to, or during, an official competition. An occasional boost to a Pokémon's strength was fine.

Their opponents spoke up, two blue haired Trainers who used dragon types who looked just as tired as everyone else who had battled through the night. Because this center was a pit stop, many additional late entries had been dealt with as well, until finally, everyone decided to close the entry. If only to avoid another bug catcher with a team full of Metapods.

"Oi! We accept the challenge. And the boy can use his Torterra too, if he likes. I am Lance, the Dragon Master of Kanto, and this is Blair, the Dragon Master of Johto. We are the former Champions of both regions. We accept their challenge, and will allow their team one night to rest and recover. We wouldn't want it any other way. Let them evolve, let them catch what few local Pokémon they can before tomorrow. It will make no difference. Our dragons will crush these two love birds."

With that, the pair walked off in silence. The crowd dispersed as well, going to find a proper rest in a proper bed at the Center's lodge. Or camping in the woods. Eventually, it was just Alex and Jess, their gaze still locked.

"This is it." He said, smirking. "This is how we become a legendary…pair." He waggled his eyebrows as he called Leo over for a well-earned rest. She tried not to break into laughter, and
fought down a giggle.

"Of course, and the rumors will certainly fly... thin walls and such..." She ran her hand up his arm, to his cheek, and then sauntered off the field, finally breaking the energy loop they'd shared for several hours, leaving both him and his Luxio staring in awe as she left. Only an idiot could miss an invitation that obvious, but his focus returned as he walked towards the central building of this complex in the middle of nowhere, to check on the Mudkip. Still, he pondered, he was sure she'd been joking. She had to have been joking.

"She was joking, right?" He asked his Luxio, who was enjoying strolling beside him after so many hard fights. His fur steamed with heat in the night air from the exertion of constant Bite attacks. "Lux." The golden cat shook his head, and Alex shrugged. Leo sounded sure of himself, but she must've been kidding... This line of thought continued on repeat as he entered the Pokémon center, and spoke to the nurse. Evidently he had healed fine, as the few fractures he been clean breaks. After seeing how young he was, the nurse had said she was surprised his mother had let him fight in the first place.

The dawn came swiftly, the early sun rise would make sleeping hard, but at least it was still cool out. Alex crawled quietly through the center to his shared room with his partner. Their room had been moved to an outer building, reserved for only the richest guests. Or the loudest.

No one doubted what those two, who had held hands through the entirety of the tournament, were about to do, and everyone had bet that it would be loud. Personally, he felt too exhausted from battling to do anything more than eat 'dinner' and then sleep. Good thing he didn't snore.

He came upon their private cabin building, with plenty of room compared to University living quarters, but only one double bed within, to find Jess sitting outside on the picnic table roasting hot dogs with Chari, newly evolved. It seemed she'd burnt a few of the sausages, and they were still cooking. Judging by the smell, she'd figured out how to control her Ember eventually.

If she was annoyed at his late return, she didn't show it with the smile that lit her face from under the flame red hair. She finished the hot dog she'd been munching, teasing him with every movement of her mouth, trying not to giggle, and wiping her hands, like a lady. More kidding around. Surely. All he could focus on was the food, and he realized just how many meals he'd skipped.

"I didn't think you'd take so long to get back. I took a...shower...and then figured I should make dinner, but Chari is...what, what is it?" He was grinning like a nerd at Pokécon, and nodded at the bushes behind her.

"Thanks, for making dinner. Oh, and your Charmeleon is being watched by another Charmander." He tried to keep his excitement in check. Charmander were more common to the north-west of this area, near Draconis Mons. Finding one here was unlikely, and it probably had a Trainer. Still...it was a chance, and he'd been absurdly lucky lately. He'd noticed his unusual streak of luck so far, and hoped that, right now, it wouldn't end. He'd dreamed of finding a Charmander. Literally.

While it was true that the little Charmander male that now watched them had indeed had a Trainer, he had lost to the power of Alex's Luxio, and its' partner, the female runt of a Charmander who had evolved into a similarly colored, smaller framed Charmeleon.

His latest Trainer had abandoned him after losing, deciding to give up on training entirely, so now this Charmander once more sought a new Trainer, on his own initiative after breaking his Pokéball
He sought a Trainer who would light him with the fire he'd seen in that Luxio. The power of the evolutionary spiral. The power that catapulted their species' evolution forward, constantly. He needed a Trainer who would make of him what he truly was. He needed to find a human whose fire would not dim so easily, as all the others had.

As he looked over the two humans, the larger one caught his eye. The Luxio beside him grinned, and bristled with electricity, as he had when they'd fought. Like an Electrike, the thunder cat had charged his muscles to compensate for his comparatively slower speed. His Trainer had a similar look, and was approaching him, a red Pokéball in hand. As the Charmander met the human's gaze, he knew. This was his Trainer. This was a Trainer who fought with everything he had. He'd had a bad run of luck in choosing a worthy one, but he had a good feeling about this one. Even his partner's eyes were on fire, and after the thrashing earlier, he had no doubts about his competence or skill level.

The Charmander wandered over fearlessly, expertly navigating his tail through the brush without starting a blaze. "That is what you are…" Alex said softly, watching, and then looking around for someone who would claim such a rare Pokémon. "A Blaze. And a Blaze you shall be."

Jess chuckled behind him. "More like you'll use him to 'blaze' up."

He winked at her, and then offered the crimson, fiery red Pokéball in his hand to the Charmander, who eyed him for a long time. "Charmander, Char?"

"Yes. I'll make you into one of the strongest Charizard in the world. There are many claimants to that title though, and the road will be long. Are you sure you want to join us?" As he spoke, Terra joined them, and his rumbling cry shook their immediate area. Naturally, the Charmander had faced a few Turtwig in his time, but seeing a Torterra was a new experience. Still, he knew something wasn't right. This Torterra towered over him like Rayquaza had. His presence wasn't quite as intense, not yet, but he was much further along than the Luxio. The fire lizard nodded. This Trainer's first, then.

Blaze glanced at the two large Pokémon, especially at Terra, who was almost as tall as the nearby shack. This Trainer could back up his promise. He was sold. He entered the ball willingly. Alex stared at the ball, still somewhat dazed. Years of misfortune seemed to be paying off now, because he had never been this lucky his entire life. He bit his thumb, hard, and Jess gave him a look.

"Just making sure this is real…" He muttered, thumbing the release on his newly filled ball. Once released again, Blaze and his new Trainer, and his Trainer's allies, all enjoyed a feast of classic Unovan style hotdogs, well into the morning. Meat was smoked, hallucinogenic Leaf was shared, and as the effects kicked in, the two humans kept eyeing each other. Eye contact was a new thing from her awkward neighbor, but Jess didn't seem to be minding the company.

Tired as they were, the usual awkwardness that tinged their conversations had evaporated, and once more the cautiously optimistic 'rookie' Trainer let instinct take over. Mutal leaning lead to hesitant kissing, but before long, the two blazed humans had begun kissing like a Kalos couple, until they'd fallen asleep. After his offer to truly 'demonstrate his skills', and her smirking acceptance of it, they had eventually collapsed on the rug before the unlit hearth within their cabin, her in orgasmic bliss, him, still with his head between her thighs. It was in that early morning time that Alex roused himself, and carried his 'lover' to bed, then cleaned up their mess.
He recalled the Pokémon, who had long since fallen asleep, and put them to rest in their balls. He grabbed their clothes, and hung those within the cabin as well. Then, he returned to the room he'd put Jess in. She reached for him as he rejoined her, their session earlier had certainly changed their dynamic. Or at least, that's what she thought. Alex blushed, but it was impossible to tell in the darkness of the room. They'd drawn the curtains against the glare of the sun.

"Did…you, umm, enjoy that earlier?" There was a giggle, and he felt her lips on his again as she pushed him onto his back, and began straddling him in the dim light of the morning.

"Yes…" She whispered, as she began grinding on him. "I'll pay you back for that, Redwood." She yawned, and then fell on his chest. "But not right now…" she mumbled tiredly. They stayed like that until they both woke up.

The match was postponed until dusk the next day, which gave Alex the chance he needed to train his new Charmander a bit. His last Trainer had been incompetent, not even teaching him how to properly use Ember.

"It's alright Blaze…but this battle is probably going to be too much for you. You'll get another shot at Dragon Pokémon, that I can promise you." The Charmander looked disappointed, but obeyed his new Trainer's seemingly experienced counsel.

Already he'd gotten stronger, and in just a few hours. That was, in large part, thanks to the Mudkip that had recovered, and insisted on battling Alex again. This time he'd used Blaze, and despite the type disadvantage, managed to weaken the little mud fish enough to capture it in the ball he'd prepared for it. A blue one with similar markings to the ones his brother Eric used for his team. Around four in the P.M. after a bowl and some rest, he brought the Mudkip back to its swamp, and gave him a choice.

"You can either go home to your family and live your days there, my friend…or you can come with me, and become more powerful than any of them." The little blue Pokémon tilted its head at him. "Mud…kip?"

Alex chuckled. "Yes, even stronger than Terra, once you learn a few moves." The Mudkip, then named Hydrus, said his goodbyes to his seemingly grateful kin, and rejoined his Trainer inside his ball. Alex eyed the four balls now, grinning. "Two to go…" He said quietly.

He met several more novice Trainers on his way back to the center, and by the time he got there, he deemed Blaze strong enough to fight. He was at least as strong as Leo had been, give or take a few levels, but he knew relying on evolution as a boost was not going to be something he could do in every battle. Against dragon tamers however, it was a good strategy. Assuming he could take one of the supposed Champions down. He privately doubted their claim, as he'd seen Champions of every era battle, and not one had lacked destruction on a massive scale. Trainers that strong were simply in their own weight class. One had to train hard, to join it.

With only a few hours left before noon, he and Jess went over their strategy, and gradually, the awkwardness had faded from their conversation. She kept staring at his mouth, and he kept staring at her legs. They had managed to focus eventually, and came up with what seemed like a sound strategy.

Alex had also done a bit of research on their supposed 'Champion' level opponents. The real Dragon Master of Kanto, also called Lance, had red hair, albeit in the same cut as his upcoming opponent.
But that Lance was ancient now, residing in Blackthorn City, in Johto.

He hadn't been a Dragon Master for decades, or, according to the PokéNet, even had an official League battle for almost as long. He was long retired, but as he looked up Blair, he instead found Clair, who must have been her mother. The resemblance was too strong to be mere coincidence.

"So they're siblings…or family, or something." Jess said, once he told her what he'd found. She was training Chari against Blaze, while he busied himself. It gave the Charmeleon a chance to get used to her new body, and it gave Blaze a chance to use the new moves he'd learned. All but one of them, anyways. Alex nodded.

"They have to be the children of the dragon tamers they name dropped…so formidable certainly, but then, why are they all the way over here, and not in Johto or Kanto? I'll bet anything they're just as new to this as we are. They couldn't be older than thirteen, and you know how the Japanese do things. They probably started training when they were ten."

Jess raised a brow. "You started training a year ago, and you haven't lost a match, despite being overpowered and disadvantaged twice now."

He shrugged, again wondering at why his fortunes had changed. He couldn't deny that he'd been on a roll lately, and even though he had lost several times at University, he didn't bring it up. "Dragons grow even slower than Turtwigs, and I've had more than two matches. I battled plenty of Trainers at school, but they usually weren't on his level." Alex said, glancing at Terra, who was lounging nearby.

He was enormous, a testament to just how rigorous their long months of training had been, but he slept often lately. The nurse had said that his body was still adjusting to his new size. After having so much power in such a small form for so long, his new form needed time to adjust. That meant plenty of time out of his ball, and plenty of sleep. Many younger Trainers on their way through had gaped at Terra, always amazed at how he could be so large.

The few daring, or perhaps stupid, enough to want to battle him were turned away. One of the brats had been particularly persistent, which was when Hydrus had climbed down from napping under Terra's tree, and launched Mud Slaps at him until he'd gone.

His voice had been high pitched, not yet dropping to the low tones of puberty, and Mudkip were sensitive to such sounds. Especially while they slept. Terra seemed not to notice his Trainer, or anything for that matter, being well and truly asleep.

"At any rate, I can't imagine them having anything stronger than a first form on their team." Alex said, glancing up at the sky.

"A first form dragon type," Jess countered, "With years of training under the offspring of two of the strongest Dragon Trainers in the world." The fact that even she had heard of Lance, if not Clair, was a testament to how strong he'd been in his prime. Everyone had heard of how he'd battled Gary Oak and Red, and how Red had then gone on to beat Gary, the Professor's own grandson, and claim the title of Champion.

Lance had lost again several years later to a Trainer by the name of Hibiki as well, and that same Trainer had, supposedly, gone on to beat Red at Mt. Silver. Or so the rumors said. Nobody actually knew who won that match. Despite his losses, Lance was no slouch, as the Dragon Master had, after
finally retiring from the Indigo Plateau, trained thousands of students to attempt to become Dragon Tamers as well. His pupils had often become Gym Leaders, or Trainers in dragon friendly gyms, and were notoriously strong. His descendants were unlikely to be weak either. They planned until the sky turned to the color of fire, and the final battle to this silly mock tournament could get underway.
The Unlikely Strategy

Pokemon Center North-East of Humilau - Northern Unova

The time for the match finally arrived, and Alex was the first one to the battlefield, looking as eager as ever. Jess appeared soon after, smirking at her neighbor. The awkward post-cunnilingus talk had been awkward, but still amusing. Her entire team was out of their balls.

"Ready?" She asked, smiling shyly.

He smirked at her, and turned his hat around. "Everyone! Out of your balls!" On command, his new team appeared all at once.

They sniffed each other, especially Blaze, but the little fire lizard only had eyes for Chari. Noticing his partner's gaze, Alex smirked. "Is Chari recovered enough to battle?" The Charmeleon stepped up to him, and roared.

He raised a brow at the yellow-orange creature and kept his face neutral. "I'll take that as a yes."

Irritated, the smallish Charmeleon opened her maw again, and he just barely avoided singing his hat as a Flamethrower shot above him. Blaze watched, and knew that this would be the Trainer who would propel him to new heights. He showed no fear in the face of this Charmeleon, a violent middle evolution that new Trainers like him were supposed to have trouble handling. The tiny fire Pokémon smirked. He'd play nice as a Charmeleon, but once he could fly, all bets were off.

Many Trainers did not have the patience for taming a Charmeleon, and simply abandoned their partners for a more malleable starter, usually from another town. Alex could see the rationale behind it, why have a Pokémon that doesn't listen to you, but it seemed cold all the same. Then again, Charmeleon probably survived just fine on their own, in the wild, and once they could fly, their instincts would help them hone in on ancestral breeding grounds.

Such a place did exist in Unova, as over time these wild Charmeleon had gathered in one place, and evolved together. They fought together, protected their land from humans, and were powerful enough to rival the inhabitants of the largest Charizard reserve on the planet, the Charicific Valley, in Johto.

This area full of Charizard who had been abandoned or born there, in the wild, was known as Draconis Mons. You had to be brave to walk that mountain. Those Charizard were ruthless when it came to humans. And, they were not alone. The top of the mountain was home to fierce species like Salamence and Tyranitar as well as Hydreigon, Dragonite, and many other dragon types. None of them had an overtly strong love of humans, as most of the inhabitants were either abandoned themselves, or were the offspring of one who'd experienced that trauma, and passed on their views.

Little was known about the mountain itself, but nobody had even bothered to set up an anti-poaching hut anywhere near it, so volatile were its older residents, who never got over their abandonment. If you wanted to reach an old age, you stayed away from that mountain.

"Sorry!" Jess said, as she came over to him after scolding her partner. "Ever since she evolved she's gotten a bit of an attitude."

"It's fine, I've handled much more sass than that. Blaze is close to evolving too." Alex said, looking
at his Charmander, after examining Chari. "You'd better not turn all self-important." The Charmander gave him a grin that implied he made no promises. Alex sighed. "It doesn't take much to get them to the second stage, but once they're there, they become truly powerful. I taught him several moves through technical machines. He's ready for the final."

Jess raised an eyebrow at that. "What moves? And are you going to share your vast hoard of TMs with me?"

He smirked at her, moving closer. "I swore to myself that I would only share those with someone I liked enough to fall for." Her face turned crimson. When she finally looked up again, he was laughing and offering an orange colored disk.

"The look on your face..." He chuckled, waving his words off, and plopping the disk in her hand. "Flamethrower." He said, handing it to her. "There's a PP Max under it too."

Her eyes went wide. "Are you insane? Giving a protein like that to a Charmander? With a move like Flamethrower? If you lose control of him, he'll be a fire storm."

Alex shook his head. "Blaze will be the best behaved Charmeleon on the continent. His goal is mine, and he won't let the rage of battle take over. He doesn't even know Rage anymore."

She nodded slowly. "Right...the TM. Knowing Rage is usually what sets them off, and makes them too difficult for new Trainers...but I guess if." She stopped mid-sentence as she felt a small paw on her bare thigh, just above her red socks that went just over her knees.

"Char." Blaze said, meeting her gaze, and nodding once.

"I see..." she nodded. "You did in a few hours what it took me all night to do with Chari...you just got him, and he already obeys you...you really are a natural at this, Alex..."

"If you two love-birds are done..." came an antagonizing call, "We'd like to start sometime today. We're Dragon Tamers! We have things to do!" Alex glared across the way at the voice's source.

"That's another thing..." He spoke loudly to the gathering crowd of beginners as he walked towards his spot on the field of battle, still smirking. "I looked up Lance, the Dragon Master, from Kanto. And the Johto master, named Clair. Not Blair. I think you two are frauds."

Jess turned her own hat backwards as well. It was a Unova thing. "So who are you really?" she said, shouting across the field.

"That's none of your business little girl." Came the voice of the female Dragon Tamer who had to be several years younger than Jess, "Once we beat you, our names won't matter either way." Chari stepped forward, snarling. Any Charmeleon could recognize a challenge when they heard one.

"Call your Pokémon!" Alex shouted, as he drew both Leo and Blaze's balls from his belt. Depending on what they called out, he would scale appropriately. The two bursts of light from across the field faded, revealing a large Dratini, and a Pokémon Alex had been looking for, but hadn't expected to find. Not any time soon, at least. A Bagon.

The cornerstone of his dream team. A powerhouse in its own right, if you could train a Shelgon hard enough, the reward was a near legendary dragon whose power was unmatched, even by a Charizard. He called out Blaze.
"Nice Bagon." He said, looking at the kid who called himself Lance. "Tell me where you caught it, if I win."

"Alright," the cocky kid replied, "And if I win, I take your girl there for dinner."

Alex's nostrils flared, and he glanced at Blaze. His Charmander was just as furious at the insult, grasping the intent behind the words, if not their meaning. "You're on."

Jess glared at him. "I am not having dinner with that prick…his hair is blue. This isn't an anime."

"You're right, you aren't having dinner with him." Alex replied calmly. "You're having it with me. Keep Chari back for now, I want the Dratini too. We're going to try that plan."

She nodded slowly, staring at him. Of all the plans they'd made, that one was the least likely to actually work. This definitely wasn't the same kid she'd lived next to before, he'd never gambled so much. But, he was on a streak of luck that seemed to have no end.

She had been more than surprised the night before, when he'd offered to go down on her, after they had kissed. If one could call that kissing. It had started well enough, and then before either of them knew what was going on, they were kissing like a Kalos couple and rolling around on the floor of the cabin, only stopping to ask her if he could kiss her other pair of lips. He hadn't seemed sure she'd accept, but when she did, he had certainly been…determined in his efforts to please her. His tongue hadn't been perfect, but he had continued for a solid thirty minutes, and she had been satisfied several times.

He said that with time he'd be able to finish her much quicker. She had thought it was a brag, but seeing him now, in the light of day, with a confidence to his stance that he'd never had before…she almost believed it. He had always used to slouch, and his weight had made him look almost dumpy. Now, finally, he seemed to have found his calling. It suited him.

She'd only seen him like this once before, at the Trainer Exam, but after that, he'd been much more withdrawn. Something had lit the fire in him again. She nodded. She had doubted his skill against his brother, and had been wrong. What Trainer could plan out a plan like his, and then follow through on it with two mid-battle evolutions? It was unheard of.

"Win." She said, and he winked at her.

"You heard her Blaze!" Alex called as the young Charmander, one of his newest Pokémon on the team, stepped forward while Chari stepped back. "Chaaar!" The little roar was laughable, and the crowd that was forming around the field again was filled with chuckles and mocking words. Let them laugh while they could, Alex thought, soon that roar would be one that inspired respect.

With that, the battle began, and neither Dragon Tamer seemed surprised that the male Charmander was charging both of them. They too could recognize natural talent when they saw it, but this newbie had overestimated his Pokémon. These were dragon types, the strongest of all the natural typings. They would not be harmed much by fire.

Others called them pseudo-Legendaries, but their rarity and difficulty to raise presented a challenge not even taming Legendary Pokémon had. One new Charmander that looked like he was barely out of the lab could not stand against them and win.

"Dratini! Dragon Rage!"
"Bagon, Headbutt!"

Alex grimaced. Melee, and long range. He was hoping they’d be novices, but apparently, they weren’t. No matter. He had covered this in his training session with Blaze. Now he would see how well the little Pokémon could remember the battle plan. Just as practiced, albeit with different moves from Leo and Terra, Blaze dodged the game-ending Dragon Rage, with a Dragon Tail assisted leap into the air. He kept the fiery orange glow around his fifth appendage as he gained height on the two.

"Baaaagon!" The Bagon leapt up to him easily matching his height for his Headbutt, but the Charmander was already spinning, smashing his little tail down on the Bagon's glowing head.

Had it been any other move, Iron Tail perhaps, it would've been pushed through. But this was a dragon type move, and dragons were weak to them. His tail glowed red-orange as the move made contact, and sent the Bagon hurtling towards the ground. Blaze landed, and snorted flames. He too, had been on a winning streak since meeting Alex. He wasn't going to end it here.

Lance gaped. "But…he said he was going for Dratini, right!?!" He was panicking already, and he was distracted from the battle. Alex smirked, and silently ordered an attack, with little more than a raised arm. The Charmander inhaled, seeming to know what to do.

"Focus!" His female partner snapped, but it was already too late.

Blaze reared back, and then shot a torrent of true fire at the Bagon. Dragon types were indeed hardy, but this one had just been hit by a dragon type move, its only weakness aside from fairies and ice, and now a Flamethrower, the most powerful and recognizable fire attack that any competent fire type eventually learned, usually once they were fully evolved. Blaze was an exception though, it seemed. His flames burned the Bagon down, and the little blue Pokémon fainted. That left the Dratini.

"Dragon Tail!" Both Alex and the remaining Dragon Tamer shouted in unison, and the crowd braced itself. The two dragon type moves collided, but Blaze came out victorious. He was, after all, just a fire type, not a dragon type. The female Trainer swore loudly. As Bagon was recalled, the male of their pair shouted again. "Glaedr! Put this lizard in his place!"

Alex felt a twinge of dread as a Fraxure appeared on the field. Fraxure was powerful, and had a high minimum evolution threshold…and then a short bout of training into its final form, Haxorus.

This was the wild card. Alex had noted they only had three Pokémon between them, and he assumed they would all be first form dragon types. He hadn't counted on a Fraxure, let alone one that sparkled like Leo did.

He checked his Pokédex quick, and groaned. This one was black, with almost neon blue coloring at its tips. He knew all too well the power uniquely colored Pokémon had. He was rapidly becoming trapped up Shit Creek, with no paddle…or so it appeared. Chari was there as soon as the Fraxure came out with a Flamethrower that hit it hard. Critically, even.

It was a miracle shot, one not seen by Pokémon or Trainer, as they had assumed she would stay out of this. What she had actually been doing, was waiting for exactly this, just like they'd planned. The Flamethrower had hit hard, and that gave them a chance, if Blaze could finish the Dratini.

His Dragon Tail had done more damage, but he had taken some as well. A dragon type move was still a dragon type move after all. Now, he needed his ace in the hole. The Dratini was slithering once
The humanoid shaped blast of fire was smaller than perhaps it would one day be when used by a Charizard, but it was large enough for the Dratini, who had no chance of dodging it. It went down in a smoldering heap, and Alex noticed that it really wasn't all that far from evolving itself. He looked at Blaze, who was trembling. A Dratini that strong would give a lot of experience…

"Chaaaaaaar!" The little Charmander shone brightly with the power of the evolutionary spiral, and began shifting his form to the next stage of his growth. He doubled in size, and gained muscle, power, trading it for the speed his child form had had. "Meeeleon!"

The new Charmeleon stomped the ground, and snorted flames. He was feeling the high his new master felt, the drive to be the very best, like no one ever was. Alex began humming the classic tune as it played in his head, and he heard Jess giggle at him.

"It's you and me bud! Dragon Tail!" Alex cried, refocusing on the battle.

"Chari, back him up! Flamethrower!" Jess shouted, and the smaller Charmeleon, who was more orange than red, inhaled deep, preparing to use her first Flamethrower.

The Fraxure, Glaedr, had not been idle, charging towards the two Charmeleon. These fire type upstarts would learn exactly how strong dragons were, and why they were so feared.

"Dual Chop!" One side of the massive, neon blue tusks hit Blaze's Dragon Tail, canceling it out entirely, and the other hit Chari, right in the stomach as she'd been preparing her flames.

The Charmeleon gasped, and coughed hard, and the two other contestants paused as they watched in shock. Fire poured from the small Charmeleon's mouth as she struggled to adjust to the new move, and the injury to her stomach.

So focused on Chari was the entire field, that when the mighty red-orange glowing tail smashed Glaedr across his own stomach in a true sucker-punch move, even Alex was shocked.

Blaze however, was enraged. His eyes were glowing red. High on the energy of evolution, fueled by the rage he felt at seeing his love interest get hurt, he struck without his Trainer's command, and looked to continue doing so. Glaedr struggled to stand, dealing with a serious injury of his own now. Blaze inhaled for another Fire Blast, when his Trainer shouted, "Hold!" The fire lizard glared at him, but then inhaled and exhaled three times, and nodded. He needed to keep his head if he wanted to win.

Alex led the injured Charmeleon to her Trainer, as Blaze snorted flames, and pounded his chest, glaring at the Fraxure across the field. Alex hoped his Charmeleon wouldn't attack again, not while he was helping their injured teammate.

Indeed, he'd stopped attacking, and was instead snarling at the Fraxure. He'd felt justified with taking one attack of opportunity, but this was still a battle. He could wait.
"Go." Alex said loud enough for everyone to hear, once he'd handed her to Jess. "This is now a one on one battle."

He turned to Lance. "Your partner is out of Pokémon. You can give Glaedr a regular potion for the pain, and we will start this on even footing once more. That blow was not ordered, nor desired, I apologize. As does my Charmeleon."

Blaze looked anything but apologetic. He shot a Flamethrower into the air, and glared at the Fraxure. Still, he did not attack again. His Trainer had a point, and a fair fight was always preferred by members of his species.

The potion was administered, and while it healed Glaedr, it didn't give him nearly enough strength to be back in the green. He was still seriously hurt from that attack, which should have ended him by all rights, but uniquely colored Pokémon could take critical hits like that, and survive by the skin of their teeth. Leo had done it. Now Glaedr had too.

But all Alex needed now was a few good, solid hits, and Blaze could win…although as he looked at his newest partner, he wondered if he should push that limit. A pupil appeared amidst the glowing red, narrowed eyes. It looked back at his Trainer. Blaze nodded, once, and raised a thumb pointed upwards. He was enraged, but somewhat in control now. It was far more common among fire types than one might imagine.

"Dragonbreath!" The first move was theirs, but Alex saw his chance. "Flamethrower." The two fire based attacks met, and collided in an explosion of color. Blue flame smashed into red flame, and the field was scorched by the fury of both attacks.

Glaedr seemed enraged as well, furious that he'd had to be given a sympathy healing. The two remaining Trainers met the other's gaze. They nodded. This was a battle of fire now.

"Agni Kai." The boy called Lance said, grinning.

Alex smirked, and then nodded. He knew the meaning behind the words, as he'd always been interested in Korian customs. "A fire duel." The honor of both Pokémon was on the line now. They roared their agreement, and the gathered crowd flinched at the ferocity in the Charmeleon's. Evidently evolution had been all he'd needed to roar properly.

Flamethrowers and Dragonbreaths crisscrossed the battle field, and the entire area's Trainers were watching now, after hearing the commotion, and seeing the massive gouts of fire shooting into the air. Alex was glad their battlefield was quite literally a grassy field, though now it was upturned and scorched, little more than dirt with vague outlines. This was the finale that their tournament deserved, and had been long awaited by most of the Trainers there.

Journeys had been put on hold, just to see this final match, and it was rapidly becoming worth it. Two genuinely strong Pokémon, from two relatively new Trainers, duking it out at a level usually reserved for the Pokémon League.

Blaze seemed to have the upper hand, until he noticed Jess and Chari exit the center out of the corner of his eye. He took a Dragonbreath full to the chest, and fell hard to the ground, shuddering.

He was paralyzed, something Dragonbreath sometimes did to its opponent. The advantage belonged to Glaedr. The two females passed through the massive crowd, and watched expectantly.
struggled to rise, and glanced at Alex, who nodded back.

They couldn't use a Full Restore right now. Even with that, Blaze was low on power for his Flamethrower, and one more attack from Glaedr, one more direct hit, would end him. It was anyone's battle. Glaedr had the level advantage as well, and as his Trainer ordered their next attack, an orb of white power formed in Glader's maw. Just as Alex had hoped. A smirk spread across the face of the Charmeleon and his Trainer.

---

Dragon tamers were notorious for one thing: teaching their dragons a move that, while powerful, was ultimately their downfall, if one was skilled enough to prepare for it. The attack was a gamble, at best, but it usually paid off if they could land it. It was hard to dodge true, but not impossible.

For a Charizard, anyway. A Charizard could fly, but Blaze was land locked, and vulnerable. He was tired. Paralyzed, and one good hit away from a KO. Lance and Glaedr saw victory, and charged blindly into it.

"HYPER BEAM!" The Fraxure wasted no time. This was it. There was nothing else that could be done. No trick. No last-minute win. This was a one on one fight, with no substitutions now, after it devolved from a double battle. And Blaze was paralyzed before a Hyper Beam from a much, much stronger opponent.

Or so it appeared. Seeing the smirks, 'Lance' quickly went over the moves the Charmeleon had used. Though most Pokémon could remember five or six at a time, this was a proper battle, and by current League rules, four was the limit. He was sure the fire lizard had used four. Hadn't he? Flamethrower, Fire Blast, Dragon Tail, and…and what?

Lance's eyes went wide. What was the final move!? He calmed himself, all in the space of a half second as the Hyper Beam grew larger in Glaedr's maw, and turned a menacing orange. He had won. He needed to relax…there was no way this Trainer, this absurdly dressed rookie, had counted on him having a dragon who knew Hyper Beam…right?

His uncertainty showed, and then he saw it. The Charmeleon had opened his mouth, and his body had begun to swell with the red colored energy that the heralded a fire type move. A powerful one. Lance swore, but his choice word was drowned out as the Hyper Beam was unleashed. A normal Trainer would normally never give his starter two super-strong moves like Fire Blast, and Hyper Beam when it fully evolved. It severely limited the number of total attacks a Pokémon could do, and more attacks meant longer trips without needing a Pokémon Center. But Alex was not a normal Trainer. Nobody from his region was, but even there, this was an unconventional strategy.

Just as Lance started to panic, Blaze's power peaked. The flame at the tip of his tail swirled…and turned bluish-white. That was all his Trainer had waited for. "BLAST BURN!" The blue-white flame swelled, and covered the Charmeleon's entire body, as Blaze roared.

The Hyper Beam met the Blast Burn, which had expanded out from his body in a wave of fiery death. Luckily, Hyper Beam was not a dragon move. It was normal. And thus, the higher damage was done by the elemental typing. It burned the Hyper Beam away with ferocity fueled by evolution, and hit Glaedr full on.

Smoke filled the air, and there was a slight tremor felt through the ground as the flames erupted around the Fraxure once the wall hit him. Blaze seemed to almost command them, as they encircled
his opponent, and hit home. He gave a cry as the inferno overpowered him. Alex had taught his new Charmander that move, sometimes called the 'Elemental Hyper Beam' when he realized that their bond, despite being new, was as strong as mithril.

He didn't quite know how, or when, but something had started the night he'd caught Blaze, and spent the evening with him, and Jess, and Chari, just relaxing. That had forged their bond, and the next day had strengthened it further. He had loaded the Blast Burn technique his Gruncle had given him, not expecting it to really work on such a new Pokémon. But it had.

As a Charmander, Blaze had been too small in form to properly handle all that power. It had taken Terra months to learn his own move, Frenzy Plant. As a Charmeleon however…he could do it, if his rage peaked, and his tail shone with the ferocity of blue and white flame.

Alex hadn't even planned on using the Blast Burn, but Glaedr had given Blaze all the requirements necessary for victory. He was a strong opponent, a dragon no less, and he had paralyzed Blaze, and backed him into a corner. All that after, of course, hitting Chari in the middle of a Flamethrower, and disrupting her flames, injuring her.

Blaze had evolved, and then become enraged…exactly the scenario Alex had hoped for. He hadn't counted on it of course, but it had certainly worked out. His streak of luck was not yet ended, or so it seemed.

Blaze's mouth was smoldering, as was the form of Glaedr. The Charmeleon roared, and beat his broad chest in superiority. Flamethrowers shot into the air, twice, until suddenly, he found he couldn't fire them anymore. Out of stamina, finally, the exhausted fire lizard slumped to the ground, but his Trainer was there to catch him as he fell back. He was a lot heavier now, but Alex managed to support his weight.

Alex spoke quietly. "Rest…my heavy friend. You've earned it." There was a slow clapping sound to his right, where he saw Jess standing with her bandaged Charmeleon. The clapping continued, and slowly, the crowd joined in.

She ran over, grinning at him. "I can't believe that actually worked…there's no way..."

Alex nodded slowly. "Right…well, it can't last forever. Far be it from me to look a gift-Ponyta in the mouth." The flame haired girl giggled.

"Now then..." He said, staring at his opponent across the way.

"Oi!" Alex shouted, once the cheering had started to fade. "We had an agreement. Tell me where you found a Bagon." Lance looked at his new rival from where he knelt next to the fainted Fraxure, who still smoldered. He sneered, looking far, far younger than Alex had thought he was.

"Mount GoMukYourself." He mumbled something in a foreign language then, returning his attention to his partner. That was when Blair appeared, sighing.

"Forgive my brother…he hates losing. He was tired of losing in Johto, so we came here. We thought a nice, easy tournament with new Trainers in it would be a good confidence boost..."

Alex snorted, and Jess winced. "He hasn't trained enough. Or maybe he's just not meant to be a Trainer. Or maybe he just isn't good enough to beat me. Either way, his Bagon wasn't strong enough."
Blair held herself in check, but her eye still twitched. "And your Charmander was?"

Alex nodded. "I trusted him to get the job done if he evolved. Because we trained, and had a plan. I didn't honestly expect him to beat Glaedr until Chari's Flamethrower got a critical hit on him. Even if Blaze had gone down, I still had Leo, and Terra, thanks to his loud mouth. Both of whom are stronger than Blaze. And that's just my team." He nodded at Jess. "Hers was ready to jump in at any time, at first."

Blair looked down, and nodded slowly, seeing the cold truth in his words. Alex continued. "You need a full party, and you need to train them, if you want to win. I was lucky with my Charmander. Extremely lucky. The most I expected from him was Bagon, and maybe if I was lucky, your Dratini. But he kept fighting, because that's who he is."

Blair tilted her head at that. "You speak about him like he's human…"

Alex raised a brow. "He doesn't need to be human to have a personality. Do you really think your Dratini is just a dumb animal? Granted, some Pokémon may not be the brightest, but all of them are just as unique as we are. Nobody ever seems to pay attention to that."

Blair crossed her arms then. "You're awfully smart for a novice…what are you, fifteen?" A few people in the crowd who were dropping eaves chuckled.

"Fifteen?" Jess spoke up now, smirking. "We're in our twenties. Most of us anyway. We study and train before we wander off on a journey…right, right, you said you came from Johto. They still send ten-year-olds out on journeys, do they?"

Blair shifted uncomfortably. "Yes…but it's worked out so far…"

Alex waved his hand. Everyone knew of how they did things in Japan, and the last thing he wanted was to start an international feud. "Regardless, your brother and I had an agreement. Do you know where I can find a Bagon?"

Lance glared at his sister, but she sighed. "Draconis Mons, of course. Where else were you expecting to find a dragon type?"

Jess spoke again, "Isn't that place mostly full of Charizard?"

Blair nodded. "Charizard do make their home there, but it's just at the top, and on the mountain itself. That's where they patrol. Their Charmander, and many other younger dragon types, often wander the woods surrounding it. If you want a Bagon, catch one there. Just don't get caught by its mother…you won't survive a Salamence's rage."

The rest of their conversation was brief, but they parted on good terms. Lance swore revenge on Alex, who loudly and openly welcomed his challenge. He was also challenged by almost every Trainer there, many of whom he'd beaten in the tournament.

Finally, he said "Not one of you could beat Lance or Blair. Most of you couldn't beat me the first time. Leo is stronger than everything you guys have, and Terra would seriously injure them."

"What about the Mudkip?" Someone asked. He swore silently.
"He's busy. Look, continue on your journey, and stop dawdling here. You need to train to get stronger, and staying here will only get you so far. At any rate, I am leaving." And leave he did, continuing south, towards Unova. Jess kept up with him, smiling the whole way.

"You're going to get challenged everywhere now, you know." She teased, and Alex facepalmed, sighing at how right she was. "Trainers talk. I give it about a week before everyone has your name and face, and demands a chance to battle you."

He smirked at her as they walked. "How about this; you can battle the ones I'm too strong for. That way you can catch up to me."

She raised a brow. "Catch up? How do you know I'm not already ahead of you?"

He chuckled. "Because I know how strong Serpi is, I've seen Chari fight, and your Piplup is fresh out of the lab. Like I said, you need to travel and train. So, train with me."

She pouted. "I don't want your scraps."

He gave her a wink, and then ran ahead to the top of the rise on the mountain trail they were traversing, looking ahead. "You won't always get my scraps. Beat enough of these novices, and the rest will gladly seek you out too. And look…there's our first stop."

He pointed, and she checked her map. "Humilau City? You want to take on Marlon first? That gym is usually the last one people challenge! Marlon would turn you into chum."

Alex smirk as they began walking again. "Not for Terra. It's exactly his level. I'll get the eighth badge first, and then the other Leaders won't treat me like some novice. Besides, our goal is Driftveil City. Humilau is on the way."

She blinked, and chased after him on the downward sloping path. "Eww, Driftveil? Really? I thought nobody in Unova willingly crossed the river to…that part of the region."

He chuckled. "You're thinking of the coast further south. The north shore isn't nearly as bad."

The Driftveil Shore was notorious for having obnoxious surfers riding the waves of the river. That in itself wasn't a bad thing, it was the culture of tanning their skin to the point of being orange, and the culture of fighting, with fists not Pokémon, that gave the shore such a bad rep with Castelianites.

"Move tutors. Move deleters. TM sellers. And of course…the old World Tournament building. Basically, everything we need in order to get our teams the moves they need." He met her gaze evenly, listing the many reasons they needed to visit the city on one hand.

She pouted again. "But I like my team's moves."

He shrugged. "I have two more Pokémon to catch, and Draconis Mon's base is on the way, too. Just north of Humilau. East of the Victory Plateau. We're technically already in it, but we'll need to go farther to find a Bagon."

His companion rolled her eyes, the strain of hiking so far and so long was showing on their sweaty brow now, but their conversation had carried them far and distracted them from the time it was taking to get somewhere civilized. "What is it with you and Bagon, anyways? Why not Dratini, or Deino?"
There are plenty of Deino here."

He nodded. "True, but Hydreigon is a real pain to train, most dragon types are, but especially that one. Besides, plenty of Trainers have a Dragonite already. No, I decided years ago that a Salamence would be the perfect secret weapon if Terra ever failed. And, their flight speed is unmatched. If I want to get around the world quickly, a Salamence will do it the fastest. They love flying, and they're aerodynamically built for it."

She shrugged. "I just think something more your style would be better. Like a Goomy."

"Hey!" She was already running ahead, laughing. He rolled his eyes, and kept walking. He didn't chase. Not on long journeys that required stamina, anyways. Let her run, she'd be exhausted later.
"Are we theeere yet?" Jess whined in his ear. He liked her better when she was too distracted by his
tongue to form coherent words. She had indeed run herself out of energy, first running ahead quite
far, getting lost, and then running back.

She'd been expecting to be chased, and as much as he would've liked to catch her and pull her into
the bushes, this was the Unova region. There were quite a few impressionable children on the road,
and he was going to do his best not to traumatize them.

All this had happened whilst in her heels as well, a type of shoe that confounded Alex and defied all
logic. If it hurt, why wear it? If you were going on a journey, why wear heels? She'd insisted that
they 'made her feel pretty', and had kept complaining of sore feet, which he had been nominated to
rub when they stopped to rest.

They'd been traveling for several days now, and she'd run ahead of him several times, only to limp
back with sore feet an hour later and ask for a ride on his back. The monotony of walking like a
normal person on a road was evidently too boring for her to deal with. Some might've found that
annoying, but he could see she was happy.

Now however, he was once more carrying her shoes, and she was on his back. They weren't thin
heels, but they were apparently just painful enough to cause sore feet. This was yet another thing he
would never understand about the fairer sex. His own shoes were perfect. Black and white and made
for travel. He'd had to wear his backpack reversed to make room for her, and now he felt more like a
camel than a Trainer. He would've ridden his Torterra, but he was still sleeping almost twenty four
hours a day, and he figured that it would be best to let him rest before the gym match. Once that was
over, he'd have a proper break in the warm summer sun of Undella Bay.

Looking at her shoes, a thought drifted into his head, and he asked, "Are you planning on staying
with me this summer? Through the whole journey? You might not be back in time for school. I'm
good, but journeys take time. Especially the first one." He could feel her sigh against his neck, and
then his vision was obscured as she yanked his hat down.

"What a question!" she said, dramatically. "Of course I'm coming with you! It'll be a good chance to
prepare my team for my final exam."

In truth, she was sick of school. The monotonous memorization of tests, the endless hours spent
discussing various type pairings. It bored her to sleep. Her father would be furious if she missed the
start of the half a year long semester. She'd always avoided taking the summer one.

The campus was oppressively hot in the summer months, and taking the final exams in the fall was
even harder. Most students only went for the winter months, when being home with family, trapped
indoors, was liable to make many of these maturing adults go stir crazy.

Alex pushed his hat up by blowing hard at the rim, repeatedly. Just enough to see the trail. "Are you
ever going to tell me what you specialized in?"
He could feel her giggle against his back. Not an unpleasant sensation, for two C sized reasons. "You'll find out. And you had better be at my graduation, Mr. Redwood."

He looked up at her, a hard thing to do with his hat so far down. "I wouldn't miss it."

She giggled again, and stole his hat, then turned hers to the right and put his on, facing the left. "Ahh…now the sun can't burn my face." She sighed, letting her chin rest on his head.

He smirked, eyes on the road ahead as Humilau came ever closer. He'd thought it was a small town, but that was because they'd been so far away from it. They were close to the Unovan coast now. "You look ridiculous with two hats on."

She swatted at one of his cheeks. "You're supposed to say I look beautiful no matter what. Who taught you how to be a lovesick puppy anyways?"

He snorted. "Puppy? If anything, I look more like a turtle. Which fits I suppose, Trainers are supposed to match their Pokémon aren't they?"

She laughed, and dug her chin into his head, trying not to sneeze as it was surrounded by wavy, dark brown hair. "Fine. You're a lovesick turtle."

That brought another smirk, one that faded slightly as he saw a group of people on the road ahead. "Can't argue with that logic."

The group ahead of them came closer, and as Jess finally noticed, she grinned. "Look! Preschoolers!" She jumped down off his back, sore feet forgotten, and ran towards them, all smiles.

Most people from Unova were inherently suspicious of strangers, as anyone from such a highly-populated region would be, but out here among the gorgeous waves and scenic mountains, people were more relaxed.

Free of his giggling burden, Alex stretched his back with a satisfying crack, and adjusted his backpack once more. He threw her shoes in it for good measure, and was zipping everything up when he heard shouting. "Oi! Turtle-boy! Come say hi and stop being shy!"

He was already moving towards her, close enough to hear the teacher say, "Turtle boy?" To which Jess shook her head. The kids loved it though. The girls, anyway. The boys were young, but they were still boys, and as a rule, thought girls were annoying and icky. But this new one was prettier than their teacher, despite the fact that she looked silly wearing two hats that clashed with one another.

Once Alex made it down the road, he snatched his hat back from her before she could say anything, and put it on again as he turned to the teacher. "Sorry for interrupting your class. I can't take her anywhere."

The teacher had to be around their age, with black hair and an average build. She wasn't necessarily unattractive, but next to Jess, every woman was less attractive. She had a sort of nerdy look about her that, had he not already been smitten, might have piqued his interest.

"Oh, it's quite alright." She said, smiling. "Jess was just telling us that she was starting her journey as a Pokémon Trainer. I'm guessing that means you two are from up north?" Alex nodded, glancing at his partner, who was playing with the kids, as he had an adult conversation.
She was enamored with the girls, and even the boys had come up now. They were, of course, talking about Pokémon, each one telling her with childish enthusiasm what they wanted, or had at home, or their older siblings or parents had, all while mispronouncing their names. It was adorable.

"Yes, our town is pretty far north of the Pokémon Center in the mountains. But it's small, nothing but ranches really. And apples." The teacher looked ready to respond, when a smaller boy with black hair and a red shirt that had a Emboar on the front of it came up to him, and tugged on his jacket.

"Do you have Pokémon too? Can we see them? Pleaaase?" The boy's teacher looked embarrassed, but Alex nodded. Nobody could resist that cuteness.

"I suppose I could let them out." The entire class cheered, but he held up a finger. "You have to be careful around them though. They don't like to be hit, or tugged on, and while they won't attack you if you annoy them, you might get shocked, or burned, or splashed with water. You have to promise to be gentle." He emphasized the word gentle. He might as well have told the sea to stay calm and never turn stormy.

"We promise!" they said in unison. Someday, far in the future, he would be wise enough to figure out how kids behaved, but at that moment, he was not wise, and decided to take them at their word, not yet understanding that children that age kept promises for about five minutes. He shared a look with Jess. The cuteness was blinding both of them, and even their teacher.

"Alright then." He grabbed Terra's ball. Out of all of his growing team of Pokémon, Terra might've been the strongest but he was also the most like Alex. He wouldn't have to worry about the kids being in any kind of danger with him. Like his Trainer, he was a gentle giant.

"Terra! Come on out!" He threw the ball into the air, and it burst open before zooming back to his hand. Terra appeared in a flash of green swirling light, and yawned, then looked around him, blinking slowly at the children.

"This," Alex began, "Is my first Pokémon. His name is Terra."

One of the girls spoke up now. "Does he like warm hugs?" Alex shared a look with his Pokémon, and shrugged, not getting the reference. The mountain turtle answered for him. "Terra!"

Even the children could tell that was a yes. Despite his size, the children were climbing on him almost immediately. Since just one of his legs was taller than most of them, he lay down, and let them use his large shell as a playground on the grass to the side of the road.

The trees had lessened now, this close to the ocean, and grassy plains with the occasional house were what surrounded them now. It was a perfect place to relax, or take a field trip.

About five seconds passed before the same boy as before ran back to Alex. The other kids watched him like a pack of Wingull watched another of their kind who had just caught a tasty fish. Perched on Terra as they were, the similarity was quite accurate.

"Do you have a fire type?"

He sighed. Most kids loved fire types, as they were, ironically, the coolest in almost every region, from Sinnoh to Unova. Even he had liked fire types when he was younger, only preferring grass types later on, when he understood how a Pokémon's type often affected how they interacted with
Grass types brought peace and clean air, but underneath that calm exterior was a power as strong as the earth itself. Fire types, and their Trainers, often had to go to areas without any vegetation to train. Fire was hard to control, most of the time, and fire type Pokémon were no exception. But Blaze was different, and so was the rest of his species. They had a sense of honor that was admired world-wide, and had helped the popularity of their species soar. He wouldn't intentionally harm weaker opponents, let alone children.

"I do actually. So does Jess. She copied me when I chose mine." She looked at him as he spoke, and made a face, like she was about to protest, when Alex threw the rest of his balls into the air, somehow managing to catch all three when they zoomed back to him. Blaze, Leo, and Hydrus appeared in burst of light matching their color.

The children stared, eyes wide as Alex pointed at each one. "This is Blaze. A Charmeleon. Do. Not. Yank. His. Tail." Quickly grasping the situation, Blaze nodded, snorting flames for emphasis. He moved on.

"This is Hydrus. His fins are sensitive, so if you pet them, do it gently, and he will love you for it. Yank on them, and he will get you wet." Hydrus, the youngest of his team by far, was inspecting a bug on the ground, not able to decide if he wanted to eat it or not. At that moment, one of the larger kids in the group burst from behind the others, a Mudkip on his blue shirt.

"Mudkip! I LOVE MUDKIPZ!" Hydrus blinked, recognizing his species' name, and then yelped, running as the large kid began chasing him. Knowing Hydrus could easily outrun the boy, Alex continued, patting Leo as he walked up to him.

"Last but not least, Leo. You might feel a slight buzz if you pet him. Don't worry, it won't shock you." "Lux." The gold furred cat purred, immediately moving towards the kids. They pet him gently, and babbled excitedly as they felt the current of his electricity under their hands. The cat looked at his Trainer for a moment, and Alex nodded. Suddenly, most of the children had their hair stretched completely straight in random directions. The boys found it hilarious. The girls immediately let go of the cat and pat their hair down frantically. They wandered back over to Jess then, but Alex didn't mind. Serpi had their attention now, as he had to admit, quite a lovely grass type.

Blaze was by far the most popular, and he didn't quite like being the center of attention. "Mak'im do a Fire Blast!" One kid shouted.

Alex shrugged, and looked at Blaze, who sighed a puff of smoke, and tilted his head to the sky. With a roar, a ball of mighty flames shot above them, bursting into a five-pronged star and flying even higher before finally exploding high above them.

The kids stared in awe, and despite his reluctance, Alex could tell his partner enjoyed showing off for them. A few kids were still on Terra, the Mudkip boy had finally managed to coax Hydrus to come over, and was stroking his fins gently. Judging by his wet clothes, he'd tried yanking on them first. The boys began shouting eagerly for more moves, many of which Blaze simply didn't know, or couldn't do without hurting someone.

"Meleon." Blaze said to his Trainer, as he was obviously tired of entertaining children, and wished to go back into his ball. Alex couldn't really blame him. As he disappeared, the boys all made an
'awwww' sound, and Terra opened one eye from where he was snoozing. Most of the kids had moved on from playing on him, but he was enjoying the sunlight all the same.

He lifted his head then, and opened his mouth as if to yawn, but instead, green light swirled towards him, forming a ball of energy in his mouth. Unlike his usual Energy Balls, this one was being drawn from the land, not himself, in small amounts from what the land could give. Once he had it large enough, several kids started to notice.

The gathered energy was inhaled then, filling Terra with green light. He closed his eyes again, and soon after, the green light appeared again, around the massive tree on his shell. Most of the class was watching now, Alex included, and after about a minute, tiny apples began to form on the branches of his tree.

"I don't believe it…" Alex whispered, "I didn't know he knew how to grow fruit yet. Who taught him that?"

The teacher walked up then, and pushed the rim of her glasses up with two fingers. "Some things can't be taught. Pokémon know how to do more than just what you teach them, especially grass types. Growing fruit for a Torterra is as easy as say, a Snivy controlling vines, or a Bulbasaur tending flowers. You have a Pokédex, right? Many Pokémon, in the wild, use Torterra's shell as a home. Torterra is often kind enough to share its shell, and if a Pokémon is wounded and needs shelter, it can provide food and safety."

Alex nodded, recalling several Pokédex entries. Some varied by region, but most gave similar information. "I remember…one of the reasons we have wild Turtwig at home is because we have farmers who grow entire orchard's worth of fruit using Torterra's trees. I used to help out at several of them when I was younger. I always liked how kind they were, and often I found Pokémon that needed treatment at our town's center, hiding on their shells. I guess growing fruit is something they do naturally."

By now, the apples were bright red, and looked delicious. The children needed no prompting, and ran over to grab them. Not long after, another would grow in to replace what had been taken, such was the amount of energy Terra had gathered. In an environment like this, that got plenty of sunlight, he had been able to draw quite a bit of energy.

They decided to have lunch then, all of them, and even Leo and Hydrus had a few apples. Blaze was called out again, and munched on several himself before returning to his ball. That left Chari as the center of attention, and the only fire type. Unlike the boys, most of the girls had just wanted to hug her, rather than make her breathe fire. Eventually, the time came to return everyone to their balls.

The teacher approached the two Trainers as the kids got ready to continue again on their field trip. It was just past noon. "We're going to continue on the trail a bit further, so we can see Draconis Mons, from a safe distance of course. Are you two headed into town?"

Jess answered, nodding. "Alex is going for the gym badge there. As his first badge in the Unova challenge."

The teacher blinked. "You're choosing Marlon as your first opponent? Willingly?"

Alex nodded as well. "You saw my Torterra. I could use him and him alone and sweep this gym. But I want to train Leo on the other Trainers under Marlon as well."
The teacher gave a small smirk. "Well, I wish you luck. Marlon knows how to handle electric and grass types, they'll have to be quite strong to face him and win. There's a reason League challengers save him for last."

Alex smirked. "Good. It's been too long since I faced a decent water type user. Thanks for letting us show off our teams. I think the Pokémon enjoyed it as much as the children did."

The teacher gave a slight curtsy then. "Any time. Feel free to visit if you ever come through Humilau again." With their goodbyes handled, Alex and Jess began making their way to town again.

Five minutes later, they stopped and called out Terra, as Jess remembered that her feet were killing her. Terra didn't seem to mind, but he looked tired. "Wake up my friend," Alex said, patting his shell. "We have our first gym battle coming up. Once we win, I'll let you rest as long as you like."

"Terra." Was the grumble he got in response. Jess hid a blush under her hair. The deep rumble of Terra's voice made the shell vibrate in all the right ways.

"We should ride Terra more often." She said, smirking.

"He's my friend, not my car." Alex grumbled. Still, he supposed it would be good training, riding cross-region on Terra would make his endurance grow even further, but something didn't seem quite right. Terra still looked tired, and not just because his eyes had changed upon evolving. He yawned often as they traveled, and every few steps he would yawn again.

Over time they became less frequent, especially once they entered town, but he made a note to be sure to have the local nurse check him out once they beat the gym. Finding the gym was easy, and the locals stared at him as he rode past at Torterra speed, lumbering through the town.

There were smirks on their faces that unnerved him. Anyone with eyes could tell they were heading to the gym, and after an unnecessarily complex series of ramps that led them up and down and up again, they made it.

"Yo, Marlon!" A man in a too-tight swimsuit called as Alex and Jess entered the building sans Terra, "We got more challengers!"

Alex raised a brow at Jess. "Are you going to try your luck too? Serpi might beat him. She's gotten a lot stronger after all those battles on the road."

Jess shook her head. "I might have a battle or two with the other Trainers, after you, but beating teams of Caterpie didn't give her enough experience to face the eighth gym of Unova right out the gate."

Alex shrugged. "Whatever you say. It just means we'll have to come back here again." She elbowed him forward as the man who must've been Marlon walked towards him, his fellow gym Trainers flanking him. They reminded him of the University's swim team. He even recognized a few faces from alumni, though of course, they had no idea who he was.

"I wanted to see the kids again anyways. Now go pull another victory out of thin air." He winked at her, and then shook his head. Type advantage would do all the work here. Had this been an ice gym, he would've just skipped it and started at Striaton, like most Trainers.
"Yo!" Marlon waved, and Alex took a minute to take in his unique appearance. Most adult men he met didn't wear pants with fins on them. It wasn't wrong, it was just…unusual. Jess seemed more occupied by his upper half as he glanced at her. "I'm Marlon, head of this gym. Which of you fine folks is challengin' me?"

Alex stepped forward, and turned his hat backwards, grinning. Marlon spoke before he could say a word. "Oh ho ho! I see! Judgin' by that hat you're from the northeast, yea? So, you must just be starting out! That's cool bro, we can take all types here! Everyone's welcome at the Humilau Gym!"

It was hard not to like Marlon. His appearance was a bit…odd, but once you got past that, he had a chilled-out vibe that seemed like it would be more at home in Alola, not Unova.

"Thank you for accepting my challenge, Marlon. But I'm no beginner, despite coming from the northeast. This is my first gym challenge, but I didn't walk over mountains to face your line up for novices." Marlon raised a blue eyebrow, and Alex met his gaze evenly, allowing a smirk to cross his normally impassive features. "Treat me like you would if this was my last gym, and after, I'd be facing the League."

"You sure, my man? My team is pretty strong." Deciding that showing, rather than telling, would be the quickest path to a match here, Alex thumbed the release on Terra's ball. He came out with a yawn, and blinked at Marlon, then looked around the gym. Despite the type advantage, grass and water types got along well, for obvious reasons, and he could tell Terra liked this gym's setup.

"Well now…I see! You must be him! The Trainer who beat ol' Tyran, and his Trainer up at the University." He turned to his protégés. "Grab your strongest, boys and girls. If this Torterra is the end result of that Turtwig, we've got quite a challenge ahead."

The gathered water Trainers grinned, and as they took their places in the gym, out came the flying and water types. Terra seemed to smile, and he and his Trainer shared a look. They strolled casually up to their first opponent, at which point a white Pokéball flew into the air, and produced a Luxio. A smirk appeared under the northern styled hat. "Thunderbolt."

As promised, type advantage took care of a need for strategy, most of the time. One by one, he could see the swimmer's respect for his skill as a Trainer grow. Leo grew as well, finishing strong as he took down the last swimmer's Pokémon, an Azumarill, with a mighty bolt of Thunder. That had been the last obstacle before Marlon, and as the other Trainer recalled the fainted Pokémon, Leo began to glow with a blinding white light in an increasingly familiar double helix pattern.

Alex kept him from evolving during the harsh gym battles for one reason: Thunder Fang, arguably the signature move of Luxray. He'd finished Azumarill with that very move, and now, he ascended to the final stage of his evolution, growing larger, and gaining sharp claws as well as a large, flared mane.

Leo grinned at his Trainer once the light faded, looking quite refreshed. His mane was large and impressive, and his eyes had a feline fierceness that suggested nobody should mess with him. In earlier forms, it was often hard to tell if a Shinx was male or female, but Alex had known Leo was male from the start, and now, his mane proved it.

The female's of his species had manes that were shorter, smoother, while the males were larger, and flared out more. A trait shared by their counterpart, Pyroar, in Kalos. Jess had gone with Marlon to the final battlefield, a series of wooden platforms with circular platforms dotting the water. They
didn't look like they'd hold Terra.

A section of sturdier wood was provided at his request once he mentioned just how heavy his titanic earth turtle was, and several strong platforms were provided for his side of the field coming up from the bottom of the gym. Terra wouldn't be able to dodge, but then, he was a tank that fired condensed grass energy now. Dodging was a thing of the past.

Terra was rested and ready to go, despite his yawning, and his defense was second to none. Alex had no doubt that if they could block ice attacks, they'd have a pretty easy win. Leo got a Max Elixir and a Hyper Potion for the final battle, and he was ready as well. Electricity bristled over his shiny black and gold fur, and mane. He was itching to try out his new body.

"I should mention..." Marlon said, after hopping across the numerous lily pads and wooden platforms that littered the Gym Leader's field, "There's a new League Challenge rumored to be starting soon. The other Gym Leaders were given special badges, and everything. I'm technically not supposed to tell anyone about it yet...but you seem like the kinda' guy who'd be interested in such a challenge."

Alex raised a brow from under his backwards-turned hat. "A new challenge? What makes it different?"

Marlon stretched as he spoke, and as Alex glanced towards Jess again, he saw her watching with undisguised interest. As did many of his female gym Trainers. He quietly lamented his lack of abs, then focused as Marlon spoke again, "Well, for one thing, there's no Conference this time. This challenge is so hard, anyone who manages to beat it will have proven themselves worthy of going straight to the Victory Plateau."

Alex felt a smirk tug at his mouth. A chance to avoid being taken out by some foreigner with an overpowered mythical partner before the Elite Four. "Consider my interest piqued."

Marlon put his hands on his hips as he explained the rules, "Gym Leaders, as you know, usually have a specific team of Pokémon they use for battles. Their teams are allowed to have one 'ace' on them, but the other Pokémon have to be relatively new, or at least match the skill level of our challengers." Marlon grinned at him. "This challenge lets us use the teams we had when we were traveling Trainers, like you."

"And that's why it's so difficult..." Alex finished. He looked down, and stroked his bare chin as he pondered whether or not he could really succeed in such conditions. The Gym Leaders of Unova were quite strong, and if they were using their best line up for this, he needed to train even harder. Two seconds later, he looked up. "Right. I'll face your team, and gladly enter this challenge."

He had no idea what exactly he'd signed up for, or why it was being held in the first place, but at the moment he didn't care. This was a way for the League to see who the standout Trainers among this year's crop were, and he planned to be one of them.

Marlon wasted no time, and soon both he and Alex had their Pokémon out, ready for battle. Terra's weight managed to be held by the wooden platform, and Marlon's Jellicent was at home in the water. With type advantage and field advantage, they were evenly matched. Marlon gave a flourishing bow. "The first move goes to the challenger! Give me your best! You'll need it..."

The knowing smirks from the townspeople and now Marlon's swimmers bugged him, but if this was a trap, he was going to spring it. "Alright. Terra, Energy Ball!"
Jellicent replied with a Shadow Ball, and the two moves canceled out in an explosive cloud of smoke. Alex and his partner blinked. Evidently, he was not the only Trainer to have figured out the many advantages in layering spherical energy attacks. Terra followed up with a Razor Leaf that hit Jellicent hard, and then two more Energy Balls, the first being deflected by another Shadow Ball. Jellicent went down, and the ref, one of Marlon's people, called it. Next up was Mantine.

"Wing Attack!" Marlon said, taking the first move now, as he was the one who'd changed Pokémon.

"Energy Ball, Terra!" Terra tried to attack, but then stopped, shaking its head. Alex blinked, and then swore as the flying type move slammed into Terra. "Razor Leaf!" He shouted quickly, not wanting to lose the advantage.

"Keep hitting them with Wing Attack! They can't retaliate with Energy Ball thanks to Jellicent's Cursed Body! Get in close!" Mantine bashed the leaves away with its glowing white fins, the flying type move batted them easily out of its path as it charged Terra. Mumbling under his breath about annoying abilities like Cursed Body and Sap Sipper, Alex switched strategies.

"Terra! Catch its fin on the next attack!" Despite the pain he took from the move, Terra did as he was ordered, clamping down on Mantine's glowing fin with his sharp mouth. "Now, hit it repeatedly with Razor Leaf!"

Unable to block the swarm of sharp leaves that flew from Terra's Ash tree with Wing Attack as it had done before, Mantine took the hit directly, and fell into the water, fainted. Next came Carracosta, a fellow turtle Pokémon. Had it not been part rock type, Alex would've used Leo. Terra stayed in, looking just as determined as ever, despite the multiple Wing Attacks.

"Shell Smash!" Marlon called the move, and Terra braced for an attack. Instead, the other turtle dove into the water after stretching, and causing bits of its rocky shell to fall away, freeing up its movement, and increasing its speed.

"Razor Leaf." Terra fired at the blue turtle, but to no avail, the surface of the water made a poor environment for that kind of attack. The crafty water type used his advantage to leap out of the water and slam Terra's head with an Aqua Tail. More Razor Leaves followed, but were similarly useless.

Finally, when Carracosta jumped to use another Aqua Tail, Terra was ready, and hit him directly, bringing the turtle down with hundreds of large, sharp leaves. After weathering so many attacks, Marlon had hoped to lower Terra's defenses, but the grass tortoise remained looking as strong as ever.

In reality, he was limited in moves and mobility. Frenzy Plant required earth to be truly effective, Earthquake was useless on water, and Energy Ball was still disabled. As Marlon brought out his next Pokémon, Alex switched Terra out.

It was good he did, because the Walrein that came out next looked strong, and knew primarily ice moves. Leo's Thunder Fang met its Ice Fang numerous times, forcing the agile cat to leap from platform to platform, before paralysis finally took hold, and Leo was able to call down a Thunderbolt from a safe distance.

As Marlon recalled his Walrein, he pulled out a final ball. "This is it. Roshi, go!" A Samurott appeared on the single platform before Marlon then, and he shivered as he met Leo's eyes.
Alex felt a shiver go down his spine as he realized that this had to be Marlon's starter, no doubt received from a Professor, and second only to his Jellicent. He imagined that together, they were quite difficult to beat. "Razor Shell!" At Marlon's command, the large Samurott drew a pair of sharp shells from each front forearm, and then dove into the water.

Alex smirked. He'd need to do better than that. "Leo, keep your eyes on him..." The golden furred Luxray watched, his gaze laser-focused on his target. A Luxray's eyes were superior even to targeting computers, and were a large part of his newfound accuracy with ranged attacks. He could be dodged, but it was not often that he missed. Leo snarled, a warning to his Trainer that the Samurott was coming up for his attack. "Thunder!"

Leo's roar, now one that well suited his lion-like form, echoed through the gym as the electricity shot into the air...and then came down hard on the emerging Samurott. The masterful swordsman cut through the attack with one shell, and the other was thrown towards Leo.

"Catch it with Thunder Fang!" Alex ordered, taking a page from Terra's tactics. Leo caught the shell sword, and then tossed it outside the field, where it landed next to Jess and the onlooking swimmers who trained at the gym. They were certainly getting a show.

Roshi dove back under the water, and Leo watched him once more. With only one shell-sword, he'd be limited to defense, but Alex knew Samurott were renowned for their sword skills, and were almost on par with Gallade in that regard.

"Hydro Pump!" Alex swore as he heard Marlon call the move, but Leo was able to dodge, as he saw it coming.

"Luxray!" He growled once he'd found a new platform. He'd lost sight of Roshi, but Alex knew where the Samurott would strike. It was where he would've struck, had he been in Marlon's place. "Razor Shell!" Marlon called again.

A shift in movement below his thunder cat confirmed his suspicions. "He's below you, Leo, hiding under the platform!" Leo jumped to another, trusting his Trainer to be his eyes as he dodged the blue slash of energy that tore the platform apart. Alex kept track of his Pokémon's position, as well as the swift blue form of Roshi.

"Keep moving!" he called, swearing as Leo was put on the defensive. Roshi continued slashing through platforms and lily pads, and Alex knew Terra wouldn't be able to pull this off if Leo went down. With only the outer ring to stand on, he'd be a sitting turtle.

"Wait for it..." Alex said, and Leo nodded, jumping between the last few surfaces on the water field. "Now! Thunder Fang!" Leo landed hard on the last wooden platform, then turned completely around as only a feline could, and leapt over the open water, right as Roshi came up again. The two crossed in the air, and Leo went into the water, snarling in discomfort, as Roshi landed on the platform, sword extended, and still glowing.

Marlon looked triumphant, and crossed his arms, preparing to declare his victory...until he took a second look at his Samurott. With a sigh, Roshi collapsed. Blocking Thunder with a water type move had mitigated some damage, but not enough to take a direct Thunder Fang from a physical attacker. Leo crawled out of the water onto the square wooden platform that ringed the field, shaking himself free of as much water as possible.
Marlon took most of it, but didn't seem to mind. Leo trotted back to his Trainer, and despite his dampness, gave a toothy grin. "Well done, Leo. You've grown more than I could've imagined, and in so short a time." Growling in agreement, Alex recalled his Pokémon, and knew the ball's interior would dry him. After a long argument about ethics, the Pokémon League had decided to give all Pokéballs a 'Luxury Ball level' of comfort within. The older model balls had been phased out, as trade-ins were free, for balls with occupants. Over time, reports of ball-hating Pokémon lessened, though there were always those who preferred to wander outside.

Riding the lily pads they'd been standing on back to the wooden slats surrounding the field, Marlon fished out a badge from his odd pants as he walked over to Alex.

"Well done my man, this Wave Badge is yours. Enjoy it, because the other gyms won't be nearly so easy. I can tell you've been practicing on other water types." Alex chuckled, thanking him for the badge.

It hadn't really been an easy fight per say, Terra was worn out and Leo had barely managed to take down that much stronger Samurott, but in the end, it was worth it. He pinned the badge to the inside of his jacket, and he and Jess left the gym to find the sun was already setting, and the sky was almost as red-orange as her hair.

"So." She said, as they headed for the town Pokémon center, "How did you like your first gym experience?"

Alex shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, it was intense, but it seems like doing that eight times could get a bit…repetitive. It's definitely a great way to train though, assuming you have enough of a type advantage and a high enough skill level."

She sighed. "Well I hope my first time is as easy as that looked."

He raised a brow. "You call that easy? I was reduced to one move for most of the battle. If that Mantine had known Ice Beam, Terra would've gone down, and that Samurott…it almost had us."

She shrugged as they entered the Pokémon center. "I guess after seeing Terra beat a Tyrantrum, a bunch of water types isn't as exciting as I thought it'd be. Though I did like Leo's finishing move. That cat has style."

Alex smirked. "He has class, too."

He shook his head, chuckling, and then got them a room. As he waited for their key, he replied, "Don't worry, there's more to life than gym battles. But I'll try to make the others more appealing."

"Oh, it was definitely appealing. Not a shirt to be found in that gym." She said with a knowing smirk.

"Nope," Alex agreed, smirking as he recalled the female swimmers. "Nothing but swimsuits." He could play the jealousy card too. She pouted as their room key was handed over.

"I'll meet you there, I'm going to leave my team here." She shrugged, already heading off towards the rooms, and Alex addressed the nurse.

"My Torterra has been acting a bit strange lately. I mean, I know he's supposed to be big and enjoy a
good nap, but he sleeps all the time and can barely go five minutes without yawning. Even in battle. Could you take a look at him?" She nodded, taking Terra's Pokeball.

"I'll see what I can do. One moment, please." One moment turned into five minutes, and then five turned into ten. Finally, the nurse returned. "Your Torterra is recovering from an imbalance of power in his body. Did you keep him from evolving for a long time without an ever stone?" Alex nodded. "I see. He's not in any danger, but he needs about three weeks of rest, preferably somewhere sunny, where he can sleep in peace."

Thanking her, he headed towards their room, swearing silently at the fact that his strongest Pokémon would now be out of it for almost a month. There were worse things, though. He could focus on training the others while Terra recovered. Arriving in their shared room, he saw his flame haired companion, already asleep and with minimal clothing. Evidently, she'd tossed her clothes, and dropped into the bed.

He slid in next to her after doing the same, but there was no lewdness. It had been a long day, and he didn't mind playing big spoon.
The next morning came swiftly, and while Alex let Jess admire his shiny new badge, he went to retrieve his team at the front desk. He then put in a call to the Redwood Lab. Surprisingly, his granduncle answered the phone for once. That was unusual, as he usually made his aides talk to people.

"Oho! Alex! You've been gone a while my boy, almost a week! I expect you've beaten the Unova League by now, Mr. Fame and Fortune." Alex suppressed a laugh. He hadn't really let himself miss being at home, but not having his long talks with his granduncle were definitely leaving a hole in his life. Luckily, Jess was filling that fairly well.

"Not quite Gruncle Red, but I did just beat Marlon at the Humilau Gym yesterday. I'd show you my badge, but it's being admired because it's shiny." His granduncle gave him a knowing smirk, not missing a trick.

"I see, I see. And is that badge the only thing that's been getting polished?" Alex snorted with a hard laugh, and yanked his hat down to hide the flush in his cheeks as his granduncle's loud laughter filled the lobby of the Pokémon center.

"Honestly…there are children here." He mumbled, trying not to laugh. The crude sense of humor was something they often shared, but the rest of the family found it childish and lewd. Not them though, they'd spent hours over the years sharing such jokes, and their conversations were saturated with innuendo. But doing so over the phone was another matter entirely. The old man finally ceased laughing, wiping a tear from his eye.

"Oh. Ho ho. Next time choose your words more carefully, lad, you set that one up for me. Now then, what do you want?"

Alex gave his favorite relative a look. "Want? Can't I just call my family to see how everyone's doing? Make sure you haven't turned to dust while I've been gone? That's what happens when fossils like you get too much sun, you know." He couldn't hide his smirk.

"HA!" his granduncle shouted again, and again he drew looks from other people using the phones. "It'll take more than age to kill me, boy. And I know you. Unless you needed my help, you wouldn't have called until you beat the Unova League. Now out with it."

Alex explained the situation with Terra, and then outlined an upgrade to his Pokéball that he thought might help the situation. Sitting in one place, lounging in the sun all day wasn't good for a Trainer like him, with a team that needed to get used to battling. If he let them relax too much this early, they'd become lazy.

Thus, he asked his granduncle to modify Terra's ball so that the internal habitat was one that would trick his body into thinking it was getting enough sunlight. It would genuinely filter in said light to him through the solar panel slots he outlined for his granduncle, just at a steady rate rather than high
amounts of it for a few hours a day.

"Hmmm." His granduncle murmured once he'd finished explaining. "Tricky…but I think I could do it. You know, you could just leave him here on the ranch."

Alex shook his head. "Unlike your wrinkled ass, I actually worked on that ranch. Not even Terra could get more than a few hours of real rest there. Sun, sure. Peace and quiet? No chance."

The old man chuckled again, nodding. "Alright. Send him and his ball over anyway. It'll be done by tomorrow." Alex nodded, placing the ball in the teleporter. He didn't bother calling Terra out to explain all this, since the poor creature had been sound asleep since the day before, and nothing could rouse him. He'd had enough power to battle, but now he slept.

Alex had decided to simply let him rest. "Just let him sit outside the lab while you work on it, eh? That way the Tauros and Miltank won't bug him. They hate the smell of your stale Leaf."

The old man snorted. "My Leaf is of the finest quality, as you well know, you curly haired mooch." The Professor waved his hand again. "Stop worrying about your bloody turtle and go find that redhead of yours. Savor every second you have with her. Terra will be fine. Go. Shoo. And be here tomorrow."

"Oh, and one more thing," Alex said, sensing the call was ending. "I need a similar setup for Leo and Hydrus' balls. Leo's can't handle his new electric power as a Luxray, and Hydrus keeps flooding his somehow."

His granduncle sighed. "Fine, fine. I'll fix your whole damn belt. Lazy boy. In my day, we fixed our own balls."

"Thank yo-" The line cut out after the balls were transported, and Alex sighed. With Terra and most of his team gone, that left him with Blaze as his strongest and only Pokémon. It felt strange, not having Terra with him. A year might have seemed like a short time, but he'd grown used to always having him within reach. Now, he wasn't. It was an odd feeling.

He decided to let Blaze walk with him, and they headed back to the room, where he found his bag and his badge were missing. He sighed, grabbing his jacket and then noticed a note that read:

_Dearest Turtle, I've gone out to train Empolia (Piplup) against the other water types around Humilau. One of our handsome neighbors told me that Draconis Mons has a lot of Bagon around lately, so you should go there and catch one. Take all day._

He sighed, as she'd added a 'wink face' after that, but there was more.

_P.S. I took your bag because it has vitamins and stuff. I left you your dragon ball though, so go catch a Bagon! I expect you back by lunch after I've beaten this pretty boy senseless. Hurry up. -Jess_

He sighed again, hoping that whatever fool had hoped to impress her with his 'skill' would survive a battle with her. One of the reasons Serpi had grown so strong was because other men were always trying to show her how strong they were, and she usually beat them. That had only become easier now that Serpi had evolved, and gained backup from a Charmeleon and a Piplup.

"Looks like it's you and me, Blaze." He said, folding the paper and sliding it into an inner pocket.
where it would be safe. He grabbed the customized Timer Ball, and soon they were on the road north to Draconis Mons, on the same road they'd seen the preschoolers on.

Reaching the giant mountain that lacked a pointed peak wasn't hard exactly, but there was a good mile of dense forest full of young or even middle evolution Pokémon that kept humans away. Alex and Blaze managed to trek through most of it rather quickly thanks to Blaze's sharp claws and Alex's lack of a heavy backpack. It was nice not having to lug around all that stuff. Maybe he would actually make it back for lunch.

His hope of lunch faded as they reached the rocky base of the mountain proper, and still hadn't found any Pokémon at all. Deciding to risk traveling up, figuring that his uncanny lucky streak, and the fact that he had a Charmeleon to vouch for him, would keep him from any real harm, he headed up the mountain itself. It wasn't all that difficult, as there was only one footpath.

He noticed a lack of human prints however, but hoped that his own would go unnoticed. Large as his feet were, that was not to be the case. By about two hours past noon, he'd climbed to the top of the mountain, which he discovered was a large crater, with a lake at the bottom. He was quite high up, but the trail had been easy enough for someone who had long since mastered the art of running uphill.

Blaze was panting by the time they reached the top, and so was Alex. It was quite a climb. Once they got to that point however, Alex realized why they hadn't seen any Pokémon today. Before him, throughout the valley, hundreds of fully evolved dragon types, and Charizard, lined the walls of the crater, along with just as many middle and pre-evolutions as well. It was one of those rare scenes, a gathering of Pokémon that was supposed to be for them, and only them.

None seemed to notice him yet, and he decided stealth would be a good idea here. In the middle of the crater, high above the lake where he could see several Dratini and Dragonair, was a rocky outcropping that looked structurally unsafe, connected as it was to only two sides of the mountain crater by bridges of natural stone that seemed to have been carved out by way of claws. Judging by what was happening on top of the circular rocky bridge, it could handle plenty of weight.

Two Charizard were dueling atop the rocky arena, in a test of grappling strength, rather than fighting with fire or in mid-air. Claw to claw. He blinked as he looked closer, and noticed that the larger of the pair was actually as black as obsidian, and had a downright nasty look to him. His wings were ragged, and pale scars covered his body.

This was an old Charizard, and likely the top dog around here. Realizing that any Pokémon that could become the strongest among dragon types that even included Salamence, several of which he could make out perched on the cliffs, could kill him without a thought, he decided that leaving quickly was a good idea. He stank of sweat from the climb, and this fight wasn't going to last much longer.

The black Charizard bit his opponent's neck then, and the spectators all roared in outrage at the apparently illegal move, but the contest continued, despite the open and bleeding wound of the smaller Charizard who, by his estimate, was still larger than any he'd ever seen.

The black one gave a mighty roar then, and pushed his opponent back repeatedly, and seconds later, it was over the edge, plummeting towards the water thousands of feet below. The black Charizard was not done however, as it took flight now, and followed him down, slashing at his opponent the
whole way.

Once it landed in the water with a giant splash, the black one flew back up above the natural arena, and roared again, establishing its dominance over the others. Every Pokémon in the crater bowed its head, and he seemed to look at each one, making sure there was no defiance.

Distracted as he had been by the fight, Alex had failed to notice that Blaze had crept closer for a better look, and was now near other wild Pokémon. He blended in well enough, but there was just one problem...he wasn't bowing his head, and the black Charizard had noticed. Alex swore under his breath as the obsidian scaled lizard snorted blue fire, a sign of its rage at rebellion from a Pokémon that wasn't even fully grown.

Suddenly sensing the amount of shit he was in, Blaze scurried back towards his Trainer, and the two bolted for the ledge that led down the mountain...only to have the enormous black Charizard land in front of them. If he'd been mad before by Blaze's defiance, his rage intensified when he discovered that the transgressor had a human with him.

Raising both hands, Alex swallowed his pride, and got on both knees before the beast, which seemed to keep it from outright killing him. He wondered why, as by all accounts, humans were K.O.S. to these Pokémon.

"Blaze..." he spoke softly, but before he could say anything else, tell his Charmeleon to translate for him, apologize for trespassing, or even ask for mercy, a powerful black tail came out of nowhere, and slammed directly into his chest.

The last conscious thought Alex had before fading out was him wondering whether that loud crack he'd heard and felt was his ribs, or the sound of his lucky streak being split in half. With his Trainer sent flying, Blaze snarled at the larger Charizard, only to be bathed in a torrent of blue fire at point blank range. He fell to one knee, glaring at the stronger Pokémon, who snarled.

A warning for him to stay kneeling. Knowing he was beaten, and that his friend was likely hurt after a hit like that, Blaze stayed down, but didn't avert his glare. Seemingly satisfied, the large fire lizard took off again, flying towards the largest peak that looked over the crater, and was on the northern part of the bowl-shaped mountaintop.

The two land bridges connecting to the rocky platform connected to the eastern and western edges, and the southern edge was the one that held the footpath for those who could not fly. The black Charizard perched on the tallest northern peak then, and curled up on it, keeping one eye on the Pokémon below. They were angrier about his dishonest fight, and his harsh treatment of a Charmeleon, than they were about the human.

Blaze however, was plenty worried about his Trainer. Most other Pokémon warmed right up to him, but the ones who lived on this mountain apparently did not care for humans at all. He limped towards where he smelled his partner, increasing his pace as he scented blood, and found another human kneeling over his friend's body.

He snarled, but knew he was in no condition to fight. Still, this human didn't look all that threatening. His skin was bronzed and wrinkled with age, his hair was white, and his back had a permanent curve to it, making him constantly hunched. His clothes were little more than rags, and he stank of Pokémon droppings.
"O-oh…you're his Pokémon, aren't you…brave little thing. Don't worry, he'll be alright…once I set his bones. Help me carry him." Alex had been slammed into a nearby boulder, and how his spine hadn't been shattered by the force of impact was a mystery, at first glance.

As Blaze stalked closer, he saw that one of his Trainer's arms looked out of place, at an odd angle. It seemed he'd actually hit the boulder on his side, not his back. Still eyeing the old, smelly human with suspicion, Blaze grabbed his Trainer's feet, and helped him move his injured friend into a nearby cave that smelled like the old man. Judging by the various trappings and odd trinkets, this was where he lived.

Blaze's opinion of the old human dropped further. No self-respecting creature would live in filth like this. The old man handed him a berry, and then shooed him away from his Trainer. Deciding it was better than nothing, Blaze chomped down on the tough, bitter piece of fruit, and then sat by the entrance to the hovel, keeping an eye out for the black Charizard, or any one of the hundreds of other powerful Pokémon that lived here. They seemed to tolerate the old man's presence, but Blaze had a feeling that if they discovered his Trainer was not yet dead, they would take steps to correct that.

The only Pokémon that did eventually show up was a Chimecho, who drifted past a snoozing Blaze. Once he heard it ring through the cave however, the Charmeleon snapped awake, and leapt to his Trainer's side, growling at it.

"Calm yourself, Charmeleon." The old man spoke now with an odd accent the fire lizard didn't recognize. "This little one is going to heal him. Otherwise, he would take months to recover." Still eyeing the two with some degree of suspicion, Blaze stepped back, ready to intervene if they tried to hurt his Trainer. Now that he'd rested a bit, Blaze could tell just how badly Alex had been hurt.

"Healing Wish, Chimey." The little Pokémon glowed with a light pink aura, and it soon spread to Alex's form. His arm popped back into place, and the angle it was bent at wasn't so awkward. His abdomen was repaired as well, filling out more under the ragged bandages that had been torn from his shirt and pants. He grunted in his sleep, and Blaze could hear his breathing become a little easier.

"There…” the old man said as the Chimecho tolled softly, utterly exhausted, and floated down into his arms. "The bones are set, and he's been healed a bit. It'll take a few weeks, but after that, he should be fine. Thank you, Chimey."

Blaze glanced at the two, and then his Trainer. "Char." His own guarded thanks was given as well. He headed for the cave entrance then, and the old man just sighed, knowing what the Charmeleon would face out there.

Pokémon that had Trainers were about as unwelcome as humans, but they were shunned, not killed. Blaze headed for the mountain ledge calmly, ignoring the other Pokémon on his way, only to be stopped as a Tyranitar stepped in front of him, and growled. He tried to walk past, but to no avail. It seemed that he wouldn't be allowed down the mountain, given that he was new, and worse, bonded to a human.

He received a similar reception from most of the older Pokémon, and eventually returned to the old man's smelly hovel after getting water and finding more tough berries. None of the others seemed to care what he did, as long as he didn't try to leave, and except for the occasional snarl from one of the fully evolved Pokémon, he was ignored.
Three days passed, with Alex getting a few more Healing Wishes from Chimey. Eventually, it floated off and did not return, looking quite ragged. It would need to rest at the mountain's base for quite some time after using so much power, but after expending it, the little Chimecho had almost certainly saved Alex's life. His body at least, was healing correctly, but he still had not awoken.

Blaze was out of his mind with boredom at first, until he discovered that the cave the smelly human lived in was connected to a series of tunnels that went deep into the mountain itself. The old man, when not tending to his secret patient, spent most of the day cleaning the dung in the larger caves, and being snarled at or attacked by the larger Pokémon with anger in their eyes.

Their moves always missed him however, their aim wasn't faulty, they just simply could not kill the human. The black Charizard had ordered him kept alive for some reason, and so the others contented themselves with scaring him. Blaze spent most of his time exploring, and replaying the moment they had been trapped here in his head, over and over.

His Trainer had knelt before the black one, something Blaze had never thought he'd do. He could see the sense in it though. That creature was fueled by hate, and lashed out at humans and Pokémon alike. Every day it loosed blasts of fire at anything that got in its way, from rival Charizard to newborn Dratini. It was a menace, but none of the Pokémon that lived on this mountain, strong as they were, could match his power.

Five days of being stuck on the mountain had driven Blaze to finally explore the tunnels under the mountain, in the hope of finding a way out below. That way, he could find Jess and get help for his master. The Torterra he used would certainly be welcome here, and along with the Luxray, they might just have a chance of freeing their Trainer. Blaze did not find a way out of the mountain, however. He found hundreds of unevolved Pokémon instead, training in a deep cavern that was lit by flowing pools of magma.

Full grown Pokémon like Magmar kept an eye on them, and more importantly, kept them from digging through the mountain itself. Long ago it had been an active volcano, but it had been kept from erupting for centuries thanks to the fire types that understood it better than any who lived above on the crater. They knew where to release pressure when necessary, and could even guide the lava flows when they needed to.

It was a full-time job, and they allowed the younger Pokémon from the crater to train down here, but otherwise they didn't care who or what ruled above them. Once fully grown, these Pokémon were far too large to ever fit back down here, and when one of the larger ones tried burrowing down, they were swiftly repelled by the likes of Magmar, Magcargo, and other Pokémon who loved the constant heat the mountain provided.

The best part was that down here, Blaze was no longer an outcast. Granted, those from the crater were wary of him, especially those who were middle evolutions, but they let him train alongside them, despite the fact he had a Trainer, and none of the adults above could do anything about it. If they tried, he could always vanish into the labyrinth of tunnels for a while, and then find another Pokémon to help him get back to the surface.

Those who lived down here weren't necessarily fond of humans, but they didn't mind them, either. Only one or two humans had ever found these secret places in the mountain, and they were forced out soon after finding them, the entrances they made were closed, and melted shut.
Blaze found himself spending almost all of his time below, returning above only to drink, check on his Trainer, who had still not awoken, and rest after hard bouts of sparring. He could feel himself growing stronger, and knew that if he so desired he could become a Charizard himself, but that would not have been wise.

The black one had no qualms about killing rival Pokémon it saw as a threat, and he had already refused to kneel once. He wouldn't get the chance to refuse again, and he knew evolving would be enough to catch their black scaled overlord's attention, and demand a show of submission. It was something he did often to the other Pokémon, and every so often, one of the prouder ones would refuse. They paid for it, sometimes with their life. So he continued to train underground, knowing that once his Trainer awoke, indeed, if he ever did, they could usurp the black one together.

Another week of hard training passed before Alex finally woke. The first thing he saw was the old man, and recognized him as being from Kanto, judging by his features. He knew one did not bring that up in polite conversation however, but he soon found he couldn't remember where he had learned that, or indeed, who he even was.

All he had were vague images. Upon noticing his newly conscious state, the old man scurried over, offering a carved rock with a bit of water in it, and a berry that looked weak and dead. He consumed them regardless, finding he was ravenous. "You have been sleeping for two weeks now. After Lizardon attacked you with his tail, I thought you were a goner. You are very lucky."

Alex grunted, examining his left arm. It felt strange for some reason, a dull ache. He felt the same in his abdomen as well, but couldn't recall why, exactly. He looked at the old man. "Lizardon?"

The old man chuckled, and spoke once more in heavily accented Common. "What you call in this region…Charizard. Wings. Fire at the tip of the tail. You don't remember?"

Alex shook his head. "I can't remember anything…except a few vague facts…but I don't know how I know them, nor who I am. Do you have any clue?" The old man reached for a dark green and black jacket, and pulled out a note.

Taking it, Alex noticed a familiar aroma. It made a thrill rush through him, insisting on being remembered, but he couldn't, nor could he understand why the scent affected him. "My name is…Turtle?"

The old man chuckled again and spoke in a voice that was soft from lack of use. "Mm. Yes. I've been calling you Kame. Good a name as any, since you can't remember your own."

Alex was busy trying to remember why the name Jess sounded so familiar…he wouldn't be able to sleep, so insistent was the urge to remember whoever this Jess was. Yet every time he tried, he met with failure.

It was like he was on the edge of remembering after the smell on the note and the name, but something was blocking him. At that moment, there was the sound of heavy footsteps by the entrance to the dirty cave. Looking up, Alex saw a red creature, with a flame burning on its tail. It looked tired, and his first instinct was to reach into his bag and heal it. He blinked. He didn't have a bag, nor did he know this creature.

"Char!" It ran at him, and he grunted in pain as it tackled him to the floor in what he felt was a hug. "Char! Charmeleon. Char, meleon. Char." Charmeleon…right. The name sounded familiar, and he
struggled again to remember why as the old man shooed the creature away.

"This is your Pokémon, boy. He came with you up the mountain. Was seen by Lizardon. Clumsy. Didn't bow before him, and then he found you. Then he attacked you. He's been waiting for you to awaken for some time." Alex blinked. Pokémon. Of course. It came flooding back, the years' worth of information that he had spent memorizing. Battle tactics. Strategies. Move types.

"Right..." he managed, meeting the fire lizard's gaze. Its intensity was so familiar. "Right." He said, more sure of himself. "My Charmeleon...I...always wanted one." The Charmeleon looked at the old man, confused. "Char?"

"He doesn't remember who he is, my friend. Nor how to understand you, I think." The old man answered, sighing. It was a talent every Trainer had to some degree, but if you couldn't remember that you were a Trainer, what chance did you have of understanding a Pokémon?

"I can...grasp the gist of his words." Alex grunted, standing now. The cave was barely big enough for him to stand at full height. "We should get back to the nearest town...someone there will probably remember me."

The old man nodded. "Humilau. But you can't go back. The path is guarded by Lizardon's minions. They fear him more than any human. If they see you, they'll likely kill you. They think you're dead already."

Alex sighed at the old man then. "So what do I do? I need to eat...I need a real doctor...Blaze looks exhausted, he needs rest too."

The old man opened his squinted eyes. "Blaze? A nickname?"

Alex blinked. "I...just called him that out of reflex...didn't even think about it."

"Charmeleon! Char!" Blaze looked at him, hope returning to his gaze. That was the name his Trainer had given him, if he could remember that, he could remember everything else.

"Come to think of it..." Alex said, finally examining the old man properly. "What do I call you?" The man was wrinkled, like the berry he'd given Alex, and had a permanent curve in his back. He shuffled around fairly quick, but it was obviously a struggle. More than that, he had bruises all over him.

He waved a wrinkled hand. "Don't worry about me. Not your problem. Worry about Lizardon. These caves carry sound, the more we speak, the more chance he hears us. We both dead if he finds you."

Alex stared at him, suddenly guilty for putting him in so much danger. "So...so what do I do? I'm trapped here, dead if I leave and dead if I stay."

The old man shook his head. "No, there is a way. You must beat Black Lizardon. Use your Blaze. Battle him, Pokémon and Trainer. Together, he will never beat you. Your Blaze has grown strong in past few weeks. Almost enough for victory, but only if you face Lizardon together. Beat him, and you can leave Draconis Mons."

Alex thought for a moment, the name ringing in his head, but with far less information to recall.
"Draconis Mons…the dragon mountain...in the Unova region. Forbidden to go there, full of Pokémon that hate humans enough to kill them...home for those abandoned by their Trainers. Home to some of the strongest wild Pokémon...on the continent."

He shook his head. "There's no way I can beat the strongest wild Charizard around when I can barely remember how to battle."

The old man grinned, showing old, yellow teeth that not even brushing could clean. "So learn! You have your Pokémon. What more do you need? You have your chance for freedom. Go into the mountain tunnels, battle together the Pokémon there, grow strong, evolve, and then face Black Lizardon. Free the mountain from his tyranny."

Alex stared at the old man in disbelief. Still, he had mentioned other Pokémon below. If he had... "Old man, let me see my jacket. Did I have any Pokéballs with me?"

The old man grinned. "Ahh. Yes, two. Was luckily in right side pocket. Whatever was in the left was crushed." He gestured to a pile of broken machine parts, that upon examining, he found looked familiar.

He sighed. "A Pokédex. Looks like I'll need a new one...I'll worry about it later. Give me the balls."

The old man shuffled through the cave, and moved some rocks, then shuffled back and handed him a ball with a flame pattern, which he assumed was Blaze's, and a dirty white and red ball with a pointed red arrow on the top of it.

"A...Timer Ball...perfect." Random chance wouldn't help him here, he needed certainty, and a strong Pokémon. The longer he battled whatever he decided to catch, the more of a guarantee he'd have that he could catch it. With two Pokémon, he felt he might just be able to beat this...Lizardon. But first, he needed to see his opponent.

He knew the old man wouldn't show him, he had seen the fear evident in his entire form when he'd mentioned the black beast. He was terrified of it, for good reason of course, but there was more to this old timer than he was willing to reveal. Humans weren't supposed to be on this mountain. Especially not ones who lived in squalor. "Right...with this, I can catch some aid against Lizardon. Then...we might have a chance."

"Meleon!" Blaze snorted fire in agreement. He felt they could've done it alone, but after remembering the fight they'd seen when they arrived, the Charmeleon felt as his Trainer did. Any aid, no matter how small, would be welcome.

"Go on then!" The old man said, shoving him towards the back entrance into the tunnels. "Get down there and train. And don't come back until you're ready to face Lizardon!"

Before Alex could respond, a large boulder was moved in front of the tunnel entrance. A few seconds later, there was a thunderous stomp from the other side of it. Alex glanced at Blaze, and listened.

There was snarling, and the sound of stomping came closer, accompanied by the muffled sound of a powerful nose inhaling hard. Nothing of his had remained in the cave, but his scent no doubt lingered. Alex had an idea of what was on the other side of the rock the old man had put in front of the entrance. Given his frailty, that rock probably wouldn't hold up. "Blaze. Move. Into the tunnels, now."
They hurried down as the rock covering the hole glowed red, but by the time it was smashed through, they were long gone, deep in the tunnels that forced Alex to crouch to Blaze's height, and kept the larger Pokémon from entering them. Still smelling the unfamiliar, but unmistakably human scent amidst the slave's cave, the black Charizard roared in frustration, and his fury echoed through the tunnels for the first time.

It was the cry of a creature that wanted blood, almost berserk with fury. But he couldn't reach the heart of the mountain, large as he had grown fighting other Pokémon on the mountain. He gave up its search for the moment, and returned to his perch. The human needed to eat and drink, and to do that he would have to scurry from his hole eventually. That was when he would be pounced on, and ended.
"Has there been any word?" The words of Alex's granduncle, Professor Redwood, came through the other side of the Pokémon Center's Holociever.

Jess had only spoken to him a few times, as her father had warned her to stay away from him. He had apparently been brilliant, once, and then for a reason nobody would talk about, fell from grace among the scientific community.

The resulting infamy had damaged the Redwood's reputation, hurting sales so much that, eventually, Alex's father had come to hers to ask to share their land. Combined, it was quite large, stretching for miles. The amount of Pokémon they could effectively raise there had nearly quadrupled, and the profit had been great indeed.

After agreeing to a fair share of the future profits, the fences had been extended, and the Redwoods had managed to grow enough to avoid bankruptcy. Her own house was still left with a large yard, and that had been divided with trees rather than fences. Curious Tauros and other ranch Pokémon would often roam through the tree line, but thankfully, they all went back at their master's call.

Still wondering at what exactly had made the old man so infamous, she shook her head. "No…nothing. Something must've happened, three weeks is too long for him to be gone without calling."

The old man sighed, and scratched his head. After a long pause he said, "You don't think he'd be stupid enough to climb that mountain without his team, do you?"

Jess began to shake her head, then paused. "Well…he was on a bit of a lucky streak, and he and his Charmeleon are pretty close…given the high spirits he left in, he might've chanced it…but Professor, if he went up there, that means…"

The old man sighed. "It means he's dead, and his charred bones are lining the nest of a Charizard. Fool. I told him a thousand times not to chance angering fully grown wild Pokémon, especially those that live on that mountain!"

Jess shrugged, thinking aloud, "Well…there was that time at school with that Tyranitar…he told me all about it. Said he and Terra had kept it from rampaging across the campus…he might've thought he could handle it."

The Professor shook his head, sighing once more. "The Pokémon on that mountain are some of the most violent in the world. And nobody can understand why, because everyone who's gone there has ended up dead or seriously injured. All kinds gravitate there, usually those abandoned by their Trainers. But they don't attack people at the base…just the top. He must've climbed up, for whatever reason."

Jess' eyes widened suddenly, and she looked down. "It was me…I told him to go catch a Bagon…he must not have found one, and thought going higher would help…"
The old man looked at her from across the phone's screen as he saw the first signs of tears in her eyes. "Now don't start in blaming yourself, lass. He made the choice to go up there. If that is even where he went. A thousand things could've happened out there. Highwaymen, a sprained ankle, a sudden and unexpected forest fire started by his Charmeleon, we simply don't know…"

Jess nodded absently. She hadn't been listening to the old man's words, her mind already convinced that none of those things would keep him this long. Blaze was strong enough to handle anything the wild could throw at them…except fully evolved human-hating Pokémon. She suppressed a groan. Up the mountain was exactly where he would've gone. She knew him.

"I'll let you know if there's news, Professor." They gave their courtesies, and then hung up.

Jess headed to her room, and surveyed her Pokéballs, lying comfortably on the bed. She had taken Leo and Hydrus back from the Professor after he'd fixed their balls, but Terra was still asleep on the large plot of land outside the lab, put aside for the other Pokémon Alex intended to catch. The Professor and his aides, as well as several of the younger kids in the family, were in charge of keeping those residing in the PC happy and healthy. Even the Pokémon of other Trainers who had started from that lab were kept there. Not many Trainers chose the Redwood Lab to start from these days, not since the Professor's fall to infamy, but her brother Connor had visited the Professor once to attempt to find a Froakie, and the Pokémon he tended to catch ended up there too.

Unfortunately, the only frog Pokémon around this region were Croagunk, Tympole, and Poliwag. Kalos, and the surrounding countries, were where Froakie tended to live, so that was where he had gone. Yet another Trainer in her life who didn't call much. He did pay attention however, enough to know that she had gone to Humilau with Alex on foot, and that Alex was missing.

He'd called as well, during the first week. The media had been abuzz about the grandnephew of the infamous Professor Redwood going missing, but as usual, had since moved on to something else when nobody could figure out where he'd gone. But she had an idea now…she at least had to look. But not without a proper defense.

With her Pokémon and Alex's, that left her with five. More than enough, especially since Alex's Luxray was also strong. He and Chari had been the first to notice the absence of Alex and Blaze, but Hydrus had figured it out as well, eventually. Still, young as he was, she had kept him busy by training him against her new Prinplup. She grabbed Leo and Chari's balls, letting them out. They looked at her, eagerly.

"I might know where Alex and Blaze went. Alex might be hurt, but Blaze should be fine. We need to get him back, at least. But to find them, we'll need your eyes, Leo." He responded with an agreeing tone. "Luxray."

She had tested his sight ability since training with him, a task he wasn't all that fond of given that she wasn't his Trainer, but after a good grooming, he'd listened to her well enough. Now, she could use his ability for something useful.

She offered him the badge. "Smell this, both of you, track his scent if you can. We'll start at the base of Draconis Mons. See what we see."

They both nodded in agreement, and she recalled them, then headed out of the Pokémon center, only to run straight into the larger form of her brother, literally, as she had been thinking about, and trying to ignore, the potential mortal peril she was about to be in.
"Hello sis." Connor said, smirking as she bounced off him. He was built like Alex, big boned, but not nearly as tall, and his glorious full beard was a far cry from Alex's bare face. His reddish scarlet hair was straight, under a blue Trainer's hat that looked more like a beret from Kalos. Only in the day could one see his hair's coloring, otherwise it looked like a normal brown. "Going somewhere?"

Jess looked up at him, still processing the fact that he was even here at all. She had never, not once, in all the time she had lived, been able to lie successfully to her brother. Now was the chance to change that. "Yes. I was going to train with Alex's Pokémon. So they're fit when he comes back." The two siblings stared at each other for a long time, before he shrugged.

"Alright. I just came from beating the gym here, now that I have my team together, I figured it was time to try to beat my home league. Kalos was…on another level." His clothes weren't all that different from Eric's, being mostly dark blue and white, the largest distinguishing feature was his long purple scarf, wrapped around his neck. It seemed he was going for the Greninja look.

"Well, I still have to train," Jess said, sticking to the lie, "I'll come back once we're done. We'll catch up." She hurried off, heading north out of town. Connor hadn't beaten the gyms in Kalos without picking up a few tricks however, and as usual, could tell when his sister was up to something.

"Gren." He said softly. The lithe form of his Greninja appeared beside him, seemingly out of nowhere. He bowed his head, slightly. "Watch her. Make sure she stays out of trouble, find Alex if you can…and stay unseen." The Trainer spoke, and the loyal Pokémon nodded again, grunting an affirmative as he disappeared.

The trip out of town was relatively easy for Jess, who called out Leo and Chari once they were on the road. After so many weeks however, they would be lucky to find anything. Leo did manage to find the path Blaze had carved through the woods however, which led them all the way to the base of the mountain itself.

After climbing the trail a bit, they found an imprint of a familiar looking shoe pattern, but it was more the size of the print that gave away what they were looking at. Only one Trainer around here had feet that large. Jess was convinced that Alex had climbed up further now, but as she made an effort to do the same, a Greninja appeared in front of her.

She scowled. "You're my brother's Pokémon, aren't you? He sent you to follow me." The Greninja nodded, and Jess sighed. "You're not going to let me up, either." The blue frog nodded again, arms crossed.

She sighed again, and pulled her fiery orange hat down as weeks of frustration built up suddenly, and all at once. "Fine…just…just do me a favor and find out if he's alive or not. I need to know. Will you do that?"

Connor's Greninja had been able to figure out who this human was, to his Trainer. They had a similar scent, and he had seen pictures of her as a Froakie. He'd also seen her once or twice when his master used the phones at the Pokémon Center, something he rarely did. He could also see the tears dripping slowly from under the hat.

His master had explained why they were here after the gym battle, and given his typing, he hadn't been used for that challenge, and thus wasn't tired. Connor had instructed him to search the town for this 'Alex' but he'd found nothing. Now, his master's sister had found a trail, but he could tell this was a place for powerful Pokémon, not humans. There was something about it that attracted the strong.
"Gren." He said, replying positively to her request. He made a show of running up the trail, before disappearing again with another high jump. Climbing a mountain wouldn't be too hard for him, but it was still a mountain. It would take time. He paused once he'd gotten high enough to be out of her sight. His master had said to make sure she was safe after all, and if she went up anyway, she wouldn't be. Eventually, she recalled the Luxray and her Charmeleon, then turned back. It was a wise move.

Only certain species of Pokémon lived here. A Greninja would be out of place, but he could go unnoticed. A Luxray would be more obvious, however. Gren continued his climb, hoping that these Pokémon wouldn't outright attack a stranger, and fellow Pokémon. There was no way they could know his species wasn't native to this region, after all.

Down below, Jess made her way back through Alex's trail alone, ignoring the wild and rare Pokémon around her. They made no move to attack her, as she looked distressed, and these youngsters, while wild, weren't quite yet nasty enough to jump out at a crying, lone woman walking through the woods without disturbing them.

She'd been forced to turn back, but still, she had managed to find some trace of her missing friend, and now her brother's starter Pokémon was searching for him.

She had no way of knowing how well he'd been trained, but she knew her brother. He would've raised his Greninja well. He'd always wanted one, after all. Eventually, she made it back to town and began training with Leo and Hydrus as she had said she would.

**Tunnels Within Draconis Mons - Unova Region**

The first night in the tunnels had been rough for Alex and his Charmeleon. His dreams were plagued by images he couldn't place, names he knew he should remember, but couldn't, and the ever-present hunger of having not eaten more than a rough berry for a number of weeks. He'd lost quite a bit of weight, and his cheeks were looking gaunt and dirty.

The heat of the mountain made him sweat constantly, a feeling he despised, and what he really needed was a good bath. But the only water they had found down here had been boiling. Eventually, unable to awkwardly crawl in the tunnels any longer in the ever-increasing heat, Alex had sent Blaze to find food, or help. They would need it if he was going to survive down here.

During his training, Blaze had made several allies down here, but when he communicated that he needed help for his Trainer, each one had refused. They hadn't been abandoned, but their parent's hatred of humans had influenced them. Eventually, Blaze found one of the Magmar in charge of maintaining the tunnels and asked for help.

Reluctantly agreeing, if only to get Alex's large form out of the tunnels, he helped Blaze drag him to a significantly cooler chamber that was actually pretty high up in the mountain. The crater above had a small leak in it, and over time, water had dripped into the large cavern below. Now, it played host to many water and ice types who kept that area of the mountain cooler. Many Dratini and Dragonair lived down here, along with another rare Pokémon species that was often abandoned.

Amaura and Aurorus were relatively new fossil Pokémon, but due to their many weaknesses,
inadequate Trainers often released them into the wild, in a world they no longer belonged in. Those that managed to survive were drawn to this mountain, like so many others, and now they had a home.

Unlike the dragon and fire types above however, these Pokémon were inherently kind. After having the situation explained to the largest of the Aurorus by Blaze, they allowed the human to drink and rest. The older Pokémon avoided him, but the younger Amaura were rabidly curious.

Alex managed to come to consciousness after Blaze splashed him a few times, and after drinking his fill, he found the little ice types adorable. But he had come for a Bagon, and had only brought the one ball. Before he left, he decided to approach one of the older Aurorus, and bowed low, fist to palm, in the Unovan style.

His memory had slowly improved, enough at least to remember why so many rare species lived on this mountain. He didn't know why, but he felt he had to try to apologize for what they had suffered at the hands of his kind. The older long necked Pokémon eyed him suspiciously, but didn't outright attack. It had watched him with the younger Pokémon, and judged him to be kind. For a human.

"I'm sorry that you ended up here…abandoned. I can't imagine what that must've been like for you. You don't belong in this time, your species has only been revived because of human meddling, and it was humans that abandoned you. We're not…we're not all like that. Thank you for not giving away my location…the Pokémon above are…not nearly as kind." The large head of the tundra Pokémon lowered to press against the human's dirty hat.

"Aurooor." Looking up, he didn't quite know how he knew, but it seemed that the older Pokémon understood the heart of what he'd said. He continued, daring to press his luck.

"I may be down here for a while…and I can't survive in the constant heat. Might I stay here until I'm able to leave?" He had Blaze translate this for him. It was too important for miscommunication.

The larger Pokémon met his gaze again for a long moment, and he stared right back. Finally, it nodded, and then spoke to Blaze. The Charmeleon then grabbed his master, and led him to a back part of the cavern, far from the Aurorus and their young, and gestured to a small pile of dried leaves, and several berries.

It seemed his Pokémon had already set up a living arrangement for him. He nodded, biting into one of the berries, which must have been picked from the forest below, given the size of them. Blaze ate too, and while it didn't completely satisfy his burning hunger, Alex felt a lot better.

When they were done, he stood, and went to the water's edge. There, he spent the next hour or so washing, and then with Blaze's help, drying his clothes. A few of the Dratini watched curiously, but swam away when he went to pet them. When everything was finally ready, and properly washed, he put his hat on, and nodded at Blaze.

"Right. Enough stalling. We need to train…and we need to find a strong Bagon. Have you met one down here?" Blaze nodded an affirmative. After several attempts, they'd managed to agree on what species they needed to catch. The Charmeleon was aware of what they'd come here for in the first place, as he was very much behind getting a Salamence on their side. What a sparring partner. It had taken a few weeks, but he'd found the perfect ally, and rival.

The tunnels that led from the ice cavern were large, large enough for an Aurorus to fit through, so
Alex no longer had to crouch. Indeed, it seemed that many of the other tunnels within the mountain itself were made for larger Pokémon, while the smaller ones were used to keep the more powerful fire and dragon types at bay.

Finally, Blaze and his Trainer arrived at the magma-filled cavern, where hundreds of pairs of first and middle evolutions trained daily. Every single one of them stopped as he entered, and a few growled. Most of them were Charmeleon. He coughed, awkwardly.

"Translate for me." Blaze nodded. "Pokémon of Draconis Mons…I come in peace. I'm not here to disturb your habitat, or get you in trouble. The black one doesn't know that I'm here. Or if he does, he cannot reach me. I came here to train with my partner…" He paused, and a few of the scowls had lessened slightly. These were Pokémon who had, for the most part, been born here, not abandoned. The human spoke of peace, so they saw no reason to attack him. Yet. They had all come to appreciate his Charmeleon's fighting spirit, and when asked how he'd gotten so good, he gave his human credit where it was due. He'd never have been able to become this strong on his own. Not so quickly, anyways.

"If any of you would like to test yourselves against a true Pokémon Trainer…this is your chance. I guarantee you that it won't be like battling by yourselves. I can also guarantee that you'll get stronger."

A few of them roared at that. These species lived for such challenges. They could accept the human's, and drive him off when they beat him. More than a few of them were confident that they could.

"However." He held up his Timer Ball, and many of them recoiled, snarling. "I'm here to do more than just train. I have a goal. I am going to beat Lizardon, and to do that, I'm going to need the aid of a Bagon. I wouldn't dream of catching one that isn't willing to battle for its freedom, so if you find the idea of becoming the strongest of your kind distasteful, don't bother stepping up. I'm going to free this mountain of its oppressive ruler, and then I'm going to become the strongest Trainer that ever lived. Challenge me! I welcome all of you."

As he finished translating, Blaze loosed a Flamethrower into the air, and the gathered Pokémon roared in response. Alex walked to the center of the cavern then, and drew a rough interpretation of a standard battle field with his heel, and Blaze's help.

His flame marked the path his heel carved in the hot dirt, and when he was finally done, he took his place on it along with his Pokémon. Many of those gathered had never seen such a stage, and watched, curious. This was an opportunity wild Pokémon rarely got to see. A genuine battle against a Trainer that wasn't chucking capture spheres at them after weakening them.

"Let the first challenger come!" He shouted, and Blaze roared. This felt right to him, being here on a proper battle field. He knew he'd done this before…but not with this Pokémon. Not nearly as often as he had with…the memory was there, but he couldn't recall it. The image of the black Charizard's tail coming at him always interfered as soon as he tried to remember something. At least he'd managed to remember how he'd been hurt.

Their first opponent was a Shelgon that looked fairly close to evolving, given its size. But he had come for a Bagon. Training a Pokémon from its earliest stage was the oldest method of getting the strongest final evolution. That was basic Trainer knowledge. The battle was over quickly, as Blaze's Dragon Tail took down his slower opponent with ease.
The gathered Pokémon stared, not quite believing what they were seeing. That Shelgon was nearly unbeatable, and even Blaze had trouble against him in the past...but battling with a Trainer was like having eyes in the back of your head.

It took five more battles before a Bagon finally stepped up, walking onto the field, and roaring. Blaze looked at his Trainer and nodded. This was the one then, the one that would be his. He examined the small dragon type, and liked what he saw.

He was large, of course, and looked close to evolution himself, but he was also young. The fire that burned in his eyes was not unlike Blaze's. He was indeed ideal. The two Pokémon butted heads before taking their positions, and Alex realized they'd battled before. They were rivals, but friends as well.

"Flamethrower." The torrent of fire was met with a similarly powerful Dragonbreath, and then the little Pokémon charged. Usually Blaze caught him when he did this, but this was an entirely different battle. The Charmeleon smirked.

"Dodge high, then Flamethrower again!" He leapt with the aid of his tail, and the fire came down all around the Bagon, who growled in irritation at his new burn. Using Dragon Tail might've ended the battle quicker, but Alex wanted to test the measure of this Pokémon's strength. So he kept to fire type moves.

As soon as Blaze landed, the Bagon leaned backward and jumped into a spinning headbutt that hit the fire lizard square in the stomach. He bounced back after the hit, and unleashed another Dragonbreath that Blaze barely countered in time with a Flamethrower.

Seeing that this Bagon was about to press his advantage, Alex decided it was time to use their new move. Learning what moves Blaze knew had taken less time than he'd thought, and it was this newest one that didn't seem familiar.

"Heat Wave!" Blaze opened his mouth and the air around them grew even hotter. Usually, this wouldn't affect a dragon type too badly, but even dragon types could suffer heat exhaustion, especially in the bowels of a volcano. This move made the local temperature nearly unbearable.

Alex was sweating hard, and he finally signaled for Blaze to stop after ten seconds of it. The Bagon was panting hard too, and the heat certainly hadn't helped with its burn. It was time to end this.

"Flamethrower." The Bagon looked back at him, and then at Blaze, who loosed another torrent of flame at him. Jumping into another Headbutt, he used the move to dodge quickly, and countered with his Dragonbreath, just in time to meet another Flamethrower. The two moves clashed, but Blaze was in better shape, and eventually his fire overwhelmed the Bagon.

It collapsed to its rear, panting. The fight was over. Alex approached the small blue Pokémon, who eyed him warily, until he saw that he was being offered a berry. This one just happened to cure burns, and heal. He had figured the Bagon they battled might end up burned, and there was no Pokémon Center here, so he'd saved one of the berries from his stash in the ice cavern. Swallowing his pride, the Bagon ate it, sighing in relief as the burn faded. Alex knelt to his level then, and offered the Timer Ball.

"I was originally going to battle the strongest Bagon I could find down here until this would
guarantee a catch…but I know the Pokémon here don't like humans. You look like you have a family, a life, here. I'm not going to snatch you away from it against your will. I'm going to offer you the chance to join me. If you do, I promise, you will one day be regarded as the strongest Salamence the world has ever known."

The Bagon looked at Blaze, who nodded subtly, and then at the human. It blinked, seeing the same fire in his eyes that was in his partner's. They were linked, and he knew that if he accepted, he would feel that fire as well. This human was unlike anything his mother had told him of. Unlike most, she didn't hate humans, but she had warned most of them were vile creatures that deserved their rage. This human had eyes like a dragon. The young Bagon knew what he had to do, and his instincts agreed with him.

"Bagon." He nodded, and his little arm pushed the strange ball's button. It opened, and he entered it willingly, finding the inside to be not at all unpleasant. Once it stopped blinking, Alex let him out again, and he returned in a flash of black light, ringed with white. Alex blinked. That was unusual, but then, this whole situation was strange.

He felt that the light should've been a different color, but decided to ignore it. His memory was still gone after all, though he'd managed to recall his name after seeing it on his jacket. For all he knew, that was the right light Timer Balls emitted. "Welcome to the team…I suppose you need a name, hmm?" He thought for a long moment, struggling to remember what he knew of dragon types. Fragments of legends came to his mind, as dragon types were, in their own right, legendary.

"How about…Shruikan? I can't quite remember where it's from…but it sounds fierce, and powerful." The Bagon nodded in what seemed like agreement. He liked it.

"Alright then…let's rest up. Then tomorrow, we'll return here for more training." He looked at Shruikan. "You're going to need to evolve if we're going to have a chance at beating that black beast." The Bagon nodded again.

That was another reason he'd accepted. His mother, a Salamence, was often attacked by Lizardon with no provocation. His father had been felled by it, one of the many victims of the black one's rage. This Trainer seemed like his best chance of avenging his sire's death, and his mother's mistreatment at the Charizard's claws.

He felt he could evolve already, but tomorrow he would finally try to. The time seemed right…one more night as a Bagon wouldn't hurt though. He examined his form as they walked through one of the larger tunnel exits. It wasn't weak per say, but not overly strong either. As a Shelgon he would have a much better chance of surviving a fire attack from the black beast that ruled over them, and be one step closer to achieving the ability to soar through the skies. He just had to trust that his new Trainer knew what he was doing.

The next two days were intense training for Blaze and Shruikan both, but no matter how hard they trained, Shruikan couldn't evolve. He did however have the unique advantage of being able to sneak down the mountain, and after convincing other Pokémon to help, he managed to smuggle armfuls of berries in for all of them.

He even got one of the Magby to open, and then close, a hole in the mountain for them. Alex contemplated leaving of course. He had his Bagon, fulfilling the task the mysterious note had told him to, but he couldn't just leave these Pokémon under the rule of that Charizard.

That species tended to outlive their Trainers, and that one had lost none of his youthful vigor. It could
be centuries before he was weak enough to be overthrown, or passed naturally. He hadn't gone to visit the old man either. There would be time enough to pry information from him if and when he defeated 'Lizardon'.

Just as Shruikan finished his latest battle with his newest move, Zen Headbutt, there was a tutting sound from beside the makeshift field Alex had created. The Pokémon here had kept it, enjoying the challenge of staying in bounds while battling, though not a one of them obeyed the rules of a ring out. The tutting sound came from the old Kanto man, who had somehow appeared without even Blaze noticing. He'd been on the sidelines, watching.

"You will never evolve him that way. This Bagon needs fire…same fire that burns in his eyes…take him to Morty. Yes, Morty will be enough. You battle him…you evolve them both. They are ready. Two more days to get used to their bodies…" A dark look appeared in the slightly opened squinted eyes. "Then, you fight him."

Looking at him closer, Alex saw his bruises had only gotten worse. Mottled green now mixed with the purple where new bruises covered the old. It seemed Lizardon had taken his anger out on the old man when Alex had failed to resurface.

Before he could say anything about them however, the old man began walking towards the largest tunnel exiting from the large training chamber. It was one Alex had never gone down, and had been kept from entering by a Magmar that had risen from the lava pool by the entrance. The same Magmar reappeared now, and then nodded upon seeing the old man. He sank back into the lava, and Alex and his team followed him.

"You better heal them." He said in his foreign accent, strangling the R sounds. "This will not be an easy battle." The other three shared a look.

"Can I use Blaze as well as Shruikan?" Alex asked quietly.

The old man stopped in place. "Shruikan? The black dragon of destruction? Why would you ever name him that?"

Alex blinked twice, the information slowly coming back to him. It had happened quite a few decades back, supposedly a black scaled Rayquaza had gone berserk in the Hoenn region, and the Champion of said region, who had tamed a Groudon, had been forced to stop it. He hadn't been strong enough however, so the story went, and the woman who tamed the seas, and Kyogre, had helped him finally end the black Legendary Pokémon's rampage.

The media had nicknamed the beast Shruikan, due to its' tendency to form a spiked circle and slam into opponents when it used Dragon Tail. They had meant Shuriken, an ancient weapon that actually resembled the spinning dragon's attacks, but by the time they admitted that, the name had become too popular.

Most of the footage of the event had mysteriously vanished, and now many people his age considered it to be nothing more than a fanciful Hoenn myth, but that didn't really help him, as he couldn't remember his age either. He looked at his Bagon, then shrugged.

"He'll grow into it. For now, Shruikan is his name. Let all who remember it know his strength." The tiny dragon growled in approval of the story, and the name. "Bagon!" Sharing a name with a
Rayquaza was an honor for any dragon type.

The old man shook his head and continued on further. They walked in that tunnel for what seemed like ages, it connected with many other smaller tunnels that smaller Pokémon, like Aron, had carved out of the mountain, but the few they saw ignored the two humans as they made their way to the chamber at the end of the tunnel.

It was large, but not nearly as large as the training cavern was. Large enough to have a battle in, certainly. In the back was a massive statue of a Magmortar that looked to have been carved in great detail from the stone, but by who was a mystery. It was missing key elements of the Pokémon Alex vaguely remembered learning about. The old man shuffled right up to it.

"Hi there Morty, sorry to wake you. There's a Bagon here that needs some help evolving. Think you could help out?" Alex and his two Pokémon shared a look again.

The old man continued talking to the statue for a good minute, before Alex spoke up. "Umm…old man, I think that's just a statue of a Magmortar."

The old man laughed loudly, hands on his hips. "A statue! You hear that, Morty? He thinks you're a statue! Oh wow. Lizardon must've hit you harder than I thought if you really can't tell a live Pokémon from a statue! Ha! Haha!" He turned back to the statue as he began coughing, ignoring Alex and his raised eyebrow.

"Come on Morty, this is serious! This young man intends to battle Lizardon, and his Bagon needs to be a Shelgon to do that. His Charmeleon needs a proper boost as well! Otherwise they'll probably be killed." Alex sighed, turning to leave as the old man began pounding on the solid rock.

"Come on you two…we've wasted enough valuable training time…" Alex muttered as he turned to leave with a sigh. Hermits were always crazy. He had no idea why he'd expected this one to be different from the ones in what stories he could remember.

He'd taken one step out of the cavern, when he felt a tremor. A slight tremor, but a tremor all the same. He didn't quite know why, but it felt familiar, the shaking of the ground. Like he'd ordered it done before in a battle…a lot… but Blaze and Shruikan didn't know Earthquake. Another tremor.

He turned, and saw the old man grinning. "See? He's finally waking up. Morty always was lazy… come on now! Get up!"

The cavern shook harder, and Shruikan jumped before his Trainer, growling at the statue. Alex swore inwardly. The old man had been right. Rocks slowly broke from the form of the Magmortar, and it gurgled over and over.

It took Alex a minute to realize it was coughing. It stared at the old man, and then shifted its' impassive gaze to him. It coughed again, hard, and rocks shot out of its cannon arms, slamming into the ground. He'd thought it a statue because the head and shoulders lacked flames, but as the massive Pokémon rose, they burned to life again.

It raised its arms to either side, and two Flamethrowers shot out, clearing any excess debris. The old man dodged the one near him skillfully, like he didn't even try, and had moved on reflex. The sudden burst of graceful movement only mystified him further. Surely he'd been a Trainer, his facial features seemed slightly familiar, but without his memory, Alex couldn't place him.
"Easy now, Morty. Lizardon is still alive…but these three can take him down. With your help. Battle the Bagon." The Magmortar looked at the old man, then growled, turning to finally look at Shruikan and then Blaze as well.

It raised one arm, pointed at Shruikan. "Mortar!" Shruikan growled in response, and Alex saw the light within its arm begin to build. The battle had started, it seemed.

"Dragonbreath!" Shruikan's blue flames cut the larger Pokémon's torrent of orange ones in half, saving both himself and Alex from their fire. Blaze didn't mind them much, but moved to stand by the old man all the same.

The old man began whispering to Blaze, but another Flamethrower from 'Morty' drowned out his words. Both Shruikan and Alex had to dodge. "Zen Headbutt!" Before the hit could land, it met with yet another Flamethrower. This Magmortar launched them easily, but this one held its stream continuously.

"Look out, lad! Move!" Alex lost sight of Shruikan within the flames as they surrounded his move, but instead of exploding, as most move collisions did, this one began to glow impossibly bright, the white light filling the room. Morty covered his eyes with his free arm, but kept the stream going. Finally, the light faded, and the Flamethrower increased. Shruikan slammed into the back wall of the cavern, but was unharmed.

He rose slowly from the rubble on four stubby legs, legs that looked too small to support the shell covering his entire body. He roared, and it was much deeper now. Morty raised his second cannon arm, and now two Flamethrowers shot towards Shruikan.

Only to be met by a Dragonbreath that was stronger than anything he'd used as a Bagon. Stronger than anything other Shelgon had used themselves. It overwhelmed the flames, shifting in mid-air into a blue colored pulse that slammed into Morty, and sent him back into the hole he'd left when he'd awakened with a thunderous crash.

The large Pokémon grinned at Shruikan. The battle was over. A proper contest would see the cave destroyed. Alex stared at his new Shelgon, and smirked. "Brilliant…Dragon Pulse…we have a chance at beating him now…we hit him with…maybe four of those, and Blaze can grab the win."

Blaze and Shruikan met each other's gaze.

As rivals, they were obviously eager to test the other's strength. Evolution changed a lot in a battle, but now wasn't the time. They were so intensely focused on each other's gaze that Blaze failed to notice Morty standing over him. He snorted in surprise and backed up when he finally did.

"Mag. Mortar." With that, the giant Pokémon left his cave, and Blaze followed, motioning for the others to come with him. As Morty walked down the tunnel, each heavy footfall echoed throughout the many smaller tunnels that connected to his. Smaller Pokémon everywhere got out of the way, but many Magby stared in awe at this example of their final evolution, a stage many Magmar never advanced to. Not without a Trainer.

They didn't know that however, so their hope of one day becoming that powerful was kept alive. Finally, they reached the training chamber. Once more, each of the dueling Pokémon stopped as Alex and his band of companions entered. He wondered if they were getting tired of the interruptions yet.
They didn't have time to complain, as Morty strode across the field with the confidence of a being that is fully aware it's the strongest one in the room. Alex wondered, briefly, if he shouldn't have saved his Pokéball for this one instead.

He banished the thought then. Doubting his team would certainly lead to failure, and he had a feeling this Magmortar wasn't completely done with them yet. At the wall opposite Morty's tunnel, a large pool of lava sat, ignored by all, save the Magmar who stood on the lone pillar of rock in the middle of it.

Morty stared it down. "Mag." He growled.

"Mar." The other responded, hopping off the pillar. Alex had only seen him do this once before, when a pair of battling Pokémon had gotten too rough while sparring. It seemed his purpose was to keep order, as well as stand guard over…whatever Morty was reaching into the lava for. There was a loud whooshing sound as the right cannon arm drew in tons of molten lava like it was nothing. Suddenly, he stopped, and three barely visible claws that acted as this Pokémon's hands lifted out of the pool, holding a shining red crystal. He turned to look at Blaze.

"Magmortar!" He tossed the stone back into what lava remained in the pool, and then focused both arms on it. The lava he had taken in poured out faster than it should've been able to, given that it was molten rock, not water. Alex attributed it to the power this Pokémon held. They could alter nature in ways man would never truly understand, and they could do it on a whim.

Blaze glanced at his Trainer, and then at where the crystal had gone. Alex hadn't felt the power radiating from it, or if he had, he'd been too distracted to notice. But every fire type in that cavern had felt it. It was old.

No more than a shard of something that had once been unimaginably powerful, the essence of fire itself, long broken into pieces that had been buried and crushed in the ground, or disintegrated upon colliding with the land…all except that one. It was the heart of Draconis Mons, the source of the power that drew powerful fire Pokémon here, Pokémon that otherwise would've found different mountains to occupy.

Every Pokémon on the mountain had felt it surface for that brief moment, but only the fire types could truly crave it. Up above, Gren watched from his place of hiding as the black Charizard that clearly dominated this mountain's crater roared with a fury that he had rarely achieved before. Pokémon scattered at this roar, even the stronger ones like Tyranitar and Salamence. When the black one got this angry, you got out of his way, or you likely ended up dead.

Down below, Morty looked up, as did many others. The roar had gotten their attention, but Blaze kept his gaze on where the crystal had disappeared. Lizardon's roar only spurred him on to do something he imagined was unwise, but in his core, felt right.

The only one who saw him start to run full tilt towards the large pool was Morty, and the large Pokémon grinned as the smaller red one leapt using his tail, over the Magmar who noticed him a second too late, over Morty's head, and finally over the ridge that separated the smaller Pokémon from the lava.

Not even Magby were allowed in this pool, but Morty made no move to stop him. The lava ceased flowing from his cannons, and he stepped back, avoiding the Flamethrower the Magmar had unleashed seconds too late, as Blaze dove into the lava, parting it in a way that shouldn't have been
Morty turned on the smaller Magmar, and smacked it with one of his cannons. The smaller Pokémon blinked, and then they both turned their attention to the pool. Alex had run up now, just tall enough to have a view of the surface. He’d seen his Charmeleon as he leapt over Morty, but had no chance of stopping him. He looked up at the Magmortar, but the larger Pokémon shook his head, and pointed with a cannon arm.

The pool seemed unusually red... because it was unusually red. It was glowing now. As the glow faded, the tips of four familiar looking orange points rose out of the pool. Wings appeared beneath the outer two on either side, the familiar dark blue of the flaps came next, followed by the eyes, which now radiated the same red color as the crystal that rose above the lava, supported by one large, orange claw. Clutching his prize tight, Blaze glared at where the furious roar from above had originated, and flapped free of the burning magma, into the air before inhaling, and loosing a roar of his own hat shook the mountain in turn.

It echoed through the chamber, shaking it with the force his new throat could produce. Many Pokémon had to cover their ears, as did Alex and the old man. Morty watched, unblinking, the ever-present smirk unchanged. Blaze flapped once, and landed outside the pool's edge, right in front of Morty. Magmortar usually towered over most Charizard, but Blaze had held off on evolving for weeks now, and his size had carried over. For his species, size usually indicated strength, and now, Blaze was a head taller than Morty.

Alex struggled to remember how large Lizardon was, then stopped himself. He was being too analytical. He had a Charizard! Morty stepped back as Alex strode up to his fully evolved partner, grinning wide. Blaze lowered his head, and while his eyes may have stopped glowing with the power of the strange gem, they still held the same fire that bound Pokémon and Trainer together. Alex put a hand against his partner's cheek, noticing that despite having been in lava, it was hot to the touch, but not searing. "Only you could make lava diving look cool."

The old man chortled behind them. "Ha! Lava diving! Cool! Because it's usually so hot! Getit?" Morty gave him a look, then began stomping back towards his cave.

"Well someone has to have a sense of humor on this mountain!" The old man turned to Alex and his Charizard. "Don't worry lad, I got the joke."

He and Blaze shared a look as well, before looking back to the old man. "Thank you, mister... I still don't know your name."

"Don't worry about it! Heh heh. Tell ya what, you beat Lizardon, and I'll tell you my whooooole life story. Deal?" Alex nodded, then shook his head in disbelief. This old man was straight out of a comic book. Though he couldn't remember which one.

"Deal..." He turned back to Blaze, who was offering him the crystal. Alex took it and with it in his hand, properly touching his skin, he knew, without knowing exactly how he knew, that he was holding a piece of Creation.

The symbol used to represent fire types was visible within it, and he marveled at it, before moving to return it to Blaze. The Charizard shook his head. "Char."
"You want me to keep it? But you can use it in the battle…” The fully evolved Pokémon growled, shaking his head again. He meant Alex to have it. Alex shrugged, deciding not to argue with his Pokémon's instincts. "If you insist… let's go back and rest… soon, we take on Lizardon, and free this mountain."
She opened one lazy eye as another loud smash echoed throughout the crater atop the mountain they all called home. The black beast that ruled over them, a Charizard that looked twice his age, but had the passionate fire of one who had just evolved, had been slamming his tail into the wall of his perch on the northern edge of the crater for two days now, out of sheer frustration.

They had all felt the power that surfaced, the power that drew their overlord into a rage that had, by all appearances, cooled. She wasn't convinced however. She could see the smoldering embers of hate in his eyes, always looking below, searching desperately for any sign of the Charizard that had roared back at him in open defiance. He had killed for less. But there was nothing.

For two whole days, the tension in the crater had been high. She had been preoccupied, however. She was a Salamence, one of the stronger species that lived on this mountain. She didn't necessarily hate humans, as so many of the other full-grown Pokémon did. Her human had passed a long, long time ago. In a far away region. She couldn't even recall his face now, just the kindness he'd shown her, the battles they'd won.

But those days were long gone. She'd flown far away from that place, found a suitable mate, and settled here on this mountain. There had been many good days…until the day a golden Charmeleon emerged from the tunnels that led into the mountain, and evolved.

In the course of a day, the Charizard he had become beat and mercilessly killed many of the strongest Pokémon that had lived on the mountain, and refused to submit to him. Her mate had been among them. After that, the Pokémon who maintained the tunnels had shut them all, barring the black one's rage from entering the core. Now, the black one was furious, and to top it all off, one of her offspring was missing.

He'd gotten old enough to begin to burn with the desire to train, grow stronger, evolve, and finally achieve flight. That was fine, every mother expected her young to leave the nest at some point. Many of her past clutches had done just that, choosing to roam far away. But it was still too early for this latest son of hers to have been gone for so long.

She worried about that Bagon. The skies had been so loud, they'd even annoyed their black scaled ruler the night his egg hatched. The storm raged for hours, only ending when the shell was finally broken. Even Pokémon had legends, and Salamence were no exception. Dragons had long lives, and longer memories. She'd heard, once, what that omen foretold, but she didn't entirely believe it.

Worse, he was missing at a time when she and the others could feel a change was coming to the mountain. Many Charizard and other species had challenged the black one for dominance…but there was something about that roar that had them all on edge. It hadn't been like the others, it had almost reminded her of their ruler's, but his was pure rage.

This one had something else fueling it, some other power that had made the very mountain shake with force of it. She shifted again, making sure to turn her gaze from the black Charizard as she did. He noticed everything that moved, thanks to the state he was in, and had been shooting Flamethrowers at any who looked at him and met his gaze. He hadn't slept, either. Something about
that defiant roar had him on edge.

Down below, under tons of seemingly solid rock, the source of Lizardon's rage had been training relentlessly for two days straight. The point of said training had been to get his team used to their new bodies, but a problem soon presented itself.

Blaze didn't quite know how to fly, and though the instinct was there, the confusing air currents and lack of experience in the hot mountain had kept him consistently crashing into the ground. He desperately needed time in the air, under the open sky. Down here, the most he could do was flap aimlessly around the training cavern, like a Noibat trapped in a house.

Over the course of two days however, in heat even a fire type finds oppressive, Blaze had slowly, and painfully, learned to move with the curve of the air. At first, he simply stayed aloft on the warm currents of air, and didn't crash into the ground. In the same day, once he'd mastered that balance upon this 'wind', he began doing tricks, flips, all sorts of aerial maneuvers.

He slowly learned what he would need to beat Lizardon. That he seemed born to the air, a true flying type, only helped. Even in this hot cavern, large though it was, he managed to learn to soar, and knew that under the open sky, he would be even more impressive.

Once the crystal had been given, the old man and Morty had vanished, far, far below the fiery cavern where their chance at freedom from Lizardon trained almost to exhaustion.

At the old man's request, Morty had opened a large tunnel in the base of the mountain, and other types, like grass and water, that lived in the forests around the mountain, once more found their own ancient caverns within. There was room for every known type, and several as yet undiscovered by humans, scattered throughout the enormous natural structure.

They came from the woods and forests nearby, for the sole purpose of seeing a place of such power freed from the grasp of a tyrant at last. The power that slept under the dragon mountain drew them all. None could imagine it would be a Trainer that freed them though.

Even a clone of Arceus, whose sole duty was to monitor this mountain where another clone of the Alpha Pokémon had once made the ultimate sacrifice, now paid attention, his focus drawn to this mountain. There was about to be a shift in the very fabric of reality. A piece of his power had been awakened.

The cavern of ice types rested under the topmost crater, where the dragon types lived. This kept them from attempting to dominate the other types, as their inborn nature commanded them to try to do. While Lizardon had certainly been a menace, the fury of the abandoned dragon types had also been kept in check.

Had humans not interfered, he could have kept the dragons in line for centuries. He would have eventually died however, but surely in all those long years, he would eventually birth a proper successor, no? There would be peace and fairness. Eventually. Once all these...rebellious attitudes...were excised. This was Lizardon's reasoning, his motive behind his claim to power. The ramblings of a tyrannical mind, justifying its actions.

The Shelgon now called Shruikan by the strange Trainer, watched the human and Charmeleon train together in awe. A Pokémon that had been raised from its first stage by a Trainer was a new sight to
the Shelgon. He watched the Charizard called Blaze slowly learn how to dodge, duck, dip, and dive through the cramped cavern, and the fire in his eyes became truly envious.

He needed to fly as well. He would be the greatest of his species with this Trainer by his side. Someday, he would ascend to the status of Legend among all of them, for this was the Trainer who could make him into such a dragon. Or so his instinct said.

For now, however, he had to deal with his hard shell of a body. He was stronger yes, strong enough for a normal Salamence to evolve after such intense training with Blaze, but he knew he was no normal Shelgon. He needed fire to evolve, as Blaze had required magma.

But not just any fire would do. So, he would continue to train, reaching the highest level he could in just two days. As the old man had said, it was enough for them to reach new heights of strength. With the intensity of their battles, they might just be strong enough, together, to have a chance of beating Lizardon.

Eventually, Shruikan mastered moving quickly with this new body, forgoing his stubby limbs entirely, and simply rolling towards his opponents. He trained against a Charizard as well, and slowly, painfully, learned their fighting style.

Always the wings were an advantage, but one Shruikan eventually overcame. Once he and Blaze could only cause a stalemate between them, the old man had stepped in, and told them to rest.

The cavern of the grass types in the base of the mountain welcomed them, and for the first time in just over a month, they slept soundly, far from the ever-present malice of the beast above. Alex marveled at the grass types, who wholeheartedly shared food and played with him. Even the larger ones were kind.

He wondered briefly why he hadn't picked one of them when he became a Trainer. He was especially fond of the Turtwigs. Several fell asleep in his lap as he dozed off as well. They liked him on instinct, and there was something comforting and familiar in their presence. He slept soundly on the back of their mother, a Torterra, who was just as kind, and had almost seemed to recognize him for some reason.

Even then, the names nagged at his brain. Jess. Terra. An image of a different mountain, with a different Trainer who both was and was not him, and a different Pokémon, mastering Energy Ball to a degree only the most skilled reached. He knew these were his memories, but he couldn't place them. Always the image of that black tail slamming into him kept them barred.

Finally, the third day dawned. Another echo in the Ice Cave under the crater signaled Lizardon's impatience, the force of which shook the mountain itself, even the fire cavern they had returned to.

Alex looked to his two Pokémon, wondering if this was the path his true self would take. He knew the strength of his partners, but he yet doubted he could beat Lizardon. That monstrosity was in his own weight class, one to rival even a Legendary.

He shook his head, and met his partner's gazes. They were ready. They knew it. He took strength from their confidence. Morty, a powerful Magmortar whose strength could not be underestimated, had bored a hole to the upper levels large enough for a Charizard. He had been the one who'd trained Lizardon as a Charmeleon, now, he righted his wrong, and released another Charizard to face him, armed with a piece of the Plates that contained the very essence of the Alpha Pokémon in the hand of
his Trainer. Only a few areas of the world had such rare crystals, though shards of them were easy enough to form. Some people had been able to reforge them into Plates, but they had only ever boosted a Pokémon's typing. He had touched such things once at a museum, but the power in the shard Alex held now felt different. Awake.

Morty had been charged by a pale clone of the Alpha himself to guard this mountain, and the powerful crystals within. Over time, the Pokémon that lived here had forgotten what had drawn their ancestors in the first place. But the shards of the broken Plates remained, and Morty was only one of the Pokémon who had stood guard over them. The night before he'd evolved, the golden Charmeleon had slain the other guardians. Now, only Morty remained, and he'd given up one of the crystals he'd been bid to guard.

It would finally right this imbalance, with the aid of a human. It was overdue. The mountain had not always housed abandoned Pokémon. Once, humans had been allowed to hike up here, and gaze upon the world, battle on the natural ring suspended over the crater, and share the company of dragon types. There was one glaring difference in the modern era though. The Unovan Dragon was not around to keep them all in balance. Still, he remained split.

But that had been ages ago, before dragon types were rare enough to sometimes be called legendary. Morty watched the human and his partners leave before beginning the process of resealing the upper mountain caverns, which was easier than boring through them, for him anyways.

There was something about that human, that Morty had sensed was unique. He wasn't like the old man, who had long since given up hope of beating Lizardon, with good reason. He fought on, and had the fire to keep going, all the way to the top. If anyone could remind the Pokémon here that not all humans were so cruel, it was a Trainer like that. He also had no other choice, if he wanted to see this mountain freed.

Up above, the black Charizard roared with fury when he smelled the challenger approach… beside the human he'd killed weeks past. And a Shelgon. One of their own. A traitor. He spread his wings, when one of the Salamence on the mountain roared at him with a rage that halted even his eternal fury.

Normally, she would die for such an act, but she moved from his path immediately, and pointed with her long head. They were climbing to the arena. They sought a proper challenge.

Lizardon's red eyes burned with hate as he weighed his choices. He ignored the Salamence, for she had several Bagon to nurture. He disliked killing females, even more so those with young, but if they challenged him for dominance, he treated them as males. Other Salamence and grown dragon types roared, as she had, and he knew if they all attacked at once, he might not survive to retaliate. At the very least, there would be none left alive to lord over, and he did not want that. He'd been alone enough.

This one had merely pointed out the situation. The Charizard with the human was impressive, to say the least, more than his last challenger, but he was walking, not flying. Shackled to a mere human.

The human held his gaze the longest. In the past, he'd thrown them from the mountainside, which wasn't necessarily a death sentence, if they were strong. Other times, he'd had loyal Tyranitar scare them away. Killing too many humans provoked a response from them, but injuring a few and having them spread tales of the mighty mountain Pokémon had seemed to work as a better deterrent.
Then this human had arrived, Charmeleon in tow. Maybe it was the fact that, but for a twist of fate and time, he could've been that Charmeleon. Maybe it was that familiar fire burning in the human's eyes. Maybe it was the hat, so similar to his former Trainer's own, save the color. Something had ignited his rage, and urged him to end this human's life.

He'd instructed the servile human to get rid of the body...but it seemed this weak, hairless ape had the strength to survive one of his attacks. He snorted blue flames, his fury ignited once more. A worthy challenger, then. He flapped once, and landed hard on the suspended arena. It had taken far heavier landings, and stayed intact.

Some force held it in place, much to the joy of the Pokémon who had once battled for fun atop it. Now, it was the site of many a slain challenger to the might of Lizardon. He spewed blue flames around the arena as the challengers approached.

Alex stared in disbelief at what Lizardon wrought with his fire. A true classic arena, from the days when official Pokémon battles were still mostly unorganized. It was shaped like aPokéball, with two rectangles on either side for the Trainers. Lizardon stood in his, and then stepped forward. He was his own master.

Blaze stood beside his Trainer in his own rectangle, which was still smoking from the heat that had renewed the carved shape. Maybe this was what had inspired the first arena fields. It was certainly old enough. All Lizardon had done was renew the ancient borders.

"Shruikan." The Shelgon stepped forward, growling at the much larger Charizard before it. The black one scented the Shelgon, and cast an eye towards his mother, the same female Salamence that had stopped him earlier. Now it made more sense. He snorted blue fury again.

If her clutch was as rebellious as their fallen father, they would go down as well. The flame on his black tail shifted to blue as his rage swelled. His eyes grew pure red. Such rebellion was commonplace these days. Always they defied him. If he gave an inch, they took a mile. No more. He could stand being alone if it meant not having to deal with constant attempts to usurp his authority. He'd dealt with this kind of irritant for decades now. He was done.

He roared his intent, to burn every one of them until he alone ruled the mountain. All the dragon types began to gather now, at the entrances to their caves. Their ruler had just declared his intention to burn them all out of their homes.

If this human failed, they would sacrifice everything to finally bring him down. They could not know however, that if this human did indeed fail, Lizardon would gain a power that would ensure his rule lasted well beyond a normal span of years.

A Fire Blast shot from the maw of the black Charizard, huge and unrelenting in its fury.

"Into your shell!" While Shruikan did know Protect, he could only use it so often. Still, the instinct remained, and it would take more fire than this to end him. The blast met his shell with fury, the blue five-pronged figure slamming into it hard. Shruikan struggled to stay rooted to the ground, even as his Trainer did the same.

"Now, let go and use Dragonbreath!" Shruikan had stopped wondering where his Trainer's battle instinct came from, and had learned to, sometimes quite literally, roll with it. As he did now. He let
his shell be tossed into the air by the flames, and then, once he spun in the right direction, he shot his Dragonbreath at the ground, spinning him further into the air, and turning him into a cannonball of blue dragon flames.

Lizardon's eyes were on his own attack, searching for his opponent in the smoke that had erupted from the impact. He never saw the furious ball of flame coming in just above his field of vision. It hit him square in the head, and his entire form shook, both with anger, and the new paralysis the critical hit had given him. His skull throbbed with pain.

"Dragon Pulse!" Another attack, another hit, directly to his stomach, as Lizardon was unable to move. He shrugged off the pulse however, fighting through the paralysis. The red eyes shifted to look towards his perch, lined with berries that could heal such wounds.

"Blaze, if he makes a move for his berries, burn them all." The Charizard shot into the air in response, and hovered right above the ledge on the northern side of the crater. Landing on it would've drawn the black one for sure, but his hovering only threatened.

"I have no items!" Alex shouted, pointing at Lizardon, "You won't be using them either." The black beast snorted blue flames, and inhaled to Roar at the human, and send him scurrying. Without aid, the Shelgon would fall easily. "Zen Headbutt!" He'd taken his eyes off the Shelgon, a rookie mistake, as the human had distracted him long enough for the insolent whelp to roll in close, and ram his stomach.

With a single flap, Lizardon took to the air. Blaze hovered closer to the berry stash. Without the old man's aid, Lizardon might've cured his weakness, as Alex would've never learned where they were.

He hoarded the berries of the mountain, staying strong while forcing others to eat weak, unwanted berries to survive, or expend energy hunting. Either way, the others were kept too weak to rebel successfully.

The old man had seen the stash however, and had warned them of it. The stash was not the black one's target, though. A claw of purplish-blue energy formed around his black claw, and he swooped down towards the Shelgon. This was it. Dragon Claw, combined with flight.

"Protect!" There was a grating shriek as claws of energy wore away, and Lizardon's real claws ran across the shell. He roared in fury, burying the Shelgon's form in a Flamethrower. Blue flames covered Shruikan's vision, but he'd need fire much, much hotter than this for evolution.

"Dragon Pulse!" As planned, the fire did little against Shruikan, but it was beginning to wear on him. His shell was smoldering, though it cooled once he rolled his face opening towards his opponent, and expelled the attack at close range.

Lizardon slid back, pushed across the arena by the powerful dragon type attack. Another Flamethrower followed, and Shruikan winced. A normal Flamethrower was hard to resist, but this one was powered by pure rage, and burned all the hotter for it. Seeing he was about to be burned badly, Alex reacted, trusting his Trainer instinct.

"Shruikan! Alpha maneuver!" The Shelgon nodded, and a Fire Blast of his own pushed back slowly against the Flamethrower's continuous stream. Lizardon had forgotten that Fire Blast was self-propelling however, and so when Shruikan again came down on him, hitting his head once more, he
was even more surprised. A quick Dragonbreath-aided jump into the air and another rolling descent scored another critical hit.

Lizardon reeled, clutching his skull, and roaring in pain. On the southern cliff face of the mountain, the Greninja known simply as Gren sat motionless. He'd watched for two days, moving only when nature urged him to eat or void his bowels. Now he was witnessing a true battle between a Trainer with natural skill, and the strongest Charizard nature could possibly create. It was a spectacle, for sure, but the mood shifted suddenly.

A foul stench filled the air. Every Pokémon knew then, the battle was about to get serious. Lizardon looked up at the Shelgon, blood dripping from the head wound. His vision was already questionable after two days of constant vigilance, and now the blows to his head made his vision swim. He realized he might actually lose this. The human was clever, as humans tended to be.

It wasn't fair. He should've been this Trainer's Charmeleon. Or at least had a Trainer worthy of his power, but no. He'd been given a coward, and then had been abandoned. It wasn't fair.

It wasn't fair that he'd had to fight to survive in the wild, abandoned, young, and alone. It wasn't fair that he'd had to learn how to battle all by himself, no parents, no guardians. He'd achieved power on this mountain, and in his mind, ruled fairly. What leader would've tolerated the insubordination he'd put up with for so long?

Now, his rule looked to be toppled by this upstart Shelgon and his human. They couldn't have been bonded for more than a few weeks, and already, their power was enough to give him challenge. It was unnatural. Dragon types could never grow so strong so quickly.

It wasn't right. It wasn't fair. It would not stand. The blue flame around his tail burned hotter as his blood fell to the ground, and the Pokémon watching could only look at their mighty ruler with pity.

He was roaring his frustration now, screaming to the heavens in his own roaring tongue about how none of it was fair. A fair creator would not subject him to this life. He demanded the power that was his birthright.

And the power was given.

The clone of Arceus that now watched the mountain had, like its inhabitants, come to loathe humans, at least the ones who treated Pokémon like that black Charizard so badly. So, he intervened, though he knew he shouldn't.

The bright golden light of Creation shone down from the sky, surrounding the black Charizard, giving him the energy needed to advance along his species' evolutionary path, a power that should have been his, would have been his, had he not been abandoned.

His form grew more monstrous, more grotesque, his surroundings changed his very typing to match that of the Pokémon that lived in this crater. He became a true dragon type then. The means to keep his power were now his. This Trainer was also, at the same time, being tested.

Arceus knew that his memory was gone. He was battling on instinct alone right now. This would test his mettle. Two birds with one stone. The heavens stopped glowing, and Lizardon stood before Shruikan, fully Mega Evolved.
"Zen Headbutt!" Alex had glared at the sky, as if to say 'Really?', but this was still a battle. He had to win it. The headbutt was obeyed by Shruikan, who took strength from his master's confidence. Someday, he too would evolve like this Charizard. But he would do it the right way, through a bond, not pure rage, desperation, and an Act of Arceus.

Lizardon caught the headbutt with ease, the skin of his claws sizzled as they grabbed the hot shell of his opponent. He did not care, for fire could not truly harm a dragon like him. He was unnaturally black in this form, retaining his scale color upon evolving. He flew into the air, and Alex lowered his hat. This was it for Shruikan. He ordered a counter anyways, refusing to give in.

"Roll in his claws!" Shruikan struggled to obey, and rotate as he had done in Blaze's claws, but these were different. Lizardon's grip was iron, like his desire to win. Higher and higher they flew, and Shruikan knew a fall from this height would end him.

Lizardon circled then, and in a true demonstration of aerial grace that only Shruikan saw, and burned into his mind, the newly evolved Charizard threw the weakened Shelgon at the ground. Shruikan fell like a meteor, and Lizardon followed him, fully intending to finish this whelp and crack the already weakened shell. When he fought, it was to the end.

Before impacting, Alex raised Shruikan's Pokéball, and the unusual beam of black light hit his falling form, recalling him into the ball. The force of his impact shook the ball in his hand as the inertia was canceled out, but these balls were designed for such stress.

Alex held it steady. "Well done, my friend…well done. We hit him harder than we thought we could…now we-" He was interrupted as a furious roar broke the sky.

Lizardon shot down from the clouds at speeds only a Mega Evolution could handle. He swung in mid-air, bringing his tail around. It glowed with the purplish-blue energy his claws had, and Alex knew he wouldn't survive this hit.

But this was not his first time on this mountain. He had a true Charizard with him now. A glowing orange tail met black, and Blaze roared in pain as he took the furious hit for his partner with Dragon Tail. The sheer force of the impact would've normally broken it, but the typing advantage from the move canceled it out, and more damage was done to Lizardon. He was unused to his new typing, and using his new form on pure instinct.

"Dragon Claw! Finish him!" Blaze met Lizardon's own Dragon Claw, and the two battled on the ground, the younger Charizard slowly pushing the older one back with pure force, or so it appeared.

At the last second, Lizardon's heightened perception let him lock his Dragon Claw with Blaze's. He spun, slamming his heavy tail into the younger Charizard, and followed that up with a Fire Blast, as blue and intense as the first had been.

Blaze was shoved back. He'd caught the tail's impact again, more than ready after training so long with Magmar, and catching its tail. The Fire Blast however, was too much to block. His claws pushed against it, and he roared for help from his Trainer. Alex, for his part, was momentarily awed by the power of the Fire Blast, as it towered over him by many feet, but Blaze's cry for help jolted him back to reality.

"Let it hit you! Absorb the heat!" He knew the max temperature of a Charizard's flames. Even Mega
Evolved, they could only burn so hot without igniting the atmosphere itself. Blaze had withstood lava, he could take this. He hoped.

Wings flared, Blaze did as instructed, and the flames surrounded him. Lizardon snarled through a dark grin, but faltered. The fire burned around his opponent now, in a manner that was unnatural. Alex looked at his hand. The red crystal shard was glowing with power...he needed to do something, but what? He looked at his Charizard. He was waiting...for something. For him.

Alex raised the crystal, and a red light shot from his clenched fist, hitting his Charizard. "Do it! Do it now!" He wasn't entirely sure exactly what Blaze would do...but this felt right. He trusted his instinct, and his trust was rewarded.

The flames around Blaze shifted to red-orange, and then soared as he roared, the sheer power of his voice filled the air. Even Lizardon winced. Finally, the fire faded away, leaving nothing but a scorch mark on the stone. Blaze stood in the center of it, fully Mega Evolved as well. But he was different.

Where Lizardon had become fierce, horned, and fueled by intense rage, Blaze had become what one might expect a Charizard to evolve into. He had three horns now, a wider wingspan, wing-like fins on his arms, and spikes along his tail. He was slimmer than Lizardon, but no less imposing. He almost looked like a crowned king, strongest among his brethren. Blaze looked back at his Trainer, and smirked, giving a thumbs up.

Alex blinked. "You...you want to handle this by yourself?" Blaze roared an affirmative, and his Trainer smirked. "Alright...you know what to do. Win!" Blaze snorted blue flames of his own, and the color of the one on his tail shifted to blue as well, out of sheer intensity. Both parties were at their peak strength now. This would be a show of power this mountain hadn't seen in an age.

The two titans clashed loudly, slamming into each other with Dragon Claws on each paw. Their aerial battling was fierce, and Alex let a dazed Shruikan out to watch. The envy of the Shelgon only grew as he watched the aerial display, and munched on one of the Sitrus Berries they'd saved for the battle.

He could've won, if he'd been able to fly. Of that he was sure. The two Charizard soared ever higher into the sky, trading Flamethrowers as well, now. They became a faint speck with an occasional streak of blue, high above the already tall mountain.

Alex would not see the rest of this battle for a while, but Blaze would remember every moment of it. The satellite responsible for monitoring and recording this area of Unova caught sight of the fight, and streamed it live, and many would count themselves lucky for having been able to watch it in real time. That wouldn't diminish those who would watch the scene later, however. This fight was about to go down in legend.

Blaze knew it on an instinctual level, and so, he demonstrated his skills, almost able to feel the eyes of the world watching with envy. He was the one responsible for dragging Lizardon this high.

He'd hurled insults with every roar, taunts with every Flamethrower, and always met his enemy's Dragon Claw. They'd scored multiple hits on each other, but after taking so much damage, Lizardon was feeling the strain.

And now, far above their planet, the rage of his flames was burning out what little oxygen there was
to fuel them. Alex had explained to Blaze, after their first day of training with his flight, that flying too high outside would cause his tail to go out.

If it did, he'd have to fall and re-ignite it, or he would certainly die. Now, the clever fire lizard had lured his tired opponent to this height. He just needed to stay on top of him, and his plan would work. A final Flamethrower hit Blaze square in the chest, but sputtered almost immediately. The air had run out. Breathing was impossible, and as their flames went out, both Charizard began to plummet.

Blaze forced himself to stay conscious however, his link to his Trainer pushing him to win. Without it, he would've passed out like Lizardon. But this was one fainting from which this tyrant would never awaken. He inhaled through his nose, and let the frigid air warm in the center of his body, where his flames dwelt. As his exhaled, his tail re-ignited.

Blaze stabilized himself with his larger wings and arm fins, but their speed was only increasing. Exhausted, but still willing to fight, he came into view of Alex as he cartwheeled in the air, and hit the unconscious Lizardon with the full force of his Dragon Tail. The attack was pure instinct, but it hit the black one directly in the stomach.

The new spikes upon his tail pierced the black beast, and blood flowed freely as his massive form shot towards the platform with a loud boom that cracked the air, such was the force of the hit.

Blaze hadn't aimed for the platform however. He'd let his eyes guide his tail, and Lizardon clipped the stone structure with a wing, breaking it and sealing his death, as he plummeted to the crater lake below.

There was another loud crash as the impact of his large body hitting the water, which was hard as concrete at that speed, echoed throughout the mountain. Blaze landed on the rock platform soon after, as blood filled the water for the last time. He roared, letting the entire surrounding region know; it was now free. The mountain was safe again.

The female Salamence immediately flew over. She'd waited until the two titans had stopped battling, before moving to nuzzle her offspring. She kept a wary eye on the human, but ignored him. What harm could a human pose a dragon?

Shruikan explained everything to his mother in a series of growls, and Alex let him as he stood beside Blaze at the platform's edge, looking down into the dark scarlet water.

The power faded from Blaze's form, returning him to normal. He growled softly, lamenting the fall of a worthy rival, and Alex nodded. "That he was."

He raised his head then, noticing the dragon Pokémon watching him expectantly. Once more, he let instinct guide his actions, not with battle, but words. He knew they could understand him. They had known the human tongue once.

His voice cracked from disuse at first, but he cleared his throat, and forced himself to orate loud enough for every Pokémon in the crater to hear. Luckily, the acoustics of the arena helped him with this.

"Lizardon…was a menace. That much is true. But he was a menace that humanity created. His Trainer abandoned him, probably after assuming he was weak, despite his unique coloring. Every
Pokémon starts out weak. You need to train to be strong. Humans understood that, once. These days though…we’d rather abandon them than train them to their full potential. Store them away in favor of something stronger. It isn't right." Many of the gathered dragons nodded, once, in agreement.

There was something about this human…they felt a connection, like he could understand their pain, and gladly shouldered it. He almost seemed like one of them. Shruikan's mother glanced toward Lizardon's cave, and blinked, confirming that it was indeed glowing a deep bluish purple. Not for her offspring, or either Charizard…it had started when the human had spoken. She eyed him again as he continued, genuinely curious now as to where exactly he'd come from.

"I'm sorry many of you were released. Abandoned, or left without a partner for whatever reason. But you need to let us help you remember how to be kind again. Let humans come to this mountain top. You will see that we are not all bad, and maybe, you'll find a Trainer that IS worthy of having you." There were mixed grumbles throughout the crater. Prejudice and old hatred was not so easily erased, but suddenly, Alex sensed a large presence behind him.

He looked up at the neck of a female Salamence looming several feet above him, and she roared at every one of them, as if telling them to come to their senses. The Tyranitar by the path down the mountain roared back, and stepped out of the way, deciding he'd had enough of playing guard dog. The way was clear, and would stay that way. Alex looked up at the large dragon type in awe. She looked down at him, winked one large eye, and backed up, lowering to his level. He pet her snout.

"Thank you for raising such a fine Bagon. I'll make sure he becomes a truly legendary Pokémon. Keep an eye on the TVs around Castelia City. If you can make a suitable nest there, you will see him. Eventually." The female Salamence eyed the Trainer, understanding his words, and nodded. She lifted off again, revealing Shruikan behind her. They nodded to each other.

"Alright Blaze, fly us home!" Alex said, patting his Charizard. Blaze responded by yawning, and tapping the Pokéball button for Shruikan's ball, then his own, each disappearing in their own black and red-orange lights respectively. The message was clear. They'd be walking, after such a hard fight.

Alex sighed, and began heading towards the mountain path down, giving respectful nods towards each dragon type he passed. They nodded in return, seemingly impressed. But dragon types were hard to read. At least they weren't trying to burn him and eat his flesh.

Seeing all he'd needed to, Gren leapt from his hiding spot, catching Alex's gaze for only a moment, before vanishing.

Alex was still trying to figure out why what looked like a Greninja would be here of all places, when he noticed the old man by the path down the mountain. "Old man. Are you going home too?"

The Kanto man shook his head. "I'll stay here. Make sure tourists don't flood the place. Only Trainers will come up this mountain. Real Trainers. I'll have a hut. Make it a true wildlife preserve."

Alex nodded. "I'll see about getting Humilau to send some people out to help you." The old man nodded, gave Alex's waist a pat, which at 6,2 was all the old man could reach with his stoop, and then shuffled back towards his cave.

"Hey! Wait!" Alex called, "You promised to tell me your story. Why are you here?"
The old man looked back at him, and gave a sad smile. "I had a Charizard once, like you, and like you, I thought to climb the mountain. I thought the Pokémon up there could give us the strength we needed to battle my rival. I'd heard they hated humans. I wanted to change their minds. When I got to the top, Lizardon was waiting for us. He killed my friend…and I refused to leave until I got his bones. They're in his cliff nest."

Alex stared at the man, heart wrenching for his loss. It wasn't quite his life story, and there was still no name, but losing one's partner was always tough. "I'm sorry, I can help get them ou-" The old man cut him off.

"No. His bones will stay there, in a place of honor, no longer a prison. He is free now. And has you to thank for that." He bowed low, and formal.

Alex scratched his head. "It's no problem...any Trainer would've done it. All I did was follow my instincts...I still can't remember anything."

The old man gave him a long look, then grinned for the first time, revealing far too few teeth. "You will. Go. Back to civilization. Oh, and one last thing." He turned, shuffling back, and offered a hand with a green crystal in it. "The Torterra from below gave this to me, for you, as thanks for saving our mountain home. You earned it."

Alex took the crystal, eyed it, and saw a leaf symbol etched within its center. Like the fire one, it too was giving off immense, but subtle power. He'd need a grass type to awaken it. "Don't lose that lad. Those crystals are more precious than anything." Alex nodded, and made his way down the mountain, still wondering at what exactly these Plate crystals were. They looked familiar, but his damned memory was still befuddled.

He knew they weren't Mega Stones, but they could make Pokémon Mega Evolve, so they had to be unique. He placed the grass crystal next to the fire crystal in his inner pocket within his tattered, dirty jacket, and made the climb down the mountain.

The old man watched him go, then looked out at the horizon, to the south west. The sun turned the entire sky a familiar orange as it began to set.

"Rest in peace now, Zippo." The old man whispered, then turned, and shuffled back to his hovel. He would bathe, and return to civilization to make sure the fools running this region didn't abuse the mountain now that Lizardon had fallen.

As Alex wandered down the mountain, pondering the mysterious crystals still, he forced his mind to other matters. Like who he was, where he was from, the mystery behind the names on the edge of his consciousness.

He once more let instinct guide him, and headed in the direction of the town he'd seen from the trail, what could only be Humilau City, to the south.

As he walked however, his nagging memories became more insistent. With the threat of losing his life gone, and the stress that came with it, he was struggling to remember. He pulled the note again from his pocket, wrinkled and torn now after so many times reading it.

All of a sudden, for no explainable reason, he looked up from the note, and stopped dead. Before
standing on the path, was a Ralts. The note was pulled from his hand via telekinesis, and the
Ralts examined it for a moment as it hovered before the tiny Pokémon's covered eyes. Then the Ralts
tossed it aside, and walked up to him.

"Ralts!" it said, reaching its stubby arms towards him. Alex didn't quite know why, but he felt the
sudden urge to kneel down to this Pokémon's level. He raised an eyebrow.

"Why?" The Ralts tapped its strange horned head with one stubby hand, then lifted the other hand
towards his own head. Despite his wariness, Alex knelt.

The Ralts came closer, rising higher on its legs until the large red horn on its' head touched the
human's. Alex's eyes rolled, and his memories came flooding back, the image of Lizardon's tail was
finally moved, now nothing more than a memory, half remembered.

He knew who he was now, more certain of it than ever after his actions while he'd had amnesia.
Blaze and Shruikan appeared in a flash of red and black light, and they both glared at the Pokémon
interfering with their friend's mind. They'd sensed Pokémon power emanating from him, affecting
their Trainer, and had responded. After their hardship together, the bond between them was quite
strong.

The growls increased in volume, until their Trainer raised a hand. It would take a while to sort
everything into its proper place, but he managed to stand, at least.

"Calm…calm down you two. My memory is back, and this Ralts is responsible." The little Pokémon
chirped again, smiling. He could tell it was happy to have helped. The Ralts grabbed the note then,
and read it, staring for a long time at the name the note gave this human. Alex tilted his head. Before,
it had looked at the paper in confusion. Now, it seemed like it could actually read it. But that was
impossible, surely.

The young Ralts had been told that his path would cross with a turtle of some sort. He examined the
human with his senses. He seemed different somehow, and the Ralts realized that his kind act had
accidentally awakened something. There was power in this human. Familiar power.

Alex looked for a long time at the small Pokémon, still not quite believing it. He'd felt his lucky
streak was over, that had been the source of his constant dread and stress while in the mountain, he
was subconsciously convinced that his being attacked would kill him, slowly, if not outright.

But now, with the finding of the last member of his ideal team, the team he'd dreamed about once,
long ago, he knew there was more to his path than luck. Things like this simply did not happen by
coincidence. These events were too coincidental. He found his ideal psychic type, who restored his
memories, just after he happened to free a mountain full of Pokémon from a tyrant? No, there was
more to this path he was on. For now, he decided to trust where it led.

The little Ralts' demeanor changed then, suddenly, as he looked up at Blaze and Shruikan, as if
properly seeing them for the first time. They weren't unfriendly, but they did have a lean fierceness to
them after their ordeal. Their Trainer wasn't the only one that was malnourished after so long without
decent food, and such intense training in sweltering heat.

The Ralts started to back up slowly, away from the larger Pokémon, when it bumped into Alex, who
had moved behind it. The little psychic type jumped, startled, but Alex gently patted its horn, which
could allegedly sense emotions. "It's okay…they won't hurt you. Nor will I. You're actually a
Pokémon I've been looking for. I don't have your Pokéball on me, however. If you come with us, I
can go get it, and we can complete our team."

The Ralts' horn quivered at his touch, and he smiled. He turned towards Blaze and Shruikan each,
and while he still seemed hesitant about Shruikan, he found Blaze as friendly as his Trainer.

"Ralts!" It said happily, pushing the return button on both of their balls with a small, controlled burst
of psychic energy. Somewhat surprised, the two Pokémon were recalled, and then, the little
Pokémon put its stubby limbs on its new Trainer's hand, and in an instant, they were back in the
room he'd stayed with Jess in. Her stuff was still here, as was his backpack, on top of which, was his
badge.

He sighed with relief, and then searched his bag for the purple ball he'd chosen for his psychic type.
He tossed it at the Ralts, and the ball flipped, capturing the Pokémon within it immediately, before it
had even hit the ground.

He picked it up then, and smirked, before putting it on his belt beside the other two. Leo and Hydrus'
balls weren't here either, nor was his spare hat, that he alternated to keep both from getting too dirty.

He still had spare clothes though, so he began to scrub over a month's worth of hard living off in the
shower unit. Once that was done, he saw his reflection, and did a double take. Gone was the
lingering fat from his face, replaced now with a thick, dark brown, unruly beard. It wasn't as majestic
as his friend Connor's, and there were still a few patches, but with some trimming and growing, they
would fill in. His hair was in desperate need of a cut, and his eyes were sunken, from so many
restless nights without remembering who he was.

He did what he could with a comb, and then breezed out of the shower, bumping into the
unmistakable form of Jessica, who'd just entered the room, and had moved to investigate who was
showering in it. They stared at each other for a good fifteen seconds.

She was sweaty, unusual for her as she preferred to lounge around all day without lifting a nail, and
she was wearing his hat, which was filthy, damp, and covered in sand. Just like her clothes.

For his part, his muscles stood out clearer now, though he looked a bit ragged. He was nude, save for
a towel, but he hadn't yet quite realized it. She was stuttering, he realized, and he moved in to hug
her, sighing contently.

It certainly felt right, though at that moment, he became fully aware that the cloth separating his
nudity from her could fall easily. He pulled away slightly, bringing the towel up, but she stopped
him.

He adjusted it as she met his gaze, smirking. "Wow. I really do like the beard." Seven words had
never hit him so hard, and he made a note to throw out his razor. For the first time, he dropped his
guard around her and gazed at her the way he'd always done from afar.

Jess felt her face heat up as she returned his gaze. His eyes were as intense as Leo's and had a similar
fierceness to them. They were still much the same, however, changed only slightly by…whatever
he'd gone through. Still just as kind, still just as blue.

His instincts had been…alive, since regaining his memory, and right then, they were insisting that he
kiss her. He couldn't have ignored them if he'd tried.
Aftermath

Domain of the Alpha - Arceus' Dimension

A reality away, in another dimension entirely, the Alpha Pokémon slept soundly, waiting with eternal patience for the One to rise again. He had awareness through the many eyes of his pale white copies, who monitored his favored worlds, and all who lived on them, for instances where his power would be needed by Sentient and Pokémon alike.

He waited for the One that his last Holder had prophesized would one day appear. The Trainer who could control his power, and was worthy of doing so. The Trainer who would, so he'd claimed, propel both their species to heights neither could properly imagine. Being all but omniscient, Arceus could imagine quite a bit. The human had laughed when he'd said as much, and promised that the next one to tame him would, at the very least, pique his interest. It wasn't as impressive as the rest of the prophecy, as it was self-fulfilling. Of course Arceus would be interested in another human that could handle his power. Sentients like them, creatures born of the universe's natural evolutionary processes, usually couldn't even properly fathom his existence, let alone tame it.

With a sudden jolt, the red eye of the true Arceus opened for the first time in millennia. His near-omnipotent senses confused him, for an instant, as he felt the potential of many Trainers who could end up taming him upon the world he watched most closely. The world he himself had saved from catastrophic imbalances in the natural cycle that had allowed life to appear and flourish. Though the humans had, at first, repulsed him, the Alpha had come to see that they were indeed worthy of being saved. The one he'd granted his power to had showed him that, and their accord was not yet fulfilled. For now, the Earth was worthy of his gaze, and attention.

After a moment, he understood. One of the potential Trainers who could handle his power had just been awakened in a rapid manner, at the behest of a psychic type. Aside from dragons, they were some of the strongest Pokémon around. For a brief moment, that Trainer's mind had almost unlocked its latent psychic abilities. Almost. Now, at best, he was aware of them, but unable to use them. For now.

Still, it was more promising than the thousands of others Arceus had sensed over the long millennia, and his latent power had been strong enough for Arceus to feel. He took a longer look at the planet through his third eye, and then realized just how long he'd slept. Humanity had evolved, since last he was awake. There were thousands with that same psychic potential, and more besides without it that could, in the right circumstances, also prove worthy. It was a far cry from the war-loving brutes they'd become once his Holder had fallen prey to his mortality, despite the Alpha's best efforts.

The challenge, the true hidden purpose of the Pokémon Leagues, established by himself and his human, had never been tougher. He could sense it. The time for his next Holder to appear was fast approaching. He stayed awake, watching the world from his dimension of infinite light, even as his clones did.

They were one, and yet weren't, and many wondered at what his awakening signified. More than a few had developed skewed personalities, but now that the original was conscious once more, they were slowly erased, and molded back into the single entity that was Arceus.

His patience was also infinite. He could wait a little longer for the next Holder to rise. He'd stayed awake, and waited two whole Earth centuries last time, which in his realm, was much, much longer.
He could do so again, if needed. He'd made a promise, after all.

Sensing the potential within this latest batch of Trainers, the Alpha Pokémon sent a psychic message to the ones who would test the potential Pokémon Master's latent power. There were many such Pokémon who lived on the world, that could test the candidates. Of all of the differing species, very few were alive when he last was tamed. Though the Sages all had psychic potential, some were simply shorter lived.

Now, they all received the message, the call. The time was approaching. His awakening signified a change in their world, one that would only appear evident as his handiwork over time. Soon, the trials would begin again. He could feel the Sage's inherent excitement at training the One. They would all be disappointed before the end though, all but one. Only one of their protégés could tame him, after all.

All across the world, the Psychic Sages shivered as they felt Arceus, the real Arceus, call them to action. They needed to stop being picky, and uncover the potential of as many Trainers as possible. This time, one *would* be chosen.

---

**Sage's Isle - The Great Swamp, Floria Region**

On the Unovan Continent, there was one psychic type who received the message, and sighed. He lived south, far south, in a massive swamp that extended from what was once called Floria thousands of years past.

Castelia City now bordered an ocean, but that ocean became swamp land further south. The continent had once, long ago, been home to many humans, but now, it was overrun by ocean, and had become a salty swamp filled with Pokémon and rumors of deadly misfortune that befell any who dared to enter.

The Pokémon in charge of testing the candidates was, on this continent, The Foggy Swamp Sage. Oranguru. He was old, not quite old enough to have sensed the last time the Alpha Pokémon awakened, but old enough to know that it was his own father who had trained a human candidate for the last cycle of awakening. He was younger than his father had been, but in his wise opinion, far stronger.

His father's chosen protégé had not succeeded in the last test. The candidate from central Eurafricasia had, but that had been a long time ago. Now, the process would begin again. Now, there was a chance to prove that he could train a worthy human to become the Holder of Arceus, and succeed where his forebear had failed.

Over ten millennia had passed since the true Arceus had been conscious, and influenced the world in wonderful ways. Humans had forgotten, and while some of them knew Arceus existed, many had simply categorized him into their 'National Pokédex', another number on a list that grew every year.

While he never interacted much with the planet, save for when humanity and Pokémon alike were doomed before a natural catastrophe, like a meteor. He had appeared all over the world at one time or another. Or rather, his pale white clones had. They sacrificed willingly, to keep the planet from being obliterated by disturbingly frequent meteors, and with each loss, the world was littered with yet more broken Plates. It was ease itself for a new clone to form from the Alpha’s dimension, and take the fallen's place.
Only one region painted his myth with him as he truly was, golden as the sun, and only one story contained the tale of this golden Arceus. But it had been twisted and misused by lesser men in the long millennia since his last appearance. Now, in the modern world, it was seen as a fantasy, a tale believed true only by fanatics, who many disliked for their disdainful outlook on their modern societies, and the morals that ran them. Oranguru sighed again.

Such things would need to be dispelled and prevented against, if the One truly did appear again. Once, Arceus' name had spread the world over, spoken in reverent tones of peace and gratitude. He had healed thousands, his power bolstered by the bond to the human who had tamed him. In response, naturally, humanity had named Arceus their deity, ever-grateful for his aid in healing the planet. Nevermind that said healing had upended entire nations with the shifting of the world's continental plates, the planet had survived, and that was what was important, for it once more gave hope to a race that had lost theirs, and accepted their impending doom brought on by their uncaring ancestor's mass polluting of the air, water, and land.

For a while, humanity had truly advanced, until the Holder of Arceus had succumbed to mortality. The cult that had formed around the Holder, and the Alpha Pokémon had grown powerful in the years they'd served faithfully. Once the Holder passed on, it had taken less than a year for the cult to fracture, and war to erupt on the supercontinent, namely in what was known today as Eous. The fractured cults, each with diverging beliefs, were what sparked the period of turmoil and strife now known only as the Dark Times.

The Foggy Swamp Sage had not lived through the Dark Times, his father had experienced them though, and had shared psychic visions of the atrocities humans and Pokémon alike had committed in the absence of Arceus' Holder. It had taken far too long to climb out of that downward spiral, and the only thing the Pokémon in charge of training the next Holder agreed on was that it had to be avoided again. Humanity had grown so far on its own, even now, and that progress could not be lost. It was their job to choose one who would be strong enough, wise enough, to keep that from happening again.

Slowly, word began to spread to Gym Leaders, and the Pokémon Leagues all around the world from Alola in the west to Sinnoh in the east. The challenge was on again. The Leagues had, originally, been formed to administer a test to find remarkable Trainers, and send those Trainers to the Sages, in an effort to find the next human capable of holding the Alpha Pokémon. In the modern era, many Trainers had held Champion status in multiple regions, and many regions had more than one Champion, if they were large. Very few ever went to the Sages, even if they were asked to.

Many of the older League members were skeptical. To become worthy of being trained by one of the Psychic Sages, a Trainer had to beat at least five of the leagues around the world. A feat not unheard of, but one that was rare enough. The only other way to prove one's worth was by Taming a Legendary Guardian, and preventing a disaster of some description. Humans who managed to bond with, and successfully use, Legendary Pokémon were assumed by the Sages to have the same potential as a Trainer who could best five regional Leagues. Trainers capable of five League victories often spent their days enjoying their celebrity status, before retiring to a University to teach, and live off a fat League paycheck until they passed. The more they taught, the more they earned.

Nobody alive knew what happened after Champions went to the Sages, because the last challenge hadn't gotten past that point. None of the candidates had been deemed worthy, and the Alpha Pokémon had remained untamed. That had been centuries ago however, before Pokéballs had existed, and the few old timers who still knew about the challenge assumed it couldn't be beaten. The Sages had a habit of rejecting anyone they felt was even slightly unworthy.
Trainers had changed over time though, mainly thanks to Pokéballs. While the civilizations in the time of the Holder had possessed similar methods of carrying their partners about, it had taken a long time for them to be rediscovered. It was still relatively new technology, barely two centuries old, but it had revolutionized modern training of Pokémon.

In this era of scientific achievement, Trainers could measure a Pokémon’s strength with statistical data, some Trainers even picked through hundreds of the same species just to find one worthy of training. Others bred them for their strength over and over until they were satisfied. With all this effort, needless to say, being a professional Trainer was harder than ever.

Most of the Leagues were excited, despite the skepticism of the older generation. Many still believed that there was a Trainer out there who would remind the world of what was actually important when it came to training Pokémon, of what really mattered. This challenge, from what little they knew of it, would separate the unworthy from the pack, and hopefully one of the chosen Trainers, should they be judged worthy, would prove to modern Trainers the world over that there was more to it all than statistics and protein maxing.

The Foggy Swamp Sage looked out over his peaceful island, and sighed for a third time. He was putting it off, and he knew his rivals were already summoning those with potential in their own regions. He knew he had to do the same. With a thought, he summoned the human in charge of gathering the worthy. Once she’d arrived and hopped from her Dragonite, he explained the situation, and she was off again just as quickly. The Oranguru watched her go as he loaded his wooden pipe with crushed Leaf, and with a flash of pyrokinesis, started yet another smoking session. He stared up at the sky as he exhaled the foul smelling smoke, remembering this calm, and knowing that it would be centuries before his home would be this quiet again.

---

**Humilau City - Unova Region**

Alex’s abrupt return had stirred the local media into a frenzy. The first thing he’d done was tell his family he was alright, and recover his Torterra. The Professor had said that Terra had slept almost the entire time Alex had been gone, awakening abruptly about a day ago.

He told his granduncle then about what had happened on the mountain, and afterwards, with his new Ralts, who was at that very moment examining the local book collection in the Pokémon Center. He hadn’t decided on a nickname earlier, so Alex left it up to him to choose. Oddly enough, he was smart enough to read on his own, and was therefore deemed capable of picking his own name.

Alex had just finished telling his uncle the whole story when, after several long moments, he said “We already know about the battle, lad. And by ‘we’ I of course mean most of the world. Two Mega Evolved Charizard going at it that high in the atmosphere catches attention. Nobody knows, yet, who the victorious Charizard's Trainer is though. Your hat was blocking your face. I suppose the local media might recognize it. It was pretty dirty though.”

Alex took a moment to ponder that information. "So…I should tell them? But there's no way they'll believe me. I bet half a hundred Trainers have already stepped forward to claim that they were the ones who battled."

His granduncle nodded. Unfortunately, there were many Trainers looking to leech fame off the exploits of their betters. They rarely succeeded, but like any leech, they were hard to pry off once they attached.
"There is one way, of course…” the Professor said, a gleam in his eye, "You have your Charizard Mega Evolve again. I wouldn't mention how the black one did it though. That'll only make the Arceans crawl out of the woodwork. The last thing we need is to give them an excuse to grab power."

Alex shrugged. The Arceans were the leftovers of the cultish group that claimed to have formed around the last man to tame the Alpha Pokémon, almost ten thousand years prior. Whatever they had been when they'd started, time and human greed had corrupted them in the absence of their leader.

Now, they were mostly in the Fornia region, but a few had migrated to Unova in recent years. They were notorious for latching on to any excuse to claim doom was coming, and unfortunately, they could convince many people what they said was true…if the proof behind their words was good enough. Fear could drive people to believe almost anything.

A similar incident had happened in Sinnoh a few decades back, and to this day, many in that region were convinced that Arceus had a fierce and vengeful temperament, which made them perfect recruits for the Arcean Church. Now, their latest claim to superiority was having 'bases' on two continents, something no other organized cult could claim.

That was due to the strong scientific following prevalent the world over, though. Many technologically superior regions had traded fairytales and myths for laboratories and research centers. They weren't always moral, but many agreed they were better than the thousands of cults that had warred during the Dark Times. Those wars had brought low almost every civilization on the planet. Many would do anything to avoid having that scenario occur a second time.

Thinking about it, Alex could see how whatever power made Lizardon mega evolve could be tied to Arceus. For all he knew, it was Arceus who had given the tyrant Pokémon that power, for whatever reason. There were others capable of it too, though, a fact his granduncle stressed early in their conversation. They didn't have to just assume the Alpha Pokémon was behind every strange occurrence.

"Fine." Alex said finally, "I'll play it vague. Just like you taught me. Now send Terra back."

The old man held up his Pokéball, and put it in the transporter. "He'll be happy to see you. He was very disoriented when he woke up. I'm just glad he recognized me before he started to rampage."

Alex shook his head, taking the ball as it materialized. "Terra would never rampage. He's a gentle giant." At his words and the sound of his voice, the newly materialized ball opened on its own, and Terra freed himself, looked around the Pokémon center for a moment, then all but tackled his Trainer.

Large as he was, very few beings could be tackled by such a strong Pokémon and hold their ground. "Ah! Terra, Terra, stop! I know, I missed you too." Alex grabbed his Pokémon's head spikes, and was lifted up and over onto his shell, covered in Torterra drool. He grabbed a branch on the large turtle's Ash tree, and wiped his face clean on the soft leaves.

He turned then, and settled on the white, raised hexagon just above Terra's head as he retried the Holociever. His granduncle grinned. "Gentle giant. Right."

Alex was focused on his partner, however. "How would you like to battle, hmm? I hope your Energy Ball isn't out of practice."
"Terra!" The large Pokémon rumbled. Seemed he was eager.

"Very well, return." Alex recalled Terra, landing carefully as his seat was suddenly gone, and then focused on the phone. The Professor seemed to have something important to say, but was holding back until his relative's attention was refocused.

"I should tell you, by the way, there's a rumor going around. Remember that super-secret elite Pokémon League challenge I told you about once?" Alex nodded, vaguely recalling it through the hazy smoke-filled memories of their long basement talks. He'd thought he was being pranked at the time. It sounded made up.

"It's on." The Professor said, quietly. "League members and Gym Leaders worldwide have already been notified…and Trainers are already starting. Do you remember what I told you about joining?"

Alex nodded. "Beat…umm…four or five League challenges…and then…" He paused, clearly forgetting the rest.

"And then find one of the Psychic Masters to train you, and hopefully deem you worthy. Honestly lad, pay attention." His granduncle crossed his skinny, wrinkled, lab coat covered arms and shook his head in mock disapproval.

"I am paying attention!" Alex said, knowing it didn't sound half as convincing as it needed to, "And I already started with Marlon." The Professor shook his head, and sighed.

"Are there any other ways of proving worthy? Preferably faster ones? Beating over thirty more gyms doesn't sound all too appealing." With a Charizard, he could probably finish relatively soon, as there were a number of Pokémon Leagues in the States, across the continent Unova shared with them.

He knew however, that traveling with Jess would limit how fast he could beat them, if indeed he could. He'd never admit it, but Marlon almost had him in that last battle, and he intended to do some serious training with the rest of his team. He was still behind everyone his age, more so now that he'd lost so much time to the mountain.

The old man scratched his chin, which seemed to be perpetually covered in gray stubble. "Well...you could always stop a disaster, or accomplish a heroic feat that benefits the world as a whole...but to my knowledge, Unova is fine right now." Alex sighed, looking disheartened.

"Don't get discouraged, lad." His granduncle continued with a sly wink, "If there's trouble around, you'll probably stumble into it."

Alex rolled his eyes before changing the subject. "By the way, did you manage to figure out what those crystals are?"

The Professor's face grew more serious, and he nodded. "Remember those Plates that I told you about? The ones that are said to boost a Pokémon's typing considerably? It seems that these fragments are indeed made of the same stuff, and have the same inherent power. My colleague in Hoenn had a Plate given to him by a Trainer, and we compared the energy readings they give off. His was a Fire Plate, and when we compared it to your crystal, the energy was identical, but somehow, your smaller one gives off the same amount of power as the Plate. Your crystal was...active, and when I touched it to the Plate, it became active too. I had a group of fire types huddled by my window, drawn by the power it was giving off."
He stroked his scruffy, gray beard before continuing, "If it really is a piece of the Alpha Pokémon, we hypothesized that someone must have taken a crystal like yours, and hammered it down into a Plate sometime in the past. We're not going to try that however…as these crystals are rare."

Alex nodded, stroking his own beard in thought. After a trim and a shower, it actually looked somewhat respectable, if patchy. "I understand. If I find one I don't need, like ice or something, we can try to turn it into a Plate."

He looked away from the screen, smirking as he spotted an unmistakably familiar shade of red coming from the hallway leading to the center's guest rooms.

As usual, Professor Redwood missed nothing. "Seems my own blood would rather talk to a pretty redhead than listen to me ramble on about science! Bahaha! I'll let you know if anything new happens with our research lad, now go to her. And use protection! Ha!"

The line cut out before Alex could respond, and he was once more left flushed red, standing in front of a phone, on a call that he knew most of the surrounding callers, and their contacts, had overheard. His Gruncle was nothing, if not loud.

He tilted his hat down, and fussed with his belt as he adjusted Terra's place on it. Blaze's ball was right behind Terra's now, followed by Hydrus, then Leo, Shruikan, and his to-be-named Ralts. He'd let his Ralts out earlier that morning after rising to discover he was sore in places he'd never been sore before. Sleeping on primarily hard stone for weeks on end left a mark, but he hadn't slept much until the sun had risen.

Thus, by the time he'd revealed his presence to the Pokémon Center, who then passed the news on to the local media, and after calling his granduncle, it was now high noon. He knew that he was being watched, as Humilau's 'open and free' center design had large windows on the front.

The local news crews had been taking constant pictures throughout his phone call, but he'd forced himself to ignore them. Thankfully, he'd had the phone closest to the windows, so the main irritation from the flashing was on him, and not his fellow callers.

Of course, there were eyes in the Pokémon Center as well. Hiding from those eyes was a male Ralts that nobody seemed to notice. He'd been shown how to use the PokéNet by his Trainer, and given his typing and stubby hands, had been able to look up whatever he liked on his Trainer's travel laptop. But the problem with that was that he had no idea what he wanted his name to be.

His Trainer had, hurriedly, shown him his final evolution, and explained that once he became a Kirlia, he'd go straight into a Gallade, thanks to the stone Alex had given him.

However, when the female who shared his Trainer's room saw that, they'd resumed their heavy-panting-mouth-sucking, and the young Ralts had been summarily ignored. Had he been anything but a psychic type, this would've gone over his head, but he understood a lot of what his Trainer had said.

He'd also understood why. In his Trainer's mind, the young Ralts had seen that he wanted every Pokémon to have their own unique name, just as humans did. To him, there was no reason not to. Calling his Ralts 'Ralts' would be like someone referring to him as 'Human', and thus the young psychic type had grasped the need for a nickname.
In the wild, there was no need for such a thing. Pokémon could always tell each other apart, more or less, but every name he found on the PokéNet thus far had been unacceptable.

With the understanding of names, the young psychic type had also understood that this was something he would be referred to by everyone. He couldn't explain why, but even his Trainer's other Pokémon, who he'd briefly met, now referred to each other by their nicknames. They had become them, and each of them fit like a glove. Especially the one called Shruikan.

Thus, he had been given access to the PokéNet, failed to find anything, and had then found himself wandering the building he was in while his Trainer made a call. Whatever that was. Nobody seemed to notice him, not even other Pokémon. He moved silently on his hidden legs, Teleporting into various rooms until he discovered one filled with strange square objects that had hard covers, but soft insides.

The runes within them were understandable though. He didn't quite understand why, but after bonding with his Trainer, reading them had become ease itself. Granted, he hadn't seen many before that, but when he had, they'd been unimportant gibberish.

Now, they seemed to rearrange themselves into something he could understand, though when he deciphered them, it was his Trainer's voice that echoed in his mind, and explained their meaning to him. He might've been awed by that, had he not been engrossed in the tome he'd grabbed.

It was the first he'd touched, several isles into the room, and it had drawn him, somehow, by pure instinct. Humans had long since ignored their instincts, and thus they'd become dull, but Pokémon trusted theirs constantly. This allowed them to prepare for, and sometimes prevent, natural disasters, as well as accomplish other amazing feats their human counterparts had no idea they were capable of.

The instincts of those with psychic power were, arguably, the best-attuned. They could even, sometimes, alter fates. This young Ralts' instinct had drawn him to this specific book on this specific shelf for some reason, one that became evident as he deciphered more and more of the text. It was a story about a king, a beloved king in a time far, far in the distant past.

Ralts quickly found that reading with his hands was far less efficient than using his powers, and soon, he'd found a dusty old couch to recline on as he held the book before him in the air, and scanned through it, reading at a speed that no human could match without the aid of a machine.

The king was called Arthur, and as he read on, the young Ralts found himself admiring the character more and more. He was kind, fair, just, and above all, a hero. He fought witches, monsters, evil kingdoms, and was surrounded by powerful, loyal friends who all treated each other like equals.

It rang through the small Pokémon's very being as he finished the book, which had been a treasure hoard of information on the king's legend. All anyone knew at this point, so many thousands of years ahead of the time in which this man had lived, was that there had probably once been a king named Arthur, who had ruled over a kingdom that might have been called Camelot. It was good enough for Ralts.

He understood that this was a story, for Pokémon had them too, and while most stories were complete nonsense, they usually carried a hint of truth. Or rather, the ones his mother had told him had seemed to. He sat quietly, still levitating the book, as he struggled to recall her.
All he really had was images, and it made him sad to remember them. He focused on the book again, recalling what Arthur would've done in the face of such sadness, for he too had, supposedly, lost his mother. He would've continued on, focusing on his quest for the betterment of his people. That was what the young Ralts vowed to do as well, and then, he smiled as he knew what his name would be.

The trick then, was getting his human to understand. In his limited experience, getting humans to understand anything was like trying to make a Geodude bathe. His Trainer was clever though, or so he'd sensed. It would probably be obvious if he saw the book. Pokémon had little concept of what 'property' was, and a Pokémon that wasn't territorial, like Ralts, had no experience with it.

Thus, he felt no guilt as he left the room, book in hand, and hurried towards where he sensed his Trainer, and the red female he seemed mentally, and often physically, attached to.

Jess had just finished lecturing him about being shy about showing her affection in front of so many watchful, knowing eyes, and in response he had done the only logical thing. The young Ralts, who now thought of himself as 'Arthur', came upon the two, wrapped up in each other in a kiss that was definitely not meant to be seen by the public.

In Alex's mind, it was necessary. She had insinuated that he was too shy for her, and now he was proving otherwise. As usual, she could do little to resist his affections, falling into each one of them eagerly after a second of hesitation. Such was the power of newly discovered lust. Had Alex not felt his Ralts tugging at his spare, and now only jacket, they might have gone further right there in the main entrance area of the center.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss, which had prompted the media circus just outside to bombard the interior with seemingly endless flashes of light, Alex looked down to his newest Pokémon, as his newest lover was left with a distant smile on her face.

He hadn't had much experience kissing, but it seemed good enough for her. He'd found that trusting his instincts had always been the smart move, when it came to her. He blinked the thoughts of lust away as he felt a book being shoved into his hand by a psychic force. Looking down, he read the title, and smirked.

He gave Jess a subtle pinch on her rear, bringing her focus back to reality, and showed her as well. She giggled, just as amused as he was at a joke his Pokémon could tell he'd been missing out on.

"Ralts." He said, pointing at the book, wondering if his Trainer had understood. He seemed distracted by this female, and could not understand why his book was so funny.

Finally, Alex nodded, and handed the book back. "Very well. I'll call you Arthur." He began to laugh as well then, and the small psychic type finally had to speak up. "Ralts?" The questioning tone was universal, even to Pokémon, but his Trainer seemed to understand.

"It's not a bad name. We're laughing because, after I gave you the laptop this morning, Jess suggested I name you after Arthur Pendragon, or one of his knights. She said it fit you, but I was stubborn, and wanted you to choose for yourself." That made Arthur smile as well, and his opinion of the female did a 180.

She'd seen what he'd felt, that the character and the Pokémon were really quite similar, even if his appearance didn't suggest it yet. Arthur turned to look at her then, and smiled, touching her
consciousness with his thoughts of happiness, approval, and admiration for her ability to understand him.

It came off as emotions to her, of course, but Arthur noticed that she seemed to understand him as well as his Trainer did.

He decided to ponder what that might mean later as he yawned, and poked the ball button on his Trainer's belt, once more entering the new pocket dimension that he now called home. It was certainly cozy, and he could tell it had been made for a Pokémon like him. He radiated a sense of satisfaction, even from within his ball. He had a Trainer, a comfortable home, and now a name. He was finally fully part of their little round table, and by his reasoning, he'd just appointed himself the King.

Arthur's sense of satisfaction spread to his Trainer, manifesting as confidence, renewed after being literally shattered by his trials on the mountain. He had the girl he'd dreamed of for years, he had the makings of his team, and already three of them were fully evolved and powerhouses in their own right.

He could handle addressing the media circus. He met Jess's gaze again, and nodded, as he adjusted his hat. She'd insisted on giving his hair a trim, and he wasn't yet used to the shortness. "Right. I think we've kept the jackals at bay long enough. Are you sure you don't want to join me? After that kiss, they're going to want to hear from you, I think."

She waved his words away, laughing nervously. "Ahaha…no. I'll be in enough trouble for that kiss. If not from mother, then definitely from father. And Connor might be annoyed as well…no, I'm in enough trouble already without adding a bunch of media rumors. They'll probably assume I'm pregnant already as it is. All they do is make up baseless rumors…I'm rambling. Go get'em, Pyroar."

He stared at her for an awkward ten seconds, before laughing. "You should've gone with 'tiger'." She turned red, cheeks flushing crimson, matching her hair. "I know, but you don't wear tights."

"I mean, even Luxray would've been better. Y'know, because I have one." He was biting his lip now, sensing that laughing might get him in trouble.

She shoved him. "Go! Before they push in here out of desperation. I'll be in the room." She added her seductive tone to the end of her sentence, and narrowed her eyes while twisting a lock of her hair. Day two, and she already knew how to stoke the flames.

She turned and left before he could think of a properly clever rebuttal, and Alex shook his head, muttering under his breath. "You chose well, Redwood. You chose well…" With that, he strode out of the doors into a barrage of intense camera flashes that, in broad daylight, were completely unnecessary. At this point, with their advanced recording technology, the flashing lights were literally just decorative, and annoying. But the news hounds didn't seem to care.

It was a good-sized crowd, just large enough to be a nuisance to the regular Humilau foot traffic, but not as large as something say, a Champion would've drawn. The only reason it was that big was because the Redwood name was famous, even in Unova proper. He knew why, of course.

Every Redwood knew the secret family shame, but to speak of it was to give it life. As his granduncle had predicted, nobody important now remembered exactly why he was considered infamous. They just knew that the once honorable Professor Redwood had been disgraced.
Now however, the media had once again begun sniffing around for dirt, in the long absence of anything newsworthy pertaining to the missing Redwood. They gnawed at whatever source they could, like a Houndoom at a bone that had been picked clean years ago. With the barrage of light came a barrage of questions, that blurred into an incoherent babble of nonsense noise.

After weeks of relative silence, it stunned Alex, and as he shouted at the crowd for quiet, his calls were drowned out, each one only making the mob of babble grow louder. Finally, there was a flash of red light, and a deafening roar tore through the babble as Blaze appeared beside his Trainer, and glared. A few more lights flashed, but soon were stilled as he followed his roar up with a deep, menacing snarl.

Each of his Pokémon had disliked the noise, truth be told, but Blaze was the first who did something about it. He had enough sense to know that these other humans probably wanted information on him. He'd caught a glimpse of a satellite, after all, not that he'd understood what it was, but he knew human tech when he saw it by now. It was little more than an instinct, a feeling of eyes on the back of his neck in the middle of a battle, but he followed it regardless.

"Thank you, Blaze." Alex said, recovering from the barrage of noise and light. The Charizard snorted flame in response, eyes still glaring at the crowd.

He put on his best public face, a face his father had coached him on long ago, when he'd been little more than a toddler. When his granduncle had been disgraced. They'd had to go on TV for some reason. He still couldn't remember why exactly, though he knew the bare details, he never pried. He knew his Gruncle was a good person, a bit crotchety, prone to bouts of sad silence, but truly and genuinely kind.

It didn't matter what his Gruncle had done, he was family, and family stuck together. Whether they wanted to or not, no matter how many branches separated them on the family tree. A Redwood was a Redwood. Or so the old man had said. It didn't matter that the aged Professor and his father didn't get along. He'd always stressed the importance of family.

"Please, I know you have many questions, and I will gladly answer them. But one at a time. I'm sorry about the wait, but its over now. Let's have a little respect for the town, eh?" To his surprise, the reporters shared guilty looks.

They had caused quite a stir, and more than a few locals were still glaring through their windows at the source of the disturbance. An elderly gentleman stepped forward then, and Alex had to blink. He was, arguably, the most famous person there. It was a testament to the severity of the light and noise that Alex hadn't even noticed him.

"I know you have many questions, and I will gladly answer them. But one at a time. I'm sorry about the wait, but its over now. Let's have a little respect for the town, eh?" To his surprise, the reporters shared guilty looks.

They had caused quite a stir, and more than a few locals were still glaring through their windows at the source of the disturbance. An elderly gentleman stepped forward then, and Alex had to blink. He was, arguably, the most famous person there. It was a testament to the severity of the light and noise that Alex hadn't even noticed him.

His tone was deep and baritone as he spoke for the crowd with their unspoken and ungiven permission. "John Crimson, Poké News Network. I apologize for my colleagues Mr. Redwood, but we are a bit excited. You've been missing for months, after all. I suppose the question to start with is… where have you been?"

It was weird to be called 'mister' by the man he'd watched anchor the most famous global news network on the planet for years. He resisted the urge to address him informally. This was a time for questions, after all, he could show his appreciation for the Crimson Fox's appearance afterwards. He was more of a silver fox these days, though no less desirable, judging by some of the looks the female reporters were giving him.
He decided to keep to the formal tone, something he would not regret in the future. "Well Mr. Crimson, it's a long story…but I suppose I can summarize. When I first went missing, I'd been hunting a Bagon around Draconis Mons, to the north. I didn't find any, or any other Pokémon in the forest. Seeing that as odd, my Charmeleon and I climbed the mountain to discover the source of this strange lack of Pokémon, and we found that the mountain was under the rule of a tyrannical black Charizard I ended up calling 'Lizardon'. I stumbled upon him as he was defeating a rival Charizard. He noticed my Charmeleon, and before we could escape down the mountain again, for we were barely off of the path to the top, he landed in front of me, and slammed his tail into me, severely injuring me after I crashed into a nearby canyon wall."

He paused for effect, and suppressed a smirk. Connor was right, he really did have a flair for the dramatic when the moment came, and though he was new to having an audience, he had them captive. He could sense the questions building, but the only sound was of writing implements scribbling furiously as they took notes on his story.

He could tell more than a few of the newer ones were thankful for his pause, but he continued all the same. After all, they'd never be good reporters if they relied on pauses.

"I was…nursed back to health by an old hermit, whose identity I will keep anonymous. All you need to know about him is that Lizardon kept him captive, and treated him like a plaything. He was old, bent, and covered daily in new bruises. But despite the risk, he saved my life. And yes, he is still on the mountain. I think that more or less covers where I've been."

There was more scribbling, and when no more questions came forth, John Crimson spoke again. "I see. I suppose we'll need a formal interview for the full details, but for now, my next question is this: How did you escape from this...Lizardon?"

Alex met the old man's curious but intense gaze. He could see the question he really wanted to ask still beneath the surface. He knew, more or less, what it would be about. Hell, his Charizard had all but made them blurt it out, but nobody dared interrupt a legend like John Crimson.

Alex allowed himself a confident smirk then, a smirk he'd practiced for hours while wearing his hat backwards. He knew it was a stereotype straight out of a cartoon, but honestly, he had stopped caring years ago. He knew what kind of Trainer he wanted to be, and if he ever did achieve true fame, he wanted that look to be obvious, and consistent.

He put off realizing that this was likely the start of his entire career as a Master, for such Trainers were almost always popular with the media. He didn't need that pressure. He instead nodded towards Blaze, who had the same smirk his Trainer did.

"Blaze here was the only Pokémon I'd brought with me onto the mountain that day. I left my bag at the Pokémon center as well, thinking I wouldn't need to lug all that weight around, as it's a relatively short trip to the mountain…Blaze stayed with the hermit, and once I was healthy again, we began to train."

He tapped Shruikan's ball, and the Shelgon appeared in a flash of black light, staring at the crowd, and then looking up at Blaze and his Trainer. He grasped, more or less, what was going on.

Blaze had explained to him, once they'd returned to the center and rested, that he'd felt their battle had been seen by other humans. Shruikan had no idea what that had meant however, this entire
scene being completely foreign to him. He followed his friend's lead, and looked over the crowd, like he was superior to them. Easy to do, as a dragon.

His appearance put any doubts of Alex's story to rest. He'd been in the area, seen on satellite, vaguely, and had both Pokémon who'd been in the battle. He was the real deal, and the few fame leeches who were watching live knew it. Most of them had a Charizard, but none of them could be put in Humilau at the right time, and none of them had a Shelgon. Even a con artist can tell when a jig is up.

John Crimson smirked, and both he and Alex knew what question was next, but Alex continued answering for the sake of posterity. "I caught Shruikan here as we trained, luckily the ball I picked for him wasn't smashed, like my Pokédex was, and eventually, the time came to face Lizardon." He crossed his arms, hoping he looked as cool as he thought he did. "We won."

The reporters rumbled again, but John Crimson's deep baritone cut through the growing chatter like a hot knife through butter. "I see. So would I be right in assuming that the battle that's still being broadcasted and watched worldwide was fought by you?"

Alex nodded. He'd seen it of course, as Jess had shown both he and Arthur, the only one of his team, save perhaps Terra, that hadn't watched it live, or participated in it. She had certainly appeared impressed when he told her the whole story, and what had happened next was not appropriate for him to be thinking about while the media was grilling him for information.

"I know several imposters have already claimed to be that Trainer. I can tell you with total certainty, that they are lying." He held up the red crystal then, which got everyone's attention, especially John Crimson's.

"This crystal is something I found in the mountain that was given to me after completing my training. Given by a Magmortar, who lived deep in the caverns within the mountain. Blaze retrieved it, and gave it to me…and when it became evident that Lizardon could also somehow Mega Evolve, I...activated it, which made Blaze Mega Evolve as well. I'm not quite sure how…"

He paused again, this time less for drama and more for weighing whether or not he should mention his granduncle. "My granduncle, Professor Redwood, examined it this very morning, the source of my delay, and told me that it has similar power to a Mega Stone, though he theorized that it could be used on any fire type, thus eliminating the need for race-specific crystals."

He flipped it in his hand, and then appeared to pocket it, instead hiding it within his black Trainer glove. He had no doubt somebody would try to pickpocket it before the day was over. This kind of power always drew out a criminal element, and a crystal that could make any fire type mega evolve was going to be highly sought after.

"I was given that crystal shard because the Pokémon of that mountain needed my help to free them of their tyrannical ruler. Now that they are free again, I want to make it perfectly clear that they need to be left alone. No government, no tourists, no power seeking amoral Trainers. As he spoke, his pocket began to glow with a familiar red glow, and he raised his fist, appearing to draw the stone from said pocket.

"Anyone who decides to ignore this warning and desecrate that mountain…” Blaze's form grew and shifted as the red light enveloped him, "Will answer to us!" The Mega Charizard beside him let out a powerful Flamethrower in unison with Shruikan's Dragonbreath, crossing in the air above him.
Alex was impressed, and proud. He couldn't have choreographed it better. He knew, of course, that there would be idiots who decided to defy him on this, and that this challenge would only draw them like flies to shit, but they would've come regardless. Now, the public would keep an eye on that mountain, and anyone who did decide to desecrate it, and was caught doing so, would never recover from the stain on their reputation. It was the ones who didn't care about reputations that he had to worry about.

The babble of questions rose up again, but a growl from Blaze, mega evolved as he was, and a raised hand from the legend, John Crimson, kept them in check. Sensing that this…whatever it was…had gone on long enough, Blaze let the power flow back into the crystal from whence it came, and Alex recalled his Pokémon.

John Crimson's voice rose again quickly, sensing their time was nearly spent. "Before you go, Mr. Redwood, one more question, if you'll take it." Alex nodded.

One did not simply defy a question from John Crimson. To be interviewed by him was a dream for any Trainer worth a damn. The fact that he was here at all was unusual, to say the least. As far as Alex knew, he hadn't been live in the field in decades.

"Your story is…interesting, to say the least. The legal implications alone…” He whistled, and a chill went up Alex's spine. He'd hoped everyone would conveniently forget that going up on the mountain was illegal, but now he'd just admitted to doing it on live TV. Given that he'd made the mountain 'human friendly', he hoped that little factoid would be forgiven, or at least forgotten.

"I know I have a lot more questions for you, as I'm sure many other people do, so I'll get ahead of the flood and make this a two-parter. Will you consent to an interview in the near future? And what's next for you? After your exam and 'tournament' victories, and of course this mountaintop duel, what are you doing next?"

Alex let out a small chuckle, not surprised that they'd tracked his every move since leaving home. He might have been John Crimson, news legend, and owner of a mustache so glorious his own scraggly one shivered in envy just by being this close, but at his core, he was still a reporter.

"Well Mr. Crimson, I can say I'll gladly schedule an interview with you in the near future. I would be honored, in fact. As for what's next…I have a certain Challenge to complete…several Leagues to win…and then after that, who knows. I may drop off the map for a while and find a mountain to train on." His smirk widened, and he took note of those who chuckled at the obvious reference to Red.

The old reporter nodded, making it clear he was done, and as the other lemmings surged forward, desperate not to be outshone by the famous old-timer, Alex quickly shouted, "No more questions, thank you!" and ducked inside the center again.

A few looked ready to storm the building, but getting on the bad side of a Pokémon Center was never a good idea, for any profession, and the local nurse had already warned them to stay outside. She was kind to Alex, and his travel companion, but he knew her nerves had to be wearing thin after dealing with him so long. For free.

After explaining that it was probably a better idea to find a new town to make love in to his scantily clad and clearly ready-to-go redhead, he eventually relented to her persuasions, and thus, they ended
They got looks the entire time, but when he told her, she'd simply shrugged and said, "I've been getting those looks my entire life, Alex. That's jealousy. They're jealous of my wealth, my looks, my clothes, my…boyfriend." She batted her eyes at the last bit before breaking into giggles, and he found himself nodding in agreement out of reflex.

That was that, then. He'd been wondering how to ask her, but it seemed she already considered them to be…a 'them'. A couple. "You're getting stares too," she said, unfazed, and seemingly not caring that the staff in the small dining area could very much hear her, "You're practically famous now. That battle of yours has been the most watched in recent memory. As if that wasn't enough, you discovered a new kind of Mega Stone. Just wait. You'll be getting mobbed before you know it. By reporters, by Trainers, by girls…but they can't have you. You're all mine."

As if to emphasize that fact, she snatched his hat and put it on, forgoing manners entirely, and shot daggers at the comparatively cute waitress who had apparently been watching him all through dinner. He hadn't even noticed. That left him in a thoroughly good mood through the rest of the evening, despite the glares he got from the other staff, particularly the men.

Pokémon Centers were free because the Pokémon League had, since its inception, funded them. The Elite Four and Gym Leaders kept the chaos of a world full of superpowered magical beings from upending society; and for that, they were compensated by the local government. That compensation went to two places: Trainers who beat the Elite Four, and the Pokémon Centers.

While the centers were required by the Leagues to take in all injured Pokémon, and anyone that needed a place while on the road, they typically despised 'freeloaders' who stayed for weeks on end.

He decided to tip generously for their dinner, as Jess didn't, and when they left out the back of the building to attract less attention, he felt the goodbye the nurse gave them was actually genuine. Which was good, because nurses talked. Bad behavior at one center led to low quality rooms and food at others. It was a very good idea to not end up on their bad side. Thankfully, getting on their bad side was difficult.

Blaze managed to fly them halfway to Undella Town, though the ride was a bit 'comfy' on his back, and the weight of two people was a bit more than he could take. Alex made a note to figure out their combined weight, and double it. He'd then make Blaze fly with that weight, every day, for every mile they had to walk.

It seemed harsh to Jess, but Blaze had risen to the challenge after Alex had explained that once he could be swift with the weights on, taking them off would make him much faster, and stronger. They needed to build up his wing strength, and quickly. Carrying them would also be a breeze, but he knew it would take his Charizard a while to get to that point.

He wasn't the only one with intense training however. Hydrus got some much need battle experience against other water Trainers on the road into Undella Town, eventually evolving into a Marshtomp. He might've been stronger, but he kept his playful attitude. He'd missed his Trainer, and though he'd grown to like Jess as well, Alex was the one who'd promised to help him grow. And grow he did.

He had Terra train Leo in evasion, by dodging as many Razor Leaves as possible, and that task kept the two busy for several hours. Once Hydrus had evolved, it was Arthur's turn to battle the random Trainers on the route south of Humilau, and eventually, he learned several new moves that helped
him one-shot the many fighting types they came up against.

During the last battle before arriving in town, he finally evolved, and then evolved again into a Gallade, thanks to his Dawn Stone. Alex wanted him to have as much experience with his amorphous body as possible. It was also good to evolve Gallades immediately, so their physical attack strength wasn't unbalanced by a Kirlia's affinity for special attacks.

He was taught to use Psychic, Shadow Ball, Night Slash, and Brick Break. With those moves, he became better at winning battles, even though he was relatively new at using them. Type advantage did most of the work.

Shruikan continued to train against Blaze, despite his training weight handicap, but once Blaze used his new weight as a weapon, they became evenly matched again, more or less, as after flying so far with two humans on his back, he could barely flap into the air during their sparring match.

They took the long way to Undella town, and eventually the forest on the other side of Humilau and Undella Bay gave way to a mountainous region that only helped him train his team further.

Jess wasn't idle either, having caught a Mareep she'd named Amphi while he was trapped on the mountain, and using her to great effect on the many, many bird Trainers. She'd also gotten the Fennekin she'd asked Connor to bring her from Kalos, and had named her Delphi. It was fitting, given what the little fox would one day become.

She had properly trained her team as well, and had even challenged Marlon's elite team, as Alex had. The badge she received was the same as his, similar to the regular one, but not. Her Mareep, after evolving into a Flaaffy, had helped her beat his gym, and then her Serperior had finished the rest, proving to be quite adept at swimming, unlike Torterra. Her team's training was a bit less intense, but it wasn't long at all before the two humans had used both teams to train as effectively as possible. As a result, her partners rapidly grew as well.

Despite their sparring, there was never an actual battle between the two humans. Though their Pokémon wanted one, the two had always smirked, and shook their heads. The Pokémon never got an explanation as to why, but as they trained, watching the others learn new moves and grow stronger, strong enough even to win their matches against Alex's team, the boys were driven to get stronger as well, and so they did.

Terra already had a year of such training under his shell, the sole reason he'd won every battle so far. Blaze's experience in the mountain had certainly strengthened him, but while his fire power was intense enough, his flight skills had been noticeably lacking. He'd been able to learn enough to fight Lizardon, but it was Mega Evolution that had allowed him to keep pace in the air, combined with his natural talent that came from typing.

After facing a particularly tough Pidgeot however, he was shown that his flight skills were definitely lacking, for a partial flying type. That was another reason he endured such hard training. All in all, the trip to Undella Town took around five days. Alex certainly hadn't minded, and though he'd expected Jess to complain, it seemed she'd changed quite a bit in the weeks he'd been gone.

Getting filthy while training no longer bothered her, she could sleep on the road without complaining, and when all they had was a thin bag between them and the hard rock terrain, she found sleeping atop his chest was quite a bit more comfortable. Once they found grass again, they continued to share a bag, and they used hers as extra padding, as it was incredibly fluffy, and high quality.
As they arrived in Undella Town, they found that the main thoroughfare was blocked. On either side the local townsfolk, who were really just rich tourists experiencing the Undella Bay's sunshine for fun, as it was still summer, watched the lone figure in the road from behind barriers of hard brown mud that acted as fences.

They were high enough to be difficult to climb over, and one could not do so without getting their outfit covered in dirt, something these elite snobs would never dream of doing. Both Alex and Jess recognized the lone figure, and as a look of irritation came over the redhead's lovely features, Alex stopped her, one hand on her shoulder.

"Let me. I've been expecting this since you mentioned he was back. I'll be the lightning rod for his anger. I can take it. This is the battle I've really been training for..." He already had Terra's ball in hand, as he stepped up towards Connor, his oldest rival, save for his brother. A makeshift arena had been carved into the sandy path, and as Alex took his position, he knew already what kind of match this would be as he saw a new, but familiar looks in his friend's eye. He'd always been rather protective of his dear sister. He'd need to vent quite a bit of rage before he'd come around to accepting reality.

Connor shouted out the rules anyway, for the benefit of their small crowd. "One on one, Redwood! Your starter against mine. And if I win, you cease staining my sister's genes, and reputation." Alex could feel the tirade his lover was about to launch from behind him, likely about freedom to choose who she wished to be with and such, a rather touchy topic among the ladies of Unova, who were finally free of oppressive Imperial traditions and serving roles. More than a few of the women in the crowd shot looks at Connor, as his remark bordered on sexist.

Alex knew it was more a result of his upbringing than anything, but Connor had always controlled his words well in the past. Well enough to avoid offending women, at least. Something was definitely off. He'd expected anger, but this seemed more like something that had been simmering for some time. Apparently Kalos had not gone well. Glancing at the Greninja, he could guess why. It was to other Greninja what Terra was to other Torterra. Larger, stronger, and given the species, more than fast enough to strike his slow turtle twice in a row. He'd definitely used the ninja frog quite a bit, enough at least for the rest of his team to be much weaker. Alex had a similar issue, though he was proud to admit the others were closing the gap admirably fast.

Connor himself was big, though not as big as Alex, as he stood a few inches shorter, but they shared a similar body type. His primarily blue outfit and purple scarf, with hints of white, made it obvious as to which starter Pokémon he'd chosen. His Greninja was right next to him, after all.

Alex called Terra onto the field, and immediately the crowd began to rumble. Grass beat water easily, and that Torterra was larger than any they'd seen. A few even recognized his Trainer from the news, and their disbelief began to turn into irritation, but Alex knew better to fall into the comfort of type advantage. This was his old friend's first Pokémon, and if he knew him at all, he knew their training had been just as long and intense as Terra's had. Finally, a worthy opponent.

"Alright, I agree." Alex said, turning his hat backwards. He felt the growing irritation turn to him, but the only opinion he cared about was Jessica's. He turned to glance at her, and winked.

The growing temper faltered, as her eyes widened. Alex continued, smirk wide on his face. "But when I win, nobody in your family objects to us. Not your father, not your mother, and not you, old friend. I had planned on doing this honorably." He resisted smirking, recalling her insistence. "...but circumstance forced my hand. Are the terms agreed upon?"
Connor's eyes narrowed, but he nodded, ultimately not caring to argue. He was going to win anyways. "They are." He was the same cocky Alex. Now he'd see what three years on the road did for one's power. The thought that he might win wasn't even considered.

Terra stomped the ground, and the fire in his eyes matched his Trainer's. The battle was on.
The crowd ducked again as the fierce impact of the Water Pulse and Energy Ball shook the small resort town with their collision. By sheer willpower, the Pokémon had managed to guide the stray balls of energy purposefully into the ground.

The road was littered with craters, but it was a dirt footpath, and the Pokémon knew that if they were going to destroy things, as was inevitable in a battle at this level, the humans would rather have to fix the dirt road than their houses. This knowledge didn't stop the locals from being angry however.

It was far past the point of no return, as that point had arrived rather quickly. Gren's first Water Pulse attack had bounced apart from Terra's Energy Ball in a collision of energy, and hit the dirt and sand road on either side of the crowd, effectively trapping anyone who didn't want to get dirty behind the barricades, which in this crowd, was everybody. Not one article of clothing there was priced under a thousand units of their currency.

This was how confident they were that the local facilities, which amounted to a Pokémon Center at most, could fix the roads in time for them to get home for dinner without ruining a good pair of clothes. The few sensible rich folks, like Alex and the sibling's families, had already dirtied their clothes to get the hell out of this battle's path, though they watched from the sturdier stone path up the hill, right in front of the aforementioned Pokémon center.

Connor had summoned both families when he'd learned, or rather, heard, what Alex and his own darling little sister were doing behind thin doors. While the parents were shocked at first, after a talk with their daughter, even the Gladstones agreed eventually that there were worse arrangements. As long as the two stayed together, there wouldn't be an issue of honor.

Connor had not accepted that, however. His sense of what was and was not honorable had shifted over the long months spent in the oriental communities sequestered within the borders of Southern Kalos, a region known as 'Gaulia'.

He'd gone there to train his Froakie into a Greninja, and as the two had matured, Gren and his Trainer had become masters, streamlining the Water Pulse technique into a form so powerful, Gren couldn't be beat. Not by the villagers anyways.

So, Connor had left, conquered each of Kalos' Gym Leaders with his Greninja's speed and ultimate technique, then returned to Lumiose City in time for the Pokémon League that year.

He'd lost, however, beaten in the final round by a superior Sceptile. It had been a six on six battle, but Connor had only entered Gren, as his other Pokémon were still too weak, and after five difficult opponents, including a Charizard, Gren had finally fainted. Nobody could solo the Kalos League. Not anymore. The Champion, Alain, was too powerful.

Connor had returned to Unova then, still with his skewed idea of justice, to train his other Pokémon, and challenge the Victory Plateau. While Kalos was difficult, the Elite Four of the Victory Plateau were the hardest Elite Four team in the entire League, which basically meant the world. Their latest
Challenge was considered ridiculously hard, as it required Trainers to take on the Four, one of the other Champions meaning Hilda, her brother, Nate, or Rosa, and then the reigning Champion and Hero of Unova himself, N. Both Champions were using one of the Unovan Dragons, and according to rumor, N used the other Legendary Dragon. The final match with him required a Challenger to be able to use the dragon they faced previously in a Pokémon battle.

This year, the Victory Plateau was the hardest to beat, or so the rumors had said, and Connor had risen to the new Challenge as his sister and rival had. To even enter the Victory Plateau, one needed to beat the starting line-ups of eight Gym Leaders in Unova, and receive the right badge. Normal badges were still being given out, but mainly for the League challenges tailored to younger Trainers.

With his new ideals, warped by a culture that had been transplanted into Kalos, or France, as some called the whole area spanning both Kalos and Gaulia, Connor had surfed southward, and ahead of them quickly via his Greninja’s swim speed to set up his challenge. He knew Alex would want to start at the beginning of Unova on his quest for badges, and would have to pass through Undella town. With Hydrus and Empolia, the pair could have easily crossed the short way, and hit their first stop, Black City. It was in his 'plan' after all.

Connor had heard about it too, though he'd only gotten an early draft by letter, asking his opinion on Alex's chosen team, but his friend's plan had not included his little sister. Upon returning home to find the two of them gone, he'd spoken to Eric, who was training like a madman, and learned the rest of Alex’s 'plan'.

Thus, he now knew exactly where they'd be, and he could take his sister home. He felt confident that Gren could beat any of the six Alex had mentioned before. The Luxray would be hard, but not impossible. Everything else should've fallen to their Water Pulse.

If the rumors were to be believed, the pair had been seen on the route to Undella several times, in the throes of passion, not caring who might hear them. In Connor's mind, the punishment for such brazen acts was total humiliation, thus he'd summoned their families, and enlisted their aid in setting the scene.

But it wasn't playing out right. Instead of being neutral to water, Terra seemed to enjoy the Water Shuriken that hit his tree, and sank into the bark harmlessly. Seeing that his grass typing was being used as defense, Connor had waited for the ground type offense, to counter with a water attack.

Unfortunately, the Earthquake had been far too powerful for Gren to block completely with his streamlined Water Pulse that formed an orb of condensed water energy, in true Kalos style. It had made a swathe of untouched ground around Gren and his Trainer, but to the rest of the coast and into the ocean, the earth had been shattered.

It hadn't been an issue for Gren though, not like it had for Squirt and Tyran. His nimble feet jumped from each large boulder easily. At 88lbs, they barely shifted in the mass of rubble. Terra had then planted his trunk like feet into the soft sandy dirt, and launched a massive ball of swirling green energy right at his opponent.

As expected, the blue frog had leapt high enough to dodge, but could now only fall aimlessly, as he'd strained himself getting to that height. He needed to land and recover his leg strength, but before that could happen, his eyes widened as another ball of green energy, but clearly one more condensed and powerful, shot towards him from below.
Terra was firing off Energy Balls like a cannon, crushing the rubble under his feet with the force of the push-back. Gren barely had a chance to raise a defense as it hit him, hard, but surprisingly to Terra and his Trainer, not hard enough for a K.O. Gren was clearly looking rough, but he could still win.

For the past four minutes, he and Terra had exchanged attacks constantly. Normally, Water Pulse would win because it could be used more, but not only had Terra become capable of surpassing his limit, by about five, which would leave him quite drained, Gren's streamlined attack took up a lot more power. At least five hits worth. Doing the math, the two Trainers met the other's eyes, and their Pokémon stopped as well, sensing a pause.

"Impressive, Redwood. I expected to crush your Torterra. You've only had him for a year. He's easily strong enough to solo the Kalos League."

Alex just smirked as he fixed his hat, "You have no idea, my friend. This isn't even his final form."

Connor's eyes widened at the claim. While no longer shiny and new, Mega Evolution was still a bar by which Trainers were judged. If you could battle a Mega Evolved Pokémon with one of your own, you were taken seriously by pretty much anyone in the Pokémon League. If you could make a Pokémon without a previously documented Mega Form attain that level, you were in a league of your own. Literally, as all such capable Trainers would soon find out.

Connor's eyes burned, his issue of honor momentarily forgotten. This was a proper rival. Alex was seemingly every bit as competent a Trainer as Alain, and his Torterra was at the same level as Alain's Sceptile had been. If not higher. Thus, in his mind, Connor slowly forced himself to focus.

This was, from his perspective, his chance to redeem his loss in Kalos. If he could beat Alex, he would go back, challenge the gyms again, against their true teams just to avoid monotony and repetition, and then all but solo the League. With that much experience, the rest of his team would probably be strong enough to at least not be taken out by a single bloody Leaf Blade.

"Enough fooling around, Gren." Connor spoke softly, his deep voice barely louder than the waves hitting the ruined beach behind him. The fire in the Greninja's eyes flared, and like their opponents, they became linked.

Alex's own fiery gaze seemed to increase as well. "So...you got him to do it too?"

Connor smirked, "I may not be the first...but since nobody but him has ever done it...that's my claim to fame. Certainly better than beating a Charizard with a Charizard."

"Oh, I'm about to be famous for another reason entirely." Alex said, smirking. "I've found Torterra's Mega Form."

After dinner on that first day back, Alex had examined his two crystals, and theorized that if the fire one had made Blaze evolve further, the grass one should do the same for Torterra. Theoretically. Once he'd figured out that to use the crystal's power, he had to have a clear focus, it became easy for Terra and Blaze to mega evolve.

Arthur had helped with understanding that, and Alex had shown his entire team the power Terra and Blaze could achieve. He promised to get all of them to that level, and their bond became even stronger. They were truly a team now, with a unified goal: to be the very best. They'd trained with impressive intensity ever since, and now Hydrus, Leo, Arthur, and Shruikan were rapidly closing the
gap between them and his Torterra.

At his opponent's words, Connor made a cross with his pair of pointer and middle fingers, and Gren copied the stance, his form shifting like water, and glowed a deep blue. Meanwhile, all Alex did was smirk as his pocket glowed green, and his Torterra shifted form, becoming armored around his head.

Spikes grew from the other side of his shell, and the tree on his back became heavier, older, and moved to the center of his back. His tail had grown longer, and formed a club on the end of it, and said club slammed the ground, causing the debris on the field to shudder. Without a word, battle was joined again, but now only Connor could see Gren move, such was his speed.

"Ice Shuriken!" He shouted, and from seemingly every direction, spinning stars of ice slammed in Terra simultaneously, and evaporated into a mist after hitting his hide, so cold were they. Terra yawned, and gave a smirk towards his opponents that mirrored his Trainer's.

Seeing Connor's confused look, Alex spoke up, taking on the tone of one who thinks they know more about Pokémon, and is about to demonstrate that fact. It was something he'd learned to mimic ages ago, and was to be expected when your mentor was a Pokémon Professor. "Like most Mega Evolutions, he gained a new ability upon evolving. He's easily over a ton now. And his Thick Fat has adapted to ice."

Connor's face tightened. "I see. Well that's irritating. I guess we're back to plan A." At those words, Gren formed another Water Pulse, and met Terra's countering Energy Ball full force. The two balls bounced off each other, further damaging the ground. Connor hid his emotions, but his tight expression was slow to fade.

Gren should've been able to handle any grass type after he'd learned to make his shuriken into ice. He supposed that if any grass type were to have Thick Fat, it would need to be similar to Venusaur, who had the same ability and thus defense against ice, in body type and species. Torterra was lucky, it seemed, as he was also a ground type. And now his weakness to ice was gone. On top of his species' natural affinity for defense, he was now, in short, very hard to beat.

Despite the damage from earlier, Gren kept fighting, but unfortunately, mega evolving was only straining what little stamina he had left. Knowing he had but one shot left in this state, Gren landed, and faced Terra head on.

He raised one finned hand over the other, and his arms curved around to his waist as the energy began to form. The giant Water Shuriken on his back faded, and reappeared between his hands, spinning fast between them as the rest of his power was channeled into this one move. Gren's new form was almost identical to the only other Greninja that had ever achieved this level of power, save for his fins.

They were a deep scarlet, the color of his Trainer's hair, with a strike of black, but the crest on his head remained the same bright red. The rest of him also remained not that different from a normal Greninja. It was a far cry from Terra's change.

Moss had appeared under his chin, looking like a beard as he'd finished changing. He looked almost nothing like a normal Torterra. It was as this water attack was being prepped that Terra drew deep from the resort town. Once more, he was lucky.
This place had enough sunlight this time of year to match Alola, and the amount of energy he could use from the local flora right now was nearly unlimited, after an entire season's worth of sunlight. He drew enough to finish this frog off, swirled it, condensed it, and made it stronger. Just as Tyranitar had showed him.

The two Pokémon fired, and this time, type advantage won out. Their Water Pulse could deflect Terra's ball with enough time, but this shuriken had tried to bisect it. With the amount of power in this Energy Ball, that was never going to happen. Thus, the grass attack won out, pushing through the shuriken, and slamming into Gren, finishing him. He tried to recover, but fell, losing his Mega Form as he hit the ground.

"I think that's enough." Alex said, crossing the ruined ground. He nodded at Terra, who began repairing the terrain by slamming each foot into the ground, and pulling it back together. Something he could only do in this new form, or so Alex thought. The ruined coastline slowly came back together, and it took Terra's entire focus to keep it like that as he guided the earth in mending itself.

Alex stopped short, as he noticed Connor move for his belt, shouting, "Dammit! Dragon Rush!" A Garchomp appeared in a flash of light, and sighting Alex as his target instead of Terra, due to his closeness, he prepared to fire the attack. Had he been a Charizard he might've hesitated at the mere idea of attacking a weak human, but his Trainer had ordered a command, and he had to obey.

Connor was halfway through the word "Wai-" as he'd realized that Alex was the chosen target, not his Pokémon, when a burst of black light appeared in front of Alex, taking the super effective attack.

Enraged and unharmed thanks to Protect, Shruikan retaliated with the kind of Dragon Pulse only a truly angry dragon could produce. This outsider had attacked his friend, with a dragon type move, and not the Torterra. Now, Shruikan was taking revenge.

The attack hit the Garchomp point blank after his Dragon Rush, and he went down with a crash, but was slow to rise. Shruikan turned his furious gaze on Connor then, reasoning that his Trainer had been attacked, therefore Garchomp's Trainer deserved no less. It was a draconian punishment, for sure, but more than that, it was sweet revenge supported by a rage he'd had since he'd father had been killed by Lizardon.

He resented not being able to take that monster down, and now his fury had no outlet but the human in front of him. He opened his mouth to attack Connor, but instead found himself soaring through the air, before crashing into the sand several feet away. He'd felt a slight tickle on the right side of his shell, and when he rose from his hard landing and looked at his attacker, he saw the new Gallade, arm blades extended in a fighting stance, protecting the blue clad human.

Shruikan snarled. That arrogant psychic type was rapidly starting to irritate him. He didn't hesitate, a powerful train of blue fire burst towards Arthur, and the crowd behind him. Arthur crossed his arms, and using Psychic, forced the flames from the crowd, or their homes.

The path was ruined even more though, parts of it turned to glass by the power of the fire. Arthur refocused his Psychic attack, turning it on Shruikan then, levitating him into the air, and facing him towards the sky, where he couldn't hit anyone with his flames.

This made the dragon furious, as he struggled against the psychic hold. He'd closed his eyes and prepared to counter with Zen Headbutt, when suddenly, he was forcibly returned to his ball. The normally stone faced Alex looked furious as he eyed the Timer Ball, which had been strangely
warped by the trip to the dragon mountain. Apparently, it didn't matter what badge he had, the eighth one received would always be the one that earned him total control.

As it stood, he had one. He needed to move faster, but first he had to deal with Connor, and their families. He nodded at Terra again, and the earth walls were shattered as well, allowing the townsfolk to move into the sturdier part of town, and get on with their day. Alex had won again. It was almost unbelievable, for a supposed rookie with only one badge.

He walked with heavy steps over to his rival, and sighed. "That was low. Your Garchomp would've ended me without a thought. What was that you always told me about 'being in control of a force of nature'? Garchomp is probably the only ground type that can handle a Torterra evenly, but he was aiming a Dragon Rush at me. I might've survived a Rock Slide, but no, you ordered the most destructive move he has." Alex looked down at his rival, who had fallen to a seated position. Connor mumbled softly, realizing what he'd done.

"I didn't… I didn't mean…" Ordering your Pokémon to attack a fellow Trainer was unheard of, and now, he'd done it to one of Unova's alleged 'rising stars'. Who was supposedly his friend, no less, in front of a crowd of witnesses. Not even team members sunk that low. They'd use harmless moves like Smoke Screen or Supersonic, but never an attack move like Dragon Rush.

Alex noticed a familiar looking crystal pinned to his rival's jacket. The symbol of water types was within it. He reached down, and snatched it before Connor could blink or protest.

"So. You figured it out too. Well, clearly, you're not ready for one of these. This is my 'prize money' for winning. You can have it back when you beat me. These should be a last resort, not a crutch." With that, he turned on his heel and headed for the Pokémon center.

As he passed Jess, he spoke quietly. "Your turn. Once you're done, tell me, and we'll move on. Clearly some of my team needs training still." He switched Shruikan to the sixth slot on his belt, behind Arthur. His last resort, until his dragon could control his rage. He went out of the town, and the two worked out the dragon's frustration as Jess handled her relative.

Jess took several hours to chew out her brother, deflect their family's inquiries, and heal her own Pokémon who were tired from road battling. Alex and Shruikan agreed they needed to keep an eye on his temper, but given he was a dragon type, and an adolescent at that, one outburst was easy enough to forgive. Nobody had been hurt, thankfully. They all got a needed rest from the constant training, and left early in the morning, surfing down the side of the road on their water Pokémon for strength training. Eventually, they passed the edge of the White Forest.

The forest had been small once, but over time it had grown in size from the coast of the river to the coast of the bay, the forest was enormous. A Trainer could spend a month in there if they left the path. It was heavily warned against, but Trainers often left it because they spied a rare colored Pokémon, and chased after it endlessly. That was the trap of the forest. It tempted you with what you wanted most, and kept you lost and wandering for weeks if you didn't pay attention. That said, it did contain hundreds of rare Pokémon, namely starters given out in labs. Nobody knew why there were so many, but it was a good place to find foreign favorites for Unovan Trainers just starting out.

It was rumored that some of the remnants of Team Skull had come over from Alola several years back, after being beaten out of their home region by a pair of thirteen-year olds. Rather than run this team out however, the local Gym Leaders and top Trainers of Unova trapped them within the Black
City, after forcing them into the White Forest.

The few who could escape the forest had been forced to stay in, to serve the time for being a sentenced Team member, but when their sentence had ended, they hadn't wanted to leave again. During their stay in the 'prison', the team members had eventually overpowered their guards, who retreated into the forest. They then took over the city, and formed a loose kind of government with equally loose morals.

Thus, Black City had become a haven for undesirable types, and due to the enormous forest surrounding the city, they had all become a bit...strange, as isolation from society tended to have that effect. The forest itself had adverse effects on evil minded people as well, but neither Alex nor Jess were worried it would repel them. If their hearts were tainted, their Pokémon wouldn't have warmed up to them so quickly. In either case, the locals of Unova typically avoided the city and the forest, often by surfing around or flying over them entirely.

Despite the numerous warnings, Alex had declared that he had a number of Pokémon to catch now that his team was finally assembled, and catch them he did as they entered the forest. They spent a full three days among the trees, as Alex used his Luxray's incredible eyesight to track what he was after by scent and print, and to keep sight of the road. A quick Thunder Wave usually made the young Pokémon weak enough to capture, and it got repetitive after a while.

He knew he was taking on a larger responsibility with so many new faces to train, but they would be well looked after back at the lab. He could find time to take them out, one by one, and train them up once Blaze adjusted to flying. He caught each of the starters he was after, namely, Squirtle, Chikorita, Cyndaquill, Torchic, Treecko, and many of the Pokémon normal Trainers caught as well, like Pidgey, that he had skipped over thus far.

He also had a list from his younger cousins, who he had conspired with just before leaving. Their parents restricted them to one partner, but if Alex just happened to catch one they wanted, and by total coincidence it bonded with them as they took care of it every day while giving it a break from the PC storage, what cold-hearted parent could deny a bond between child and Pokémon? While Alex's parents had certainly had no issues, his relatives had always been sympathetic, but ultimately unwilling to risk the roof over their heads, and lack of rent, to give him a Pokémon. He had a feeling their own children having more wouldn't be too much of an issue. They were older now anyways, and he sympathized with their losing streaks. Most kids wised up and gained full teams early on, if they intended to go on a journey. That made victory over people with one partner much easier.

He had Ultra Balls, so the going was easy, the hardest part was always navigating the ever-changing maze of a forest. He'd also found an entire nest of Eevee, and after capturing their eldest brother, convinced the rest to come along in balls of their choosing. He'd described a good place on his farm they could reside, and in time, he would make them strong. They'd each agreed, after he convinced them that he did indeed know how to make each of them into the form they desired. He used the fire, thunder, water, ice, and leaf stones first, giving those Eevee a chance to start adapting to their bodies posthaste. The others would change with time, and friendship, and he intended to carry his future Umbreon and Espeon around for a bit as they traveled Unova's Trainer rich roads. Those two had agreed to protect his home, from whatever threatened. His father had been reluctant to train guard Pokémon for their ranch, and had instead left it to the Arcanine belonging to Jessica's father. He was getting older though, and while it was sad, defending the herds had to fall to a new generation.

He had enough for every eeveelution but Sylveon. Jess wasn't idle either, as she'd caught the remaining Eevee, a lone runt from a different litter, and agreed she was destined to be a Sylveon, if
she had her way. Ultimately though, they agreed to let the Eevee pick their own forms. Alex's only caveat was that none of them become identical, which was apparently fine by them.

As the days slipped by, Alex was growing ever more impatient at his lack of progress in the Unova League, and thus he caught Pokémon at an alarming rate, often running through the forest, zapping ones he picked with Leo, and then throwing balls, staying just long enough to be sure they were caught. They transported soon afterwards, but by the time they were transported to his Gruncle's lab, he was already onto the next one.

Jess also managed to train her Flaaffy, alongside Alex's Marshtomp, and once they were strong enough, they decided to move on to Black City. Home to TMs of every kind, rare Pokémon trading, specific battle types, and a bunch of other modern Trainer crap Alex didn't care for.

They even sold mass-produced Rare Candies, though the only place to get them was from street dealers, who would rob you just as soon as they'd sell to you. They were very much the out-of-place rich kids in a city full of criminal elements.

He had one goal for Black City; get his TMs and Get Out. Because of what running aimlessly through the forest did to people, the residents of Black City were a little...off.

The remnants of Team Skull had not been the only criminals to end up in this unique prison. Several groups of former team members from Team Plasma, Galactic, Flare, and many others, had inhabited Black City. In response, many strong Trainers had come to the forest, to make sure the criminals stayed put. Over time, they decided to make the forest their home, and had even made the White Forest grow somehow, to be a thousand times larger than it had been in the past. Now, it was common sense for Trainers to avoid it, lest they lose themselves to chasing imaginary rare Pokémon. To help with that, the forest Trainers provided flight training for flying types who had yet to learn how to carry a human at both ends of the forest. The one they had passed had claimed Blaze was well on his way to handling a large Trainer, and even both of them at once. With time, he'd grow larger, and it wouldn't be an issue, or so the flight master had claimed after battling him without the training weights.

As bad as the city was however, the people who lived in the forest had become the kindest on the continent, and had managed to, allegedly, cure the team members who came to them of their desire to do violence. They also directed Trainers who dared to chase the forest's Pokémon to the exit of the forest, but there were too few of these strange, nature-loving folks to help every Trainer who got lost.

To call the city creepy was an understatement. This was definitely a 'counter-culture' type of place, except it was full of scum. They were almost immediately set upon by the locals, and the two Trainers battled at least ten such thugs before Alex finally unleashed Terra, hopped on his back with Jess, and stomped off. None of them dared to test their Zubat and Woobat against a beast like that, especially once he'd mega evolved.

The Pokémon center at least, seemed like a haven of sanity in a strange city, but the local nurse looked tired. She perked up when she saw them however, glad to see a pair of comparatively normal Trainers, instead of the usual punks who hit on her constantly. She had black hair, and make-up that probably wasn't approved by the League, as she'd been mid bong-rip when they'd entered to the familiar stank of the grass Trainer's favorite herb. She demonstrated that not all in the city were bad. Just most. They convinced her to join them for another bowl of Leaf, before going to bed.
At her advising, they spent the night in the room with Hydrus blocking the door with his weight, and Leo watching the window with his eyes. Their room was almost broken into twice, but both times the would-be robbers ran away with searing electrical burns, and a bite mark. Leo was very protective, and while he was silent, the yelping locals were not. Eventually they seemed to understand that their room was inhabited by badass Pokémon. From the noise, it seemed they simply moved on to others.

The rest of the trip to Nimbasa City was spent much the way their last time on the road had been. Alex had managed to find weights that Jess had sewn into vests for their teams during his re-supply. It was convenient, as Black City had almost anything a Trainer could want, but no massive crowds to slow him down. Just the occasional biker thug who thought a Koffing had any kind of chance against his team.

He was challenged to battle, of course, and he let Hydrus, Arthur, even Shruikan battle on their own against these wannabe Trainers, the only aid he gave them was, "Use what moves you think I would tell you to use, and you'll win. Be clever, and above all, stay in control." He'd glared at Shruikan after that until the dragon averted his gaze.

He'd been embarrassed by his rage in Undella Town, but had since calmed down. He and Arthur had gone around the city, fighting double battles together, and had repaired their budding friendship, to a degree. They would always be rivals, a knight against a dragon, but even they admitted that together, they were hard to beat. Alex imagined that once Shruikan had wings, they'd be even more powerful.

The vests had paid off, though they'd made every Pokémon but Terra pause at first with the added weight, eventually, each of them became used to it thanks to the constant training on the road. They sacrificed progress for training time, but eventually, they reached Nimbasa City. The whole trip through both sides of the forest had taken four more days, and the trip down the route to Nimbasa took another eight, thanks to their constant training.

Alex had planned to skip Nimbasa and hit it when he looped around again, but fate had other plans. Elesa happened to be at the Pokémon center when they arrived, and after speaking in some strange woman language about clothes and shoes, Jess told him that she had challenged them both at her gym.

He'd shrugged it off, but then the television in the relatively high-tech Pokémon center turned on with a loud announcement from a TV show that, evidently, had nothing better to do than spew information about current events. He missed the old style text-based terminal messages, but there was ad revenue to be gained from the program that had apparently replaced them in recent years. He sighed, as they overzealously delivered the latest piece of ultimately irrelevant news: Alex Redwood was in the area, and Elesa had 'thrown down the gauntlet'. There was no ignoring a call out like that, not when an entire borough of New York City saw it on the numerous giant screens scattered about Nimbasa. When a Gym Leader issued a taunt, everyone heard it.

The local 'news' station then ran thirty minutes of a strange program that highlighted his journey so far, for those who hadn't heard of him yet, and he began to grow irritated at Elesa, who was narrating in a taunting tone.

Many of the facts were wrong. He'd once tamed a herd of rampaging Tyrantrum with only a Turtwig. He'd gone to every party that school year, instead of catching more Pokémon. He'd run off and eloped with his rich neighbor's daughter three months ago, and she was now somehow six
months pregnant.

It was, in short, the kind of fake news experience one usually expects from a town obsessed with fashion and aesthetics. After another examination of his so called 'deeds' was scheduled for the next half hour, he decided enough was enough, and marched over to the gym, a smirking Jess in tow.

He realized on his march over there that the show had probably been a ploy to lure him in for a match. Jess had probably mentioned his plan to simply pass through, but Elesa wasn't having that. Elesa was a bit old to be a model, but no less attractive, really. Too flashy for his tastes, but certainly not ugly. She had been the Gym Leader of Nimbasa for decades, and was just as loved in New Tork City as Burgh was.

The two were old enough to be grandparents these days, but neither one seemed ready to retire, and indeed few in Unova could even imagine their city without Elesa or Burgh as the Gym Leaders of the northern and southern halves of it.

As he entered the gym, he swore quietly, only then remembering that it was a very public runway, surrounded on two sides by a massive crowd of primarily girls. Keeping his face passive, he ignored the mix of jeers and cheers as he approached his target, only to be stopped by an attendant who forcibly attached a mic to his jacket's collar as Alex silently glared at him. The giant monitor in the back of the gym showed his uncomfortable face for a moment, before it switched to Elesa.

"Welcome, Mr. Redwood!" Elesa spoke, and her fans of both genders drowned out the sound in the arena gym with their cheering. That was going to get old fast, he thought, as the sound became so loud he couldn't think straight.

He waited for the cheers to die down, and then spoke quietly and awkwardly into the mic. "I'm, uh, here to battle you." Though she'd once dyed her hair black, the once more blonde woman laughed at him, and then gestured to the arena they were standing on.

"I guessed that much." She was baiting him, but it took more than that to make him forgo his easygoing nature and lose his composure.

He gave her his smirk, turned his hat backwards, and drew Hydrus' ball. The crowd made an 'ooooo' noise. "With your true team, miss Elesa. Not the one you use on amateurs." That made her blink, before she returned his smirk.

"I see. Very well, Challenger. I'll use my own team." The crowd cheered again, and he felt his nerves wearing ever thinner. The battle was short, for though Elesa was no slouch of a Trainer, Leo took down her Emolga easily enough, and after that, Hydrus finished the rest with Mud Shots, not even blinking when he took electric damage.

The mud fish had grown significantly since he left his swamp, despite his Trainer's absence. The training they'd done had worked the best on Hydrus, who showed the most improvement and maturing of his whole team. He battled constantly against Terra. Evidently, he hadn't forgotten how pitiful their first encounter had been. They almost reminded Alex of himself and his own brother now. Before favoritism had separated them.

After taking his weighted vest off, Hydrus surprised the entire crowd by moving almost fast as Leo had. Leo had still fought with his own vest on, but his dark coat hid it well. The resulting illusion was that this Marshtomp was as fast as a Luxray. Another ridiculous rumor, but one he had on video,
as Elesa had a habit of recording all her gym battles. Showing N’s, and the other Champion’s from back in the day, was always amusing. Hilbert and his Serperior had not liked the pair of Emolga she used.

Alex was the only one who wasn't surprised when Hydrus decided to evolve after taking down her Zebstrika. He'd taken little damage, and upon becoming a Swampert, it affected him less. He was much, much larger now, which meant more stamina in battles, and a legitimate chance at matching Terra’s strength.

Elesa's first Pokémon had been a Blitzle, and she'd caught a Pichu on the same day. She had switched to Emolga soon after starting her journey, when she saw how tricky they were to beat, and now, she brought out her fully evolved Raichu, who had long since grown too strong for regular gym battles.

The two powerhouses fought it out, shaking the entire arena with their colliding Hammer Arms and Mega Punches, but eventually, a continuous series of Mud Shots slowed and blinded the poor thunder mouse enough to finally make it faint with a direct hit. Thus, Alex won his Jolt Badge.

The very public win only helped the small flame of his fame rise and spread through the region like a wildfire. Every once in a while, a genuinely strong Trainer would appear, and word about them would spread through Unova in a day. It helped that most of the region was connected to Castelia. Unova was one of the most technologically advanced places on the planet, and had the largest population by far. Only northern Kalos came anywhere near them technologically, and that was primarily because of Clemont.

The Lumiose Gym Leader had done more for that entire region than any other, after returning from a long journey around the world. He was on Alex’s list of Gym Leaders he wanted to battle. Only a few had that kind of fame.

As he and Jess left Nimbasa and began traveling down the Join Boulevard, it took him a minute to realize they were getting looks. Well, more looks than usual. If he was honest, he'd won half of his random road battles thanks to them being distracted by Jessica’s looks. That applied to both genders.

Elesa had, at his request, personally admitted to making up the rumors from the last broadcast, but hadn't given them any new information on this Trainer either. Thus, the local hotshot Trainers in the city decided to keep an eye out for him, if only to see if the hype was real. As they walked further down the absurdly large tunnel, packed to the brim with shops for literally everything, the going was slow.

Like most women, his was not immune to the lure of shopping, and given that she'd coax a certain black piece of plastic from her father, her spending was wild. Naturally, Alex ended up shoving half of it into his bag. It was bigger on the inside, a 'secret Redwood tech trick' as his Gruncle had called it, but even it had a limit. He didn't mind the extra weight, though. She'd resisted her womanly impulses in Mall Town so he could focus on his Luxio, the least he could do now was carry her stuff.

The Join Boulevard had once been a small passage on the long road from Nimbasa to Castelia, but after years of support from Unova’s many Champions, it had grown massive. The twins, Hilbert and Hilda, along with Nate and Rosa, all had entire sections of the boulevard devoted to merchandise they specifically supported.
Now, you could go from Nimbasa to Castelia without so much as sand in your shoe. All along the Join Boulevard, Alex and Jess were challenged on a daily basis by Trainers with actual teams, not just six Magikarp in a row. The experience was tough, but no tougher than training with their weight vests had been on the road to Nimbasa.

Now when they took them off for battle, the effects were already beginning to show. They had been forced to loop back to Nimbasa for several days, as there was no Pokémon Center on the Boulevard. They were enjoying the local fame, and then Jess had challenged Elesa as well, winning handily with her Charmeleon.

She too had purchased TMs in Black City, and now her team was rapidly becoming a challenge to his. They didn't battle however, not officially, as each of their teams considered the other a part of their road-bound family by now. Battling them seriously was just unthinkable, to most of them. They would spar, of course, but an actual battle simply never occurred.

After a few days of battling genuine Trainers on the massive Join Boulevard, which had actual motels now that had once been homes, they reached Castelia City, a borough of New Tork that never slept. Alex was eager to challenge the local Gym Leader that very night.

He was stopped however, right in front of the gym, by an aide from the Poké News Network. John Crimson wanted an interview that night, and Alex agreed, saying, "Right after I beat Burgh."

The aide mumbled something about make-up and checked his watch constantly. He'd been told to collect Alex within two hours by John Crimson himself, but Alex was already inside the gym. He knew the drill by now, and he had Hydrus get used to using his Ice Beam in battle as he fought Burgh's warm up Trainers. It made Hydrus stronger, too. He'd been battling a lot lately, to try and bridge the gap between Terra, Blaze, and the rest of his team. They all needed to be that strong if they were going to take on the Victory Plateau. For the battle with Burgh himself, Alex's choice was different.

Blaze had begun to get twitchy, and while Alex knew Hydrus needed to train, his Charizard needed to battle strong opponents. Blaze gave his Trainer a look when he saw a bunch of bugs, but after a hard Metal Claw from Burgh's Scizor, a member of the team he had once journeyed with, Blaze got into the fight.

He took down four of the bug types, relatively easily as he could use his flames or his wings to fight them. Either way, he was at an advantage. Seeing he was sated with those easy but no less intense battles, and that his next opponent was part rock, Alex switched Hydrus in.

Another two Ice Beams ended Crustle, and then finally, out came Leavanny. Her Leaf Blade was nearly enough to take Hydrus down, but his retaliatory and doubly effective Ice Beam did what her blades had been unable to. Thus, Alex won his third badge.

Burgh himself was a decent guy, and they had a chat over a bowl of Leaf before they returned to the bottom floor of the strange gym, only to find that Jess and the aide for PNN were still waiting. The aide had, upon hearing who she was, wanted Jess to interview as well, but he was denied yet again when she challenged Burgh herself.

The aide was a few years older than them at most, but his forehead already had signs of wrinkling. He wore a navy-blue uniform that seemed strange in public, and had no belt of Pokémon either.
He looked like a corporate drone, but corporate drones had name tags. Jess was telling him that she planned to battle Burgh next, and could interview some other time. She wasn't going to fall behind Alex. Burgh agreed to take her to the local Pokémon center, and then battle her, while Alex went for his interview.

Deciding one Trainer was good enough to keep his job, the aide gave in, and brought Alex to the station, where he refused attempts to have make-up dumped on him, and offers to trim his scraggily beard that still had a few patches of lighter fuzz in it. He also got an offer for a new wardrobe, and though he was seriously tempted with going black and gold, he kept his clothes as they were. He'd managed to get another spare outfit in Nimbasa, and switched to the clean one.

Burgh's gym had been quite warm, as his Pokémon loved heat, and even on a cool summer night like this, Castelia City might as well have been an oven. He handed over his dirty undershirt and pants, letting them be taken to be washed after the people assigned to make him presentable insisted he do so.

It seemed that keeping their jobs depended upon them aiding him in some way, and they told him as much when he asked. It made his stomach curl, but he stayed polite, knowing it wasn't the aide's fault they had to act like this. Their usual clientele was probably a lot different than he was.

Their world didn't have many problems, it was true. Once, supposedly before Pokémon ever came to be, humans had had to deal with issues of water shortage, air pollution, violence, etcetera. It was said that the old world had collapsed, only rising again when Pokémon appeared, and solved many of these problems.

Energy, water, food, pollutants, there were Pokémon to combat every negative aspect of human existence. Some people claimed Pokémon had always lived with humans, but his granduncle had disagreed.

Like the skeptic he was, Alex had asked for evidence, and in response, had been shown stories in truly ancient books, now only existing on the PokéNet, that didn't contain a single mention of Pokémon. It was hard to believe, since everything in the world he'd known had some tie to them, but the stories he had been shown when he was younger contained no trace. Just humans with the aforementioned problems, and many others in addition.

The ancient fairytales about King Arthur or the notorious archer of Galar, Green Hood, were good examples of tales without Pokémon, but most people saw them as just that: tales. Pokémon had been around longer than anyone could remember, and a few fairy tales from pre-history would not be enough to prove they had once never existed on this planet. Now though, after a very long time, Pokémon and their Trainers had become an integral part of their advanced society.

Some problems still remained however, the largest being, as always, human greed. Money controlled many aspects of the 'real world', as his father had called it. It was fine for Pokémon Trainers to run around on the road, eating for free, and battling for fun. But, he had been told, society needed currency to function.

That was one point his granduncle and his father intensely disagreed upon. The aging professor had insisted that many of the issues they did face would disappear if humanity gave up currency. They existed in a society capable of supplying them with whatever they could possibly need fabricated. He'd claimed that as long as greedy humans had some kind of currency to horde, they would do whatever they could to horde as much as possible. Far too many simply didn't care what they had to
do to achieve a comfortable lifestyle, even if that meant ascending to disgustingly wealthy levels by stepping on the backs of their fellow man.

His father had responded by saying new issues would rise to replace those that had been solved. Alex had done his best to remain neutral in this debate that he, as he'd gotten older, realized was at the core of the separation in their family.

But now, looking into the faces of total strangers who all but begged to serve him, lest they lose their job and their access to currency if they failed to do so, he started to understand why his granduncle was so passionate about defeating human greed. If these people just relied on Pokémon instead, they could be just as well off, but no, they needed currency like a crystal addict needed dust. Crystal was one of the 'harder' substances available in shadier places, that had similar effects to Leaf, but far worse consequences. It was also highly illegal.

For his part, Alex didn't really see the issue. In the now famous League Court case against three members of the now disbanded Team Rocket, evidence had been presented that showed, on numerous occasions, the criminals in question had scraped together funds for hundreds, if not thousands, of giant robots designed to catch Pokémon.

They obtained these funds, supposedly, by working at menial jobs. Apparently, they paid just as well as Pokémon battles, and were far more reliable for income. The cost of living in this modern age was low, thanks to Pokémon.

As Alex subtly watched and spoke the numerous aides flitting about the dressing rooms of the PNN building's lower floors, he realized these poor people were essentially slaves to whatever 'celebrity' happened to be entertaining their audience that night. It was a business, and like every business, some parts were considered more important than others.

The aides assigned to him were obviously on the bottom of this business totem pole. They didn't even have name tags, and as he looked closer, more than a few had bruises. He felt Arthur's ball shake, as he waited to be called onto the stage for his interview.

He thumbed the release. "You sense it too, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"Gallade." The response was solemn and understanding, but under the surface, Alex sensed the same fury at this ridiculous pyramidal setup. He didn't have a better alternative for distributing currency. He knew others had been tried before, only to succumb to power hungry tyrants.

This currency based system had eventually beaten all the others, and his Gruncle had warned him that speaking against it, especially in public, would make you a pariah. You simply did not question the system.

The door opened, and the younger male aide from before, who had to have been around ten or twenty years older than Alex, came in. He had the strange navy-blue uniform on still, the PNN logo was sewn into the chest of it, but otherwise, it was little more than a bland suit.

No name tag, no Pokémon belt. Even the man's features were unremarkable. Brown eyes, dark hair that was cut short, a clean-shaven face. Each of the aides assigned to him had looked this way.

"Mr. Crimson is ready for you, sir." He said, looking hurried.
Sir. Alex had never been called 'sir' before he'd left home, but as he traveled, he noticed that amongst the few who'd heard of him, he was regarded with more respect. They'd called him 'sir' too. 'May I have a battle, sir?' 'Might I have your autograph, sir?' 'Please sir, keep your Torterra from defecating on the grass.'

Was that what he had to look forward to? A future where, eventually, he stopped even noticing aides like this entirely? He noticed Arthur staring at him, and the Pokémon smiled, sensing his emotions, and put a hand on his shoulder. Confidence filled him. He knew that his Gallade would keep him honest, if nobody else did. Alex nodded, smiling back, and then recalled him to his ball.

"Thank you. What was your name? I didn't catch it." The aide blinked, and Alex could tell, nobody had ever asked him that question. His face betrayed a hint of nervousness, and Alex understood. He wasn't supposed to have people ask him his name. Judging by the beads of sweat forming on his brow, he thought he was in trouble.

Which meant that his superiors were either listening, or he thought he'd somehow offended this guest, which was, he assumed, an offense that resulted in being fired. Alex put a hand on his shoulder.

"Relax, you're not in trouble. I just wanted to know your name." If the younger man had looked put-off before, he was doubly so now. Someone famous enough to be interviewed by the legend, five-time Pokémmy award winning reporter John Crimson, taking notice of him? Unheard of. Impossible. And yet, it was happening.

Alex gave the shoulder a squeeze, and the aide finally stammered a response. "I-I'm Joey."

Alex gave what he hoped was his best comforting smile. It needed work. "Well Joey, I need you to do me a favor, and it's going to sound unusual." The man's eyes faded back into the practiced neutrality he maintained as part of his job. Eyes that were dead, with no spark of hope whatsoever. He hadn't been noticed, this was just another celebrity with a fetish or something.

Even his response was robotic. "Of course, sir. Whatever you need, PNN will provide."

Alex had expected such a response, you couldn't undo programming like this with a few sentences after all, and he was due to be on the air. "After I'm done, when I come back for my things, please bring in the other aides that were assigned to help me. Can you do that, Joey?" The man blinked again, wondering what new perverted hell awaited him and his coworkers now. You could never tell with famous Trainers.

"Of course, sir." He said, not betraying a hint of worry. "We'll be waiting here once you and Mr. Crimson are done. Now if you please, we really should be getting upstairs."

He was shown to the stairs leading up into the studio where he'd be interviewed, and before he could utter a word of thanks, Joey was off. Putting the man from his mind, and focusing again on his public face, he wandered onto the studio.

"Ahh, there he is. Mr. Redwood! Over here." Being waved over in such a friendly manner by a legend like John Crimson was going to take getting used to. He began walking over, and did a double take when he saw who the legendary reporter was talking to, over a shared dinner of steak, waffles, french fries, and of course, Scotch.
Professor Gilroy Redwood. His granduncle. He broke into a smile. If John Crimson was someone his Gruncle could stand to talk to, he couldn't be all bad. From the way they were sitting, close, friendly, and with a pair of Scotch glasses, they seemed like old friends.

John Crimson offered a hand as he made his way over. "It's nice to properly meet you, lad. Your granduncle and I go way back, and you're the only relative he ever talks about favorably."

Alex returned the handshake, smirking at his Gruncle, and then the reporter. "I usually go by Alex. Only this old fart calls me 'lad' anymore."

Alex grunted as he felt a hand slam into his back. He gave his Gruncle a look, and the old man shrugged. "What? I had to be sure you were really back. And that this crimson fox didn't take advantage of your naivete."

The aging reporter feigned offense. "Take advantage? Me? I'd never do that, Gil. You're practically family, and he's your grandnephew, which makes us…"

"Very distantly related." Alex said, smirking. The blood tie to his favored relative was already thin enough, he had enough trouble remembering his cousin's children, let alone all the family more closely related to his granduncle. He often mused at the irony. Redwoods were a particularly large species of tree. It was fitting his family tree was just as large.

At a hand signal from one of the crew, who were similarly garbed as Joey had been, but did actually have name tags, at least, John Crimson led Alex onto the stage. It was a simple setup. Two chairs, a table, and glasses of water. There were of course, many ways to interview people.

John Crimson however, liked to say he was 'old school'. For a reporter, Alex supposed this was as old school as it got. He took his seat, the old reporter took his, and the countdown began. Alex knew the drill, as he'd told them earlier that he'd seen plenty of these interviews before. Mr. Crimson would start them off, but it soon became obvious he was reading directly from the holoprompter.

"Tonight, on Poké News Network, we have a story from our home region of Unova! I, John Crimson, will be reporting on and interviewing one of the newest hotshot Trainers in our region; Alex Redwood, a supposed rookie with a winning streak, an epic adventure, and even an Elite Four level win on his record already. There's been a lot of talk about his exploits lately, and as always, we're here to separate fact from fiction. Shit from seed."

Hearing the intro for his own interview was almost surreal, and Alex wished he'd actually done more before agreeing to it. Three badges was nothing. That wish faded as one of the crew mumbled into their ear pieces, "Stay on script John. We're live. And manure is actually used to fertilize crops."

"Well that is disgusting." Crimson said, loud enough for the mic to pick it up. "Script!" came the voice again. The old reporter turned his focus on Alex then, and he put on his trademark smirk as he desperately tried not to burst into laughter.

"So Alex," he said, dropping formality as he'd requested, "Hows life? Two badges and a string of victories from here to Unova University. Not many people would believe it."

He let his smirk grow appropriately, before answering. John Crimson was stroking his moustache very obviously as he spoke, and he seriously considered a career in acting as he managed not to laugh.
"Three badges, actually." He managed in a weak tone. He coughed, and spoke stronger, louder. "Burgh was kind enough to allow me a challenge before I came here tonight." He paused, enjoying the look of surprise on the old reporter's face. Interviewees didn't usually drop a brand-new story at the start of an interview, but it seemed like John Crimson was more interested in the badge itself.

"Can we see it?" Alex stared for a moment, then shrugged, and nodded. The old man stared at it openly and spoke not-so-subtly, "Ooooh. Shiny. But wait, that's not a standard Burgh badge, is it? It looks different."

Alex blinked, wondering if he'd meant 'bug badge', despite the fact that the official name for it was 'Insect Badge'. "Erm. No, it's not. It's part of the League's new challenge. You ask the Gym Leaders to battle you with their original teams, and in return, you get a special version of their badge, showing you beat them."

The silver fox nodded, still very obviously stroking his moustache. "Interesting. You know, I battled Burgh once. Great guy. Great Trainer. We made a bunch of happy little clouds after the battle. Good times." Alex blinked. Did he just imply that he too had shared Leaf with the bug training painter? It didn't seem too hard to believe. His gym was right across the street.

"As for how I am?" Alex continued smoothly as the crewman shouted "SCRIPT!" once more, "Well, I've watched your show since I was five. I never thought I'd be on so soon…not before beating the Victory Plateau, at least. It's exciting. Thank you for having me."

John Crimson tried to sip his water smoothly, but ended up taking too much at once, and began coughing. "Ugh! What is this…tasteless garbage? Vinny, who was in charge of getting the Scotch out here?" The old man looked back stage as his crew manager grabbed a piece of white cardboard and wrote 'SCRIPT' on it.

As the crewmen tried to keep from laughing while on the air, John Crimson eventually recovered and found his voice again after sliding the glass of water away and turning back to squint at the prompter, "So...who was the herdest...oh, oh, hardest...who was the hardest leader you've faced, so far?"

Alex paused a moment, stroking his patchy beard, and biting his lip hard as he tried to focus, and not laugh. "Marlon. His Mantine had my Torterra at a field advantage, and a type advantage with Wing Attack. Terra was really hurting after that fight, but we managed to pull it out in the end."

"Always a good idea to pull out, lad." The crew burst into giggles and heavy sighs, but John Crimson continued, unfazed. They'd given up on shouting 'script' over and over.

"Terra...so I'm guessing that's the one you beat that Tyrantrum with at the start of the summer?" John asked again, this time apparently reading from a folder full of scripted notes that he'd failed to secret away before recording started. It seemed the prompter's script was too small for his old eyes.

Alex nodded, smirking. "Aye, I took the University's final test with a bit of a handicap, but we made it through." Mr. Crimson adjusted his seating then, and Alex felt the tone shift.

"Always a good idea to pull out, lad." The crew burst into giggles and heavy sighs, but John Crimson continued, unfazed. They'd given up on shouting 'script' over and over.

"Terra...so I'm guessing that's the one you beat that Tyrantrum with at the start of the summer?" John asked again, this time apparently reading from a folder full of scripted notes that he'd failed to secret away before recording started. It seemed the prompter's script was too small for his old eyes.

Alex nodded, smirking. "Aye, I took the University's final test with a bit of a handicap, but we made it through." Mr. Crimson adjusted his seating then, and Alex felt the tone shift.

A look of competence came over John Crimson, and Alex saw a spark of what had made him so famous flare to the surface for a moment. "The last time we spoke, you'd just returned from Draconis Mons after a fairly harrowing experience. I know that I, and many of our watchers have been eagerly
waiting to hear the full account."

Alex let his smirk fade, and then sighed, nodding. "I don't know about the full account, that would take quite a while, but if you have questions, I'll answer them with as much detail as I can."

John Crimson nodded, and continued, flipping very obviously through his folder and tossing cards he'd already read behind him while the crew tried not to laugh. "Very well... let's see...ah!"

He traced the words with a finger as he read them. "What we saw on that video was quite an aerial display. Many have been wondering; how exactly do you give commands to a Pokémon that's in the atmosphere?"

Alex chuckled, and wrung his hands out of reflex. "You don't really. What you need to understand is, at that point, we'd been living in that mountain for weeks. It was hot, uncomfortable, and what little food we could get was usually pretty nasty. Blaze couldn't leave the mountain, and I had to appear dead so that Lizardon wouldn't have a reason to attack him."

Alex paused, for a moment, then continued, "Blaze and Shruikan were doing whatever we could to beat that monster, and free not just ourselves, but the entire mountain. He was dominating all of them, even the dragon types. I told Blaze that, if he flew high enough outside in the sky, he'd eventually run out of air. I guess he remembered that, and figured he could get the advantage on his larger, healthier, and more experienced opponent if he fainted from lack of oxygen. But I didn't command him to do it. Once they Mega Evolved, they were fighting on instinct."

The old reporter grinned, and Alex knew what question was next. "I see," he said in his smooth baritone, "So I guess the next question is...how did a wild Charizard Mega Evolve?"

Alex gave a mirthless smirk, and then looked into the camera directly behind John. "Well, there are a number of ways. We've seen it before, but only in Legendary Pokémon, and only with a stone containing Mega Evolution energy. My granduncle and I theorized that Lizardon must've had a stone like mine somewhere nearby, and used it on his own. I think he could've been classified as a legendary Pokémon, more or less. His speed was clocked at matching known Latios and Latias, and he was, at heart, half dragon. He lived among dragon types, and literally dominated them. He was a unique case, to be sure, but he lived in a unique environment."

John Crimson gave him his best attempt at a knowing look. "I see. A good answer that, but I assume you've heard that many are starting to claim that this transformation was an Act of Arceus. Would you agree with that assessment?"

Alex sighed, "No. And even if it was, I couldn't really blame Arceus for bestowing the power. That Charizard was a product of our society. Some rich snot probably thought he'd be the next Champion because he had daddy buy him a unique colored Charmander. He probably lost a few battles, and went back to doing whatever it is rich snobs do, abandoning his Charmander."

Alex looked down at the floor then. "I've never seen so much rage in a Pokémon before, and when I started to beat him with my Shelgon, he was roaring at the sky in frustration. Even I pitied him then. You didn't have to be a Pokémon to understand that he was asking why he couldn't have been the Charmander who got a skilled Trainer. I don't think he wanted to end up on that mountain, powerful and alone."

He looked up at the camera again, staring it down. "But of course, none of the Arceans claiming
Arceus gave this power on purpose to wipe out humanity or something, were actually there. They didn't see that part of the fight. I did. And while I pitied him, truly, he was too far gone to ever be reached by a human. In the end, his rage consumed him. Act of Arceus or not, the deed is done, and Lizardon is a threat that Unova won't have to deal with. The Dragon Mountain is free again, and as long as humans have enough sense to stay away, it will remain free."

John Crimson sat, listening, fingers entwined as he let his interviewee speak. "I see. Bold words from a strong Trainer." He gave a slight smirk then, his deep tone taking on a humorous tint. "So, how is it you know the mind of the Alpha Pokémon so well?"

Alex chuckled, and shrugged. "I don't claim to, I want to make that clear. But, if I were in his position, with the power to help that abused, vengeful Pokémon in his hour of need, I would've done the same thing. Blaze was going to Mega Evolve anyways, as I planned to use the crystal, somehow, just not that early. We wanted to damage him more, then finish him quickly, but fate had other plans. All his evolution did was balance the scales, and Blaze came out the victor."

John Crimson nodded. "I see. It's getting late now, and I need a Reuben, so we should wrap this up. A few final questions. What's next? What should your fans be on the lookout for?"

Alex blinked, answering before thinking. "I have fans?" He knew he'd been asked for battles, autographs, Holociever numbers, but he always assumed that's just what you did when you met a strong Trainer. Fan clubs were for Champions, no?

John Crimson nodded, pointing at words only he could read within the folder. "Quite a few it says here, after that video of your battle. All around the world, in fact."

That was when it finally hit him. He was on, live, with arguably the most famous news man on the planet, being watched by uncountable numbers of eyes, in an uncountable numbers of countries. He resisted shivering as he felt a cold chill up his spine.

PNN had a presence everywhere, and TV sets sold cheap these days. Then of course, the PokéNet would have this interview on it tomorrow, too. He was on a stage, and a good portion of the Trainer world was probably watching him, either live or in the future. He took a deep breath, trying to ignore the sudden feeling of millions of eyes on him. His voice came out shaky, and he had to clear his throat several times.

"Wh-what's next...let's see. I'll be hitting the rest of the gyms, of course. Then...uh, Victory Road, and on to the Unova League. I'll challenge the Elite Four, so...I guess I would tell them to keep an eye on the next Champion of Unova." He spoke with what he hoped was confidence.

John gave his 'I'm-going-off-script-look' to Alex, and said, "Whooooee. Boys got some balls. Where does this confidence come from, eh? What training method makes you so much better than all the rest?"

"Well," Alex said, smirking, "I want to be a master, and I have the skills to be number one. But, I admit freely, that without my friend Nick's training plan, I wouldn't have a chance."

John Crimson tilted his gray head. "Nick?"

Alex waved his question off. "A friend from University, from my home town in fact. My first year there, he helped me devise a training regimen for my future Pokémon team. Diet, exercise method, everything. It was his goal to be a Gym Trainer, although, not in the Pokémon sense. He trains..."
people, mostly. I followed his plan to the letter, for months, and my Turtwig reached a level of power that beat a Tyrantrum. It's not for everybody though. In fact, you'd have to be insane to even try it… but I managed to survive intact, and so did my partner."

In actual fact, the plan had called for even more workouts than Alex had done, no days off, and a diet of strictly vegetables. He'd had to change it up a bit, as he would always be an omnivore at his core. Meat was as much a part of the 'circle of life' as any vegetable, and after raising a grass type, he didn't see a difference between killing animals or vegetables for food. It always came down to survival. You either ate something once living, or you died. Just like his Gruncle had said.

His response made the old reporter chuckle, as he clearly understood about a fraction of what he'd just said, and then he closed out the show with his usual catch phrase of 'Stay Classy Castelia'.

Before Alex left the set with his granduncle, John Crimson stopped him and said, "Lad, I hear from my loyal man, Danny, he's right over there behind the camera, that you have quite a lovely lady traveling with you." The old five-time Pokémmy winner handed him a dark bottle that was black, light blue, and streaked with gold. "Musk up with this before you see her. It's Luxray Musk. Illegal in nine countries. Makes women crazy."

Alex stared at the old man with the glorious mustache that was offset by his crooked bottom teeth, for a long time. Then, he pocketed the bottle, and said, "Thank you. I don't really need it though. I actually own a Luxray."

"Getting it from the source. I like that. It's smart. But trust me, sixty percent of the time, it works **every** time." John Crimson winked, as he watched the Trainer leave. Alex shook his head.

"He took the bottle." Professor Redwood said, grinning, and the two old timers laughed for a good minute before their aged lungs forced them into a coughing fit.
Alex thought long and hard about what he was about to say, ironically, more than he'd thought about what to say in an interview on live TV. He considered this next conversation one that was far more important.

He was on his way to his dressing room, where he'd left his bag, when he was suddenly tackled from behind. Feeling a familiar press against his back, he smirked, even as dainty hands covered his eyes.

"There you are…so…how did I do?" He felt Jess giggle against him.

"You're wasting time. Do you know how many Trainers he interviews weekly? You could be in Opeleucid by now." Her tone was teasing, but true. He'd been dragging his feet since coming back from the dragon mountain, and it became obvious why when he'd battled Connor.

Now he was dragging again, hoping to run into his friend and travel with him, the way they'd wanted to since they were ten, envious of Trainers in places like Kanto who started so early, without an education.

"I have one more thing do here. Wait for me at the Pokémon Center. I won't be long, and then we can get to Driftveil." He felt her nod, and then slide off of him.

"I'm going to fly to Nacrene, and get that badge, while you waste time." She bopped his nose, then walked away, swaying her hips on purpose. He shook his head, then continued on down the hallway, stopping when he heard a creepy noise from a dark hallway, leading down presumably to the basement, or sewers.

"Muuuuuuuuuuuuuuk." Alex blinked, watching as a literal herd of poison type sludge monsters came towards him. "Mmmmmmmuuuuuuuuuuukkkkk!" They cried continuously.

Then he understood why, and brought out the bottle of Luxray Musk. They stared at it, their sludge-eyes forming into hearts as they saw it. Finally crept out, he threw it down the hallway, and he was pretty sure the Muk it landed on was devoured by the others.

Alex was just about ready to leave the city, after that display. The scent of a Muk was what gave people cancerous tumors in their lungs. If you left it in a sewer, and not open air, at least. This wasn't the first time he'd seen strange places for Pokémon to live while in the city. It was definitely a unique place, with unique people. You couldn't walk down the street without seeing someone his rural townies back home would call 'abnormal'.

He stopped again, before descending to the lowest basement where the dressing rooms were. There was a…nagging sensation in his head, like a voice, but not, urging him to come towards it. Normally, his skeptical nature would make him ignore such a strange thing, but he could tell this one was tinged with worry, loneliness, fear, and many other negative emotions.

He followed the directions, and instead went to the penthouse of the building. Once he met the source of the nagging sensation, it guided him to another floor, where he surmised the employees of the PNN building lived. Living at work was illegal for many reasons, but only one group got away
with it, claiming that their 'beliefs' would be infringed upon if it wasn't allowed.

He didn't have to guess which group was using freedom of belief to hide behind and abuse their workers. It was a play straight from the Acrean's own handbook, a titillating read that his Gruncle had a copy of, and had let him peruse once.

Fuming inwardly after what he'd discovered in the two upper floor rooms, he once more descended to the basement, and the dressing rooms, two Pokéballs heavier. Several of the gathered aides were female, and rather attractive, but there was one blonde in particular who, in his opinion, came rather close to Jess in looks. A 'perfect ten' as the numerous male influences in his life would 'rate her'. She was very obviously holding a can of some kind of spray he had a feeling was made specifically to repel creepy men. She was about to say something, as she saw his eyes, drawn by pure instinct to her generous attributes, when Joey appeared between them.

"Oh, Hi Alex. Welcome back. We're here, as you requested." They were all very obviously still on edge, and eyed him expectantly.

He was almost tempted to try to poke fun at them, just to see the reaction, but then he remembered the conditions he'd found upstairs. He sighed instead, saying "What have these assholes done to you people?"

The tension bled from the room, and the blonde lowered her can. Finally able to tear his eyes from her glorious cleavage, he closed his eyes, letting the pause grow as he calmed himself.

This took about half a second as he looked back up at all of them this time, saying "I called you all here because I saw the conditions you're forced to work in, and wanted to help...but then I discovered the conditions I can only assume you're forced to sleep in, as well." The group shared nervous looks. They'd been expecting some strange sexually oriented request, but his tone was veering towards rebellion against their employer. At a normal job, loyalty might have kept them from considering. At this one, fear, and terrible living conditions, usually kept them in line. The blonde girl, despite her looks, was no idiot. She knew a way out when she saw one, and this Redwood had sway with John Crimson himself.

The blonde was definitely gorgeous, easily on par with Jess, but his momentary distraction was based on instinct as old as the human race, and those instincts had been controlled years ago, by pure willpower. His eyes did not wander as he met the eyes of each person gathered. The blonde raised a brow at him. They all did, as if they didn't quite believe what he said.

Alex turned to Joey then when nobody spoke, "I found your... 'apartment'. I'm guessing they gave you that 'room' because you're in charge? Well the door was unlocked, and there were some shady people in there, stuffing your Pokéball into a bag, as there was nothing else of value in there except a sleeping mat." Alex held out the Pokéball. "You shouldn't leave home without it. It's dangerous to go alone." Joey took the ball, and it shook, opening, and revealing a Raticate in a flash of white.

Joey knelt down to his friend. "I'm sorry..." He looked up at Alex, "You're right...my Raticate is the best, in the top percentage of Raticate actually, and he should always be with me. But..." He looked back down at his Pokémon, "The higher ups don't allow us to let them out, or have them on us. This building is owned by the Arcean Church, you see...and they don't allow Pokémon they don't control on their property...and since we all essentially live here and work fourteen hour shifts...we have no choice but to leave them in their balls."
The blonde spoke up, then. "Even our bosses don't have Pokémon, but John Crimson doesn't work enough to miss his Ninetales these days. I know that during your interview, he didn't have his Ninetales on him though. Like Joey said, they're...strict."

Alex had a good guess as to what she meant by strict. He was familiar with the Church's not-so-
subtle punishments, and knew what employees like these risked by asking for a raise, let alone
bringing in their Pokémon. The disciplinary actions given out by Arceans were well documented.
The Church, of course, denied any such actions were ever given out. They denied any negative
allegation, loudly and publicly. Even when hard evidence to the contrary was readily accessible. It
was a good bet that if they denied something, they were responsible for it. Often, one could
accurately guess what they were guilty of, as their denials were unnervingly specific.

More than that, they accused the people who reported these incidents of being the worst kind of
scum. Pedophilia, thievery, drug use, any seemingly negative, and usually baseless, accusation they
made was a total fabrication. Little more than an attempt to slander people. And yet, many humans
bought into it.

When a large group of people picketed your neighbor's house and told you they were a pedophile,
most people were gullible enough to buy into the lie. It was an effect of being in crowds. He'd
written a report on it, once, back in University.

Alex considered the blonde woman's words. "That means he doesn't have it with him now. Joey.
Let's go pay your 'boss' a visit."

Joey nodded, and the two left the room, and headed back up into the shooting studio. Arthur
appeared alongside Joey's Raticate, acting protective over all of them. He'd had trouble forming his
arms into swords, hence his use of Psychic and not Psycho Cut, but it didn't seem to be an issue now
that he needed them.

He was readying a Night Slash, and as their group reached the studio, a pinkish white energy
appeared within the dark energy on his arms, swirling into a Taijitu symbol on each arm.

Neither Alex or Joey seemed to notice the swirl of energy, but their audience did. Most of the
vacationing elite of Castelia were still there, partying in the now vacated studio, but John Crimson
was in a corner, with an ominous older gentleman, clad in a large cloak that looked like it had been
purchased from a movie involving one of those classic stereotypical villain types. Alex and Joey
walked over to them, with both of their Pokémon out.

The older gentleman was wearing a badge upon his chest that very obviously insinuated that he was
a 'holy man' of the Arcean Church as indicated by the golden symbol covering the front of it. What
was strange, however, was the fact that he was wearing a hood, indoors. A flash of red gleamed
from beneath the hood as the man raised his head to examine the two youths approaching him.

"Can we help you?" He asked, looking at Joey for an instant before moving his gaze to focus on
Alex. Judging by the stoop in his back, and his voice, the man was older than he seemed. There was
something familiar about him, in a manner Alex couldn't quite place. The cut of the robe's style, the
gold and white mantle that surrounded his shoulders and almost looked like a castle parapet.

Alex was still smirking as he eyed the man, despite his growing feeling of unease, "No, not really.
We have no need for any guidance in 'holy' matters. We're here to speak with Mr. Crimson." Alex
pulled out another Pokéball that wasn't his own, an Old School type design that was as fiery as the
Ninetales had led Alex into John Crimson's home, and Alex had figured out that the Pokémon had guided him there because 'Tailsy' as he was called, knew that his owner would soon need him. He'd guided him to Joey's Raticate as well. He knew better than to question a premonition of a Pokémon with latent psychic power. The ball opened on its own, and the Ninetales within appeared in a flash of fiery red light. He wrapped his tails protectively around John Crimson, and snarled at the strange old man.

The old man glared at the aging reporter. "Crimson...how dare you...you know the rules. Pokémon are not allowed at work, where they can be pushed around, and mistreated...you remember what happened the last time we allowed them. Leaving them at home is for their benefit."

John Crimson looked down at his Ninetales, who looked at him at the same time.

"Can you confidently say there is no truth in what I'm telling you?" The old man limped towards the reporter, and that was when Alex noticed he had a cane in his left hand, though he couldn't get a good look at it, the familiarity only increased, nagging at his brain to remember why this man looked so familiar.

"Pokémon contain unlimited potential..." He continued, in his smooth, charismatic tone made hoarse by age, "They do not belong in human buildings, confined to wandering small spaces for hours at a time, every day. You may think leaving them behind is cruel, but is it not more cruel to have them be bored? Or worse, abused by some stranger when you're distracted? At least their balls can be infinitely entertaining, and keep them safely in one place."

The old reporter kept his eyes on his fire fox. "I...I don't..." He was clearly struggling to argue against the relatively sound logic coming from the man.

That was when Alex realized who this old man was, as it all clicked in an instant. "Ghetsis..." He hissed quietly. He finally remembered. Long ago, when he'd been younger, he'd watched a video of the notorious villain, taken by way of camera phone, as he gave his first known public address, back when Team Plasma had appeared honorable, knightly, even kind.

He'd used almost exactly the same words, and Alex too had once thought that he'd had a point, even though he'd been young. It had taken his Gruncle to set him straight by reminding him of one simple truth that every Trainer shared, and as he remembered that lecture, he started to repeat parts of it.

"Some people have them as pets...others use them to battle...at times we play together...other times, we work together..." The cloaked Ghetsis, Joey, and John Crimson were now looking at him, and Joey was grinning ear to ear. Every kid heard this speech at one point or another. Professors the world over went to classrooms all the time, making sure the next generation understood the world they lived in.

Alex stepped next to the old reporter, and put a hand on his shoulder as he quoted his granduncle, "But the most important thing to remember about Pokémon, any Pokémon, is that they're our friends." He turned his glare to Ghetsis then, and Arthur joined him in standing between the man and John Crimson. "There are no bad Pokémon...just bad Trainers."

"Nonsense!" The shout from Ghetsis drew the small crowd's attention to their little corner once more,
and murmurs filled the air as they noticed the Gallade with the shining arms, and the strange symbol. Gilroy Redwood, who'd been chatting up several older ladies who were gray, but still far too young for him, also noticed the symbol, and stared at it in awe.

Few remembered now what the sign of the Unovan Dragon had been, long, long ago in Unova's golden age, but the Professor was a learned man with a specialty in ancient and unique Pokémon, and the myths surrounding them. He eyed his relative with a new respect. Perhaps he would be the one to do it...that would make the effort of setting this stage for him worth it. He didn't quite know what Ghetsis had on his belt these days, but given the rumors coming from the Victory Plateau, he had a good idea. He'd maneuvered his idealistic grandnephew here knowing that seeing the Church's working conditions would set him off. He was bonded to a Gallade, after all. If this kind of thing didn't tweak his sense of justice, nothing would.

Ghetsis continued, devolving into a rant as he slammed his cane into the mahogany floor of the studio. "Pokémon are meant to be used not played with! They're incredible sources of energy! Friends...pah!" He spat on the floor then, glaring at the arrogant Trainer from under his hood, oblivious to the looks he'd drawn.

Alex turned his hat backwards, but did not smirk. This was too serious. "I knew this 'No Pokémon' rule was tied to Plasma filth..." he said, glaring right back, "The rest of Unova has accepted that Team Plasma was wrong, hypocrite. Move on already."

Arthur's eyes glowed with Psychic energy then, and the robes on Ghetsis' ancient body flared up, revealing a full-size team of six Pokémon on his belt. He glared at Alex furiously as the rest of the room noticed this literal hypocrisy.

"I'll meet you outside, boy...I will not be humiliated by some child from who-knows-where..." He thumped out of the studio, and down the stairs, muttering, "Not again..."

The room went silent, and all eyes shifted to him. Alex understood then, nobody here was actually good enough to beat Ghetsis, a man known for abusing his Pokémon, and attacking civilians. They knew he was a criminal, but none of John Crimson's guests were willing to ruin their night by involving the police. He'd forced them all to follow his absurd rules through fear. Yet another Arcean tactic, straight from their 'Prophet' and his 'playbook'.

Alex hurried down to meet him outside, emerging to his Cofagrigus' Shadow Ball as soon as the building's doors opened. Luckily, Arthur was there with his Night Slash from his glowing, swirling arms. A second slash followed the first, slashing right through the tomb Pokémon's ghostly body. It fainted in a single hit, but Ghetsis already had his Bouffalant and Bisharp out. Blaze joined Arthur as Alex threw his ball, giving them the type advantage, as they'd practiced.

A pair of double Brick Breaks from Arthur into the charging Bouffalant and his partner damaged the Bisharp, but took down the bull Pokémon completely. Blaze finished off the Bisharp with a timely Flamethrower that was launched so fast mid-flight, it couldn't have been dodged.

Their training weights were off now, and they were benefiting from the long hours of wearing them in so many battles with Trainers on the road into Nimbasa, and then the Boulevard to Castelia.

As Ghetsis recalled his Pokémon, Alex did the same. This slippery bastard would claim the battle was unfair if he'd left them out during the next round. His notorious Hydreigon appeared, and Alex brought out Shruikan without hesitating.
Shruikan had been training solely for the Opeleucid gym, and the battle against the Gym Leader, Iris, and now his weights were off as well. His minor temper flare during the battle with Connor had been smoothed out, and now his sole wish was to evolve. Anything that would help him get experience, he did willingly, trusting his Trainer to lead him on the right path to attaining flight. All he could do now to honor his fallen father was prove that the strength he'd inherited was worthy of recognition.

It was clear Shruikan was unusual somehow, his granduncle had muttered something about 'Pokérus' when he'd examined his ball, but hadn't explained what that meant, exactly. Alex figured that only flames from a Legendary Pokémon like a Moltres would be strong enough to evolve his Shelgon, so he'd been listening carefully to the world news, waiting for a Tamer of such a Legendary Pokémon to appear within his reach. For now, a fight against this Hydreigon would be a good test of how much stronger he was after so many battles.

Dragon Trainers were common in Unova, and Shruikan had seen some serious battle time. They traded furious Dragon Pulses. Shruikan's was, by now, a ball of dense energy, similar to his teammate's moves like Energy Ball and Mud Shot or Water Pulse, but Ghetsis' Pokémon used a stream of that energy, wild and uncontrolled.

When Shruikan's attack blocked his so easily, it infuriated the barely tamed Hydreigon, and all three heads attacked at once. Shruikan used Protect, taking the hit, and then retaliated with another dense, swirling Dragon Pulse, scoring a direct hit on the other dragon. It went down slowly, but Shruikan followed up with a Dragonbreath, and ended the round.

Ghetsis' Drapion met a similar fate at the hands of Terra's Earthquake, and the old man laughed, then, in disbelief. "I didn't expect to need him for this. This was a routine security check for the building…it should've taken five minutes, and now I'm battling a boy in the middle of a street whose pushed me to this..."

It was a summer night, and the foot traffic on the Castelian street had stopped to gather around the two Trainers duking it out. The crowd had only swelled when it heard Ghetsis was involved, his hood now fallen, many people recognized him.

What nobody could believe was that another Trainer was beating him, and he wasn't even a Champion. Ghetsis had evaded capture for years because of his power, and now, he was being beaten in public by a nobody.

He hadn't intended this battle to last past that first surprise Shadow Ball, but he'd forgotten about the glowing Gallade. The crowd gasped then, as he called out his ace, and Alex stared in horror at the monstrosity they had all heard was long gone. A forced fusion of Reshiram and Kyurem by way of machines.

Alex knew what he had to do then as he recalled Terra, and brought out Shruikan. As hot as White Kyurem's Ice Burn was, Shruikan could handle hotter when he used Protect, and countered with a Dragon Pulse, hitting the abomination hard enough to stop it in its tracks.

Flames burned bright as the body of Kyurem connected to Reshiram's power, and it became apparent that Shruikan had merely stunned the Legendary Pokémon. As it readied another Ice Burn, it gave Shruikan time. The white half of the Pokémon seemed to be reluctant to listen, as if Reshiram was yet within, and aware of his chance at freedom. Kyurem had zero issues taking down a Shelgon, though. Even if it was at Ghetsis' order. The human was strong, and dragons respected strength.
The fused dragons had been slowed long enough for Shruikan to aim an attack at the DNA splicer forcing the two together, and break them apart. As soon as that happened, Reshiram was freed, and the monstrosity that was Kyurem roared, freezing the feet of every nearby human before it stomped off to the north, through the city, leaving a trail of icy terrain in a line straight to the Giant Chasm.

Life had just begun to return to the chasm, but now, it would surely vanish as the product of man's desire to war with each other, which had split the Unovan Dragon apart, returned with an icy vengeance.

Reshiram examined Alex for a long moment, and a noble, strong telepathic voice echoed in his skull, and his alone, "Come to the Plateau...the time has finally arrived...come..." It gave him a last look over, then blasted upwards in a fiery turboswirl, and headed north as well, but towards the Pokémon League, to his Tamer. The Champion.

Ghetsis stared at the shattered DNA machines. "You fool...what have you done? You've ruined any chance of uniting the Dragon!"

Alex just shook his head. "My truth is stronger than your skewed ideals. You only want the Dragon for power, but the more you take by force, the less you will truly have. Over and over you have been shown this lesson, by each of Unova's many Champions. It ends here. You will never have the chance to cause strife like this again."

Arthur held Ghetsis in place with Psychic as Alex freed most of his team from their balls. Cofagrigus and Hydreigon stayed, but the rest left. Not even prison was able to split up Trainer and Pokémon, which meant the guards of their prisons had to be serious Trainers, lest they be overwhelmed. The police arrived with their various partners, as Castelia was quite diverse, and Ghetsis was finally taken away in cuffs. Hopefully he'd stay there this time.

With the PNN crew now outright demanding the allowing of Pokémon teams in the building from their Arcean overlords, Alex decided to move on, assuming that their issue with the Arcean's rules was over.

Beating one of their enforcers made it clear that he was ready and willing to back them up against any threat they received from Church members, and with Pokémon of their own, he hoped the employees would be able to avoid feeling threatened. The Church backed down against public displays like Pokémon battles, which was the main reason they kept their 'foreign' employees from using them. Under no circumstance was it okay for an Arcean owned building to be visited by police. Their image could not be tarnished.

Alex met up with Jess at the Pokémon center, and the two began the long trek to Driftveil as he explained what she'd missed. They spent most of the journey battling, as always. When they finally crossed the bridge into Driftveil, they headed immediately for Clay's gym which each of them beat rather easily. The Boss of the Underground was old, but not quite ready to retire yet. A running theme with Unova's line-up of Gym Leaders.

It was on their way to the southern part of Driftveil that they got sidetracked again. A trio of men were battling in the old World Tournament building's main hall, as the stage was long since broken by the ferocity of the matches there. The new stadium was shaping up to be much more impressive. Still, this old building was used for battling, and today, the famous Triple Trouble Trio were offering a prize before they each finally retired.
Alex approached the men, and when he asked about the challenge, they revealed that they'd been battling all day, giving out their old elite versions of the Trio Badge, from their predecessor's era. The last ones had never all been given out, as the challenge had ended abruptly, and now these spares were offered by the League, until they ran out at least. They had one left, the pair discovered, and Jess sighed. Alex wanted it bad, she could tell, and his team was itching to battle strong opponents again.

She'd finally outpaced Alex in badges, but she saw the look in his eye, and knew he couldn't resist battling them. It was the perfect chance to train every part of his team. The trio accepted his challenge, offering him their final badge if he could beat them in three six on six gauntlets, one battle against each of them.

Alex agreed, and Cress was up first. He demanded a double battle, and so Terra and Leo teamed up to effectively wipe out his line up with a few Razor Leaves and Thunder Fangs. Leo covered for Terra's ice weakness by hitting those who might know ice moves first, and his Razor Leaf was strong enough to finish off most of them as well.

Cilan also wanted a double battle, which meant that Blaze and Shruikan were up. With a pair of Flamethrowers, Cilan's team didn't even have a chance. That left Chili, and his fire types, who wanted the glory that came with a one on one battle.

Such battles also came with humiliation, as Hydrus smashed down each of them with Water Pulses and Mud Shots. Blaze had been watching Chili's match, as he had wanted to battle other fire types, and he was instead astounded to see the little Mudkip he'd never seen as much of a threat, or ally, prove how strong he'd become.

Chili then questioned Hydrus' strength, saying that only Rare Candies could've gotten him to such heights so quickly. Alex denied his accusation, and flashed his recently acquired badges. Between road battles and his weight training, Hydrus had become a legitimate threat, and a key battler on his team. Eventually, the hotheaded brother withdrew his accusation, at insistence from the other two. Accusing a Trainer of using such things was serious, and incidents without proof were not taken lightly. One could end up in just as much trouble for falsely accusing a legitimate Trainer.

On the other hand, the police and the League had methods to test for such things. If a Pokémon received more than ten candies at once Trainers were issued a fine, and lost their ID, which effectively trapped them, for life, in their region. Trainer IDs were the only way to travel freely between countries connected by the League.

With Striaton's Elite Trio Badge in hand, he and Jess moved on to Mistralton, where Alex finished Skyla, and her team of aging flying types single handedly with Leo, giving him some much-needed experience.

Blaze had wanted to fight, of course, and hone his aerial skills, but Leo needed the experience more. Alex brought his fire lizard out against her Skarmory and Braviary, and Leo handled the others with rather impressive Thunder Fangs. Jess used her Flaaffy, who evolved into an Ampharos after beating Skyla as well.

After getting so far in one day, the pair decided to rest in Mistralton, and while they enjoyed sleep and a dinner, Connor spent the night catching up to them after detouring to Virbank City, for the Elite Toxic Badge, and some training for his Garchomp.

Gren had handled Clay, and now Tonitrus, his Elektross, had swept Skyla's gym as well. She
remarked that she hadn't seen so many strong Trainers in one season since Team Plasma first formed, and when Connor asked her to elaborate, he learned that he had finally caught up to Alex and Jess.

They were away from the Pokémon Center, sparring against each other, alongside their Pokémon. They barely knew the basics of martial arts, but they had once taken such lessons simultaneously at their home town's dojo. Though they sparred hard, their movements were sloppy, compared to a professional, and lately sparring together rather than training specific team members had become more enjoyable, as it often led to other things.

Each of their Pokémon was having a battle south of the Mistralton Pokémon Center, atop the large hill. Their Trainers were fighting each other too, and Connor didn't know what to make of the strange sight. He'd never seen a Torterra and a Serperior coaching a Gallade and a Braixen as they battled each other.

It was fortunate that Alex and Jess noticed his presence, as the two had been eye-locked for the past minute, and the amateur karate sparring was devolving into something else. Any later, and her brother would've stumbled on something that would have probably started another grudge match between he and Alex.

"Connor…you finally caught up, hmm? Are you after your water crystal, then?" Connor smirked, and shook his head before responding to Alex.

"I have a new one. Keep yours. You'll need it more than I will." Alex felt slightly guilty at taking it now, as he had intended to return it. He hadn't even let Hydrus use it, though his Swampert clearly wanted to. Alex scratched his hat, and then turned it forward.

Connor continued, "Each Trainer only needs one crystal…usually…and they can Mega Evolve any Pokémon of a matching type. At least, that's how they do it in Gaulia. Kalos is catching on, but they still rely on Mega Stones. So really, keep it. I don't mind."

Alex listened, shrugged, and then smirked. "Good, you know, I'm glad you'll let me keep it. I learned about these crystals when my family vacationed in Alola for a few weeks, and since then, I've been trying out some new...techniques...with them."

He held up a crystal like Connor's then, but instead of blue, it was brown, had the ground symbol within it. "I was actually given this by one of the Island Kahunas...even though I didn't have a Pokémon, and made it clear I wanted a fire type. At the time. Or maybe even a grass type. She just shrugged, and gave me this. I didn't realize what it was until I came back from that mountain...but I convinced my Gruncle to send it to me when I passed through Undella."

Connor's face had regained the similar look he'd been wearing in their last battle, a persistent frown, as Alex had spoken. "Wait, so one of the Kahunas just gave you a crystal?"

Alex smirked, "No, I helped her hatch a Mudbray. In fact, I spent several days of my vacation helping her out, so that was my reward." He'd been too young to battle, and had accepted the crystal regardless of the fact that he was unable to use it. His Gruncle had liked it, so he'd let the old man hang on to it. Until now. Evidently it was not a 'Z-Crystal', or so the Professor had told him, which probably explained why the Kahuna had given it away relatively easily. His Gruncle had theorized that Z-Crystals might also be capable of triggering a mega evolution, but these Plate crystals were different. They came from a much stronger source than Necrozma.
Connor crossed his arms. "Well, go on then. Show me this 'new technique'." He was clearly skeptical that Alex had created anything truly new. Finding undiscovered Mega Forms was one thing, but new Pokémon moves were an entirely different trick.

Alex chuckled, and responded by summoning Terra over to them, and after mega evolving, the giant grass turtle used the crystal's power to combine grass and ground energy into a single, balanced ball, turning his Energy Ball into a dual-type attack.

Connor just stared. "That can't be legal…"

Alex shrugged. "Clay did something similar against Blaze when I brought him out to counter the steel type he was using." He smirked, lifting his hat slightly. "After that, I found out that anyone participating in the League's new challenge is allowed to use whatever moves they wish, in whatever manner they please. Technically speaking, what I just showed you is classified as a 'Z-Move'. It's something the Alolan Trainers do. Mine just don't seem to require interpretive dance to use."

Connor's frown deepened. "Those moves require motion to unlock them…so how are you bypassing that?"

Alex smirked. "You'll find out. My Gruncle gave me some insight about this tournament back when I was learning. He said that it was unlikely that it would ever start up again, but wanted me to know what his master had taught to him anyway. I combined that with the dense energy technique, the one you use too, and that's the move. I asked Clay about it, and he said anything goes in this League challenge. Only the strongest Trainers have a chance of beating it."

Connor recalled his Greninja, and left, still not accepting that in so short a time, his rival had gotten so far ahead. Then he recalled the plan, and rightly surmised that since getting his full team together, Alex had begun battling as many people as possible, and trained by himself constantly.

Since returning from the mountain, Jess had joined him in said training, and her team had gotten stronger as well. She left Alex atop the mountain to train, and went to prove it to her brother. They were long overdue for a match, and she needed to practice using these new dual typed moves as well.

The next morning, as they were leaving Mistralton, and getting ready for another day of hard Trainer battles, Connor joined them again. "I owe you two an apology. I've been acting strange since I got back."

He looked at Alex. "I forgot a long time ago, about our promise to travel together…but you're right, we're rivals second and friends first. Teach me what you know. Both of you. Help me catch up." Evidently, Jess had finally, and literally, beaten some sense into her brother.

Alex accepted his request for help immediately, as did his sister, and in the first battle they came across, Alex used Hydrus, and mega evolved him for the first time. Awed by how strong his combined water and ground type Water Pulse was, Connor asked again how legal this could be.

This time, Alex's opponent explained. She was in the new League challenge as well, it turned out, and ever since the battle against Lizardon had gone viral on the PokéNet, Trainers with such crystals had been using them as Alex had, with varying degrees of success, the world over. The trend was catching on, Professors were scrambling to record all the new Mega Forms being discovered, and as the crystals grew more popular, it seemed they would be even rarer.
As Connor continued to watch Hydrus, who stayed mega evolved for most of that morning, he noticed something about the dual type attacks. Other Trainers used them as well, but they looked different from Alex's. That was when Alex decided to stop for lunch, and explain what he and Jess had discovered about those kinds of attacks.

Only Pokémon of a dual typing could do them without a partner, and when in a double battle alongside another Pokémon of similar strength, a Pokémon with only one type, like Luxray, could combine attacks as well.

With these new attacks, Alex was usually unstoppable. That was largely because his Pokémon had each learned a move that formed their energy into a sphere. Each of them had learned how to condense it, with Terra’s instruction.

In Terra his Energy Ball had gotten stronger with the ground type, and now in Hydrus, his Water Pulse had as well. Blaze had been practicing forming his Flamethrower into a condensed sphere as well, but without a flying type move that could form a sphere, it remained a single typed attack. As far as he knew, only a move like Aeroblast would suffice, but they didn't have a Lugia around to teach that to Blaze.

Leo also remained without a dual-type move, though with his strength and speed powering his Electro Ball, he didn't seem to need one. He’d considered combining Leo and Blaze as fire and lightning, but balancing two spherical moves from two Pokémon was beyond them. For now.

Arthur was a walking symbol of his typing balance, even if he didn’t know Psycho Cut yet, and Shruikan wouldn't be one until he evolved. His Dragon Pulse remained as strong as ever though. Arthur had focused on trying to make his Shadow Ball a physical move by condensing it, but ghost energy was hard for him to control.

His orb was smaller than the others, but seemed to do more damage than an ordinary Shadow Ball, at least. It left him wide open for a counter attack though, as Delphi, Jess’ Braixen, repeatedly showed him.

"You know," Alex said after pausing to eat lunch, "Nobody ever examined Greninja's new form for a change in type. Judging by those shuriken, I'd say he was part ice."

Connor raised a brow at him, "Oh, and your Torterra was examined?"

Alex nodded. "My Gruncle examined both him and Hydrus, and both remained part ground upon Mega Evolving."

Connor looked at his Pokémon, then shrugged. "I would think the dark typing would make more sense."

Alex smirked. "So try teaching him Dark Pulse, and find out."

Connor glanced at his starter. "Gren, Dark Pulse." The Greninja sighed, and then formed a ball of dark energy in his palm. He continued to eat with his free hand.

Alex chuckled. "Weak. Very weak. You need his full focus for combining the types, he's still mastering this move." Hearing him, Gren's eyes narrowed, and the ball of swirling energy tightened, forming into one similar to his Water Pulse.
"I think he's saying he knows how to do that." Connor said, mockingly.

Alex's smirk widened. "Alright, now combine Dark Pulse and Water Pulse in one single attack." Gren stared at him for a long moment, then looked away. "That's what I thought." Alex said, still smirking.

Connor sighed, "His ice shuriken are just…a trick he knows. They're not a dual-type move."

Alex nodded. "They're an ice type move. Meaning he used ice type energy to turn the water into ice. If he balanced that energy with water, then they'd be even stronger." Alex looked at his sleeping starter. "Terra. Show him how it's done."

The large turtle rose with a yawn, and then began stomping away beside Gren, to find a spot that could handle the destruction this training would cause. Connor was busy examining his Pokédex, and then made an 'aha' sound as he displayed the page on the only known Greninja capable of mega evolving.

Alex shrugged. "Maybe you're right. In either case, combining darkness and water should be quite strong...if you can manage to do it."

It was Connor's turn to smirk triumphantly now. "Watch me." He joined Terra and Gren, and had his Pokémon focus on Shadow Pulse instead of his Ice Shuriken.

They came to Icirrus later that day, around noon, exhausted from the constant battling on the previous route. They rested at the center then, and Alex left at dusk to challenge the local gym, not wanting to wait until the next morning.

He found Jess and Connor already there as well, and discovered what had held them up. The gym was opening for the first time since Brycen retired, and now his son was the new leader, an ice-type user, like his predecessor, his journey around the world's Leagues had just ended, and his team was young and strong. Arthur and Blaze bashed them down, winning the first Elite Freeze Badge.

It was in the old style, from Brycen's era, as nobody had ever won his final badge from the last League challenge, that had preceded this one by decades. Connor and Jess received the newer version, and they were assured that all of them would qualify for this challenge.

Alex tried to remember just when Brycen had retired, it had been long before his time, and it made him realize just how many Trainers had failed this challenge before. That didn't seem to be the case now, though. Everywhere they went, they met Trainers with crystals and elite badges from all over. Victory Road looked to be quite the ordeal.

Most people skipped through Icirrus on their journeys, but during University, Alex had learned that the old gym would be re-opening in late summer. He had expected to have eight badges before that, but the mountain escapade had slowed him down, and the timing was now perfect. They moved on to Opeleucid then, and Alex won handily against Iris with Shruikan, who was as enthusiastic and powerful as Blaze was after so many battles. He was ready to evolve, but he could be patient. He knew Alex was looking for the right flames to evolve him.

Jess had caught and evolved a Snorunt with her extra Dawn Stone outside Icirrus, and now her Frosslass and Empoleon swept the dragon type leader as well. Gren was used again, as he had been with Clay, and his Ice Shuriken along with the newly combined 'Dark Water Pulse' swept Iris' team as well. After three consecutive losses, she announced that she was retiring, and left the gym to find
itself a new leader on its own.

Confused, the gym Trainers, of which there were many, explained that the Elite Four's Marshal had just retired as well, and Iris was probably off in the city with him somewhere. Still feeling kind of guilty for temporarily knocking out the last gym of the region, and the most popular, as it was right before the Victory Plateau, the three Trainers set out on Victory Road immediately with their new elite Legend Badges.

As they traveled, Alex instructed his friends on how to properly balance the energy of a dual-type attack. The key was to have your Pokémon summon two large forces of each type, and then combine them in a balanced swirling pattern called a 'Taijitu'. His granduncle had claimed it was the ultimate embodiment of balance, and as far as shapes went for their moves, it had done rather well in keeping the energies involved stable.

Thanks to the amount of energy drawn by these attacks, they could only be used as a finishing move, as they left Pokémon exhausted. It was as Alex was explaining this, his voice ringing throughout every cave in the mountain, that a figure appeared by their camp.

He was getting on in years, but his hair was still a red mahogany color, streaked with gray. He wore a lab coat, under which he had a blue shirt, and between the edges of the coat, a crest could be seen hanging from a thin rope around his neck. It was the very symbol Alex had been describing.

"So, you think you know about the Taijitu moves, hmm?" The man's voice was dripping with sarcastic wit. "What makes you think you kids are serious Trainers?" They held up their collection of badges, and the man scoffed.

"Right. Badges. There were eight to get in Kanto. I earned ten." He shook his head. "I know you, Alex Redwood, and I know your granduncle. He hasn't told you anything about this challenge, has he? Just enough to be dangerous. Of course."

Alex eyed the stranger, who'd invited himself to their fire, "And who are you then, if you're smarter than my granduncle?"

The man grinned. "I'm Professor Oak, one of the people who started the challenge you claim to know so much about." He looked around, and then lowered his voice. "I'm going to educate you, as I can't erase the knowledge you already have. So pay attention, because none of you are supposed to know this yet."
Unova, Part 2

Victory Road - Unova Region

Professor Oak had the three Trainers spellbound as he told them of his adventures as a Pokémon Master. He had caught so many Pokémon, and catalogued so many regions, he considered himself a Professor, like his grandfather had been. Like his grandfather, Gary Oak was considered a 'brilliant mind', compared to Professors like Redwood, who were rumored pedophiles.

He went on and on about his superior child-free pedigree for a full minute before Alex interrupted, "So you know about Taijitu moves too? Knowledge is power, but a demonstration is more effective in this instance."

Gary Oak smirked at the challenge, and avoided the Trainer's gaze entirely, looking as smug as ever. "Right. You get the point, good job, Redwood. I was talking about this Challenge, and how you knew just enough about it to be dangerous. Courtesy of your relative."

Alex rolled his eyes. After that tirade, he couldn't let the insults stand. "I wonder how much you truly know, if you're gullible enough to buy into baseless accusations on the word of a cult."

---

Alex waited, patiently, as Connor and Jess smirked. Both of them had seen Alex's skills from his granduncle's theorizing first hand by that point, and this so called 'Professor' was talking big enough that they were legitimately doubting his identity. Gilroy Redwood was no pedophile, and in actual fact, the idea of combining energy in an attack was brilliant.

Professor Oak continued anyway. "This League Challenge is designed to test your aptitude as a Trainer. Usually, Trainers need to beat five or six regions before they start messing with Taijitu moves, because that experience is usually required for their proper use. You're from Unova though, a region where Trainers start when they're older. I saw you in Castelia against Ghetsis, and at each of your Gym battles since. I've watched all three of you. You're all worthy candidates."

The three Trainers shared looks as this famous Professor told them how great they were. They focused again as he mentioned the League Challenge, and their Gym battles. Alex raised a brow expectantly.

The Professor continued. "Alex, you will find your next step after beating the Victory Plateau. It's the hardest League in the world, and a Champion from there is considered in a level all their own. If you beat the Unovan Challenge, you will be worthy of asking the Unova Champion about the Swamp." Alex wondered at his mention of the Swamp. Was it the Great Swamp that was south of Unova? It seemed likely, but he would wait to find out.

The Professor turned to the siblings then. "Connor, your challenge remains in Kalos. Practice what Alex has shown you, until he completes the challenge here. Then return to Kalos and prove yourself. You'll be worthy of the Swamp then as well. Have Alain tell you about it."

He turned to their redhead then, "Jess, you have another year of learning. You'll find your path to the Swamp as well, but the boys will beat you there. Once the summer ends, you need to focus on honing what you have learned, and by the time you graduate, you'll be ready to join them."

The siblings thought on what the Professor had said, and they both replied, "Alright. But we're
staying and challenging the League after Alex. We didn't work for these badges for nothing."
Professor Oak shrugged. "It won't really matter, and you'll understand why, after Alex wins it. If
indeed he can."

Alex rolled his eyes. After talking with several Trainers on Victory Road, he knew exactly how the
Victory League was structured for this particular test, and he was planning on relying heavily on
Arthur to counter the ghost, dark, psychic and fighting types. Once he made it through them, he
needed to face down one of the four Champions, who would be using one of the Legendary
Dragons. If he could win, he would take the defeated dragon, hopefully after a short rest, to face N,
the reigning Champion, who would be using the opposite dragon to the one he would ally with.

If one could beat N, the League would recognize them as worthy of the Champion title. Hundreds of
Trainers had already tried by now, and all had been soundly defeated, unable to control the power of
Reshiram's truths or Zekrom's ideals against N, who had mastered both, supposedly.

Alex had an idea of what he needed to do to beat N, but Gary Oak didn't need to know that. So he
played along with feigned ignorance.

Seeing the disbelief in the 'leader' of this little trio, Gary grinned. "Let me see your Pokémon. All of
them."

They appeared simultaneously, as each of them had been watching the scene from within their balls.
The Oak name was a legend to Pokémon, as all who listened to Celebi's stories knew of his
grandfather, Samuel Oak and the Trainer who joined him from the future to save the time traveling
Forest Guardian's life.

The Professor eyed each of them, from Alex's Terra to Connor's Garchomp. He nodded then. "As I
suspected. All three of you are indeed capable of becoming candidates for the trials of the Swamp. In
there, you'll find real power. If you have what it takes. Do as I told you, and you won't regret it."

The aging man got up and left, then, and the journey through Victory Road continued. Arthur saw
the most use, and had by this point become as physically strong as Terra or the others, but still had a
weakness in being limited to using Psychic. Once they arrived at the Victory Plateau's building, Alex
went in first. The three had agreed to heed the Professor's words, even if he'd come off as a bit of an
ass. He was still Gary Oak. The man was no fool.

Arthur made quick work of the first three members of the Elite Four, despite their use of Mega
Evolution. Type advantage kept him strong, and between Brick Break and Night Slash, his
opponents rarely lasted more than a few hits. The victories only made him stronger, and Alex had
him rest up before each match. Through dark, psychic, and ghost types the Gallade had fought
bravely, the only unusual thing about their challenge was the fighting type expert.

His door had remained locked after each challenge, and before his third, Alex had wondered why.
He'd wanted to get the fighting types done with earlier, but now had to face them last. Of all the
other types, even ghost, he knew the fighting types would be the roughest on the primarily psychic
type Gallade.

Fighting moves were fast and hard hitting, and even though Arthur wasn't weak to them, Alex knew
his Psychic would take two hits to finish each of them. Which meant several painful hits on his
Gallade. He was simply better with physical attacks.
As the door to the fighting arena finally opened, Alex strolled in to see Nick, his own physical trainer, sitting in classic 'Bruno-style'. The battle began without a word as Alex realized what this meant. He'd beaten Nick soundly in Icirrus, and now Nick would retaliate. Hard. His intent was on stopping him. Right here.

The two had often done this sort of thing, if Alex struck back against him at all, the retaliation for it would be severe and over the line. Alex decided it was time to show him just how outclassed he was. He'd just beaten three of the Elite Four's best teams, after all. Surely his old friend didn't stand a chance.

Arthur took down Machamp by making it punch itself four times, then came Hitmonlee and Hitmonchan. Hitmonlee had beaten on Arthur hard before Psychic brought him down, and the Sky Uppercut from Hitmonchan had been surprisingly effective. Arthur went down hard after that, but managed to hang on just enough to stay conscious. He didn't want to stop fighting.

Arthur was clearly drained, and Nick had three more Pokémon. Not willing to tire out Arthur completely before the battle against the Champions, he switched in Blaze, whose Wing Attacks, with the weights off, were all but unstoppable.

"Next time..." Alex said as Mega Blaze finished off Nick's Medicham he'd nicknamed 'Shifu', "Arthur will take you by himself. You will see without a doubt that the apprentice has become the master."

It had been a running joke with them, that Alex had been Nick's 'apprentice' for years, but now he was making it clear who was where on the skill ladder, and judging by the fire in his eyes, Nick didn't intend to stay below him. Alex knew he'd always have a worthy challenge against him, but true to his word, he'd only use Arthur from then on.

Alex eyed his Psychic type partner, wondering not for the first time if he should've waited for an Espeon, or found an Alakazam. Alolan Alakazam were the same type, and presumably had stronger 'stats'.

But no, he thought as the Pokémon met his stare, and gave him a tired thumbs up, this Gallade had almost soloed the Elite Four. There was no shame in having Blaze finish up the last three. Not this early in their journey. He knew he could rely on each of his team to do their best, and Arthur had certainly done that. He could ask no more.

On to the Champion he went, further up the man-made mountain that resembled the Celestial Tower in design. He came to the first level, and saw Hilbert, one of the Champions of Unova. Because of how long the Elite Four needed to recover, Connor and Jessica were forced to wait, so they decided to watch Alex take the challenge.

They'd reasoned that he should go first, to see if what the Professor had told them had been accurate. It had created an awkward moment though, when they bumped into each Elite Four member in the League's Pokémon center. They explained to the siblings that their teams needed a lot longer to recover after their battles, as many of them had Mega Evolved, only to be brought down by the strength and type advantage of Arthur's attacks.

By the time the pair returned from their brief intermission, they found Alex in mid battle against Reshiram. The Legendary had already taken out Shruikan, but Blaze was holding his own, thanks to his fire resistance and dragon types moves.
He had just managed to hit the giant white dragon with such a move, unbalancing it. It was in that moment that he had the Legendary off balance that he Mega Evolved with the fire crystal, and after that, they were on relatively equal footing. The siblings were simply watching in awe as they shared a plate of nachos they bought from a strange trio of food sellers.

Head to head, Reshiram would always outclass Blaze, even when he Mega Evolved like this. It was the speed he gained in addition to the power that had them more than matched. Alex had his hat backwards, and had the look he got when he finally got the chance to battle a serious Trainer all over his face. He'd grown up watching the Champions of Unova save their home countless times, and if he was honest, Hilbert was his favorite. Behind N, of course. N had traveled to many regions on the eastern part of their continent, and his fame had only cemented his status as one of the best, easily on par with Cynthia, who had won the last World Championship, cementing her status as the strongest Trainer alive. If N had bothered to use more than Reshiram and Zekrom, that title might have been his.

"Now, corkscrew into a Dragon Tail!" Because of his speed, Blaze could swirl in with a high-speed attack from any direction, and be gone before the Legendary had time to use anything more than a Fire Fang in retaliation, which usually wasn't a problem for Blaze.

Hilbert's mama hadn't raised a fool though, and he countered, hard. "Fire Fang."

Reshiram's maw opened, catching the attack, and whirling effortlessly through the air as he used Blaze's momentum to send him hurtling into the closest stone wall of the Champion's Hall. Blaze was hurt, but not down, even though his tail had a slight burn on it from the sheer heat of the Legendary Pokémon's fangs.

For a moment, Alex had wondered if Reshiram's flame would be enough to evolve Shruikan, but he had fainted long before they could find out. He was strong, a good battler, but he couldn't face such raw power unevolved, with only Protect. Dragon Pulse had been too much for him, and there was no way he could attack faster. Not with a shell that heavy at least.

This was the seventh such exchange Reshiram and Blaze had gone through.

Hilbert sighed. "We're too evenly matched." Alex reached for another ball from his belt as he nodded in agreement.

"Hilbert. I'm making this a double battle. I'm bringing in a water type, and I'm telling you about it. Just to make things interesting. What do you say?"

The Champion raised a brow, then shrugged. "Fine. Grass it is." He lifted his own hat, so similar in style to Alex's, and revealed a smirk. "Caesar, come forth."

There was a green flash from behind the Champion, and a massive Serperior appeared, slithering onto the battlefield. He was at least twice the size of Serpi. The Champion's smirk shifted to a grin. "Mega Evolve."

He held out a crystal of his own, green, and with the grass type symbol embedded in it. It was similar to Alex's, the one he used when he mega evolved Terra, and as the grass snake began to shift in form, Alex didn't waste time either. Hydrus had appeared when Caesar had, and now the mighty Swampert was mega evolving as well with the water crystal that had once been Connor's.

Caesar hadn't changed too much, his body was still serpentine, but now he had a crest of green that
almost looked like armor, and it flared into a pair of green wing-like protrusions on either side of his large, coiled body. His tail had become razor sharp as well, and Alex had a feeling a Leaf Blade from that thing might just be enough to one-hit his water type. Hydrus looked ready to take it however, his new, massive form certainly looked sturdy enough.

"Dragon Pulse!" Alex watched Reshiram, waiting for the attack, but he saw Caesar using it as well, and swore.

"Hydrus! Ice Beam!" The two pulse attacks had combined, but as they hit the beam of ice, they were stopped cold as type advantage did its work. "Blaze, Dragon Claw!"

Hilbert ordered Reshiram back, expecting the Charizard to come after the Legendary again, but he had focused on Caesar instead. Guessing rightly that he'd become part dragon, Blaze's claws struck home, and he torched the giant grass snake with a Flamethrower for good measure.

Seeing this, Reshiram had charged Blaze, blue flames forming in his mouth, swirling into a ball of fiery death.

"Ice Beam!" The attack from the Mega Swampert hit hard, as the Legendary dragon type had forgotten him for a moment. Reshiram spiraled down as the beam hit it, and then caught his balance. Alex frowned for a second, then silently swore. He was part dragon, part fire…ice wouldn't be his weakness.

Reshiram turned his focus on Hydrus, and as Blaze was busy with finishing off Caesar, who was barely fending him off with his singed tail and Leaf Blade, Alex knew no help would be coming for Hydrus. That was fine though, he knew Hydrus was as defensively strong as Terra, if not stronger. Surely, he could take a fire attack.

The blue flames returned to the maw of the Legendary Pokémon, and fired seconds later in a brilliant burst of blue and white. They hit Hydrus hard, swirling around him, and Alex knew he was in trouble when the large mud fish fell to a knee, and struggled to rise. Blue Flare was no joke, apparently.

There were ways through it though. "Earthquake!" Focusing again, Hydrus slammed the ground with both massive fists, and the entire plateau rumbled as the guided boulders from the attack shot towards Reshiram.

The Legendary Dragon was already trying to ascend, but it wasn't quite fast enough. Using Blue Flare had taken a lot of fire power, and the vast white Pokémon's tail had become unlit for a moment after the attack, which was when Hydrus had countered.

It was Reshiram's turn to be slammed into the rock face of the building now, and as it slowly rose from the large crater, it looked up to find Blaze, a smirk not unlike his Trainer's on his face. Caesar had finally fallen, it seemed. A final Dragon Claw ended the match.

Hilbert clapped slowly, as Reshiram rose from the rubble, and examined Blaze, who had let the power from the crystal go as the battle ended. The two eyed each other, and Reshiram glowed then, its tail's flame surrounding both of them. It shifted to a deep blue color as the heat intensified, and Alex started to speak up before he saw his Pokémon's face.

"Fire types aren't always injured by Blue Flare." Hilbert said, approaching Alex. "In fact, Reshiram
can heal them with it, if it chooses to do so." Alex nodded, staying silent, choosing instead to watch the two.

Hilbert continued. "You've won the right to use him now, for your battle with N. He'll be using Zekrom. If you can defeat N, you will be the newest Champion of Unova." The Trainer smirked, shrugging. "We had so many Champions already. We needed to make things more difficult, for this."

Alex smirked as well, and then shook Hilbert's hand as it was offered. "I'd expect nothing less from the Victory Plateau. It's been an honor battling with you. We should have a proper six on six some time." He recalled his team after healing them up, and even offered Reshiram an Elixir.

Alex needed him at full strength for the duel with N. He gave a small wave towards his spectators, all two of them, and then proceeded further up the plateau, to the very top.

He could understand why the Champions had beaten Team Plasma. If Hilda was as strong as Hilbert, no team of gangsters would be able to stand against them long. N was supposedly stronger than both of them, the alleged new incarnation of Unova's ancient hero. Alex had been looking forward to this battle for years.

As he reached the top of the plateau and looked around, he saw the familiar green hair of Unova's strongest Trainer. "Alexander Redwood." The voice was as charismatic and strong as it had sounded on the TV, where Alex had first heard it so many years ago.

A Trainer like N was, of course, famous and loved by the Unovan people, and he'd had many region-saving adventures, often stopping rampaging Pokémon, or shady people from abusing the power of Unova's many Legendary Pokémon.

"It's about time you got here. I must thank you for freeing Shiro…I'd been looking for Ghetsis for months, after Kuro and I discovered Kyurem was missing. When Shiro went missing too, I had a feeling he was trying to fuse them all again."

Alex shrugged. "It wasn't that difficult…he's not the Trainer he used to be." He looked up at Shiro, and smirked. "I'm glad I was able to help the embodiment of truth."

N nodded. "I can sense the conviction behind your personal truth… impressive…you might actually prove challenging."

Alex hadn't bothered with shoving Reshiram into a ball, yet, and had instead freed him entirely of the one Hilbert had used. This only seemed to make the white dragon like him more. He'd even spoken, using his latent psychic powers, to thank him for keeping him out of such a confined space.

His Gruncle had been right about Legendary Pokémon. They were simply too strong to keep confined to a ball. Trying to shove a force of nature into a pocket dimension was just a bad idea.

This was why Trainers weren't allowed to catch Dialga, or Palkia, who had jobs to do and universes to bind together. Other Legendary Pokémon were fine, however. As long as what they caught wasn't integral to the balance of the planet, the League didn't mind you using them.

To this day however, Professors could not explain why some Legendary Pokémon seemed to appear in multiple places. For example, the breeding habits of Moltres, Zapdos, and Articuno were still unknown.
The fact that you couldn't entrap them in a Pokéball however, did not matter to some Trainers. Some Trainers became 'Tamers' and were able to summon whatever Legendary they had bonded with and proven worthy of wielding, at will, no Pokéball required.

Dialga and Palkia were different, as those who tamed deities were classified as 'Holders' according to his granduncle. The gods of Time and Space did indeed have Tamers, but they wished Trainers wanting to battle them the best of luck. Being able to travel freely throughout space and time made it difficult for those who would challenge the Holders of Time and Space. They could be anywhere, at any time, and they sure hadn't seemed to stick around Earth.

They did show up when summoned however, and the only one who could summon them was Arceus…or a clone of Arceus.

N proved his own skill by summoning the other half of Reshiram, Zekrom, whom he had nicknamed Kuro. Like Alex, it seemed he'd not bothered with a Pokéball. "Kuro, his truth is as iron…let us forge it into steel…or more likely, break it."

Zekrom's roar was the air, and Alex felt a shiver up his spine from the Hyper Voice. A dragon and electric type was a fierce combination, and the only counter to it was a Pokémon like Shiro.

Alex couldn't tell which dragon was stronger, as he eyed the two of them in the same place. In fact, the more he glanced between them, the more he was convinced he was missing something obvious.

"Fusion Bolt!" The Champion shouted. Alex raised a brow. Was he really going to start that contest? This early?

"Fusion Flare!" Alex responded, and the two Legendary Pokémon bashed against each other uselessly. Reshiram was unharmed, but Zekrom it seemed had, by pure chance, caught a burn. Seeing that losing was now a real possibility, N got serious. There was no point in using Blue Flare or Bolt Strike, not when dragon type moves were so much better.

"Dragon Pulse!" The two Trainers shouted at once. The Legendary Dragons responded, but different attacks came out. Shiro's Dragon Pulse had changed, becoming dense, and swirling with the energy of the dragon type move, and the fire type power he was drawing from his new Tamer's crystal. This was a new trick, but one Alex was happy to observe, contribute to, and save for later. If his Pokémon could summon half the energy required themselves, and simply take the other half from a crystal, even single typed Pokémon could manage to use these moves. Theoretically.

It was too late for N to counter, and Zekrom took the hit hard, landing before N in a smoking heap while Shiro floated above, almost seeming to grin. Often had darkness bested light on this plateau, for many Trainers had truths they believed in, but few even knew what ideals were. N's ideals, what governed his very training style, were stronger than most, and thus, Zekrom responded just as strongly as Reshiram had to N's own truth.

As the years had passed, the Champion had forgotten what his truths were. He sat on this plateau all day with Zekrom, usually, having forgone any other Pokémon. His ideals kept him stubbornly opposed to carrying them around in Pokéballs, and often the partners he'd had gladly offer themselves for capture, if it was by him, were outright ignored.

He'd refused them all, and eventually, they had left. The Pokéball was a device that had been designed by corporations, but had been commissioned by the Pokémon League almost two centuries
ago. In those two centuries, training had changed entirely.

The pure convenience of being able to take your Pokémon wherever you pleased, and then store multiple once the pocket dimension system was applied to the PokéNet, couldn't be matched. Multiple Pokémon could travel with their Trainers all over the world, rotating in and out, but N hadn't wanted that. Alex had no qualms about it though, and his full team of six Pokémon was very obvious, even under his heavy black, brown, and green jacket.

N stared at his belt, and his eye twitched. Reshiram watched, smirking knowingly. He'd finally found the right Trainer to move N past this block...or so he had thought when Alex had beaten Hilbert. Shiro was now convinced that this Trainer had what was needed, what they had previously thought only N possessed, the power to right the wrong of the ancient brothers, and once more unite Unova, and the surrounding regions of the 'States' into a cohesive, enlightened whole, as it had been before it was fractured by war.

N had come so close...but in abandoning his Pokémon team while claiming to hold to his truths, he had ultimately failed. No one had been able to de-throne him however. It seemed that finally, someone had arrived who could.

Shiro felt his counterpart stir, and slowly reach this same conclusion. Bonded as they were, N sensed it too...and grew angry. "Hypocrite..." He snarled, "You sit there with a team you're not even using, abandoning them in favor of my Shiro...you're like every other Trainer...you abandon your enslaved friends for a Legendary Pokémon at the first opportunity!"

Alex's brow rose to Spockian heights, as he'd just noticed N's rage. He'd been enjoying the battle, but something had shifted. Instead of bouncing back, Zekrom had risen slowly, blue sparks rolling across his body, his power being fueled by N's newest ideal, to never be replaced. It was twisted from his original ideal of never binding Pokémon to balls, but Zekrom was already bound to him.

For battle, they were connected on a deeper level, and this connection was now affecting the Legendary Dragon. It figured, for Kuro had always responded easiest to darker emotions. All Alex felt from Shiro was calming peace and light.

That was when his eyes widened, a sudden realization completely distracting him from the battle. "Kuro, Bolt Strike!" With the rage that fueled the attack, Alex didn't need to bring up type advantages in his head.

If that hit Shiro, he might survive it, but would most definitely be paralyzed. And even one missed move in a battle like this meant defeat. No, Alex decided, that move needed to miss. He took a page from Hilbert's book.

"Fire Fang." Shiro's maw blazed to life, and it dodged its counterpart's furious strike effortlessly, and then struck at his outstretched arm, clamping down on it hard with his fangs.

Kuro tried to switch arms for his Bolt Strike, but by the time he had, Shiro had already spun, and thrown him into the building that housed the only entrance down. Luckily, the viewing for this match was via satellite, in the highest definition of course.

Since this new challenge had started, Leagues all around the world had been in a constant state of competition, and all matches against Champions were regularly broadcasted.
The siblings took advantage of this, and were watching their friend from the Pokémon Center as the Elite Four recovered, and they all shared Leaf bowls and nachos. Jess had been chatting to, and eager to challenge Hilda, who was rapidly becoming good friends with the lovely redhead. She'd made such friends, usually always powerful female Trainers, all along their travels through Unova. Having the chance to befriend a Champion, a woman who'd tamed Zekrom, was one Jess couldn't pass up. It helped that she genuinely liked Hilda.

She eagerly agreed to battle, though the Champion had warned it would be a six on six, and not against Kuro, as he was busy and would need to recover from a fight like this. Every Trainer taking the new challenge had failed to beat this League over the course of the summer, reinforcing the League's title of 'hardest in the world'. Alex had ignored that title however, for he'd already started the Unova challenge, and didn't have time to visit a new region.

Beating Hilda, Nate, or Rosa would solidify the sibling's records as serious Trainers, but ultimately do little more than add to their Elite Four wins. The title of Champion, for this challenge, could only be given once, or so they were told. N had remained unbeaten all summer, living up to the legend he had built for himself.

Watching Kuro in his enraged state, Alex began to understand Professor Oak's words. If his new idea, the product of his realization, actually worked, the challenge for the Unova region wouldn't be able to be completed more than once. He briefly wondered how Jess would ever prove worthy enough to reach the aforementioned Swamp, but resumed his focus on the battle as Kuro attacked again with a Dragon Pulse. This was it, then.

Alex smirked, and Shiro responded with his own densely compacted Dragon Pulse. He'd figured out how to do it after one demonstration from Terra, proving just how exceptional Legendary Pokémon could be. Alex had wondered if Arceus had the same similarities. He was a deity no? He had to already know something as simple as condensing a pulse attack. Right?

Alex had Shiro combine his power then. Being a Legendary Pokémon, he could raise a crystal's worth of dragon energy easily. The Firium crystal compensated, and his next Dragon pulse was once more part dragon, part fire type, and more than Zekrom or N could handle after all the intense battling.

Shiro's balanced dual-type attack again brought Zekrom low, and he crashed again into the Victory Plateau's harsh terrain. He struggled to rise, and then fainted. The red fury from N was cut off, and his eyes lost their enraged glow. N was still furious however. "This isn't over! You will not replace me!"

N dropped into a martial stance, but Shiro descended between him and Alex before N so much as moved. With almost a field between them, Alex did not hear what Shiro told N, but after, N calmed, and walked over beside Shiro.

Alex had gone to Kuro, deciding that earning its trust now would help with his idea. It worked, and the deep black Pokémon thanked him as Shiro had when he was given a Max Revive, and an Elixir as well.

"You did it." N said. "You're the new Champi-" He paused, as there was a beeping from his pocket. After checking his Holociever, Alex's started ringing as well. It was his loving girlfriend, of course, as always with impeccable timing. He didn't care if N was interrupted, he'd still become the new Champion.
"Jess. My reason for existing. What is it?" She was having none of his attitude though, distracted as she was.

"If you two are done slamming dragons together up there, we need the Champion down here. Kyurem is on a rampage. Evidently it wasn't able to freeze the Chasm again, and now it's furious. People are dying, Alex. We need the dragons."

N and Alex shared a look, and then N sighed at his device, and shut it down, ending the contact. "You heard them. They need the dragons, Champion. Go. Save Unova."

Jess made an 'o' face as she overheard N, and then looked excited. "You won!? The smoke hasn't cleared yet, we didn't see the end!"

Alex winked at her, then closed the phone almost entirely. It wouldn't end the call, but N didn't need to know that. He also knew Jess would kill him if he didn't share something this good.

N looked depressed, almost pitiful, as he realized he wasn't needed anymore, that he'd somehow failed at being Champion. Alex patted his shoulder. "They'll need you, too. Don't sell yourself short, you're the hero of Unova. My victory isn't going to change that. You didn't fail at your duty…you just didn't finish what you'd started."

N blinked slowly. "What…I started?" Alex pointed at the two dragons then, smirking.

They had told him they approved of his plan, after a brief telepathic conversation, and their good mood was infectious. "With them. You kept them separate, all these years. They're meant to be One, you brilliant fool. Until your Team Plasma awakened them, they were fine existing apart. Now that they're awake, and at peace, they wanted to become themselves again. You woke them up and calmed them into a state of balance, but simply never finished unifying them, and thus fell out of balance. Without unity, one side eventually takes over the other. For you, it was the darkness."

N stared at the new Champion. "What?"

Alex simply chuckled. "Hop on Kuro. I'll show you what I mean." Alex hopped on Shiro, and together, the four of them soared down the Victory Plateau. Alex had a feeling a certain fiery redhead would be calling whoever owned those satellites that had broadcasted their match, and demand they follow them. She needn't have bothered however, as the recording had continued, and would continue, until N fully declared Alex the Champion. That meant the automated drones would follow the current Champion, until the title was verbally transferred.

That was their excuse for it anyways. Pokémon League monitoring was a boring job most days, and the men monitoring the intense match would take any excuse to not cover the drudgery of the minor League challenges after this battle resolved itself. Or so they would tell their boss.

In reality, it was the League cameraman's desire to take a break during what he assumed would be another loss to N, and leave the cameras on the Champion and the Challenger, that would lead to the recording of such an historic moment.

Kyurem wasn't hard to find, as its path of destruction was obvious. The frosty dragon had returned to his old stomping grounds, Lacunosa Town, a strange little place that had lost so many children to Kyurem, they had legends about him.

Instead of simply abandoning the settlement, as anyone with any sense would do, the people had
stayed, at the behest of the Arceans, and their Church. They had claimed that if the townspeople but believed in Arceus and gave their lives to his Church, as they did, he would shelter them from the monster.

Over time, children stopped playing in the woods because of the town's high walls, technology had advanced, and portable tech was all anyone that young cared about as they were, of course, watching Pokémon battles live, all over the world. This peace is what had lent the Arcean Church credit for a 'miracle', for after they'd established a small church in the town, Kyurem hadn't taken anyone. The people of Lacunosa had become devoted Arceans, and with that devotion, Lacunosa had become a very…strange place, as the base of the Arceans in Unova.

They'd always wanted a base in the east after infecting the western coast, and they'd finally gotten one. They claimed to have facilities the world over, but Alex had discovered during his research that the majority of them were actually entirely empty buildings, run by literally nobody. He'd even visited one, out of pure curiosity. The lights had been on, but nobody had been inside the lavishly decorated rooms.

Lacunosa Town had, as the Arcean's base, received an influx of Trainers from the Fornia region. Nobody knew what they were up to, only that they frequently visited the Chasm. This is how Kyurem became embroiled in an enormous battle that led to the deaths of hundreds of young Trainers. He'd stomped over to Lacunosa from Nimbasa, and hadn't done much the first pass through. Absofusion drained him, as it was man's attempt to forcibly pair the boundary Pokémon with his other halves by way of technology. That would never lead to a complete restoration of the One Dragon, but Kyurem had not bothered to tell Ghetsis, or anyone else, that fact. Kyurem rarely, if ever, spoke.

Once he'd discovered his Chasm however, he'd entered a state of rage. Lacunosa Town was a perfect incubator for the Arcean's strange and oppressive style of belief and living, as they'd moved in and taken advantage of the walls, and turned the once peaceful town into a functional prison for those who had once called it home. Despite their apparent conversion, the original residents had been treated to the poor living conditions suffered through by most Arceans. Naturally, those who wanted and enjoyed higher quality living than thin mats on hardwood floors tried resisting, and that resistance had led to imprisonment, in their own town.

From Lacunosa, the Arceans had ordered their aspiring Trainers to visit the Chasm regularly, and catch as many Pokémon as possible. The wild ones there were quite strong, thanks in no small part to Kyurem itself, and upon seeing its friends being captured en mass as it returned, the ice dragon had made the Trainers responsible pay for it. Catching a few that jumped out of the grass was one thing. Those Pokémon usually wanted a human to train them. What the Arceans had been in the process of doing had been systematic, thorough, and all but robbed the area of its natural inhabitants.

Kyurem, enraged, had headed for the Arcean Trainers as they ran in terror. He caught them easily with Glaciate, and then turned his rage on the not so distant Lacunosa Town. Devout Arceans were slaughtered, along with their guards, as Kyurem's Glaciate all but buried the town in ice. Something similar had happened to Opeleucid, and while many people would be safe for a time in their homes, or be able to be thawed free in the coming days, many would simply die in that ice. It was why Unovans didn't upset the balance between the dragons, and why Ghetsis was now serving life in prison. But who knew if he'd actually stay there.

Alex and N arrived on the scene to find Kyurem nestled in an enormous crater of ice. Because of the town's tight knit construction, it appealed to both the controlling Arceans, and the wandering
Kyurem, who made it into a new icy cavern.

"We have to smash the top of that before it freezes completely. Or it will never melt." N spoke quickly, guilt all over his face. Had he been paying attention, he would've surely gotten here sooner. The Victory Plateau gave one a large view of the entire region, and one could even make out Castelia's spires from the top.

"Shiro and I will handle it." Alex said, knowing the fire would be quicker. "You go in through the 'entrance' by the Pokémon Center."

N wanted to salvage this town, but to Alex, it was a den of corruption, now frozen, that he'd just as soon let freeze. He didn't like Arceans, but they were still people. He also needed Kyurem, and if his plan succeeded, the town would likely be saved regardless.

Shiro's blue flames melted the ice near-instantly, the only reason he hadn't used Blaze instead, and Kyurem was below them. It roared up at them, and as it did, Zekrom flew in with a Bolt Strike, upper cutting the hollow ice type in the jaw.

Alex winced. They needed dragon type moves here, or at least fire. Electric attacks were not very effective, a fact made evident by Kyurem's slow turn towards Kuro and N. Alex summoned Blaze then, and together, he and Shiro used Flamethrower to hit the dragon and ice type.

Alex had taught it to Shiro in favor of Fire Fang, as it was much stronger, and more useful for a Pokémon with strong special attacks. Kyurem went down hard under the twin torrents of flame, and Alex dropped to the ground, running towards N and Kuro.

He looked at Zekrom as it spoke into his mind, then glared at N. "You have a what? Give it to me. Now!" N looked confused for a moment, before Zekrom informed him of what the new Champion needed.

"What? I'm not giving you that! I need it…" he let his sentence trail off. Alex had beaten both Hilbert and himself. Technically, he now was the Tamer of both dragons. Which meant the crystal was his.

Sighing, N handed over a deep bluish-purple crystal, the symbol of the dragon types embedded within it. Dragon types were the rarest of Pokémon, and naturally, the pieces of a fallen Arceus' dragon plate were just as coveted, and rare.

They were so powerful, that an order of Dragon Masters had arisen for the sole purpose of keeping those crystals from the hands of dark minded Trainers. They didn't stop them from taking other crystals, though they confiscated them when they could, but the dragon crystals were by far the most important to keep safe.

Alex took the crystal, then looked at N. "You'll have this back, I promise. I just need it for a minu-

N interrupted him. "Keep it. I no longer need it."

Not knowing what to say, as he was technically correct and pointing that out would be awkward, Alex simply nodded. "Very well…I'll be sure to use it wisely."

He turned to Kyurem then, who had almost freed itself of the Flamethrowers, and even Zekrom's Fusion Bolt, which lanced from his maw in a streak of electricity. "Kuro, use Dragon Pulse, you too
Shiro. Terra, Energy Ball, Hydrus, Mud Shot, Leo, Thunder, Shruikan, Flamethrower, Arthur, Psychic."

He called out each of the moves, and each of his team appeared as he called them. He weaved their energies together with the Dragonium, forcing the Legendary ice dragon down under the force of so many powerful and varied attacks. Alex approached, holding the dragon crystal in his palm.

He showed it to Kyurem, and the Legendary Dragon paused in his struggling.

"Cease." Alex said, and the attacks stopped. The dragon-ice type rose, looming over him. Alex nodded then, smirking, and turning his hat back, only to find that it was already backwards. "I understand." He said as he adjusted his hat, pretending he'd meant to do that, instead.

The ground shook as ice erupted and grew all around them. A gateway of sorts appeared by the entrance N and Kuro had used, and Kyurem walked backwards, slowly, then hunched down into a battle stance. He was inviting the human to face him. Properly.

"Shiro, Kuro, you will help me battle him." The two dragons stepped forth, and it was on. Kyurem's Glaciate was the first move, and it assumed the only move it would need. "Blue Flare!" Shiro's flame burned through the attack, protecting Zekrom from his weakness, and doing minimal damage to him.

Fire always beat ice. The area not protected by Shiro was completely frozen however, and the move had one-hit Arthur, Blaze, Shruikan, Leo, and Hydrus, but not Terra, who had latched onto the grass crystal's power in time to mega evolve. His ability protected him from most of the damage, and he was still raring to counter-attack.

"Heal them." Alex said, pointing at his frozen team. "Terra." Alex blinked at the refusal.

"What? Oh." He saw that Blaze had actually hung on as well, and was now restoring himself, for a time, with the fire crystal. That restoring heat from his Mega Form was spreading to the rest of the team as well. All but Arthur and Shruikan had endured, and not fainted, but had simply been frozen. Once Blaze thawed everyone free, Alex recalled his team, and refocused on Kyurem.

The insanely powerful dragon-ice type roared, and the two dragons roared back. Ice shot up behind them, locking them in, and once more, fire ice and lightning met in a collision of power. Alex glanced at what Kyurem had wrought, and though the circular town seemed more like a prison, to his eyes, it could almost be a stadium.

Later, he would learn that there had indeed been eyes to feel, as this time he was live, and very clearly seen. He'd made himself presentable for the League Challenge, and now, looked like he'd never lost a game of 'who's the protag' as he stared down the giant hollow abomination. The League's floating camera monitor continued to record, despite the ice. It was strong, but clear enough to see through. Kyurem wanted those present to witness this battle.

"Shiro, Dragon Pulse... Kuro, Mega Evolve." Shiro launched his newly perfected dragon move at Kyurem, who took it head on, and looked seriously injured by the attack. A hollow hole had appeared in his head, in the crest of ice, but the unbalanced spirit would not be cowed so easily. As a Glaciate was launched in response, it was blocked by the still cone shaped Dragon Pulse of Mega Zekrom.

Zekrom needed to be able to balance his energy as Reshiram had, or Alex would lose balance as well. Allowing the mental contact between himself and the black dragon, Terra gave the knowledge
freely, trusting the Legendary Pokémon to use it for the good of them all.

"Now Kuro, balance your energy. Dragon Pulse!" A ball of electric energy swirled in the dark dragon's maw, and it was joined in a Taijitu swirl by the dragon type energy that was coming from the Dragonium, and fueling his Mega Evolution. "Shiro. Mega Evolve!" Again, Kyurem was unbalanced by the massive dragon and electric attack as it struck home. Kuro had focused on drawing electric power, and the Dragonium had given the rest.

And now Reshiram joined its counterpart at the same level of evolution. Their forms did not change much, save that they now each had a balanced swirl of their counterpart's coloring on their torsos. The Dragonium was providing the energy for all of this. It was, after all, only two thirds of a Pokémon he was evolving, and each of them drew from the same stone.

Now in their true forms, the two Legendary Dragons forced their empty, frozen shell into submission. Kyurem stared down the Trainer who had managed to subdue him so handily with the separated avatars of truth and ideals. A deep voice rang through the colosseum-shaped crater of ice, "You...have nerve...thinking to unite what has been broken..."

"That was a long time ago..." Alex responded, holding the Dragonium crystal up to the Boundary Pokémon, "It is time for you to become One once more. Humanity will never sunder you again. Not while I yet draw breath, anyways." Kyurem looked ready to attack for a moment, then nodded, lowering its head and touching its snout to the crystal. It too, mega evolved, and of the three dragons, his form changed the most.

Kyurem had always been front heavy, with small arms and powerful legs, like a Tyrantrum, but now, its arms became longer, sturdier and ended in claws similar to his feet, the 'wings' on its back became even lengths, and rose from the base of his neck, which had also lengthened, and come up from his torso.

His body was now more akin to that of a Tropius than a Tyrantrum, and as Mega Kyurem turned its gaze to its two counterparts, the three spoke as one. "It is time."

Each of Kyurem's 'wings' shot towards Reshiram and Zekrom, connecting to the Taijitu swirl on their stomachs, and the Dragon Crystal flared again as they used its power to once more become whole. The flash of blue and purple dragon energy fused them, and blinded those who tried to stare into the fusion. Finally, the light faded. Alex lowered the arm he'd used to shield his eyes, and gasped at what he now saw. The Unovan Dragon had returned.

Mega Kyurem had provided the boundary needed to keep the two other parts of itself in balance, and now once more, a golden age would rain over this land. Its typing had been fused by dragon, and thus had been lost in the final reforming. Fire, electric, and ice were now balanced in one draconic looking being who was as light as he was dark.

Alex and N knelt, awed that they were in the presence of this legend, appointed by Arceus to safeguard their continent so very very long ago. He had four limbs still, and his wings sprouted up from the base of his neck. The scales upon them were as white as Reshiram, but the webbing was as dark as Zekrom.

The Taijitu symbol, in black and white, was imprinted on the dragon's forehead. His snout was long, and had two long tendrils that dangled down from it. His claws were fire, his breath sparked with electricity, and the crest that surrounded and formed his horns, and ran all the way to his tail, was
made of pure ice. N stared at Alex, conflicted, and yet balanced, in his dislike and admiration for this random Trainer. For this Champion of Unova, worthy of the title of Hero.

The great white scaled dragon, whose underbelly was also black, leaned down to Alex, and in his golden eyes, he saw the eternal balance this being had enjoyed until humanity ripped him apart for a few millennia. "You are my Tamer now, human. See that you do not ruin my perfection by splitting me apart again."

Alex smirked. "Don't worry, Tao. I shall see to it you remain whole." Enjoying the sound of his newest nickname the dragon grinned, and Alex focused on reviving and healing his team. His bag's hoard of items made him a walking Pokémon center, but no amount of Max Potion could pass for genuine sleep at a real center.

He kept looking up at the massive dragon, and then realized why the statues in the Opeleucid Gym were not shaped as Reshiram and Zekrom had been. They had been carved in Tao's image, clearly, but evidently humanity had forgotten.

With a glance, the First Dragon melted the ice his empty shell had created around Lacunosa Town. As the ice faded, the inhabitants slowly came out of their shelters, and many of the outraged Arceans were stopped mid-tirade as they witnessed the return of Unova's Dragon. He radiated a sense of calm that not even Arcean indoctrination could overpower.

Alex felt it most keenly, as he and N rode upon his long back. The energy from this dragon made him feel like he wouldn't need sleep for a month, so closely were they bound now. That bond was a safe, balanced center he could always come back to, if he focused, a gift that would be invaluable in the trials to come.

Tao flew them northwards, and then to the east, over the trail of destruction Kyurem had caused, and though many of the humans that had been caught in his ice attacks thawed harmlessly, as they approached the Giant Chasm, they saw that many others had not. The initial Glaciate had been truly powerful.

Tao landed in the icy crater now, the long tendrils from his snout touched the bodies of many fallen Pokémon as they thawed, and then retracted in sadness. "What happened?" N said, astounded by the damage.

Tao snorted flame, then looked saddened again as his eyes were drawn back to the destruction. "The Arceans happened. This was where your predecessors split me apart, so very long ago. It was where the shell of myself, Kyurem, was most at peace."

It arrived, and found a group of them capturing Pokémon who had returned to live here, and dragging them back to Lacunosa Town..." As Tao spoke, the memories flooded into the heads of N and Alex. They saw what Kyurem had, and N grew angry.

"How...dare...they..." He said, sharing in the rage Kyurem had felt. Alex felt it too, though he was more saddened than anything.

"That explains it then...with Ghetsis holding White Kyurem, the Arceans assumed the Chasm would be unguarded. Who knows how many Pokémon they managed to haul off before I split them apart..." Alex hopped down from Tao's back, and looked around, sighing. "Can you do anything for
The long-bodied dragon lowered his head next to his Holder's, and seemed to smirk. "Do you think I would have come if I could not?" Alex blinked, and the dragon raised his head again, surveying the land. "Once, Unova was golden. The land was bountiful, and Pokémon and humans lived in harmony...it took many millennia, but despite my absence, you managed to achieve that balance again. More or less."

His wings raised into the air then, revealing a white circle pattern of scales on his right side outlined by black, and a black circle on his left that needed no outline on his white scales.

The tendrils from his snout grew longer, and moved back to link to both circles, and the dragon began to glow with golden light. "Behold," he thundered, "The return of Unova's Golden Age!"

His wings flapped, the power dispersed into the ruined landscape, and the very dirt began to shift in color. Grass returned then, appearing gold, and new trees budded from the seeds of the ones that had fallen to Kyurem's unbound rage. With time, the Chasm would heal.

Alex and N returned to the dragon's back, and as they ascended, the two humans watched with awe as the dragon continued to smirk. They were so very easy to impress. The literal golden glow was spreading from the Chasm, from Humilau, to Mistralton, the land would once more enter a seemingly literal golden age.
Unova, Part 3

The Dragonspiral Tower - Icirrus Town, Unova Region

The return of the Unova Dragon had been televised, thanks to the League's cameras and their auto-pilot function. Naturally, it ended up on the PokéNet a few hours later, and soon the world knew. Alex Redwood had brought the Unovan Dragon, Tao, back into balance.

Once more the land took on a golden hue, and peaceful emotions reigned across the region. A holiday was declared, and everyone took the day off, bringing the region to a standstill, as the reformed dragon returned to the Dragonspiral Tower with the new Champion upon his back, after leaving N at the Victory Plateau by his request.

John Crimson was there, of course, eager for the story, only to have Alex remind him that it was all readily available on the PokéNet. He did however, mention that one of the Arceans at Lacunosa had tried to saddle him with a bill for damages, with a price tag that was a good number of zeroes above what anyone sane asked for, or even needed, with the amount of materials their currency could buy. In a world where clever businesses made use of Pokémon, such things could always be gathered, or crafted, with speed and efficiency that rivaled machinery.

Most of the damage was ice related, and since the ice had melted in Kyurem's absence, Alex didn't see how the damage was his doing. They'd brought on Kyurem's rage by capturing its friends en masse. Since Kyurem had been discovered, the general rule amongst Unovan Trainers was to not piss it off. Most did this by avoiding the Giant Chasm entirely, which had worked, and helped it to heal. Some Trainers between the Chasm and Lacunosa had lost their lives, but through Tao's power, many of those trapped by Glaciate had been successfully revived.

Given that most of the injured were Arceans, they were, of course, looking to sue someone. It was what they did, whenever anything even remotely bad happened to them, or their group. This tendency to go after whoever they could pin the blame on legally, and win, had led to most groups of note avoiding the zealots entirely. Nobody wanted to deal with them, or their crazy habits, for good reason.

In the past, the Arcean's legal team had 'miraculously' found documents that would often support their legal battles, and it was no coincidence that most of the judges who presided over their legal cases were rich enough to retire not long afterwards. The tactics of bribery, blackmail, and planting evidence didn't always work, but they worked often enough, and even if their involvement was discovered, anyone going after them was labeled a bigot, and the Church itself claimed said person was infringing on their spiritual beliefs, and thus labeled them 'intolerant'. Rather than attacking organizations, the Arceans had entire divisions of their government devoted to picketing houses of naysayers, and spreading foul rumors about the inhabitants. Pedophilia was a favorite accusation, but thievery, corruption, and even incest made their appearances. Thankfully, they hadn't had time to pin Alex with any of that before Tao had carried them away.

All in all, it was a frustrating way to end such an epic day. The whole challenge against the Four had taken most of the morning, Shiro and Blaze had fought well into the afternoon, and by the time Alex had beaten N, and Kyurem had attacked, the sun had started to set.

Deciding that these zealots could try to bill him on literally any other day, he had taken off on Tao
with his literal childhood hero, N. The One Dragon headed to his old seat of power, from which he had once dispensed wisdom and knowledge to Unova's Trainers. Alex had always wondered what the Dragonspiral Tower had been for, but he had no idea how integral he would be to reviving it.

As they came upon the large, castle-like structure, Alex felt the dragon sigh as his calming mental baritone echoed in his skull. "I knew it had fallen into disrepair...but this will take some time and effort to fix."

Alex had given the dragon a comforting pat, though he had no idea if it had been felt. "Worry not. I'll help, where I can. I'm sure they will too." He said, pointing to the milling crowd of Unovans below. Icirrus was flooded with people, and they all cheered as their Dragon God of legend returned home, at last.

The media beat them there, somehow, and John Crimson repeatedly asked Alex to explain the concept behind his fusing of the three Legendary Dragons. He had to explain several times before the silver fox and the reporters around him grasped it enough to parrot back to their audience.

It was fair to say that most Unovans had no idea how Alex had balanced the dragons, but most didn't seem to care right then. The One Dragon had returned. Unova's Golden Age had started again. Many of them had been waiting for this for decades now, but they had expected it from N.

Nobody outside the Trainer world really knew who this 'New Champion' was, only rumors that he had supposedly beaten both Hilbert and N, on top of the Victory Plateau's Elite Four. A few recognized him from PNN's interview, but John Crimson had already interviewed three other up-and-coming Trainers since. His had been easily missed. It was always available on the PokéNet though.

The celebrating of the One Dragon's return lasted a week, the last week of August, in fact. Almost a year to the day since Alex had first caught Terra. Alex spent that week by Jess' side as much as he could, putting off asking N about the Swamp. If they had to part, he could deal with it later. Mostly, they clung to each other as often as possible, in an endless game of hiding from her brother, who caught on to their antics almost immediately.

With the final two parts of the Victory League's special challenge now unable to be completed, Connor and his sister challenged the Elite Four, but had to settle for Nate and Hilda respectively. N had no other Pokémon, and Tao had made it clear that Alex alone had earned the right to use him in battle.

Alex had even selected a suitable Taijitu swirled Pokéball of black and white to stay in, when necessary, but both he and his Trainer agreed that he should interact with Unova as much as possible.

Despite the semi-chaotic state of the Elite Four, Jess and Connor gained a League victory on their battle records, but N refused to tell either of them about the Swamp until they either had four more victories, or accomplished something as legendary as reuniting the First Dragon.

The crowd stretched from Mistralton to Opeleucid as Trainers came to see the reformed dragon, and hopefully catch a hint of his great wisdom. As Legendary Pokémon went, Tao was friendly, and could speak to them, which made him unique, and immensely popular.

Most Legendary Pokémon were shy, or angry towards humans, and could be enormously destructive
without a guiding hand. Many of the Legendary class Pokémon had latent psychic abilities, allowing basic telepathic speech. Even then, many did not use them. With humans. Tao had never liked that approach though, and had always wished for closer ties between humans and his own kind.

Tao spent his energy on rebuilding the tower, which had long since fallen into a state of near-constant disrepair, and became little more than a hangout for ghosts and wayward dragon types. He kept everyone but Alex from the tower as it was re-worked into what it had once been, and every so often, Alex would appear to ask the celebrating crowd outside the tower for a particular Pokémon move, or item that Tao needed. They usually had it ready for him, as the crowd had swollen to a massive size now.

Over time, Tao would stare out at the crowd, until he sensed one of the millions of humans swarming around them that actually had potential. He would single that person out, and offer them a chance to learn his Way. It was said that, with enough training, the disciples of the First Dragon would gain unnatural power. In modern times, such people were called 'psychics'. This was something only mentioned vaguely in the region's lore, from the era before the brother's war, and thus, all who were given the chance to learn, took it. One simply did not turn down the chance to be a vessel for the Dragon of Unova.

Thus, Alex had more and more free time to spend with his woman, but with so many eyes around the rapidly reforming tower all day, they'd resorted to sneaking north with their Charizard in the night. A small mountain range, nothing like the one up by the University, separated 'northern Unova' from 'Unova Proper'. It was in those foothills, they'd carved out a cave to chill in all night. It was a bit of a nostalgia trip for them, as that very area had been where they'd first met. The new World Tournament building was also nearby, but rumor said it still wasn't ready yet.

The re-working had taken a few days, and in that time, much of the region had condensed itself into this usually sparsely populated area. Everyone wanted to be worthy of the great wisdom the Unovan Dragon possessed, and if they weren't here for the dragon, the Trainers in the crowd usually wanted to challenge the new Champion. Word had evidently gotten out about his winning streak, and as usual, the Trainers of Unova were determined to break it.

Alex had welcomed the challenges, though they took up time. He let Blaze and his other Pokémon battle to their heart's content, as most of the Trainers simply were not on their level, but he was usually constantly busy working with Tao. The battles kept most of his team sharp, all except Shruikan, who had fallen into a deep sleep. After consulting the Pokédex, he'd learned Shelgon had several such periods, as they prepared to become a Salamence. This was the first he'd seen, but as he watched, his eyes had widened as the sleeping dragon type slowly grew in size.

Alex barely slept since he'd started work on the tower, though it was mostly Tao who worked. Strong as Alex and the other humans were, they were simply incapable of digging through millennia of rock and soil buildup. The Unovan Dragon, however, made short work of all of it. He'd smashed through the 'puzzles' of each floor with mild irritation, and had reformed the rooms into the designs they'd once had. Many levels of open spaces, easily ascended to and descended from, and each with a purpose for the humans who had come to reside within, and learn the dragon's wisdom. The restoration had picked up considerably, once Alex and the others didn't have to hop around all the time.

Tao didn't exactly need help, either. He alone could sense what needed to be where in order for the tower to regain its 'Feng Shui', and though Alex had a few good guesses, this was beyond him most of the time, and as he lacked psychic powers, he couldn't really do much to repair the stonework
itself, which left him to enjoy his lover in their private abode as the dragon flitted about his old home, repairing it.

Finally, once the interior was repaired, Tao had the humans and Pokémon leave the tower. In an awesome display of his power, the Unovan Dragon had raised his ancient home from the swamp that had formed around it, reworking the very land itself, something that was simple to one on his level of power. Having been formed directly by Arceus, raising a building was within his power.

Buried by water and years of silt buildup, the uncovered levels were damp, grimy, and a pain in the rear to clean. But clean them Tao did. Alex had watched with interest as swarms of Unown had flooded from the sunken tower, only to then proceed to aid Tao in whatever he needed. Alex and the other selected humans were made ultimately useless in the reconstruction, and the new Champion wondered if he could convince the dragon to tell him what the Unown actually did.

Tao had responded with a smirk, and promised that, if Alex but obeyed his wisdom, he would find out. This was akin to most of the answers the dragon gave him regarding the mysteries of the universe, and thus, Alex contented himself with waiting. He supposed it would come to him the same way the idea to reform Tao had. In the moment, when he needed the knowledge, and not a second before.

With everything once more in place, the dragon invited the growing horde of Unovans into his home, and all twenty four floors were filled with milling humans, each waiting for their chance at an audience with the dragon. Though Alex was nearby, the humans who approached usually regarded him with cold looks, fear, or general ambivalence. They didn't care to speak to the man who'd reuni ted the dragon, they wanted the legendary being himself. Alex found he didn't mind, as after listening to several of the conversations, he realized two things. Humans were, by vast majority, stupid. Most of the problems Tao handled could've also been solved by five seconds on the PokéNet. He also learned that his kin were, in a word, inherently violent. Too many who came to the dragon came demanding his power, so they could crush their rivals. Those types were usually summarily Teleported away, and to where, Tao never said.

Once he'd had enough, Alex walked off to explore the other levels of the castle-like tower. It wasn't long before Alex found Connor sulking in a shadowy corner on the top floor, bluish-purple scarf around his mouth, like he was some sort of ninja. His hat was all wrong for it though.

Connor nodded at the dragon as Alex joined him. "I was thinking, looking at him, I'm reminded of that old line. 'Disturb not the harmony of fire, ice and lightning'…"

Alex tilted his head for a moment, eyeing Tao, then looked back at his friend. "You don't think Lugia and the others are…?"

Connor grinned. "I intend to find out."

Alex rolled his eyes. "Fine. If you manage to balance the birds, I'll eat…something edible, shaped like my hat." He liked his hat too much to actually eat it, and had no illusions that Connor would definitely hold him to such a promise.

Connor stood straight then, and Alex saw his bag as well. He was readying to leave. His bag was similar to Alex's, a few years older in design, and covered with a lot more sentimental junk, but it still matched his edgy dark blue thing he had going on.

"I'll hold you to that, Redwood. I should get going now. The party has been going for days, and I've
idled long enough."

Alex raised a brow, then thought for a moment. His past two weeks had mostly been spent restoring an ancient building covered in the dredge of a lake and hundreds of years of pollution buildup. He supposed everyone else had been enjoying the new 'golden age'. He'd heard about the golden grass, the bluer skies, the pinker nights, but he'd seen little of it between his lovemaking and his working.

Everyone told him how impressed they were with his achievement, and yet up until today, he'd seen almost none of it. Unova had definitely changed, and he would leave it to Tao to make sure it stayed balanced.

Connor walked off then after the manliest of brief hugs, to find his sister. It wasn't hard, for though much of Unova was a varied shade of hair colors, nobody else had red hair like hers, and she stuck out in the crowds when viewed from the air. It still took some time, though.

Tao often levitated in the air at the top of the tower as he gave his patient wisdom, eyes closed, speaking quietly with the gathered Unovans by way of telepathy as he gave them insight into what their lives required for balance. He didn't solve every problem immediately, but most people left with words of wisdom that would only make sense when the time was right.

Often he was challenged to battles by Trainers who'd captured other Legendary Pokémon of which there were many. Such Trainers soon found out that the dragon, despite being quite good at battling, much preferred to Teleport away with the Legendary Pokémon in question, and enjoy a private chat as they caught up on news, and shared important information that evidently was for their ears only.

Alex was usually left alone when he did this, and those training the rare Pokémon looked at him like a leech, rather than the human who'd literally tamed the strongest dragon in...anywhere. He knew the time to head for this Swamp he'd heard of several times was fast approaching. Dealing with humans was clearly Tao's specialty.

Stuck outside while the temple was full of petitioners, Joey and other Trainers had gathered at the local fan club, and had happened to recognize Jessica Gladstone as she was heading to the Pokémon center. She was semi-famous of course, but nobody had tied her to Alex yet, nobody except those who had seen how they acted together. Joey had been chosen by the Dragon too, and had seen how they were in the temple. They'd even spoken around bowls of Leaf on breaks.

Joey had convinced her to chat for a minute once more, even though he was surrounded by a troupe of equally overly-interested Trainers, who hadn't been chosen, but clearly found Joey and Jess awesome, because they had. Rumors abounded about Tao's 'enlightened disciples', and the only way to find out if you had that potential, was to speak to the Dragon himself.

They all made it clear that they wanted to learn from her boyfriend. She admitted that having him teach them now would take time away from his other duties. She was in the middle of explaining the awkwardness of the soon to be long-distance relationship when Connor spied her hair, and descended alongside his Reuniclus, Lancelus, who was flying him around with Psychic, and evidently having a blast doing it.

Feeling nauseous as the overly bubbly psychic type twirled him towards the ground, Connor muttered, "Gah...flying is for Pokémon..."
Once he landed and fought the urge to hurl, he eyed the group of strange men surrounding his sister with strangely eager looks. Connor moved towards her. "I'm, uh, leaving."

He was too distracted by the men, who were very obviously staring at him too now, to come up with a more elegant way of phrasing his imminent departure. He met her gaze, and then nodded at the men, who continued to smile enthusiastically. They really just wanted to meet the Champion, but these Trainers had never mastered social graces, especially not around women like Jess.

Jess found the whole situation hilarious. "They're here to meet Alex, gutter-brain. They want to be his 'disciples' and learn what he's apparently taught us as well."

Connor's eye twitched. "So...we're his apprentices now? Senior apprentices, since we've mastered these 'skills'." He looked at the ground, then at the Trainers, and then at his sister who he could tell, had recently been intimate. They weren't too careful about hiding the aftermath lately, and didn't seem to care, judging by the slightly mussed hair and askew clothing. The imminent separation was approaching. Little else mattered, apparently.

"Right." Connor said, tossing his old hat he'd worn since he'd been in University to the ground. "I'm going to call you around Festivus dear sister, I need you to make something edible in the shape of Alex's hat."

Jess arched a brow. "Whyyyy?"

Connor grinned. "I'm going to...do something 'Legendary'. I've a bet with Alex. It involves a hat-shaped edible arrangement, and you're the only one of us who knows how to cook."

He walked off before Jess could say anything more, and accelerated into a run, just like he had been taught. Then, he vanished. He needed a new hat, and plenty of training. He was behind his sister and his rival in the balancing of these moves, but had picked it up quickly. Too quickly, for Alex's tastes, who had stopped teaching him just in time for them to arrive at the Victory Plateau.

He had used his position as friend of the Champion, and being a Champion, technically, himself to finally see Tao for insight on his idea of uniting the birds. The Dragon had paused as Alex frowned, and then said that he already knew what path he had to take, thanks to fate, and anything else would just be a distraction from that.

His destiny was Kalos, and had always been Kalos. With that, he'd left without another word to Alex, who had tried to stop him. Uniting the birds and battling him wasn't his path, but he was letting their rivalry cloud his mind. He'd been joking earlier.

He would grasp for power until he felt he'd matched his rival, but would only understand after several long months that he should've just followed what Oak had told him.

As she watched her brother leave on his quest, Jess decided to leave as well. Alex tried to persuade her to stay, until he saw it was already past midnight. They'd been making love straight through dinner, and then work had pulled him away. He was helping Tao solve people's problems, and the more of them he heard, the more he was convinced that humanity was doomed.

Eventually, during yet another examination of Arcean-supporter philosophy and the legitimacy of their mythology with regards to who had really brought the golden age about, he walked away, and left it to Tao. They were now trying to claim that, had Ghetsis not held Reshiram and Kyurem, Alex would've never united the Dragon. They now claimed to own 2/3rds of Tao, in Kyurem and
Reshiram. Since Ghetsis had been part of their cult, his Pokémon were, supposedly, also part of their 'religious property'.

Reasoning with those people was like teaching the alphabet to a barn door, and instead of knowledge about the dragon, and how the three were literally just One, these people in old style navy military uniforms only sought to inform him that he was being sued for damages to their town. Over and over. Every time he finished speaking.

As the town had been smashed by a Legendary Pokémon, he wished them good luck with their ludicrous lawsuit, and went to find his girlfriend. He hadn't controlled Kyurem. Kyurem was their property, apparently. They'd damaged it themselves. Alex wondered if the Arceans would actually try to sue themselves as he returned from his work to find his lover ready to leave.

They made no mention of Festivus, as she knew he couldn't stand his family all at once for a full month. Especially not now that he'd done something so 'unbelievable'. He also had a feeling it would take more than a few months to deal with whatever this 'psychic master' had in store for him.

Then, finally, she was gone. It was cold in Icirrus now, granted, being thousands of feet up might've caused that, and he watched the light of her family's luxury driving car head north until he could no longer make out the lights.

Discovering that he was genuinely freezing, even to his nose hairs, he went back to the Pokémon Center on Blaze, who had been responsible for flying him up. That cold air above that had carried the first freeze of the coming winter had chilled him more than he expected.

He enjoyed a bowl of Leaf then, and was soon joined by other people, who were all passing around a bong full of it. Typical grass Trainers. The massive crowd brought all types to the formerly sparsely populated Icirrus Town. It looked more like a tent city, these days.

The Arceans had pitched a fit when they saw a follower of 'their dragon' smoking 'drugs' with other 'random Trainers' in the middle of a Pokémon Center. The local nurse, who was rapidly considering relocating, had considered a group of relatively harmless Leaf smokers the least of her worries. The crowd was full of battles, and lack of hygiene was causing sickness to spread. She had bigger things to worry about, but the Arceans were relentless, and it wasn't long at all before the legality of the Leaf was once more in question, as the use of the herb had become strong amongst those milling around Icirrus. There were simply too many for the local police forces to handle. Many had simply joined in, as the good mood following Tao's revival had been infectious. Others, rallied behind the Arceans, thinking that the return of the One should be celebrated with ancient ritual, not bong circles. As was the usual with crowds, tempers rose quickly.

For once, the Arceans made a good case. Devout followers of the Dragon famously claimed that he had abhorred the Leaf. It was the entire reason the herb had been banned in the first place. These so called 'dragon-priests' had evidently been wandering the crowd, shaming anyone they caught enjoying the Leaf. Arguments became heated. Sides began forming.

The issue was then brought to Tao, by Alex, who after being told, preceded to fly out of the massive structure that was his home, awing the equally massive crowd with his heavenly grace. The cheers lasted a full five minutes, and the vain dragon enjoyed them as he gracefully twirled through the air. It was good to be whole.

The dragon flew low over them then, and winked. He twisted a claw, and a piece of thin, wispy
cloud, the only one for miles that day, became a familiar glass shaped instrument. He curled his tail in
the air, and rested his upper half on it as he pointed at the ground, and massive balls of green rose to
his claws as nature itself bent to the Dragon's needs.

He twisted his claw again, taking what was left of the thin cloud, and turning it into a familiar glass
slide. The balls of green floated into the new slide with his telekinesis, one of the powers his
followers supposedly gained, and the crowd quieted entirely.

One of his claws blazed with blue flame over the large green buds as the massive dragon inhaled.
Thankfully, it was a now cloudless, late summer day. There was no cloudy moisture to ruin the buds.
The force of his inhale would've definitely brought them through the slide, and made his buds damp,
and unsmokable. He usually didn't do this this high up, with a bong this fragile. The wind sucked,
the cold air ruined the burn, and he never got as much as his massive body desired.

He had an entire room in his temple for this sole activity, that he and he alone could handle. Only
Alex joined him in those sessions, with a gas mask for all the smoke. But he had a point to make.

---

The legality of this same herb was an issue with Legendary Pokémon as well. Some enjoyed it.
Some did not. Some claimed the Alpha was against it. Others said it was the only way to the Alpha.
Tao was one of the latter.

He eyed the stunned humans as literally everyone stared at the dragon, usually in disbelief, but just as
commonly with open laughter at the sheer absurdity of what was happening. The dragon-god of their
people was smoking a bowl.

A cloud of light-gray smoke rained down on Unova as the massive white and black dragon exhaled,
and thousands started coughing, like complete newbies. Tao sighed, and his tone rang out over the
hazy crowd. "We have much training to do…"

---

The legality of the herb was settled, then. The Governor of Unova had looked at the Arceans of
Lacunosa, or AoL, and said to their leader, Ghetsis' handler, "I'm not going to argue over the
legitimacy of sacred texts when the Dragon God himself smokes a bowl and bathes half the region in
harsh smoke." Evidently, the 'dragon priests' had just been Arceans, converts from Unova itself, and
history buffs as well.

Even the Arceans couldn't argue with the dragon's actions though, and dropped the issue entirely.
Strangely enough, the Dragon's smoke had only caused good effects, cured many of the crowd's
diseases or infections, and even healed wounds.

The crowd only grew as tales of this 'magic herb' spread beyond just Trainers, and Tao took to
smoking on the ground with them. One day, when John Crimson predicated a thunderstorm
approaching, Tao had taken those strong, dark clouds and forged a set of bongs and slides for both
himself and his Tamer with the power of electricity, fire, and ice. Storm clouds were a bit harder to
mold than wisps.

---

After witnessing Tao's little stunt and laughing for a full minute, Alex had returned to the former gym
of his friend Nick, who had also come down, with the other Four, and joined in the festivities. The
entire gym was on break from training, and those within were hanging out, and smoking bowls of
the herb.

The offers for sex 'now that Jess was gone' came rolling in as word spread among Tao's followers
that the Champion was out of the tower and among the throngs of people. Eventually, he had to leave the gym's rooms for the tower again. Free of the distracting haze he usually only shared with one person, he returned to Tao, and told him that he would be leaving as well.

The dragon had simply nodded, and spoken, gaining the attention of the entire crowd. "Go then, Champion. If you need me for battle, I will be there." They enjoyed a final bowl together in their already well-used cloudy gray glass sets, and then Alex headed off for the Victory Plateau upon Blaze again. N would still be waiting there. It was kind of his thing, a habit he'd developed once the League had named him the strongest of Unova's many Champions.

Alex arrived once more atop the battle-torn plateau, now understanding just how epic his battle must have looked. The plateau had once housed N's castle, but now, the land it had stood upon connected to the back of the Victory League's final room. All that remained of the castle were the stone pillars that formed a loose circle around where the two dragons had battled. As expected, said pillars did not last long, and usually had to be rebuilt. This was where most of the material making up N's old home had gone, and over the years, it had faded entirely as it was deconstructed piece by piece.

"It's about time." N said, not turning to his newest, youngest rival, who he refused to be surpassed by, "You've taken two weeks. We'll be late at this rate."

Alex raised a brow. "Late for what?"

N grinned, turning to him. "For the race to the Psychic Master in the Swamp."

Alex and N departed then, and found him a flying type as soon as possible. They hadn't looked far, as there was an Aerodactyl waiting for them at the bottom of Victory Road. N looked at the Pokémon, speaking to it, and then shed a single tear.

His old friend Archeops had sensed his Trainer's need, and sent a friend to help. The offspring of his own nest's neighbors, a young Aerodactyl who needed and wanted a Trainer. He came clutching a Pokéball as well, one that was as black as Zekrom had been.

Inside the ball was his Zoroark, who had been captured by Ghetsis. N asked if he wanted to be released, but he refused. His ball belonged to N now, and he was fine with having one if N was his Trainer.

Alex gave him a Luxury Ball for his Aerodactyl, but then said he'd need to earn money by battling to get balls for his other Pokémon. Twitching slightly, N nodded. He'd never needed money, or Pokéballs. He was still wrestling with balancing his strong ideals.

"I just don't like confining them to Pokéballs." He kept saying as Alex continuously pointed out the many advantages of having them on hand. Finally, he'd convinced Arthur to come out, and share mentally with N what the interior was actually like. After that, his reluctance was greatly lessened, but he still let his two partners out often.

Hilbert had had a conversation with N before leaving ahead of Connor, Jess, and now Alex as to the fate of himself, and the other Champions. Nate had taken over as the leader for Opeleucid's gym, which left the two female Champions, Rosa and Hilda, to keep the Unova League's status as the hardest in the world.

There was a backlog of Trainers coming up Victory Road, and the Elite Four didn't always beat
them. Since adding Nick to their ranks however, just getting to one of the girls was quite challenging. Very few Trainers could match Hilda or Rosa though, and the ones who did would end up battling Tao, and losing.

By the time all this transpired, Alex and N had reached the southern edge of Unova. South of there, things got…strange. Strange people, strange culture, all terrified of the Swamp that loomed to the south, and threatened to swallow up their home, as it had to the land once known as Floria, which was now overgrown with massive sky-scraping trees, and people who lived on the dangerous and salty swamp waters.

"This is where I leave you, Champion." N said as they reached the southern edge of Aspertia City.

Alex raised a brow. "Are you not coming?"

N shrugged. "I might, someday, but you made it clear that my destiny is not yours. Perhaps I am destined for a different Psychic Master."

"I was wondering about that," Alex said, eyeing the tree line. He could see a barely used footpath there on the edge, and knew walking through it at his size was going to be a joy. "Professor Oak met me while I was on the Victory Road. He said to ask you about the Swamp."

N sighed. "Show me your badges." Alex did so, and the Champion swore. "Fine. I guess we're just handing all the secrets to you."

Alex smirked at N. "That's the idea. I am the Champion."

"Bianca should be doing this…” N muttered. She was the Pokémon Professor now after all, though the aging Professor Juniper still helped every so often.

"The Swamp is the second part of the League Challenge you've somehow managed to complete. Usually, a Trainer whose beaten several Pokémon Leagues is given this information. Because Oak told you enough already, and because of what you did for Unova, and your victories here, I will tell you where to go. Head south, past the Swamp fearing people of Jinia Town, and you will find a group of Trainers. They're from the hundreds of regions on this continent, and all are going to venture into the Swamp to find the Psychic Master. Assuming you survive the Swamp, the Psychic Master will inform you of the rest of the challenge."

Alex blinked, absorbing the information. "And who is our Swamp's Psychic Master?"

N tilted his head. "A powerful one. He's as close to human as a Pokémon can get. Intelligence wise. Big, like you. You'll like him." Figuring that meant N had seen this master, he began to ask, but N had already flown away on his Aerodactyl.

After battling through half the region, it was now strong enough to carry N. Several of his old team had returned, but he had a few new faces as well. He would need time to train them, but they promised to be a difficult team to beat. His reluctance to battle had faded when his partners had told him how much they enjoyed it, how strong it made their bond, and most importantly, how skilled he was as a Trainer. Even without one of the dragons, the former Champion was quite good.

As Alex turned to face the barely used path to go further south of Aspertia, he blinked, seeing a trio of youngsters step in front of him. They were adorable, and each one wore a color matching the
grass, fire, or water type.

"Stop right there, Champion." Said the boy barely into puberty, who was wearing fiery red. If Alex had been in a game of 'who's the protag' this youngster would've beaten even him. His hair was gelled and spiky, with a flame like pattern on each spike. This was the future. Alex sighed.

The girl with the green clothes on threw a Pokéball then, and a Servine appeared.

"Not yet!" The other young girl in blue growled. She stared then, as her own ball opened, and her Dewott appeared beside the Servine. They glared at each other, and Alex knew, they were rivals. Sighing, the fiery boy brought out his Emboar, fully evolved. It was fitting, as the flame-head was a few years older than his lady friends.

Alex raised a brow, then eyed each of the Pokémon, who had dropped to their battle poses and stared him down, eagerly. That was when it clicked. He had rejected these very three, and had sent them to partner with Trainers as young as they were.

"I see." Alex said, smirking. "They noticed me, and called you three out of your homes. Very well. Let us battle." Terra popped out, towering over the Servine, Blaze appeared before the Emboar, and eyed the fire pig, smirking. They bumped fists, and took battle stances. Hydrus yawned and examined the Dewott, then shrugged, and dropped into his battle crouch.

"Go easy on them." Alex said, hands in his pockets.

It was over in one round. Terra had turned, and blasted the Dewott with a Razor Leaf, the Servine had received a non-condensed Flame Burst from Blaze, and Hydrus had taken down the Emboar with a single similarly non-condensed Water Pulse.

The three Trainers stared at him.

"A good Trainer relies on their starter." He said, patting Terra, "But they also have other Pokémon, with different typing. Next time, we will battle one-on-one. Prepare for that day, conquer Unova, make a strong team, and then come and challenge me. Who knows. You might become the Champion."

He winked then, leaving, knowing that maybe one of those three would accept his challenge, and make it all the way up the Victory Plateau.

Everyone thought his title of 'Champion of Unova' relied on the dragon's power, and not his. Many still hadn't had the chance to battle his team, though on the way down with N, he met quite a few, and beat them as hard as Hilbert had.

Alex and his team were essentially following Hilbert's own string of recent victories through the mostly undeveloped, but populous regions in the center of the eastern coast. Much of the land was used for farming, as the east had always been more fertile than Fornia to the west, which was mostly covered by a massive desert. This region provided food to almost every one of the States. He knew they were on the right path to the Swamp as, whenever he asked about it, the Trainers he met would make Arceus' sign in the air with their fingers, and promptly leave. That was fine, though. He could find the true edge of it on his own.

Once he was through the more wooded part of Transylveticut, the state directly south of Unova, he
found a rustic looking Pokémon center, and decided to rest up. One or two Trainers asked if he was the new Unova Champion, which had made him smirk, but beyond that nobody seemed to know him.

It was nice not having all eyes on him all the time. He hadn't been this ignored since before the mountain fiasco. He made a call to his Gruncle, and thankfully, the center still had modern technology within its wooden frame. A sign of the League's wealth, even here, in these wide, primarily empty farm lands. The 'breadbasket of the continent'.

After having him transfer over a new Pokédex, he plied his granduncle for information, but he was a stubborn old goat, and apparently, was in the middle of an experiment. That was odd, for as far as Alex knew, his granduncle hadn't conducted an experiment in decades. He usually sat around smoking Leaf in his lab's dingy basement, dispensing wisdom to anyone who would listen. Not many did.

Feeling exhausted and frustrated at his lack of progress on finding out anything more about this Swamp, Alex went to bed. His relative had stubbornly refused to talk about the Swamp. He was 'on his own, for that nonsense'.

He slept for almost a full day, recovering from the long weeks of work, and sex, with almost no sleep. Tao's energy had sustained him, but he could feel himself slowly growing more exhausted the further he went from Unova. He awoke over a day later to find that Arthur had taken care of the rest of the team, letting Hydrus and Terra out to lounge around.

Blaze was practicing aerial maneuvers, with his weights on, and Alex was surprised his team knew how to attach them properly.

Impressed with his responsibility, Alex sparred against Arthur, something he often lost at, but knew his Pokémon enjoyed immensely. They both had rough, untrained styles, and were both complete amateurs. Still unable to properly control his Sword Arms, Arthur took every chance he could to try and master them.

They had just finished battling, when Alex noticed a blur of dust headed straight for his lounging team. If he was being fair, he'd been petting Leo, who noticed it first, and growled. The cloud turned towards them, and at the head of it, Alex saw a familiar dragon type.

The Dragonite pumped its absurdly tiny wings as it struggled to stop its forward momentum. How a creature that oddly shaped flew so fast was an aerodynamic mystery that scientists still hadn't figured out.

The large dragon stomped over, and that was when Alex noticed the bag around its body. It handed him a pamphlet of some kind, and waited patiently. Looking around, as he didn't quite believe he was experiencing this exact scenario, he turned his focus to the pamphlet then.

"If this is an exploding hologram, I swear…" He opened it, and while it had some sort of tech within it, the words required one to read them. It was an invitation, apparently, to some sort of gathering by the northern edge of the Great Northern Swamp.

He looked up at the Dragonite, who was still waiting, and noticed it was offering him a writing implement. He checked the 'accept' box on the small card that had come with the pamphlet, and after taking it, the Dragonite launched into the air again, straight up, before stopping in mid-air, and then zooming southward with incredible speed. Blaze growled, he'd wanted to fight a dragon like that. It
may have looked silly, but it was clearly strong.

Alex recalled his team, and then walked over to his Charizard. "If you can catch up to him, we'll battle him." Motivated to carry his master's large frame for once, Blaze launched himself into the air, and began flying south as well. As he was carrying a passenger, there was no way he could catch up. At least Alex had removed the training weights though. He usually left them on.

It didn't take long for them to find what they were looking for. The massive group of Trainers was stretched out on the abandoned, grassy fields north of the Swamp. Makeshift battlefields had been carved into the dirt in a haphazard mess, and from the air, it looked quite unusual. Knowing he needed to find someone in charge of this chaos, he had Blaze hover behind clouds as they approached. Not that it helped.

He could see the people battling below, and had a sudden premonition that they'd be in the air as well. He was right, as a mega evolved Pidgeot blasted past him, straight into a Staraptor it was battling. A Talonflame joined in then, and it was ridiculously hard for both Alex and Blaze not to watch. They were masterful in the air, and he had to all but smack his Charizard to get his attention, and refocus on flying.

He took Blaze down then, and just for fun, the flying orange lizard began to spin. It was a good trick, but his Trainer felt his lunch threatening to come up.

As his Charizard leveled out over the crowd, gaining the attention of many of the idle Trainers camping below them, he spotted someone who looked like they were in charge. They were by the Swamp's edge, so he guessed they must know about it. He was directed from person to person until he finally found the real makeshift headquarters. Because of the barely controlled chaos, he'd needed aid in finding it.

The person in charge of this mess of camouflage clad Trainers was a woman with purple hair, and a strange robe-like garment, that covered a pair of her own camouflaged clothing. She was older as well, and her left eye had a patch of dark cloth over it. She carried a staff, ordinary, wooden, which she leaned on as she surveyed a map of what he assumed was the Swamp.

She looked up as Alex was escorted into her tent by her similarly garbed guard. They wore a strange kind of clothing that was patterned with green, brown, and gray. When asked, one of the guards had said that it was old-fashioned survival gear that the people of this region had apparently worn for millennia.

"Ah yes, the Unova Champion. Good. Now we can begin." The way she looked him over made him nervous. It wasn't all that different from how Leo had eyed the female Luxray they'd encountered in this area of the continent.

Raising a brow, Alex held up a hand. "Please, I have a few questions, before anything begins, I'd like to know what everyone else knows. What is this challenge?"

The older woman eyed him for a moment. "You already know what everyone else does. Like you, they were told by the last Champion they surpassed that they needed to come here to seek the Psychic Master. Beyond that, nobody knows what this challenge will entail. Now go outside and join the others…the test will begin soon."
Being relatively fresh from University, the word 'test' still made him flinch and filled him with an aura of anxiety. He despised tests, or rather, written ones. There had been a fair number of physical tests over his years there, but most had been of the writing variety. It had taken him two years to realize that everyone was cheating on them. The increase in his grades after acquiring that knowledge was, of course, purely coincidental.

"Fair warning, Redwood" the woman said as he left, "Most of the other Trainers here know about you, and what you did in Unova. Some are impressed, but most are irritated that you acquired the knowledge of this challenge without beating other Leagues in other regions."

He sighed, and nodded as he left. It figured as much. Something as notable as reforming an ancient and unimaginably powerful Legendary Dragon Pokémon was exciting news, and in a world as globally connected as theirs, everyone naturally had an opinion on it.

He put it from his mind, and ignored the occasional too-long stare he sometimes caught from the crowds of other Trainers gathered around makeshift campsites. Judging by their clothing, he soon got the feeling that each region's worthy competitors were expected to team up for this.

His feeling was confirmed as he saw Hilbert approaching him. It seemed Unova only had two competitors, as he was camping alone. They clasped arms, and shared a smirk. "Welcome to the Swamp, Champion."

"Glad to be here." Alex responded. They had about fifty-five minutes of casual conversing over Leaf that his Servine, Caesar, had grown, before the announcement happened.

A Hyper Beam shot into the air, and punched a wide circular hole through the clouds. Finding its source, Alex stood. It was the Dragonite who'd delivered his pamphlet. Motioning for his fellow Champion to follow, the two men made their way towards the purple haired woman's tent, which was closest to the Swamp's border.

Hilbert was quite a bit older than Alex, by at least three to four decades, but they had become fast friends since their match. He also knew Leaf smoking techniques that had been quite beyond Alex when he'd tried them, and looked forward to practicing them more. If they could.

The purple haired woman thumped her staff, gaining their attention as she began to shout at them, without raising her voice. Despite that, her words still reached their ears, somehow. "Welcome, Trainers of the Northern Continent. Some of you have waited years for this challenge to begin, others among you have only recently acquired this knowledge. Regardless, the Master himself instructed that each of you be invited here."

She began pacing on the platform of raised earth that hadn't been in front of her tent earlier. "Each of you has demonstrated a potential worthiness, however, few of you will actually succeed in this challenge. Indeed, many of you may even lose your lives. If you are not willing to risk death or maiming, leave now."

Alex sensed heads turning as people watched for those whose nerves were weak. Most of these Trainers were hardened Champions, however, and had traveled the world. Their resolve would only break during this challenge.

Surveying the crowd of Trainers, and noticing that none had left, the woman smirked. "Good. At
least you're all worthy of not being called cowards." She knew that a few of them would likely leave once the challenge began, to avoid scornful looks.

Some Champions prized their lives and material wealth above such challenges, and weren't willing to risk cutting them short for more glory.

She continued, suppressing a wry grin. "During this challenge, you will be required to venture to the heart of the Swamp. You may not fly above the canopy while the challenge is in progress. Violators of this rule will be shot down." Alex flinched again, as did every Trainer in the crowd. The feeling of unease from this woman was universal, it seemed.

Each of them had seen her Dragonite's Hyper Beam, and most of the Trainers gathered knew it would be enough to cause serious injury if it came out of nowhere and hit their Pokémon mid-flight. There were always exceptions, of course. Alex had a feeling they'd learn the cost of breaking the rules rather painfully.

"In the Swamp, you will each encounter a challenge that will be tailored to you, and your past. Some of you will re-live harsh emotional events from your life, and feel things you thought you'd never feel again. If you are not prepared to suffer such things, leave now."

This time, a few left, hopping on their various flying Pokémon and soaring away. Evidently there were some who had experienced such horrifying trauma that no reward was worth re-living that experience. Nobody sneered at them, however. Not openly, at least.

"If you manage to pass this challenge, you will soon find yourself in the heart of the Swamp, and in the domain of the Master. If you fail, you will continue to wander aimlessly, lost, until you complete it…or go mad. Many who venture into this terrain do not return. Those of you who have visited the town to the north know that the locals fear the Swamp. They do so for good reason. Underestimate it, and you have already failed."

That got a few murmurs, but otherwise, the crowd waited patiently for the old woman to finish. "If you, at any point, wish to quit the challenge, you need only fly two miles above the canopy. Keep both arms raised above your head as you do, and you will not be shot down. Once you reach the aforementioned height, and confirm with an official that you're quitting, you may leave."

The woman paused then, and affixed an item to her Dragonite's head. It was a scope of some kind, with a green lens that hovered in front of the Pokémon's eye.

"These scopes will be affixed to each group of Pokémon assigned to shoot down those who violate the no-flying rule. The League has banned these devices, because they allow a Pokémon to attack with a move, and rarely miss. Do not try your luck against them, you will fail."

There were a few skeptical rumbles, and there would likely be a few daredevils who tried to cheat, believing their aerial dodges would suffice here. They would be proven painfully wrong. The Sage's Examiners took the 'no-flying' rule quite seriously.

"In a few moments, I and my attendants will take position at the Swamp's edge. Each of you will come forward, and speak to your guide. There are papers you'll need to sign, as well as last wishes, and what you want done with your bodies and Pokémon, should they be recovered. Once that is complete, you may enter the Swamp." With that, the woman hopped onto her dragon Pokémon, and
headed for the edge, where the rest of her strangely camouflage garbed people were already standing.

It took a few minutes before the crowd surged forward, and as it looked like a few would try to avoid the lines and just enter the Swamp regardless, a massive wall of red light shot up from behind the stationed guards. The Swamp's trees were massive in size, and towered high above the energy barrier, but the wall served its purpose. Anyone trying to circumvent it would be noticed easily, and then presumably shot down.

A few Trainers tested the barrier of energy, then resigned themselves to the que. Alex and Hilbert, along with other scattered loners from remote regions, lagged behind. They saw no sense in rushing, as the Krokorok would only need so many meals to be satisfied for the day. Traveling would be easier once they chomped on those unlucky enough to fall into one of the Swamp's numerous deep, salty water basins.

The other Trainers, Alex and Hilbert discovered, were from all over. Sippi, Kentu, Ohiana, Texico, Kanadia, and even Takoma in the far north west. They quickly discovered that there was a person from pretty much every State not in league with the Fornians, and their crazy Church. Forming a fast friendship, they spent their time waiting in the now abandoned campsites by the old woman's tent. Hilbert was mainly fine with waiting, because he thought Hilda, Rosa, or even Nate would join them down here too. They had all beaten the League, after all, and saved Unova. They'd earned this.

It took about three hours for the lines to die down. They were mostly filled will large groups of older Champions from many of the 'east central' states. Given that the crowd was enormous, they rightly assumed a Champion, past or present, from every region on the continent was here.

Alex wondered how they were supposed to survive in a Swamp environment, but Hilbert didn't seem to be concerned. When Alex asked why, he learned that his Pokémon were capable of feeding their Trainer if they had to. It was namely celery stalks from his Serperior, but it sufficed. Alex supposed he could always survive on Terra's apples, if he had to. His Mega Form could make them easily, and they were red, and delicious.

Alex and Hilbert spent the time waiting sharing stories and several full bowls of Leaf with the other gathered Champions. It really was a popular herb, especially among Trainers. Only more so now that Unova, the so-called 'Eastern Capital' had now completely legalized it, effective immediately.

Anyone strong enough for this challenge had a means of growing it, usually by using their grass type. These Trainers had teams that were well balanced, and could handle many type variations. Often, the battles here had resorted to flying vs flying or fire vs fire, if only to avoid constant switching out to gain type advantage.

Upon learning who he was, the group had, of course, asked how he'd reunited the Unovan Dragon. Thankfully, they grasped the concept easier than John Crimson had, but none among them had thought to try combining moves. He did notice that several of them had crystals similar to his, and he was informed that many Trainers had acquired one of every type before coming here. Nobody had tried Mega Evolution with them. Yet.

He'd spent the last half hour beating himself up for not gathering a full set as well, but it was too late now. He'd been told he was almost late for the challenge, and had rushed here. It wouldn't take long for Trainers this skilled to grasp what they could use their crystals for.
Once more he lamented losing so many days to Draconis Mons. He would've likely had time to gather them, if he'd just been more careful. Seeing that the lines were reasonably long now, Alex and Hilbert parted, and headed for the Swamp.

Alex went into the 'dragon lady's' line, a nickname he'd learned the Trainers who'd camped here for weeks had given her. He signed the documents without hesitation, and she smirked, then gave him breakfast.

After his papers were processed, a square shaped outline appeared in the barrier of crimson energy. He entered through it, and the Swamp challenge began.

"Hello." A voice said to his right. Alex jumped as he looked, realizing how on edge he was. The Swamp was massive, full of Pokémon his Pokédex had never seen, that all had strange, unique, and likely deadly abilities. This place was a region in its own right.

Alex looked at the man, who stood as he approached. He was 6,4, blonde, and more muscled than Alex would ever become. Alex raised a brow as the man stood two inches over him. He had to look up to address the man, something he was clearly not used to, and said, "Do you speak-a my language?"

The blonde man stared at him for a long time, and then pulled a large bong from a camouflaged backpack. He winked at Alex, and began walking through a path in the dense Swamp they could both easily traverse with their size. He handed the challenger a Vegemite sandwich as he began loading the bong. He took a long hit, exhaled, and then offered it to the Champion.

"Do you come from our land'a'plenty?" The man grinned, and Alex nodded as he took the bong, smirking. This was a land 'down unda' alright. They had different styles of living, and Alex just shook his head, hitting the piece as well, before passing it back.

He exhaled the smoke slowly, and chomped into the Vegemite sandwich. This was going to be a fun challenge. He could tell.

On the northern continent, there were a series of territories known as the 'States' from coast to coast. Nobody quite knew why they were called states, all anybody could tell, from ruins and texts of a bygone age, was that was what they had once been called in the past. Now however, they were anything but united.

Each of them was ruled by a Governor, and each Governor was part of a council that oversaw regional issues of trade and such. Naturally, with so many voices clamoring to be heard, this council managed to get very little done. Votes on anything often ended up tied, until one of the abstaining states could be convinced to change their vote. The coasts generally unified under one Governor, and for the east, that was Unova's, as New Tork was the largest city in the east, and Unova had the largest population.

More importantly, Unova had also once been the head of their Dragon Empire, which had stretched from coast to coast, and had given their land millennia of peace and prosperity under the First Dragon. Many who wanted to see those days return, tended to look favorably upon the old imperial capital. Others, namely from Fornia, wanted a new power to rise. The Arcean Church had an iron grip over Fornia to the west, and had been slowly expanding their influence east for centuries now. Nobody considered them a legitimate threat though, and the Church itself was seen as little more than a nuisance that would sue anyone who went against it. Thus, it was largely ignored.
Each of the states had a Champion chosen to participate in this challenge, and from Alola to Unova, they had come. Just over five thousand Trainers had entered the Swamp, and since the Swamp stretched from the middle of the eastern coast all the way to the southern tip, there was plenty of room for all of them.

It didn't go nearly as far west as it did north, but still, the sheer size of it was impressive. From the word go, Alex had sensed something strange about the Swamp. Something about it made the back of his head tingle constantly. There was an ever present brownish-green haze that filled the humid air, and the vines between the massive trees made flying impractical for all but the smallest of Pokémon.

No Pokémon small enough to successfully fly through the tangle of vines could carry a person as well, with the exception of the 'Eurafricasian Swellow' which could carry five times its body weight with ease. Very few Trainers here had one of those however, though many had caught the far more popular 'Hoenn Swellow' which had spread to every continent the world over, more or less.

The difference between the two species was minimal, really, but several scientists from the Galar region, north of Kalos and across 'The Channel', had insisted upon making the variation well-known.

Alex spent about five minutes with his 'guide' before he realized that he too, was Unovan. It had been kind of obvious, in hindsight. They traveled for days, as the man taught Alex the finer points of their region's lore. It was custom, for Champions to educate other Champions on it, and make sure they understood what they were representing. Thankfully, Alex already knew much of what the tall man told him. He paid attention regardless. This man had come in-between the last official challenges given by the Master, and had thus wandered the Swamp, for years, before stumbling on the Foggy Swamp Sage.

He had been commanded to use his experience surviving in the Swamp for years to guide those from his region, for a time anyways. Just long enough to make sure the new Trainers understood the important things about the Swamp, like not to mutilate it to make travel easier. They had come across several macabre sights, Trainers crushed to death by vines, and his guide claimed that this was the fate of any who overtly harmed the Swamp. It was also why the locals of Floria had been unable to stop it from growing so large, and swallowing their home. Everyone like him, and there were many in this Swamp, trapped like him since the last challenge, knew where the center was. As well as the Sage who lived there. They had been rejected before, but now, he'd claimed, they had a second chance to prove their worth as his disciples.

The Swamp was indeed a region in itself, and Alex would evidently be expected to one day do as they did, and leave the Sage to educate other lost Champions. The blonde, muscled man told him that the Sage expected as many potential candidates as possible. Nobody knew what exactly they would be candidates for.

Eventually, the man parted, saying that anyone from Unova with his skill level should be able to survive easily in a land like this, and find their own way. He'd hopped on his Floatzel then, and smoked a bowl as he chilled on its massive stomach, and followed the river's current away.

Alex was now on his own with this challenge. With the lack of flying, that meant traversing the Swamp's wet, slimy ground. Alex took about ten steps before he found his oversized feet stuck in the muck. He was forced to call out Terra, and ride him instead.

He didn't seem to mind the Swamp at all, which worked for both of them. The going was slow however, and eventually the mighty earth turtle tired of pulling his feet from the muck.
Remembering that Swampert was, supposedly, the 'king of the swamp', Alex called out Hydrus instead, and rode on his back as he swam through the murky brown water. He was indeed at home in this place, and apparently loved the smell and taste of the water. The few Krookodile they came across already seemed full, and avoided a battle with mutual heads nods of respect with the powerful Swampert. They traveled for what felt like hours, and soon Trainer and Pokémon grew bored. The scenery was the same wherever they looked. Brownish green, vines, trees, and more water.

The Pokémon were unique, true, but Alex conquered most of them with his Shruikan, and the Flamethrowers he had. He didn't need to fly, like Blaze, and could essentially burn away any challengers that popped out at them. They didn't see any other Trainers.

Alex spent several days traveling on his own, and one night, as he enjoyed a bowl of his ever-full personal Leaf stash, courtesy of his beloved turtle, with the draconic blue flames provided by his loyal dragon, Alex decided to try to call out to whatever Psychic Master was supposed to be testing him.

"I can handle navigating the terrain. Are you going to challenge me, or not?" Silence answered him, and he sighed, packed his instruments safely away, and went to sleep.

As soon as he'd finished sleeping, and had continued on his journey once more in what felt like the morning, he felt Hydrus stop, and then looked at what had made him do so. A bright circle of white light had appeared before Hydrus, and out of it, floated a creature from myths. Alex stared in open awe upon the impressive form of Arceus, the Alpha Pokémon.

He was white, with a regal looking horned head, impassive red eyes, and the body of a stag. Around his middle was the golden ornament that was used as a symbol by those who followed him.

It was not only the Arceans who worshiped him devoutly, across the Eurafricasian continent he still had pockets of tribal followers who, through their kind hearts and unwavering devotion, were rumored to be able to tap into his power. Many in other regions jokingly offered praise to him, though a few who understood his nature were more than accepting of the worship that would always surround such a benevolent being. But now, here before him at last, was the real thing. He bowed as low as he could, and Hydrus also dipped his head.

You have asked for challenge…and so I grant you one. Prove yourself, Trainer. Shivering from hearing the psychic speech of the Alpha Pokémon reverberate through his very being with unbridled power, Alex smirked.

"Challenge accepted." He said, turning his hat backwards. The eyes of the Alpha Pokémon narrowed, and as Alex brought out Terra, he had Hydrus bring him to the closest mound of relatively dry dirt before recalling him.

Alex didn't hesitate then, shouting "Energy Ball!"

The gold coloring of the white Pokémon shifted to an icy blue, and a tinge of dread rolled up Alex's spine. The rumors were true, then. The Alpha Pokémon could change type at will.

A beam of ice formed where its mouth should've been, and as Terra saw this, his form shifted, the power of the grass crystal coming to his aid with rapid speed.

If it was impressed, Arceus did not show it. Even as Terra fired the Energy Ball, the Ice Beam lanced
forth from Arceus' maw, and cut through it with ease. It hit Terra before he fully mega evolved, and Alex knew his strongest ace in the hole had just been taken down in one hit.

It wasn't the first time Terra had fainted, nor would it be the last, but it was a rare enough occurrence. Switching Terra out quickly, Alex shouted, "Flamethrower!" Blaze appeared in a burst of red light, and once more, the color of the Alpha Pokémon shifted, from an icy blue, to a deeper navy color. The flames passed over him harmlessly, his water typing making them all but ineffective.

Then, he countered, and Alex knew that it would almost certainly take down his Charizard with one blow. This was a deity, there would be no counter-attacks.

"Blaze!" He shouted quickly, "Fly up!" Blaze was already moving, but Arceus' eyes were already glowing with fierce power that Alex could sense from his spot on the embankment. A wave of filthy water rose from the Swamp, and hit Blaze directly.

The sheer force of the attack slammed him into a large tree behind them, and Alex recalled him before he hit the ground, knowing the move had finished him long before the impact had.

Thus, he continued. Leo was taken down by an unavoidable Earthquake, Arthur by his own redirected Shadow Ball, and then Shruikan by Ice Beam once again. No matter how hard he urged them to dodge, duck, dip, or dive, each move from the Alpha Pokémon hit without fail, and every counter he managed to make was immediately nullified or made not very effective by Arceus' type change.

He'd saved Hydrus for last, wanting to keep him strong for the remainder of their trek, but now he called him out as well.

He'd never had a full party wipe before, and he didn't intend to have one now. Even before a 'god'. He saw the Alpha Pokémon's type change to a familiar green, and he suppressed the urge to cheer. He'd actually made the Alpha Pokémon fall for it. Water had two weakness, electric and grass, but electricity didn't really harm a ground type. At all. That left grass as Swampert's weakness, and thus, the change to a familiar green.

"Ice Beam, quick!" Hydrus launched the attack, and it hit the stag shaped Pokémon square in the chest. Alex cheered. At least he'd managed one hit. "Well struck, Hydrus! Aga-" but it was already too late.

The Alpha Pokémon had flinched, briefly, and then retaliated. A familiar looking ball of condensed green energy came arcing from his maw.

"Ice Beam!" He needed another hit, and that meant at least trying to neutralize this attack. Then, somehow, the Energy Ball curved away from Hydrus' attack, and came around at his left side with incredible speed. It slammed into the mighty Swampert, and sent him crashing into the tree that took up most of the embankment Alex was on. Running over to his friend, as he'd feared he'd heard more than just wood break with that impact, he knelt beside him.

"Hydrus…easy bud…you'll be okay…" He fed his Pokémon a Max Revive, which slowly brought him back to consciousness. Alex smiled, then faltered, as he sensed a massive amount of power behind him.

He rose quickly as he simultaneously turned, and found himself face to face with the Pokémon he'd dreamed of catching since he dreamed of becoming a proper Champion. It rose above him then,
coloring returning to normal white, and Alex recalled Hydrus.

He'd given each of his Pokémon a revival item, but hadn't brought them out again. They were usually in no shape to fight once revived, which seemed off to him for some reason, but distracted as he was by literally facing down a god, he failed to make much of the observation.

You have failed your challenge.

Alex opened his mouth to protest, then stopped, and nodded. He had, indeed, lost. Finally, his party had been wiped out in its entirety. The sarcastic part of him remarked that it had taken a deity to do so, but he was in no mood to feel smug. He'd finally had a chance to catch the Alpha Pokémon, or at least prove worthy of being his Holder, and he had failed.

"I have." He mumbled softly, turning his hat forward once again. He looked down for a moment, then met Arceus' gaze as the being floated higher into the air.

And now, the Alpha Pokémon declared, You will be Judged.

Alex froze. He had heard the stories from Sinnoh, of how Arceus' Judgement had been furious to behold. Luckily, the damage had been negated by some sort of time travel shenanigans, the details of which had never been made fully clear, but still.

Many had witnessed his rage, and to this day, those who had seen it lived in constant fear that the vengeful Pokémon would someday return to finish them. Of course, any who had seen it and yet lived were almost a century old, and were nearly senile, yet they feared all the same. This fear made them easy prey for the Arcean Church to get a foothold in Japan.

He decided then, that he wouldn't be afraid. He'd lived his life trying to be as kind as he could. He recalled several of the tenants Arceans adhered to, and wondered if Arceus would now make him pay for not obeying them.

He dismissed that thought, then. He refused to accept that the Arceus the Arceans worshiped was so petty and cruel that he judged humans harshly for enjoying their brief existence. Surely the true deity was not the vengeful monster that absurd cult groveled to. No merciful god chose a man like Caleb Pravus as a 'Prophet'.

His uncle had told him of his escapade into Fornia, and had recalled the man's brutality, and amorality, many times in their smoking sessions. He always seemed frustrated to have been slandered into ineffectiveness.

"I accept my failure, and your Judgement, Alpha Pokémon." A swirling orb of pure power formed above Arceus' horned head. Alex's eyes were upon it as the Alpha made it grow in size.

Alex briefly wondered if the resulting explosion would kill other Trainers in the Swamp, and he sincerely hoped the Alpha Pokémon had enough control to avoid collateral damage. This Judgement was his, and his alone, and he would not run from it.

The red eyes of Arceus shifted back to him then, and he barely had a chance to shiver with suppressed fear before the blinding ball of light shot towards him. The resulting explosion filled the area with blinding white light, and Alex knew no more as he whitened out.
Gilroy Redwood, who went by 'Gil' most of his life, became a Pokémon Professor around the same time the far more famous Samuel Oak did. Unlike his Kanto counterpart however, he stayed in Unova, in his family's home town.

There had always been a Redwood Lab adjacent to their farm land, handing out Pokémon to Trainers from towns all over the largely unpopulated north east. Most would hardly even call that area Unova, Unovans would call it 'northern Unova', and given that not many people lived up there, not many people minded the lack of an official region name.

Unova was close enough of a trip whether by car or flying Pokémon, so it didn't really matter to the locals of that area. It was, however, far enough for Professor Juniper and her associates not to bother with it. Unova proper had enough Trainers as it was, and it was hard enough getting them Pokémon.

Because of the general lack of people, Trainers around that region within a region didn't usually go off on journeys. The people who lived there could generally trace their roots in the area back five generations, and the Redwoods were no exception. Unlike more populated regions, this also meant that the official lab servicing the area didn't stick to a trio of particular starter Pokémon. It was more of a 'choose what's around, and go catch it' type of experience.

This is also what caused the local Trainers to start so much later than other regions. The north east was dangerous, home to Tyranitar, Ursaring, and even the occasional Beartic. The winters were usually harsh and long, and the summers didn't tend to last through August.

Despite all this adversity, the area did tend to breed a tougher kind of Trainer, for the few who actually bothered to prepare to go on a journey. Most kids worldwide were taught early on about tall grass being dangerous, but the locals here had a different tradition.

They let their youngsters wander the woods, and they left it to the esteemed Professor Redwood to teach them. There were wild Pokémon all over the place, and walking through grass was an inevitable nuisance. Thus, the community had decided long ago to educate the children early.

This was how poor Gil got roped into sticking around his hometown. He would've much preferred to go south and study the strange Swamp that took up half the coast, or continue to wander the world searching for unique variations of known Pokémon species, like the Black Salamence, but he was needed at home. It was hard to up and leave when most of the youngsters relying on you for their education were related by blood.

The Redwoods had, by far, the largest family for miles, with an aged manor home that could barely fit them all. They never had an issue with extending the barn to make room for more Miltank and Tauros, but Gil's brother, Renault, had outright refused to let anyone touch the house itself.

When Gil and Renault's father, Professor Alaric Redwood, finally passed, the surrounding towns were left without an official Pokémon Professor for several years, as Gil was still getting educated. Becoming a genuine Pokémon Professor tended to take a long time, especially if your specialty was
on rare and unique Pokémon that were, more often than not, completely made up.

Gil spent many years as a Trainer of sorts, on the road, traveling the world. Decades had passed by the time word reached him of his father's death, and his brother's. Thus, he managed to miss his nephew's generation entirely, and they were all born by the time he returned to the family lab at the ripening age of seventy-five.

It became obvious on day one that he would be arguing with his brother's children for the rest of his life. Renault had four, and they themselves were in the process of making even more children. Renault had passed while Gil was still in school, and thus when he finally returned, his young nephew Frederick was playing the 'man of the house'.

It was an altogether dreary, depressing place in his opinion. The children had clearly been raised 'proper' and saw Pokémon as a source of income, not fascinating creatures meant to be studied and loved.

Frederick had three siblings, Lisa, Edward, and Gilbert (who also went by Gil, making things even more confusing), and they were all in the process of expanding the family line. In short, he returned to a house full of pregnant women and screaming babies. This is how he took to shutting himself in his lab's basement, rather than the uppermost room of the manor.

Everyone was okay with this, as 'The Professor', as they all called him, had a 'foul and disgusting habit'. Smoking Leaf had been illegal during his school days, and that had only made it slightly thrilling. Now, he mostly smoked to alleviate the headache his relatives gave him.

He spent some years living like that, out of his lab's basement, until eventually, by an act of Arceus, he found a woman. Elaine was a 'local', which meant she was from one of the surrounding towns. Nobody cared that her hometown was on the north-eastern coast, they still considered her 'local'.

For a local, she was quite a looker. Hair that was a wonderful cross between red and scarlet, curves in all the right places, and as if that wasn't enough, she shared his sarcastic wit and love of the Leaf. He knew as soon as he met her, and discovered these things, that he would marry that girl.

Which of course, he did, despite his age. With their technology, humans were living longer than ever, and the males of their species didn't lose their juice until they hit their nineties. It also helped when one's lover had a thing for older men and still looked as young as women in University.

For about a year, things were fine. Their basement was extended, if only to give them a private bedroom, and while it was cozy and stank of many, many smoked bowls of Leaf, the two were quite content to live there.

The trouble started when Elaine discovered she was having a girl. The Leaf smoking stopped, of course, and suddenly, their living conditions were unacceptable, a fact Gil agreed with. The only problem was that by now, everyone had four-year olds running around the main house.

Frederick was also finally married which meant the promise of more children, and he refused to expand the house, as his father had, and also refused to let Gil take his portion of the family money to build a proper house elsewhere. Gil even offered to extend the lab into a second house, but that too was 'unacceptable'.

These long months of stress, coupled with the total lack of stress-relieving Leaf sessions, is what
caused Gil's hair to finally turn from a rich auburn-brown to gray. Not entirely at first, but enough to be noticeable, around his dwindling hair-line.

What turned him snowy white was his wife's death, in childbirth. As obscure as their town was, they'd made the trip to Unova for the birth, and for reasons that were never fully explained to him, he lost his wife, but gained a daughter. The combination of shock, lack of sleep, and having to drive a screaming child up to his home kept him from questioning it properly for years.

As a Professor, he should have pressed harder. He had been trained to handle human injuries, as well as Pokémon's, and he knew enough about the body to understand the medical jargon that the average layman would not. He stayed preoccupied however, as the depression, funeral planning, and lack of sleep kept him from being anywhere near as sharp as he should have been.

His demeanor changed, after that trip. He stopped arguing with his relatives, barely leaving his lab. Almost all of his aides left, and the few that stayed only did so because they had become ingrained in the town after spending so long at the relatively isolated lab. Many said that he'd simply lost the ‘spark’ that had driven him to investigate even the most absurd rumor in search of a new Pokémon, and it was only his years of travel and experience that kept the rest around. That, and his always-full Leaf jar.

His daughter, Malina, grew up in the main house mostly, spending most nights with the other children. By the time she was five, she was already sick of their smelly basement, and was more than eager to get on with becoming a Trainer. Her father didn't often brighten up, but every once in a while, he'd tell her about his travels. For a brief moment, the man he used to be would return.

The cold cynic would always come back, however, as the story only had one ending, and he stopped telling it long before he got to mentioning her mother. By the time Malina was ten, Frederick had finally managed to have his first child, who he'd named Alexander. Up until then, he and his wife had cared for her like a daughter most of the time, and she was a large part of what kept the two men from arguing.

Malina was sixteen when she demanded to be taught to be a Trainer, claiming that Unova girls were already adventuring, and taking down evil organizations with full teams of Pokémon. She had a point, as everyone had seen what Hilbert and his sister had accomplished against Team Plasma. The old Professor finally relented, and resumed teaching the new generation about Pokémon, as best he could.

Aside from a few Trainers who came by seeking a proper starting Pokémon, his students were the offspring of his own nieces and nephews. He taught them everything his own grandfather had, how to walk in tall grass without angering wild Pokémon, which Pokémon were territorial, which would attack to defend their territory, and which would simply growl if they accidentally intruded.

He noticed two things as he began educating his thirteen relatives. His own daughter, and Frederick's son, were remarkably close. What was more, was the son in question clearly did not take after his father. His eyes lit up around Pokémon just as brightly as Malina's. He clearly loved them, and one had to be blind not to see that love reciprocated. He'd narrowed his little eyebrows at the idea of his Miltank friends being sources of money, rather than individuals, at which point his father had passed him to the Professor to teach. He'd been in class for a week before Alex and his daughter had run off to the nearest pond to try to find a Squirtle, or a Bulbasaur. Naturally, the rest of the kids had followed, and Gil pretended not to notice. There was to be a full moon that night, and the air had a
tingle to it. There was no better time for fate to unite a Pokémon and a human.

It ended rather quickly, when young Alex's father found out. The other children had been just as eager, but when their parents discovered their plans to go around the nearby wilds in search of Pokémon, they mostly shut them down. A few of the older kids, like Malina, Geralt, and Aria had already managed to catch an Eevee, Rockruff, and Swablu respectively, by convincing them to become their partners. That too, was a Redwood specialty.

Like his grandfather, Gil taught the kids that offering a chance to join your team, rather than snatching a Pokémon from their home, usually made for better companions. Some Pokémon would battle to test a Trainer's worthiness sure, but most were capable of deciding whether they wanted to be part of a Trainer's team or not.

It was an 'outlandish' theory to the more popular Pokémon Professors, who to that very day continued to tell new Trainers that 'weakening' them was key, but it was one theory that Gil had seen disproven over and over again on his travels. There was no need for a battle if the Trainer in question could approach a Pokémon properly.

He had no idea where the concept of needing to battle before catching came from, but he'd done his best to discredit it. That, along with his discovery of the difference between truly unique species variations, and regional variations, was what had given him his small amount of fame.

With most of the burgeoning Redwoods prohibited from becoming Trainers, Malina's closeness with Alex's parents soon faded, and only faded further as they were primarily focused with caring for Eric, who'd been born three years after his brother. When Gil made his rare visit to the main house to watch the PNN, and his old friend John Crimson, he noticed something else that irked both him, and his daughter.

Eric had been four when the family decided that catching more Pokémon would mean too many mouths to feed, now he was eight, and his brother was ten. There was no ten-year-old alive that wanted a Pokémon as badly as Alex Redwood. He talked constantly to his 'Gruncle Red' about having a Charmander, or maybe an Oshawott, or a Tepig, and so on. It changed almost hourly, but he usually stuck to Charmander as his default.

His father was adamant though, he could have a Pokémon when he could afford one. It was no secret that the family funds were running on the low side, even with Gil doing what he could to help out. Pokémon Professors got a nice paycheck from the Pokémon League, especially when they actually started a Trainer on their journey. It was hard to do that, given the lack of gyms in their 'region', but he managed.

When Eric turned ten, he was presented with a Squirtle. The family's fortunes had slowly improved, or so Frederick had claimed, and the new generation was allowed to choose partners, with young Alex being the exception. Gil was there for that too, as was Malina, who had just finished her final year at University. She'd inherited her father's mind, praise Arceus, and was on the fast track to becoming a Professor in her own right. That night, as Alex's brother slept soundly curled up with his new Squirtle, the thirteen-year-old and his favorite cousin went to see his father.

Gil had sighed when Eric received the Squirtle, and seeing the glimmer of hope in the young Alex's eyes fade as they took in that sight caused more of a heart ache than he thought he could still feel. His naïve daughter had been sucked in by those large blue eyes on the verge of tears, and she later admitted she spent much of that night to keep him from crying. Even back then though, he'd
managed to keep his face somewhat passive, though his chin had trembled.

When asked why Alex was still being denied a Pokémon, Frederick's response had been to push his son into the hall, and have a long talk with his uncle's daughter. His reasoning had been thus: because Alex had a tendency to be quiet, shy, and withdrawn around people, the local grade school teacher had informed his parents that something was 'wrong with him'.

When he did talk, it was about Pokémon. Rather than doing math, he drew doodles of Charmander. Even at recess, he'd wander into the nearby woods and entertain himself with the Caterpie there, rather than join the other kids. Were it not for his size, he would've been bullied.

His parents had 'tested' him then, driving him down to Unova so a 'proper doctor' could examine him. The doctor had found him to be 'slow' and recommended keeping him from becoming a Trainer, lest he hurt someone with the power a Pokémon could put out. It wasn't that far-fetched of a fear. There were teenagers running around taming Legendary Dragons, after all.

Malina was, of course, furious when she heard this. It was clear what young Alex's parents thought of their children. One was a 'Professor in the making'. One would be lucky to live out his life as a stable hand. Naturally, she went to her father with this news, only to discover that he'd known about the Squirtle. Gil had tried reasoning with his nephew, but as usual, that got him as far as it ever had, and it seemed Alex would continue to be denied a Pokémon. Frederick had even gone as far as to threaten to evict the Professor if he got one for his son anyways.

That, more than anything, set his daughter off, and it was only his laughing that kept her from demolishing their cozy basement furnishings. He told her that she reminded him of her mother, even though she'd inherited his brain and his hair color. They talked long into that night, and even enjoyed a bowl of Leaf. He wasn't all that surprised to learn she'd become fond of it while away at school.

The next morning, she demanded that they go down to the hospital in Castelia City to find out what had actually happened to her mother. Given that he had always preferred Pokémon to machines, he called out his aging Rapidash, who was still every bit as fiery as he'd been in their youth, and rode him down to the city.

It was more crowded than he remembered, but much of his memory of his last visit down here had been hazed over by pain and time. Malina was adamant though, and eventually, they tracked down the hospital. Gil had to blink several times as he stared up at the symbol that now adorned the entrance of the building that had not been there previously.

The symbol of Arceus, supported by a metal cross underneath it. Evidently, the Arcean Church had bought out yet another building. He paused, holding his daughter by the shoulder. "We should stay out here. There's no reason to get involved with these people…and knowing them, the records are probably ash by now."

Malina sighed at him, "Dad, most records are kept on computers. Honestly, how old are you?"

The Professor sighed, and muttered something about being too old for 'tude, before heading in. The desk monitor already had her hand on the desk phone, presumably to summon security, as he walked in. He didn't particularly find a brown suit covered by a lab coat threatening, but evidently this poor woman did.
"'Morning, ma'am. I was here about two decades ago with my wife, while she was giving birth to this one," He patted his daughter's head, and smirked as both women gave him a look, "Unfortunately she died during the birth, and nobody could tell me why. I wasn't in my right mind at the time, not enough to prod anyways, but now we'd both like some answers. Do you happen to have any records from back then?"

The woman looked between him, and his daughter, then shrugged. "You can hav'a look in tha basement. Don't get'cha hopes up though. Floodin's a bitch." He nodded his thanks, but the evidently locally born and bred woman was already focused on her Holociever again.

Upon seeing the basement, the Professor had to agree. Flooding had indeed been a bitch, but by an act of Arceus, the records from the year in question had been stored on a top shelf, and thus were some of the only papers still intact.

The two Redwoods searched what they could when the Professor suddenly asked, "Malina, what did you say the name of Alex's doctor was? The one Fred took'im to?"

She was by his side seconds later. "I think it was…Doctor Ein…wait, he handled mom, too?"

The Professor's eyes narrowed as he examined the picture. "That name…seems so familiar…but why?"

The two left quickly and quietly then, with a lead to follow. The entire ride back up to Derrion Town, the Professor was lost in thought, using his considerable brain power to try to remember why that name sounded so familiar to him.

Once he got home, he began researching on the PokéNet as his daughter eventually dozed off on their basement couch. He'd shared as many stories of her mother with her as he could bear, over a bowl of Leaf of course, and then once they'd cried themselves out, she had fallen asleep. It was hard to remember she was still just a kid as, like her mother, she'd developed relatively early. He had enough on his mind though, and put the thought of worrying about boyfriends away for another time.

Three hours into his research, he finally dug up something useful. An report from Orre, where a scientist by the same name had been involved in the Shadow Pokémon incident, a calamity that had gained worldwide attention when it had been leaked that a Lugia had, briefly, been infected with shadow energy as well. Thankfully, the science was too complex to easily replicate, and those who had started the research were either in prison, or defectors who sold out their former comrades for reduced or no jail time.

The Professor had had many gut feelings over the course of his life, and he didn't like where this one was leading him. He needed to follow it regardless, however, which meant more digging. He left his daughter a note, got a haircut, and trimmed his beard. He added a bit of hair dye, red like his wife's had been, and he was reasonably disguised.

He got on his Noctowl, Soren, then and headed for the distant Formia region. The trek was long, and his Noctowl was as old as he was, but he was still a stealthy flier. They moved at night, when he was hard to see, and eventually, they managed to enter the Formia region by coming down from the north-western coast. That small region was the only part of the coastline to remain free of Arcean control.

Infiltrating the Church wasn't exactly difficult. They welcomed new members, especially members
with a background in science and the study of Pokémon. A friend in the north-western Takoma region had given him a fake ID, as a Fornia-certified Professor. His name was changed, but his skills were still very much real. Within a week, he had passed their PokéMeter tests, and was admitted into their main lab in the center of the region, in the city of Sacreus.

Being inside the organization itself, it was easy to see why so many people clung so tightly to their status as a member of this cult. At that moment, he was a cog in a much larger machine, and had he not had an ulterior motive, he might've been swayed into believing their menial busywork actually had a greater purpose. It was nice thinking that their efforts were benefiting the entire planet.

The longer he stayed, however, the more the corruption began to peek through the cracks in the aesthetically pleasing society. Coworkers would appear with bruises after not having any the day before. Female workers were often called into their superior's offices, and one didn't have to be psychic to guess what was going on behind the doors. He could only hope it might be consensual.

What got him in trouble, were the children. He loved teaching young ones, and had done so many times on his travels, as well as back home. They made him laugh, and always had questions. His station in the medical wing often had him walk by classrooms full of children, whose parents were presumably hard at work 'in the name of Arceus' prophet'. He noticed one of the supervisors of these children, not much older than some of his own family members, getting far too friendly with several of them. Boys, girls, it didn't seem to matter to the man in question.

He reported it to his superior of course, with the idea that not even the Arceans, who he'd never had a high opinion of to start with, would be okay with a pedophile in their midst. Instead of punishment however, the supervisor in question was moved to a different classroom, and Gil got to spend eight consecutive hours in 'PokéMeter Therapy', until he admitted that he'd only 'made up' those accusations because he had 'guilt' for his own 'crimes'. After eight hours of repeatedly answering the same damned question, he made up whatever lie he could, just to get out of that room. After that, he began to understand why it was so hard for people to leave. This was little more than brainwashing. Legal brainwashing, he reminded himself.

He resolved to get out as soon as he could, and thankfully, an opportunity presented itself two weeks after he was brought to live at the facility. His room was spartan, and he'd seen jail cells with better lodging, but he didn't mind. Living in this hellhole gave him access to what he needed: files.

He'd mentioned early on that he could work night shifts with ease, and as he'd guessed, most of the other night workers were not nearly as adjusted. Most adults worked sixteen-hour shifts, so he couldn't blame them. Most teenagers worked the same shifts. If you were in an Arcean family, you let the Church educate you, and Church education, as usual, left much to be desired. Like actual education. Those who conformed to the rather harsh standards required by Arcean Trainers excelled, and were given the basic knowledge one would need to function as a Trainer in a foreign region. Those who did not conform, as they rather preferred to enjoy their freedom their own way, ended up mining for fossils in the region's north at large, isolated camps run by only a few adults.

The lack of education was yet another shackle that kept the potentially disillusioned cultists where their leaders wanted them, as even if they did escape, they would never earn enough money to support themselves alone. If one family member left the Church, the others either disconnected from them in every conceivable way, or left with them. Sadly, the families in question, while saddened at losing a family member, thought the 'Prophet's mission' was far more important. Thus, the very idea of leaving was considered taboo. It was a clever idea, turning every member of the cult into a potential snitch certainly dissuaded any thoughts of disloyalty or subversion, but at the same time, it
It was on one of his many graveyard shifts that he finally managed to find what he needed: a detailed file on 'Doctor' Ein's experiments. It seemed that after the Cipher Organization had fallen to pieces, the Arceans had moved down the coast to absorb what was left of them. One of their own former admins, Ardos, was reportedly working for the Prophet himself, as one of his Hands. The idea was that, because Arceus himself was rumored to have created reality with a thousand arms, his 'Prophet' should have many arms as well. It was the highest position one could hope to attain in the Church. Some Hands had more importance than others, but all had the authority, and security clearance, to enact the Prophet's will.

The research on Ein's work almost made him grimace where he crouched. The Church had evidently started up the process of creating Shadow Pokémon again, but as before, they had been unstable. This Ein character had gotten the brilliant idea to use human stem cells to try to stabilize the darkness, and after injecting them into several Pokémon eggs, they'd had a breakthrough. The madman had copied what the scientists behind Team Rocket's Mewtwo disaster had done. Evidently, they wanted history to repeat.

He couldn't really blame them, as Mewtwo was monstrously strong. According to the file, the specially infected Pokémon were bathed in Shadow energy, and then handed out to local Trainers, as this variant of Shadow Pokémon could gain strength from battle, but only as an unevolved species. Naturally, the poor things were confused, angry, and unable to bond, unless their Trainer proved themselves by dominating their partner.

In this way, the Fornian Trainers kept the weaker bleeding hearts from advancing too far in the Church, while those who embraced their cruelty were given legitimate power, to be used in the name of the Prophet.

The Professor's gut guided him towards the source of the stem cells used, and his lunch nearly came up as his worst fears were discovered. The use of stem cells to extend human life and repair damaged organs had been discovered ages ago, the only problem was getting a supply of them. Most modern doctors had moved on to other methods of repair, and only used such cells sparingly when needed from the donated surplus their organizations managed to collect, but from what the files he dug up said, the Church had been gathering a stockpile large enough to support a second Shadow Pokémon project. Many of their sources were hospitals in Unova, and other States that their Church considered 'enemies'.

He could only imagine what two decades had done for their research. He carefully took the files, and gave them to his Noctowl that night, who carried them to a safe place, far from Arcean jurisdiction. Given that they were paper files, created in case the computers ever went down, he didn't expect them to be discovered missing for quite some time.

As he entered his third week of hard meaningless labor and graveyard shifts, the wear was starting to show, but he couldn't give up yet. He needed hard evidence to tie Ein to his wife. He'd read that one of the methods of collection was siphoning cells from umbilical cords that were supposed to go to legitimate facilities, and legitimate doctors who, presumably, still held a moral code.

Such methods could only get so many cells however, and after finding a vague mention of siphoning cells from fetuses about to be born, it didn't take a large leap in logic to assume what might have happened to his wife.
He could stand to be tired if it meant discovering that secret. He'd even risked being caught, but he no longer cared. The truth was out there, and it was so close. He remained stealthy however, always making sure to get a full rest before attempting another search. It didn't mitigate the exhaustion completely, but it helped.

It took many long hours of scouring through records both physical, and on the net. He knew he risked discovery by using his computer, but he had no choice, if it meant following a lead. He tried to hide his extracurricular searches in between the numerous logs he made to keep the medical wing running smoothly twenty-four seven, but eventually, his luck did run out.

It was on the day that he finally found hard evidence of Ein's pass card being used on the same Unovan labor ward his wife had been in, when he was confronted. He'd been the only person in the office that night, and had taken the chance to dig online for what he needed. Had he been more awake, he might've smelled the not-so-subtle trap.

"Well well well." A smooth baritone interrupted his search, and he felt a chill go down his aging spine. The tone might've been charming had it not oozed sleaze. "Someone has been searching for information in all the wrong places. You're clever though, Professor Redwood. It took us far longer than I'd like to admit to notice where you were digging, and why."

After spending over a month pretending to be a devoted Arcean, the Professor knew who he was talking to. The Prophet of the Arcean Church was a figure the workers pledged their oaths of loyalty to on a daily basis. He coughed, his voice rough from disuse, "Caleb Pravus…I thought I smelled a Muk."

The strike to his cheek was as hard as it was fast, and it sent the elderly Professor spinning in his chair towards his keyboard. He snagged his data disk, and slid it up his sleeve, along with the saved napkins he'd kept from dinner. He glared at the man, wondering how anyone could purposefully go for the 'evil villain' look, goatee and all.

"I guess the rumors are true then…beating subordinates must be so easy... when you control every aspect of their lives..." The Professor expected the next punch, and the one after that, as his arms covered his face. One glance at the 'Prophet of Arceus' told him all he needed to know. The man was enjoying beating on him a little too much. The look in his eye was almost manic.

"You'd know all about that, wouldn't you, Professor?" Pravus grabbed what little dyed red hair he had still, primarily on the back of his balding head, and forced their eyes to meet. "I had no problems ruining your life...it was so easy to fake her death...on paper, at least. Ein was the one who had to get his hands bloody, weren't you my friend?"

The bespectacled man with dark hair and a hair flick that was entirely too long walked into the Professor's vision. "Caleb, we shouldn't be-" The man was silenced as the fist that had been holding the Professor's hair swung to strike the scientist across his face.

"You will Address me...as the Prophet! Sir will also suffice..." Pravus was panting slightly, his face red from the exertion. It took the Professor a moment to realize that it wasn't exertion that had caused his heavy breathing, but pure, undiluted rage.

Gil wondered for a moment how a man with such issues managed to control a state as large as Fornia, which made up the majority of a coastline, with absolute authority. Then, he surmised, a cult
was probably the way he would've gone about it as well. In this era, such groups were rare enough, but they always devolved into brutality behind their closed doors. During the Dark Times they'd been far more popular. Thankfully, the world had turned more peaceful, and rational. To a point.

Ein glared at his superior, and then adjusted his black, spiky glasses. They were several years out of style, and now had cracked lenses. "Sir…is it wise to be telling him so much?"

Pravus turned back to the Professor, and smirked, "Oh Ein…fret not. This wrinkled sack of skin won't ever see daylight again. Put him in the Hole."

The Professor felt himself being lifted by two burly sets of hands, but after being struck and beaten, his vision was becoming unsteady. Fist fights and old age did not mix well.

The next thing he knew, he was waking up to the feeling of someone shaking him. He blinked his weary eyes open, then looked around. He was still clothed, and judging by his exhaustion, hadn't been out for too long.

He noticed then, that he was being shaken by a blonde boy, who couldn't have been older than Alex. "Hey mister," he said, sounding entirely like a twelve-year-old, "You should sleep in the day, when it's hot. It's better to be awake at night. That's the only time we get food."

Groggy as he was, it took the old man a minute to comprehend the boy's words. "Food? What?" He blinked again as several loaves of bread, covered in what looked like dumpster gruel, fell on top of them, and the forms of several other huddled humans nearby. He grabbed one, and sniffed. He'd tasted some harsh dumpster gruel in his time traveling the world, namely in Eous, but this was an entirely new level of foul.

He took the time then to figure out what exactly was going on. The boy, whose name was Bradley, said that they were in 'The Hole', and that it was where people went when they were bad. When he asked the boy what he'd done to get put in here, he said, "I…lost my Charmander…Uncle told the Prophet I lost it on purpose, and then he…then I was put in here."

The Professor gave the lad a shoulder pat, though he kept it brief, as he felt the child stiffen in fear at the contact. That was another aspect of this cult he didn't particularly enjoy. Members were required to report other members for violating the 'rules' of the Church. Not doing so got you put in here, or so he heard from his fellow prisoners, and he realized that was probably what had gotten him eight hours of meter time.

Night eventually gave way to the day, and the Professor chuckled. It was amazing how wrong Pravus could be. Judging by the hole's entrance, the sun would be visible for several hours a day, at least. By his third day in the pit, he'd figured out the guard rotations, and from then on, began to plan his escape.

He knew Soren was likely looking for him, and given that they'd been in worse prisons than this, he felt escape would be relatively simple. To the guards, he was just a sunbaked old man making hooting noises for hours on end, but he knew the hole's acoustics would likely be what helped his sharp-eared friend find him.

Eventually, of course, he did. Hypnotizing the guards was simple, it was helping his fellow prisoners that almost de-railed his plans. None of them would escape with him, each of them, Bradley
included, said that they couldn't just abandon their families.

Leaving them behind was hard, but after ten minutes of arguing, he'd had enough. He had information to share, a story to tell, and a daughter to go home to. If these people refused to help themselves, he couldn't force them. Not with only one flying Pokémon. Soren flew him back up north, sticking to the treetops, and eventually, they were free. He patted his old feathered friend, and thanked him.

Once he was safe in his friend's Takoma hideout, he shared what he knew with his ally. He had a vested interest in bringing the Arcean Church down as well. They discovered that the old man did indeed have useful information, on not only Ein, but Pravus as well.

Gil had taken to walking around with a pocket recorder years ago, as he and his wife had won or lost arguments by recording previously spoken words. He'd kept hers for years without over-writing it… and in the moment he'd been caught, he'd turned it on more by reflex than anything else. He wouldn't let the loss of the last recording of her voice be in vain. He had proof, now all he needed was an exposé, and he knew just the man to do it.

"I'm sorry Gil, but I'm not the man to do this." John Crimson said as he poured yet another glass of what looked like scotch. They were in his penthouse apartment of the PNN building in Castelia, and the legendary reporter was bathing in his hot tub, a tray with his favorite meal floating before him, "The Arcean Church has been trying to buy this studio for years, and they're about to succeed. If I run this story, the entire network might go down after they sue us for every charge their lawyers can cook up."

"John, I have the man on tape admitting to covering up murder. That's as hard as evidence gets. It's like you, in Nimbasa's Red District." He'd made four copies of the tape when he'd returned home, and hid them in every safe spot he could think of. Paranoia was a blessing, sometimes.

John Crimson shrugged, "If it's that hard, bring it to the police. If Officer Jenny can't make it stick, no one can."

After several more minutes of arguing, the Professor eventually left the PNN building, and went to the police. Finally, after weeks of hardship, he felt progress was being made, as the officers at the station guaranteed him they could convict on evidence like that.

He went home then, and slept soundly for the first time in a month. He called a week later to check the status of the investigation, only to find that the officers at the station had no recollection of his visit, the evidence he'd presented, or the charges they'd discussed filing. The man on the other end of the phone was more interested in knowing if he had any additional copies of this evidence however, and the Professor disconnected the call before swearing loudly and colorfully in the privacy of his lab-adjacent room.

He went to every news station that would take his call then, resolved to give the story to a hungry young reporter, eager for a 'scoop'. After the Ryme City scandal, they'd popped up like weeds the world over. Before he could contact them, they came to him, asking questions about a fabrication that, by its design, he knew came straight from the nonsensical realm the rest of the Arcean Church's accusations manifested in. The Arceans had moved quickly to counter him. Pokésites had popped up, claiming that the esteemed Professor Redwood had recently taken a vacation to the Fornia region, infringed on the religious rights of the Church, and had returned home, drunk off his ass, trying to sell a fake story in order to get a scrap of fame.
Any idiot with a three-digit intelligence quotient would’ve been able to tell who was sponsoring the aforementioned sites dedicated to smearing him, but the press' interest was on his personal affairs, not the truth. Moreover, they’d taken a similar tactic to his own, and used his own recorded words about his 'crimes' to slander his name. His tone was clearly sarcastic, irritated, and exhausted, but the 'evidence' in his own voice was damning. Eventually, he resigned himself to the fact that he would never be in a position to take Pravus down.

He became even more withdrawn after that, his daughter met a man from Kanto, and moved overseas with him, desperate to get out of that lab basement and start her life. He never heard from her again.

Abandoned, slandered, and outfoxed, Gilroy resigned himself to his studies, but his efforts were fruitless. His sole comfort was his grandnephew, Alex, who alongside his uncle, Gilbert, often joined him in the Lab's basement for talks about life, and Leaf smoking sessions. Of Frederick's generation, Gilbert had turned out to be the least stuffy.

The Professor buried what evidence he had in his former bedroom, and took to sleeping on the couch. Eventually, he sealed the door entirely, utterly convinced that what was behind it would never be useful.

He often wondered why people had so easily believed the lies on the PokéNet, and the cynic in him said it was because most people were too thick to dig a little and find the truth. Eventually, he stopped caring altogether, and focused on trying to impart some kind of life wisdom onto his favored relatives, namely, the newest generation.

He'd tried telling Alex's father who the doctor responsible for 'testing' him really was, but as usual, Frederick took his word, and chucked it. Gil had discovered that Ein had been the one to test Alex, and not using psychological methods. They'd put him on a PokéMeter, and he knew all too well what had happened after that.

The boy had no doubt registered some degree of talent, enough to be a threat. Arcean procedure then instructed the meter reader to either indoctrinate the individual in question, or keep them from becoming a threat. Ein had deemed Alex too 'mentally unfit' to handle a Pokémon once the attempt to indoctrinate his parents failed, and thus Alex grew up without Pokémon. The only comfort he had was the love the Pokémon of the ranch showed him. He handled them better than anyone, and thus was often the one left to clean up after them. It took him all day, usually.

The Professor wanted to help him out, but knew that giving him a Pokémon would only result in eviction, and that would leave him without a supportive mentor of any kind. Something needed to change, before he risked that, and eventually, something did. New neighbors moved into the old mansion roughly a mile from their own plot of land, and the Professor watched the new arrivals with curiosity.

For once, Alex bonded with people over Pokémon, though he suspected they only kept coming around because there was literally nothing else for bored rich kids to do in town. Not long after the neighbors came, Frederick made a deal with the man of their house, an agreement to share the vast swathes of land that had been 'town property' for decades now, and far out of the Redwood's price range.

The number of ranch Pokémon increased, the Redwood family clawed back from bankruptcy, and
by the time Alex left for University, they were once more sitting comfortably on a pile of golden
currency.

Alex had changed as well, however. The Professor had noticed a hardened look in his eye one day,
and from then on, it seemed obvious the lad had a goal. He'd spent his years on the ranch battling
Tauros against Bouffalant or vice-versa, learning Pokémon moves, and squirreling away what
allowance he received in order to buy items.

It didn't take a Professor to figure out he was going on a journey soon, and it wasn't until he asked
for aid on a topic for a school paper that the old man got an idea. He recommended his grandnephew
research the Arceans. They had helped contribute to his Pokéless existence, a fact he would realize,
if he dug deep enough into the cult to learn of PokéMeters, and their purpose. He had a mind that,
with maturity, had become as sharp as his brother's, and the Professor knew that he wouldn't stop at
the surface of the rumors he'd no doubt find.

The Arceans hadn't become kinder in the years since his infiltration, and his hunch that they would
eventually out themselves with their plans for world domination eventually became substantiated. He
slowly realized, after watching his relative battle with a Turtwig against a Tyrantrum in his final
exam, that this was a Trainer who could out the foul cult, perhaps permanently. All it took was a bit
of strategic placement.

John Crimson agreed to help this time, and by pure coincidence, one of the Hands of the Prophet
paid the PNN building a visit on the same day Alex Redwood gave an interview. In truth, the
Professor had thought his plans foiled before they began once he disappeared on the dragon
mountain, but when the video of his grandnephew's Charizard surfaced, he was more convinced than
he'd been in decades. This was a chance for retribution.

Fate, it seemed, agreed with him, as it was Ghetsis' own pride that led to Reshiram's freedom, and all
the wonderful things that followed.
The first thing Alex felt, was damp wetness. There was nothing he hated more than feeling dirty and damp, and it was that innate discomfort that finally brought him to consciousness. He sat up, groaning, and looked around to find that his entire team of Pokémon was out of their balls, standing around him, with concern in their eyes.

Arthur knelt next to him, and he rubbed his aching head. "Oof. What happened? Where'd Arceus go?"

Arthur tilted his head at his Trainer. "You fainted. Never saw an…Arceus. Whatever that is."

He turned his head to the others, "Did you guys?" They all responded with negative sounds that were part of their name, and that was when Alex noticed. His head snapped back to Arthur. "Wait…did you just speak?"

Arthur blinked at him slowly. "You…can hear me?" He sensed confusion, and not just from Arthur, but from his entire team. Alex nodded, eyeing each of them. It was like he was seeing them for the first time, what they thought, what they felt, and with but a glance, he could tell how much they cared for him.

His heart wrenched as he sensed their loyalty, especially Terra's. He resisted the urge to hug them all, and forced himself to stand up. They were sensing the connection as well. Something had just awakened another part of their Trainer, and their bonds were stronger than ever. He formed their seven minds into a unified mental web by pure instinct, and a little help from Arthur. They were a team now, bonded in thought and purpose.

He'd felt their loyalty before of course, in battle, but this…was different. "We battled with Arceus." He said, voice returning to his usual confident baritone, "We battled and lost…hard…he used Judgement on me…and then I fainted."

His team continued to stare at him. Arthur spoke again, and as soon as he started, Alex's eyes went to his mouth. It wasn't moving.

"There was no battle, partner. No…Arceus." His comprehension of human terms for the deity of all Pokémon from just a few hazy dream memories was impressive, but then, he was a psychic type. "We would know the Alpha. You rode Hydrus, then fell into dirt-water. Been lying here ever since."

Alex let the psychic words ring in his head for a moment, still amazed that Arthur could form them. Of his entire team, he now knew, Arthur was by far the most intelligent, meaning were he to be tested, his intelligence score would be the highest.

That was normal for psychic types, as they were said to have near-human intelligence. Now, with his strange new ability, he was slowly realizing that it was humans who had near-psychic type intelligence.

He eyed each of his team again, and noticed something else. Their coloring was…different somehow, brighter, and though he knew their typing by heart, he knew that with a single glance,
he'd be able to tell another Pokémon's typing as well. Then, on a whim, he looked at himself, and his mouth dropped. One eyebrow raised to Spockian height.

In each of them he could see their typing, and by pure instinct, he knew what they were, each of the known types having been drilled into his skull at University. When he looked at himself, it was no different, but what he sensed was normal, and psychic typing.

Did that technically make him a Pokémon? Was this how all psychic types viewed the world? Could he learn attacks, or something? What did that make the rest of humanity? Could they learn from TMs as well? He tried not to wonder the chaos that would ensue from humans learning they could, if the trend held, learn a move like Hyper Beam.

Realizing he was damp all over, he paused the flow of questions as he undressed from his soaked, wet clothes and changed into his spares, or rather, he would have, but instead found a new outfit, and a note within its folds as well.

He didn't have to read it to know who it was from, her scent was all over them, and suddenly, standing in naught but his undergarments, he was reluctant to put the new clothes on. He might go months without that scent, he didn't want to lose it.

He decided to keep his damp socks, and had Blaze dry those first. They were a bit singed afterwards, but warm feet were better than damp feet, and now, the pair from his lady love would remain untouched. As long as he washed and dried them, the ones he had would never need changing. Holes in one's socks were a thing of the past.

He grimaced then, as he realized he'd be living out here for who knew how long with only one pair of socks. He fervently hoped this Psychic Sage had clean water. Then again, there was always Hydrus, who even now was washing his filthy clothes with Water Gun. Even though he'd forgotten that move ages ago. Arthur then let them hover over Blaze's tail to dry, using his psychic power, and keeping them from burning. The whole process was relatively quick.

Examining himself again, he tried to figure out how to tap into his supposedly psychic abilities. As he had so often in the past, he reached out towards the nearest small object, a rock on the embankment, and tried to make it levitate. Something was different this time. He could feel it.

He pushed and pushed, until he began to sweat, but the rock he focused on remained firmly in place. That was when a new voice, similar somehow to Arthur's, rang in his skull, and he took a moment to puzzle out the words.

"There will be time enough for that later. Come, my student, and I shall teach you."

"How?" he said aloud, drawing looks from his team once more. Leo muttered to Terra in Pokéspeech, but Alex understood the gist of what he said near-perfectly. He'd been able to before, with about 80% accuracy, but now, he had no trouble discerning that Leo was wondering if their Trainer was losing his mind. Fainting randomly, and now speaking to the open air? Signs of madness indeed. He ignored the two, and mentally fumbled for the source of the deeper voice.

"How?" he asked again, without speaking, instead letting his question echo in his head, hoping that would work.

Then, just like that, he knew. He knew every part of the swamp, every tree, every river, every
Pokémon. He could sense them, if he focused, and he had a feeling he would be able to do this on a much larger scale once he was trained.

More than that, his insight into the previously unknown Pokémon’s minds gave him Pokédex worthy information. He could catalogue entire regions, if he entered entries manually.

He felt his excitement build. Not because he would likely be able to finally move objects with his mind, but because through this sensory technique, he could maybe, one day, communicate like this to Jess. Distance could mean nothing. He was even more eager to learn, now. He tugged at his new jacket, as it fit a bit snugly over his large frame.

It was primarily black, lined with white, and his undershirt was white, and bore a green Pokéball on it. He had black pants and shoes as well, also with bits of white. His new gloves were white, and his new hat was similarly split between the two colors, but more importantly, bore the symbol of eternal balance on the front of it. She knew him so well.

His clothes still smelled like her, even his new hat, which he had instantly loved. He was half tempted to try reaching out to her right there, but had a feeling that would be meddling with powers he had not yet mastered.

He'd read enough stories to know that heroes who used such things without practice usually ended up paying for it. Heavily. For all he knew, his attempt at psychic contact would fry her mind and leave her a tragic vegetable. He could be patient, if it meant avoiding that.

So instead he recalled his Pokémon, and rode forth once more on Hydrus. He knew their destination now, and as he linked with Hydrus, he knew his Pokémon knew the route now as well. He'd almost jumped out of the water when he felt Alex's consciousness brush his, but he was rapidly adjusting to it. He was the last member of the team to be fully integrated into their mental connection, and the others teased him like he was their little brother.

Feeling a sudden urge to prove himself, Hydrus reached out with his mind to his Trainer's over this new link. They were one. Alex crouched, placing his oversized feet where he knew Hydrus preferred them, and the swamp Pokémon picked up speed, as he could feel his Trainer's movements, and easily keep him from falling.

The Swampert smirked as he sensed the rest of the team's shock at his speed through the swamp water. He was built for this. They all shone with the power of the Waterium crystal, as Hydrus Mega Evolved. His arms rumbled like rocket engines, and now, Alex had to cling for dear life as the speed of Mega Evolution propelled them along the massive swamp rivers.

They were speeding now, rapidly, down a series of smaller rivers, and then into a larger one. He saw several other Trainers doing the same, and gave them a tip of his hat and a smirk as he blew past them. They would try to follow, but he understood the Swamp now. Finding the center was inevitable, but he could understand why not choosing the right direction to wander in led to so many lost Trainers. Apparently, those the Sage wanted were supposed to wander towards him on instinct, likely have a vision similar to his own, and then be given the same mental map he had.

He'd had his resolve to be a Trainer tested by what seemed like an illusion of the Pokémon he wanted to one day partner with. He didn't care whether it had been real or not, that had nothing to do with the lesson he'd learned.
Losing was as much a part of the path he'd chosen as winning, and even when he'd managed to almost turn things around at the end, and was then cheekily thrashed, he hadn't given in to despair. He didn't care what his record said now, but he would always consider himself one loss heavier than the official number.

He adjusted his seating again, regaining some hold, and felt Hydrus turn then, down a side river, and heard the Trainers behind him make the same adjustment. They were a persistent bunch, and he had a feeling that guiding them to the Sage wouldn't be a good thing, for himself, or for them. He almost stopped to reason with them, when he spied a fork in the river he knew Hydrus had to take. They were moving in a counter-clockwise spiral, heading ever closer to the center, and so their path always was to the left.

He knelt down on Hydrus then, and gripped his head fins, the way he knew he'd have to once he submerged himself. They weren't as sensitive anymore, and Hydrus didn't mind having them petted now.

"Water Pulse." A condensed ball of water shot from his mouth, and Alex marveled at how he'd drawn the power, formed it into a sphere, and then launched it all within seconds. He'd felt it like he was actually doing it. He was quite proud of how strong his little Mudkip had become, and he felt Hydrus grin as he sensed his Trainer's pride through their link.

The river exploded before them, and Hydrus dove, dragging his massive hands through the silt at the bottom before moving left again. The other Trainers tried to follow, but by the time they decided on a direction, they'd split up, and the pause had given Alex and Hydrus enough time to make two more such left turns.

They were closer, but it still took some time for them to travel the spiral. He knew Hydrus sensed quicker paths, but he kept him on the spiral course. Alex didn't quite know why, he simply felt his instinct telling him to do it, so he did.

Hydrus didn't argue with his Trainer's instincts, and took the longer path without complaint. He opened up his speed as they came into the last turn, and they sped through the water like a bullet until finally they spied the center. Hydrus slowed to a paddle in the filthy swamp water he loved so much, and let the power of the crystal fade, but his attention was on land, for once. The river's center flowed into a massive wooden hut, and as they entered it, Alex felt a presence. It was enormous, ancient, powerful. It had to be the Sage.

The room they floated into was half water, half wooden flooring. The wooden half had a Taijitu symbol carved into it that must've been centuries old. He couldn't help but grin. His granduncle wasn't as 'mad' as everyone made him out to be. This was physical proof that his concept of combining type energy in that pattern was the right way to go.

He recalled Hydrus, and entered the wooden building. It was little more than a dock, really, evidently made for Pokémon Trainers arriving by way of surfing. As he exited the old structure, he found another symbol of eternal balance, right in the center of several other similarly old, moss-covered buildings.

This one was much larger, however, and newer. It was made of stones of varying shades of white and black, that had been fused together somehow. In short, it was a masterful work of art and he didn't want his clumsy feet anywhere near it. He walked around, on the white Yang side, towards the large building directly in front of where they had entered this new central area. That was where he
sensed the Sage.

It was, by far, the nicest building in this compound, despite the fact that there was an enormous tree serving as the back of it that reached well above the canopy, and into the sky. Now he understood why flying wasn't allowed. Anyone who saw it could make their way towards it easily, and bypass the test.

He had seen had several other buildings and wings to the compound, but they were simpler compared to the one he was approaching. He wanted to explore every inch of this place, but first, he needed to meet this Sage.

As he entered the building by way of ascending wooden steps, he found himself standing in a grand room that almost reminded him of a throne room in the ancient castles that yet dotted the planet. Nobody knew who had built them, or why, but they had captured the imagination of humans.

They were only owned by the mega-rich, of course, as they were limited in number. The Redwoods owned none, as no such castles had been found in their region. He knew Jess' father had at least one somewhere in Albion, north of Galar. He bragged about it every Festivus.

Perched on an ornate circular wooden bowl that acted as his 'throne' Alex spied the Sage. He was an Oranguru, but he was easily larger than every other Oranguru on record. Most averaged out at four to five feet. This one had to be pushing fifteen. Instead of a star upon his brow, Alex again spied a Taijitu symbol, white and dark pink, outlined by black.

He examined every part of the room then, and realized this wood was mahogany. The Sage had good taste, it seemed, especially in his doors, which also bore the Taijitu symbol. It was everywhere.

Two Passimian stood before the Sage, clearly acting as bodyguards. They, at least, were more normal sized. He still wouldn't want to fight them himself, however. He approached, and saw the guards tense up, ready to fight. His team responded, eager to thrash these strange, new, and evidently powerful Pokémon.

He held them in check, and gave the guards a smirk. He couldn't wait to battle like this. They'd be unstoppable, now that he didn't have to call moves aloud. They could hear his thoughts as Arthur could, though forming a similar response with human words was, for the moment, beyond them.

Ascending the steps to the throne, Alex looked up at the Sage, and blinked. He'd assumed the large green thing behind the Sage was just another part of his ornate chair, but no, it was much more. Most Oranguru used hand fans made of leaves to channel their psychic power. This one was much, much larger, though given the size of the Sage himself, Alex didn't doubt he could wield it with one hand.

The Sage spoke first, and the power in his voice sent shivers through himself, and then every member of his team. "Hello there." Alex had paused before the guards, who had moved out of his way. He hadn't stopped for them, but had instead been, for a moment, unable to move forward against such raw power. "Come here, my little friend. Don't be afraid." Again, his voice echoed, but this time, with far less impact. Like Arthur, his mouth did not move as he spoke. He was more amazed that someone had actually called him little.

Alex placed his right fist against his left open palm, and bowed in the classic Unovan style. "Foggy Swamp Sage, I have come many miles to learn from you. Please, teach me." Oranguru eyed the
Trainer then, and his eyes widened. Old as he was, with mastery of the psychic power a human could only ever dream of wielding in their limited lifetimes, he saw many things with the same kind of sight Alex had only just acquired.

Only those with the potential for such power made it through the Swamp. The others usually quit, disappeared from even his sight, or were eaten by one of the many Pokémon that had acquired a taste for humans.

Those mostly lived south of him though. There was a reason Trainers came here from the north. The local wildlife knew not to attack humans in his territory, but should they wander beyond it, said humans were considered fair game.

With his sight, the Swamp Sage saw that this Trainer had already used his new connection to bind his team together. A tingle of what might have been excitement ran through the ancient Pokémon.

There had been a prophecy, made thousands of years past, during the age of Arceus' last Holder. It said that one day, another Trainer would rise to the same heights he had, and when Arceus was again tamed, the whole of Time and Space would finally enter into an eternal balance with the realm in which Arceus dwelled.

Passing between them would become easy, and all those who suffered would have a means by which their suffering would end. Since that prophecy had been made, the world had descended into the era known only as the Dark Times, which had ended not so very long ago, at least for a Pokémon as long lived as he.

Oranguru's sire had passed when the Dark Times finally ended, and that was when his heir finally stepped up to become the next Foggy Swamp Sage. As it stood, he was still in his youth, though he was old beyond measure by human standards. In the final days of those long, dark millennia, he had seen, through inherited memory, and his own sight, attempts to find the next Holder fail time and again. The few candidates who made it to the Sages were always turned away, or denied the chance to become the honored student of the Sage who taught them.

Oranguru expected this time to be no different, and yet, the raw potential in this Trainer before him, and indeed, in all the Trainers that had thus far arrived at his secluded home, astounded him. There were several Sages around the world, and though he had several rivals amongst them, he had friends as well. One such was a Slowking, who was the Secret Island Sage of his region, Alola.

They had often competed in games of chess, an amusing and challenging game the humans had invented in a time lost to history. Slowking had also sent word; his own crop of candidates was just as promising. After checking with and receiving similar reports from each of the Sages, they had all agreed. This time, the World Tournament would truly commence, and for the first time in centuries, one of their pupils might climb all the way to the top. But first, they needed to be trained.

Alex had been waiting, awkwardly, for about five whole minutes as the Sage sized him up, and after coughing, Oranguru blinked, and Alex felt his focus return. "Hmm? Oh yes. Train you I shall. For now, join the others in the dormitory. It is almost time for food."

Bowing again, Alex strode from the Sage's hall, following the mental directions the Sage had shared. He was experimenting with following them while his eyes were closed, when he felt himself bump into someone.
"Oof, I'm sorry, I wa-" he paused, opening his eyes as he didn't quite believe who he sensed. "Professor Oak?" It was indeed the same Professor from Victory Road, a little worse for wear, but unmistakable in appearance.

Gone was the lab coat, and without it, Alex got a good look at his outfit. Purple, mostly, on his long, woolen shirt, the manliest of colors, with the Taijitu pendant still where it had been before, dangling from his neck.

"Ahh! Young Redwood. Glad to see you made it."

Alex raised a brow at the Professor. "I…didn't expect to see you here, Professor. I thought this challenge was for…erm…younger Trainers."

That got a laugh from the aging Professor, who shook his head. "Nonsense. Most of the challengers are my age at least, or rather, the ones who made it here are. Though there are a few exceptions."

Alex's brow rose further. "Really? Who? How many made it here?"

The Professor stroked his stubble-covered chin, saying, "So far? Around thirty. I didn't expect so many. As for who? Hmm…well there is one you might have heard of. His name is Red."

Alex blinked. "Wait, not the Red from Kanto, who beat you at the Indigo Plateau! Trained on Mount Silver? Former Champion of who knows how many regions? That Trainer is here? Now?"

"Yes, the very same!" Gary Oak said, chuckling. He'd had a feeling Alex was a secret Red fanboy, though the way he talked, he'd probably studied a few other past Champions as well. Including himself, of course. "He was in the Unova region actually, but didn't get a chance to challenge the Four before…well, before you showed up. He ran into Lance, the Dragon Master, who was searching for his nephew in Unova, and Lance guided him here when he heard the Word. I tagged along as well. I've always wanted to train under a Sage."

Alex paused for a moment, then eyed the Professor. Normal typing only, or so his instincts said. Perhaps not everyone's challenge had awakened their psychic potential. Or perhaps the Professor's potential lay in another direction. "The Word? What word?"

Gary chuckled. "The one from Arceus. The real Arceus. He's awake again. The challenge to find the next Holder is beginning. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment with a bush I need to get back to. Don't eat the berries. Smell ya later, Champion." Suddenly glad that they hadn't clasped hands, and still processing the surprising information the Professor left him with, Alex continued on to the dormitory, to find that Professor Oak had been right again. Most of the Trainers here were several years older than him.

Looking around, he realized he was probably the youngest. He ignored their stares, a skill he had acquired after being forced into the spotlight so often back at the Dragonspiral Tower, and claimed a bunk at the far end of the dorm.

He decided immediately that he could not, would not, live like this. The combined stink of thirty grown adult humans that had just spent over a week in the Swamp, minimum, was almost too much to bear. Even swamp gas was better than this.

Dinner came, and after gathering in a great hall on the opposite side of the dorms, to the right of the
main entrance yard with the Taijitu symbol etched in precious stones, Oranguru informed each of them of how their training was to proceed. Each day, they would receive exactly one lesson, no more, no less. Upon completing that lesson to the best of their ability, they would be given a new one the next day.

These lessons were quite difficult however, the Sage had warned, and some trainees had taken lifetimes just to complete one. Having acquired a nose for BS from living with his granduncle, who had quite literally berated the naivete out of him long ago, Alex had a feeling most of them would not require a lifetime to complete, but rather would improve consistently over the course of a lifetime, as was typically the case with 'special powers'.

He groaned inwardly. It seemed Oranguru was one of those hermit-types that liked to speak in half-truths and give information from points of view only he was privy to. Just like Tyranitar, Tao, and his granduncle. His mentors had a common theme, apparently.

Dinner was simple fare, some bread, some rice, and a banana. The Sage gladly took the fruit from those who abstained from eating it. Alex had no desire for it either, but he knew he'd need more than bread and rice before long. His body was large, and required quite a bit to keep it running at the level he knew he would need. Thankfully, the Sage informed him that they could indulge in as many helpings as they dared.

Wary of the master's word choice, he settled for seconds, and didn't take more after that. Some other Trainers did, however. One in particular, a Trainer with a red jacket, tanned skin, and sandy blonde hair who was clearly from the Fornia region, Unova's equivalent on the western coast, helped himself to four rounds of rice and bread, eating as though he'd been starved for months.

The others, Alex included, had watched for the consequences of so much gluttony, but the Sage had seemed to ignore him. Indeed, he ignored them all most of the time, preferring to spend his day meditating on his throne. At his size, moving was a chore.

That was how the first three weeks passed. Occasionally a new student would arrive, or an older one would depart, frustrated with their lack of progress. September was just ending, when something interesting finally happened.

The old Psychic Sage had mostly ignored the apprentices who survived the Swamp, and while he trained them, and answered any question with a confounding riddle, he wasn't the sort of Master you could just visit. He battled each of them once a day, and by using Instruct, taught their 'weakest link' in their Pokémon teams how to properly get over a shortcoming.

For Alex, he knew it was Arthur's inability to learn Psycho Cut, a physical move, instead of Psychic. To get to Psycho Cut however, they first had to learn a new fighting type move that suited this Gallade perfectly.

His other partners had gotten lessons in battle experience against the Sage, and those battles had not allowed talking. Many students, who Alex saw also lacked psychic typing, had floundered. Yet when Alex's opportunity had finally come, he had excelled…or rather, he'd at least managed to order an attack.

Like the others, he lost consistently to the Sage's fierce psychic power, for he never went easy on them. It was only once Terra had demonstrated that he could balance both types of energy in his Energy Ball, and thus survived the Sage's fierce power, that Oranguru had ordered him to appear.
early the next morning, for a private lesson. Other students had received similar instructions, and
always, they and their Pokémon came away stronger for it soon after.

As instructed, Alex appeared the next morning on the training field. The compound was south of the
massive tree that grew partly out of the Sage's main hall, but to the north of it, there had been enough
untouched land for a proper battlefield to be constructed.

Instead of a Pokéball in the center however, yet another Taijitu symbol had been carved. Alex was
starting to see it in his sleep, and he knew there was a reason. His mind kept nagging at him to look
at it, but he never quite figured out why. He felt something obvious was staring him in the face, but
the more he tried to see it, the more it eluded him.

Today, Arthur had been picked out by the Sage, and he and Alex stepped onto the field, expecting a
battle. Out of all his team, Arthur usually did the best, as fighting moves were Oranguru's weakness.

"Not today." The Sage had said, as his fan glowed with psychic power from where it was fastened to
his back. A large boulder had been brought onto the field then, and placed before Arthur.

"Now," came the psychic tone of the Sage, "Use Brick Break upon it."

Arthur's hands glowed with the energy, though they didn't form swords for this move. Oranguru's
fan glowed again then, and before Trainer or Pokémon could blink, he'd used Instruct to force
Arthur's glowing hand into the massive boulder, burying it deep within the large rock.

The energy of the fighting type move faded, and Arthur looked at the Sage. He tried to raise his fist
then, and found himself stuck. He couldn't pull his arm free of the stone. Refusing to be made a fool
of, Arthur summoned the fighting type energy again, and it flowed through his arm.

Deep within the stone, the Sage had used his power to shape it, molding it, and forcing the malleable
arm of Arthur, unique to his species, into a proper sword shape. It had been stuck however, despite
now being sharp.

As he used Brick Break, planning to pull free of the stone by force, the fighting type energy of the
move, channeled through his sword-like arm, allowed him to pull free effortlessly. Eyeing his arm,
Arthur switched it between its normal and sword forms at will, a skill that until now, he had not had.
As usual, doing it once was enough for the brilliant Gallade.

"Form a sword, and channel the energy again." The Sage had instructed, and as Arthur complied, his
Trainer stared. He wasn't using Brick Break anymore. He and his Trainer shared a smirk. They had
always talked about him learning Sacred Sword, but had no idea for how they might achieve that.

As he focused the power for the attack, his sword arm began to glow with a golden light. Alex
suppressed a chuckle, as he heard what his Pokémon planned to call his newest weapon. When filled
with fighting type energy, and using Sacred Sword, he would refer to his arms as 'Excalibur'.

Oranguru beckoned the fighter, only to see that Arthur was already being given a PP Max for his
new move by his eager Trainer. Eye twitching, the enormous ever-present fan on the Sage's back
glowed with a furious pink colored energy. Not unlike Mew, when frustrated.

Suddenly sensing that their daily battle was very much on, Arthur's eyes glowed as well. But for this
attack, his arms glowed with a Taijitu swirl on both limbs, a balance of bright pinkish white psychic
energy, and the dark type energy he now called forth as well. He never had problems forming sword arms of dark type energy.

He slashed through the furious Psychic attack, canceling it out entirely. Had it continued, it would surely have obliterated the rest of the compound behind them, which would've meant failing, and proving unworthy of...whatever he was here to learn from this Sage. The boulder had, of course, been crushed when the moves had canceled out, and now the field was clear once more.

The Sage's eye twitched again, this time a proper battle-strength Psychic lashed out at Arthur, and even though he knew fighting type energy had the disadvantage, he used his new move, Sacred Sword, anyways.

It was a poor choice. The immensely powerful Psychic attack cut painfully through the perfected fighting type move's energy, revealing a hidden layer of psychic energy just underneath it, and the attack was canceled out again as it slammed into Arthur, damaging him quite a bit. Astounded, the Sage sat hard on the ground, a little impressed that this duo had withstood a serious attack from him.

Arms still glowing with psychic power, Arthur looked back at his Trainer, giving a weak grin as he held his smoldering arm up, and the glow increased. "It's Psycho Cut! At last!"

He looked back to the Sage, who had a smile for once upon his lips. Nothing could quite compare to seeing one's students excel, and these two were quite the pair indeed.

The battle raged on for a few more rounds, and eventually, the Sage called a draw. With Sacred Sword, Psycho Cut, and Night Slash, this Gallade had managed to hold his own against the fearsome power of a Sage Pokémon. They were almost ready.

"How did you two come by such a strong bond so quickly?" The question rang in the skulls of Trainer and Pokémon, and Arthur let Alex answer. Even though he could communicate now, even with other Trainers, he found conversing to be irritating.

It seemed that after their trial in the Swamp, Alex had not been the only one to gain a new ability, and yet only Arthur had benefited as well. The other five seemed unchanged, though now, connected as they were, they could use Arthur or Alex as mouthpieces. It was quite useful for all of them.

"After I...experienced a vision in the Swamp, I awoke to find that I could see the typing of other Pokémon, and communicate telepathically...with those I could see, anyways." The Sage came closer then, sitting before the Trainer and his now-released team. He made a gesture that suggested they should sit as well. Though most of them were itching for a battle as well now, they complied. Chances for Instruction from the Sage always gave them new insight that made them stronger.

"And what did you do in your vision?" The Sage had an inkling, but he needed to hear it from the Trainer himself. Reading minds was nothing for a Pokémon of his power, but when it came to humans, he found that they appreciated not having their innermost thoughts read aloud.

"I battled Arceus...I battled Arceus, and lost. Hard. I managed to get one good hit on him, but then he took out my last Pokémon, and used Judgement on me. When I woke up, I saw the world with different eyes." The Sage pondered his words, then nodded.

"No more training do you require today...nor any other day. You and your partners are ahead of the others by many degrees. You may stay, train, observe, but until they catch up, you do not require
more instruction. For now." The Sage eyed the human subtly, watching for a reaction of rage, or
disappointment, or entitlement… but this Trainer remained calm, balanced, and though he could see
the Unova Dragon's presence deep within his very being, he did not need to rely on that Pokémon's
balance to keep his own.

Choosing an honored apprentice this early was unheard of…but the Sage had a feeling that this
Trainer would definitely be one of the final contenders for that honor. There were many challengers
now, though. Roughly five hundred Trainers total now remained at the Swamp Dojo, less than half
of what they'd started with. Many Champions who'd made it to the Swamp's center had left after
weeks of poor living conditions, and way too much free time. Though sparring against other
Champions was entertaining, the way they battled, newcomers faced off against previous winners,
and some, like Redwood, had earned annoyingly long winning streaks.

In time, many of the others had gone home after receiving permission to fly away, but some were
simply lost in the Swamp still, and likely would be for a time, until they were found. Or eaten. Even
though training that many other humans would take time, Oranguru resolved to keep an eye on this
one from then on. "Go, enjoy your free time, do what you wish, and when the time comes to resume
your training, you will know it."

Alex nodded, then stood, and bowed. The rest of his team, even the prideful Charizard, did the same.
The Sage felt the tingle of what could have been excitement once more. "We will still battle once a
day…but otherwise, you are free to do as you please."

Alex nodded again, recalled his team, and left. Oranguru then announced that for the rest of that day,
all but Redwood would be required to endure the intense physical training under the guidance of his
strongest Passimian. He would still spar with them in the Foggy Swamp Style of martial arts, but he
and he alone got a free pass from the endurance training.

The announcement caused confusion, even anger, but Oranguru knew that drawing ire to his
strongest pupil would only forge him further into what he needed to become. He had singled out a
candidate, and that meant Redwood now had a target on his back.

He reacted accordingly, and that night he did not return to the dorm, much to his fellow Trainer's
surprise. Instead he camped out in the Swamp, on an unused part of the massive landmass the great
tree stood upon. It was probably the largest mass of land in the entire Swamp, and the Sage's
compound took up only a small space.

Alex set about constructing a small private dwelling then, with the help of his team. Each of them
pictured what it should look like, and eventually, they worked out a design and set about building it.
On the westernmost edge of what he'd nicknamed the 'Sage's Island', for the landmass was
surrounded by water, Alex set up his hut.

Hydrus had access to the water, and was content with sleeping in the mud and filth his kind
preferred. He said that on the Swamp Scale, this place was a ten. Alex didn't quite understand that,
but took Hydrus' word for it.

With the help of the rest of his team, he gathered logs, cut down a few trees across the massive
swirling river, and bound them together with the ever-plentiful vines that crisscrossed the Swamp's
canopy.
Terra also slept outside of the small dwelling, covering most of it from view with his tree. He buried himself in the rich soil, as his mother had, and each night grew stronger for it. He too found that the land here was giving him immense power, as he adjusted to it.

Blaze rested atop the domicile, and because everything was flammable, he'd been given a small U-shaped perch he could rest his massive tail upon safely. Leo preferred to stay inside, with his Trainer, keeping him warm as he lounged in the bed of woven vines he'd shaped like Oranguru's 'throne' and gave the thunder cat scratches as his laptop entertained him.

Arthur had a small adjoining room where he let himself hover in the air as he slept. It wasn't full sleep, but more of a restful meditative trance that allowed him to remain vigilant, but also rest his conscious mind. Shruikan, for his part, had opted to remain in his ball. He didn't care for the Swamp, finding the whole thing a waste of time. He wanted to evolve, and he often asked Alex how he expected to find a Legendary Tamer if all he did was train here.

As time passed and the fall passed with it, the training of the rest of the compound intensified, and the Sage kept an ever-present eye upon the Trainer he had a feeling would make the final cut. He had a top four of potentials already, but time could change his opinion, as could new students. Pupils needed to constantly advance, to keep ahead of their peers. Such Trainers grasped that he only took the best. He kept an eye on all of them, though Redwood's antics often drew his gaze with routine curiosity.

He was a strange man, always lounging around with his Pokémon, smoking various plants he grew on his Torterra's shell astoundingly quick in the bright southern sun. Despite the Swamp's ever present and entrancingly green canopy, there were patches of sunlight where his Torterra would lounge, and he'd discovered that tossing the seeds of Leaf he found in his purchased bags onto his Pokémon's shell was an amazing way to grow a stash for the rapidly approaching winter.

He'd run out of seeds once, of course, but the 'Vegemite Man' as he'd named the blonde stranger from Unova, always had more. From their home region, no less. The Leaf often reminded him of home, and Terra kept up a steady supply of it for his Trainer, who horded it in a strong, storm cloud colored jar, full of crushed Leaf.

When asked why he did this, by the Psychic Sage himself, Alex replied, "Because, winter is coming." Oranguru's stoically passive face had twitched as he suppressed the urge to laugh, and had gone back to lounging. Winter was indeed coming, but this one wouldn't be too terrible. Next year's, he had sensed, would be quite harsh indeed.

The next chance he had, Oranguru looked in on Redwood some more. He moved around strangely, with a makeshift 'staff' of what looked like a long, thin, ancient piece of plastic waste used at one point, ironically, for cleaning homes.

He'd apparently found it while wandering the Swamp, but now, it was an extension of himself, and when asked if such a strong Trainer like him needed a real staff, Alex simply shrugged saying, "I don't mind using this one until it breaks. I have a better one."

From then on, he made a show of idly twirling it as he amused himself on his solar-powered computer, which he'd stashed in his bag. He smoked, gamed, and grew more for winter.

His debts were paid back home from the money he'd gained on the road, and he'd earned the right to not have to deal with his family's insanity this Arcanalia, another term for the Festivus season. When his device needed recharging, he trained with his team, every day, pitting them against the opponent
they'd have the most trouble against over and over, until they found a way to win. Training ceased when the charging was done, and there was a decent eight hour split, with the rest of the time being used for sleep. Since training here, he found he only needed four hours for a full recharge.

He'd told his family he would become a serious Trainer, and with the sheer amount of uncontrolled destruction his lounging Pokémon wreaked on his 'room' any civilized home would've been destroyed. Yet another reason not to return home for Festivus. After Redwood had blocked the Sage's full power moves, there had been a shift in the mood of the complex.

The other students continued to get one-on-one time with the Sage, but Redwood had not, as his Gallade had already learned Psycho Cut and Sacred Sword, thus fixing the weakest link in his team. While many of the other disciples envied or disliked him for his seemingly rapid advancement, most had been fascinated, or curious, and sought to learn from him.

He had combined the Unova dragons together again, after all, at the Sage's own admission when the feat had been doubted, as was typical. It was no small accomplishment, restoring a Guardian, and none wondered if the Sage was lying. There had been video evidence of the entire thing, after all.

Alex explained what he'd learned about combining the energy of Pokémon, and how he used it in battles, and often he would spar with the other Trainers, teaching them what moves he could, usually though, he was the one learning.

Oranguru had approved of this, and soon, being able to successfully combine a dual-type Pokémon's attacks was a requirement for advancing. Many Trainers had special crystals and at least one Pokémon with dual typing, so all of them had the potential to master this style of battling.

Alex hadn't held onto his perfect win record, not like he supposedly had in Unova. The Trainer from the Fornia region with the sandy blonde hair and classic good looks had arrived at his hut to challenge him one day, and revealed that all he used was a Rayquaza.

Typically, there were three shades of Rayquaza to a continental region, not dissimilar to the roosting habits of Moltres, Zapdos, and Articuno. Each Rayquaza ruled over a portion of the sky, and often you could tell which you were facing by its coloring. Because much of the western part of the continent had red rocks, the western sky's Rayquaza had formed red scales, while the east's remained green. Unova's Rayquaza was much, much older though, having legends of its heroic and noble deeds that stretched back as far as the Unovan Dragon's own history. Give or take a century.

This Trainer's Rayquaza was powerful, and could even Mega Evolve. Often a powerful Outrage attack would one-hit Alex's chosen Pokémon, Shruikan, and through the bastardry of item usage mid-battle, he could end up missing the right moment to hit the Legendary with a dragon move in between truly destructive bursts of rage.

Shruikan saw it as good training though, for if he was going to be stuck in this green hell, he might as well benefit from it. As messy as Alex's Pokémon were, their destruction usually did not permanently injure their surroundings, but this Trainer and his partner did not seem to care what destruction their attacks left in their wake.

Each time they battled, the Swamp around them would have devastation for miles, the only exception was when Shruikan actually got hit. Then, it was the makeshift battlefield that took the damage.
After a straight week of being beaten in this manner, Alex approached the Sage, more irritated than anything. His items were not infinite, and he was running through Max Revives. There was no place to replenish them, either. Oranguru had almost seemed to smirk, and say that Alex simply hadn't practiced enough, clearly. He'd returned home then, only to find Brad waiting to battle again. This latest loss was different, however.

"What's the matter?" The sandy blonde Trainer said, shouting as Shruikan went down again after the latest pair of Outrage attacks. The Trainer's flute cured confusion, so after a brief song from it, his Rayquaza could attack over and over.

"Too much for you? As someone who's supposedly mastered a Trio of Legendary Pokémon, I figured you of all people would be able to handle my 'inferior' west coast Rayquaza. Have you caught the eastern one yet? Or, you could just use the Unovan Dragon… unless he was too much to handle in a ball."

On their continent, Unova and Fornia had always clashed, as they were the center of their respective regions, and the most obvious way of testing which coast was stronger, short of war, was battling. There was a tradition of Trainers catching the Rayquaza of their region, and then battling against the other.

The east coast had a record of victory over the west, but since the east's Trainer had passed several years ago, causing their Rayquaza to disappear in sorrow, the west now claimed superiority. Nobody in Unova seemed to care however, as they were too enamored with the return of Tao to bother with worrying about the annual battle with the Fornians.

Alex smirked. He swirled his bag around to his front, catching the 'staff' that had been resting between the pack and his back expertly, before it could fall. He fished through his pack with one hand, and pulled out an emerald colored ball, patterned with the coloration of the eastern green Rayquaza's scales.

These battles had acquired a small crowd of other disciples over the past few days, and now, they murmured with excitement at the appearance of this ball. This was the Trainer who combined the Unova Dragon. Surely catching a Rayquaza would've been easy compared to that.

The other Trainer stared. "You…did catch it? Then why aren't you using it?" Alex shrugged, smirking inwardly as he played up his bluff. The ball was, of course, empty.

"My own team needs the experience more than a Legendary dragon type does. I was hoping to battle your team, you know, the one you journeyed with?" The crowd murmured again, and the Trainer, Brad, lowered his gaze at the mention of his team.

He had classic good looks and tan skin to match his hair, a perfect stereotype of the people who lived on the western golden coast. As Brad looked down, a flash of red light burst from Alex's belt. Blaze appeared in a burst of flame, and glared down at the tan Trainer, nostrils flaring as he recognized the scent of the man who'd abandoned him.

He'd watched from his ball for several days now as this Trainer had beaten his, and while losing wasn't new for them, it wasn't common. Not that common, at any rate. He'd been itching to save their battle record, for Blaze actually cared that his wins counted towards the League's view of their skill level, but he hadn't been sure of this Trainer's identity until he'd gotten a good look at him, and his
chosen Pokémon. Blaze had been abandoned, forced to wander the massive desert of the Orre region, as his Trainer had managed to acquire Rayquaza early on through sheer luck. A relative's Pokéball.

Evidently, he had no longer seen the point in using his Charmander, so he flew into the desert and left it. Blaze shifted his gaze to the 'guardian' that was responsible for abandoning him. This Rayquaza could fly far and fast, and once it saw his Trainer leave Blaze's ball, it must have known the Charmander within was likely to die if left alone. Yet it had done nothing to prevent this.

Blaze had emerged from his ball on his own, and upon realizing he'd been abandoned by his best friend, shattered the symbol of their bond with Dragon Tail. It was a move that would keep him alive as he traveled ever eastward, towards the rising sun. Alone, lost, and in one of the most hostile environments on the planet, he moved quickly, avoiding human and Pokémon alike. As he crossed, he gained only a few levels. Enough to, at least, learn Ember and give him a slight type advantage over the many bug and grass Pokémon he ran into. It was sloppy though, and had a tendency to completely miss his target. Between that and Dragon Tail, he'd managed to survive. He'd traveled from one side of the continent to the other before he realized what he was looking for was an honest Trainer who could make him strong. He was sick of losing to ground types.

The fire crystal in Alex's pocket glowed, and surrounded the Charizard. His form shifted as he near-instantly mega evolved. His eyes were as red as they had been against Lizardon, and he snorted blue flames at Rayquaza, before focusing his gaze on his old Trainer, and snarling.

Being the sole member of a Trainer's team for most of his pretty challenging journey had made this crimson Rayquaza a bit arrogant, and attached, to this human. What he'd lived through had touched a sympathetic nerve in the dragon, one the cult the boy belonged to used to their advantage. He was in prime form, could Mega Evolve, and few were capable of withstanding his Outrage. The Legendary Pokémon's eyes burned as well. If this upstart thought he could match a Legendary because of a temper tantrum, Rayquaza would put him in his place.

Realizing the battle was on again, Rayquaza kept his Mega Form, but before he could unleash an Outrage, Blaze was there, furious, both claws engulfed in the deep red energy of his Dragon Claw. Alex shared his rage, as through their link he had read the Charizard's thoughts, and memories. The fire lizard had, after some reluctance, finally shared them with his team.

Blaze had always been reluctant to share his past with his Trainer, but now, the secret was out. There was no hesitation on Alex's part. He shared the universal dislike of Trainers who abandoned their Pokémon, and Blaze had more than earned his revenge. He freely gave him the power to take it. United, they were ridiculously strong.

It didn't matter if this single battle with Shruikan had already ended, Rayquaza hadn't been hit, and this was a grudge match that Alex had no intention of stopping. The crimson Rayquaza went flying through the air, and though it eventually managed to right itself, it had been knocked clear of the makeshift field Alex had outside his hut.

After so many Outrage attacks, the 'field' was basically gone, but that didn't matter anymore. Furious, and knowing he'd need room to fly, Blaze torched the vines around them, clearing a space above the field. Oranguru's field had a similar open-air space, so Alex figured it was fine. There would always be more vines.
"Alex! Calm your Charizard down!" The cry came from Red, who was standing beside Gary Oak. Both known experts on how to use a Charizard. Reds', once Gary's, was rumored to be a king. In Johto.

The two had met, of course, and Alex found the older Trainer's insight both amusing and enlightening. They'd even pitted their Charizard against each other, and had a great match. Blaze had gone strike for strike with Red's Charizard. Alex was kind of proud. They'd eventually had to stop however, as the combined heat of two Pokémon with Drought had rapidly turned the Swamp to kindling.

Oranguru watched the battle unfold from his bowl throne, which could ascend to the branches of his tree. Did they not hear the thunder? That was his home that was likely to catch on fire. He mentally spoke to the Swampert, and told it and every other water type around to put out any fires.

Alex shook his head at Red's words, and the other Trainer arched a brow. "Don't worry, Red. His eyes do this sometimes...but he's never been more focused. It's long past time for this Rayquaza to face someone its own level." Alex spoke quickly as Brad's Rayquaza recovered, and prepared to retaliate. He had no doubt as to what move it would use.

"Trainners who abandon their Pokémon are scum." Alex declared, glaring across the ruined field at his opponent. "This Charizard was once your Charmander. Do you remember him? You left him in the Orre Desert to die once you had your Legendary."

Brad kept his face neutral as he ordered his partner to attack. "Outrage." The small crowd's murmurs turned to angry whispers, and more than a few glared at the Fornian Trainer. It seemed the rumors about the Fornian's tendency to leave weak Pokémon to the desert east of their region was true. The Church's Trainers only accepted the strong.

Nobody liked stereotypes but most gathered had learned about Alex's connection to his team. His words rang with truth, and Blaze's fury only reinforced them.

Crimson light surrounded the Legendary dragon, and a similarly colored beam shot from its maw, towards Blaze. Wordlessly, he narrowly dodged by turning sideways in the air, and flew towards his opponent. The thing about Outrage however, was that it was a furious, multiple shot attack that kept coming and rarely missed.

Blaze dodged each of the fierce shots, using Alex's eyes and his ability to fly in combination. He'd been burning for a shot at this Rayquaza for years. He refused to lose. Now, this Trainer would see what he had missed by choosing a Legendary Pokémon over him. That choice had cost him everything he'd ever known. It was time for revenge.

Once he reached his opponent, the Charizard raised a claw, and Rayquaza twisted, planning to dodge it. Blaze let the claw slash through the air uselessly. He hadn't summoned power for the Dragon Claw attack, but instead used it to gain momentum for a forward roll, that ended with a fierce Dragon Tail.

Rayquaza eye's widened as it recognized that particular strike, one his sire had mastered. The crimson dragon went down hard, but this was a Legendary, and a well-trained one at that. The irritating sound of Brad's flute cured the haze of confusion that had begun to settle over his eyes, and once more, Outrage struck.
Once more, Blaze dodged. In a normal battle, he might have taken a hit, but this was no normal battle. Not for him. This was long-awaited revenge against the Trainer who'd abandoned him. His focus was like iron, and linked as he was to his Trainer, these attacks almost seemed to move in slow motion. Seeing them from multiple angles made dodging much easier. Had the Rayquaza used its own speed to outmatch him, Blaze likely would've fell, but he could tell this dragon had been relying on its impressive power alone for quite a long time.

Again, he countered, dodging the last furious blasts of red energy before coming up and hitting the Legendary with a dual Dragon Claw across his throat. It was a critical hit, and caused serious damage, but Blaze wasn't done. He spun again, sideways this time, hitting the snake-like body of the Legendary horizontally, and sent it soaring across the river to the west, through yet more vines that hadn't been burned, and into the trunk of a large, ancient tree on the opposing side of the wide river that surrounded the island.

Alex sensed his Charizard fully intended to rid the western skies of their guardian, when he shouted, "Enough!"

Blaze paused, glaring back at his Trainer, and Alex focused on their link, reaching into his partner's mind, and letting his inner peace mix with and balance out Blaze's rage. "Enough..." He said again, tone soft.

Blaze landed, and Alex held out his hand, palm open. The fire lizard pressed his forehead against it, and his Trainer sighed in relief. He'd been close to losing control, closer than he'd ever been, but Alex didn't blame him for it. He would've been just as furious.

"You'd better go to him." Alex said, louder, hand still resting against his Charizard. "He's hurt. I can sense it from here." He looked from Blaze to Hydrus then. "Help him cross the river, and then bring him to the northern edge of the Swamp."

The Swampert then ordered the other water types he'd gathered at the Sage's request to keep dousing fires, as it obeyed Alex's command. Oranguru watched, stunned, as his command was overwritten. The mud fish respected the boy more than a Sage. He sighed, exhaling Leaf smoke as he watched the human from his perch. "This kid..."

Alex turned to Brad then, giving him the same icy stare his Charizard was. "From there you can find a Pokémon Center. Heal your partner, and don't come back. Scum like you doesn't deserve to learn from the Sage."

The sandy blonde's face twisted with anger. "You're going to pay for this, Redwood..."

Alex smirked. "No, I don't believe I am. When you and I next meet, Shruikan will be more than a match for you, and on the off-chance he isn't..." Blaze snorted, his flames still burned blue, and they seared the air.

"My Charizard will handle you. Either way, you are done here. I'm not going to abandon you and your injured partner to the Swamp, the way you abandoned Blaze. I'm a Pokémon Trainer. I try to help everyone. Now get out."

Brad looked around, but seeing that the few friends he'd gained here had turned to enemies, judging by their expressions, he did as Alex suggested. He was wise enough at least, to take help when it
was offered. He stomped over to where Hydrus waited, muttering as he shoved past Alex, "You will pay for this, Redwood. I'll find another Sage. Mark me, this is not over."

Blaze snarled at the Fornian Trainer, fangs bared. "End him now, no threat later…" His thought process echoed in Alex's head. Rather than respond, Alex focused on keeping Blaze's fury from re-igniting.

"Not yet, my friend…" He replied, glaring at the Trainer as Hydrus ferried him over. "Not yet…be better than he is. Everyone has the potential for redemption…and if they don't, he at least, does. There's potential, otherwise Oranguru wouldn't have let him in. Time away might do his attitude some good." He stayed closely linked to Hydrus for the rest of the day, and when he felt the pair had reached the northern edge of the Swamp, where they'd started from, he instructed his Pokémon to return post-haste.

Hydrus did so, but not before batting away a Master Ball from Brad, sending it smashing back into his face. The coward had tried to add thievery to his list of abuses, and Alex looked forward to the day he dared to show his face again.

Alex exhaled slowly, and kept himself, and the rest of his team, calm. They would use that anger later, and save it for a battle in the future. For now, he would let it simmer. Once Hydrus returned, Alex sensed Red approaching.

He arrived just as his Swampert did. "The Sage has asked to see you." Alex nodded. He'd been expecting that, as well. He rose, and headed back towards the compound.
"I will say this much. You have nerve, Redwood." The Foggy Swamp Sage sat upon his wooden bowl-throne which, Alex realized, was balanced perfectly on one of the massive roots of the tree that grew on this 'island'.

He raised a brow at his mentor, and crossed him arms. "I'm sorry, I assumed you wouldn't want Trainers who abandon young Pokémon to their death in favor of power, learning from you. Was I wrong in that assumption? If so, I'll leave right now."

Oranguru raised a hand. "Nonsense. Nobody leaves until I allow them to. What you learn here can be dangerous if not used properly."

Alex rolled his eyes. What he himself had actually learned here was minimal. His team had gotten most of the training. His own 'power' remained woefully untrained. "All the more reason to not allow Trainers like Brad here in the first place."

There was a heavy sigh from the Sage, and he glanced at his Passimian guards. They proceeded to leave immediately after. "I sense conflict within you. I assumed that when you said you would be staying here for the winter it was because you had nowhere else to go, but that is not the case, is it."

Alex frowned, and buried his surface thoughts. "Don't change the subject. We were talking about Bra-"

"We talk about what I say we talk about, Redwood." The Sage interrupted, "I am the master. You are the student. Speak, why have you not opted to return alongside the others for your solstice holiday?"

Alex averted his gaze from the Sage, "I have no desire to see my family when I could be honing my skills. I still can't use these powers I supposedly have." That wasn't entirely true, as he could at least levitate a pebble now…but the appeal of levitating a small rock was short-lived. Still, just seeing the damned thing move when he ordered it to with his mind was intensely satisfying, after years of literally nothing. He levitated his Pokéballs every chance he got, wanting to get stronger.

The Sage pressed him, speaking as he always did, with his mind, not his mouth. "There is more to life than training. For those like us, there must be time to eat and rest as well. Do you not care for your family? Do you not wish to see your-"

It was Alex's turn to cut him off. He didn't want to think about who he was missing out on seeing, as it was too painful. "Of course I care. I have those I wish to see. But this is more important. My instinct says to stay here and train."

Oranguru's wide lips formed into a sly smirk. "You humans pride yourselves on the ability to ignore your instincts, do you not?"

Alex's eyes narrowed, as his mastery over his lustier urges had been a recent stray thought when Jess had been all but mentioned. "Stay out of my head."
The large Pokémon laughed then, a sight that was rare, as the Sage did not often display emotion. "I cannot. Your thoughts are like a loudspeaker, and my senses are everywhere, I see all, I hear the thoughts of every living thing in my domain. I could listen to the planet, if I wanted to go mad. I cannot help it if I overhear yours. Such is the strength of my psychic power."

"See!? That! That is what I want to learn." Alex sighed, looking down, then finally back to his master. For all the grief and riddles, he had come to like the old Sage in the long months they'd been stuck together. His humor was dry, clever, and often Alex was the only one who laughed at his jokes, as he was the first one to grasp them. The Passimian found them humorous as well, but the other students were still convinced the Sage simply wasn't funny.

They still needed time, and that was the deciding factor in what had convinced Oranguru to let them return to their homes for two months. He knew many would not return. Living in the Swamp was hard, after all.

"A compromise then, master. Teach me how to speak to those I cannot see, with my mind. Or tell me how I can lift more than a damned pebble. Give me something to hone over the two months you want me gone. If you don't, I might go mad with boredom."

He'd almost gone mad with it by staying here. Red had been the last to leave, as he'd finally left roughly an hour ago. Those who remained were the Sage's attendants, students who had dropped out of training, content to aid the Sage with whatever he needed them to do. By this point in his training, it was the middle of November. Since most of the Champions had left for the absurdly long holiday, the days had become monotonous, and aside from his daily spar with the Sage, the rest of his time had become outright dull. There was no connection to the PokéNet out here, he'd thoroughly beaten what games he'd brought with him, and if he was being honest, he missed conversing with people whose mouths actually moved when they spoke.

He missed food that had flavor, and wasn't remotely related to rice or bread. He hadn't had meat for the longest time, and while Blaze, Shruikan, and Leo hunted, he didn't find what they brought back very appetizing.

The Sage looked him over, the same way he'd done when he first arrived, and Alex's excitement grew as he sensed he was finally about to convince his master's stony refusal to teach him to bend.

"Fine."

The deep voice boomed in his skull, and rang with a tone of conceding an argument. He'd been pushing for more training for months, without success. Until now.

"I will teach you how to reach out with your mind and communicate with those you cannot see, and even those who are far away. Then, once you have the basics to practice, you will go home, and enjoy what time you can with your family."

He knew better than to jump with excitement, but he was practically shivering with it. He bowed instead, right fist to left palm. "I await your instruction, master."

The Sage rolled his tired eyes, and then closed them. "Enter the state you are in when you meditate…Arthur, join us." Arthur appeared then in a flash of pinkish-white light, bowed, and sat beside Alex, legs crossed. Alex copied him.

"Show him."
The Sage spoke again, echoing in his head, and Alex blinked in surprise. "Wh-" but he was already being guided by Arthur's own Psychic power, instructed first hand on how exactly to reach out with his, and sense the world around them. This was mainly done by focusing what energy he could in his forehead. Fighting types shouted, and embraced emotion to gain power, but psychic types relied on a calm mind, and intense focus. Such was required to keep their energy from going wild.

His lack of emotion played a large part in this, and Arthur warned him to maintain his balance. Anger, frustration, rage, these things could manifest as devastating psychic forces if left unchecked, and could potentially destroy the world around them. If he turned too dark, the atrocities he committed with such power would haunt him forever. Luckily, Alex had always been slow to anger.

Something he felt he'd been missing for months finally clicked into place, and his eyes shone blue. First, he sensed Arthur, then the Sage, then the Passimian guards just outside the room. He opened his eyes, and felt he could still sense them.

He brought his senses in, then expanded them again, over and over, testing the limits of how far he could actually reach. Oranguru watched his student with his own third eye as he took his first steps into a larger world.

"Come." The Sage said, "Place your hand upon this root...sense the tree as you have sensed us, and you will understand."

Alex raised a brow, and rose. Arthur followed him as Alex ascended to the throne, and surreptitiously peered into it as he knelt beside the root his master was balanced on. He knew Red had been lying about the master having Pokéballs within his reach. A Pokémon as a Trainer? Outrageous.

They could teach, yes, battle alone, learn from and enlighten others, but battling as Trainer and Pokémon was an act only humans and Pokémon could do together seriously. it hadn't stopped some of the more humanoid ones from trying, but things like Mega Evolution remained beyond the abilities of such pairings. He didn't quite know why. Yet.

Red had the opposite opinion, mostly because his spoon-wielding Mewtwo had battled him with his own team of allies, before Red eventually caught him. Mewtwo and Arthur had yet to face each other, as Alex kept holding off, until they had a Psychium crystal. Mewtwo's power was allegedly on par with Arceus. Especially in Mega Form. If they were going to battle, it needed to be somewhat even.

He felt the Sage's power force his head back to the root, and he cleared his mind once more, placing a hand upon it. He reached out, feeling it as he had felt the others. It was alive, of course, but beyond that, he couldn't tell what he was supposed to be understanding. "I don't...I don't sense anything, master."

He heard the Sage sigh. "You're too focused on what is in front of you. Reach out to what you know is beyond you. Be mindful of your surroundings."

Sensing what he was getting at, Alex shifted his focus to the tree itself. It was just out of his reach, but then he noticed that if he but followed the root, he could reach it. That was when things began to make more sense.
The root was a part of the tree, it didn't matter how far away it was, they were connected, and that connection could be followed. Follow it he did, and again, his perception changed. The tree, he had known, was massive, but he had never understood just how massive it truly was.

It went deeper than he imagined, and he followed the roots, until eventually to his surprise, instead of ending, they grew into another tree. And another. The further he followed them, the wider his perception became, until finally he could see it all. It was similar to when he'd received the map to this place telepathically.

For a brief moment, he had sensed the entire Swamp, and everything’s position in it. Later, he had discovered that ability had disappeared with time. Now, he realized, that awareness had been residual knowledge from the Sage. He was as much a part of the Swamp as this tree was. Alex once more felt as though something obvious was staring him in the face.

He sensed the Swamp, and everything in it, and just as he felt he was about to cross that threshold of understanding, an entirely too-relaxed voice echoed in his head.

"Hey there."

The random, casual voice he heard in his head made him jump, and he could feel the two psychic types next to him smirk.

"I'm the Swamp Tree. How's it hangin' bra?"

Alex glanced, eyes still shining blue, at his master, and then the tree again. He sensed it all, and the Swamp Tree made him realize just how close a connection psychic power let you have. With anything. Plants were great, naturally, and were usually pretty chill to talk to.

He smirked, and decided to enthusiastically roll with it, responding mentally, "Not much, Swamp Tree. What's up with you?"

The two conversed for almost thirty minutes then, and Alex learned exactly how effective trying to get information out of a tree was. You had to know the right questions, otherwise the trees would mock you, and remind you that they were just trees.

He sighed, as he sensed the Swamp Tree was yet another witty mentor. He knew they'd be having lessons all the time.

"At last, he understands." The gentle mocking of his psychic partner echoed in his head.

"Return to us." The Sage said. His usually thunderous tone seemed muted.

Alex panicked for a moment, unable to separate his own senses from everything he was connected to now, but then Swamp Tree reminded him that he could simply follow his mind's own tie to his body back to the Sage.

It was a complex bit of mental gymnastics, but eventually he forced his eyes open. He was sweating, drenched, really, and he hated every second of being so swampy, but he'd finally done it. He also had an inkling as to how to solve his pebble problem, but that could wait. He looked up at his master then, and simply bowed.

"Thank you. I will depart." The Sage stopped him.
"Hold, a moment. What you have just learned is not to be shared lightly. In the wrong hands, this power could unbalance the entire world. It has before. Understand that if you share this knowledge with whoever you can, you will not be welcome in this Swamp again, nor will any of the other Sages train you."

Alex frowned, "But how do I discern who I can and cannot pass it on to? Did you not tell us that someday we would be responsible for passing on what we have learned?"

The Sage sighed again. He'd forgotten how impatient humans were. "Always reaching for knowledge they cannot yet handle…" Alex blinked. He had a feeling the Sage hadn't meant to share that thought, but he'd picked up on it anyway.

Indeed, he realized, he could now sense the surface thoughts of Arthur, and the nearby guards as well, if he but looked. He felt that doing that was a bit rude however, so he tried to ignore it.

Oranguru continued, "When you can peer into a person's mind and see the core of their being, you will know. It's the same as how you know what typing a Pokémon has. Instinctual. You are not, however, able to keep your emotions from clouding your perception yet. Leave the passing of knowledge to the Sages, and be patient. Your time will come."

Alex thought for a moment, then responded, saying, "I know someone who is worthy. If I judge her correctly, and you share my judgement when she comes here, will you trust me to share this knowledge?"

The Sage eyed him again, and Alex had no doubt that he knew exactly who he had in mind. "Interesting. Very well, it is agreed. If you can successfully judge her potential without being blinded, I will help you refine your skill in this further. It will be a good first step. Once I deem you ready, you may share it with whomever you wish. Know this, however, those you teach will be bonded with you for life. They become your responsibility, their actions will reflect your tutelage."

Alex bowed again, nodding. "I understand, master. I won't fail." The Sage eyed the young human, and suppressed the urge to chuckle. He didn't understand, not yet, but he would. Sooner than he could imagine.

Packing his things took less time than he thought it would, and as he headed for the entrance that connected to the river, he saw the forty Passimian who lived with and protected the Sage awaiting him, though many sat on the roof of the entrance building, or in some of the lower hanging branches of the great tree.

They too trained here, practicing a style of martial arts that was all their own, the Foggy Swamp Style, that each human pupil was expected to learn as well. Alex hadn't really picked it up as well as the other students.

They were all still nowhere near the Passimian's level however. Their leader, who Alex had personally sparred with only once, and lost badly against, was holding a small cloth sack full of rice and bread. He blinked, wondering how he knew that, and then realized that he had inadvertently sensed the thoughts of the Pokémon before him.

Feeling slightly guilty, his appreciation for his budding power grew, and he knew it would only grow stronger. He needed to keep it in check, always. His master had once compared his fledging
power and his own, saying that he had achieved but a single drop, in a wide, wide ocean. He decided not to give the Sage attitude if he accidentally sensed his thoughts in the future, and he knew the urge to resist reading someone's thoughts would be strong indeed.

Accepting the gift, he bowed low, and then brought his free right hand up rapidly as he sensed the lead Passimian strike. He'd taken his eyes off the Pokémon, but he managed to catch the blow on his own arm, even though it hurt quite badly. He'd have a bruise there for sure. Seemingly impressed, the Passimian dispersed then, and let him be on his way.

The trip through the Swamp this time was actually rather pleasant, and for some reason, many of the Pokémon he saw from Hydrus' back eyed him for a long time as he passed. It was only when he reached out with his new senses and caught some of their surface thoughts that he realized they had felt him earlier, and recognized his presence as a friendly one.

Feeling Hydrus' sudden desire to speed through the rest of this trip, he crouched low again, and once more, Trainer and Pokémon rocketed around the spiral. He was much faster than last time, and Alex held on to his head fins for dear life. Each of his team had grown stronger over the past few months here, but he wouldn't know by how much until he battled some Unovan Trainers. Still, Hydrus' improvement was a good indication.

His little mud fish had once more improved in skill, and now, when he and Terra sparred, the very earth shook, rumbling like thunder. They'd become good friends as well, the shared ground typing and the beneficial relationship between water and grass types made them natural friends, and rivals.

Instead of just stopping at the edge of the Swamp, Hydrus found a route that led into a river which would take them onto the western part of the grassy plains they'd entered from. Most Pokémon would've just stayed in the water and let their Trainer disembark, but Hydrus was nothing if not playful. As a Mudkip it had been cute. As a Swampert, it usually meant Alex was in for another night of sore bruising.

Hydrus approached the bank from the water, and launched into the air, soaring a respectable distance before landing hard on the shore. Being part ground type, he didn't mind. His Trainer, however, was tossed violently and rolled a few times before coming to a stop, and groaning.

Thankfully, his water-proof bag full of fragile items had been strapped to a safe place on the large Pokémon, and seemed to have avoided damage. He was glad. A 'bigger on the inside' bag was rare, and his gift from his granduncle was apparently unique. Despite that, he'd learned both Jess and Connor possessed similar bags, but neither of them would tell him why.

Alex raised his head groggily, and saw the river which curved to the west, and eventually fed into the much larger river that split the northern continent unevenly in half.

The eastern states had a certain amount of territory a specific number of miles west of that river, which was under their control. The center of the continent was full of regions and people who historically had wanted no part of the eastern and western rivalry, and they served as a buffer between the two, to prevent war. That hadn't always been the case, and there were still some areas of the middle of the continent that favored one coast over the other, but in this modern age, they were at peace.

Once Alex recovered from the rough landing, and glared at his ever-happy Swampert as he recalled
him to his ball, Blaze was up next. He hadn't been very good at carrying Alex on his back before, as his Trainer was quite large, and that muscle mass added a lot of weight.

Now, he didn't seem to have a problem. After months of staying low under the vine-filled canopy, training against Pokémon, like Red's own Charizard, who had been flying much longer than he had, his wing strength had increased considerably.

It had to, as the Passimian he'd sparred against were weak to flying type attacks, but only if he could hit them hard enough with them. Now free to fly as high as he wished, Blaze shot flames from his maw and corkscrewed through the air as they headed ever northward. Once more, Alex held on for dear life, and wondered if he'd ever be able to simply enjoy traveling on his Pokémon.

Eventually, Blaze's giddy joy at being free to fly as high as he wished faded, and he leveled out. They flew low and fast over the land, passing many towns, and even cities. His Charizard was much faster than before with his new size, and on their journey north, they were stopped twice by enterprising flying type Trainers who simply needed to battle that Charizard. Upon learning he was somewhat famous as well, they'd only gotten more excited. The battle over the Dragon Mountain had gone viral, evidently.

Alex indulged them, as they had both been rather young, as most Trainers whose teams consisted of only one species or type of Pokémon often were. It was usually the older Trainers who had balanced teams, like his, that could give an advantage over pretty much every type. He'd let Blaze battle on his own, deciding to take the time to inform a certain lady of his impending arrival.

He had no desire to intrude on the Festivus celebrations quite yet, and he knew the Gladstones would likely be at the ranch. The Redwoods always had their neighbors over this time of year, which of course meant that it became a madhouse.

While he would never admit it to his master, he had missed many of his cousins. He hadn't seen them since the start of the summer after all, and now it was December. So much had happened in that time, it felt like years had passed, not months. More than that, he was the Champion now.

He'd done what he'd said he would do, and had excelled once he'd finally gotten his team together. He wondered if his stubborn father would finally admit that he'd been wrong in essentially ruining his childhood, but that was one conversation he fully intended to avoid. Irritating him purposefully for the holiday would only irritate everyone else who had to deal with him. He'd waited two decades for the opportunity to prove him wrong. He could wait some more.

He knew that the arrival of a Champion in such a crowded house would change the mood, and likely spark the aforementioned confrontation. Jess however, from the image she sent in response, did not mind the return of her Champion. She'd even mentioned that her own house was empty. He was suddenly rather glad he'd been coerced into coming home. One sparring session a day was simply not enough to release his stress. It was as he was enjoying the thought of imminent rest in civilized company, that he noticed the air around them had gone still. The kind of stillness that only resulted from powerful Pokémon, and their abilities. Rain Dance could vary in power, but was usually localized. Things like Air Lock or Drizzle affected things on a much larger scale.

It was still cold, but the wind was gone. Blaze had Mega Evolved halfway through the miles of land between the middle coast and Unova, and though they made great time through the snowstorm currently hitting the region, the wind had been rough.
They had just crossed into Unova, and were now crossing high above New York City, specifically the Join Boulevard, on their journey northward. They had no idea what was going on in the city below, but they'd be back soon enough to find out.

They were over the region's Entral Park when they noticed the sudden lack of frigid, north east coast winter wind. Blaze let out a Flamethrower at a mental command from his Trainer, and he nodded, understanding. Even the falling snow had frozen in mid-air. His suspicions grew.

It was as he was pondering why the locking of air seemed so familiar, that he noticed. A flash of green came to the corner of his eye, and Blaze, with his reflexes in his Mega Form, shot upwards, above the powerful bluish purple Outrage attack. They unified their sight, as they did before every battle these days, and both rider and Pokémon saw their opponent.

The Rayquaza of the eastern coast. Many Rayquaza patrolled the massive expanse of sky across the world, but because it was the Unovan Dragon that created them, Unova's was the oldest, by far. This meant that he was twice as long as his other counterparts, and that much harder to tame.

The eastern coast's guardian of the sky had vanished when his previous Trainer had passed on. Dragons, especially Legendary ones like Rayquaza, were exceptionally long-lived, if not outright immortal. They tended to avoid Trainers, because of their tendency to be mortal, but once they bonded, they were friends for life.

Alex smirked, as he realized the Outrage attack had been to get his attention. He could only imagine how it looked from the ground. Tao had warned him that his revival would likely draw out the grieving Rayquaza, and that Alex would have to capture him if balance was to be maintained. Alex hadn't actually expected to run into him over the city.

He hoped they were high enough to avoid collateral damage. Blaze launched a Flamethrower in a wide fan at the Legendary dragon, only to burst through it at a different angle, and strike with a Dragon Claw as the jade dragon gracefully dodged under the flames.

Blaze was relentless, and refused to lose to a Rayquaza. He didn't care how old it was, he would establish himself as being on par with dragon types. Especially in this form. His successful claw sent the large jade dragon down, and he spun into a Dragon Tail. Bonded as they were, Blaze knew his Trainer feared for the residents of this massive, poison infested nest of humans, and thus the great green dragon had been aimed into a part of the water surrounding Entral Park.

Nimbasa was close enough to see, and Alex again reminded his Charizard that there were people nearby. The area between Nimbasa and Opeleucid was lightly populated by humans, but he knew Pokémon had homes here as well.

The Legendary dragon managed to right itself, expending energy hard, as it consciously tried to avoid crushing the many water types that called this park home. That was when it felt the ball hit its scales, and it turned, glaring at its would-be Trainer.

He began to resist the capture, only to realize that this was a Master Ball the human had painted to match the green pattern of his scales. The dragon rumbled, and the Master Ball shook longer than it should have. If he was going to be captured, he was going to make this pocket dimension enjoyable to be in. Warping something as simple as a Pokéball was nothing for a Legendary Pokémon. The ball dinged shut, and then began to fall towards the water.
Not even Blaze could keep it from hitting the water, however, far away as he was. One of the Floatzel that lived in the park that happened to be nearby caught it, and batted it upwards with an Aqua Tail, shooting it high enough for Alex to catch as Blaze flew by.

Alex tossed down a Sitrus Berry he'd found, and he chuckled as he saw it submerge in the Floatzel's paw. The Pokémon of the park were absurdly friendly, after so much positive human interaction. It was just good manners to give them a berry, if they helped you. He turned his attention to his new Pokémon then, and headed for the Victory Plateau. He knew this Rayquaza would always resent him if he kept him locked away in a computer box, or a Pokéball, and he usually made a point of meeting newly captured partners before letting the PC system take them away.

He'd specifically disabled that feature on this ball, however. Having a Rayquaza nearby would undoubtedly be helpful, and it wouldn't be against the League's rules if he didn't battle with him. He had several slots for extra balls in his bag, but he hadn't expected to be using them just yet. Tao's was, of course, in there, but he'd let him remain free of it.

The Victory Plateau was empty, as he landed, and let Rayquaza free of his ball. The long-bodied dragon eyed him with suspicion, and curled himself into a pile of coils he could rest on. "Go ahead, then." The tired, psychic voice thundered in his skull, "Make your wish."

The Trainer tilted his curly haired head slightly. Everyone had heard stories of a Rayquaza that granted someone a wish if you presented the sleeping stone forms of Reshiram or Zekrom to it. He hadn't thought it was real.

"You mean that 'wish' nonsense is actually true?" The great green dragon nodded, its expression unreadable. "Well we can't have any of that." Alex said, crossing his arms. "How about we skip the part where you teach me a lesson I already know about my personal greed? I hereby wish that from this moment on, you are free from granting more wishes to those you do not deem worthy. Upon my passing from this world, your ball will become your own, to give to a Trainer you wish to partner with. The first Rayquaza shouldn't be used like Hoopa."

The great green dragon stared at the Trainer for a minute, then recognized the symbol on his hat. "I see the Swamp Sage has taught you well…it is done. Your wish is granted. I will accompany you."

"You don't have t-"

The giant snake-like dragon seemed to smirk as his thunderous mental baritone interrupted Alex. "I will accompany you whether you want me to or not. You have piqued my interest, little human. Take from that what pride you can."

He was about to cleverly quip a response when something on the wind caused Blaze, still Mega Evolved, to turn. He hadn't dropped the form for some reason, as his instincts told him to hang on to it for now, and linked as they were, Alex smelled it as well, though not nearly as clearly.

Seeing that something had drawn his new Trainer's interest, the old Rayquaza looked now, and raised a scaly brow at what he saw. Like most Legendary Pokémon, he saw the world in a different way.

To try to put it to words is futile, suffice to say that he, like the Sage and now Alex, could tell typing from a glance. He had noticed this Trainer's latent psychic power, small and undeveloped as it was, and now in as many hours, he found a second human with similar potential, though far deeper
buried. He had been right to return. The winds of change had again begun to blow.

Blaze shot a Flamethrower into the air, only to see one in return, in the distance. His Charizard was grinning, and his tail actually wagged back and forth. "My, someone's eager tonight…" Alex chuckled, guessing correctly at who was intruding on their little gathering.

A Charizard that was a bit small for a Mega Evolution zipped down from the gathering clouds, and entered the area of calm snow and wind that constantly surrounded Rayquaza. Alex briefly wondered if this was why people said it flew so fast.

Not having to deal with weather would certainly make flying a lot easier. Jess, for her part, looked like she'd flown through a blizzard, which indeed she had. It had kicked up halfway between their home to the north and the Victory Plateau. Her heavy winter clothes, red as always, were almost white with frozen snow. She'd never looked better, to him.

Once he'd offered his jacket, and warmed her up with the fire of their two still Mega Evolved fire lizards, she started speaking. "As soon as I got your message, I realized I had to come get you. Things have changed in Unova, and right now, nobody expects you at home. Not yet, anyways." He sighed. He'd had a feeling Unova's balance had been disturbed, but Tao had never responded to his mental queries, and Alex assumed he could handle it. Apparently not.

"Well, go on then, what happened in the few months I was gone? Is it so hard to maintain the balance without a babysitter?" She gave him a look, before continuing. Apparently, Festivus had been stressful.

She spoke softly. "The Arceans took Tao."

Alex blinked down his rising fury, and his eyes grew hard. He knew there was a reason Tao had still felt distant, despite his return to Unova, but this was too much. "How?"

Jess shrugged, "How indeed? Once you left, Tao spent most of his time in deep meditation, though he continued to help those who visited him. Apparently, he didn't notice being captured, because he hasn't awoken since. The Arceans have him on display atop the PNN building, still resting. Anyone who tries to enter, to free him, gets blasted by a Tri-Attack from a machine they've hooked up to him. Ghetsis and the Arcean's leader, Caleb Pravus, have been ranting about their 'superior technology' for the past three months, claiming that their possession of it was what had kept you and the other Champions away from Tao, who is apparently, legally, two thirds their dragon."

At the mention of the other Champions, Alex raised a brow. "You mean the others, all three of them, were beaten back? How? Ghetsis was easy enough for me, and I hadn't even gathered eight badges when we battled."

Jess looked down, and sighed. "The four of us, as I went with them, were repelled by Pravus, and his minions. They don't battle by League rules. They ambushed us at the front entrance with ten other Trainers, and then finished us with a Tri Attack from their machine. It's not like a Pokémon move, it's much stronger. A beam of manifested fire, ice, or electric energy. Usually all three. Delphi managed to keep it from injuring us too badly, and we escaped. We tried a few more times to get in, but they repelled us, so we decided that we'd have to accept the situation until you returned with Hilbert."
As Alex absorbed the information, he knew numbers would be useless here. They needed to take that machine down first, and then rush in, preferably with a small group. He looked to his newest partner, the massive, ancient jade colored dragon.

"Can you take down that machine?" The Rayquaza nodded, and Alex turned towards Castelia city, then blinked again. "Hey…does Castelia look different to you? I've never seen it so bright…or so orange…" Jess turned as well, and then the Rayquaza spoke again, startling Jess as it echoed in their heads. By now, Alex was used to it.

"Those are flames. Whatever you plan to do, do it soon. The city is unbalanced, and it seems war has erupted."

Alex raised a brow. "War? Between who?"

It was Jess' turn to chime in again. "Probably between the Arceans and Tao's followers. Once you left, he let quite a few people stay at the Tower, and maintain it, as he meditated. They've been planning a rescue attempt ever since. Supposedly. Nate and Rosa have been organizing local Trainers while Hilda has been here, defeating challengers of the League. Only a few managed to get past the Four, though."

Alex stroked his bearded chin as he eyed the burning city. "And Hilbert? He should've been back by now. He left weeks ago. He's definitely strong enough for Ghetsis, after the training we had." Hilbert had arrived at the Sage's home a week after Alex, battered and bruised, but alive, and sick of Vegemite sandwiches. He, Red, and Alex had often relaxed together when they had a free moment.

Jess shrugged again. "Nobody has seen him. He does have a tendency to vanish, though."

Alex swore, and mounted Blaze again, who was already ready to go. He was also glad he'd kept his Mega Form. Chari had done the same, and soon, Jess had mounted up as well. Close as they were, Alex caught a strangely familiar scent. He smirked at her, "Is that lilac and goo-"

"So, what's the plan, Champion?" Jess interrupted, as she put her Trainer hat on. Free of the heavy winter clothes she'd somehow stuffed in her own bag, she'd been dressed far too nicely for stopping a war, and had apparently prepared for his return before rushing off to warn him. She looked like a proper Trainer now, and he had a feeling he hadn't been the only one to improve.

Alex suppressed a chuckle, and looked back at the bright light of Castelia. "My green friend here will free the First Dragon, then…I have a meeting with this Pravus fellow." He didn't even bother to ask how Ghetsis had escaped prison, as organizing Arceans in Unova was his role in the Church.

He'd done it so many times now, he was convinced the prisons just let the inmates out the back door once they were processed. Apparently, the guard's Pokémon weren't always able to beat a prisoner's, and he knew from experience how strong Ghetsis was against most other Trainers.

Getting into the tower would've been easy for him, and knowing Ghetsis, he probably had a machine of some kind that had forced Tao into submission by surprise.

The trip to Castelia was short enough, and they came over Nimbasa first, which was noticeably less on fire than the borough to their south, Castelia. Alex looked down as they flew over the Join Boulevard, which now connected both cities with a series of shops within the long tunnel.
"It hasn't reached the boulevard yet. Jess, keep it that way, hmm? You and I had fun there, I'd like to go back. Tell any Trainers with water Pokémon to be ready to fight the flames. You're a Champion too, they'll listen."

She sighed. He was right, technically, but nobody really acknowledged their victory except on official records. Reuniting the One had taken up most of the news coverage. "Fine. Once that's done, I'm joining you."

He nodded, and she and her Charizard peeled off for the ground, where people were flooding into the relative safety of the boulevard. They had indeed had fun here, and as she landed, many of the Trainers they'd battled remembered being beaten by her, or her lover.

Soon, teams of water types were running through the city, putting out fires, and aiding the local firefighters as well. Other Trainers heard the call, and on seeing civilians were getting involved with saving their city from burning, they lent their water types to the cause. Between Jess and the firefighter's experience, they'd soon contained the blaze, and began putting it out in short order.

Alex and Blaze flew over the northern part of Castelia, and looked to Rayquaza then as the PNN building came into view. The aforementioned weapon began to glow with red, blue, and yellow light. "Let's start this party, shall we? Dragon Pulse!"

The Legendary dragon shot ahead towards the PNN building, dodged each part of the Tri Attack, and then countered with his Dragon Pulse. The way he fired, it was more like a Hyper Beam of dragon type energy. The weapon was left a smoking ruin, completely obliterated by Rayquaza's power.

"Go!" He thundered, "I'll free the First Dragon."

As he flew over, Alex saw that most of the city was lighting up with new flames, as many of the Trainers below were using fire attacks. The fighting had erupted in multiple battles in the city's streets, battles that were not adhering to League rules. The Pokémon center was overrun with members of both sides, and fist fighting had broken out there, as well. Amateur 'Kung-Fu' was tested against Arcean conditioning camp martial arts, even as their Pokémon battled.

Though Alex wasn't aware of it, this fighting had been raging for hours now, and was coming to the point that would decide who won and who lost. As a result, the Pokémon center had become a crucial point for either side to hold. As another of Rayquaza's Dragon Pulses lit up the PNN building and arced towards the plasma cage that held Tao, Alex had gone further south, and had Blaze land amidst the fighting before the Pokémon center with a Blast Burn that got everyone's attention.

The flames swirled around him and his fire lizard, and he appeared within them as they faded, arms crossed. "Listen up!" He shouted, addressing the crowd. A few of them grinned as they saw, and recognized him. "That explosion was the sound of the Unovan Dragon being freed of captivity. If you are an Arcean, I suggest you return home. Immediately. Things are about to turn against you in this 'war'…and I'd rather not have to kill any of you."

At one time, this might have been taken as a challenge. But this was Unova, and he'd built a solid enough reputation. Everyone present seemed to recognize him, if not his Charizard, and knew how strong his team was.
Blaze punctuated his words with a snarl, fully intent on being the one to battle, if he had to. A large group of what he assumed were Arceans fled down the road to the east of the center. He had a feeling they were heading for the sewers, as that had been where Plasma had once holed up as well. He’d have to route them out of there too, or they’d regroup, and the fighting would continue.

Blaze took off after them, sensing his thoughts, and assuring his Trainer that none would escape back into the city. Alex then hurriedly began helping the center's nurse heal Pokémon. He had enough items to make a dent in the number of patients, and as they moved through the streets crowded with wounded Trainers and Pokémon, he healed who he could. Arthur had been helping him navigate the streets towards the PNN building, and the two locked eyes as they both stopped short. They'd both felt it. Tao had awakened…and he was *not* in a good mood. Something had gone wrong on Rayquaza's end.

Alex darted down the westernmost street, and headed for the PNN building. This street was still embroiled in fighting, and he was about to try to gain their attention when he saw Rayquaza appear above the battling Trainers. Their Pokémon stopped, and they had no choice but to look up and acknowledge the massive dragon. He flew towards Alex, and hovered over him.

He took his chance to try to dissuade them. "If you don't want to get hurt, get out of here. All of you! Now!"

Most of the Trainers scurried off into side alleys and down other streets, but two stubbornly remained to guard the door of the Poké News Network. They each had a Drapion, and they each commanded a poison attack against him as he approached. Rayquaza had flown back towards the building's roof as Tao's furious roar echoed through the city.

Arthur's arms glowed with the power of his Psycho Cut and with two slashes of psychic colored energy, his power ended the two poison types after slicing through their attacks. He loved Psycho Cut, and it had quickly become his favored move once he'd learned to use it in melee, and from a distance. The Drapion's Trainers ran off, abandoning the Drapion to their fate. Alex left a pair of Oran Berries for them before moving into the building and recalling his psychic partner.

It was a far cry from how he'd last seen it. Things had certainly changed, though not for the better it seemed. PokéMeters, the machines used by the Arcean Church to allegedly pinpoint problem areas of a person's life, were set up all around the lobby, and Alex started to understand where they'd suddenly found so many Trainers.

Three months of indoctrination backed up by the very obvious sleeping form of the Unovan Dragon above the building was sure to impress gullible people, and the Arceans were infamous for being able to retain the people they snared in their buildings. Whether through monetary or emotional control, those who fell prey to the scam rarely managed to break free of it unscathed.

Using the PokéMeters, they were often able to convince people to try their 'courses', as they claimed doing so, for a modest fee, would improve their life, and save them from depression they didn't know they'd had.

It was one of those very machines that had caused him to grow up Pokéless, and as Alex debated whether or not to smash the machines that had pretended to be measures of potential psychosis to pieces, Jess burst in through the doors behind him, and he couldn't help smiling, despite the fact that things were likely about to heat up. He heard Tao roar again, from above. "I'd have a romantic quip for you, but this is all happening rather fast."
She managed a smile as well. "Save it for later. We need to get up there." They called the elevator, got in, and then waited. It was a long ride to the top floor, and the Festivus music was entirely inappropriate for the moment. "I had Empolia handle the fires. They got most of the east side of the city, when I noticed Rayquaza moving. I figured you were on your way in."

Alex nodded. "Your timing was perfect, really. I expected more resistance though…"

Without warning or explanation, a Gallade and a Delphox appeared before them, springing from their respective Pokéballs. Then, the doors opened, and their Trainers understood why. The room was full of Arceans, clad in their standard blue suits with white naval caps.

They looked ridiculous to Alex, but then, he imagined his own garb wasn't all that impressive either. It still smelled of the Swamp, too. Poison attacks came from every direction, but Arthur was there, arms glowing with psychic power as he blocked each of them with a rapid series of Psycho Cut attacks.

The League's rules were indeed being ignored. Jess' Delphox retaliated after that, a wide fan of flames arced towards Trainers and Pokémon alike hitting with unerring accuracy.

Most members of groups like this tended to use normal or poison types to battle, and the Arceans were no exception. Arthur knew what to do, and began zipping through the room, arms in Sword Mode, using his various attacks, and changing them up when he had to. He was perfect for this, really.

As with the Elite Four, he usually had type advantage, or at least a move that would be super effective. Between his expert strikes and Delphi's flames, the opposing Trainers went down, hard. Many recalled their Pokémon, and then scurried towards the stairs, heading down, likely to the sewers. Most buildings in Castelia had an entrance to them somewhere.

As Jess watched Alex and his partner, battling without saying a word, she noticed the two had become much, much stronger. As Alex gave his partner some much needed potions to recover his strength, another person stepped forward. The leader, hopefully.

Alex sighed as he examined the man. He was too young to be very high up, but judging by the manic spark in his blue eyes, he was 'devoted' enough to be given control of his own group of Trainers. Devotion didn't appear to inspire loyalty, however, as his cronies, those who remained conscious, had fled to the lower levels, usually clutching a burn. Delphi had not held back.

Alex looked at Jess, smirking. "You take this one. Arthur can't have all the fun."

She was already stepping forward, and waved his words away. "Go. Save your dragon. Delphi can handle this zealot."

The two engaged in a rapidly escalating battle with a strong looking Skuntank, but Alex was already heading up the stairs of what he realized was the studio where he had once been interviewed. Like the lobby, it too had changed in appearance.

It was a classroom, with what looked like Pokémon education. Arcean style. He grimaced, recalling more stories his Gruncle had shared, of Arceans who had a strange thing for little boys. As their teachers. In rooms just like this. The very thing they'd accused the Professor of had likely happened again in this very room. Alex tried not to vomit at the thought.
Since this was an indoctrination room, that meant this party would be on the roof. As he rapidly ascended the stairs with Arthur, he knew Jess would likely be right behind him.

As he reached the top, he beheld a sight that made his anger, slow to awaken, rise. Tao was indeed up, his energy cage broken and smoking, but his long body was bound with ropes and stakes pounded into the roof's concrete. His wings were similarly bound with a ring of energy that kept them upwards and pressed against each other. It certainly looked painful.

Worst of all, they'd muzzled his long snout, and several men in Arcean uniforms appeared to be in the process of trying, and failing, to pull off his white scales, to get at the obsidian colored skin beneath them.

Alex leapt onto one of the random piles of wooden crates that littered the roof, towering over them all as his eyes burned blue. "You muzzled the One Dragon? Sacred Sword!"

Arthur's arms glowed bright with fighting energy, that shifted to bright gold light, and once more he moved with speed, slicing at the ropes that bound Tao down. He struck at the binding on the dragon's wings then, but that one was considerably stronger. "I'll need a minute for this." He said, mentally, as his arms struck the binding over and over.

"Hyper Beam."

Neither Alex, nor his Pokémon had time to react, and Arthur was blasted off of Tao's back as the other Arcean grunts tried to keep the struggling dragon pinned. Alex reached out to the Legendary dragon. Telepathy wasn't something he was entirely sure would work, but it would be invaluable here. He felt the dragon's mind, confused, unbalanced, a whirlwind of emotion.

"Relax, Tao. I'm here." The dragon abruptly stopped moving as it heard Alex's mental words, and met his gaze. He sensed the acknowledgement, as Alex began to tell him what the plan was. Busy as he was with his mental conversation, he missed the opening lines of the monologuing man who had ordered the surprise attack.

He looked up as his newest opponent paused, and seemed to be waiting for him to answer. "Sorry." Alex said, chuckling, "I missed most of that. Care to repeat for my friend here?" He gestured to the stairway he'd exited to get onto the roof, right as Jess ran up next to him. Being able to sense her presence was really useful for timing witty banter.

Their opponent narrowed his eyes. "I am-"

Alex interrupted again. "Caleb Pravus? Right? The man behind the cult? Shouldn't you be dealing with those allegations of beating your subordinates? Why are you wasting time here?"

The man's eye twitched, and he finally regarded the strangely garbed boy below him. He had some balls to accuse a man as 'well respected' as him of beatings. It didn't matter that the accusations were actually correct. Denial was a part of the Arcean's playbook, and they used it often.

Having done some prior research on the Arceans in his school days, Alex had recognized their leader. He couldn't help but smirk as he saw the man's face darken at his words. He really did not like it when people mentioned the ugly rumors about his tendency to beat his subordinates. Bruises tended not to lie.
Caleb Pravus was an older man, who looked like he'd been cast to play the villain in an old-fashioned play. His suit was more casual, but better made than his subordinates, and it was black, with a purple shirt beneath it. He had black hair, combed over to his right, and kept reasonably short. What really stood out was the goatee, however.

Aside from being a stereotype for evildoers, he'd let the hair on his chin grow longer, so it formed a twisty, pointed clump that dangled from his chin. One of his brown eyes twitched continuously with pure rage at Alex's words, and Alex had a distinct impression another attack was coming. Neither he nor Arthur had determined the source, yet.

Suddenly, Arthur sensed just what they were fighting, as he'd needed a minute after getting blindsided by such a strong attack. "Alex! It's a-

He was drowned out once more by the Arcean's Prophet as he uttered the words that confirmed what Arthur had sensed. "Aeroblast."

A beam of white energy shot from the darkened, cloudy sky just above the building, but Arthur cut through the attack with Sacred Sword. His blocking arm was marked with black, and smoking, but he'd managed to avoid the hit, more or less.

He was already moving to engage the Lugia that had fired the attack, but Alex still couldn't see it, which was odd. Lugia was always white in color, even the variant that lived in the Atlantican Ocean, and had red horns rather than blue. It should have stuck out against the purple and black shade of the night's clouds...unless...

Sensing his Trainer's thoughts, Arthur continued to watch the clouds. If the Arceans had actually managed to replicate that technology, this Lugia was going to be a lot harder to deal with. Seeing as Alex had the Arcean leader distracted, Jess ordered her Delphox to try to free Tao, but Pravus wasn't having any of it.

He ordered several of his minions to engage her, and they all brought out water types, primarily Seismitoad, then pressed Jess and her Delphox back towards the door as the psychic fox struggled to block the multiple water and ground attacks with Psychic.

Unable to fly, all Arthur could do was dodge or parry the attacks being launched at him from the cloud's cover. What little he saw of his opponent didn't make much of a target. Irritated, the Gallade looked back at his Trainer as Pravus called out a unusually colored Gengar, and then Mega Evolved it. The intimidating white ghost grinned at the Gallade, and prepared an attack.

"Let me fight the ghost...this is a battle for someone who can fly."

Alex smirked. "Or someone who can cripple flying types..."

Leo appeared in a flash of white-gold light, electricity already sparking over his fur. He was ready to go, but as the Gengar launched a Shadow Ball at him, changing his aim at the last moment, he found the attack deflected by Arthur, and his Night Slash.

Pravus glared at him. "You're getting annoyingly difficult to ignore. Leave. This does not concern you." It occurred to Alex then that someone like Pravus, who ran a cult, might not know about up-and-coming Trainers.

His organization was, after all, a business first and foremost. He likely brushed elbows with the rich
elite of their world. Such people didn't have time to keep track of new Trainers. Their respective 'worlds' simply didn't collide.

"It does concern me, actually. I'm the Champion, and therefore, Tao's Trainer. You've much to answer for, Pravus." Another Aeroblast arced towards Arthur, only to be blocked by a hasty Thunderbolt. Had Leo been a bit slower, the Gallade would've likely fainted right there, distracted as he was by fighting the Gengar, who was parrying his Night Slashes with the same move.

The aging man's eyebrows went up. "Ahh. The Redwood boy. Yes...I've been expecting you. I didn't expect you to look like a monk, though."

Alex didn't know of any monks with his amount of hair, but his new jacket did resemble a robe. Kind of.

Pravus continued, "Tell you what, lad, if you manage to beat me, I'll give you my Psychium." It was Alex's turn to frown now, as that type of crystal, aside from dragon crystals, was extremely rare. There was a reason only N had possessed a dragon crystal in the entire Unova region, and none but other Champions in the Swamp had held a Psychium.

Still hesitant, Alex answered the man. "Fine. Challenge accepted."

Recalling his now fainted Gengar, Pravus brought out his psychic type partner, a Gallade. Unlike Arthur, he was red, not green or blue. His torso was purplish-black, but his horns were a deep red, and he maintained bits of white as well, on his legs. Seeing Arthur as his opponent, the Gallade smirked.

A dark voice echoed throughout the area, startling everyone. "Oh...so that's why you did that. I see."

It was mental, like telepathy, but broadcasted so strongly, everyone could hear it.

Then Alex understood. This was what Gallade turned into when infused with Shadow energy, like the Lugia his Luxray was currently trading blows with.

"Mordred." The word was a command, and the Gallade before them was wreathed in bright purple energy as he Mega Evolved. The Psychium crystal became visible, as it was pinned to Pravus' chest, and in use. "Shadow Slash."

The Mega Gallade launched forward, every bit as fast as Arthur, as ghost type energy flowed up his arms. Arthur met it with a Night Slash before Alex could even think the command.

Arthur looked back at him as the dark type energy beat out the ghost. "Relax. I have him. Help Leo."

"Aerial Ace!" Pravus had looked annoyed again when Arthur blocked a move he was supposed to be weak to. But dual types had multiple weaknesses. He swore colorfully and loudly as Arthur's Night Slash blocked that as well.

He could block all day, as the damage he took wasn't too terrible, but he needed to counter soon. He realized he needed to wait until the opportune moment presented itself. Just as the Passimian had taught him.

As it turned out, that moment was fast approaching. Leo had been shooting Thunderbolts into the clouds at the Lugia, and now, lightning flashed constantly, illuminating the outline of the Legendary
Pokémon.

With a roar, Thunder arced from each of the charged clouds, slamming into Lugia. It fell from the clouds, smoking, revealing dark purple coloring. Their hunch had been correct. Dark energy had been infused into this creature, perverting it into something that should never have existed.

Another Thunder struck it as it began to recover, and the smoke from its body changed then, growing darker, and engulfing the Lugia's entire form. Then it was gone, without a trace. Leo grimaced and Alex sighed softly. It had been an unstable transformation, which meant Pravus had not yet perfected the art of infusing Pokémon with such energy.

The Shadow had finally overwhelmed that Lugia, and now it was gone. Alex didn't have the tools to counter that kind of infection, almost nobody did, as it had only broken out in the Orre region primarily, and had been stopped before it could spread. That had been years ago, and nobody had been mad enough to attempt it a second time. Until now, apparently.

He had no idea what to do about the Gallade, Mordred. He did however, know that the Arceans, or at least their 'Prophet', would go down for this. Forcing that much dark energy into Pokémon for a boost in power and change in attitude was illegal in every country with a Pokémon League, which at this point, was pretty much all of them.

Alex focused his attention back to Arthur, who appeared to be standing victorious over Mordred, or rather, had his sword-arm to Mordred's throat. He'd taken the Aerial Ace, hard, but in return had launched a Shadow Ball at point blank range. Infused as his opponent was with Shadow, he'd still retained his species' typing. As well as its weaknesses.

That opening had given Arthur what he needed, and though he was hurting, he'd still managed to pin his opponent after the power of the condensed sphere of ghost energy knocked the dark Gallade down.

His arm shone with the golden light of his Sacred Sword, smoking as it touched the shadowy purple skin of Mordred, but before either could find out what the move would do to him, Mordred vanished, as his Trainer recalled him to the obsidian colored ball he apparently called home. Pravus, seeing his Lugia fall, had decided he could deal with this nuisance in plenty of other ways.

"Get us out of here…" The older man rumbled, turning his back on the Champion.

Pravus' shadow moved then, and enveloped the man whole, then sank back into the concrete roof, and slithered off before Alex could so much as blink. He swore colorfully, but knew he wouldn't be able to catch the man. He had a reputation for being able to slither away from most situations unscathed. His followers claimed it was a miracle, a sign that what he did was sanctioned by the Alpha, but as usual, reality proved to be different.

Alex turned his attention to Tao then, and saw the injured form of his new Rayquaza lying not far from him, tail dangling over the side of the building. Evidently, the Lugia had overpowered him with a surprise Dragon Pulse.

Delphi had bought Jess time to call out Serpi, and together, the two had beaten the Seismitoad back. The number of Arceans restraining Tao had shrunk as Jess took them down one by one, and as only one of them remained, the furious dragon reared up, free now that Serpi's Leaf Blade had slashed
through the ropes binding him, his eyes blazing with darkness.

His scales took on a darker tone, and electricity sparked over his form. Alex could feel it as well, the Shadow energy they'd been pumping into him had awakened Zekrom apparently, and now that black aspect of the Unovan Dragon was becoming dominant. The plan he'd shared earlier was forgotten, as his darker half's rage awakened, and shook the sky with his roar.

Alex had no doubt that Castelia would be a smoking ruin if he left Tao like this. History blamed Reshiram for the ancient fiery destruction that had occurred when the two brothers had warred with each other, but in reality, much of it had been the result of stray lightning from Zekrom hitting the trees of the region.

They would've raged forever if Reshiram hadn't stepped in after the battle. Thinking of the light half of his partner, Alex pulled out his Firium crystal, and pointed it at Tao.

He tried his hand at telepathy again, unsure if it would reach the furious Legendary. "Shiro, you need to balance yourself! Take the power, before you lose control."

The white scaled dragon twisted in the air, his long body not entirely unlike a Rayquaza's. The crystal's energy seemed to set half of the Pokémon aflame, before both it and the sparking electricity suddenly vanished. Alex sighed in relief as he felt the balance return. He also felt Tao was exhausted after months of resisting his darker half's takeover by remaining in a trance.

After failing to close his heart, the Arceans had pumped as much Shadow energy into the dragon as they could manage. It was a credit to Tao's strength that he'd managed to resist it, but it had certainly taken a toll.

The long-bodied black and white dragon landed, evidently, he'd broken the wing restraints with his own surge of power, and he met Alex's gaze. "I need to rest…I'll take the shape of an orb for a time…"

Alex held up a hand. "The last thing we need is your power in a shape that these people can easily steal. I have another form in mind. What do you think?"

The tired dragon gave him a long look, then smirked. "Fine. That will do…for a time." His form shimmered, and became that of a staff, half white, half black, the Taijitu symbol of his balance emblazoned in the middle. Alex caught it, and marveled at the power he felt running through the resting dragon's form.

He twirled the staff a bit, smirking. "Any feelings of nausea?"

Tao's voice emanated from the staff, "My mind is not so weak it will suffer such things. Use this form as you wish." His presence retreated then, and Alex could tell he had already slipped into slumber.

He slid the sleeping dragon between his pack and his back, securing it tight, until he was sure it wouldn't just fall away. Jess meanwhile, had corralled the Arcean grunts, and left Delphi to keep them in line.

After their leader abandoned them, they had surrendered, and were now arguing about whether or not to remain in the Church, or if they'd even be allowed in after such failure. Alex walked up next to the fiery haired Trainer his gaze always lingered on. "Any idea what to do with this lot?"
She shrugged, "The police and Ranger forces are busy raiding the sewers. That's where the Arceans were hiding as they waited for their Prophet to kick things off. Evidently, once Tao's followers and the Arceans saw Rayquaza fly over the city, chasing you, the real fighting broke out. Nate and Rosa are down there too. They assumed you'd be nearby to help them."

He nodded. It was a bit surreal to think Unova's heroes were counting on his aid, but he had a feeling they'd be able to handle whatever they found down there with their own teams, and the Rangers. There was a reason they were Champions, after all.

Alex walked over to the arguing Arceans, and as he approached, they eyed the staff on his back warily. "You lads have some explaining to do. Legally, Tao is my Pokémon. Not only did you steal him, but you then used his power for defending your rat's nest of a building as you tried to corrupt him with Shadow energy, another very illegal act."

He knelt down to their level then, and noticed they weren't bound. Evidently Delphi had kept them in place with Psychic, and they'd simply given up resisting.

"You have some serious prison time in your futures…unless you're willing to divulge where your leader went." In response, he sensed one of them about to spit in his face. He dodged it, easily, and then backhanded the man, who fell over groaning. As large as his hands were, his knuckles left a noticeable impression.

Another of the men, who were all easily older than him by a good decade, judging by their looks, blonde, tanned skin, and classic jawlines, spoke up then. "You'll get nothing from a True Arcean. Caleb Pravus will clear this world of filth like you. Half-breed!" Alex sighed, then turned his gaze to the final man in the trio. Evidently, this was the one who had become disillusioned.

Alex stepped over to him, and the man looked up, fear evident in his eyes, "Please…I can't go to prison…I have a family…" The other two began to protest, until a very hot ball of flame appeared between them, and began expanding in size at Delphi's command. They stopped talking, eyeing it warily. Jess stepped up next to Alex, then and knelt down before the third man.

"It's alright." She said, taking on a soothing tone, "We can put in a good word for you…"

"But only if you give us something useful." Alex finished. They'd been able to finish sentences for each other before, but with latent psychic abilities, it was a lot easier. He suppressed a smirk as he felt her eyes on him. He'd spoken her next words verbatim.

He could already sense the multitude of questions she had, but he sensed something else she wished for first. It took him a minute to recognize her lust, and he had to work at keeping his cheeks from flushing.

The man glanced between the Champions and his companions, then sighed. "I can't…you don't understand…if I utter so much as a word about him, they'll kick me out. I'll lose everything. My job, my family…my entire life is in the Church. It's all I've ever known."

Alex shrugged then, "Fine. Enjoy prison, I suppose." He empathized with the man, but in all fairness, he'd joined this group of his own accord. He'd followed orders, indoctrinated his family, and become so entwined with the Church the thought of leaving was absurd.

Arceans that did leave were cut off from family and friends still in the Church, at the behest of the
Church itself. The Church denied that they did this, of course, as they denied any negative allegations against them. Even when hard evidence to the contrary was readily and easily available.

What gave everyone a headache was when they denied obvious fact, supported by evidence, and never once admitted they'd done something wrong. The Arceans denied everything, and if you spoke against them, they had no qualms about trying to smear your reputation with Pokésites propagating false rumors. Alex had no doubt that after three months of illegally holding his Pokémon, and this evening’s events, he'd earned a smear site or two as well.

Knowing that the other two were likely to turn on this man when they wound up before Pravus again, as they no doubt would if he deigned to spend money on releasing them, Alex sighed. "When this group of yours turns on you, and mark me, they will, go to the Dragonspiral Tower. One of the attendants there will give you a room. Tell them who sent you."

Seeing the glares from his companions, the ostracized man waved Alex's words away. "I need no pity, I exist only to serve the Church, and Arceus' Prophet on Earth."

If his companions were buying his words, it didn't show. Alex sighed again, and then went over to Rayquaza, who was struggling to rise. He fed him a Max Revive from his rapidly dwindling supply, and soon the dragon was floating again, and the snow and wind on the rooftop became muted. Agreeing to rest in his new ball, Alex recalled his newest partner, and put his ball in his bag. It was strange, carrying two Legendary dragons around, but being Unovan he really should've expected it eventually.

He felt Jess return to his side again as he stared out of the smoking city, and she seemed more upset than he was. She'd tried convincing the man to talk, but had also failed. "I will never understand those people." She sighed, and then leaned on him.

Given she weighed hardly anything to him, he welcomed the weight and responded in a low voice, "Understanding isn't something their 'Prophet' encourages. You either obey, or you're excommunicated. Cut off from everyone and everything you've spent your time doing in the Church."

He felt her eyes on him again as she spoke softly as well, "How do you know so much about them, hmm?"

He smirked, "I was instructed to write a paper, back in University, on an example of the power of indoctrination. Nobody approved of my topic, even the Dean was angry about it, but I still aced the assignment. After I burned and deleted all copies of the paper. They were very adamant that it never be seen by the public, let alone actual Arceans."

She raised a brow at him, "Really? That seems a bit extreme…"

Alex shook his head, sighing. "No, it isn't. Not where Arceans are concerned. They have a tendency to sue anyone who so much as looks at them the wrong way. I expect you and I will be getting court summons soon enough. When they can't take things by force, they switch to legal trickery."

He felt her shrug, "Oh well. Daddy's lawyers will take care of them." Alex just chuckled. Her father's lawyers were most likely working for them. If you didn't have moral qualms, the Arceans were a guaranteed fat paycheck. "Shall we go home, then?"

Alex looked around at the pockmarked roof, then nodded. He reached out with his mind, and soon,
Blaze appeared, landing with a large yawn. Flying hundreds of miles at top speed would drain any Pokémon, as would holding a Mega Form for as long as he had.

It was gone now, however. Chari was called out as well, and soon, the two Trainers were on their way home, back up north. They assumed Castelia could regain some semblance of order by itself, now the Arcean leadership had vanished.

Before they could take off, Alex was stopped by someone yanking on his leg. "Ahh, Joey. I didn't know you were here...or an Arcean..." His tone turned mildly disapproving as he examined the man's clothes.

Joey shook his head, "I'm no Arcean. I stole a uniform and spied on Pravus and Ghetsis. Nobody noticed. I also did as you suggested last time, and recorded everything I could."

Alex had suggested that Joey record his bosses telling him that he wasn't allowed to bring his Raticate with him to work, back at the Dragonspiral Tower, when he'd mentioned that the owners had caught him with his Raticate's ball, and had threatened to fire him if he kept it.

Most people brought their Pokémon everywhere, as leaving them alone for hours on end was legally considered abuse. He'd also have grounds to sue them, for more than enough money to sustain him until he found a better job. Alex smirked, glad for once that the man's enthusiasm had proved useful rather than annoying. "So you have hard evidence against them? That's brilliant! Well done."

Joey scratched the back of his head, and averted his gaze. "Yea...actually, I handed over all of it to Pravus, downstairs...he appeared alongside a Darkrai. A purple Darkrai...but, I did manage to snag this before he left."

After looking crestfallen at the loss of evidence, Alex's expression shifted to a smirk. "Well now...it might not help legally, but...I'm sure you can make good use of it." The Psychium pulsed once in Joey's hand, but the man handed it to Alex. "I don't have a psychic type...and besides, you can do more with that than I can, Champion."

Alex looked Joey over then, and nodded, hand closing around the crystal. He might have been weak-willed and a bit annoying with his constant texts about what his Raticate was doing and how amazing it was, but he'd really come through this time.

He could also sense Arthur's excitement, but he was hesitant. Madmen like Pravus tended to over-do things, and with an abundance of Shadow energy, who knew how he'd corrupted this crystal. Arthur might become something monstrous if he used it. He'd have his granduncle examine it first.

"I suppose I can..." Alex said finally, pocketing the crystal. "I won't forget this. Thank you."

As the pair of Charizard flew into the snowy night, Joey waved at them until their tail flames were out of sight.
The 'Castelian Civil War', as it was being called, had occurred five days from the start of Festivus. In those five days, Alex Redwood and Tao remained safely hidden in the icy north, and as with most small towns, any media attempts to find his residence were met with stony silence by locals.

That's not to say the entirety of their small town liked the Redwoods, they just disliked the media circus more, especially since they were very obviously from the west coast. Even with the coordinates of his home available to the public, with the sheer amount of farm land their small town had, finding the actual residence was a challenge.

The blizzard that had been raging in that northern region didn't make matters any better, and eventually, most of the media crews gave up, or hunkered down at the local inn until the storm passed. With the Arcean's sudden withdrawal from the city, the local Castelianites were left to clean up the damage, which included paying for it.

That was a large factor in what soured most of the city against the Arceans and their Church, which had more than enough money to fund the repairs seven times over. Since they'd been the ones setting most of the fires, purposefully, the least the inhabitants expected was proper reimbursement for their damaged they ever received however, was a public statement claiming that the incident in Castelia had been perpetrated by Unovans who had been radicalized by the east's 'wild and free' lifestyle and morals. Therefor, the Church claimed to owe nothing.

Tao's followers had stayed, alongside two of the four Champions who'd fought beside them, and aided in the repairs as best they could. The locals had also begun taking a page from their attacker's book, and began suing the Church itself. With so many battle recorders on the Trainers who'd defended their home, it was hard for the Church to deny their involvement, especially when one of their higher ups had been caught on camera. The Trainers who offered said video soon, sometimes, found themselves evicted, and Arcean landlords came out of the woodwork with new 'building codes' in regards to Pokémon. Evidently they'd bought up quite a few buildings in Castelia, though in a city as large as New Tork, they were vastly outnumbered by groups who'd owned land much, much longer.

Neither 'coppers' nor criminals cared much for foreign trash that set their city on fire. It stank, it was filthy, and your average fellow citizen would typically pass you without so much as noticing your existence, but it was still their home. Local crime bosses, who made up the crime element in New Tork, partnered with 'Jenny Law', and in three days, the foreign ownership of the buildings in question was returned to the state of Unova, their landlords having had their property seized once the criminal element of Unova rather easily brought their dirty laundry into the light. Pedophilia, illegal Pokémon trading, possession of Pokéballs with foreign and unregistered Trainer numbers as trading partners, which implied they were stolen. Not since Team Plasma grunts had been brought before the Unovan Supreme Court had so many criminal charges been slammed onto so many people at once. The foreigners were advised to return to Fornia, and were 'guided' to the nearest plane flight across the country, headed for one of their 'satellite states', regions of the north western continent that had, over time, become devout Arceans in their own right.

Alex and Jess had returned home to find her house empty, and his house bustling with activity,
despite the snowstorm raging outside. Having a mansion to themselves certainly aided with the pent-up stress and extra adrenaline from fighting in an intense conflict. They'd had to stop when her parents had returned, nearly two hours past midnight, but with some help from Leo, Alex had escaped discovery, and ridden home on his back.

It was the first time they'd tried it, and they discovered they made a good team. Leo's movements were fast and soundless, and even though his Trainer added quite a bit of weight to his step, they were able to leave minimal prints in the snow. The blizzard took care of them, and thanks to Leo's eyes, getting home was easy.

The lights in the main ranch house were dimmed as they approached, but the adjacent lab still had a faint glow, and as Alex examined the smaller building, he saw the telltale gleam of an old fashioned hand-held lighter brighten the interior for a moment. Then he spied a plume of smoke rising from one of the windows that faced the land behind the lab. He smelled what Leo smelled, and one didn't have to be linked as they were to recognize that familiar Stunky-esque scent.

Sensing and sharing his Trainer's thoughts, Leo moved them away some distance so Arthur could join them in relative stealth. The swift Gallade kept low under the opened window in the back as Alex and his five-foot-tall electric lion made their way to the front door.

He had to resist swearing, as he hopped off Leo, and sank a good three feet into the unshoveled snow. His granduncle was a classic leaf head, and in his day, the herb had been made illegal for several decades. As such, he had a lingering paranoia whenever he smoked.

The eastern part of the continent shifted its stance on the legality of the herb all the time, but the western side had outlawed it completely, thanks in no small part to the Arceans. They saw such things as 'distractions' from their goal of preparing the planet for Arceus' imminent return. This didn't mean all Fornians disliked or abstained from enjoying the Leaf however.

Those who managed to fly under the Arcean's radar kept to the mountainous north of the western coast, and grew and smoked in relative safety. Or so Alex had heard, from that area's Champion, one of his fellow trainees in the Swamp. She too had returned home before he did.

Because he knew his granduncle's quirks so well, he knew, with some certainty, how the old man would react to a simple knock at his door in the middle of a smoke session. He pounded his large fist on the door three times, and heard the clanking of glass and crunching of plastic bags as his oldest relative hurried to hide the evidence of his midnight smoke session. That was where Arthur came in. He was carefully watching the old man, and noting where he hid everything.

Alex suppressed a chuckle, and Leo had what looked like a smirk on his furred face as they heard the spraying of some kind of air cleanser meant to rid, and in this case, hide the odor in the air.

When his granduncle finally got the door, the faint scent of lemon hit Alex, and he made a show of waving the smell away as the aging Professor pinched his brow and sighed. "Blaziken's balls, lad you nearly gave me a heart attack! I thought you were the police, or worse, your father. All I need is him showing up at midnight, drunk, to 'wish me a Happy Festivus, and talk'. Again. You know better than to knock. Now get in here."

Behind the old man, Alex spied Arthur, carefully lifting the hidden pieces of glassware, a bong and several slides, as well as a bag of familiar green, out the still-open window via his psychic powers.
Apparently leaving a window open in a snowstorm was entirely normal. Alex chuckled, and then embraced his granduncle. "It's good to see you, Gruncle Red. I missed the stench of your stale Leaf stash." The old man returned the embrace, though to Alex, it seemed weaker than before. "Bah. My stash is of the highest quality. You should know, ya bloody mooch."

The two Redwoods entered the lab then, and Alex saw no sign of Arthur. From what he could sense, his partner was still outside, waiting for the jig to be up, but something was off. He was too distracted by his granduncle's words, and the state of the lab, to notice, however.

"Well?" The old man grunted, returning to his seat, "I heard about Castelia. Is it true? They're calling it war."

Alex looked around the lab, and then noticed why something seemed different. Papers were piled up everywhere, not a single piece of the dated equipment was being used, in fact, most of it was covered by white sheets.

"Yea..." Alex said, still taking in the sight of the disused, and filthy lab. "The Arceans...as soon as I heard they had Tao I had to get him...I guess when they saw me fly over on Blaze, trailed by Rayquaza, Tao's followers kicked off the rescue attempt...and it devolved into open conflict. I've never seen anything like it. I doubt Fornia will do anything though, they're claiming they had no involvement."

The Professor nodded, returning to the chair he'd placed by the window. "I did warn you not to mess with them. They'll give you no end of trouble. Especially since you have a psychic type on your team."

That got Alex's attention. "What? Why does having a psychic type have anything to do with their opinion of me?"

The old man raised a scraggly gray eyebrow as he reached for his hidden bong, behind the chair, yet only found air.

"You don't know? They hate psychic types, and anyone with the ability to use similar powers. Even those with minor empathic abilities. They're convinced that the psychic types are controlling the world's governments, and making them do Giratina's will, or some such nonsense. Where the bloody hell..." He turned to look behind his chair now, and discovered his stash had vanished.

Alex kept his face neutral as he thought for a moment, taking a seat in the chair opposite his granduncle. "Odd...I didn't find anything like that when I was researching them..." His Gruncle had spoken of this before, but had never revealed so much at once. Alex urged his old brain on.

The Professor looked up, and chuckled. "You wouldn't. It's something they like to keep secret, but one of their core beliefs is that psychic types seek only to challenge Arceus' rule...apparently having psychic power, and being human, marks one as a 'half breed'. You don't want to know what they do to psychics they find in Fornia. They see natural power as a sign of domination by a malevolent psychic type, and the resulting 'half-breeds' are considered to be the antithesis of everything they stand for."

Alex stared back at him. "But...but Pravus uses a Gallade...I saw him Mega Evolve it with a Psychium crystal. He had a Lugia as well, another psychic type, and Tao easily qualifies, with his telepathy. Even separate, Reshiram, Zekrom, and even Kyurem all possessed that ability."
That brought another chuckle from the old man, "You expect the leader to follow his own rules? Ha! He's likely explained that using them like this is part of some Arceus-given plan, but owning his own Gallade, Pokéball and all? That's damning evidence."

Both their heads turned as they spied a soft orange glow from outside, and Alex laughed into his hand as he finally sensed what Arthur had been hiding.

He'd been suppressing their link for a moment, just long enough to try this Leaf that appeared so popular with humans, and apparently ancient, wise Pokémon. Both the Sage and Tao had openly enjoyed it, and he was tired of missing out. Manipulating the instruments was easy enough, but the smoke was awful. Still, he had enough residual knowledge from Alex, and had seen him use similar equipment enough times to take a passable toke.

"Speaking of Gallades… yours wouldn't happen to be using my bong, would he?" Alex broke down into full laughter, and the old man hobbled towards the window. "Oi! If you scorched the entire bowl, I'll have your hide."

The old man's bong, as well as all of his other various smoking apparatus, floated back in through the window, safely tucked in the old man's own backpack. Alex raised Arthur's ball, recalled him, and then let him out again within the lab. "Couldn't resist, could you?"

Alex smirked at his partner, who took a seat, cross-legged, by Leo. The large cat had curled up between the two humans, and had been napping. He opened one eye, blinked at Arthur, then resumed his nap.

Arthur shrugged, and then projected his telepathy for the two humans to hear. His speech had improved over their months in the Swamp, and now he spoke with the eloquence of an Albion Knight.

He had a baritone that almost sounded like Alex's. "You never let me try it in the Swamp, and I was curious. It's an odd sensation…but I rather like it."

That got a laugh from the two Redwoods, and soon after, they decided to descend into the basement of the lab for a proper post-midnight smoke session. Arthur's first.

Leo opted to remain above, taking one of the chairs to curl up in, while the other three went below. It wasn't long before the air was filled with smoke, and the conversation resumed.

"You mentioned that Pravus having a Gallade was damning, but how?" Alex asked, somewhat distracted by the disoriented thoughts of his own Gallade. Arthur was enjoying himself, it seemed, and it was flooding over their link.

His granduncle looked at him as he took another deep hit from his piece. "You still have that battle recorder, aye?"

Alex's eyes widened. "I see…yes, I should…and if it recorded that battle…"

"Then you have video evidence of the Arcean Prophet's hypocrisy." His granduncle finished, smirking and exhaling a cloud of smoke. "That kind of evidence would put a serious dent in what little credibility they have left. They'll deny it of course…but if it's straight from the recorder, it won't make a difference. The trick will be putting it on the air. Arceans need to see it, not just the general
It was true enough, as most modern Trainers had PokéNavs, Poketches, and other useful, but ultimately frivolous devices that aided them on their journeys. He brought up his last battle, which had luckily been the one against Pravus, and smirked. "Here it is. It got him Mega Evolving his Gallade and everything."

He handed the recorder to his granduncle, who was also smirking. "I'm making a copy of this. If they ever give you grief, let me know. I'll have this ready to be sent to every media station the world over. Whether they broadcast it or not is another story."

The old man got up, hobbled over to the basement computer, and then went about saving the recorded battle. "Send a copy to me, too." Alex said, smirking, "Just in case. The more backups we have, the better."

Alex was fully expecting Pravus to retaliate, but he hoped he'd wait until after the holiday. He would never admit it, but the long months of living in the Swamp had worn him down. It was hard, living out there, only ever getting answers in the form of riddles or wise anecdotes, eating only simple fare on what the small isle could grow. He was looking forward to a rest.

His granduncle nodded. "As you know, they have no qualms about breaking into buildings and destroying evidence like this. Either way, I'd rather them not learn what we're hiding here. I prefer my lab to not be broken into."

In the past, on the western coast, there were numerous stories from former Arceans that had managed to escape Fornia's main hub, Sacreus City, and the oppressive rule it was subjected to, that told of security forces employed by the Church breaking into homes of those they deemed 'heretical', and destroying whatever negative evidence against the Church they could find.

The Church, of course, denied these allegations, but given their denial of anything that portrayed their group in a negative light, it was a good bet that the stories had some truth to them.

"Speaking of your lab…" Alex continued, looking around. Even the basement had white sheets over most of the equipment. "What happened in here?"

His granduncle sighed, and groaned as he sat in his worn reclining chair. The old man proceeded to hit his bong before answering. "You know the rest of our family has been pushing me to retire for years now. About a month after you went south, my doctors gave me less than a year to live. My lab assistants found out, and moved to different labs. After that, I decided to finally retire. Your brother will inherit this eventually, but for now…it's little more than a storage building."

Even if his head hadn't been swirling from the nights events, and the hallucinogenic herb, Alex would've felt the same vertigo. He had known this was coming, of course. Death came for everyone, eventually, and even though humans these days lived much, much longer than they had in the past, no amount of technology could grant immortality. Yet.

It was as he was processing his relative's words, that he felt the staff he laid beside his chair stir. A single golden eye opened on the white half, which was sticking up towards the ceiling. His
granduncle had noticed immediately, and both humans watched as the eye began to glow. Its focus was the old man, and to his credit, he didn't waver before it.

Alex knew what Tao would find, but as he felt the resting dragon's sadness, what small hope he'd had of preventing his favored relative's end vanished. "I'm sorry." Linked as they were, Tao had sensed several diseases that even now were ravaging the old Professor's body, and now Alex knew of them as well.

Brain, lungs, heart, liver, the old man's body was rapidly fading. No amount of medicine could save him. Even the power of Tao, now united once more, couldn't stop the inevitable. It was a shame, for as the resting dragon had listened to the two related humans banter, he'd grown to like the old man. He knew much of what his Trainer had learned came from him.

His granduncle waved a hand, as Tao's voice had been projected to all three of them. "I'm an old man, dragon. I've known this was coming for some time now. It comes for all mortals…I've had a long life, which is more than most humans throughout our race's history have had. Don't apologize. I'm fine with going quietly into the night...those who rage at the inevitable are childish."

He took another toke from his bong. At one point, it had been clear glass, tinged with red at the bottom, but after years of use and lack of consistent cleaning, the glass had turned mostly green, and the whole piece now had many shades of color, almost like a rainbow.

The elder Redwood had no idea how it had survived in one piece for so very long, but it had, and now it seemed it would outlast its owner as well. That cheery thought brought another hit, and he then passed it to his favorite nephew.

"That'll be yours, when I'm gone." He said, almost sighing as the thought of his imminent nonexistence loomed over him like a shadow. "As will most of my possessions. Your brother's getting my research, but my will says you'll have free access to it as well. Maybe something in there will help you. Heh."

Suddenly, the piece floated away from Alex, who was yet still lost in thought. It had been an emotional night, but his attention refocused itself on Arthur, as he watched the Gallade rise, and take the glass piece. He spoke only to the Professor then, keeping his words from Alex and Tao.

Tao heard, of course, but he kept the knowledge from his Trainer. A tear fell from the old man's eyes after a moment, and he nodded. "I'll hold you to that." He said, his voice suddenly rough.

He cleared his eyes, and nodded. "You'll excuse my skepticism…but...if anyone could…" Arthur raised a hand, stopping the old man before he could say more, and then gave the piece back to his Trainer, resuming his seated position on the old wood floor between them.

Eyebrow raised, Alex looked between his psychic partner, and his favored relative, then shrugged. Some things could only be learned in time. If it was important for him to know, he trusted his Gallade to tell him when the moment was right.

Tao's presence faded as he resumed resting, and Alex finished the bowl, though by that point there was barely anything left. "Well, I should get to bed…" He said, standing and recalling Arthur to his ball.
He helped the Professor up as well. "Aye lad, it was nice having you back. We'll do this again before Festivus is over, I'd wager."

Alex chuckled. The two of them shared a common stressor in dealing with the rest of their family. They didn't dislike them, but conversing with them all at once for an entire week was stressful, to say the least.

"We will. You can count on that." Alex said, as he moved for the stairs. His granduncle usually slept in his lab, and judging by the state of the basement, he still did. The equipment was covered, but signs of habitation were all over.

Ashes from past bowls of Leaf, a stray sock, his old lab coat, even the cot in the basement, which was actually quite comfortable, seemed to still be in use.

Alex recalled Leo as well, and then, using Tao's staff form as an aid, made his way to the front door of the main house. Nobody was awake at this hour, as it was quite late. Had the storm not still been raging, he reckoned the rising sun's light would be visible.

Normally, his family would be up soon enough, taking care of the ranch, but with the snow as high as it was, all the Tauros, Miltank, Bouffalant, and other Pokémon were resting in the barn behind the main house.

It was also where Professor Redwood stored the extra Pokémon of the Trainers who started from his lab. There weren't many, but Alex's other Pokémon were among them as well.

He made a note to visit them as he tried and failed to sneak upstairs. His feet were large, and the house was old. The floor creaked with every step as he made his way to the top room, and found it as he'd left it.

The bed was folded and proper, but aside from that, everything else was the same. He dropped into it with a sigh after removing his clothes, and setting his team on his desk.

Tao was propped up next to his bed, and it didn't take long for him to fall asleep after that. His dreams would no doubt be troubled, especially after the night he'd had, but he never did remember what he dreamed that night. He was too tired to stay semi-lucid, as he often did.

He slept until well past noon the next day, and upon awakening, wasn't surprised to find that his team had let themselves out for breakfast, and lunch. Arthur had taken care of them while their Trainer slept, and had answered most of his family's questions when they'd demanded to know why he was on the morning news, which was covering the events of the previous night.

Thus, when he finally descended, showered and with Tao in hand, they'd been more happy than irritated to see him. Arthur had shared the events of the previous night through his telepathic image sharing, and thus despite what the news was saying, his older relatives were proud of their family's newest Champion. Most of them, anyways. As usual, his father was convinced that his becoming a Trainer had somehow started a war, despite the fact that he hadn't actually been around for the beginning.

Some channels labeled the new Champion as responsible for the fighting, while others, PNN included, gave a more truthful recounting of the night’s events. Castelianites knew, more or less, which version was actually truthful, but the rest of Unova either bought into the lies, or remained
The storm continued to rage as Festivus drew ever closer, and it was being called one of the worst storms in years. It wasn't all that uncommon this far north. The snows were always intense.

The storm continued until Festivus finally arrived. Alex had spent the past day preparing to leave to find a spot to train at, but despite the weather, he'd gotten a visit from N. As the new Champion, he had duties to perform this time of year, not least of which was facing challengers who had managed to beat Hilda.

There weren't many, but some had been waiting quite a while now, and were eager to either win, or get on with their journeys. He spent most of the second day back at the Victory Plateau, first having Blaze clear it of snow, and then battling his challengers. There were three in total, but none had the strength to topple him now. In a six on six battle, he was quite hard to beat.

They had still proven challenging though, and he sent them to the Dragonspiral Tower after losing, suggesting that they should return once they learned what they could from the monks there.

Tao's followers had taken to wearing white robes with black pants, in the old style, shaving their heads, and practicing martial arts. It wasn't all that different from how Alex had been living in the Swamp, though having the modern comforts of a region with actual infrastructure made living much more tolerable.

Tao awoke the next day, recovering much quicker now that he was whole once more, and resumed his dragon form, before flying off to his tower. Before he left, he'd split a small part of himself to remain as a staff, and left it with Alex. With it, he claimed he could escape future confinement, provided Alex helped, without losing his strength.

At first Alex had protested, but Tao insisted saying, "I was split in three for millennia. This is different, and useful. You will see. Humans are clever, especially when it comes to capturing Legendary Pokémon. I won't always be able to fight them off, but this will solve that problem. It is a part of me. Keep it by your side." He hadn't elaborated on how it would be useful, exactly, but had been quite sure Alex would know what to do when and if the time came to use it.

Tao departed with relative stealth, and Alex decided against telling anyone. Let them think he was still hibernating upon his back. He did tell his granduncle though, along with Jess. They, along with his uncle Gil, and Arthur, all decided to have a smoke session in the lab while the main house was packed with relatives and neighbors again.

About halfway through, Alex showed his granduncle the Psychium crystal he'd acquired, and after a few tests, the Professor deemed it free of Shadow energy. He had no doubt Pravus had tried to corrupt it, but it was a shard of Arceus itself, and like Tao, had been immune to that kind of corruption. There was no greater known power, and if there was, it was unlikely Pravus had access to it.

Arthur wanted to try it immediately, but given that he was new to smoking the Leaf and could barely stand, the humans all agreed to wait until his head was clearer. He'd gone into his Pokéball to sulk, then, and stayed there for the rest of the day after falling into a Leaf nap.

Alex spent the remaining few days before Festivus sleeping, enjoying the company of his lover, and
eating real food. He'd grown a bit gaunt on only rice and bread, but the Redwood pantry was always well-stocked for Festivus. After a straight month of celebration, there were many meat-related leftovers.

Modern technology kept it from going bad, and thus Alex was able to enjoy relatively fresh plates of food that had been sitting in there since November. He was usually the one who had to finish such things, as his relatives seemed unable to do so themselves.

All the leftovers threatened to have him gain too much weight, so in the dark of night, when all others slept and his lady was comfortably enjoying the latest pleasure coma he'd left her in, he did what he always did.

He trained.

Festivus was approaching fast, and for that, he knew the population of their small town, and the surrounding towns, would all be heading south to Castelia to celebrate the coming of a new year.

The media was nicknaming the new year the 'Year of the Dragon', and Alex knew Tao appreciated it, as it had been named in honor of his return. Dragons were nothing if not a bit vain, even the first. They appreciated being admired by the shorter-lived humans. It fed their superiority complex, a fact Tao was well aware of, and ignored. He was a dragon, they were supposed to feel superior.

Alex traveled far to the north to avoid the storm, and thanks to Rayquaza's air lock, they were able to train in relative comfort once they'd found an open spot and cleared the snow away. It was still bitterly cold, and Terra opted to stay in his ball for this session. There was no sun, and they were still surrounded by ice. He wasn't having any of that.

Alex first knew there was trouble when he saw the ancient form of his Rayquaza float into the air. He had since become linked to the team's mental web in an adjacent manner, and thus could communicate to them as easily as their Trainer did.

"Something is approaching." He said, and each of them stopped their training.

The ground rumbled once, and Alex looked around in vain in the dark of night. His eyes were useless, but they began to glow blue as he extended his senses, and swore. He knew who was coming now, as did his team, and Blaze shone with a crimson aura as he Mega Evolved again.

Alex recalled them all, but left Shruikan and Blaze out to deal with this approaching threat. The earth trembled again, and he wondered just how exactly his newest enemy had managed to capture another Legendary Pokémon.

As the three prepared for battle, a powerful roar echoed through the mountain chain, and the Pokémon that produced it was unmistakable. Everyone knew the sound of a Groudon's rage.

After the one in the Hoenn region had gone Primal a few years back, that roar had become as recognizable as a Tyrantrum's. Barely anyone lived this far north, as the heavy snows and large mountains left little room for rivers or houses.

It had suited his purposes for training, and now he was glad it was devoid of people. He knew the Pokémon of the surrounding area were wise enough to hide from a power like this.
The crimson scaled Rayquaza descended first, and it snarled at its larger green counterpart as his Trainer landed on the field Alex had made in the snow. "There you are, Redwood…I almost thought you wouldn't train tonight…but you're finally here..."

Alex glared Brad down. The Fornian had a black eye, and many other bruises Alex couldn't see, and that was when it clicked. "You're an Arcean aren't you…a spy sent by Pravus, perhaps? I take it he wasn't happy to learn that I'd foiled that plan as well."

He now knew why his master had seemed to ignore Brad's gluttony and misbehavior. He'd likely grown up dealing with such abuse, and once he'd inherited a Rayquaza, he could only guess at how the Church had treated him.

The Sage had done what he could to guide Brad down the right path, but he had also known a confrontation between he and Alex was inevitable. They were more alike than they realized, and if not for a twist of fate, Brad might have very well been the one in Unova, and Alex forced to live under Arcean brainwashing.

He didn't quite know whether he would've been able to handle such a thing, and it spoke to the opposing Trainer's strength that he'd come through it yet again, relatively intact.

Alex looked to Blaze as the two reached the same conclusion. Brad had likely been ordered to abandon him, or risk being excommunicated, cut off from everyone and everything he'd ever known. A test, to make sure the Rayquaza Tamer did not have a soft heart. Remembering his first Trainer, Blaze admitted that the boy had likely been heartbroken. Abandoning him hadn't been in his character. He'd cared, and he'd paid for it.

His Charizard now watched his former Trainer with pity, more than rage. It had been an impossible choice, most likely, and one forced on a young Trainer, no less. A choice between staying with his home, his family, his beliefs, or staying with his Charmander. In the end, for one that young, there had been only one option that had allowed Blaze a chance to keep living.

Alex knew his Rayquaza had likely been subjected to the same conditioning, and facing the same choice, between a Trainer who needed him, and a young Charmander, he'd been forced to choose his Trainer, and hope that the Charmander managed to survive.

Now, it seemed the pair was focused on making him pay for indirectly forcing Brad into a beating, likely at the hands of Pravus himself. The Groudon roared again, and now it loomed in the dim moonlight, towering above the small mountain Alex had found his training spot on. He and his team stared in awe, as they realized that this Groudon's coloring was gold, not red.

"Precipice Blades." Brad called the attack from the back of his crimson dragon, and the golden Groudon sank its claws into the land. Blaze flew up, avoiding the attack entirely, but Shruikan didn't move.

The massive daggers of rising earth popped up around him, but he stayed still, and waited. This was it. This was the Pokémon who had the firepower he needed to evolve. He could feel it. He wasn't going to run from it, not when finally achieving flight was so very close. He could hear the thunder, as the Sage had foretold he would, and an ancient song, in the tongue of dragons, rose in the Shelgon's head. Alex smirked, finding the tune entirely appropriate.

Furious that his attack had simply missed, the Groudon reared back, and expelled an enormous Fire
Blast from its maw. Shruikan grinned to himself as he went into his shell with Protect, and waited.

The primordial heat from the Groudon scorched over his shell, but left him essentially untouched, thanks to his move. Runes of black appeared over his shell as the heat hit and engulfed it. He felt the power surge within his body, enhanced by vitamins from his Trainer, as his shell absorbed the primordial heat, and once it was exhausted, he used that heat to finally evolve.

The sky thundered, and even the gathered powerful Pokémon were forced to pay attention to it. Shruikan's eyes glowed red from within his shell…and then, he began to glow brilliant white as the spiraling power of evolution propelled him, finally, into the air.

Thunder roared through the nearby area, and lightning struck the ground as Shruikan's form began to grow…and grow…and grow. The thunder boomed once more, and as his shape became that of a Salamence, lightning came down from the sky, striking him directly.

Most Salamence were more wide then tall, but Shruikan's parents had both been old enough to have grown well over six feet, and now he himself pushed ten feet as his form coalesced. The skies roared again, and as the glow from his form faded, Alex noticed he had trouble making out his new Salamence, who had immediately shot into the cold night air on his new wings. He would waste no time in testing them.

Another Fire Blast from Groudon was launched at his newly evolved opponent, even though Brad had ordered a Fissure attack, and as the massive five-pronged attack lit the sky, Alex glimpsed Shruikan as he dodged in front of the flames. His scales were black, and his form was massive. Alex had expected a normal Salamence, stronger perhaps than others of his species, as most of his team was by now, but still relatively normal. He should've known better. His underbelly was still the same color as a regular Salamence, and even his wings, though perhaps a bit more crimson than scarlet, were the same shade. It was his main scales that had changed, but as Alex got a good look at him, he had to blink.

He'd gotten fairly used to knowing a Pokémon's type by instinct, and because he had known most of them already thanks to years of education, he was rarely surprised by what his instincts told him. He'd seen various dual typing in some humans among Castelia's crowds, some as normal and fighting, others as normal and dark, in Pravus' case. When he looked at Shruikan, he'd expected to see the flying type, but hadn't.

Instead, his instinct told him his Shruikan was now part dragon, part electric, and as he tried to understand why, he noticed his new Pokémon's mouth glowing with golden light, as he formed a move he'd only expected Leo to know. Thunder Fang.

"I have risen with the storm, and through the pain, human." Shruikan spoke, in his new baritone. "Unleash me."

Alex briefly wondered how he'd use his power on a ground type like Groudon, when he noticed Shruikan's target was actually the Rayquaza instead. Naturally, it was time for the numerous consecutive losses in the Swamp to be made up for. Alex had, of course, let his dragon attack. Shruikan was now an adult, a full-grown dragon, and losing his temper was hopefully a thing of the past.

Shruikan's speed was unmatched, and the crimson Rayquaza could only blink, before it realized it had already been struck by the Thunder Fang. Electricity arced over its form, holding it in place, and
as Shruikan looped around towards them again, he gave a mental nod to their Rayquaza.

Alex noticed his own Rayquaza was shining, as he shifted to his own Mega Form. His normal one had been on par with his crimson rival's, but now the arrogant runt had awakened his Ancient Power.

This was, of course, a rock type attack, and instead of raising chunks of earth, the ancient Rayquaza simply launched the rock type energy, as a sort of Hyper Beam, forgoing raising boulders entirely. The paralyzed dragon could do nothing to dodge the beam, and it struck him full force.

His crimson scaled rival went down hard, and Alex flew down on Blaze as he saw Brad fall from its back. He might've been a rival, but he was still human. He hadn't chosen the path that had led him here. That was why the Sage never scolded him.

Blaze and Alex's combined vision spotted his red coat, and with a sudden burst of speed, Blaze grabbed the Fornian Trainer, and zipped away. Seconds later, an Eruption leveled the ground around the fallen Rayquaza. Groudon was free of its domination, and now he wanted revenge.

With the dragon even now burning in the magma he'd raised, the golden scaled beast turned its focus on the tiny human that had ordered the dragon to command him. Each Rayquaza, no matter how young, had the power to control either Kyogre or Groudon as needed.

They couldn't do it without human aid, however, which let them reach their mega stage. Once there, they had the power to control the land and sea as needed, and had once helped Regigigas in raising, moving, and shifting continents the world over, at the behest of the Alpha Pokémon.

The humans of the past had melted their ice caps, flooding numerous lands and cities with water. The two Groudon had strode the ancient lands, drying up the water, as the Kyogre at each pole restored the planet's melted ice. Once more, harmony in nature had resumed. Arceus, being all but omniscient, knew that humanity would be doomed to repetition as long as they had 'holy' lands to fight over. Even when he'd arrived, the wars between humanity had not ceased, only grown more desperate. The addition of Pokémon had made them truly terrible. Thus, the Alpha Pokémon had upended the regions the humans refused to share in peace, unable to accept coexistence after millennia of senseless killing. Between his own awesome power, still told of in legends, and Regigigas, they had turned the middle east of the planet's landmass into what was now known as the Mediterra Mountain range, the largest in the world, by slamming the African continental plate into the Eurasian one. It had settled the issue, and the only humans to claim the land of the mountains since had been the Imperium of Man. Nobody disputed their claim, as most were convinced those mountains were haunted by the warriors they'd crushed.

Civilizations had risen from the chaos of the planet's shifting plates, ancient, powerful, and mysterious ones. Some had ties to the Unown, others had possessed the ability to tame and battle giant Pokémon. The idea was absurdly common in Japan, for some reason.

Alex's Rayquaza focused on the Groudon as his new Trainer flew away carrying the other human. The ancient dragon's eyes glowed with power as his Mega Form prepared an Outrage attack of his own.

"Go." The word thundered in the air, and the golden beast paused, as it realized which Sky Guardian this was.
Effectively cowed, the Groudon seemed to nod, letting its anger cool. If it ever saw Brad again, it would annihilate him, but for now, the Groudon could wait. Fighting *that* Rayquaza right now, wasn't worth it. The Rayquaza in question looked at its fallen dragonkin, sighed, and then lifted his form from the magma with his latent psychic power.

He was largely fine, he'd simply fainted. Alex appeared then, and skillfully tossed the first of his new stash of Max Revives into the fainted Legendary's mouth. The red dragon blinked awake, yawned, and then slept, recovering.

He looked at his newest dragon, the Black Salamence that had distracted the Rayquaza, and then had moved away from the furious Groudon, had now rejoined them in the air as they flew the relatively short journey back to his home. He still couldn't believe how cool his Salamence was, and as he thought that, the black dragon smirked.

Alex's innermost secret pocket had begun to glow with the ancient blue-purple power of the dragon types. Shruikan Mega Evolved then, and his new form, which had retained the black scales, looked like the normal form most Salamence had at this level.

He was fast though, as in the space of a single eye blink, he burst ahead towards their home, outpacing all of them.

Alex looked at his Rayquaza then, smirking. He knew which Mega Form would be faster. There was a reason Rayquaza's kin were considered Legendary. He was hampered by the large form of his red scaled passenger at the moment, though.

"Take him somewhere safe to recover. Then do as you please. I won't need you until Festivus Eve, I think." Alex's words were sent telepathically, and the dragon gave him a look, then nodded. He arrived back home soon after, and he saw how massive Shruikan was now, compared to his home. He had no idea how he'd ever fit in the Swamp.

The black dragon had seared the ground beneath him with a Dragonbreath, and then let his Mega Form fall. That part of the ranch would have a large circular mark, come Spring, and most of the snow around the barn had melted thanks to the heat of his attack. They could likely let the Pokémon within come out soon, if it didn't snow again.

Alex looked up at the dawn of Festivus Day, and then down at Brad, who Blaze had deposited on the scorched dirt. The storm had ended, but it was still cold, and the Fornian, unused to such temperatures, was shivering. Alex helped him up, and the two eyed each other. Alex spoke first, "What will you do now?"

The Fornian looked at the direction the older Rayquaza had taken his. "I don't know...It's probably better if my Rayquaza stays away from me...but now I have no Pokémon. There's a lot of tall grass between here and Fornia." He gave the Unovan an awkward smile, and despite himself, Alex chuckled.

"Heh. I might have something to help with that..." Alex spoke softly as his Charizard appeared from the barn, carrying an egg. "I'm fairly certain this is Blaze's. He's been rather...active with Jess' Charizard...walk around a bit, head towards Unova. By the time it hatches, you should be near Humilau. Train it up...*properly*, this time...and avoid the Arceans."
Brad shook his head, "I can't...they can track my Trainer card, and my whole family is in the Church...I can't just leave..."

"And what's the alternative?" Alex sighed, "Pravus is going to keep using you for your natural talents, until one day he decides he doesn't need you. Like he decided he didn't need his wife. You're a Fornian. When was the last time anyone saw her? Publicly?"

Brad stayed quiet, and looked down at the egg. The truth rang loudly, and obviously. The Prophet's wife had simply vanished one day, and nobody, not even the higher ups, were allowed to ask why. It didn't take that much of a logical leap to assume murder. Pravus was a violent man, after all. Everyone around him knew it. Nobody had the balls to speak it aloud in his presence, though. If any did, they'd probably 'disappeared' as well.

"I...guess you're right. I won't let this Charmander be abused." He turned to Blaze, then, "You have my word. Someday, it will be strong enough to beat you both." He took out his ID card then, and handed it to Alex. "Destroy this...it's better if no one knows where I am for a while..."

Alex nodded, "I'll...take care of it." He offered a hand, then, "I don't quite know how yet...but someday, I will help you go home. Pravus needs to be stopped...and I might very well need your help to do it. The word of a non-Arcean won't go far with your people, but if the Fornian Champion says something...well, we might just have a chance."

Brad looked at the hand, and then the egg again. He shook it, sighing. "I suppose I have no alternative...Pravus doesn't accept those who fail twice...you're right. I can't go back, not yet. If I did, he'd just take my Rayquaza...or this Charmander."

"When you're ready to storm the Fornia region, come to the Dragonspiral Tower. Tao can get in touch with me. We'll need full teams for that, though." Alex recalled Blaze, after giving his large chin a scratch. "Good luck...and...I'm sorry for how I acted in the Swamp. I've been told I need to see things from other's viewpoints before cementing my own...I guess I still need to train."

Brad shook his head, "No, you were right. Trainers who abandon their Pokémon are scum...I knew it was wrong, and I did it anyway. I'll make up for it though...later, Champion. Good luck today."

Alex nodded, and let his newest rival set off on his own before he snuck inside in the semi-darkness of the dawn. He was stealthy for once, and nobody noticed him return. Thus, his family had no idea why there was an enormous Black Salamence napping casually outside the following morning.

Using Delphi to lift her up to the window to Alex's room, Jess had snuck past the sleeping dragon, and Arthur, his 'guard', was left distracted by the psychic fox. Soon the two were flirting, and not long after, battling. Shruikan had awoken to watch that, as it was quite a show.

Jess had opened the ranch's barn as well, and released the family's horde of boxed Pokémon. Many of Alex's watched the psychic battle, while the other fire types set about clearing the snow for the masses of Tauros and Miltank.

Alex awoke to the not unpleasant feeling of his lover straddling him. He yawned, still tired. "Well, someone's early."

She smirked back, "No, I just don't sleep as long as you do after a session." He rolled his eyes. The
fact that she'd been asleep at all was the reason she now risked sneaking over to wake him up. "So. Tell me about that dragon out there. It's enormous. Is that Shruikan?"

Alex looked up, and out his window. Even from up here he could see the dragon's black scales very easily against the golden grass of Unova. "Ahh. Yes, that, he evolved during our morning training session." He smirked up at her. "He's part dragon, part electric. Like Zekrom. He knows Thunder Fang."

She looked out the window at the dragon, then shrugged. "You should teach him Charge Beam instead."

---

Alex raised a brow, and despite the erotic positioning, his brain was once more all about Pokémon. "But his physical attacks are stronger. He's better with physical moves, like Arthur."

She bopped his nose. "Which is why Charge Beam will raise the strength of his special attacks, and his Dragon Pulse won't be useless either. Dragon Claw can do just as much as Thunder Fang."

He smirked. "I see the student has become the master. But as I recall, your moves were a bit rusty last night."

She blushed, then tossed her hat away, letting her hair blind him as it fell on his face. "I've been out of practice for a few months. And it doesn't help that you've somehow increased your stamina. Again. Honestly, hiding this is getting quite difficult."

He blew her hair out of his face and looked up at her, smirking. "Well, winning the Unova League pays quite well. As does battling. We could get a permanent residence. Somewhere."

Before she could ask if he was serious about potentially moving in, there was a commotion outside, and the two Trainers jumped up immediately, only to see the door was still closed, and they had not, in fact, been caught.

Alex looked out the window then, and smirked. "I guess Arthur won the battle." He expected it, not because Delphi was weak, but because Arthur's Night Slash was rivaled only by his Sacred Sword.

Alex had been forcing him to train without relying on their Psychium crystal, to improve his base form. Now that he had, he could already sense his partner expected to train in his Mega Form next.

Alex sighed. "I guess I'll have to let him Mega Evolve now."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Your Gallade is a cool guy, don't get me wrong, but I'm still wondering about the giant Black Salamence sitting in your yard. How? When? Why?"

He chuckled, and retrieved her hat. "I'd like to know that myself. And you know there's only one authority on rare and unique types of Pokémon around here."

---

Alex and his lover descended with relative stealth to the lab. Delphi kept the majority of the hungover adults and spastic children entertained with a display of fire-bending that was truly impressive. She'd clearly been practicing.

They came upon his granduncle and one of Alex's cousins, Geralt, the son of Alex's uncle Gil. Most of the Redwoods tended to have dark brown or reddish hair, but Geralt's was white as the snow
outside. His training clothes were all studded leather. He was a Ranger now, and not unlike his cousin 'the Champion', he had ascended to the position of Top Ranger, one of several that patrolled this continent. Alex was surprised he'd had time to come home for a visit.

Pokémon Rangers had changed over the past several decades, after Red and several other Champions from Japan decided that they should combine the organization with the International Police. The IP had agreed, and taken on the Ranger's name, as well as their ideologies. Most didn't have full teams of Pokémon, but then, most didn't need them. One to three partners was more than enough, and there were always wild Pokémon around to aid them, if necessary.

Geralt gave the Professor a nod, and left the lab. He and Alex exchanged a brief few words, as they had always both been quiet types, and then, he was off. He didn't have a flying type, and as most of the local ones were hiding from the snow, he'd hopped onto his massive white Lycanroc, Ghost, and vanished into the distance with a few graceful bounds. Alex had heard his cousin had a nickname amongst his fellow Rangers. The White Wolf. Though he wondered who that nickname was really for. Geralt's eyes had been different, almost like a cat's, and when he'd tried to see the Ranger's typing, his vision had revealed nothing. Not even normal typing. He supposed he wasn't the only Redwood to have gained special powers, but then, stranger things had happened.

The Professor spoke up as he and Jess entered the lab. "Ahh, Alex. There you are. I saw that Salamence. I expect you think I know everything about it then, right?" The Professor was sarcastic, but Alex knew he was excited. He'd dreamed about seeing a Black Salamence up close for over a century. Literally.

Alex shrugged. "Nobody knows more about rare and Legendary Pokémon than you. You told me yourself there's always a grain of truth in the legends that make them Legendary. So spill, why is my dragon part electric?"

The old man gestured to the back room of his lab. "I pulled up everything I could find on a Black Salamence, by pure coincidence of course, months ago. It's on the computer in the…little room…thing…where I showed you where to find Turtwigs."

He guided his great-nephew as Alex hit the switch, and opened the well concealed side door. Soon, he'd found the folder, which only contained one article, from the Hoenn region, and was quite old. Thankfully, it was also detailed.

Alex Redwood's voice rang softly in the small adjoining room to his grand uncle's lab, as he read for Jess. She wasn't very good at it, and often spent five minutes staring at a sign or something similar before moving on.

"The unholy offspring of lightning and death, the Black Salamence is a rare offshoot of the Bagon species, that occurs in roughly one Shelgon out of five hundred thousand." Alex paused for a moment. The unholy offspring of lightning and death. He felt a shiver run down his spine. He was going to use that.

He continued, "These Shelgon take a notoriously long time to grow, and can only evolve in specific conditions. If they meet said conditions, which are usually finding a source of heat strong enough for evolution, they can then use it to propel themselves into their final form, the Black Salamence. Unlike most Salamence, and their green scaled equivalent, the Black Salamence is of an entirely different type, and may even be considered a new species of Pokémon. Possessing the rare dragon and electric typing, this Salamence retains its ability to learn flying type moves as well as electric moves the main species of Salamence don't have access to. The only stats ever recorded on one
showed that this variant of dragon type gains Special Attack potential to rival their Attack strength."

Jess smirked. "There you go. A balance between attack strength and special strength."

Alex sighed as he pondered his dragon's moveset. Special attacks, namely ranged ones, combined with flight were hard to beat. Much harder than quick aerial physical attackers, like Pidgeot, and regular Salamence. He looked up as he sensed his Charizard and Salamence readying for a match of their own. He knew Blaze and Shruikan had been itching to battle, but given how strong they were now, he'd forbade it...for the moment. The ranch was too fragile for their strength. "No mention of how hot the flames should be to evolve one. Hmm." He continued reading, "Because of their rarity, the Black Salamence is considered to be a legend by most, a fluke of nature, by others. They are, allegedly, notoriously hard to raise, according to the now passed Drake, dragon master of the Hoenn region. Drake only ever mentioned seeing one of these creatures, and when asked how to train one, he reportedly responded by saying, 'Don't bother. This dragon is untrainable. If you encounter one, run, and pray it does not find you.'"

He whistled, and then looked at his redheaded companion. "Unholy offspring of lightning and death. Sounds like it came straight from a book, or something."

Jess shrugged. "Sounds more like a movie...in any case, he's a lot faster in the air than Blaze is."

Alex nodded. He could also transport more people on his back, easily. The trick was accounting for the increase in wind that would seek to rip passengers from his back. Salamence were a lot more aerodynamic than Charizard, who used their flight skills mainly for battle, not soaring all over the world.

Jess poked him as he stayed lost in thought. "You should battle Connor with him."

He sighed again, and recalled the last time Shruikan faced off against Connor's Garchomp. "If he goes wild again, a Psychic attack won't be enough to stop him from hurting someone."

Alex blinked as he felt his Salamence, hurt by his words, echo words of his own, and the emotions they came with, in his head. "I'm in control now. Besides, that Garchomp has..." His words fumbled.

New as he was to speaking the human tongue, Arthur supplemented his words through their shared six-way link. "Type advantage. Ground and dragon."

"I'm sure he'll be fine this time. He was quite friendly when I first came over. Besides, you said yourself that the mountain forged a bond of trust that you didn't have with the rest of your team." Jess spoke again, and Alex suppressed a chuckle as he heard Shruikan echo in his head once more. "I like her." Blaze chimed in as well, "So do I."

Ignoring his mental peanut gallery, and her quizzical look, he suddenly turned serious. "I was right. Blaze and Shruikan are good friends. But I've had a few adventures with the others as well. Adventures you weren't around for. Which reminds me, What are you doing this summer?"

He was still trying to get over that he'd only been an official Trainer for a bit over a year. He'd done a lot, but then, any Trainer worth their reputation had done just as much, if not more, and usually in shorter amounts of time.

She was in his lap then, and the ancient rolling chair squealed in protest at their combined weight.
His Gruncle's voice came from the lab proper, after the sound of a bong being hit, of course. "If that chair starts squeaking, you'd better close the damned door!"

Alex smirked, and waved at the button, sealing the door closed with a small burst of psychic power. That got Jess' attention, as he'd been reluctant to try his powers so close to his family. "I expect I'll be learning how to press buttons with my mind. How? When? Why?"

He looked at the door for a long moment, until he was completely sure that the old man had indeed hobbled over, and pressed a cup to it. He couldn't tell if it was out of envious lust or genuine curiosity. Which was saying something, given his seeming ability to read anyone's mind. It seemed some minds were indeed harder to read than others.

His gaze fell on hers. Or perhaps, he thought, the better you knew someone, the easier they were to read. Her eyes mirrored his then. She knew that look, and he could already sense the rising lust.

He decided to speak before his mouth was occupied by either set of her lips. "I could teach you…but my master forbade it if I found you unworthy of the training. I have to peer into your very being before I'm allowed to teach you anything."

If he was being honest, he hadn't had much more success with his pebble lifting. He could manipulate the pebbles now, make them zip around the room, and even push or pull small objects, but anything bigger, like, say, a door, and he might as well try pushing a mountain.

She pressed her forehead to his, and his vision took in her eyes, and only her eyes. "Go ahead. You know me better than anyone…I don't mind you peeking inside my head."

He blinked once, and then his eyes began to shine blue. He reached his senses out to her then, as he had with the tree, and once more, his perspective shifted. She was as connected to the world as the tree had been, but not by roots. He sensed a similar kind of energy to her own, and then realized it was actually just the computer. He suspected he could follow that energy as well, but for the moment, his focus was for her.

He knew that the energy that made up human consciousness was electrical in nature. Wouldn't it make sense if, on this level, it shared a connection? That would explain the similarities between her, and what he sensed from the computer. He focused on her again, and then realized the difference. There was organic, decaying matter in her, the computer was a machine, one built to outlast either of them. He briefly wondered if combining durable materials with the human body was the next step for them as a species before he felt his focus drawn like a magnet back to her.

He realized that she was sensing him as well, and from what he could tell, she didn't appreciate the implication that her 'soul' was akin to electricity. He shared his knowledge then, of biochemistry, learned of course, in his last semester of University. She hadn't had those classes yet.

Once he sensed she understood, more or less, the foundations of that particular science, which if he was being truthful was the extent of his knowledge as well, he turned his focus to rest of her. She hid nothing from him, and he saw every embarrassing moment, family dinner, and even romantic thought she'd had throughout her twenty plus years.

"Do you want to see what my three months apart have been like?" Her inner voice seemed almost sad, and he wondered why. She showed him, then, the constant romantic advances, offers for sex,
even attempts at forcing such a thing. He burned the faces of the perpetrators into his own memory, and hid his rage well.

He'd battled a few of them the year before, up at the University, when he'd noticed several strange men stalking her, with more...gusto...than he ever had. He and Terra had battled several, and told them to leave her be. It seemed they'd forgotten his lesson. He decided to visit his Alma Mater, and reinforce what he'd taught them, and he sensed his team only shared that desire. They were sensing, to a degree, what he was as well, but he'd kept most of it from them.

He looked and looked, and learned more about her, even as he sensed her doing the same for him. Nothing he learned however, shifted how he felt about her, and the tone of the connection shifted as she discovered exactly how he felt about her.

He could sense she felt the same way, which was a relief for someone as paranoid as he was, but he couldn't be blinded by love right then. He had a purpose here, after all.

He searched for memories of her reaction to having power. The first time she'd realized Serpi was a true force of nature. The first time Chari and her new Flamethrower, a gift from him no less, did serious damage to a dragon type.

The first time she'd felt Delphi's power, true psychic power, and envied it a little, but respected it enough to not abuse it. More than a few Delphox Trainers had gone bad in the past, as they were quite powerful, and power tended to corrupt those unworthy of wielding it.

"Good." The voice thundered through both human minds, as their combined thoughts had begun to veer towards le romance, and Alex recognized it immediately. He felt Jess was a bit dazed however, and soon helped her focus again. The presence of the Sage receded as quickly as it appeared, and Alex felt his mouth grimace. His tutor hadn't trusted him after all, keeping an eye on him despite the promise to not be blinded by love.

He sensed Arthur's voice then, "He did trust you...you just don't understand yet. This power...it **cannot** be allowed to be abused by humanity. Not again."

Alex was about to acquiesce to the Pokémon's decision to hide some things from him again, when he decided that he needed to know, this time, why this was so important. "Why? What happened that makes this level of secrecy necessary?"

As their conversation was mental, it seemed his mentor overheard them. As did Jess, who remained linked to him. They both liked the closeness it brought, and that fact only made them like it more. He felt the gaze of the Sage's third eye sweeping over the three of them, and suddenly, a fourth joined.

It took a minute for Alex to recognize his lover's Delphox, but since coming home, Arthur had been teaching her how to project telepathy, and he'd come to like her. She was clever, one might even say sly.

"Good..." The Sage thundered again, "I have to teach all of you this eventually, and I might as well teach the two of you at once. Save some time." Before any of them could respond, a vision filled their minds, a vision of the world as they knew it.

"Long ago, the Earth was in a state of chaotic imbalance...since the fall of the humans, this planet was on the verge of becoming uninhabitable for millennia, and the humans who lived in those times were convinced that their ancestors had doomed them all with their careless destruction of natural
resources, and complete lack of conscience for what they inflicted on their home by way of toxic pollution. Your kind had returned to their nomadic roots, wary of technology, and the doom they believed it had brought upon them. That changed when Arceus appeared."

The vision shifted again, zooming outwards, and the four saw the golden form of the stag like Alpha Pokémon, hovering over the blue planet.

"Arceus admired the world's beauty, but everywhere his gaze fell, he saw the ruins of a fallen race, clinging to the surface of a dying world. Eventually, he found the remnants of your people as well."

The scene shifted again. The Alpha Pokémon hovered above a group of tribal humans, but instead of embracing the creature, they told it to leave them to their doom. Over and over the scene repeated, in rainforests, tundra, mountain tops, deserts, and abandoned city streets, everywhere the Alpha appeared, he was told to leave.

Humanity, a species not likely to agree on anything, had given up, and this attitude of despair and hopelessness was prevalent across the globe. Their cities had drowned, their fuel had run out, and their carefully stacked monopolies had crumbled in mere months, revealing just how finite their 'mighty reign' actually was, when tested against screwing with a planetary force's ecosystem.

Humanity had learned that their home was very much alive, and aware of them. Nature had reacted, and as humans were forced into hovels again, predators had appeared to hunt them, and keep them from ever rising again, as the planet struggled to heal itself.

The Sage continued, "Arceus eventually grew to share the human's despair, that is, until he noticed the children. When he appeared in his radiant glory at these human hovels, always they were sure to keep their children from sight, out of fear of this strange, alien, creature that shone with golden light."

"It was when he looked on them from afar, for his sight is limitless, that he saw the children, and the adults as well, bonded with some of the natural fauna around them. They were a broken race, but in falling, they had rejoined the natural balance of the world, what little was left, and that was when the Alpha Pokémon had an idea."

The four were spellbound by the vision, but as it paused, he felt confusion. Primarily from Delphi.

She wanted to hear more, but the Sage was preoccupied by...something. His voice returned, and he seemed...lighter, in his mental presence. His voice didn't thunder so loud. That's when the Delphox and her Trainer realized what the Sage was doing, and Alex felt Jess smack him, speaking verbally, "You taught him to smoke too!?" Arthur broke down laughing, and Delphi simply sighed.

The Sage chimed in then. "Please. I was smoking this herb before the Redwood line even existed. Anyway...Arceus saw that this planet, one of many the universe had spawned, was one that needed his aid. Life flourished across the worlds he touched, and there was something about this one backwater planet, in a galaxy of no particular import, that made him decide to leave the planet's fate, and the fate of its inhabitants, up to his divine Light."

An image of the Alpha Pokémon appeared in their minds again, his golden form once more hovering over the planet. Alex repressed a shiver, as he saw the being ready a Judgement attack, one massive enough to wipe out their world. The ball of Light energy slammed into the Earth, and instead of being destroyed, the planet was instead infused with the power of his attack. "Judgement is not always a damaging move," Oranguru explained, "Sometimes, as you well know Alex, it does
nothing but aid that which it is focused upon. The fact that the Earth survived showed the Alpha that this planet was worth saving, and had a role to play, though I suspect even Arceus doesn't know to what extent, yet."

The scene shifted yet again, and the four saw images of Mew, the first Pokémon, thousands of them, soaring across the planet. The first area they came to was the Mediterra mountains, which had risen when the African continent had been pushed to the north east, into the Eurasian continent, at the order of the Alpha Pokémon. The result was a massive spine of mountains that upended holy lands, ancient kingdoms, forests, entire deserts, and most importantly, fossils.

It was Alex's turn to speak up then, "Wait, so the original Mew cloned the DNA from the fossils in the Mediterra range? Are you telling me that Aurorus, Aerodactyl, Tyrantrum, etcetera, were all created from species that predated even ours?"

The Sage chuckled, and gave the mental equivalent of a nod. "They went into the oceans too. They found the creatures there, transformed their very DNA to match them, bred, and the result was Carracosta, Relicanth, and the other ancient Pokémon of the sea."

Arthur spoke then, his tone grave. "And how did the humans react to the new fantastical creatures in their midst?"

The Sage seemed to sigh. "About as well as you might expect. Fear, at first, though eventually they came to only fear those with teeth. Before long, they'd turned them into beasts of burden…there was a catch, though…they soon discovered the incredible power creatures like Aurorus could learn. Understand, before then, something like an Ice Beam had simply never been seen. Food was able to be preserved, Water Gun was a nearly limitless supply of fresh water, if you could get enough Pokémon."

Jess spoke then, "It seems to me like we did fine at first. No different from now, really…I sense a 'but' coming, though…"

"But," the Sage said, continuing on in his deep baritone, "Eventually those with dark, greedy hearts saw these new creatures as a means to control the leaderless masses. Tyrantrum was, in those days, the undisputed king among Pokémon. Most of them were actually quite even tempered, almost noble. They kept the natural animals and other humans from hurting their fellow Pokémon as the remaining Mew spread to other areas, cloned other animals, and created even more Pokémon. Arceus was not idle either, as he spawned legends across the world, Guardians to watch over the world, and always to keep it in balance. The Unovan Dragon is one such Guardian. Eventually, one of your kin managed to force a Tyrantrum into submission, and the power he controlled through it was great…terrible…but great."

Another vision then, a man with a metal, clawed arm and a heavy metal staff, ordering a Tyrantrum covered in sheets of rusted metal from the old world that acted as armor, to unleash its Hyper Beam upon settlement after settlement. Humans and Pokémon alike fell to its power, for combined, they were unstoppable. The scattered humans flocked to his strength, and it wasn't long at all before the scenes displayed an army of humans and Pokémon sweeping down from the north of the new super-continent, intent on conquering all of it.

"Arceus saw this, of course, and devised a counter-measure. Many years had passed by this point, but he knew the humans and their latent greed would eventually abuse the Pokémon of this world he was rebuilding. This tyrant only proved that humans and Pokémon together would indeed reach new
heights, as he'd foreseen, but evidently, said heights would not be reached until they dealt with the
greed inherent to their species. So he scanned the world for one who was worthy, and decided to
appear once again, before a boy in a small desert settlement in the warpath of the Tyrantrum and his
master.”

The Sage's words caused yet another shift in scenery, as Arceus appeared before the boy in question.
He was remarkably normal, brown hair, brown eyes, tan skin, as he lived in the desert.

He offered the boy an orb of gold that looked suspiciously like a Pokéball, and then disappeared into
it. From then on, Arceus appeared at the boy's command, and eventually, the orb was little more than
a symbol of their bond, and rarely used to contain the Alpha Pokémon.

"The boy defeated the tyrant, freed the Tyrantrum, and humans and Pokémon alike hailed him as a
hero. He showed that battling alongside Pokémon gave a human great power, and more importantly,
could be fun for all involved, if it was treated as sport, rather than a life or death contest. The tradition
catched on quickly everywhere he went. He set about traveling the world, finding that Arceus was not
the only 'Legend' class creature around. Arceus had been busy creating others, defenders of this
planet and its numerous regions. Once he was sure his Legendary Pokémon would keep the balance
of this world, he had dealt with the menace. There were others though. Always others."

Another mental scene change revealed the same boy, slightly older, and garbed not too differently
than Alex, Jess, and most other Trainers. A backpack, a walking stick, and a good friend by his side.
That was the dream, and Alex was beginning to see why so many Trainers started on similar paths.
He already had a feeling that he knew how this boy's life would eventually end, but he continued to
listen.

"Worship of Pokémon had sprung up all around the world, and for all his sight, Arceus had not
predicted the devout and sometimes perverse measures humans will reach to demonstrate how much
they loved and worshiped their deity of choice. Many of the Legendary Pokémon were
uncomfortable with this, as they had no desire to challenge Arceus for the right to be the Alpha. Only
one other had tried, and that other had paid dearly for its arrogance. Arceus is merciful true, but his
wrath, when awakened, is truly ferocious."

The scene shifted again, and the Sage kept speaking. "The humans had begun to rebuild their cities
alongside Pokémon, and when Arceus and his partner arrived, they were educated as to who the true
Alpha was. The humans, of course, praised him as the highest of high powers, though many still
revered the Legendary of their region with respect, and Arceus did not seem to mind."

Alex flinched as he saw Tao, a bit younger looking, lazing on a familiar mountain as a group of
humans stood on a familiar peak, and listened to the Alpha Pokémon. It was undoubtedly the Dragon
Mountain, but it was different.

There was a battle arena, as the Unovans had apparently been one of the first to organize Pokémon
into battling teams, but the mountain top was flat, not a crater. The northern peak had the same
familiar cave though, and Alex had a feeling that he knew what was residing in that cave, perhaps
even now, waiting to be discovered.

He felt the ever-present staff shudder at that thought, and his focused returned as the Sage continued
on, "Eventually, as all humans do, Arceus' partner grew old, and he returned to his village...only to
find that it had been leveled. Even with his travels across the globe, unity evaded the humans, and
others continued to use Pokémon to try to gain power over other humans. Arceus had separated from
his partner for a number of years, for such a span of time is nothing to him. He tried to quell the
numerous wars, only to find another had sprung up while he was busy. Many kinds of kingdoms had risen in this new age. Entire civilizations rose and fell in remarkable time, always brought low by the greed of one of the humans within it. Over and over this repeated, and humanity began to stagnate. As the situation became more and more futile, Arceus began to wonder if his Judgement had been incorrect, if perhaps it was the planet that deserved to live, not the Sentients upon it."

"His fury was justified." The Sage continued, "He is a being that is used to letting the universe run itself, and often hibernates for millennia at a time. He had been awake for far too long focusing on one planet, using his power on an almost daily basis as he adventured with his partner, and all they had to show for it was a few hundred million overly zealous followers, and more bloodshed. He made his intent to wipe the humans out clear, except for his partner, and those he cared for."

The scene shifted, and Alex recognized the Judgement attack forming above the golden Arceus' head, ready to come down on two seemingly random warring armies of humans and Pokémon.

"Eventually, his partner managed to calm his rage…but not before it devastated the humans who refused to stay peaceful. His Holder, an old man by then, appeared to Arceus, as he'd been traveling the world with Pokémon he'd trained from eggs, spreading peace where he could to as many as possible. The Alpha attempted to grant him immortality, but sadly, the human's body was already too far decayed, and eventually, mortality took him. It was then that Arceus quit this world, depressed and disillusioned, to recover his strength. His human had foreseen that, one day, another would come to help him guide humanity once more, but in that moment, the Alpha was too exhausted to be optimistic."

The Sage gave the mental equivalent of a heavy sigh. "He told us, the Psychic Sages, that some day, when this world managed to find peaceful coexistence between his creations and humans, he would return to partner with one who was worthy. To help with that, he gave one final gift to you humans…yes, Alex, you're right. Your insight serves you well."

The others waited expectantly, and Alex spoke then, "I guessed that Arceus decided to make us similar to his own creations. Pokémon, of a kind, but unlike any others. Normal types, of course, though some of us apparently have dual typing."

The Sage smirked to himself. Arceus' gift went a lot farther than that…but he had a feeling the young Redwood would find that out for himself soon enough.

"As I said, you are correct, though even to this day, you arrogant humans think you're 'above' mere Pokémon, just as you pretended to be above the natural fauna of this world so long ago, but this is simply not the case. I, and others like me, have watched your race crawl back from the Dark Times that came after the Holder's death, and Arceus' departure. You have, slowly, begun to manifest more and more humans with psychic potential. Never forget what you are; a race spawned by nature, and empowered by a deity. You all have so much potential…you could be incredible...if you'd only stop murdering each other." The Sage spoke, as the scene shifted to one that every Trainer experienced at one point or another.

Some Trainers inherited Pokémon, or bonded with them, some were given their first by their parents or siblings, but every Trainer who was serious about adventuring had visited a lab at one point or another, to get one of the unique Pokémon used by so many Trainers across the planet. The scene that came to their minds now was evidently one that had been before the onset of the Dark Times.

The same boy from before, now ancient and bent and swathed in a white robe that dangled from his
frail form, whistled, and three Pokémon came over to him. A fire type, a grass type, and a water type. He'd evidently rebuilt his little village, and had become a revered elder among the people, far surpassing the normal span of years most humans lived, a gift from Arceus no doubt, but the Alpha was not present in this scene.

"He chose a Successor," The Sage said, quietly. "And from among all his followers, he found the one with the most psychic potential, the one who, he hoped, would lead humanity and our world as a whole back into Arceus' light."

The boy in question had fairer skin, blonde hair, and green eyes, wide and curious. He pointed at the grass type, a Snover from the nearby Mediterra mountains, and Alex chuckled.

"Mm. I'm glad it amuses you." The Sage spoke, as he shifted the scene again, to one that outright shocked the four seeing it. It was the same village alright, but covered in ice, and devastated by massive vines. They could even see some of the townspeople, and their Pokémon, trapped within it.

"That Trainer went on to develop his psychic power, and once he had that power...he used it. Again, and again, he forced his unwilling Abomasnow to comply so many times, it eventually became little more than a husk. Into that husk, he poured dark energy, and with it...created something truly atrocious. He went on to form a cult then, a popular thing at the time, when Arceus' Trainer, seen as a Prophet by some, and a hero by others, finally passed on. The followers they'd gained over the long years fractured, and the world descended into an age of darkness the likes of which it had never, and will never see again."

The Sage continued to narrate as scenes, from his own vision now and not his father's, flitted by, showing but a fraction of the carnage. "The 'new Prophet' and his forces were all trained in the psychic arts, mastering and abusing their power, until eventually, they killed each other off, or died in other ways. They turned on each other almost daily, to the point where it became expected for an apprentice to one day slay his master, and claim his knowledge. This is why you must be extremely cautious in who you give this power to...not all humans are capable of handling it."

Alex spoke quietly then. "Am I? Are any of us?"

That brought a chuckle from the Sage, "The fact that you even ask only proves that you're already worthier than some...but time will tell. Return here with your female when she completes her final year. Then, we will test you. All of you."

Alex and Jess shared a look as he opened his eyes again. It took a minute for his vocal chords to work, as he'd become so used to telepathy in such a short time. That was often how it was with the Sage. "That was..."

He felt her lean on him then, "I'm glad you think I can handle this power...but what about my brother? I don't think he could control it...and that's almost more dangerous than abusing it."

Alex waved a hand again, pushing the button for the door, in the lab. His Gruncle was nowhere to be seen, evidently, he'd left when they'd stopped speaking with words he could hear. "Don't worry about your brother...he just has to find his own path. It might not lead him to the Swamp, but Professor Oak said it would...and he's been right so far. If he starts to misuse what he learns, you and I will keep him in check. Like we always do."

She sighed, and he cheered her up then by teaching her how to reach out with her burgeoning
senses, and lift small objects. She failed, of course, as he had his first day, but he was slowly learning what being a teacher was like. He didn't mind it much, but it certainly helped that his 'student' was so close to him.

They trained all day, until he was certain she could, at the very least, reach out and mentally link to him. They thoroughly enjoyed being linked to that degree, and that was how the two stayed as they joined their families in the massive convoy of cars and Pokémon heading for Castelia City. It was Festivus Eve, at last, and Alex fully intended to relax and enjoy himself.
Disturb Not the Harmony

This is a canon short-story that you can skip, if you like. It's plot relevant, and takes place in the same time period as the main story.

The Orange Islands - Kanto/Johto Region of Japan

Connor Gladstone had come to the center of the Orange Islands of Japan for one reason. Like many other Trainers, he'd heard the legends of the Guardian of the Sea, a Lugia who was supposed to be stronger than any other in the world.

As a rule, its species was stronger than most, and rare enough to be considered a legend, but this particular Lugia was older, and stronger, than others encountered by Trainers. Not unlike Unova's Rayquaza.

He'd arrived on the island, parlayed with the locals, and now, he was on his way to the Lightning Island, home of Zapdos, supposedly. The other two islands had noticeably lacked Moltres or Articuno. He departed in the boat he'd rented, grabbed the yellow crystalline sphere at the shrine, and then searched for Zapdos. Like the others, it was nowhere to be found.

After heading back to the islanders, they pointed him in the direction of Slowking's shrine. The more he spoke with them, the more he was convinced they weren't telling him something, especially after not finding the legendary birds. He went to the shrine anyways, placed the colored spherical gems, and waited.

And waited.

The islands were gorgeous in August, even though it was almost over, but as the sun began to set, and deprive him of a view, he wondered if he'd have to wait all night. He was willing to, of course. He needed a Pokémon to rival Alex and Tao, and you didn't just find one on Tao's level sitting around. He'd wait all night if he had to.

It was as he thought that thought, that the voice spoke. "You won't find him." Connor turned, eyebrow raised. A Slowking stood behind him. If rumor was to be believed, he was the shrine's caretaker. Nothing to worry about, then. "You won't find him." He repeated, "You don't have the song."

"So teach it to me." Connor replied, standing and turning in one fluid motion.

The Slowking sighed. "It won't matter if I do. The Guardian isn't here." Its offspring was, guiding and keeping the ocean's current in balance while its parent was away, but this Trainer didn't need to know that. Humans had a tendency of disrupting the balance, if it meant gaining power. The same one had tried twice to capture the Guardian of the Sea. The second attempt had cost that human his life.

Connor's brow rose further. "Then where is it?"
The Slowking gave him a look. "You already have the answer to that."

Connor sighed. The rumors were true, then. He was part of *that* Trainer’s team, and trying to find information on that particular Trainer was a rabbit hole that everyone went down, eventually, but few ever managed to find him. He’d done more in his tenth year than most Trainers did in seven. He didn’t stay in one place often. "Then where are the birds?"

"Gone. Captured, most likely, though the ones you’re thinking of left long ago, after the second incident. Zapdos might still be around. I saw it a week past, during a storm." In truth, the storm had been the product of a Legendary electric type, Slowking hadn’t seen Zapdos itself. But this human didn’t need to know that, either.

"Zapdos it is, then." Connor sighed, and turned to leave. It wasn’t Lugia, it wasn’t even Moltres, the bird he would’ve preferred, but it was better than leaving empty handed.

The Slowking watched the Trainer go, and sighed. Many like him had come over the years. Repeated the ritual, best they knew how, and then left empty handed. The islanders had adapted, after the second incident perpetrated by the same man had made national headlines.

They charged such Trainers exorbitant fees to rent a room or a boat, or even to eat. That had driven most of them off, but this Trainer didn’t seem bothered by it. He’d likely leave empty handed too.

Slowking sighed again, watching the sun fade completely, and as he did, he noticed something. The lightning orb had begun to glow, though the others remained dormant. He knew Moltres and Articuno had left, as had Zapdos. He couldn’t rightly figure out why it was glowing now.

The villagers greeted Connor’s return from the shrine with the same passiveness, and fully expected him to leave. When he asked for a boat to go out again, they denied him, and he shocked them all by calling out Gren, and surfing away on his narrow back, despite the oncoming thunderstorm on the horizon. It promised to be a powerful one, but Connor ignored the islander’s warnings. Great Trainers were not dissuaded by something as simple as bad weather.

It was hard going, as his Trainer was stocky, and Greninja were, as a rule, not big enough for a comfortable ride. They managed, as Gren was quite strong. Connor recalled him once they made landfall on Lightning Island, and began heading towards the shrine again.

Once there, he climbed to a nearby hill of sorts to the right of the thunder shrine, blinking in surprise as he realized it was metal he was now standing on. Rusted and old, he examined it further, only looking away when he heard the boom of thunder overhead, and noticed the sky was now dark with angry looking clouds.

Lightning flashed, and though he was momentarily blinded, a figure atop one of the nearby cliffs lining the shrine appeared once the blindness faded. It roared at him, and thunder boomed through the area again. Most Trainers would’ve been awed, but Connor simply grinned.

It made some sense. If the birds were captured or migrating, then what Pokémon would be better for watching over their energy filled homes than Ho-Oh’s own trio? Connor blinked, and leapt off the pile of rusted metal, landing before the shrine. He pulled out his Unova style Pokédex, double checking the entry for the Pokémon he suspected now stood before him.

It was Raikou, of that there was no question, but this one was orange. That, too, made some sense.
The current Champion of Kanto and Johto's Pokémon League was rumored to use the three 'Legendary Beasts' as they were sometimes called.

Raikou's eyes lit up with psychic power, and Connor's grin only widened as he heard its voice in his head. "You wish to tame the essence of lightning…" The massive thunder Pokémon leapt from the cliff, and landed before him with a deep snarl. "You can certainly try…"

Connor had no illusions about who he'd need to use for this particular battle. Gar, his Garchomp, was the obvious choice for his type advantage, but Connor had a feeling Earthquake and Dig wouldn't be effective against a Pokémon as fast as Raikou.

He went for his fastest then, and called out his Infernape, Ardor. Gren was technically the fastest, but he knew no amount of tricks would help this kind of type disadvantage. This was a Legendary Pokémon. Unlike most members of his species, Ardor's fur was crimson not orange, and as he saw what his opponent was, the flame on his head swelled.

Raikou started the battle, with lightning arcing from the clouds on his back. Ardor had decided to use a Mach Punch, before his Trainer could call it, and Connor sighed. His Infernape had a tendency to battle on his own instinct, and take things too far. It was a theme, with fire types. Even those who were well trained.

There was a reason he'd kept the impulsive ape around, though. He dodged the electric attacks easily, and while a normal punch wouldn't normally do all that much, this one hit Raikou's jaw with unerringly accuracy and a lot more power. Enough to daze him, for a moment.

"Close Combat!" The Infernape fell into a stance for his own unique style of fighting which his Trainer had nicknamed the 'Iron Fist', and as each of the fighting type hits from his legs and feet landed, Raikou seemed to take them without an issue.

"Is that all you have?" Thunder boomed with its' telepathic words. "Come! Give me a challenge!" It roared again, and the heavens seemed to shake with the force of it. The fact that it could speak wasn't necessarily unusual, not to Connor, anyways.

Most Legendary Pokémon had some kind of latent psychic potential. He did wonder who taught it Common, though. It attacked then, with a Thunder Fang, and Ardor's hands lit up with fire as he caught the manifested electric jaws.

Ardor looked back to his Trainer, for once, seeking guidance. His Trainer nodded. "Do it." The Infernape leapt back, narrowly dodging the fangs as they clashed shut, and then lunged forward again. Instead of a punch however, this time, he used a kick. His foot was enveloped with fire as he slid under Raikou's guard, and then launched the Blaze Kick upwards into the Legendary tiger's chin.

"Now, Fire Punch!" The force of the kick had actually managed to lift the legendary beast off the ground, onto his back legs, and Ardor let his momentum carry him as he arched his back, and flipped backwards from the kick. His fist was enveloped in flame then, and he let it carry him to his target, hitting the tiger-like beast directly in the chest.

There was a thunderous crash as the Raikou was sent backwards into one of the nearby rock faces. It rose from the rubble then, and took a different approach. The Raikou leapt onto the pile of rusted
metal, and electric sparks ran through it, making its outline obvious.

It took Connor a moment to realize that was the one of the airships that had almost caused a global unbalancing of the ocean current. It had to be the first. There hadn't been anything left of the second. Several bolts of electricity hit the metal as they arced down from the clouds, and then curved towards Raikou, who redirected them towards his opponent.

They were fast, and relentless, all Ardor could do was dodge. Every time he tried to approach Raikou's perch, it attacked with Thunder, scorching the ground before it. Eventually, it grew tired of being dodged by the agile ape, and once more changed tactics. The electricity clung to the Legendary Beast's form, and then expanded in a circular wave of energy. A Discharge.

Knowing that kind of hit would put them at even more of a disadvantage, Connor acted. "Get some height, then Blaze Kick through it!" Ardor moved quickly, climbing the shrine itself and leaping. The wave of energy was almost upon him once he'd gotten the kick going, but it pushed back against the attack, and hit him regardless.

The flames had been unable to push through the wall of electric power, and Ardor hit the ground hard. Rain began to fall from the darkened clouds, and given the region they were in, it soon increased in its' intensity. Ardor's flame weakened, but both he and the Raikou were panting. Connor eyed both of them, and nodded. It was time to finish this.

Raikou sensed the end of this bout coming as well, and another Discharge formed around its body. This next round would decide it. Ardor met his opponent's gaze, and the flame on his head swelled…and swelled. He didn't like losing, and he wasn't going to let this so-called Legendary Beast show him up. He let the flames engulf him, and roared, pounding his chest in challenge.

"Fire Punch!" Connor called the move as the Discharge came, and Ardor's burning fist finally managed to push through it. He was better at punching, then kicking. The flames around his body kept most of the damage from him, but he was holding on by a thread. One more hit would likely knock him out.

The comet-like form of the fire ape slammed into Raikou, who caught the attack with his Thunder Fang. Both Pokémon winced as fire and electricity battled for supremacy, distracting the thunder Pokémon long enough for a Pokéball to slip past its' defenses.

Raikou's eyes widened in surprise, and as its form was called into the ball, Ardor fell to one knee, shivering with paralysis.

The Ultra Ball had a great success rate that had only improved over the years, as the technology was perfected. Technically, the one Connor had thrown was the third generation, the newest, and the one that had a catch rate almost as good as the Master Ball's.

The ball dinged shut, and once it did, Ardor collapsed, only to be caught by his Trainer, who had sped forward both to catch his Pokémon, and retrieve his prize. "Well done, Ardor." He said quietly, as he grabbed Raikou's ball. He recalled the fainted Infernape after feeding it a Max Revive, and let him rest.

Then, he called out his newest addition. The large, tiger-like Pokémon eyed him as he approached, and snarled as a Max Potion was applied to his wounds. Connor crossed his arms then. "If I take you
from here, will the islands be out of balance?"

Those who knew of the incidents that had occurred here always knew just enough to be dangerous, but luckily, maintaining the balance of power between the three islands was common knowledge, and Trainers from all over Japan were ready to fly down and maintain it should it be disrupted.

The Raikou shook its' head. "There are other Guardians. One will come."

Connor nodded, trusting the Legendary Pokémon to understand such things better than he could. It was rumored that Raikou traveled by way of thunderbolts, and nothing he'd seen seemed to contradict that.

"Alright, then you're coming with me. We're going to Kalos…but first, a question. Who taught you to battle like that? And to speak the human tongue?" The large beast seemed to smirk at his new Trainer.

"One who, like you, had the drive and the power to rival a dragon." Despite not getting the Lugia he'd wanted, Connor grinned.

Four Days Later…

Getting to Kalos all the way from the Orange Islands had taken longer than he'd wanted. Luckily, his new Raikou had the ability to dissipate storms, which had made crossing the enormous Mediterra mountain range much easier. He would've gone the other way, through Unova, but the Arceans of the Fornia region were very particular about who they let through their air space, and given that they controlled the entire coast, more or less, no pilot was willing to risk trying to sneak past.

Though they denied it, the Arceans had a tendency to have numerous 'accidents' from aircraft that tried to pass over their waters, but the desert of Orre, and their ability to suppress information, kept anyone from tying them to the accidents. As it was currently, only fellow Arceans and certain people from certain parts of the Sinnoh region were allowed through.

He'd eventually crossed the mountains, visited home for a few days, and after hearing that Alex was skipping Festivus in favor of training, had returned to Gaulia to do much the same. He could always return for the end of the holiday, and the start of the new year.

As he looked around the front of the airport, he sighed. Technically, he was in southern Kalos, a region sometimes called Gaulia. He'd switched out his Elektross, Tonitrus, in favor of Raikou, and while he knew ground type attacks would once again be a pain to deal with, this particular Raikou had informed him that he could handle such things.

Apparently, he had been the Pokémon of a master Black Belt in the region of Hoenn for many years, and together, they had developed a style of martial arts that even now the Legendary Pokémon was teaching him.

He'd come to Gaulia to continue his training. The Kalos League was set to start just before the end of Festivus, which gave him roughly two months to prepare for it. He already had the badges, now all he had to do was pass the Kalos Conference, and then take on the Four. Given the strength of their Champion, the Kalos League was considered almost as hard as Unova's.
As he made his way towards the village of ninja-esque Trainers who had originally trained both himself and his Greninja, he resolved to visit home at least once before the League started. He knew Alex was training as well, though he’d been less than forthcoming with the details. It didn’t matter. If he could beat Alain, his neighbor would be no challenge.

The village elders welcomed him back with little ceremony, and a bit of hesitance. Once he showed them his new instructor, they agreed to let him stay. Many of his fellow trainees, who had never stopped training, were eager to learn this new fighting style as well. Raikou taught all who were willing to try, but he had an eye for those who could not handle it.

It was perfect for someone like Connor, with his large frame and honed swiftness, but those with smaller builds were eventually turned away by Raikou. His style involved combing speed and power in explosive demonstrations of force.

Those who had weaker bodies would never master his techniques. He did direct them to masters who could make use of their strengths, and before long, every trainee not learning ‘Raikou Style’ martial arts was sent off across the world to find an appropriate master with the word of a Raikou vouching for their competence.

The village elders didn't seem to mind, nor did their families. The world was connected like it had never been before, and even though the developer of the Pokémon Storage system, Bill, was still working on a human teleportation device, one akin to the one used for Pokéballs, there were other ways of returning home quickly. The village elders often spoke with Raikou, and they took the Legendary Pokémon's advice without hesitation.

2 Months Later…

The training had been long, difficult, and in the end, only Connor and a few other students were deemed ‘masters’ of Raikou’s fighting style. At the end of the two month wait, Connor was the only one who left the village, garbed in the black and white garment given to children of the village who were seen as particularly strong, and wise. He hadn't earned it the first time he'd left, but he was ready for the Kalos League now.

His team had filled out nicely as well, as both his Grovyle, Itharius, and his Kadabra, Sophos, had evolved. While the rest of his team were now all as fast as he was, Gren remained the strongest by far. Only Sophos was unable to keep up with the rest, but after learning to levitate himself with his psychic power, he could keep up with all of them. He'd switched out Lancelus for Sophos, as Alakazam could actually Mega Evolve, and was quite strong with special attacks, something sorely needed on his team of fast, physical strikers. His goofy Reuniclus had simply been too slow.

Once Connor left the village, he set about looking for crystals, shards of Elemental Plates from a fallen incarnation of Arceus. Naturally, finding such things was difficult, at best, but he did have some luck after doing a bit of research.

Usually, such shards were found near the sites of massive planet-ending asteroid impacts that had been mitigated by the power of the Alpha Pokémon. Whenever a crisis that was capable of destroying the planet came about, it was always mitigated, somehow, by an unknown power.

Researchers had attributed it to Legendary Pokémon like Rayquaza, but every so often he found a reference to a catastrophe that was far beyond a Sky Guardian's ability to handle. In the end, he
managed to find a Psychium crystal by wandering the forests near the edge of the Mediterra
mountains.

He came across a Delphox, a wild one no less, and only after defeating it with Gren's aid did he
realize that he recognized it. With Sophos translating, he was able to inform the distraught and beaten
Pokémon that the Fennekin it was searching for was in good hands, with a good Trainer, and had
already become a Delphox herself.

He spent the night in the Delphox's hut, and promised to inform his sister as to the whereabouts of it
so that parent and offspring could see each other again someday. Before leaving, the psychic fox
gave him a crystal, and a reading of his future. Much like Professor Oak, she told him to head to
Kalos. All roads led there, it seemed.

He traveled to the gyms quickly, meeting with the Gym Leaders, who made sure he was still
competent enough for the League challenge. He mainly used Sophos for these battles, as his Mega
Form was slowly becoming strong enough to handle just about any challenger. As his strength grew,
so too did his intellect, and by the time they came back to Lumiose for the conference, he was
speaking in short sentences.

A year's difference didn't really affect the quality of Trainer in the conference, and Connor managed
to once more beat whoever he came up against, although this time, he didn't rely on Gren alone. He
used his Sceptile and Infernape respectively, and kept his ace hidden, saving his strength for the final
battle with the Champion.

The conference ended the week before the end of Festivus, and on the last day, Connor once more
challenged the Four…or he would have, if he hadn't been interrupted before he could face his first
opponent.

The Festivus celebrations in Kalos were as enjoyable as the ones in Unova, but this year, security
was relatively lax. With the Four and their undefeated Champion, Alain, the locals didn't worry
about another Team Flare incident, and even if one did occur, they were sure their Champion would
handle it.

It was as Connor was taking the elevator up to his first opponent that the entire castle-like building
shook. Upon reaching the Elite Four member's chamber, the inhabitant within stepped off of the red
throne, and joined him on the elevator. "I'm very sorry challenger, but your battle will have to wait
until this disturbance is dealt with."

The rumors had said that Serena was lovely, and even as a woman several decades ahead of him,
that fact remained true. Being one of the defenders of Kalos, Serena had taken the place of Malva
when her ties to Team Flare were discovered. He'd beaten her easily with Gren a year earlier, though
he didn't assume victory would be that easy this time around.

Once outside the League's building, she called out her Delphox as the source of the sudden attack on
the stadium became clear. "What is that?" She said, pointing towards the sky.

Anyone who'd grown up in Unova, or the regions surrounding it, knew well the ominous outline of
the infamous Plasma Frigate. While the airship that now moved over the stadium did indeed resemble
that ship, it was newer, and fundamentally changed in design. Like most airships, it now had proper
wings, complete with tandem rotor blades embedded in the wings for sustained hovering.

"That, madam, is a flying ship." Connor spoke softly, glaring at the black metal aircraft. "Team Plasma used one like it a few decades ago to freeze Opeleucid…but it's different somehow…" His eyes noticed it then.

Instead of plasma-sails, the 'mast' on the airship's deck was now an enormous t-shaped block of metal, supporting a symbol that was easily recognized. The Symbol of Arceus, all in gold, of course.

"Team Plasma was disbanded though." Serena looked back up at the ship, "So who is piloting it?" Connor called out Raikou then, who growled low as the ship came closer.

"I know that mark…" His psychic baritone rang in his Trainer's skull. While the symbol of Arceus was widely used by those who still clung to systems of worship around him left over from the Dark Times, the Arcean's had made their own variation unique by placing the golden symbol over a t-shaped cross.

Once the airship was above the stadium, the rest of the Four, including the Champion, came out to the front of the building. Alain and Connor locked eyes, briefly, before his Charizard joined them, alongside numerous other Pokémon from the other members of the Four.

A voice echoed from the ship then, and Connor spied a loudspeaker attached to the top of the 'mast'. "Members of the Kalos League, Challengers and Champions, behold. Your destruction has finally come."

A cry echoed throughout the plateau then, one that Connor was unfamiliar with, but was all too familiar to the citizens of Kalos who'd lived through Lysander's madness, and the remnants of Team Flare that tried to revive his dream. The voice rang out again as the Destruction Pokémon, Yveltal, flew out from above the ship, and began circling the plateau.

"Make this easy, Champion. You know what we want. Give it to us, and you may all leave here without turning to stone."

As Yveltal flew, its Dark Aura permeated the area around the League building, and from the ship, a white Gengar, in its Mega Form, landed before the group of Trainers and Pokémon. "Last chance. Come peacefully, or condemn everyone to death."

The Champion's Charizard looked ready to battle, but his Trainer stopped him. "Not this time. I'm not letting another madman hurt the people I care about."

He looked at the Gengar, whose eyes were glowing with a bluish white power that meant it was using some sort of psychic ability. "I'll come peacefully."

The Gengar levitated the Champion up to the ship, and his Charizard followed, circling the deck, ready to attack if its Trainer was harmed at all. Minutes crept by slowly, and yet, there was no outbreak of battle.

Connor, for his part, had ordered Raikou to be ready to hit Yveltal with a Thunderbolt if it made a move to attack them, but it only circled the mountain top, which was odd. All data on it said it attacked indiscriminately until it ran out of energy, and then entered a cocoon, that sucked the land dry. As a Legendary himself, Connor hoped Raikou would be able to keep the creature from killing
them if it decided to attack.

More time passed until suddenly, Alain's Charizard landed on the deck of the airship, and then flew down to the ground with his Trainer. A beam of black light shot towards Yveltal, and it was recalled much in the way a Pokéball recalls a Pokémon. The ship sped off again then, headed in a north-eastern direction.

Connor didn't quite understand why, as the only thing in that direction was Norstad, a country full of technologically impaired 'barbarians', who fought their kinsmen for the glory of battle and bloody honor, with the help of subdued Pokémon.

The ban on technology included Pokéballs, and he could only imagine how an airship would be received. Let alone one that was presumably full of self-righteous and conversion happy Arceans. Insulting a Norstadder's gods was a good way to end up as one of the slaves they sold to the Imperium.

As the Champion landed, he did not give an explanation as to what the mysterious voice had asked for. In fact, his only command was to resume testing this year's conference winner. Before he walked away, Connor spoke up, "If I beat you, you tell me what they wanted from you."

The Champion glanced back at him, then sighed. "Deal. But you'll never beat me with a Greninja."

He did however, beat Serena, and her colleagues, all of whom managed to pull promises of sharing whatever the Champion told him, if he managed to win.

The actual battle with Alain went much the way it had a year prior, at least in the beginning. Gren showed his skill against the Champion's Tyranitar, and despite Mega Evolving, the win once again went to the Greninja.

He was switched out then however, as a Metagross appeared on the field, and Mega Evolved as well. The only Pokémon Connor had that could possibly match it was Ardor, his Infernape, and with speed and type advantage, he won that as well. Ardor stayed in for two more bouts then, against Alain's Sceptile and Bisharp, and won.

Exhausted as he was however, Connor brought out Raikou to take care of his Talonflame, which then only left his Charizard.

The battle a year earlier had gone similarly well in Connor's favor, but by this time, Gren had been exhausted, and the Mega Sceptile that had been his last opponent had torn through his untrained team easily once it dispatched his ace.

This time, the Champion's ace came in against his full team, save Ardor, and was starting against a Legendary Pokémon no less. Raikou didn't give it a chance to Mega Evolve, as the Thunderbolts started coming immediately, and didn't stop.

Whenever the Charizard tried to advance to the next stage of evolution, a Discharge ruined its focus, and as it retained its flying type, it was quite damaging. It did eventually manage to Mega Evolve, and after that, despite getting in a few more hits and a Thunder Fang, Raikou went down. Alain's Charizard was arguably the strongest in the world, and this only proved it. There was a reason he'd stayed Champion for so long.
Instead of Gren, Connor brought out Gar, which caused the Champion, and his Charizard, to pause. Even today, they hesitated when facing a Garchomp. If only for a moment. A sandstorm soon filled the Champion's chamber, and Gar began zipping around, desperate to hit the dodging Charizard with a Dragon Rush.

When Alain finally ordered a Dragon Claw attack after seeing his wounded partner torn apart by the harsh sand, the Dragon Rush hit home, and the damage from Raikou, the Sandstorm, and the final Dragon Rush move finally bought the Charizard down.

It took a moment for Connor to realize he'd finally won. He hadn't soloed it with his Greninja, but in hindsight, that had been a ridiculous goal. Unrealistic. Something he'd expect from his rival, not him.

Alain recalled his partner, and then brought Connor up to the Hall of Fame. It was almost as old as Unova's had looked, but was easily far more ornate. The Kalosians did love their décor. Once his team was entered into the Hall's records, and his title as Kalos Champion was officially bestowed, he asked Alain about the incident earlier. The entire thing still unnerved him.

The Arceans had a reputation for retaliation, and his sister had recently very publicly helped remove them from Castelia City. Killing him with Yveltal would've been easy, satisfying, and yet the Arceans hadn't attacked. It didn't make sense, until Alain started explaining.

"The man running the ship did not introduce himself, though I can only surmise that he must have been Caleb Pravus. He fit the description, at any rate. He's after Xerneas, more specifically, the eternal life that particular Pokémon can bestow upon others. Up until now, I've denied his requests for an audience, or any information about Xerneas…but as you saw, I had no choice today." Alain sighed.

Connor spoke quietly, his sense of dread only growing. "Did you tell him where to find it?" The power from the Life Pokémon was rumored to give true immortality. Short of total atomization, survival was guaranteed. Forever. That kind of gift in the hands of the Arcean's leader was, based on the information his sister had shared, a very bad combination.

"I only know of two Xerneas. The one here in Kalos is sleeping, as our Yveltal is now awake again. The other…is rumored to be in Norstad." The Champion averted his gaze. "I can only hope the people there do not know where it is, or have countermeasures against people like Pravus. I could practically see the greed in his eyes once I told him."

Connor began heading for the exit elevator. "I'll stop him before he ever gets there. Those people don't have the tech to repel a weaponized airship."

Alain gave a humorless chuckle. "I wouldn't worry about the locals…five minutes with Pravus, and they'll probably kill him for fun. There's more. He bragged about an upcoming attack on Unova…he said it was set for tonight."

Connor pinched the bridge of his nose. Of course he'd set his followers loose on Festivus Eve. There were ways of crossing oceans quickly, and while he knew Sophos might fly him over with Psychic, it would take too long, and he would never stop hurling. "I'll head to Unova…try to help."

Alain raised a brow. "And how do you expect to arrive in time? The sun is setting, the attack is probably coming soon, if it hasn't already begun."
Connor hit the button for the elevator, and grinned at the former Champion. "I have a Pokémon that runs so fast, it can cross oceans. I'll be fine. Try to send word to Norstad. We're headed there, next."

Alain's brow rose higher. "We?"

Raikou had fought bravely against Alain's Charizard, but after a Max Revive and a Max Elixir, as well as a short rest at the Pokémon Center in the League building, Connor was on his back, and headed towards the western coast of Kalos.

Raikou ran just as fast on land as he did on water, and given the lack of hard terrain, water was actually quicker. He knew Alex and Jess could likely handle whatever the Arceans were planning on hitting Unova with, but it never hurt to have another skilled Trainer nearby.

Even if Unova was already full of skilled Trainers, he needed those two for other things. According to his sister, Alex had gotten even stronger, after training in the Swamp. From her description, Pravus had almost beaten him, which meant taking on him and a ship full of his henchman alone was a bad idea.

He only hoped they had a faster method of travel, as Raikou could only comfortably carry him, and maybe his sister. Even then, it would take a lot longer to reach Norstad from Unova.

About thirty minutes passed before the cloud of dust behind Raikou became a spray of water. There was relatively flat land between the Kalos League's plateau and the coast, and there were plenty of rivers to run on as well. Raikou estimated that the trip over the Atlantican Ocean would take about two hours, and the sun was just past its zenith above them, turning the sky orange. Accounting for time difference, it would be setting in Unova soon as well. As the seemingly endless expanse of cold water opened up before them, Connor only hoped they'd arrive in time to be helpful.
The roads may have been packed, but once more, Pokémon proved how invaluable they were to the human race, most of whom could no longer even imagine a world without them in it. Teams of flying Pokémon who knew Flamethrower, which were primarily Charizard, or dragon types, had been clearing the numerous roads to Castelia city nonstop since the storm ended.

Alex, Jess, and several other members of his family who had Pokémon, had opted to ride them down, as did many other Trainers. It was simply superior to travel in cars.

They flew over the outer southern edge of their small town however, and noticed someone was flagging them down. A line of cars was backed up all the way to the main road through the town, and none of the locals had fire types on hand.

The Pokémon usually responsible for clearing the roads was an Arcanine, but Alex learned that he was getting on in years, and had been sick since before Festivus began. The local nurse had given him a month, and he'd lasted three, when his Trainer had become depressed by the imminent loss of his friend.

Now, it seemed, this Festivus would be his last. Sad as that was, the more callous individuals in town were eager to get on with the celebration, and given that both Alex and Jess were on 'fire breathing lizards', as they put it, they were all but demanding the Trainers help them.

Almost hesitant to comply after being all but ordered by people from his own home town, Alex had Blaze Mega Evolve, and as his form changed, the area around him became much hotter. Not hot enough, however, as the snow was piled up five feet high.

Alex nodded at him then and said, "Heat Wave." Blaze flew into the air, and then unleashed his attack. It took about a minute before the golden grass was visible again after being melted by the blazing waves of heat. Looking around, the circle of now uncovered golden grass extended all the way back to town. The residual heat made it almost feel like spring time. Almost.

Deciding to give Blaze a rest after expending so much heat, Alex took out Shruikan, and he and Jess opted to ride him southward at a leisurely pace, which for his new form, was almost as fast as Blaze while Mega Evolved. Shruikan got looks wherever he went, as they soon came upon a flock of other Trainers from similarly small towns, all heading to Unova.

The large black dragon and stuck out in the late afternoon sun. Naturally, requests to battle a Pokémon that unique were constant, and eventually, a bit annoying. Shruikan indulged a few of the stronger ones, again mostly Charizard, but his new Charge Beam and Thunder Fang ended them quickly.

After the fifth such battle, the air around them had become packed with flying Pokémon, and when it became evident that these Trainers weren't going to take 'no' for an answer, Alex told them they could battle his dragon if they managed to beat the Victory Plateau. In the few days since his battles there, nobody had made it past the Four, or the other Champions.
They wouldn't be there today, though. The new year was upon them, and the Champions, past and present, alongside the Elite Four were expected to be in Castelia for the ceremony in Entral Park that would mark the start of a new year. Tao was already there, from what Alex could sense, and thankfully had not been attacked or stolen.

The thing about large gatherings of humans, was that they were always a good place to strike if one wanted instant infamy, and to remove the power structure of the entire region. This time, measures had been taken.

Alex was greeted in the air by two Pokémon Rangers as he flew over Opeleucid, and though Shruikan could've outpaced them, he had nothing to hide, and no reason to quarrel. Normally, the city of Dragon Tamers would've been clogging the streets to see such a unique dragon, but everyone, including Nate, the new Gym Leader, was already at the park.

As were more Rangers. As a rule, most of them didn't capture Pokémon in Pokéballs, preferring other methods of temporarily requesting their aid. This time, it seemed some had indeed brought along Pokéballs, though none of the Rangers he passed had a full team. Close partners, then, or perhaps their Pokéballs were temporary.

Whatever the reason, Alex was glad they had others on hand. Wild Pokémon were usually weaker than ones bonded to Trainers.

As Alex landed, he did a double take. Just north of Entral park's center was the ever-recurring symbol of balance. Dark and light, yin and yang, the Taijitu symbol, or so it first appeared. Alex soon realized it was actually Tao, lying on the grass. It seemed that even while resting on the ground, the First Dragon embodied eternal balance.

The Legendary dragon's mind connected with his, but his focus was on Shruikan. They exchanged 'words', of a kind, through emotions and images. Alex understood about a quarter of it, but was yet again impressed by the dragons. He felt Jess was as well, as the two had remained linked since he peered into her mind. They couldn't bring themselves to part, and seeing as how they had a month and a half left before they'd split again, they saw no reason to unlink their minds until then.

It wasn't as personal as it had been in the lab, and was more akin to the bond he now constantly shared with his team. She had connected with her team in a similar manner to theirs, and Alex wondered if there was a limit on how many mental connections he could maintain, and what would happen if he surpassed said limit.

He sensed amusement from Tao as the three finally landed, and the dragon's voice echoed in their heads. "There is no limit to the connections one may make…however, the humans I've known have had difficulty keeping track of them all in the past. You would be wise to organize them…when you've advanced." The dragon focused one massive eye on the pair. "You've begun to train her? Hmm."

Tao's eyes were pupilless orbs of gold, and they examined Jess for a long moment. His voice thundered again, "Your insight served you well. She may indeed be worthy…” His voice and tone shifted then, echoing in the deepest recesses of his mind, away from his connections to the others. "Always remember my friend…only one can truly become a Master."

He responded immediately, taken aback, "Are you saying I'll have to turn on her? On anyone who has the same goals I do?"
The dragon blinked once. "No. I am only warning you of a potential conflict in the far future. You may want to share your ultimate goal with her, lest it become her own."

He noticed she was staring at him, giving him the Spock brow, and he winked at her, pulling her closer with the arm that had reflexively wrapped around her waist. He spoke so she could hear as well, then. "I know who she is. Whatever conflict may one day arise, it won't sunder us. Nothing is more important to me."

The dragon lifted his head from the golden grass covered ground then, and stood. He almost seemed larger than before, but that was likely due to once more being in balance. Captivity and months of meditating had left him somewhat gaunt before, but now he was restored. "As you say. I've seen few bonds among your kind as strong as yours. Cherish it...such things are not easy to find twice."

Alex let the dragons converse then, in their own tongue, and he could already sense Jess' confusion. She might not be able to read fast, but she could tell when she'd missed part of a conversation. "What was that about?" She whispered, keeping her voice low.

Alex responded mentally, as he saw who was approaching, "Later." He let his mouth form a smirk. "Well well. The newest member of the Four. It's good to see you."

Nick had picked out his younger friend's form quite easily, as all eyes had been drawn to the Black Salamence that had landed near Tao in the middle of the crowded clearing. "It's been a while, Champion. I haven't even gotten a text. Where have you been?"

Alex shrugged, "Oh, you know, here and there. I went south to the Swamp with Hilbert around the end of summer. I got back a few days ago. Naturally, there's no PokéNet down there."

Nick gave him a look, seemingly unconvinced, then noticed the woman by his side, and blinked in recognition. "I see you've brought another victor with you...is she the one you never shut up about?"

Alex nodded. Nick continued, "I remember she thrashed my team pretty hard with her Empoleon. It'll take more than Aerial Ace to beat us now, though."

It was Alex's turn to raise a brow, "Oh? That sounds like a challenge...are you sure your team is ready?" As soon as his finished speaking, Nick's Medicham, Shifu, appeared from his ball, and took a fighting stance. Arthur was beside Alex a moment later, arms extending into swords.

Nick grinned, "Fighting and psychic typing versus psychic and fighting, one on one, no substitutions...I like it...but you'll have to do better than last time. We've perfected our battling style." Alex responded by turning his hat backwards, and smirking.

The two were already walking towards the nearest open area of the park. Nick spoke first once they found a big enough space. "Shifu, make us a battlefield." The Medicham nodded, and then proceeded to mega evolve. Flashes of psychic power appeared from under the golden grass, lifting the turf up, and outlining the field with the removed dirt. Alex supposed they could always put it back later, with minimal damage to the grass.

As soon as people heard that one of the Four was battling the Champion, a crowd began to gather. Arthur glanced at his Trainer, and Alex looked down at the Psychium crystal, then nodded. "Don't hold back." Shifu looked like most Medicham who reached that level of power, save that the circles on his legs were now sporting a familiar pattern of eternal balance. Nick was sporting it as well, on a
new belt holding up his rather normal, if a bit baggy, pants. It seemed the Four had indulged in Tao's wisdom as well. They'd need to have a tournament before long, to make sure the Four weren't surpassing the Champions.

Arthur's form had minor differences as well, as the crystal finished its work. The spiky 'hair' that his species had now curled up around the green 'helmet' that covered his head, not unlike his Trainer's. In other aspects, his Mega Form did not differ, though the pinkish blades on his arms began shining gold as he readied his favored move.

They knew Shifu's weaknesses well, for they were the same as Arthur's, and as the Sacred Sword met and blocked the multiple Force Palms from the Medicham's six arms, the collisions sent shockwaves through the air. Arthur was a master of close combat, but fighting an opponent with six limbs tested even his skill. There was a reason Victory League challengers saved Nick for last.

After the fifth exchange of fighting type moves, Arthur noticed that neither Nick nor Shifu seemed to need commands to battle. "His typing is still normal and fighting, right?" Arthur asked mentally, growing irritated by the seemingly impenetrable defense.

Alex looked again at his friend, and nodded. They spoke with the speed of thought, but that didn't make it any easier for them to talk mid-battle. It was still a distraction. "He is. Shifu must be connecting them…but that means his entire team isn't sharing it."

For whatever reason, aside from Sages, he'd noticed most psychic Pokémon could only form that kind of close mental connection under specific circumstances, and with only one or two others. He had no clue why humans seemed to form them so much easier.

Arthur watched the flurry of palms, and saw his opening. His arm blazed with darkness, and he weaved through the attacks, hitting home with a Night Slash. Shifu countered with a Focus Blast soon after, as he had when Arthur had managed to get past his arms before, and the Gallade was knocked away once again as his opponent followed up with more Force Palms.

"That's it…I'm trying it. We can't hold out forever." Arthur dodged each of the palms with grace few other Pokémon species possessed, then flipped backwards once more, out of his opponent's range.

Alex raised a brow at his Gallade's words, and shrugged. "If you want…just be careful. You haven't perfected that, and it could seriously injure Shifu."

Arthur glanced back at him. "You have a better idea?"

Alex nodded. "We get creative." He smirked, and let Arthur read his thoughts.

The Gallade rolled his eyes, and focused on his opponent, who had taken the initiative, and charged. "Fine. But I seriously doubt that's going to work."

"Trust me. It'll work." Alex smirked at Nick, whose brow furrowed at that unflinching confidence. "Do it."

Arthur nodded, and shot forward again, taking two Force Palms before he was able to slide under Shifu's guard, and ready his kick. It wasn't an attack persay, and had he not been a fighting type, it probably would've failed.

Once under his opponent's guard, he was in a kneeling position, and with a backwards flip, he
brought one of his feet up under the Medicham's chin, hard enough to launch him into the air. Arthur flipped, and landed, then jumped as he formed a Shadow Ball between his palms.

He'd always had trouble controlling ghost type energy, and even though he'd managed to condense it into a similar attack that the rest of his teammates used, it required both his arms to do so, which left his guard open far more than he liked.

He sailed above Shifu, who was still smarting from the surprise kick to the jaw, and opened his eyes just in time to see Arthur's condensed Shadow Ball slam into his midsection. He went down spinning, hard, and the ground shook from the impact.

Arthur landed, and when Shifu didn't rise again, and lost control of his Mega Form, the battle was over. Nick was staring at Alex in disbelief. He had, in essence, ordered his Pokémon to use a particular set of moves from a fighting video game they had both played in high school.

With the combination Nick used to consistently beat him, no less. He'd never used any other series of attacks, making the whole thing frustrating for Alex back then, but now, revenge was all the sweeter for it.

Alex flashed his friend the victory sign, and turned his hat back around. His Gallade shared his smirk, and was already helping the dazed Shifu to his feet. They set about fixing the disturbed ground caused by their clash as the two Trainers met, and clasped arms.

"He's gotten better…but that Shadow Ball should be a Shadow Claw. It leaves him too open, unless he finishes with it." Nick was eyeing Arthur, who had let his own Mega Evolution fade.

Alex nodded, "That's actually what he's been practicing lately…but he doesn't have control of it fully. Yet. I didn't want to risk hurting Shifu."

Nick thanked him, and then looked towards Tao, who had, alongside Shruikan, flown into the air, and headed for the center of the park. "Looks like we're about to start. We should get to the center." Alex sighed, as his ride had taken off without him. Dragons did as they pleased, it seemed.

The two recalled their partners, and looked around. The forest on the raised circle of land in central Unova was slowly emptying, as people gathered in the lower ring. It had once been home to Pokémon, but they had been safely relocated to a much larger circle of water that the humans had made for them in response to a growing population.

Now, the original circle was paved, and an ideal place for Unovans to come for the end of Festivus. Not everyone fit into the circle however, and many locals opted to picnic in the trees, and watch the ceremony from afar, once everything got started. As the reigning Champion, and a member of the Elite Four, Alex and Nick headed to the raised bit of land, the area that had always been known as the center of the region.

The 'Entree', a massive spiraling tree of black and white, towered above Unova's central point. It had grown so massive over the years, that now the area around it was only occupied when Festivus ended. Each year, the Champion addressed the region, and marked the end of the old year, and the start of the new.

From up there, they had a good view of almost all of the people who had come this year. Given the relatively recent events, Entral Park was packed with people who still hadn't seen Tao in the flesh.
Alex spied him curled up again, Shruikan beside him, speaking to the other Champions, and members of the Victory League's Elite Four.

Upon closer inspection, Alex realized Tao was primarily speaking with N, and his conversation was kept private. Tao often blocked his link to his Trainer when other humans confided in him, and though Alex had never minded much, he was admittedly burning with curiosity. N was a legend, he'd saved Unova more times than anyone could count. If you grew up in Unova, there was a one in five chance he was the Trainer you styled yourself after.

Or so that had once been the case. Alex felt Nick nudge him. "Look, Champion. Your fans are already mimicking you."

Alex looked to where his friend was pointing, and did a double take. The crowd was filled with copies of his hat, sporting the symbol of eternal balance. While Unova had not initially understood how the new Champion had reformed Tao, over the past several months, it had been repeated and simplified enough for even the dullest tools in Unova's shed to grasp.

The response had been a positive one, evidently. Unovans were once more embracing the concept of balance, and applying it to literally everything. Tao's voice reverberated in his skull, "There's no such thing as too much balance. Be proud of what you've accomplished so far. It's done more good than you know. Once more, the land is on the right Path."

As always, the Legendary dragon left his Trainer pondering his words, that is, until he noticed N was tapping his shoulder. "Come with me…we have a technicality to address."

Alex blinked, "A what?" But N was already marching towards the southern edge of the raised land.

"People of Unova!" The crowd quieted as N began orating. He had the bearing of a king, and a voice to match. He'd changed quite a bit in the months Alex had been gone. He no longer lacked balance, and it showed.

"There has been some talk of late about the confusing events surrounding the return of our region's favored dragon. While Mr. Redwood did indeed beat the challenge, I never got the chance to declare him, and mark him in the Hall of Fame. The two challengers who came after him did receive this honor, and as you can imagine, the official judgement of who is actually the reigning Champion became muddled for some time."

The crowd murmured in confusion. The message had been broadcasted in every connecting terminal throughout the region. Alex Redwood was the new Champion, and the Unovan Dragon was made whole once more by his hand.

N continued, cutting through the murmurs. "The League has decided that Alex and I shall have one final match, to determine who will officially hold the Champion's title. Win or lose, he and his team will still be recorded in the Hall of Fame. We could think of no better way to kick off the final party of the year!" The crowd roared in approval. Matches on this level were rarely so easy to watch, especially live.

N turned to Alex, and the crowd went silent. "So, challenger…do you accept?"

His hat was already backwards, and Terra's ball was in his hand. He smirked. "Like I could refuse. You're on." There was a large gust of wind as Tao launched into the air, and perched upon the
sturdy branches of the Entree. "If he smokes a bowl again, I'm done." Someone from the crowd muttered, eyeing the dragon.

Tao stared down at both of them, amused at how N was clad in white, and Alex remained in the black garb he'd been training in. "I will officiate."

His telepathy thundered through the surrounding area, and the crowd murmured again softly. Nobody was going to dispute Tao as a judge, though having a Pokémon officiate was irregular. Not because it wasn't allowed, but because Pokémon who had the mental prowess required for the job rarely associated with humans.

"Begin!" The Unovan dragon punctuated his word with a roar, and before Alex could call Terra out, he paused. Shruikan lumbered onto the field in between the two Trainers, and stared N down. Electricity sparked from his maw, but the older man only grinned under his hat. "It seems the tables have turned…dragon and electric…a tough combination. But familiar."

One of the balls on his belt opened, and a Mammoswine appeared in a flash of light. It stomped the ground once, then paused, as it saw the fury in Shruikan's eyes. All were intimidated before the unholy offspring of lightning and death. There weren't many type combinations he was susceptible to, but Mammoswine's was one of them. It didn't matter though. He was determined to win.

N pointed across the field, "Manny, Earthquake!" The mammoth Pokémon responded quickly, but he might as well have been moving in slow motion compared to the dragon. Shruikan was already in the air, and now fire, not electricity, leaked from his mouth. Wordlessly, he arced around the field in the air, and came in low over the upturned ground, bathing it in a Flamethrower.

The next attack came swiftly, as N shouted, "Blizzard!" Though weakened, Manny managed to comply, and the air was filled with ice. Shruikan was pounded by it, but his own defense came before the storm could knock him from the air. His Flamethrower burned a swathe through the attack, and finished off the Mammoswine. He landed then, panting. He'd taken more damage from that than he'd expected, and Alex recalled him as N did the same.

A Scizor as green as his Trainer's hair appeared next, and Alex called Arthur out. The two circled each other twice, then bumped claw and sword arm together once, before leaping back in front of their Trainers. N used a Mega Stone, and Arthur drew on the Psychium's power. Once both Pokémon had reached their peak of power, the fight began in earnest.

Arthur had a clear advantage with Psycho Cut, but this Scizor's Shadow Claw proved as useful for defense as it was for attack. Alex and Arthur switched their tactics then, and instead of using Psycho Cut from a distance, Arthur's arms shone with psychic power, and each strike physically slammed into the Shadow Claws.

It took N longer than it should have to realize what Alex was doing, and by the time it became obvious, Arthur's contact with his enemy's dark type attack had done its job. He sliced through the Shadow Claw, overpowering it, and scored a direct hit on the Scizor, fainting it with a single blow. His attack strength was almost quadrupled after that exchange, and he shared his Trainer's smirk as he readied himself for the next opponent.

Next up was N's Zoroark, and while its Night Slashes were able to block Sacred Sword several times, they only powered Arthur up even more. Eventually, the powerful fighting move struck home, as the Gallade's flexible body helped him get past the Zoroark's guard. One hit was all it took. An
empowered Sacred Sword was nigh unstoppable.

A Shiftry came out next, and though he managed to parry Arthur several times, eventually the Sacred Sword struck home as well, and another Pokémon went down to the Gallade's absurdly powerful physical attacks. His speed was hard to match, and in his Mega Form, few could challenge him. The boost to his attack power only made him that much harder to beat.

N chose his next partner, throwing a familiar looking ball into the air. A Luxury Ball. The one Alex had given him not so very long ago. His Aerodactyl took the field, and as it soared through the air, it Mega Evolved. Few Pokémon were as strong, or fast, and Alex knew none of Arthur's moves had an advantage. They were both reluctant to admit it, but Arthur would likely lose this round if he stayed in.

The Gallade let the Mega Evolution fade before he was recalled, and before Alex could summon Hydrus, Blaze made an appearance in a fiery flash of red light from his similarly colored ball. The two combatants locked eyes, and the fire lizard wasted no time Mega Evolving as well, and taking to the air.

Out of all his team, Blaze was by far the most independent, and Alex could sense his desire to fight an opponent this strong on his own. Alex wasn't having any of that this time, however. They needed to win.

He was shocked as Blaze began the battle regardless, and blocked out his Trainer's link. Alex glared at the Charizard. "Prideful fool…"

He crossed his arms, and continued to glare. N noticed, and slowly, a smirk of confidence came over his face. "Having trouble controlling your Pokémon? With a name like 'Blaze', I'd rebel too. Do you have any idea how many Charmander share that name?"

Alex turned his attention to his smirking opponent, face neutral as he raised a brow. "You don't know why it's so common? I thought everyone knew." Above them, the two Pokémon traded blasts of flame and dragon fire.

Though Blaze was clearly the better flier, and scored more hits, he was only half as effective as he normally was. Being part rock, the advantage went to the Aerodactyl. His Charizard was going to learn the hard way the cost of fighting on his own in a battle like this.

They were a team, and if he'd really forgotten that, a powerful move like Ancientpower would hopefully remind him without taking him down in one blow.

The confidence on N's face faded slightly. "Enlighten me."

Alex allowed himself a smirk, "Well, aside from the obvious fit with his species, many Charizard Trainers use their tail flames to 'blaze it up'." He used air quotes, hoping the exchange of words would give the younger Pokémon pause. It didn't. It seemed this Aerodactyl was as eager to fight alone as Blaze was.

Comprehension came over the former Champion's face. "I see. Communal herb smoking sessions around a tail flame. Is that really the reason it's so common?"

Alex smirked, shrugging. "That, or perhaps I'm just unoriginal."
N looked up suddenly, and shouted, "Stone Edge!" Alex swore quietly. N was no novice, but Blaze had had an advantage, for a moment, and had almost landed a Dragon Tail. N had countered at the right moment, after letting his Pokémon battle solo for several rounds. Meanwhile, his own Pokémon still refused to link with him.

He paid dearly for it. The rock-like protrusions on the Aerodactyl's wings shone with rock type energy, and had Blaze not been mid-swing into a Dragon Tail, Alex had no doubt the move would've knocked him out.

As it was, the collision mitigated some of the damage, but his Charizard was hurting. He closed his eyes, and forced his mind through the block, surprising Blaze as he spoke silently, "Listen. I know you can battle well alone, but you need me if we're going to win this."

The response was, not unlike Shruikan's method of speech, a mix of emotions and images, followed by words. "He…has no…link. Isn't fair."

"The word you're looking for is 'honorable'. Perhaps it isn't even, but right now, you're one hit away from losing. In front of all of Unova." He sent an image of Tao, perched atop the Entrée even as they spoke with the speed only thought had. "We're a team. Use our link. N is fully capable of establishing his own, or he should be, it's not our fault he hasn't."

He could sense it still didn't sit well with his proud Charizard, but the only thing he disliked more than an uneven battle was publicly losing. The connection flowed once more as Trainer and Pokémon linked, the logic of his human was too sound to ignore. The Sage had warned him of his pride, and the prideful Charizard had ignored the warning.

Thankfully, his Trainer had kept him from making a total fool of himself. That was his role, after all. "Use your speed, not your power. You're outmatched here. Hydrus should be battling, but we might still salvage this. Go high."

Blaze sensed what his Trainer had in mind, and wondered for a moment if that would actually work. When flying horizontally, a Mega Evolved Aerodactyl was just as fast and powerful as his Charizard's form was, but now Blaze went vertical, and the sudden shift in direction slowed the Aerodactyl as gravity did its work.

It also kept him far above his Trainer, unable to hear commands. As they went higher, eventually, the unfamiliar added weight from his Mega Form finally caused the younger Aerodactyl to lose his balance.

He let it happen, and turned down towards the ground again, but Blaze had already corkscrewed through the air, and much as he had against Lizardon, came down hard with a Dragon Tail that he followed through all the way to the ground.

There was a loud boom as the Aerodactyl hit the ground, and lost its Mega Form. Blaze roared, triumphant, but was clearly weakened by the battle. Alex gave him a Max Potion, and then let him rest.

N kept his face neutral, but Alex sensed a shift in the tone of the battle then. He'd been beaten on every match-up so far, and simply did not have the ability to sweep a team like Alex's with only one Pokémon left. That didn't mean he couldn't try, however.

He drew a black Pokéball from his belt then, and tossed it, saying, "I summon thee…Helix!"
An Omastar appeared then, and Alex summoned Terra to counter. N held out a blue crystal then, and gave the command, "Mega Evolve!" Alex blinked as he tried to recall what Omastar's Mega Form was…and then realized that there was no record of one. He couldn't resist grinning. He loved it when this happened.

The shell on the spiral Pokémon's back extended, making it look more like a squid, in appearance. The tentacles grew longer, suckers appeared on the ends of them, and then, out from under the shell came two long, thin, folded blue wings. Omastar gave a terrifying screech as it extended them, and began floating in the air. From what Alex could tell, it had traded the rock typing for dark typing.

Rain began to fall over them as the sky darkened, and Alex let Terra draw from the grass crystal's power as well. Terra slammed his clubbed tail on the ground, shaking the entire area as he faced down Helix.

"Ice Beam!" Alex smirked as N called the attack. The beam of ice glanced off Terra's shell, as his Thick Fat kept him protected. He retaliated then as his Trainer simply pointed at the floating Omastar. Ground moves wouldn't really help, but grass moves would, and Omastar had impressive defense against physical moves. Not special ones.

Another Ice Beam cut through the Energy Ball launched toward it, and Alex sighed. Terra might have been immune to his greatest weakness now, but his moves weren't.

There was one move though, that might just do the trick. First, he had to make sure this winged squid stopped moving long enough for it to hit. His words went to his oldest friend instantly. While he'd refrained from using Terra lately, due to the cold, he remained his Trainer's closest friend, thus, all it took was an image from his Trainer's mind for him to grasp the plan of attack.

Razor Leaves filled the air, the wind accompanying the storm clouds only helped whirl them around. N didn't notice at first, until they began covering Helix's aerial avenue of escape.

"Blizzard!" N shouted, as he saw what was happening. Helix aimed for the leaves above him, and exhaled a devastating flurry of ice, blowing straight through his opponent's attack. Which was all the distraction Terra needed.

The green crystal in Alex's hand flared as his massive earth turtle slammed the ground with both front legs. The ground shook, and N seemed to smirk for a moment, as he mistook the attack for an Earthquake.

The smirk vanished as massive roots shot up from under Helix, binding its wings long enough for the rest of the Frenzy Plant's roots to hit home. Helix struggled, shooting multiple Ice Beams at the attack, but the roots were endless, and pummeled the unnerving Pokémon into unconsciousness.

The disturbing form faded from the Omastar. Terra gave a cry of victory as the clouds began to disperse, and the crowd echoed it.

The two Trainers recalled their partners, and met in the center of the battlefield, which had been repaired by Terra, and his manipulation of the earth. It almost looked like a battle had never occurred there. The two shook hands, and N turned to address the crowd, "Unova! Your newest Champion shall continue his reign!"

There was thunderous cheering, so loud that Alex almost didn't notice what was descending from the
clouds against the violet sky that signified dusk had arrived. Tao, however, did notice, and warned his Trainer. Alex pointed up at it, directing the more attentive people in the crowd towards the ones who dared to intrude on the end of Festivus.

A voice rang out over the area, emanating from a large, black airship that looked uncannily like the one Team Plasma had used in their second bid for power, save for a few key design differences. The mast had been replaced with the Arcean's symbol, but the ship was still recognizable. It had to be the one that had frozen Opeleucid, and it seemed the Arcean's income from their followers had paid for upgrades.

"And now, his reign is at an end!"

N's eyes narrowed, "I know that voice…"

The voice continued, "And not short enough it was! Release them!"

Alex's eyes narrowed as well as the speaker began cackling. His hands curled into fists. "How many times must I defeat the same damn criminal?"

He felt N's hand on his shoulder, "I know your pain. I was raised by the man. He's very… persistent." Alex nodded.

N had clashed with his adoptive father many times. "This is my mess to clean up, Champion. Not yours."

Alex nodded again. "Take Tao. Do what needs to be done. I still have a few on my team that can battle." Tao landed behind them, and N climbed on his neck, gripping the icy horns and sitting somewhat comfortably on the crest of ice that ran down the dragon's back. The two gave each other a final nod. N could handle Ghetsis, Alex would handle whatever he decided to throw at Unova.

The dissipating clouds returned with a vengeance, and darkened until they were black. The crowd was already evacuating at the behest of the Four, who had their Pokémon out now, ready to shield the bystanders from attacks. As this was Unova, more than a few of the Trainers in the crowd had stood strong, and called out their partners alongside the Four.

Thunder boomed, and the wind picked up. Ghetsis' voice rang out again, "Storm, Earth, and Air, heed my call! Eradicate the Champion, and any who bear his mark!"

Alex swore, loudly, as much of the crowd was wearing the symbol of balance on their hats, shirts, anywhere really. They'd all just become targets. The Pokémon Ghetsis was ordering appeared then, as the clouds parted. The three forces of nature, Landorus, Thunderus, and Tornadus, already in their original forms, floated above the Entree.

Their forms were twisted, turned dark by what Alex assumed was more Shadow energy. Their eyes burned red, and Alex felt three pairs of them center on him as they descended to carry out Ghetsis' orders.

He felt a hand on his shoulder before he could draw a Pokéball, and sensed Jess beside him. They'd temporarily dulled the link between them for the battle, but now, it returned. "Take Landorus," Jess said, drawing a Pokéball of her own. "The other two are mine."

He nodded, sensing her thoughts, and called out Hydrus. Blue light surrounded him as he Mega
Evolved, and roared a challenge at Landorus. The three responded as one, with Stone Edge, Thunder, and Air Slash.

Hydrus slammed a fist into the ground, and a large chunk of earth rose up to absorb the impact. He needn't have bothered however, as Lassi, Jess' Froslass, had lanced the three combined attacks with an Ice Beam. The beam had disrupted the air and the stones, leaving only the Thunder to crash harmlessly into Hydrus' now ruined earth shield.

The ghost's hollow, icy body howled ominously as Tornadus' wind blew through her, and she focused on Thunderus then, launching another Ice Beam. Hydrus shot one as well, this time at Landorus, who took both attacks for his brother, before falling towards the central mound of earth that the Entree rested upon.

Hydrus leapt into the air with help from his arms as they unleashed jets of water, and Alex ran after him, leaving Jess to handle the other two. Lassi had begun gracefully weaving between Air Slashes and Thunder attacks, and Amphi had joined her. Between the two of them, Alex had a feeling Jess would be fine. Her Ampharos wasn't to be trifled with.

Alex found Landorus rising from the crater he'd made when he fell, still covered in bits of ice. He recognized the growing orb of bluish purple energy in Landorus' maw, and Hydrus countered quickly with another Ice Beam to the center of the swirling energy. The Outrage attack fizzled, and the enraged Legendary roared in fury before charging his smirking opponent. He wasn't the best special attacker, but he'd used that move so many times, he rarely missed with it.

Several Hammer Arms came down on Hydrus' own arms as he blocked them. Swampert was not the fastest Pokémon, but after several Hammer Arms, he was fast enough to finally counter. He'd taken damage, true, but that would only help in this instance.

Alex gave the command once he mentally confirmed that Hydrus' Torrent had activated after taking such powerful attacks, and the Swampert lowered his arms to retaliate. They slammed into the ground as he summoned the water energy, the most he could handle. In this form, that was quite a lot. His gaze focused on Landorus, and the Hydro Cannon, an already devastatingly powerful move, was now quadrupled in strength by ability and shared typing.

It took the enraged Legendary down, knocking him into the northern tree line surrounding the Entree with a hard crash. The Shadow energy faded, and Alex recalled Hydrus as he walked towards the fallen force of nature.

Jess, meanwhile was battling admirably, as were the Pokémon Rangers around her. Arceans had dropped from the airship at Ghetsis' order, and the battling had broken out all over the central part of Unova. Rangers and local Trainers in the crowd, many from Castelia, now once more battled the Arceans. Like their Champion, the Trainers involved in that first skirmish had trained hard afterwards. It was hard to explain to those who hadn't witnessed the rage in the zealot's eyes as they tried torching New Tork. They had all understood, more by instinct than anything, that these people were in no way done. After Team Plasma, it was assumed that unless the Unovan authorities found all 'team members', there would still be danger to the public.

Any hope they'd had of sweeping their failure in Castelia under the rug was now totally gone. Pretty much all of Unova was witness to their attacks. There was no question as to whose account of the Castelian Civil War had been accurate, and whose had been patently false. Moreover, they had just outed their media allies in the east. Tao, who had taken an interest in freeing the PNN of any foreign
influences, had also taken to Teleporting those outed as spies presumably back to Fornia.

While Alex had managed to handle Landorus with relative ease, the other two were not so easily brought down. They worked well together, united in their Shadow-fueled rage, and they were Legendary Pokémon. Every attack Amphi launched at Tornadus was absorbed by Thunderus. Each Ice Beam was blocked by a Hammer Arm from Tornadus' tail, and Blizzard was only so effective against a Pokémon that literally controlled the wind.

Now sufficiently irritated by the ghost before them, the two Legendary Pokémon shot a unified Dark Pulse at Lassi from two directions. Amphi stepped forward then, taking one, and blocking the other with a Focus Blast. It wasn't the first time she'd had to take a hit for Lassi, and this one effectively knocked her out of the battle.

The two furious Legendary Pokémon prepared another pair of Dark Pulses, and as they shot towards Lassi, a bolt of Thunder shot through them horizontally, canceling the attack entirely. It wasn't Leo's though. This one had much, much more power behind it. Jess had sensed her rescuer, and Alex seemed just as surprised, though he was distracted as he mentally calmed and communicated with an angry, confused Landorus. Shadow still coursed through him, but his mind at least seemed his own.

Thunder seemed to boom again, but this time, it was on the ground, and was followed by a blur of orange. The blur moved both Lassi and Jess as another pair of furious Dark Pulses blew apart the area they'd been standing on only a moment earlier.

It took Jess a moment to realize she was on the back of a Pokémon, and a moment longer to recognize it. She looked up at her brother, who she hardly recognized. He was garbed not unlike Tao's followers, though where their colors were white, he was in mostly black.

She gave him a hug, and asked, "How on Earth did you get a Raikou?"

Connor waved her words away. "Later."

The two furious Legendary Pokémon had prepared another pair of attacks, though once more, they were stopped in mid-air, and redirected back at their owners. Arthur, in his Mega Form, had bounced them back with his Sacred Sword, and now Alex and a recovered Landorus were close behind him. Being the most sensible of the trio, he'd agreed to help the humans calm his brothers.

Once more in his normal form, the guardian of the earth pointed at Jess, and motioned her over. "When I give you the opening, freeze them where they stand. They will not calm down otherwise." Landorus' deep baritone seemed fitting, as he was rumored to be the strongest of the three brothers, but he didn't ring quite as loudly in her head as Tao and Alex's Sage had.

She nodded, regardless, and Lassi approached the two again as they recovered from the surprise redirection of their attacks. Their tails both glowed with the fighting type energy of Hammer Arm as they saw their icy opponent return for another round, and as they swung towards her, Landorus acted.

Normally, a decent Trainer would wonder how a ground type could possibly lord over a flying and electric/flying type. It became obvious as the lord of the land raised his arms. The gravity around Lassi, and his two brothers, increased dramatically, and all three were brought to the ground. Tornadus and Thunderus hit harder, as they had been in mid-attack, and that brief pause was all
Lassi needed.

"Blizzard!" Jess gave the command, and her partner summoned the wind that had previously been hard to control, infused it with ice, and froze the two grounded Legendary Pokémon where they'd crashed.

The Shadow energy slowly bled from their battered bodies, and Landorus floated over, now in his 'Djinn form', and with two Hammer Arms, freed his fainted brethren from the ice. Alex and Connor had followed him, and gave the two weakened Pokémon Max Revives. Their bodies also returned to normal.

The group turned suddenly, as an explosion, and waves of concussive force, rocked the immediate area. The airship had an enormous hole in it, and Tao was no doubt responsible.

Thunder swirled around him as he came zooming out of the massive hole in the ship's hull. He arced gracefully in the air then, and flames engulfed his serpentine form as he tore through the ship again, giving it a second hole. He flew up from the other side, and with a roar, a beam of ice struck the main deck for good measure.

A figure jumped on Tao's back as the ship began to plummet towards the water, and the Pokémon in the immediate vicinity of the crash zone were urged to move at another roar from the Unovan dragon.

Tao arced towards the group then, and landed with a hard thump. N jumped from his neck, and nodded at Alex after glancing at them all. "It's done. Ghetsis won't be bothering any of us again."

Alex turned to Arthur then saying, "Help the Rangers. Capture as many Arceans as you can. If we let them go, they'll try something again." He glanced over at Tao as Arthur leapt towards the nearest sound of battle. Gren soon leapt after him, and the two made short work of whoever they came across.

Tao was conversing with the three forces of nature, and after a moment, raised a white claw above them. The lingering Shadow in their hearts faded, and the three sighed with relief. They began speaking again, and the looks of relief turned to irritation. From what he could glean by Tao's mood, he was arguing with them over something. Once the argument ended, the three brothers clasped their palms together, and light formed between each pair of hands.

Eventually, the three turned, and approached Alex, Jess, and Connor. They extended their hands, with slight frowns on their faces. Landorus spoke for them, "The Dragon has commanded that we reward you for your aid in freeing us of that foul energy. Thus, we grant you gifts that will aid you in your adventures. Use them well, they are not lightly given."

In Landorus' palm was an Electrium crystal, which he handed to Alex. Thunderus met Raikou's gaze with a mutual nod of respect, and then handed Connor a Grassium crystal. Tornadus approached Jess as well, and handed her a Psychium crystal. The humans shared a glance, then bowed.

The three bowed in return, and then ascended into the clouds. The clouds dissipated soon after, but any trace of the trio had vanished. Only smoke from the crashed ship and the numerous battles now filled the sky. Connor and Jess gave Raikou and Delphi similar instructions as Alex had with Arthur, and they too zipped off to help quell the fighting.
Alex meanwhile approached Tao, and spoke with him in the comfort of their minds. "I didn't know the brothers could create such powerful items. I thought they were a piece of Arceus himself, of his Plates."

The dragon seemed amused for a moment, then answered, "They do not have the means to create such things. However, there are numerous places across the world where such pieces exist, that have yet to be uncovered by humans. It is from one of those areas they pulled the crystals. That ability tires them, so they use it rarely, and never for lowly humans."

Alex raised a brow at him, "Lowly humans? If we're so inferior, why did they agree?"

Tao's lips pulled upwards in a smirk. "Because I am the Dragon of Unova, and they know better than to test my patience. You helped free them of that foul energy, as you did for me. This was the very least they could do to thank you." Alex felt a newfound appreciation for just how strong his partner was.

Alex thought for a moment then spoke again, "If you're so much stronger, could you not do as they did, and pull more crystals?"

The dragon brought his head to his Trainer's level, and stared at him with one large, golden, pupiless eye. "Be wary of your greed, Alexander Redwood. It will consume you if not controlled."

Alex rolled his eyes, trying and failing to not be unnerved by the dragon's gaze. "I wouldn't call it greed…they're just useful to have around. The more I have, the more Taijitu moves I can pull off, the stronger we are against threats like Ghetsis."

The dragon blinked once, "By my count, you now have one for your entire team. What more do you require?"

Alex blinked, then fished his stash of crystals from their hiding place. Fire and Grass from the mountain, Connor's former Waterium, the Psychium from Joey, Dragonium from N, and now Electrium. He hadn't even realized how close he was.

He'd learned early on that lying to Tao was futile at best, so he stuck to the truth when speaking with him. "You're right…as always, Dragon of Unova. I have all I need…for now…"

The Dragon chuckled with minor amusement. "Not quite yet, Champion. In any case, that ability is not one I possess…although…hmm." Tao examined Alex again, then nodded. "Give the Dragonium to your friend, for his Garchomp. I know of something much stronger, and suited for your Salamence."

Alex glanced at the crystal N entrusted to him. Then at N himself, who nodded. If the Dragon was sure of his choice, neither Champion had an issue as to who should guard the crystal.

Alex blinked as he sensed the dragon think of the cave atop Draconis Mons, and then walked back over to the siblings, lost in thought. He handed Connor the crystal then, pressing it into his hand. "The Dragon of Unova has suggested I give you this. If you can control Raikou, I've no doubt your Garchomp has advanced as well."

Connor took the crystal, eyeing the symbol of dragon types within it. "He has…but what about Shruikan?"
Alex glanced back at Tao, who had walked over to the battle-torn earth around the Entree's plateau, and made it whole once more. The damage compared to Alex's battle was significant. Legendary Pokémon always managed to cause such devastation, when enraged.

"Shruikan will be fine…Tao said there's something else better suited for him, and is still capable of helping him Mega Evolve."

"Good…” Connor pocketed both crystals, glancing up as the orange form of Raikou leapt over the nearby trees to the south of them, and landed before them. "There's something I need your help with. The Arceans have been busy today, and were it not for time zone differences, I might've arrived too late to help you. We'll need a Salamence's speed if we're going to catch up."

Connor gave the tiger-like Legendary a scratch beneath his chin, which made the fur on his back ripple. Gren and Arthur reappeared soon after, and returned to their balls. "He says the fighting has been quelled for the most part…which is good. We're running out of time."

Jess and N joined them then as her Delphox returned, and went into her ball. "Time for what?" She asked.

"The Arcean's leader…he's headed to Norstad in search of Xerneas. He already has Yveltal. He's after Eternal Life. We need to stop him." Connor glanced between the three as he spoke, trying to impress just how bad a man like Pravus gaining eternal life would be.

Alex glanced at N. "Can you handle the clean-up? We're burning daylight."

N nodded. "I'll make sure things stay in balance."

Alex smirked. "Have Tao help you. I know you two are friends, don't feel awkward about battling with him. I could never claim sole ownership of a dragon like that."

N gave the three a short bow, before heading over to Tao. The dragon looked at the three of them, then back to N. He called out his Aerodactyl, and after being bathed in golden light from Tao, seemed entirely rejuvenated. The two flew off then, headed south towards Castelia as Tao walked towards them.

"Before you go…” His voice echoed in each of their heads, "There is something we must do. You can depart for that icy wasteland after we pay Draconis Mons a visit."

Alex glanced at the other two, then shrugged. It was hard to argue with a dragon. Tao lowered his head, and the three humans climbed atop his ice-crested back. Tao flew into the air then, and arced northwards towards the faint outline of the Dragon Mountain in the distance.
"I thought he'd be colder!" Alex smirked as he heard Jess speaking from behind him. The massive, white scaled serpentine dragon glanced back at the humans perched on the icy crest that ran down his spine as his powerful wings ate away the miles between the center of Unova, and the Dragon Mountain.

"Just as a Rapidash can choose not to burn its' rider, I can choose not to freeze those I deem worthy of riding on my back." Alex mostly ignored what Tao was saying, which was impressive, given that his soothing baritone was thundering in his skull.

He was more focused on the land below, specifically Lacunosa Town, where the Arceans from earlier had been tossed, and the Chasm that Kyurem had once inhabited. The Rangers had been disturbed and surprised when they found the town already suited to hold the Arceans as criminals. Castelia was still processing Trainers from the other battle.

Thus, the Arceans became imprisoned behind bars they'd paid for, and the Unovans of the town were all too happy to finally have power over them. Their initial words had been sweet and convincing, but it hadn't taken more than a month before the freedom friendly ideals of Unova clashed with the standard Arcean methods of mental conditioning. The villagers promised not to free the Arceans, but several Rangers stayed in the town anyways. This group had a bad habit of breaking free of imprisonment.

The land around the Chasm had indeed recovered, if only slightly. The heat of summer had been used to good effect, but winter had come early, and much of the plant life and Pokémon remained away from the area. Several minutes later they were over Humilau, and then, began ascending to the top of Draconis Mons itself.

It seemed livelier than when he'd been here last. Pokémon of all types shared the upper bowl with the dragons now, who were content to stay within the carved-out caves and cliff-sides that made up the edges of the massive mountaintop. Normally the dragons would have dominated their territory, but with the return of peace, they were all just glad to be alive.

He spied a small, ramshackle building by the footpath up the mountain, and smirked. It seemed the old man had stayed true to his word. With the dragons as sentinels, not to mention the other Pokémon, he felt sorry for any idiots dumb enough to try to poach from this place. There were a few hikers, but most of the older Pokémon shied away from them, and they in turn were experienced enough not to intrude too close.

Alex smirked as he felt his belt shudder. It seemed both Blaze and Shruikan, weakened as they were from battling, still had energy enough to desire to join the other Pokémon here. He thumbed both of their ball's release buttons, and the two appeared in bright swirls of light above the central platform of the mountain.

Tao had definitely gained the attention of everything living atop the mountain, but the appearance of Shruikan had a more noticeable effect. There were low growls, that dissipated quickly when it became clear that this black beast was not the one that had ruled over them so harshly, but was in fact
Alex and Shruikan noticed the dragons were eyeing both of them with what seemed like approval, and something else. After a brief mental sweep, Alex smirked, and his dragon roared. Lightning sparked through the previously white clouds as they shifted to black. The dragons of the mountain were burning with the desire for a battle, and neither Pokémon nor Trainer was about to pass up a fight like that.

Tao spiraled down onto the central rocky platform, and growled softly, stifling any battles before they sparked up, and once more addressed the humans. "Hold off, for now. Let your partners free, they will need the rest, and they will be safe while we do what we must here." The white and black dragon's voice echoed quietly to Alex in particular as he said, "Get ready to bring your team with you. And tell your woman to bring hers, as well. We leave soon."

He raised a brow, but let the rest of his team out for the moment, as did Connor and Jess, and the gathered Pokémon, all powerful in their own right, wasted no time in beginning to socialize. Alex's knew Jess' well enough by now, but Connor's were new and interesting.

Alex handed Jess Arthur's ball, and she raised a brow at him. He shook his head, shrugging. "His request, not mine. He insisted on it for some reason. Psychic types."

Tao brought them up to Lizardon's cave then, and it seemed abandoned. None of the local dragons had tried to claim it, and now that the First Dragon had returned, none of them intended to. Before the Dragonspiral Tower had been built in his honor, this had been his home, after all. Tao entered the cave without hesitation, the whisker-like tendrils on his snout lifted up by his horns, and sparked with blue electricity, lighting the interior.

Alex stared for a long time, as the symbol of eternal balance became visible against the back of the cave. It was definitely an old carving, at least as old as the ruins in Unova's western desert area. Three massive gashes ran through the center of it, and he had no doubt as to what Pokémon had dared to make them.

Tao sighed as he examined it. "That brute had nerve…" He opened his maw, and flame enveloped the carving, searing through each line. When it vanished, the rock was flawless once more, and Tao turned back to the humans, then. "What lies in this cave is a useful place where my followers would train when the need for experience was dire, and time was short. It is from here that the first political power to unite this land originated. They ruled the land with the power acquired here, ended the wars, and brought peace. You will do the same."

The dragon directed his gaze at Connor specifically then, "You however, do not require use of this, which is fortunate, as it can only take two humans at a time."

Connor arched a brow. "Then why bring me here? I could be halfway to Norstad by now. We cannot delay."

The dragon exhaled at the impatient human, hot breath ruffling his reddish-brown hair. "Patience. The dark one will have to search long to find what he seeks, and even if he finds it quickly, it will not yield as easily as he believes. Practice what Raikou taught you as you wait." Tao looked to Alex, then. "Rest, eat, recall your teams, and then Open the Way."
Alex blinked up at the dragon. "Sure. How?"

Tao looked at him for a long time, and a chill ran down Alex's neck. As if this mysterious and confusing circumstance was actually of incredible importance.


Tao's head came close to him once more, and it took Alex a second to realize that his eye was almost as tall as he was. "Find the central point of this balance…and you will find the answers you seek."

Alex pondered the Dragon's words as they ate, and of course, enjoyed a bowl of Leaf. As he let the effect wash over him, his mind began connecting certain events he'd experienced over the past year. A pattern emerged. Always, he'd needed to shift his viewpoint, and expand it when he learned something. He had a feeling this would be no different. He recalled his team once they were finished resting, and approached the wall.

The dragon lifted his head up again then, and watched his Trainer as he sprawled comfortably on the cave floor, forepaws crossed. He had not enjoyed the bowl, but the smoke, each powerful inhale more than enough for a contact buzz.

Alex could feel Tao's gaze, and he realized that this wasn't all that different from his training in the Swamp. A wise old Pokémon with more power than he could dream of, watching him expectantly after divulging a cryptic clue to help solve whatever conundrum he was facing.

He sighed. Apparently, centuries of living did strange things to one's perception of the world. He did not yet know how right he was about that.

He focused on the symbol again, and his eyes went to the middle of it. Surely it wasn't as simple as focusing on the point between the two smaller circles that represented light in darkness, and darkness in light. Then again, simplicity had been a running theme with his training. The answer was always simple, once he'd found it.

Except when it came to higher mathematics, which was why he despised it. Answers led to more answers, and some answers were needed to solve the entire problem. Sometimes they had to be in a specific order, or pattern too. It made his head spin. He was thoroughly glad Trainer majors only had a few math courses, focused on making sure they understood the currency of their world, and how to exchange it. Most regions used Pokédollars, but other forms of currency existed.

He put his large palm over the center of the symbol, and resisted glancing at Tao as he heard the dragon chortle. There was a trick to it then. That was fine. There usually was.

He ignored everything else, and focused on the burgeoning power that Arthur had been helping him expand during their late-night training sessions. His eyes shone blue, and his entire form was limned with blue energy as he drew more.

By his Gallade's approximation, he could use a Confusion level attack about five times before the strain on his undeveloped power would cause his body to start failing. The most obvious sign of this was a nosebleed. He had enough for this, however, and as he looked at the carving once more, his instinct guided him.
He let it. His hand moved to the top, tracing the outline of the circle, and moving through the lines that had been carved into the rock. Where his pointer finger trailed, a line of psychic energy was left behind, and as he continued, lines he hadn't noticed before became obvious to his eyes, as they linked the smaller circles seamlessly.

He followed them carefully, until he finally traced his finger to the center of the carving. He flooded it with power then, and the rock rumbled, and fell away. He let the power fade, and smirked at the dragon. "How'd I do?"

Jess spoke up from behind him. "What did you do? You just traced the outline, then let your power go. I don't get it." Her brother nodded in agreement, arms crossed. For them, the circle was lifeless, the rock, just rock.

Alex raised a brow at the dragon, who winked his left eye, visible to only his point of view, at him. "Go." He said, speaking only to him then, "I will see that your woman finds her own path. This one is yours, and yours alone."

He hesitated. His path was hers. He'd told her as much, and he'd meant it. The dragon eyed him expectantly, and he walked through the shining doorway. Now wasn't the time to argue over how attached he should be to her. Still, if anyone knew the depths of his ties to her, it was Tao. The dragon didn't see the need for such ties, but then, he didn't have reproductive organs, or a desire to breed. As far as Alex knew.

The siblings stared, eyes wide, as their neighbor walked through what looked like solid rock. Jess was up against the wall then, hand running over it. She turned her gaze to the dragon. "You said we'd be going in together. I can't even sense him anymore."

Tao nodded. "You wouldn't. He is no longer on this plane. If he manages to cross to the other one, then I will have you attempt to cross as well."

She raised a brow at him. "If? You never said this was dangerous."

"I warned him of the danger, as I am now warning you. He accepted the risks." The dragon's head moved towards her then, much as he'd done with his Trainer. "Will you accept them? Will you put your life on the line?"

Jess backed away from the wall a step. "Woah, hey, nobody said our lives were at stake."

The dragon seemed to sigh, and blinked his golden eyes at her. "Your lives are always at stake. You are frail, easily broken mortals. It makes protecting you quite difficult. Though I admit, I haven't seen any human as durable as your mate. Most humans who dared to climb this mountain in days past reappeared dead. That brute did not restrain himself."

Jess thought for a moment. "So you implied he could survive whatever he just walked into?"

The dragon shook his large white scaled head. "No. That one does not let fear hold him back. There are other ties that make him hesitate."

She ignored Tao then, and summoned her own power. She was still quite new at using it, however. Unlike Alex, she only traced the symbol. Tao yawned, and returned his head to resting on his paws. "You won't be able to enter until he passes through. The way is shut."
Jess crossed her arms, anxious, and nearly jumped when she felt something on her shoulder. She turned, seeing Arthur, Delphi, and Sophos, all free of their balls. They’d popped out when they sensed the psychic power shift the fabric of reality, only to realize everything was fine.

Naturally, the psychic types got along. Sophos had learned much in the short time he’d conversed with them. Arthur's knowledge of grammar, and Delphi's, helped him thread proper sentences together that no longer seemed as jilted.

He was the one who spoke, as he nodded at the symbol on the wall. "I sensed that one's power from within my circle-home. There is no…need…to worry." He was still having trouble sorting through all the words he'd learned evidently, but an Alakazam's mind was like a supercomputer. It wasn't that surprising that he was learning so quickly.

**Meanwhile…**

There hadn't been many times Alex's experience as a smoker of Leaf became useful, but as he stepped into the portal and saw what lay beyond, his first thought was the similarity to his more potent dreams while experiencing the hallucinations his subconscious fabricated when exhaustion mixed with the calm of a recent smoke session. He blinked, bit his tongue, then nodded. This was no fever-Leaf dream.

He looked down, and saw the world. He was floating in a multicolored shaft of light, motionless. He could see other similar shafts from numerous points around the planet, and one in particular caught his attention. It was truly massive, and originated from somewhere east of the center of the Mediterra mountains.

His brow furrowed, as all that was supposed to be out there was vast desert, until the borders of the country known as Eous, the largest country on the planet. Much like Unova and the other regions that made up the States, it had many regions within it, and many more Pokémon.

He followed the large shaft's direction, only to see that it was pointing in the same direction his was. He drew on his power again, and began floating along his strange light shaft, and as he did, his perspective shifted. His point of view turned kaleidoscopic and circular, but he kept propelling himself in the same direction, until finally, he was surrounded by white light.

Then, it faded. He was standing again, on stone, and as he looked around, he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. The Arceans claimed that their Creator lived in a golden paradise surrounded by clouds, that only loyal humans and 'non-suppressive' Pokémon were allowed to enter.

In their view, any and all Psychic types were automatically considered enemies of Arceus' 'true vision', and were therefore labeled as 'suppressive' to the Prophet's, and by extension Arceus' desires.

What he saw before him now very much seemed like what they had described Arceus' abode to look like. Grand marble columns, nearly blinding omnipresent light, but something was off. He walked around the immediate area, probing with his senses for any intelligent life, and then noticed a path, a pattern in the rock he hadn't seen before.

He followed it, and eventually the weathered columns gave way to a massive tower that looked almost identical to the Dragonspiral, back in Unova. This incarnation wasn't weathered with age however, and an image of Tao could be made out, spiraling all the way up to the top where, instead
of a flat top, there was a massive reproduction of the Unovan Dragon's visage. It was uncannily accurate.

As he made to enter the castle-like building, three spheres of light shot from the mouth of the carving. He stared, as once more Kyurem, Reshiram, and Zekrom appeared before him. They were different, though. Kyurem's color was deeper, and its eyes and head crystal were scarlet. Reshiram's bands were gold, not white, and Zekrom was a lighter shade of black, with bits of glowing green, rather than blue.

"I…I don't…what? When? Why? How!?!" His gaze moved between the three of them, but they spoke as one in response to his words, each of their faces smirking in amusement. "We are as you see us…and yet, we are not what you know. We are the prototype for the One."

Alex continued to stare, suddenly wishing he'd taken the Dragonium with him. He could've reunited these three, and as he had that thought, they collectively shook their heads. "The Creator made us first, but we were inherently flawed. Forever out of Balance, too fundamentally different to ever unite. He replaced us, and bade us to guard this, the home where the One was birthed from the combination of our essence."

Alex blinked again, several times. "Wh-what? Replaced you?" He felt a cold dread as he realized what that meant. Perhaps the Arceus the Arceans worshiped wasn't all that far off from the real thing.

The dragons nodded again. "With our help, he cast down the dark one, and used our remaining power combined to create the One. From our deaths, he rose."

"Wait…you're…dead?" He looked at the three again, and then noticed. They were all vaguely transparent. They nodded again.

"Now, we guard this home, for those who the One wishes to train. Pity us not, human…this duty is an honor, bestowed for our sacrifice." Combined as their voices were in his head, they sounded uncannily like Tao. "Tell us human. It has been ages, even in this place where time is altered, since we have seen him, or his students. What befell the One?"

Looking at these ghosts, his eyes noticed other things. Wounds, barely visible, but evidently fatal. Whatever they had fought had hurt them severely, and with the last of their power, they formed Tao. He sighed. "Humans tore apart that which should never have been separated…which is why I recognize the bodies you're in."

He went into detail then, about the legend of his home region. The empire, the wise king, his two sons, the war, the split, and the millennia that it had taken for the dragons to awaken once more. He finished by saying, "I freed Reshiram from a forced fusion with Kyurem, and soon after, combined the three into one once more with the power of a Dragonium Crystal."

The dragons glanced at each other, then nodded. "For this deed, you are worthy. Enter the Tower of the One, and gain the knowledge you seek."

Almost two hours went by before Tao opened one eye suddenly, and his head rose to eye the symbol in his cave. "He has done it. Though I expect it will be easier for him."

Jess rose from where she'd been sitting, and brushing her Delphox's hair, with Arthur's aid as he mediated. He'd held it aloft with his power, making brushing it quite simple. Sophos had left with
her brother and Raikou, to train. "What will be easier?"

The dragon blinked at her. "Entering the tower. Its guardians are…fickle. Prone to infighting that can last centuries. Now you may attempt to follow. Be warned…this is not a journey lightly embarked upon. You will not be the same human when you return."

The redhead recalled Delphi, and Arthur as well, as Alex had left his ball with her. She stared the dragon down then, her earlier hesitation gone. "I don't let fear cause me to hesitate. I am not afraid."

The dragon seemed to chuckle as he stood, and touched his nose to the symbol. Again, nothing appeared to happen. He looked back at her before walking through the solid stone as well. "You will be."

Eyes narrowing, she called on the power as she'd seen and partially felt Alex do. Being mentally linked made understanding such things much easier, though what it had caused had been blocked from her, by the dragon, if she guessed correctly. Her form shone with an intense pink aura, and she stared at the carving, recalling the Dragon's words.

She blinked a few times, seeing a faint glow in the recesses of the rock, where Alex had traced his finger. Things became easier to piece together as she did as he had, and made out the faint lines as well. The rock turned blindingly white, and she walked through the portal.

Where Alex had experienced a vision with which he was somewhat prepared, Jess' experience was much, much different. She experienced vertigo, seemingly endless vertigo, as she tumbled ceaselessly through her own personal hell. Every unpleasant moment of her life, from being berated by her father, to something as simple as smelling something foul in the air, was on full display as she felt herself fall into eternity.

She felt as though she re-lived all of it, and before long, a pattern became apparent. Over and over she could hear her father's voice repeating, "Journeys are dangerous! They're not for people like you! You have a future, a duty to keep the family line going! Don't waste your life on a dangerous, pointless excursion with that bloody farmer!"

She saw then, the events she'd been involved in that had risked her life without her really noticing it. After seeing Alex clash with, and beat, her brother she knew how strong he was. She'd always taken her safety for granted when he was around…until she saw things from a different perspective. The first time they'd met. That time a furious Tauros had almost run her down. Traveling through Black City, and then White Forest, the long hours of training, the arm and leg bruises from sparring with Alex, who never once went easy on her.

The Castelian Civil War, seeing the fire burn through almost half of the city as Arceans not locked in battle continued to set them. Charging head first into the PNN building. Facing down yet more Arcean thugs as Alex took on a Lugia and a Gallade infused with shadow.

Seeing Tao's darker aspect take control had brought genuine fear. Seeing a being straight out of myth, a deity to the people of his region, with the power to literally turn the land gold start to lose control had made her pause.

As the scene played out, the enraged dragon's eyes focused on her, his entire form sparking with electricity. She'd always thought Kyurem was the most frightening of the trio, but being combined
and dominated by Zekrom only enhanced how terrifying he'd looked in that moment. His words echoed in her head. "You will be…"

Her eyes hardened, and she managed to right herself as she continued to plummet, though which direction was up or down was a mystery. She used her best guess.

All her life she'd been told Pokémon were friends. Powerful, useful, loyal, cute, but Legendaries were in an entirely different class. Especially ones that seemed to stem from Arceus, like Tao. A true Guardian of an entire region. She had indeed been afraid, many times in fact.

Then she noticed something else. Every time she'd faced one of these scenarios, Alex hadn't hesitated. He'd stepped right up to Tao and forced him back into balance. Again. Just like he'd jumped in front of that Tauros. Without hesitation.

He'd rallied Unova's Trainers to fight off the Arceans in the streets, and the fire burning their homes. Even in this latest confrontation, he'd faced down three forces of nature without so much as blinking. Could she have done the same? Had she used her own Firium crystal, could she have balanced Tao?

"Yes." The voice echoed in her head, unmistakably male, and yet it wasn't Alex. He sounded similar, but she could tell Arthur and his Trainer apart easily. She held up his ball, and it glowed with psychic energy, the scenes around her shifted.

Her Empoleon, fighting the fires. Herself, covered in soot as she emerged from building after building with people who'd been trapped inside. Her Delphox taking on three Arceans at once, and still managing a win.

The long hours of sparring had paid off. She noticed the scenes moving in reverse now, but this time, she gave herself credit where it was due. The bruises had faded, and her body had hardened. She'd fought off just as many creeps in Black City, and had been the one to stay on the forest's trail as Alex flitted through the trees hunting rare Pokémon. She was the anchor, the point he always came back to, the center of what made him so good at staying balanced. He'd told her so during one of their many, many sexcapades.

Then she almost laughed, recalling the first time she'd actually seen him. Dirty, messy hair, a hat that barely fit, and a strong scent of Leaf. Some things never changed.

Then, she saw her father once more, and the echo of his stern baritone ceased as she stared him down, and she smirked, her own psychic power outlining her form as she recalled what she'd told him: "He's no more a farmer than you are, and in case you haven't heard from your son, the future of our family line is all but guaranteed with him. We've been neighbors for years. You know him. How many times did you talk with him during Festivus? How many times did that dry wit make you nearly cough up dinner, by your own admission? I expected blind reactionary anger from Connor. Not from you."

She'd left then, with an appropriate show of storming off. Her father had come to his senses, admitting that of all the many Redwoods, Alex was probably the best choice, given his brother's history of poor health. He was first in line to inherit all of it, like his father had been. He'd acquiesced to her traveling then, and had handled her brother, to boot. She was glad she had such a sensible father, or at least one that could be sensible when it suited him. Sometimes, she'd found, men just needed a nudge to remember common sense.
The final image she saw was a still one, of a girl she hardly recognized, running ahead of a beardless green and black clad Alex, carrying two backpacks, and a pair of shoes that did not belong on dirt roads. She tossed Arthur's ball, and looked up as she heard it hit a palm. "Thanks for lending him to me…though I'm still not sure why you did."

Her lover seemed changed, somehow, now garbed in the primarily white and black clothes that Tao's followers usually wore. They were different, though. His white robe-like jacket was down to his black-clad calves now, the symbol of eternal balance clear on his undershirt, and his hat. It was on the back of the coat as well, though she couldn't see it right then. His pants had changed too, white on the inside, black running down the outside.

"He told me to, remember? At this point, I don't bother prying when he refuses to tell me why." He sighed, then smirked, placing the ball back on his belt. "Come. You're going to love this place."

The three guardian spirits appeared once more as Jess approached the tower. She barely had time to blink in surprise, before they spoke, in unison, into her head. "Answer we these questions three, or the inside ye shall not see."

She gave Alex a look, and he shrugged, then shook his head. "They're a bit…eccentric. Just do as they ask." His hands were in the pockets of his long coat as he waited, patiently.

She looked back up at the dragons. "Fine. Ask me your questions. I'm not afraid."

The three dragons seemed to grin. "What…is your name?"

"Jessica Gladstone."

Their grins widened. "What…is your purpose?"

She paused for a moment, glancing at Alex with a growing smirk, and then the tower. "I come to learn."

The dragons continued, "What…is the average air-speed velocity of an unladen Swellow?"

She rolled her eyes. "A Hoenn Swellow, or a Eurasricasian Swellow?"

The three dragons exchanged looks. "We…we're not sure."

The two humans burst into laughter, and the three dragons shared another look.

Tao appeared then, flying in from behind the tower, and blasted the three dragons from their perches with a burst of flame. "Enough fooling around. We've work to do." His golden eyes focused on the pair. "Welcome to my true home. Enter." He arced through the air and flew through the large entrance as the three guardians retreated to his carving's mouth.

She took Alex's hand as they entered. "They do know that's the easiest question on the Unova University's entrance test, right?"

Alex smirked. "They don't know, actually. They've been dead for millennia. It's an old joke they find amusing. You'll hear it again, I promise. Apparently, Tao likes it too. One of my advisors said it was the oldest question on the exam. Can't remember which one told me."

Any further witty remarks were stifled as they entered the main room of the tower. Unlike its earthly
counterpart, this one had books lining every single wall, all the way up. Tao was curled up already on a large black and white pillow, scanning them, and sighing. "Take her up to the Dojo. Put her through the basic forms. All of them. We don't have time to waste."

Jess glanced at Alex, and through their link, saw the forms already forming in his subconscious mind. He led her up the ramp, and she looked closer at him. The beard was longer, fuller, as was his hair. "Exactly how long have you been here?"

He gave her a wink. "About two weeks, by my reckoning, but Tao said not to bother trying to discern time here. It flows differently than it does on our plane. And, there's no need for sleep."

She stared at him. "That's impossible. You were only gone for a few hours… and our bodies need rest, or they eventually fail."

He shook his head. "I thought it was impossible as well, but aside from an occasional meditative trance, I haven't slept since I arrived, and I'm perfectly aware. It's a bit unsettling. Don't get used to it, like I have. It'll be hard to adjust for once we return home."

They reached the top then, and she blinked again. She'd seen the fighting gym in Icirrus, and this room was uncannily similar. In fact, everywhere one tried to learn the martial arts, in Unova at least, shared a setup with this room. She hadn't been to many back home, though. Not as an adult. Connor had always had the interest, she'd only learned the basics of defending herself, at her father's insistence.

As he began demonstrating the forms they would be using, she interrupted and asked, "Why exactly are we learning martial arts? Don't Pokémon do our fighting for us?"

Alex paused, and smirked. They really were quite alike. "I said the same thing when I got here. And when I was in the Swamp. The Sage just ignored me, and let me forgo practicing if I was so sure. Remember when we were on the PNN's roof?" She nodded, and he continued. "Imagine you'd been facing down five Arceans. Not three. What would've happened?"

She looked down, then back at him. "I get it. Our enemies are no longer content with just using Pokémon. They'll get physical if they have to." In both of the recent attacks, she'd seen plenty of fist fights as Pokémon battles devolved. It was what shocked many Trainers, and led to quite a few Pokémon being snatched. Most of them eventually were returned.

He nodded. "I don't know when they decided their 'security force' members needed martial training, but both Tao and my granduncle confirmed that they do have it. Norstad is dangerous in the same manner. They may lack technology, but they do have Pokémon. Strong ones, bred by a harsh environment, and the people are just as strong, and combat-wise. From what I hear, they have zero qualms about defeating outsiders, and then selling their Trainers into slavery to the Imperium. I for one, am not going to end up as some slave. Nor are you, if I have anything to say about it."

She acquiesced then, and they spent the next ten hours going through the forms he'd shown her. She was a fast learner, and their now re-established mental connection only helped her pick up what he'd already learned much quicker. He'd also been right about sleep. By her estimate, it was supposed to be night, but the light remained white outside, and she felt no need for sleep, just sore from hours of hard exertion.
Alex had explained what exactly he'd been doing since arriving, and told her that, like Raikou, Tao had also developed a style of martial arts after watching humans. He had outlived more generations than any human alive, and their centuries of knowledge had been refined by him into what he called 'The Dragon Style'.

There was indeed a variant of it taught in Unova, but Tao claimed that, from what he'd seen at least, it was more about tournament fighting then a style of real combat. Before long, Jess had caught up to Alex, and Tao began instructing them both in the finer points of his style. Alex had, after a particularly grueling session, finally asked how long they were going to be doing this for. Time flowed differently yes, but it still passed.

Tao had simply smirked, and said, "By the time we're done here, no more than eight hours will have passed in the real world. That's roughly the equivalent of two years, in here."

He'd started to groan, but one of the dragon's face tendrils had thwacked his forehead. "You need to be ready before you go to Norstad. Pravus barely considered you a threat last time, but he will not make that mistake again. Training like this should take much, much longer…but we don't have time to waste. Now is the time, Redwood. Advance, or you will surely be killed."

The training intensified then, and despite their best efforts, neither human could tell how much time had passed. It was simply impossible in the ever-white tower, surrounded by clouds. There were few places to wander, though wander they did when their relentless instructor gave them a break. There was a garden atop the tower for meditating, but even then, they trained.

In secret, at first, they tested their psychic powers against each other in literal clashes of psychic energy. Eventually, Tao noticed, and the matches became more intense. They learned how to defend their minds, penetrate others, read surface thoughts, and even invade a person's mind. Other people with psychic powers or mental training would be able to repel them, but the vast majority of humans had no such defenses. They both began to understand a little better just how important it was to keep this from the hands of someone who let the power go to their head.

Eventually, they reached a point where Tao stopped guiding them, and left it to their Pokémon. He claimed he'd refined as much of Alex's psychic skill as he dared to, for his did not wish to unbalance Oranguru's plans for him in that regard. Jess, being free of such obligations, continued to learn from her Delphox, and it soon became clear which of the humans had a knack for special attacks.

Tao's fighting style was, of course, all about balance. Though it wasn't energy they were balancing, but motion. He taught them to move fluidly, like water, or himself when in the air, but when they struck, they struck hard, and precise, where their opponent was most vulnerable. Ideally, they'd unbalance them with enough strikes. Often the three ghosts would possess human-like training dummies, and spar with them. First one on one, then two on one, and then all three at once.

Their teams received similar instruction, always in their Mega Forms, at least in Alex's case. Leo joined the others, finally, when he too had Mega Evolved. He looked like one might expect a Mega Luxray to look, similar, but different. He'd gained the dark typing, given that his species were night hunters, it was fitting. His fur remained gold, but the ferocity of his gaze only increased. He could see through anything now, and Alex knew that ability would be invaluable.

Before long, he could balance the power of electricity and darkness into a Taijitu attack. Moreover, the speed of his new form made up for his species' relatively low stats. Compared to most electric types, they were slow, but thanks to training and Mega Evolution, Leo soon outpaced them all, save
Shruikan, who borrowed Tao's power to reach his next evolution.

The two humans had no way to measure how much time passed, and eventually, they just asked Tao to tell them when it was time to leave. They trusted him. Eventually, he decided to inform Connor and the others that they'd be staying the night. After considering their progress so far, and the hours they were already behind, a single night would make little difference. They'd arrived at the mountain around sunset, and the original eight hours became thirteen. They'd be a day and a half behind Pravus' ship, but Shruikan could outpace any human craft in the air.

Arthur learned the Dragon Style alongside them, while Delphi constantly reminded them that against a real psychic Pokémon, they were still just amateurs. She taught them as well, sometimes, but in the two weeks Tao was gone back to normal reality, she was infuriating, to both of them. Her personality was that of a trickster, and often she would make them think they were learning, when in fact they were falling for another prank. Only when Tao returned did she relent, and teach them properly once more.

It was hard for the two humans to romance each other in this strange place, as along with every other need, that too had vanished. They'd enjoyed each other several times, but not with the same fervor that usually filled their nights back home. The urges were muted, and though they came through eventually, they could suppress them for what was likely months. Being a woman, Alex suspected Jess could've gone the entire time without so much as a sensitive touch. Thankfully, she hadn't wanted to.

Tao drilled all of them constantly, and soon, time began to matter little to any of them. When he didn't train the humans, he battled with their Pokémon. Often, he faced off against Shruikan in the air. None of them had realized just how good Blaze had become at flying, until Tao demonstrated over and over that the young Salamence was nowhere near his level.

He might be faster in a race, but the Charizard would always have the advantage in maneuverability. Eventually, he asked his Trainer to battle with him against the Unovan Dragon, and with two sets of eyes, he started to improve quite a bit. It also helped that Alex shielded their minds from the dragon, who constantly tried to worm past his defenses during the battles.

The Unovan Dragon was a ruthlessly efficient instructor, but he was also the reason they progressed so quickly. More than once, he'd had to literally control their limbs to show them a complex move, and had them drill it until they hurled, or couldn't move.

Much like the Swamp, food was limited to simple fare, like fruit. Dragon Fruit, of course, and though Tao certainly seemed carnivorous, he sated himself with the seemingly endless supply of it. Alex once asked him if he hunted, and he replied by saying that he had the urge to, but denying it was his burden, like an alcoholic denies themselves a drink. He accepted what was given to him by humans, but he refrained from eating anything raw.

Eventually, Tao deemed them all ready. "You have each learned what you needed to learn, and then some. Norstad will not be kind. It will not be pleasant, and it will be even rougher, as your bodies struggle to balance their needs again. You are all in for several rough nights, emotional turmoil, and exhaustion."

"How much time have we spent in here?" Alex asked.
"Don't worry about it. Time here is meaningless. Your bodies haven't aged. Biologically, you're the same age you were when you entered...." The dragon looked between the two as he spoke, looking somewhat proud. "I've rarely had such dedicated students. Once you adjust to the prime material plane once more, you will see just how far you've come."

Jess was clad much the same as Alex now, though she'd eventually lost her own hat. It got in the way. She settled for a headband of black and white, an all-too-familiar symbol on the front of it. She'd gone with black for her robe, like her brother, whereas Alex had remained in his white one. They made a good team, and had become quite adept at fighting together. They could even give Arthur and Delphi a good battle.

"There is one last thing," Tao said, as he raised his right forepaw, and it shone with a golden light. "This is for Shruikan."

At the mention of his name, he popped free of his ball, and eyed what the dragon was holding. It looked uncannily like the Dragonium crystal, had the same sparkle, but it was in the form of a large square plate, the symbol of the dragons was also embedded within the sparkling metal. Shruikan pressed his snout to it, and the plate floated in the air before it affixed itself to his chest, just under his neck.

"You can use it to achieve your Mega Form near instantaneously, and it will empower your dragon type attacks considerably. Do not lose it. It's quite valuable." Tao spoke, and the black scaled Salamence nodded, pressing the button on his ball with his tail, and returning to the comfort of it with a swirl of black light.

They headed for the exit then, when they each paused, sensing the three guardians approaching. As always, they spoke in unison. "We've a gift for them as well." The three ghostly dragons opened their maws, and in a fusion of fire, electricity, and ice, a pair of crystals appeared. A symbol of the dragon types embedded within them. "Use them well." They said, looking suddenly dimmer, and more transparent before floating back to their eternal rest.

Tao watched them go, and Alex did a double-take as he saw a look of genuine confusion on the Dragon's face. He'd never seen that before.

Jess frowned, slightly as she took one, and gave Alex the other. "I suppose it will help but...I don't have a dragon type."

Tao chuckled as he brought forth the exit portal. "Worry not. Your Serperior and Ampharos can both use it. Such is the case for any dual-type. If you know what type they gain upon Mega Evolving, the appropriate crystal can call it forth."

The two humans exchanged a look. Neither had been aware of that, but the implications were interesting. Alex's first thought was to try his ground crystal with Terra, and see if his form was different. He didn't know how to feel about having another Dragonium, but he reasoned that if the guardians had seen fit to grant him one, he would guard it as well as N, Connor, and the other Dragon Masters did.

The three went through the portal, and exited into the cave to the first light of dawn. They were early. Tao grinned. "The time-dilation favors us. Fate is on our side. We should've come through later, but now you'll be that much closer to Pravus. Go. Quickly. Do not allow him to gain what he seeks, whatever the cost."
The two nodded, and bowed, then ran from the cave. Jess hesitated at the cliff, but Alex simply smirked, and leapt, calling on his power as he soared through the air. He came down in a three-point landing beside Connor, who was impatiently waiting on the central platform suspended over the crater.

He arched a brow at his friend. "Wow. What'd that dragon do to you in there? You seem… different."

"I am different." Alex said, patting his belt. He smirked at Connor, and nodded at his sister as she floated down, limned by scarlet pink light. "And, we know Kung-Fu." Tao had explained that his style wasn't entirely original, as he'd gained much from the ancient knowledge humans had uncovered in Eous. Still, he felt it was different enough. Improved, now that he'd ironed out the flaws. When he spent millennia in three separate parts, two of which were orbs, he had time to think about such things.

Connor just stared at him. "That's impossible. How?"

"Later." Jess said from behind her brother. She'd floated down gracefully, and landed without a sound. He turned to her, and rolled his eyes.

"Seriously, what did he do to the two of you?" Connor looked between them, and the two shared a smirk.

"Don't worry about it," Alex said, calling Shruikan out. Connor blinked at the dragon, who suddenly seemed much, much larger than he had yesterday evening. He was, in actual fact, far more muscled. His height had remained roughly the same.

"We'll tell you later." Jess said as Shruikan Mega Evolved using his Plate. She climbed into the metallic underbelly of the dragon, after Alex. With his forearms tucked against them, they'd be close to his body, warm, and relatively shielded from the wind. Not to mention secure. Alex put his hat under him anyways. Connor climbed in as well, and just like that, they were off.

It might have been the vertigo, and the incredible speed at which Shruikan now soared, but both Alex and Jess felt slightly nauseous, and suddenly exhausted as they flew further and further from Unova. Tao had flown off towards Castelia as they left.

Despite the nausea, the two managed to fall asleep, much to Connor's dismay. He'd wanted details, explanations, but their bodies had been awake for longer than they could rightly remember, and the sudden return to reality was taking its toll. Thankfully, it was a long flight to Norstad.

Shruikan poked Alex awake thirteen hours later, over the eastern end of Kalos. They were right over Lumiose City, which was just starting to light up in the coming darkness. He almost wished they could stop, he'd never been to Kalos, but given the culture and seriously strong Trainers, he'd always wanted to go. Few regions were as technologically advanced, and willing to allow Mega Evolution in battles.

For some regions, it was still a new technique, and as such, not always allowed. The League had remained divided on its usage, leaving it up to the local Elite Four and Champions to decide on their own. Unova welcomed any challenger, any battle style, and thus earned a place as one of the hardest Leagues to beat.
The two siblings were still sleeping, and Alex saw no need to wake them, as his draconic friend simply needed directions. "Head north-east. They say Norstad is surrounded by an ever-present storm on its borders, which makes entering exceedingly difficult...for normal Pokémon. Take us high."

Shruikan arced up then, as far as he could, before the wings of his Mega Form needed to split and start flapping. Eventually, they found an air current that seemed to be carrying them straight towards their destination.

Alex had nodded off again, but awoke once more at Shruikan's mental nudge. The current was gone, the air was being bisected by something unnatural, and as he saw the massive gray clouds spreading for miles in either direction before him, he nudged the other two awake. "We're here."

The dragon flew right over the clouds, and then arced down behind them, straight into a blizzard. Shruikan's nostrils flared, and Alex swore. "We have company." Several shapes formed in the gray swirl of snow around them, and Shruikan began dodging several Ice Beams.

The cries of the Pokémon flying around them, nearly invisible in the storm, were similar to the species Alex was familiar with, but it seemed the Skarmory of the land of ice and snow had traded the steel type for ice. It was all the same to him. Fire could handle both, but ice would seriously injure their dragon.

He spied shapes on their backs, as he looked through Shruikan's eyes, and swore again. Riders. "Shruikan. Show them why they should fear a Black Salamence." The mental command was all he'd needed. His maw sparked with electricity, and he spun as he arced the Charge Beam in a circle, catching at least two riders.

There were plenty more, though. Beams of ice began forming in the midst of the snow and gray clouds, and Shruikan repeated his maneuver, this time with flame. Even with their locations revealed by attacking, the smoke from the Flamethrower cancelling the attacks obscured their vision, and their assailants disappeared back into the clouds. The Skarmory blended perfectly with the storm.

"Enough. Go down, we need to get out of these clouds." Alex was glad he could communicate mentally. Shouting in this kind of storm would never be heard. Shruikan shot down again, occasionally blasting fire to gauge where the ground was. Unfortunately, it also gave away their position. Ice Shards came down around them, and both Pokémon and Trainer winced as several hit.

"Can't...take much more of those..." Alex nodded at Shruikan's words, and pulled out Blaze's ball. He put his hat on again, and crawled into a freefall from his dragon's stomach. He saw the riders pause, and realized that the storm was lessening, at least in this area. Shruikan had flown far, and fast, and now he could make out the ground below. It was a slightly whiter blur than the sky.

He called out Blaze, and the flash of light from his appearance, along with the glow of red from the Firium crystal, caught the rider's attention as Alex adjusted himself on his back. They turned towards him, likely assuming he'd let his Salamence go on ahead while he fought on a stronger Pokémon with a better type advantage.

He smirked, and gave Blaze the order for a Blast Burn. The snow around them had melted in the presence of the heat his Charizard's Mega Form gave off, and now they all had a clear line of sight. The flames roared towards the riders in a crescent of flame, and they flew up to avoid it, whooping
and shouting as they laughed at his aim.

Alex smirked at the whooping riders, and he gave a two-fingered mock salute to them, as he mentally ordered the command. "Dragon Rush."

Shruikan came down from the clouds then, his entire form wreathed in bluish purple energy. As one of the fastest known fliers, their opponents had no chance of dodging. Nobody got away with ignoring the offspring of lightning and death. To do so was to lose.

Shruikan's attack hit all six of them in a line faster than an eye blink, and then he arced his head down to look at them from under his stomach. He gave them a Charge Beam for good measure, and the two that had managed to stay somewhat airborne, began to fall.

Some of the riders managed to hold on to their mounts, the others became splotches of red on the ice below. One of the icy birds shook off its rider, who had slipped and grabbed a tail feather. The bird flew off into the clouds then, disappearing completely, despite the red smear left on its tail feathers.

Alex patted Blaze. "Well done. Both of you. Let's clear off before they regroup." Alex jumped from his Charizard to his Salamence, and then set about tending to Shruikan's wounds. They'd long since mastered having him walk on the dragon's back in the air, though his speed slowed considerably.

Tao had even made them battle him like that once. He then rejoined the other two in the scaly undercarriage as Blaze flew alongside his longtime rival. Even now, he knew they were itching to battle. Tao had kept them from clashing too often, and when he let them, it was to remind Shruikan that they were unevenly matched. The training was done now, though. By the Dragon's admission, they were all more or less at the same level. They itched to battle again.

Connor smirked at Alex as he awkwardly crawled in again. "Having fun, are we?"

Alex shook his head. "I would've preferred it if they'd all survived…but I expect there will be many more such encounters before we leave this place."

Shruikan roared, and the three humans paused in their banter, to look down. The massive, black form of a smoking airship bearing an Arcean Cross was below them. Evidently, the riders had given them trouble as well.

Jess spoke quietly as they looked at the scene. "Looks like a battle…that's still going on."

Indeed, bursts of flame and ice, along with other attacks, and the collisions they caused, dotted the landscape. Alex heard her speak again. "Holy…look what they're riding!"

Connor stopped looking at the clouds for a moment, and stared. "Those aren't Skarmory…"

A veritable flock of what could only be Articuno were circling and firing down at the Arceans, often freezing both Trainers and Pokémon in place with their powerful Ice Beams. Connor frowned as he spoke again, "But where's…"

He was interrupted as a massive bird, pure white in color, descended from the clouds to rejoin the fighting. Each of them also had riders, though they were garbed much different from the hooligans that had ridden the Skarmory.
Their white helmets were styled after their mount’s crest, and each had a tail extending from the back. The rest of their clothing appeared to be white, but beyond that, detail was hard to make out. They were quite a sight as they flew, and, he noticed, they didn't always strike to kill. Not against the Pokémon, at least.

Their Trainers were not so fortunate. Several were already encased in ice, and as the massive white Articuno joined in, the tide quickly turned.

"We're helping them." Jess said, sliding from Shruikan's cover and calling her Charizard, much as Alex had. Her brother sighed. "Always on the move…"

Alex looked at Blaze. "Cover her. Make sure the riders don't turn on her, too." Connor followed after his sister, calling on and mega evolving his Garchomp. While their species couldn't fly as high as say, a Salamence, gliding was well within their range, especially in their Mega Form.

Alex hopped into Shruikan's claw, and took his place on the dragon's massive head, sitting comfortably on the spikes of his Mega Form. "Stun the Arceans. Try not to hurt the Pokémon too much. Make them abandon their Trainers, if you can."

As the four new arrivals joined the fray, the Articuno riders looked ready to attack them as well, until a twin pair of Flamethrowers scorched a Scizor, and its Trainer, and burned away the ropes around one of the Articuno that had fallen.

Gar and Chari freed the few other captives, while Alex and his Salamence Dragon Rushed over the lot of them. Shruikan spiraled over them, then flared his wings and roared, intimidating everything below him into pausing, perhaps briefly, from their battles.

Alex kept his speech short, as he stood on Shruikan's head, arms crossed. "I'll only say this once! Surrender, and you will live to see your families again. Fight, and…well…” Shruikan finished for him, a Charge Beam launched from his maw, and corralled the Arceans and Pokémon into a loose circle as it tore up the icy ground.

The response was split. Several of the Arceans, clad in a tundra-adapted version of their blue uniforms, recalled their Pokémon, and raised their hands. Several others replied with zealot-like shouts of 'For the Prophet!"

Before Shruikan could make them pay for it, beams of ice hit every resisting Trainer, and their Pokémon paused as electricity once more formed in his dragon's maw. "Peace, Shruikan…” He spoke softly, patting a horn. "It's done. For now."

The dragon snapped his mouth shut. He was disappointed, but he'd already gotten to battle. He could wait for another. He rather liked this land, despite the ice. Barely a few hours here, and they'd already been in two battles. It was more interesting than the Swamp, at least.

The Articuno rider landed around the encircled Arceans, and the large white one landed behind them. Alex waved his friends over, as his black dragon took him down. Up close, the bird was even more magnificent. Her feathers shone brilliantly in the harsh sun, almost blinding him as her rider hopped down. Only a female of this species could be so large, or so naturally lovely.

Her rider was also female, which surprised Alex. He'd been led to believe the Jarls of Norstad were all male, and that their society spat on women, refining them to serving roles, as primitive cultures so
Given the gender of the other riders, that didn't seem to be the case with this tribe. She approached, and waited for him to join her on the ground, arms crossed. As Shruikan lowered his head so he could jump down, their attire became easier to see. It helped that the storm was dissipating as well, though the snow never actually stopped falling completely.

The woman's garb, along with her follower's, were clad in feathers, no doubt from their mounts, and the other riders were, after a closer look, actually garbed in a light blue, instead of white. It seemed that the variant of the species here was primarily lighter, which likely meant the matriarch of the brood was white with age. Nobody knew the lifespan of an Articuno, but she was certainly large enough to be several centuries old.

The woman's voice was rough as she spoke, "Hail, Dovah Zorrik. I am Lokra of the Lok Briinah. Your aid is welcome against these kroveds."

Alex blinked, processing her words. The ever-present staff on his back shuddered at them. He heard Tao's voice, faintly, "I know these words…they resonate in my head longer than they should…and I do not know why…tread carefully."

He guessed that 'kroveds' was probably a derogatory term, and he was glad she hadn't used it for him. That said, he had no earthly idea what title she seemed to have given him. "Hail, and well met. I'm Alex Redwood. Those two are my friends, Jessica and Connor Gladstone. I know these…kroveds. They come from my homeland. We tracked them here. They're criminals. What happened before we arrived?"

She eyed him from under the crested helmet, and he saw her eyes go to the symbol on his hat. He'd kept the robe buttoned, as it was so cold, his nose hairs were freezing. The otherworldly material seemed to repel what it covered, and he almost regretted not getting one for Connor, who even now was digging in his pack for a dark blue jacket. His own black attire might as well have been sleeveless, for all the good it did in the cold.

"The ship came into our territory, surrounded by a flock of thunvu on their war-birds. This lot drove them off with the destruction-monster. It turned many to stone, and made them flee. When the ship came to our territory, we greeted it, only to find these kroveds were heading into the Revak Feykro." She paused, seeing his confusion.

"Erm…thunvu? Kroveds? Redak Fekyo?" Alex looked genuinely puzzled, and the woman chuckled, finding his genuinely confused expression amusing.

"I forget, you tirah come here with no knowledge of our Tinvaak. Erm, speech. Thunvu are…bandits. Scum. They ride on the Skarmory. The Revak Feykro…" She said, emphasizing the pronunciation, "Is the…how do you say…sacred woods. It is forbidden to enter without respect. These came, and began taking the magical creatures into their balls, forcibly."

She eyed his belt with a disapproving glance as the siblings finally came over. Alex chuckled, "I know someone who shares your opinion of them, but trust me, mine, and my friend's, are all willing partners. And, from what I understand, the insides are quite comfortable. They are our friends. Not our slaves."

Her expression softened, though only slightly. Granted, on her scarred, wind-burned face with fair
skin turned red by the harsh sun, she had a persistent severity to her look. "Mm. You are a…Trainer, then. I see. We have had your kind here before. They were curious, like children. Harmless…but not prepared."

She waved a hand. "As I said, they tried to enter the sacred woods, and we stopped them. I brought their fragile ship down, and then handled the destruction beast. It had many riders, and went away after Iizlokraan drove it off." She patted the massive Articuno, who had locked eyes with Shruikan.

His opinion of the woman increased. Taming an Articuno, bare-handed, was one thing, but driving off Yveltal? After taking down an airship? That was far more impressive. He hoped the local Guardian of the Sea was as seemingly even tempered as this bird was.

"The destruction beast, Yveltal, where did it go?" Connor said, eyeing the woman, who eyed him in return.

"Do not speak its name. You will draw it here. It went north-east. But you will not find it so easily. There is a dark, ever-present storm there. Nothing can penetrate it. Demons live within. We avoid it." Connor resisted rolling his eyes at her superstitions by biting his tongue.

Such beliefs were common in lands like this after all, and often, insulting them meant death. He almost preferred the Arcean method of suing anyone who uttered a public bad word about them.

"We crossed a similar storm to get here. I think we can handle it." Alex said, hearing Shruikan groan inwardly. He reassured the tiring dragon. Blaze would be needed, if it was worse than the one they'd encountered first. He had a feeling they didn't have Charizard in these parts, let alone ones as strong as his.

The woman shook her head. "The wind is like a hurricane, the snow, a blizzard. You may try to enter, we will not stop you, but to go is to invite death." She glanced over at Jess, who was all smiles as she approached the Articuno.

It lowered its head to examine her, and then allowed her to pet it. He heard her speaking to it, mentally, though at this point he wasn't all that surprised. Articuno was considered Legendary, after all. Latent psychic power was a running theme with them.

If the Articuno riders couldn't fly through that storm, he wondered if Blaze really could manage it. His Charizard responded by landing, hard, beside him and snorting flames at his feet. Their eyes met. "Wind and ice are nothing to me."

Alex wanted to admonish him for his recurring pride, but had to admit, he liked the attitude. Sensing his Trainer's whirl of emotions, the Charizard smirked. He was twelve feet tall, and almost as intimidating as Shruikan, and the woman's Articuno. The three traded glances, and he didn't doubt the lovely bird was just as eager to test their mettle. Lokra was staring up at his Charizard, and Alex noticed the heat he was radiating made her fidget.

"Perhaps you will manage…" She muttered, before chuckling as Blaze lowered his head to lick her. "You are welcome to stay with us after we deal with the kroveds."

Before any of them could stop her, she marched towards her fliers, and the Arceans they'd corralled. They were in the process of smashing the Pokéballs on them to pieces, after freeing the Pokémon within. The three stared, awestruck, as several of those radiating a visible aura of Shadow were cleansed of it by a mere touch from an Articuno.
"I want one…” Jess said, admiring each of the birds. Alex and Connor shared a look. They glanced behind them as they heard Blaze and Shruikan take off, and start to spar in the air. Evidently, they had agreed that the no-wings-two-legs were going to start chattering again, and thus, they now had ample time to spar. Finally.

Alex sighed. "I'm done trying to keep them from battling. They're like magnets." He turned to join Jess and Lokra, while Connor and several of the riders watched the battle. Flame and thunder collided in an awesome spectacle, and their Trainer suppressed a smirk as he heard their thoughts and felt their emotions.

They were battling so they could show off, as much as they were battling to test each other. The Articuno didn't seem interested though. They were all focused on the enemy humans, eyes narrowed. He had no doubt the wise birds had some understanding of what the Arceans had subjected their partners to.

Lokra backhanded one of the louder Arceans, who was half frozen in ice, and had been partially melted by his Emboar. The flaming pig had backed down after being cleansed, but still refused to leave his Trainer. Its flames flared, and it stared the woman down, only to have them puff out from a snort that the white Articuno aimed at them. It backed down again, but stayed stubbornly, freeing its Trainer.

Indeed, most of the Pokémon had stayed, with only a few running off towards the forest roughly five miles to the north west. Judging by their species, Alex guessed they'd once called the Giant Chasm their home. He didn't blame them for leaving. Kyurem's memories of seeing them being captured still managed to irritate his eternal patience.

"We will never betray the Prophet!” "You barbarians aren't worthy of setting foot on His ship!” "Release us, hags!” Numerous cries from the Arceans erupted, and as their captors focused, and struck them as their leader had, they only grew louder. They whined about persecution, brutality, unfair treatment. Alex wondered if they actually realized what land's sacred woods they'd just tried to land an airship on.

"Enough!” he shouted, cutting through all of it. There was a brief pause. He looked around at them. "Which one of you slippery bastards has the lowest rank?"

The group of roughly fifteen people murmured for a moment, then one of them shouted, "Umm, that would be Billy…” "Shut UP you imbecile!” Shouts and verbal abuse rained down on the man who'd spoken out, and Alex nodded to Jess. She grabbed the man, who like the others, was bound with rope. Many of the fliers had climbing gear for use on the icy cliffs of the region, so the spare rope was always a useful tool.

A few of the riders gave her a mildly impressed look. The man she was dragging across the snow-covered ground was easily two hundred pounds of muscle, and she tossed him like a sack of feathers out of ear-shot from the others without visible strain. Tao had been efficient with his instruction, and the long hours of strength training were paying off.

It wasn't hard to single out the aforementioned Billy. The man who could only be the captain of their little squad was practically screaming at him. "If you utter so much as a Word to them William, you are Dead! You hear me? Dead! And not just you! Your family! Your sister! Your parents! Your little brothers! Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead!”
With each cry of 'dead' the man was headbutting the poor kid with no regard to the damage he was causing himself, and Alex had a feeling he'd be beating him if his arms were free. He was like most of the upper-echelon of the Church, that Alex had seen, anyways. Suave, classic good looks, blonde, blue eyes, Fornian tan, he looked uncannily like Brad.

He could've been on one of their seemingly innocuous recruitment posters. There were cracks in the façade though. Unshaven stubble. Bloodshot eyes. A manic look on his face. A bruised jaw that was in no way recent, given the mottling. Someone had caught him good, and Alex didn't have to think hard to guess who.

As he approached, the man's eyes widened in recognition. He started to spew, but Alex held up a finger, and let his eyes shine with blue psychic power. They flared with energy now, radiating it in wavy patterns, instead of just glowing. A sign of his prowess. The man stopped speaking as he stared in disbelief. "Your jaw. Who gave you that bruise?" The gathered men around him went quiet, and more than a few narrowed their eyes in anger. They all knew, of course. But to admit it was to admit their Prophet was a violent bully, not a divine messenger. As with most humans subjected to mental conditioning, they clung to the facade.

The momentary awe was gone. "Half-breed! You Psychic loving swine! Your mother was a Gardevoi-" The epithets halted as Alex knelt down to his level, finger still raised, eyes still flaring. Fear overpowered the blind faith and devotion, in that moment. He concentrated power into his digit, making it glow like his eyes did.

"Dead." He said, poking the man in the forehead. He dropped, seemingly boneless, and the other Arceans crawled as far away as their captors would let them, gibbering in terror about demons and 'suppressive Psychics'. Lokra stared as well, a slight frown on her face. Her fliers murmured, uneasily.

He focused on Billy. He had to be around Alex's age. Thin, tall, there were more bruises now that he looked, and there was a tinge of red in his hair. His befreckled face showed the same fear, and Alex smirked, winking, before letting the power fade. "Relax, Billy. It's alright. He's just unconscious. I don't indiscriminately murder people…though you've probably been told to believe otherwise."

Billy just nodded, the look of fear lessened, slightly, now that he appeared normal again. Alex continued, speaking low to the man. "Now, listen carefully. I want you to think the answers to what I ask you. I'll hear it. You just keep spouting insults, otherwise your friends will probably kill you for speaking with me. Alright?"

Billy nodded again, paused for a moment, then realized he was supposed to start insulting. "Y-you're a-a filthy Tepig f-fucker…"

Alex rolled his eyes, "Close enough…” He put a hand on the scared man's shoulder, and whispered quietly to him, keeping his lips hidden from the view of his comrades. Lip reading wasn't a common skill, but he was done underestimating Arceans. They seemingly had all sorts of weird abilities. "I know why Pravus is here. I can guess what he's after. What I want to know is why he took Yveltal into that storm to the north-west."

He waited patiently for the man's mental response. "We have…a base…there. Supposedly…an old ally…of the Church. That's all I know…"

Alex continued whispering, "Does he know where Xerneas is?"
"No…not really…he guessed it was in the forest…but...we didn't look." Billy paused, then glanced at his comrades, whose fear was slowly turning to anger. He gave a not-so-convincing thumbs-up, then said, "The P-Prophet will make y-you all pay for th-this, you…you heathens!"

Alex patted his shoulder, and figured he was speaking truthfully. The forest was the first place he would've looked too. Norstad was supposed to be a barren tundra, mostly uninhabitable, the fact that there was plant life could only mean the Life Pokémon was within. "Good effort. Now, tell me where I can find your family…you know what's going to happen when and if you ever get home. I need to warn them of what's coming…and hopefully they'll hide before Pravus ever gets word of this."

Billy started to shake his head, but Alex continued, "You know as well as I do where you all get those bruises from. You know who I am. I can only imagine the punishment Pravus has for speaking with me, or someone like me." Billy looked down and to the side. Sensing his thoughts, Alex saw the naïveté. He was convinced he hadn't told too much, but Alex knew that wouldn't matter. Arceans had a way of drawing secrets from people, and then using said secrets to keep them from leaving, or seeking help outside their cult.

"You also know that, regardless of what happens next, your comrades will rat you out in their snitch reports. Tell me, Billy." Alex said, giving the shoulder a slight squeeze.

He thought the address, then said, mentally, "Please…don't let them get my family…"

Alex patted his shoulder again. "I'll do what I can. I can't promise they'll heed my warning though."

Billy surprised him then, grabbing the collar of his white jacket. "My sister…talk to her…she'll believe it. She can get my brothers…at least…" Billy blinked, then steeled himself, aware he was being watched. He switched to speaking with his mouth. "You're w-wasting your time…Psychic scum! I will n-never talk!"

Alex stood then, feigning irritation. "Fine then, zealot. Crawl back to your friends. I'm done with you." Billy crawled towards his comrades desperately, and their anger faded. Murmurs of praise and bravery went his way, and they looked more surprised than anything. Evidently, they'd expected him to break.

He blinked, feeling Lokra patting his shoulder. "The greasy one…he lives?"

Alex nodded. "Just knocked out. I couldn't let him hear any of that. These people are…fanatical, and brutal to their own members. They'll probably beat that kid for a year just for being that close to me."

She snorted. "I've seen tougher. Do you want them? They could be…useful. We don't often find males that are...so easy to control."

He glanced at the woman, recognizing the look in her eye. "Trust me…you don't want these. You saw their Pokémon; their seed is probably tainted. Weak. The young would never survive out here."

She eyed him again, and smirked. "Yours could. But I know better than to anger that one." She nodded at Jess, who was still interrogating her prisoner. "She has eyes like an Odprakem." She paused, seeing his confusion. "Ice snake…very large…burrows. Has icy vines, too. Pulls prey underground. None return." She turned her attention to Connor then, who was being flanked by no less than three of her fliers. "What about him?"
Alex laughed, and shook his head. "You'd have to ask him. Might want to hurry." She nodded, and barked at her fliers, who scurried back to their mounts. They enjoyed the spectacle that Blaze and Shruikan were still having. He let them continue, walking towards Jess.

She pulled her palm from the man's forehead as he approached. "Anything useful?"

She shook her head. "He wouldn't give me anything else. So I took it. Billy was correct, but there's something about this 'ally' of theirs they're being vague about. They seemed to fear him almost as much as Pravus, according to this one."

Alex eyed the unconscious man, who was as blonde and tan as every other Fornian he'd run into, except Billy. From what Jess had shared over their link, his eyes were blue as well. He started to wonder if there was a reason for that. Eugenics wasn't exactly a new concept, but it was one most modern humans considered a vestige of a world ruled by senseless bigotry and hate. A world now long gone, and mostly forgotten, but if anyone would try to bring back old practices, it was this cult. They claimed all of their traditions were 'wisdom from the ancients'. "Alright. Toss him with the others. We need to free Yveltal. That'll trap Pravus here, or his followers at the very least."

Once they were all gathered, Alex addressed them again. "Listen up! You're all free to go. By all means, wander the wastes of Norstad, or, stay here. And while you wait and eventually die of starvation or cold, ask yourselves if following that fanatic was really worth it."

Lokra stepped forward then before they could spew a response, her Articuno right beside her. Her white feathers puffed up, and she looked genuinely menacing as she glared at the Arceans. "Do not hunt in the forest. We will know if you try. Next time, we end you." She turned, and followed after Alex. "Is it wise, letting them live?"

Alex shrugged. "They're harmless, more or less. If they do happen to die off, save the one I spoke with. He's decent."

She nodded, then hopped onto her bird's saddle, and with a shout, the other fliers took off as well. Before they flew off into the gray clouds that covered the skies of Norstad, their Articuno combined their Ice Beams, making a wall between the ship and the forest. It was large, and stretched for many miles.

Alex and his companions huddled far from the others, as he healed up Shruikan and Blaze. No clear winner had been decided, and he'd stopped them before they expended all their energy. The items helped, but they were no substitute for genuine rest.

"We should split up." Connor said, eyeing the forest. "I'll uh...stick around their village, search the forest a bit. Maybe make a map. You two take your fire lizards and storm that base. Two Mega Charizard should be enough to penetrate the storm. I don't have a strong flier, and I'm not even going to attempt to go by land."

Alex and Jess shared a look, then nodded. Map making. Sure. "Alright. If we're not back in three days, get backup. From Kalos, from Unova, from whoever is available. I'd rather not stay in an Arcean prison. If they manage to catch us."

With the plan agreed on the three set off, Connor on Raikou, and the two lovers on their Charizard. Raikou sent the Arceans, and what few Pokémon had remained, scurrying back into their frozen
ship, before following after the Articuno fliers. It didn't take Alex and Jess long to spot the storm. That they could see it from that far away was a testament to its size.

He'd never really considered weather menacing, but seeing those black clouds swirling for miles, he got a sense of foreboding up his spine. By his estimate, it would take a day to cross over the mountains between them and the storm, but they could likely camp there. They had to make sure not to oversleep, as well. They were both exhausted, and could easily sleep for three days if nobody woke them.
"Fine. It's a deal." Caleb Pravus glared at the man across the unnecessarily long mahogany table that sat him, and the rest of his followers with room to spare. Those that had managed to climb on Yveltal, anyway. He could send someone to retrieve the others later. If they were even alive still. There was a time when he wouldn't have left anyone behind, but he'd long since stopped caring about which of his sentient pawns lived and died.

They were expendable, after all. And irritating. Always whining, complaining about morale, or the weather, or their lack of time with their family. He was quite sick of it, frankly. He pulled the enhanced Dark Ball from the magnetic clips that held his other sentient tools on the inside of his suit jacket, and tossed it to the man.

He had to hold back disgust as a psychic aura of pink surrounded the ball, and levitated it towards the man, who examined it with a sigh. "Shadow-infusion, hmm? How…original."

There were murmurs of distrust, and each of Pravus' followers eyed their 'ally' with sudden disgust. The only thing worse than psychic Pokémon were humans with psychic powers. They were considered to be among the greatest enemies of those who made Arceus' will manifest on Earth, rumored half-breeds whose parents were enslaved consorts to the ever-manipulative psychic Pokémon.

There was, of course, no evidence to support the theory that humans and Pokémon could successfully breed in the first place, none that Pravus hadn't fabricated at least, but thanks to the ever-expanding sources of pornographic material on the PokéNet, his followers believed it.

The man who caught the ball holding Yveltal, who was destruction made manifest, was the epitome of what one might expect an 'eccentric billionaire' to look like. Fine light blue and white clothes, snobby features, an ever-irritating smirk, and were it not for the fact that he had more money than anyone Pravus knew, he'd be a welcome enemy. One day, perhaps, he'd get his hands on this man's fortune, but for now, he could be patient.

"You have your precious Yveltal. Now talk. Where is Xerneas?" Pravus stared the man down, but he simply smirked, and thumbed the release on the ball. Nothing happened.

"Nice try, little Caleb, but you're going to unlock this before I give you so much as a hint." The man stared him down with piercing, unnatural gold eyes. "Do it. Now."

His followers looked between their so-called ally, and their beloved leader. He was loathe to show weakness in front of them after spending so long literally beating obedience into them, but he had no choice. "Fine."

His two left pointer-fingers were limned with black energy as he waved them at the ball. There was a noticeable click. "It's unlocked. Now tell me what I want to know!" He didn't notice slamming the table, but his friendly adversary did, and frowned. He looked more disappointed than irritated.
He tutted at Pravus. "Temper, temper. I'll tell you. No need to get violent." Pravus' eyes narrowed dangerously. He was rapidly tiring of dealing with this man, but he knew he couldn't kill him, and he'd just given him the only Pokémon that might have been able to.

"When you woke this Yveltal up, Kalos' Xerneas went back to hibernating. This means, our Xerneas is now awake again, for the first time in millennia." The man tossed the Dark Ball up and down, seemingly taunting the 'Prophet', and he was admittedly enjoying the growing rage he saw in the madman's eyes. That would only motivate him more.

"There are only so many forested areas in Norstad. Xerneas shall be awakening soon in one of them. I can provide you with aerial transport, I have plenty of spare ships. Do try to bring it back in one piece." The man gave a grin to Pravus, whose knuckles were turning white against the table.

"Like I'd ever come back here…" He muttered.

"Oh, but you will be coming back here," the man said, still tossing and catching the ball. "You'll be bringing Xerneas to me, before you leave these lands. Otherwise you won't be leaving them. Nod if you understand." The fey man gave the Prophet a smirk.

Pravus' left eye twitched with suppressed fury, and his adversary had no doubt that one of these poor bastards under him would be an outlet for that rage before long. "Fine. You need to make it give me what I seek, anyways. It only listens to you, or so the legends say."

The man's smirk widened into a knowing grin, "Oh, I wouldn't trust legends around these parts. They're a bit…unreliable."

Pravus sighed heavily, still glaring at the man. "What do we do about the Articuno riders? My men aren't competent enough to stop them, and that white one…well, even Yveltal had trouble with it."

The man paused in tossing the ball, it hung in mid-air, once more suspended by pink aura. "Articuno riders? Really? Huh. Well, if you avoid their village, it shouldn't be an issue. Send one of your more charismatic men there. They won't be able to resist being distracted by fresh meat. If that fails, you'll have to hope the cloaking device doesn't break."

Pravus rolled his eyes. He made a point of making sure any rival charismatic personalities were culled, or suitably controlled. He didn't have any with him on this mission. He'd figure something out. "Fine. Show us to your ship."

Meanwhile…

Two Charizard in their Mega Forms did indeed prove effective against the snowy aspect of the storm, but the wind was a literal wall. They'd camped in a mountain cave, and managed to wake up at a reasonable hour, but now they'd lost several more, battering uselessly against the wall of wind. The storm was circular, and spread for miles, never moving. It was entirely unnatural, but similar in some ways to the one they'd passed through earlier.

Eventually, Blaze and Chari combined Dragon Pulses, and managed to blast a temporary hole in the wind. It was a struggle to fly through, but eventually, they made it through to the other side. Both were panting hard, and Alex switched them out for Shruikan.
He and Jess rode on his head spikes this time, after he mega evolved, as he was flying slow through the relatively stormy area. Even within the cyclone of black clouds, the weather was horrible, and the temperature well below freezing. Shruikan often exhaled a Flamethrower, just to keep heated.

They continued flying and searching until the sun began to set. He knew flying at night in a place like this wouldn't be a good idea. Their Charizard could keep them warm, but he didn't want to camp on the barren ground. Finally, Jess spoke up, sensing something.

"There's...what looks like a village, north of us. It's full of people, at any rate. Maybe they'll give us a place to sleep." She looked at him, shrugging.

Alex was more skeptical. "And maybe they'll kill us before giving us our final rest. It's worth a shot."

Shruikan banked towards the village, and as it came into view, Alex had to blink. It looked like a city straight from a video game, in classic 'nordic' style. Wood buildings, wooden roofs, dragon heads carved everywhere, wooden carts pulled by hardly looking Mudsadle. The resemblance was uncanny. There was a shriek from below, and Alex glanced down as he noticed they'd been seen by a woman of the town.

He had to blink again as the man beside her turned and ran towards the town shouting, "Alduin! Alduin returns! The end is nigh!" He and Jess shared a look. She hadn't been half the 'gamer' Alex and her brother had been in the old days, but even she knew that name. Now that Alex thought about it, Lokra had spoken seemingly familiar words as well. He had to be dreaming. Nobody in this region was supposed to have technology, surely a good pinch would wake him.

He felt Jess pinch his arm, and he moved to bite at her fingers as she did. "Ow."

"Focus. You're in your head again. This is real, and for whatever reason, these people think your dragon is the 'World-Eater'. We should land before they start trying to shoot us down." Alex scanned the town, focusing as she spoke.

Arrows had indeed started flying up towards them, but they bounced uselessly off Shruikan's scales. Eventually, he unleashed a Flamethrower, incinerating those still in flight. The archers ran then, towards a large building at the back of the town. Alex and Jess agreed that it was likely where they would find a Jarl, one of the major powers in this land, supposedly.

He saw a burly figure, wielding what looked like a giant two-handed axe stride from the largest building, axe resting on his right shoulder. He had a familiar looking helmet on, made of what looked like iron, with shed Skiddo horns curling down either side, and Alex had to try to suppress a smirk. This was too ridiculous to be real, surely. "Is it bad that my first instinct is to try and sneak around, steal the helmet, and then run to the nearest cave?"

He heard his lover sigh as she leapt from his dragon's head, landing gracefully moments before Shruikan did. He towered over all of them, though the burly man had to be pushing seven feet, and was awfully close in height to his dragon.

"Thees ees the mighty Alduin!? Pagh!" The man spat on the ground. "I 'ave seen 'orses weeth lahger clahws." Alex felt Shruikan's amusement at the large man's accent. He had muscles, an impressive weapon, but he lacked wings and the ability to breathe fire. In Shruikan's mind, that made him inferior.
He leaned down towards the man, and his maw sparked with electricity. The man stepped back a few paces, and then fell into a crouch, brandishing the axe. Shruikan looked to his Trainer for a cue, and Alex held up a hand. "How about we all... just calm down, hmm? We come in peace."

The burly man burst out laughing, and several of what had to be his goons came trotting up behind him, similarly garbed in bits of leather and iron, all wielding deadly looking weapons. "Peese! Ha! 'e wants peese boys!" The man's jovial attitude shifted to a dark smirk. "Let us show heem what 'peese' he finds in Norstad!"

Alex looked around at the other men, and he didn't need psychic powers to guess what they wanted. He'd been training for this, and he nodded at Shruikan and Jess, before stepping up to the man. "I take it that means you wish to fight, then. Very well, choose your Pokémon. I'll use Shruikan here, and we can battle."

The helmeted man tapped the axe's haft against his free palm. "Dat's not 'ow we do things in Norstad, boyo." He raised the axe. "Here, we fight for Honah! Weeth our own 'ands! ZIINKRIF!"

With the shouting of the strange word, he swung, bringing the weapon down in a diagonal slice. Alex turned himself sideways, making his usually bulky form a smaller target, and leaned backwards slightly, letting the axe pass by harmlessly, and dig into the frozen dirt ground. It went several inches. The man wasn't playing around.

He pulled the black and white staff from his back, and it extended several feet, slamming into the ground as he held it before him. "Fine. I accept your challenge. I'm Alex, Champion of the Unova region. In my country, we exchange names before fighting."

The burly man seemed irritated, and focused on pulling his weapon from the ground as Alex spoke. He grunted, nodding. "Eh. Talk too much in your country. I ahm Jarl Arkyn. Now fight with puny steek, 'champeeon'." Alex raised a brow at the man, bowed, and then dropped into a crouch that Jess and Shruikan were all too familiar with.

Seeing his opponent wasn't going to attack first, the burly Jarl charged him, bringing his axe up in the opposite diagonal direction. Once more it whipped past Alex harmlessly, as he spun in place, and moved around the sloppy attack. It left his opponent's guard wide open, and his footwork was appalling. He hooked his staff with his ankle, and used the two combined to trip the man as he stumbled forward, off balance.

"Pitiful." Alex said, taking on an instructor-esque tone. "Your footwork is sloppy. Your strike is slow. How has nobody killed you yet? Did your Mudsdale teach you to fight?"

Roaring in irritation, the man let his upswing momentum carry him as he stumbled, and regained his footing. He spun, and guided the axe down behind him in another downwards slash. Alex barely had a chance to raise the staff, catching the absurdly large weapon by the haft as he kneeled under it, the blade inches from his face.

The Jarl tried pressing down on him, but he was already as far down as he could go. His base was solid against the ground. "Better."

Alex raised his stave's left side, tilting the weapon's balance, and letting the man's attempts at pushing his opponent down drive the blade into the earth once more. Furious, the Jarl let his weapon go, and
moved to punch at Alex, but his fists only hit air, and he stopped suddenly as he felt the stave's tip press against his throat.

"I wouldn't do that." Alex said, staring him down. "Pick up your weapon. If you don't, honor demands I fight hand-to-hand as well…and if I do that, you will likely die." The man opened his maw, likely to spew more garbled insults in his rough accent, but Alex didn't let him.

The staff spun with a blur of white and black, and smacked him across the face, hard, stopping any speech, and giving Alex a sense of just how hard it would be to take a man this burly down. It had been like striking a boulder.

Judging by the lack of any kind of give from a strike that hard, he knew the only way he'd win was unbalance this man. Brute force would never work. His strength had never been an issue, as he'd always had enough physical strength to move boulders they dug up in their fields, and once, stop a Tauros mid-charge. It was hard to admit this mass of muscle could overpower him, but he didn't have time to nurse his bruised ego.

The man grabbed the axe again, yelling as he tore it from the ground in an explosion of dirt, and spun blindly in Alex's direction. He jumped back, but the man kept spinning, letting his momentum do the work as he spun his weapon in a whirlwind of death. Alex swore. The counter to a move like that was relatively simple, but Jess and Arthur were better at it. He was usually too big to safely duck under the opponent's weapon.

He had a staff this time, however, and a poorly trained opponent. The three ghostly dragons had been much cleverer and stronger, even in the humanoid forms they'd sparred with. The Jarl was quite tall as well, which made ducking under the spinning axe much easier. By the time he noticed the foreigner he was swinging at had disappeared, he was already having his sloppy footwork knocked out from under him.

He landed on his back with a grunt, and he snarled, fully intending to rise again. A quick jab to his wrist dropped the axe. The staff rested against his throat once more. "Yield." Alex said, looking down.

The Jarl laughed. "We do not surrender 'ere. We fight to glorious end…you 'ave wrong weapon for thees country." His laughter faltered as the black edge of the stave turned sharp suddenly.

"I said Yield." Alex repeated, pushing enough to draw a small drop of blood. "I didn't come here for your women or your lands. I want information. You can keep your life, and everything else."

The man looked at his axe, and reached for it, only for a massive claw to hold it in place. Shruikan growled at his cronies, who looked ready to jump in, despite the cry of Ziinkrif. "Fine! Bloodee foreigners…I talk, you take your death god, and go away."

Alex let up on the staff, and nodded to his dragon, who backed up several paces. "Good. You said you're a Jarl, right? Who is your High King?"

The man sat up, grabbed his axe, and then used it to push his considerable bulk to a standing position again. His face had a new look of fury upon it, and he looked ready to start attacking again. "How do you know of thee High King!? We do not speek of him to foreign scum! Who told you! I vill keell heem myself!"
Alex rolled his eyes. In truth, he'd been guessing, based on prior experience with this seemingly familiar culture, that a High King even existed. "Nobody told me anything." He let his eyes flare up with blue psychic power. His voice took on a deeper tone, and echoed with power. A simple, but effective trick. "I know he exists. Where do I find him?"

The man stared at the strangely garbed dragon-riding foreigner, and his demeanor did a one-eighty. The men behind him mumbled, and shifted uneasily where they stood. Offensive postures shifted to defense, and several made signs of what he assumed were warding with their fingers in the air.

The Jarl eyed him for a long time, and then shouldered his massive axe. "North…by thee edge of thee storms…he ees my fatha'. Do not kill him, Nahgah Gein."

Alex sighed, looking northward. He was accruing all sorts of new titles that he had no idea the meaning or significance of. He let the power fade, and his voice and eyes returned to normal. "I have no intention of killing him. As I said, we…did not come here to fight."

The man looked at him suspiciously, one eyebrow rising. "You come 'ere…not to fight? You are strange man indeed, but then, your kind is always strange. Ah. I s'pose every man 'as his own way of reaching Sovallah."

He eyed Alex again, and then his dragon, and the woman beside it, a bit longer than he needed to. Alex coughed, getting his attention. His cronies had noticed her now as well, as she'd approached with Shruikan. Red hair was uncommon here, judging by what he'd seen of the genetic makeup of the village, and her looks were likely more alluring than any woman in the region.

"Grrrm. If you weesh to spend thee night, I weel allow eet. You fight well, you fight with honah, you ride the Dovah weeth no trace of fear! I would not want to anger such a man. You are welcome een our village. For thee night." The man gestured to the village, and Alex heard the men murmuring. He didn't need to read their minds this time, either. The barely suppressed lust was obvious.

He glanced back at Jess, speaking mentally. "Well? Do you want to deal with oversized, pent-up men for an evening?"

She smirked back at him. "Is that a hint of jealousy under that irritation? You should know by now that you can't hide such from me." She winked, then pretended to ignore him as she patted Shruikan. "I don't mind staying. Connor is learning about the culture from the natives. We should too."

Alex nodded at the Jarl then. "Very well, your offer of hospitality is accepted. I just have one question…where can I get a helmet like yours?"

That brought laughter from the Jarl, and the gathered warriors, who'd sheathed their weapons. He patted Alex on the back hard enough to drive him forward a few steps as they headed for the village. "We shall geet you thee finest 'elmet we 'ave! And then, we feest!"

After Alex had his helmet and received sufficient mocking from his woman and his dragon, he recalled Shruikan, and the entire village seemed to calm down. They set about gathering information, then. The village was called Frändiheim. Their leader aside, the villagers were, after a few pints of 'grog' and several cries of 'Skoal!', quite friendly.

Or rather, as friendly as one could expect sequestered people to be. Jess found that the men spoke to her far more openly than the women did to Alex, and while they were certainly not ugly, what with
their rustic charm and primarily blonde hair, they simply couldn't measure up to Jess in looks. The men were a bit different, mostly blonde, with a few brown and black heads thrown in, their features might've been pleasant, if a life of beating each other to a pulp hadn't warped them.

They didn't think highly of bathing, either. That more than anything assuaged Alex's ingrained fear of being romantically stabbed in the back. He knew Jess better than he knew his family, and yet, he couldn't quite shake the fear. It was certainly justified, what with her looks and the amount of attention she got. After his first real love had essentially cheated with the majority of the town behind his back, with no less than thirteen others (that he'd been told about), long before her family had ever moved to town, he'd had the underlying paranoia.

She was well aware of that, however. Such details were hard to hide from someone you shared a mental link with all hours of the day. Thus, she never gave him reason to worry. Despite the men and their willingness to talk, all she really got from them was endless ego-boosting compliments towards her beauty. They spoke rough, but she could sense their honesty, and it was rather flattering.

Thus, Alex was the one who got the most useful information. From what he could tell, the women found his gaze too intense for their liking, and his beard was, by comparison to the village, scrawny.

Despite that, he learned that they were the only village allowed to live within the High King's 'Ven Vund' or Wind Wall. This was, supposedly, the most fertile land in Norstad. He hadn't really noticed a difference between it, and the other frozen, barren tundra but he took the villager's word for it.

When he asked why only their village was allowed here, he was told that it was due to the fact that each of them had blood ties to the High King himself. From what he was told, the High King was an immortal, a deity, of a sort. He was sometimes portrayed in legends as a prankster, other times, he was told tales of how he'd traveled the world, taming Pokémon, averting disasters, seducing women, and fathering countless children over the course of several thousand years.

He had power too, not unlike Alex's, or so the Jarl had said, once he'd brought up the High King again during dinner. He said that those like Alex were sent to live with the king in his northern fortress, where he trained them, and if he found them worthy, sent them to the Seidr's Isle. There, they were supposedly taught by an order of old men known as the 'Graybeards'.

Once more intrigued by the uncanny similarities, he asked what power these Graybeards supposedly had, but at that, the Jarl clammed up saying, "You ask the High King. Ees not my place to speek such words to a foreigner."

He then tried to draw out a name, but the Jarl was having no more talk of their High King, and instead began questioning him about his dragon, and whether it was actually the harbinger of the end times. He assured him that Shruikan wasn't going to end their world, but even despite that, he knew the Jarl had doubts.

Apparently, they really didn't like black scaled dragon types around here. He scolded Alex, claiming his Salamence was probably one of 'Alduin's offspring'. Of course, that only made the fact that he had tamed such a creature all the more impressive to most of the villagers. Most had never seen a Pokéball, and when he'd recalled the dragon, they had been awed. It seemed these people were rather easy to impress.

Eventually the two retired to the bed set aside from them, in the Jarl's own spare rooms. Alex sensed
him sneak into their room to summon Jess, and from what he sensed on her end, it was evidently to attempt to cuckold him.

He felt a bit smug as he sensed her deliver a bone-shattering kick to the man's crotch, before returning to the fur-lined bed. Now, he'd definitely be spending the night alone. The adrenaline kept her up however, and she nudged Alex, suggesting that they further incense the man by making it obvious as to what they were doing in the borrowed bed.

Both had discovered that, after a good night's sleep, the urges that had been muted in Tao's home had now returned, with a vengeance. Not that either of them minded.

The next morning, they were rather satisfied, even though the broken bed frame had interrupted their sexcapades, forcing them to sleep on the floor. The furs were padding enough, and they'd slept on harder surfaces.

They bid farewell to the Jarl's woman, or rather, the leader of his own personal harem, and then left. She claimed her husband was recovering from the drinking of the previous night, but it seemed Jess' kick had been quite effective in crippling the man.

They headed north then, to the alleged fortress, and shared what they'd found out the night before. It was clear something was off in this region. The similarities to the established lore of a particular series of games was too much to be coincidence, but according to the locals, it had been a part of their culture for as long as they'd had a culture to be part of.

They both agreed then, that this 'High King' was likely the one behind this. If he was the prankster he'd been made out to be by his own relatives, tricking an entire region into accepting a fake culture as their own was right up the alley of a being that was supposedly immortal.

That too wasn't all that hard to believe. They were in a region that was home to Xerneas, after all. It was rumored to grant eternal life to those it deemed worthy, and it didn't seem entirely impossible that a person given such a gift would then use it to take over an entire region. It had happened in Kalos. It would be even easier if he possessed psychic power as well. The people seemed relatively happy with their simple culture, despite the violence. That was more than most dictators allowed.

As they approached the northern edge of the fierce wall of wind, they saw it completely vanish, for a moment. They were able to make out a tower as the snow and black clouds cleared. It was clearly metal, but it had been painted to be the same color as mahogany wood, and like the village, there was a Nordic vibe to the style of the building, with traces of what looked like Eous influence. Jess had even remarked that it looked similar to the tower she'd seen in Ecruteak.

Something drew their eyes, as it shot from the top of the tower, where they made out what could have been a landing platform. It had extended from the tower, slowly, and they had agreed it was likely an invisible aircraft of some kind. Whoever this High King was could have just left, but as the outer wall of wind returned once the barely visible outline of the ship passed through it, the platform remained extended, and the wall of wind that surrounded the tower remained lowered.

The two Trainers shared a look. "Seems like an invitation to me." Jess nodded in agreement, and Shruikan began ascending towards the landing. The wind was fierce as they landed, and Alex recalled his dragon, then took Jess' hand and made their way towards the entrance at the top of the tower. Their guard went up as the wind wall they'd seen before returned once they'd landed, and
shrouded the tower once more in fierce wind.

He walked towards where he assumed there was an entrance. It looked like a wall of mahogany brown metal, but as they approached, battered by the ever-increasing wind, the wall seemed to split in half, and opened to admit them.

Neither one of them could see the interior, but Alex trudged forward anyway, suddenly glad he'd swapped out his hat for the gifted helmet. It wasn't getting blown away in the fierce wind, as it was made of iron, and he rather liked how it fit. He didn't care that Jess kept mocking him, mentally, almost every time she looked at him. They might as well blend with the culture, if possible.

The wall before them opened, revealing total darkness within. Alex walked into it, and extended his senses. What he found intrigued him. Since he'd gained this ability, he'd found conversing with Ninetales to be that much more interesting. They were as clever as a Delphox, but much, much wiser. Not to mention shy.

Blue and white balls of flame lit the interior of the room, and once more, he noticed the theme with mahogany brown. It was real wood this time, even the floor. Covering the floor was a standard Pokémon field used for battling, usually indoors at gyms. The entire floor of the tower must have been devoted to the field, such was its size.

On the opposite side was the Ninetales, and though one might've expected the regional ice type variant, this one seemed just as fiery as the more common species. Its fur was a silvery blue, however, and no Trainer stood behind it.

A voice rang out through the room, presumably via some sort of intercom. "Welcome, welcome! It's been so long since I've had such…interesting guests. The ones that just left were rather…prejudiced, but you two…you two are cut from the same cloth as me! How wonderful!"

Alex and Jess shared a look. It was clearly a man speaking, though he had an almost genuine-sounding Galarian accent. Most people could easily fake one though, and it seemed to be universally enjoyed the world over, given how often it appeared in televised dramas. His mother had watched a lot of them when he was growing up.

Alex spoke first, "Right…umm…who am I speaking to?"

"Oh how ruuuude of me! Kurama! My entrance, please." The Ninetales, which had been sitting and grooming a fore-paw seemed to roll its eyes.

One of the tails glowed, and pointed to the center of the field. Blue flames swirled as a very obvious opening in the field's Pokéball center raised up a platform, upon which was a man.

His hair was white, his eyes were gold, and his fine clothes all had a theme of light blue, white, and bits of gold. He was built thin and wispy, and there was something almost…fey about him. Alex eyed the man for a moment as he made a dramatic pose before the flames dissipated.

Alex brought out his Pokédex then, and thumbed through it hurriedly, then closed it just as quickly as he confirmed exactly which Pokémon the man's color scheme was matching. It was a trend with Trainers, especially wealthy ones.

"I am Percival von Guterstein Velhavende Locuples the Third. But you can call me Percy!" The man finished his absurdly long name with a flourish, and Jess golf-clapped, far more amused than Alex
was. He had a growing suspicion that the man's previous guests had been their own quarry, which likely meant the jovial attitude and flamboyant charm was a farce.

"Percy…very well…I'm Alex, Champion of Unova. My lovely lady here is Jessica Gladstone. We're chasing down a band of homicidal zealots that we have reason to believe came this way…” He paused, eyeing the man.

Most humans had the normal typing, and his enhanced vision had, thus far, always confirmed this. Those who had dual typing were rare, but it was usually obvious. This man, to his eyes, seemed normal as well, but something was off. It was like he had a second typing, but for some reason, it was eluding his gaze.

"Oh, they did come this way. I assume you mean little Caleb and his…followers. Yes, they came here to deliver Yveltal to me. In exchange for information." Percy walked to his Ninetales, patting the lovely fox, before taking his place in the Trainer box. "I assume you already know what they're after. I'd be disappointed if you didn't. I gave them a clue and a ship, for you see, I have a vested interest in finding Xerneas as well."

"Do you have any idea what he's done with Yveltal? There are still reports coming in, from all over Kalos. Seemingly random people, turned to stone. And you just let him fly off to go gain eternal life? Why!? You don't look like any Arcean I've seen." Alex stared the man down. He wanted to like him, but something about him brought a deep-seated sense of dread. Jess didn't feel it, and he had no idea why he did. It was more of an instinct, than anything.

Though the signal had been spotty, his town map, which also functioned like a television, had kept them somewhat informed of what was going on in Kalos and Unova. After years of relative peace without random teams of criminals interfering with the affairs of the world's many regions, a new wave of them was evidently starting up again. With Tao's return, rumors were coming in across the globe of rising tensions and power plays between enemies.

Percy rolled his eyes. "Well you're right. I'm no Arcean. I've done the 'cult of personality' thing, and it was amusing for a while…but then I got bored. Little Caleb's group is…a bit too violent for my tastes."

"Then why help him?" Alex asked, reaching for Hydrus' ball.

"Because he's the only real connection to the outside I have anymore. The only one that will speak to me, anyways. And, he wants Xerneas as badly as I do." Percy gave his Ninetales a thorough petting as he spoke, and then met Alex's eyes as he prepared to ask more questions. "Enough. No more answers! If you can give Kurama and I a decent battle, I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Deal?"

Alex nodded his agreement, but as he went for Hydrus' ball, he saw the flamboyant man make a gesture that, to his eyes, registered as some sort of psychic power. His hesitation was momentary before throwing the ball, but he did a double-take as Leo, not Hydrus, was called out mid-nap.

"I'm not interested in your Swampert. Battle me with your Luxray, one on one, no type advantages…I find his thoughts intriguing…and that fur, oh, it's so lovely!" Percy's Ninetales stood then, tails flaring out behind it. A low growl filled the room, and Leo's ears flicked in annoyance.
Alex raised a brow at Leo as the large cat yawned, and glanced at his Trainer. They spoke with the speed of thought. "Well? How about it?"

Leo stretched and dug his claws into the field, smacked his lips, and then opened his eyes, taking in and staring down his foxy opponent all at once. A small smirk appeared on his lips.

Leo's words were slow, careful, and his tone had a persistent air of superiority. "Mmm...yes. I shall battle this one..." Suddenly, his mane stood on end, electricity flowing through it. Sparks covered the rest of his fur, and he returned the intimidated fox's growl with a loud roar.

Percy clapped excitedly. "Ooo. Careful Kurama...you woke the kitty from his nap." The Ninetales loosed a Flamethrower then, and Leo countered with a Thunderbolt. The two attacks canceled out in the air, and Leo's eyes lit up, piercing the smoke, and following his opponent. A condensed ball of dark energy came flying out of the cloud, but Leo dodged it easily. It exploded in a manner Alex recognized, and left a crater with a horizontal swirling pattern in the field.

Alex smirked. So, someone else had thought of condensing the energy of spherical pulse moves. So much for being original. "Get close, and strike hard." Leo was better with physical attacks, though special ones were almost as strong, due to his nature, and his training. It made him versatile, which was useful against the flying and water types he usually battled.

His Luxray wasted no time then, charging the fox, only to pause before attacking. There were nine copies of it now, and they began running, circling the electric lion, and smirking as they did. "Ohoho! What to do, what to do! I do so enjoy it when he uses this move." Percy seemed to be enjoying himself, but Alex only smirked.

"Double Team is an effective move, I'll grant you that...but..." Thunder manifested in Leo's jaw, surrounding his formidable fangs as he leapt at one of the foxes, clamping down hard on it with the Thunder Fang, and throwing it from the field. "You can't fool the eyesight of a Luxray."

"Can't I?" Percy snapped his fingers, and the bluish white flames lighting the room vanished. "Confuse Ray."

Though the change in light didn't affect Leo, it did cause him to lose track of his opponent for a moment. The ray hit him from his left, as soon as Kurama ran back onto the field. Flames shot from its tails again, lighting the room once more, only to reveal eighteen images of the fox. Leo's head was spinning, and he growled, arcing a Thunderbolt through three of his best guesses.

They vanished, only to reappear seconds later. "Seems like your Luxray is having an issue with aim!" Percy chuckled, and this time, each fox formed a condensed orb of dark energy. Eighteen of them shot towards Leo, who strafed to his left, and dodged three, before the real one struck home.

He rose slowly, shaking his head. The confusion was gone, luckily. "Pretend to stay confused." Alex said through their link, smirking. Leo walked forward shakily, and then ran for one of the Ninetales, attempting a Crunch attack. He bit through the illusion harmlessly, and hit the ground hard. He looked around, panting, and still pretending to be confused.

Percy sighed. "Oh well. It seems this is decided. Finish it." The eighteen Ninetales formed Flamethrowers this time, but by then, Leo had singled out the real one. As the flames approached, he shot a Thunderbolt towards the real Flamethrower, just as the others hit him. He pretended to go
down in the cloud of smoke from the collision of the moves.

Percy opened his mouth, but paused, seeing Leo rise again. The cat gave him a grin, before unleashing a Discharge across the field. He chased after the edge of the electric wave quickly, and as it passed through each clone, Percy shouted, "Dark Pulse!"

Leo's Thunder Fang caught the dark ball, tossing it elsewhere in mid-air before he came down with a Crunch attacking, causing the fox to flinch, and he finished the fight with another Crunch, tossing his opponent across the field. Kurama struggled to stand, but his Trainer was by his side.

"That's enough…pretending to still be confused…clever. I almost bought it, until I realized he'd hit the real Flamethrower. I'm sufficiently amused! Well fought, both of you. You are welcome in my abode!" The man turned, and headed through another door, this time made of real wood, at the opposite end of the field.

Alex glanced at Jess, shrugged, and followed the man. He still had questions. Percy led them into a posh lounge, complete with everything you might expect a rich snob to have in such a room. Fireplace, large screen television, adjoining kitchen that also had a bar. It had the same color scheme he did, light blue, white, and bits of gold.

"Go on then," Percy spoke as he settled behind the mahogany bar. "Ask away, I can sense you have a thousand questions."

Alex raised a brow. "Can you? I'd heard you also had psychic abilities…"

It was their host's turn to raise a brow. "Heard? Oh, from that village. Hmm. Yes, I suppose some of them are psychic in nature. Like moving your hand to call out your Luxray." Leo and Kurama had followed them in, and the large fox settled on a couch as Leo stayed by Alex. Both he and Percy pet him, and he purred in delight. "I meant what I said. Your fur is gorgeous. I love unique Pokémon."

Alex glanced at his Ninetales. "I can tell…have any others? Like, say, Xerneas?"

The man gave him a grin, then hid his expression behind his long, flamboyant hat as he set about making drinks. "Yes…once. A long, long time ago. Before she fell asleep…she granted me eternal life, and we traveled the world together. Then, she left me alone to rot in this tower…"

Alex tried peeking under the man's down-turned hat, to no avail. "Can't you leave?"

The hat shook side to side. "Not anymore. Xerneas deemed my attitude…destructive, and confined me to this prison until I learned my lesson…unfortunately, she was sent into hibernation when the Yveltal in Kalos expended its energy, and thus awakened the Xerneas of that region. There was a war, or something, and the land needed healing. The result was my Xerneas going back to sleep."

Alex nodded, taking the information in, when Jess spoke up. "How old are you, then?"

Percy gave her a look. "I'd expect better manners from someone like you…but if you must know…I was around for the final years that Arceus' last true Holder spent on this plane. I saw him die, I saw his cult crumble, I saw the chaos of the first ages of the Dark Times…and I got a bit too involved in them for Xerneas' tastes. Thus, the tower. So to answer your question…over ten thousand. Give or take."

"Why have you molded an entire region's beliefs and culture on a video game?" The question came from Alex, and the two men stared each other down before Percy answered.
"Because I was bored…and because after the tyrant that caused Arceus to interfere in the first place was dealt with, there was no culture left. The people of this region lost any kind of connection they had to their past in the flames of war…that is, until the PokéNet was created. I helped with that, you know. I got the idea from the Old Net."

"The Old Net?" Jess asked, confused. This time, Alex answered.

"It's what our ancestors had, and what the PokéNet was based on…much of what we know comes from it. Science, technology, culture, there was a ton of information found…but it was never entirely released to the public." Alex stared Percy down again, who was in the middle of fixing drinks for them.

"For good reason." He muttered. "Our ancestors were violent, stupid people. They killed each other, the local fauna, and almost killed the planet, before inhospitable conditions tore their society apart. Things got so bad, our entire race eventually reverted back to living in caves. Until Arceus showed up, anyways."

"That doesn't mean that knowledge shouldn't be available." Alex growled, crossing his arms.

Percy gave him a look. "Yes yes, the Unovan ideal of free information, speech, etcetera. I've read Professor Aristole's treatises. You know not what you're asking for. There are some things on the Old Net that are best left there. Forgotten."

"That didn't stop you from using it to warp an entire culture." Alex shot back. "Why choose such a violent model, anyways? The rest of the world gets on fine without killing each other these days. Why convince these people to avoid technology?"

Percy sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, as if he'd had this argument a thousand times. "You're just like him…look, all these people knew after they were defeated was how to tame powerful Pokémon, and how to fight. A happy-feely model wasn't going to work, but the one I chose eventually did. If they'd had technology, they would've risen up again. They're far better off as ignorant, violent, barbarians. Besides, our distant ancestors discovered something with that...game...something that surprised the Alpha himself, when he learned of it."

Alex raised a brow. "Now that's new. What could our ancestors have possibly found that surprised a supposedly omnipotent deity?"

Percy grinned at him. "A language. An ancient tongue, with far more power to it than they ever realized. Thankfully, they were unable to tap into it...but now...the people of Norstad have learned to use its hidden power. All because of me. They don't need technology. They don't want it."

Alex rolled his eyes. "We'll just have to disagree on that. Your own kinsmen would benefit greatly from it. At the very least, they'd stop dying of disease so often. How did you even convince them to adopt this transplanted culture anyways?"

Percy slid a glass of what looked like orange juice in front of Alex. Jess' looked similar, though hers was red on the bottom. "It took a long time, a lot of research, and a lot of patience. But eventually the culture took hold. It helps that there are so many similarities between fantasy, and what my people once followed, long ago. Better to have them fighting for honor than for world domination."

"Oo! A sunrise! How'd you know?" Jess spoke then, breaking the tension between the boys.
Percy gave her his best knowing smirk. "After a few millennia, you learn how to find a person's favorite drink."

Alex glanced at his, and sipped from it, blinking once. "A screwdriver?"

Percy nodded, sipping from his own. "Not unlike mine. A sonic screwdriver. Everything's better with a bit of sonic. I have a friend who absolutely loves these."

There was silence as the three enjoyed their drinks, not awkward persay, but more like a pause. Finally, Alex broke it saying, "Why did you tell Pravus where Xerneas is? He could ruin the entire world with eternal life."

Percy put his drink down, and met Alex's gaze. "Like I said, he's the only one who will talk to me anymore. All of my friends are long dead, and the only new ones I can make think I'm a deity. I need to get out of this tower. He was my only option. I can leave for a few hours, by foot, but that doesn't really help. And I'm eventually forcibly teleported back. It's quite painful. I'd much rather have a 'hero' like you off retrieving it for me, but I don't think you understand just how isolated I am up here."

Alex raised a brow. "Are you saying you'll tell me where Xerneas is? Because I'll gladly go and try to bring her back here. You don't strike me as an evil person. Perhaps Xerneas will feel the same."

Percy looked down at his blue drink for a long time, then nodded. "I'm not the man Xerneas locked in here. It's been thousands of years…the only interaction I have is with my Pokémon, my bank representatives, and people who call on my expertise when their precious 'transfer system' has an error. You should know that if you help free me, you'll gain quite a few enemies. The people leeching off my fortunes won't appreciate losing access to them."

Alex glanced at Jess, and she agreed, mentally, that he seemed nice enough. There was one thing that still bugged him, though. "I want your word, Percival. That you won't abuse the gift you've been given. Help your people, 'High King'. Bring them into the future, don't just assume they're too violent, or primitive. Like you said, it's been millennia. People change."

"Not as much as you'd think..." Percy said, sighing again. "Fine. You have my word, 'Dovahkiin'."

Alex raised a brow. "That one, I know. What exactly have I done to earn such a title?"

Percy gestured to his helmet. He'd almost forgotten he was still wearing it. "It suits you…but clashes with the rest of your…outfit." He stood then, and his hands glowed pink as an evil smirk appeared on his noble features. "Let's make you suited to the role, 'hero'."

"Wai-" Alex didn't get the word out before Percy pointed at his clothes, and they warped as his large frame was covered in pinkish white light, changing in appearance, and feel. The white became hardened, bone-like, while the black sections became dark colored chainmail.

He stared in disbelief. Not only was his appearance now a fair reconstruction of the 'dragon bone' set he'd gotten for his character back when he'd wasted his time playing games, the helmet now matched too, and was no longer iron-gray colored. He turned, and saw a long bluish-purple cape as well, the symbol of dragons burned into the back.

He gave Percy a look as Jess burst into laughter. "You can't be serious…I look ridiculous."
Percy raised an eyebrow as he saw the cape, and then shrugged. "You look like suitable 'world-saving' material to me, O' Dovahkiin." He winked at Jess, who burst into another fit of giggles. "Oh? You find his attire funny? Perhaps we should change your appearance too!"

"Don't you da-" But it was too late. Whatever ability Percy used worked its magic on his one true love. Her hair turned brown, her clothing became a combination of steel and leather. Her shoes were replaced with steel boots, and she sighed, looking at all the changes. "Seriously? Who am I even supposed to be?"

Percy grinned. "One sworn to carry the burdens of the 'chosen one'." It was Alex's turn to burst into laughter. Jess just stared at him, not getting the joke. "Don't worry, the locals will think you fit right in. It's not permanent either. By the time you bring Xerneas back, you won't even notice it."

Alex drained the rest of his drink, and nodded at Percy. "How far, exactly, did you warp their culture?"

The wealthy man raised a blonde eyebrow. "Oh? Why do you ask?"

Alex smirked. "I have an…idea, should we need the aid of the locals. It might even help put them on the right path to joining the rest of civilization. But first, I need to be able to speak their tongue."

Percy eyed him for a long moment, and walked out from behind the bar, blinking in surprise at their capes. Jess had one as well, crimson, and emblazoned with the symbol of fire types. The leather in her armor was similarly crimson colored, and the whole thing worked nicely. Percy had some fashion sense, at least.

"Oh my…now isn't that interesting…no wonder you two get along so well…" Percy looked up from their capes, and grinned at Alex. "Very well. I have an idea as to what you have in mind. The people of my land thoroughly dislike dragons, but, there is one among them who tames the beasts, and keeps them in check. He's my favorite persona, if I'm honest."

The man smirked, and his own form glowed pink, as he too changed his appearance. The armor he now bore was ebony black, and almost looked like obsidian from a volcano. It covered his entire form, and had veins of glowing red as well. Two horns jutted upwards from the full helmet.

Alex laughed. "Wow. You would go with that set."

Percy laughed as well, a much more menacing sound now that he was clad in such fierce armor. "What can I say. It weighs less. In either case, you should be able to borrow my role as Dovahkiin… for the moment." Just as easily, Percy's clothes shifted back to normal. "Now as for our tongue...that will require you two to lower those mental shields of yours. I can share with you my knowledge of the words, but unless you can use Hyper Voice, they won't help much."

Alex stared at him for a long moment. "Are you telling me that you know how to Shout? Are you telling me that Shouting is even a thing!?!" He fought down the excitement. The urge to rush headlong into this absurd wish-fulfillment. There had to be a catch.

Percy grinned at him. "Nii los ol hi saag, Dovahkiin." Alex took that as a 'yes'.

"Fine." He said, still suppressing the excitement. "Share the knowledge." He lowered his defenses then, and he could already feel his lover's disapproval. Tao had warned them to never lower their guard, but now, the two men's minds linked.
It wasn't the same as his link with Jess, or even his team. It was a minor connection. Brief. Limited. Percy's haughty accent rang in his head. "Oh my...yes...yes, you will do nicely indeed. You were born for this role."

Alex's suspicion rose, as did Jessica's. She had, of course, heard every word. "What do you mean?" He said, warily. The unease remained, and it only grew now that his very being was brushing against Percy's. It was like something about the man was fundamentally opposed to a part of his own core.

"Don't worry about it..." Percy said, "This knowledge will only aid you. I'm sharing my knowledge of Hyper Voice as well. With both of you. Prepare yourselves...this is going to hurt."

The pain was, for Alex, instant, and unbearable. He felt Tao's sudden concern, distantly, and he felt his body slump back into the bar stool. His head throbbed, and his ears refused to work as thousands of Words thundered in his skull, each one with their own meaning. Finally, the painful torrent ceased, and one last bit of knowledge came from the strange man.

The knowledge of Hyper Voice. The sacred art of Shouting. It wasn't all that different to how he drew his psychic power for a Confusion level attack, and he knew that, had he not unlocked it, this knowledge would've eluded him. He also sensed that his years of practice inhaling Leaf smoke had increased his lung capacity. He now knew how to Shout, as did Jess, but he knew his would be stronger. For a time. His size, for once, was beneficial rather than hindering.

His vision swam as his ears started to work again, though it was a long time before he heard more than the throb of his heartbeats. He looked up to see the eyes that snared his soul, full of concern. With a start, he realized their connection had been cut. From his team, as well. He hadn't been so alone since battling N on the Victory Plateau. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but in reality, had only been roughly half a year. Slowly, he reconnected with them, assuaging their fears. The shock of the knowledge transfer from Percy had disrupted his links.

And as he looked at the man again, he now had an inkling why.

Alex kept his suspicions to himself for the moment, and stood, meeting Percy's gaze. The hints had now, in hindsight, seemed so obvious, but Percy's revealed typing now only confirmed what he suspected. Still though, he hesitated. He needed more before he fully accepted what his senses were telling him.

Percy spoke with his mouth this time, their connection was also gone now, and his defenses rose once more. "The mighty hero awakens. And how do you feel, Dragonborn?"

It took Alex's ears a second to register that Percy had spoken in the tongue of dragons, the language of Norstad. He understood it perfectly. "I'm...fine..." he managed, and he sensed Jess' concern grow again.

"Alex." She said, shaking him slightly. "Focus. You're speaking their words. Not ours."

He nodded again. His skull was still pounding, but Jess, for her part, seemed far less affected. He felt terrible, and as he groaned softly, he felt a drink being pushed into his hand. He looked up to see Percy, and a refilled Screwdriver.

"Drink." The eccentric man said softly, "It will help with the nausea...though I imagine you'll need a rest before your skull stops pounding."
The fact that Percy knew how he felt didn't surprise Alex. The two had stared into the other's very core, and found them to be opposites, but not necessarily enemies. He stood with a grunt, and drained roughly half of the drink. It did help. A little.

"We should head out..." He said, speaking his birth tongue, but still sounding groggy.

Jess looked ready to protest, but Percy cut her off. "I expect you to return with Xerneas, hero. And tales of adventure, of course."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I have an idea as to what I might need to do...now, where do I find your friend?"

Percy shrugged. "Xerneas does her own thing, and I've been cooped up here too long to know exactly where she is. She does tend to move her tree from time to time. Here's my advice, Dovahkiin. Life needs life to live. Where you find an abundance of it, you'll likely find her. Oh, and look for an Ash Tree. She prefers that species for some reason."

Alex nodded again, then looked at Jess. He could tell she was already planning to mock him for the obvious wish-fulfillment he was about to enjoy, now that she knew he was fine, but he honestly didn't care. How often did one get a chance to fill such legendary boots? To literally step into a story like this? It was unheard of. But, if he was honest, he genuinely hoped it was real, and not some fever dream caused by leaving Tao's realm.

"Ready to go?" He asked Jess as he recalled Leo into his ball. His loyal feline had also been silently mocking his appearance. The rest of his team had joined in, and found it quite amusing, once the link was re-established. He'd spent much of his time in the Swamp playing the very game this land was molded on, so they had a second-hand grasp of the situation, and how outlandish it was.

"Yes...just don't get too distracted, 'hero'. We have a mission to fulfill." She sighed, and shook her head at him. She looked just as lovely as a brunette, but he did admittedly miss the red.

He headed towards the door, striding with confidence as he straightened his posture and let his tone even out. He could pretend to be whole, for the moment. If only for her sake. "Oh, I know...but I'm fully intending to use this to our advantage in that regard. Fare thee well Percival. We shall return soon!"

The man simply laughed. "As you say. Go! Save the world, Dovahkiin." He shook his head as he watched them depart, and looked at Kurama. "You were right once again my friend."

The blue fox had been lounging on one of the white leather chairs in the posh room as the humans drank and chattered. "Of course I was." He said, his telepathic voice filling the room. "My premonitions always come to pass. You of all humans should know that."

Percy joined him on the couch, and pet his fur again. He gestured to the brushes he used on the tails, and they floated over, grooming the lovely blue fur, mussed from the earlier battle. "I'm surprised you let the Luxray win."

The fox snorted. "I did not. He caught me by surprise. But we will battle again, that much I know."

His owner raised a brow. "Oh? Another vision? Does that mean our heroes will be victorious?"

The fox smirked slyly. "Perhaps. I never said his human would be using him." The fox yawned, drifting slowly to sleep. "Truthfully, the next series of events is...muddled. Anything could happen."
Percy sighed, still brushing his fox. "I don't care anymore...I just want out of this damned prison." He gestured at the wall then, and it lifted, revealing the ceaseless storm outside. He longed for lovelier vistas. Like Alola. Oh, how he'd missed the sun.

Somewhere over the Jhötunn Forest - Norstad Region

Caleb Pravus tapped his pointer finger in mild irritation. "Anything?"

"No sir!" One of the ship's pilots said immediately. No doubt spurred by his new blackened eye. "This forest appears to have no trace of the Fairy Aura either."

Pravus swore, and the entire bridge of the ship held its breath. Upon leaving the strange half-breed's tower, their Prophet had begun swinging at anyone who was in reach. Naturally, that had meant the entire bridge crew. They all had fresh bruises, reminding them of their leader's ruthless power. None dared speak against him, though. That would ensure their families disappeared. Quietly. Without a trace.

"Enough of this." Pravus snarled, standing, and moving to the front window. He scanned the area below himself. A massive forest, surrounding a massive mountain that was separated from the rest of the region by an equally massive river.

They had checked the forest south of this one as well, and extracted information from the locals, who had been resistant, at first, until his Darkrai made itself known. They had said that if anyone knew where the 'rainbow hart' was, it would be the Jhötunn miners who hunted these woods, fished these rivers, and mined this solitary peak that loomed over the area. He was getting sick of mountains, and thus far, the woods were devoid of human life.

"Is the analysis of the culture complete?" He waited to a count of five before snapping his fingers.

One of the bridge techs spoke up nervously. "Yes, my Prophet. It seems to be a blend of the lore you'd expected, and mythology from some ancient culture called the 'Norse'."

"And? Is integration possible?" Pravus turned his head slightly to glance at the technician.

He stood up straighter, and Pravus decided to hold off on beating him. "Unlikely, sir. The people of this region are uneducated, isolated, and wholly devoted to these entities they believe walk among them as friends, guardians, even lovers, apparently. It would take a full-scale Inquisition to establish a useful foothold. Given the lack of resources and infrastructure, it wouldn't be worth our time."

The Prophet nodded, returning his gaze forward, and the tension bled from the bridge. Slightly. "Infiltration it is, then. Who or what are these barbarians most likely to open up to?"

He heard the blonde-haired man once more examining his computer, and allowed him a minute to gather more information. One minute stretched to two. Then three. He sighed.

"U-uh...let's see...the patriarchal figure of their beliefs is someone by the name of...Woden. It says here he has an eye-patch, a spear, and is flanked by all manner of beasts." The tech spoke hurriedly, knowing he'd pushed the Prophet's patience. The information they'd extracted had been high in quantity, but details had been scarce.
Pravus sighed once more, and shook his head. "No. I'm not limiting my vision, and spears are so easily broken."

There was more clacking of keys on the board, before the tech spoke again. "Here's something. A figure by the name of Shor. It says he's clad in heavy armor, wields a hammer that sparks with lightning, and is regarded as the ultimate warrior-hero. Something the locals greatly approve of. He's even known to, supposedly, wander from village to village seeking a worthy battle. He's the 'favored deity' of the peasants."

The Prophet looked down at the woods again, and sighed. "Fine. It will do. Load the Kecleo data." He turned to the pilot. "Set a course for the other forest. Try to find our people, and stay unnoticed. I don't want those damned birds taking another ship down."

He pulled up his PokéPad, and transferred the data on his newest persona. The macho fire-and-blood type wasn't really his thing, but this was Norstad. It was inevitable. So be it. The Articuno riders no doubt knew exactly where his quarry was, and for all their power, they were still barbarians. They'd fall over themselves to let the 'mighty Shor' speak with the beast. They might even let him drag it away without a fuss.

For the first time since arriving in the frozen hellhole that was Norstad, Pravus allowed a smirk. It quickly faded as he heard the voice of his lieutenant. "My Prophet, we've received a comm from the Dominus. It was text only, and marked for your eyes alone."

"Send it." Pravus waited patiently as this new message made its way to his personal pad. He turned as he read it, and his knuckles turned white as he gripped the pad tighter. A black aura surrounded his body, and the feeling of imminent death permeated the bridge. For all who were not him, all they could feel was the ever-growing, creeping terror that their mortal lives were about to be snuffed out.

Very rarely had he gotten so angry. Very rarely had anyone survived seeing him in such a state, but this time was different. He needed these pawns. Fornia was on the other side of the planet, and reinforcements were not coming. He exhaled slowly, and the cloud of black miasma that crept from his mouth floated harmlessly into the air, dissipating.

"So...Unova's Champion continues to nip at my heels...and now Kalos' newest has joined with him as well, and has befriended the riders...Samson..." The man in question, his lieutenant, still recovering from the undiluted fear he'd felt, blinked twice before answering.

"Y-yes, my Prophet?" He even threw up a shivering salute, fist to heart.

Pravus grinned, only his eyes now radiated that terrifying color, but it was enough. "Send the word to Headquarters...kill the nuisance. I care not how. I am through being lenient..." He turned again, glaring out the window as his will was done.

He would avoid the intrepid Trainer, for now. This was a mission for stealth, and Unova's newest 'hero' had an annoying tendency to interrupt his plans. None of his agents in the Swamp had reported back. Bradley, the only one to make headway with the Sage, had vanished, and the signal from Ghetsis' frigate was offline, and had been for days now. He had been the one in charge of making sure Redwood stayed occupied and frustrated. Once more, the aged criminal had failed. If he wasn't dead yet, he soon would be, but his Shadow Triad minions would continue to be useful. Upon saving their beloved master from crippling madness evidently brought on by a combination of age and losing to not one but two teenagers, the shadow beings had been awed by the Prophet, and he
had shared with them the identity of his true patron. Despite the return of Ghetsis' competence, more or less, the Triad's loyalties had shifted to a man who was not unlike them, and had much bigger, and likely more successful, goals.

Few Pokémon Trainers had been so irritating in so short a time, but that was why he had assassination squads. Trainers who had traveled through each of the Fornian satellite states, beaten their gyms, earned their badges, and trained their teams. They would eliminate the pest posthaste. But first, he had to play dress-up. Pravus left the bridge then, eyes returning to normal, as he descended and strapped on the Kecleon Belt.

---

It modified his appearance in looks and feel. Within moments, he was clad in iron and leather armor that hid his face well under a full Skiddo horned gray helmet, and a square-headed hammer appeared on his waist, covering over the black baton he used on especially deserving subordinates. He grabbed it, testing it out, and it sparked as he swung it. Good enough, he supposed. He sat then, and waited patiently as the stealthed ship shot over the mountains, back towards the 'sacred woods' the fliers evidently defended.

All he had to do was beat Redwood to the prize he had no doubt the greedy Trainer also sought. Once he had the stag, he could easily depart. There were things to do back home, and Fornia would provide a sufficient barrier from any more Redwood interference.

In truth, he was surprised there was interference at all. Gilroy Redwood had been flagged as a potential enemy, and any relatives of his that had serious potential had been labeled 'incompetent' as Trainers by one of his 'medical physicians'. The only one to receive such a label had been this very boy. He had no idea how he'd obtained a Trainer ID regardless, but it didn't matter now. The order had been given. There was only one punishment fit for those who meddled with the Prophet's affairs.
The Way of the Hyper Voice

Hrothofkiin – The Seidr's Isle, Norstad

On the Seidr's Isle, there is an order of men, rather than Pokémon, who make their home in the volcano-riddled hellscape, and use the power of their Voices to keep the elements from annihilating their fortress. It is known, as Hrothofkiin.

Pokémon do inhabit this fiery island. Species like Magmar, Magcargo, even a smaller breed of Charizard, but they take little notice of the humans within their midst. Indeed, most have no idea what humans even look like. This balanced ecosystem of fire and ice is one of the last places on the planet free of their meddling.

In this high fortress among the volcanic peaks of flame and ash, the 'Graybeards' as the locals call them, watch over their homeland of Norstad, from one of the three highest locations in the region, the other two being Ymir's Wahlom, and Valaskjalf, the home of those who ride Articuno.

It is as their nearest and greatest of volcanic peaks erupts, with a fury they've not seen in generations, that the Graybeards consult with the two elder members of their order. Koraaviik, the only man known to be able to read the Dragon Scrolls, and Zuwuth, the leader of their order.

The assembled men, all gray, bearded, and cloaked in similarly colored gray robes, bow to their leader. Zuwuth's Voice is rarely heard, for he rarely speaks. His power is truly fearsome, but today, he must speak. Luckily, all those assembled can withstand the power of his Voice. For a time.

"My brothers..." He says, speaking the tongue of Dragons in but a whisper that causes the innermost chamber of their fortress to shudder, and shake loose dust and rock, "The High King has passed on his knowledge of the Voice...to an outsider...and it has awoken something...something better left...asleep."

A few of the younger and not-so-gray bearded men murmured softly to each other, but the elders continued to listen. "Hush." The command from their leader fills the room, and silences all other tongues with barely more than a whisper.

He spoke again, once more in soft and hoarse tones. "The Scrolls have been consulted...Koraaviik senses not malice from this outsider, but hope. For our people. For the future. Clad in the bones of dragons...he brings change wherever he goes. This is what the Scrolls foretell. Koraaviik believes that now, where the Scrolls become vague...is our best chance to positively influence...this new Speaker. If we do not...his Voice may unbalance everything. According to what we know...he hunts a foul presence, recently come to our lands. You have all felt the presence I speak of."

Indeed they had, for a brief moment. Pure, undiluted anger, rage, fury, all backed up by a power that, to their finely honed senses, seemed utterly foul. "For this reason...this outsider must be brought here," Zuwuth continued to speak, and the soft, but powerful reverberations of his voice continued to shake them all. "He must be taught our Way. His Voice must become stronger, for this outsider's presence has been noticed. The World Eater stirs...and we must venture to the mainland to give what aid we can, preferably before He rises again."

The bearded men shared several looks, and then, as one, nodded, and waited for their leader to
appoint someone to leave. They did not leave often, and did not do so lightly. The people of their land had a tendency to worship them as deities because of the power their Voices had, something none of them wanted, but admittedly enjoyed. While it lasted. Always, they returned to Hrothofkiin.

"Koraaviik shall fetch him." The murmurs started up again, largely in protest, but Zuwuth cut through them once more with the power of his authority, and his Voice. "Koraaviik has yet to leave this place...but there is none more skilled in our Way. He will bring this outsider to us as quickly as he can...and then we shall test his Voice."

The murmuring stopped. There was a reason only twenty or so Graybeards existed. They rarely recruited, and often, those they did recruit would be torn apart in this very test. The applicants needed to survive the unbridled power of four Voices for as long as they could. The minimum was thirty seconds.

Only Zuwuth had lasted longer, though how long exactly, nobody knew. He was a private old man, and kept to himself. Often, applicants would barely last five seconds, and be torn apart by the sheer power of their better's Voices. That was simply how it was, and the people of Norstad knew this. Yet every year they came regardless, seeking power. It was their way.

This stranger, whoever it was, would likely die if tested so quickly. The fact that Zuwuth knew this, and proceeded anyway, was odd. Their order valued all life, an unpopular opinion in Norstad, and thus they thoroughly disliked testing applicants. Often, the masters who did the testing needed months to recover from the sadness of losing a promising pupil.

This was a stranger, though. A foreigner. It was likely that only a few would feel sadness if he failed. The universal dislike of outsiders pervaded even here, in this fortress of tolerance and knowledge.

Koraaviik departed then, and with his Voice, tamed one of the Charizard in the nearby volcanic areas. Though they were small, due to a lack of berries, but their forms were actually capable of diving into the freezing sea, for what they truly lived on. Fish. Like most Charizard, their tail flames could handle being under water, for a brief time. This offshoot's tail's burned even in the water.

They were strong fliers as well, for often they had to range many miles from the island just to find enough fish to satiate their hunger. Koraaviik's mount had been forced to aid him, but in appreciation of his strength, agreed to bear him for as long as his journey lasted. The Charizard of the isle often did this, as they were the only local species with wings. They didn't mind, provided they were fed.

Koraaviik had seen the nature of this new force of change, and had been eager to meet it, face to face. Zuwuth had, at first, denied him. But his skill at Tinvaak was unmatched in their order, and finally, the aged elder had agreed to let him go. He hadn't been back to Norstad's mainland in decades. He was eager to see his home.

A sound like thunder boomed for miles as the seer and his mount approached the fierce winds surrounding the mountains between the island and the mainland. The wind stopped. The snow halted. His Charizard flew through, unfazed. The Pokémon had sometimes seen the powerful humans stop volcanoes with their voices. Wind, by comparison, was nothing.

The Revak Feykro - Norstad
After several nights of sleep while they crossed the incredibly vast, barren tracts of icy tundra, Alex finally felt better after his encounter with Percival. Indeed, at that very moment, as he rode atop Shruikan's head, he felt wonderful.

He could feel this new power, and whatever it had awakened, eager to push forth. To be used. But both he and Jess had agreed that until he knew what he was doing, he shouldn't try using the Hyper Voice.

The desire to do so anyway burned brightly despite this. He was like a spoiled child on Festivus Eve, staring at a large present that he knew the contents of, and wanted to enjoy. He wanted to shout to the heavens in this new, strange, tongue. Just to see what would happen. But he resisted, and patiently rode on.

After two days of hearing his thoughts, Jess was rather sick of reminding him not to start using this new power. They'd agreed to go and get Connor, before trying to find out where Xerneas was. It made sense to visit the Articuno riders first. They had implied they knew where Xerneas was after all. Pravus would likely seek them out as well. Probably in a disguise. It's what Alex would've done, in his situation.

Finally, Shruikan brought his riders over the 'sacred woods' they'd stumbled onto previously. The airship was all but buried in snow. There was no sign of human life. Alex swore quietly, and continued on. If Pravus had beat them here, this could get a lot harder. Shruikan circled the downed ship thrice before skirting around the eastern edge of the woods.

They flew slowly, obviously, unthreatening, or as unthreatening as a Black Salamence could be. Alex had even tried taking the helmet off, only to discover that it wouldn't budge. None of it would, unless they needed to relieve themselves. It seemed they'd be wearing it forcibly until they brought Xerneas to Percy. The lack of freedom to copulate would speed their journey considerably. The 'High King' had read them well.

Alex's neck hairs rose as they flew further alongside the edge of the forest. He could feel eyes on them, and more than one Articuno could overpower Shruikan. He'd hit them as well though, with an electric attack. The clouds were always stormy in this region, and his electric bolts were quite strong. To attack the intrusive dragon was to ensure fainting of all parties, and a likely fatal drop for their riders.

"Jess…you should join me up here, and do the talking. I get the feeling they don't care for men, and right now, I look like a local." He sensed her amusement at his mental words, and Shruikan slowed again, as the woman floated up to hold onto the free head spike, limned with her deep scarlet pinkish aura. They could both fly true, but Tao had warned them ceaselessly, almost to the point of madness, that they were not to, under any circumstance, waste their power.

Small tricks like glowing eyes were easy. Flying, especially for Alex and his larger form, wasted too much energy at the moment. Jess had a smaller build though, and thus could fly whenever she pleased. In terms of psychic power, she had gained an advantage. Her Delphox had favored her, and Arthur was bound by the Sage not to teach Alex any more until he was told to do so.

Not long after Jess joined him upon Shruikan's larger head spikes, a pair of Articuno gracefully arced down to them, and flew on either side of their dragon. He eyed the Articuno, as they eyed him, ready to attack if provoked. Though as they saw the ferocity of the dragon's gaze, and the sparks around his intimidating fangs, the birds seemed to drift away, slightly.
They spoke the tongue of Norstad, and for the first time, Jess was glad Alex had pushed Percy into sharing it with both of them. It had seriously affected her lover, enough to make him too exhausted for copulation even, but he'd recovered now. It didn't really matter though, since their 'armor' refused to come off.

"Hail, strangers. Why are you flying in this region?" The female rider on their right had spoken first. The left simply stared at Alex, and he gave a slight nod. The severe expression lessened from outright disgust to cold ambivalence.

Jess answered, as they'd both mentally agreed she was the one being addressed. "Well met, rider. We fought alongside your clan at the airship by the edge of the forest. We've come to see my brother."

Alex and Jess shared a look as they saw the woman blush. Her stony demeanor melted in an instant, and she looked almost shy. "Right…Connor…right…he's umm, this way." The Trainers shared another look as the two riders pulled ahead of their dragon, who sped up to match them. Shruikan knew if he lost sight of them, this mountainous area would make them hopelessly lost. He had no idea what Norstad looked like, he'd seen no maps, and his Trainer hadn't thought to ask for one.

Thankfully, he kept pace easily. They banked up, suddenly, and Shruikan followed, every bit as graceful. At least to Alex's eyes. They could both sense Jess watching the birds, and felt how badly she wanted one.

The two riders paused at the edge of a sheer cliff, and waved them over. The three looked down, and took in their first view of the rider's home. "Welcome…to Valaskjalf."

Thus far, Norstad had looked like a frozen wasteland, acted like a frozen wasteland, and felt like a frozen wasteland. It was cold. Barren. Cold. Icy. And cold. Alex sighed in relief as he felt the warmth coming from below, and spied the source of it. Hot springs. A village full of lovely Legendary Bird riders, and they, even now, were bathing in hot springs.

Jess punched him, hard, as she knew where his eyes were wandering, driven by instincts older than their race. While the women below were indeed as lovely as their icy mounts, he knew they couldn't compare to his love. Not that it mattered, so long as their damned clothes didn't come off.

He just smirked. "Connor must not want to leave. I can't say I blame him."

Unlike the rest of Norstad, Valaskjalf was nestled in a lush valley of green grass, trees with leaves of gold and red, and below, in the depths of the fjord it occupied, was a massive lake, dark and foreboding. Both he and Shruikan felt their gazes drawn there.

Their view was interrupted by the massive form of a white Articuno flying up in front of them. There was a screeching sound as the Articuno's rider brought her spear up to Alex's neck, covered mostly by the horned dragon bone helmet. His staff, which was now disguised as a Greatsword, had caught the spear, and the weapons shivered as they pushed against each other.

"Lokra! Stop! We're allies!" The spear lowered at the sound of his voice, and the words of the dragon's tongue. The ice and electric attacks that had formed in their mount's maws faded. Neither had wanted to take the first shot. Lokra, however, never hesitated.

She eyed him for a moment, then smirked. "I know those eyes. You're the Trainer. An…interesting outfit you've chosen...and you know our word, too...so quickly..." The massive white bird flapped
backwards, twice, and was over the village again. "Come! Your friend awaits!"

The large bird arced then, swooping back down into the village, where Alex finally got a sense of scale for it. Next to Iizlokraan, the buildings were quite large. She was too big for most of them, though as he got a sense of her size against fellow Articuno as well. They seemed to be thriving here, and he was glad places like this still existed, even if there was a bit of a confusing bias towards men.

They landed soon after she did, and much of the villagers, almost entirely women and small children, also female, stared at the massive black Salamence in their midst. Some murmured whispers of Alduin, and Shruikan finally asked who this Alduin was, according to these humans. Alex gave him a mental explanation of what he knew of the character, but warned that there was likely more to it. Reality always had more to it. If a dragon type had earned that name even from humans who flew on Legendary Birds, it had to be formidable indeed.

Jess spoke for them, only half paying attention to his mental words. "So. Lokra. What has my brother been up to, exactly?"

The aged woman smirked, hopping down from the lofty perch her mount had taken. "See for yourself." She led the way into the largest building, one that had steam leaking from the roof of it, and with one look inside, Alex knew they'd found the center of this village.

"And that's how I recombined the three Legendary Dragons of Unova into One Dragon, and brought about a new golden age." Connor's voice wafted out nearby, and Alex smirked. Someone might as well use that line. He didn't need it.

There was Connor, his friend, half nude, and surrounded by a spring's worth of similarly un-clad women. Many didn't even have clothes on, and the steam did nothing to hide any of it. Looking up, he saw the fuming face of his suddenly-brunette sister, and the smirk of his rival, underneath what looked like a helmet straight from a video game that he too was quite familiar with. "Oh, muk."

The girl's attention suddenly shifted towards them, and Alex crossed his arms, staying silent, and hopefully imposing. His instinct said to let Jess talk here. This was clearly a matriarchal society, and he didn't want to know what they did with the males of their tribe. Historically, such villages never had very humane methods used for regulating the gender not in power, and as pretty as the village was, this was still Norstad. Everything was earned here, including reputation.

"Making maps are we, brother?" She walked up to the edge of the spring, which was still the natural rock that it had formed in. The villagers had built around it, and carved it a bit in certain places. Being a main spring, this one had depictions of Articuno all over it.

Connor laughed, scratched the back of his head, and shrugged. Alex had rarely seen him in such good spirits. "Yes, well, there was no need for a map. After I rescued Billy, there was nothing to really...do...until you two arrived. So. What did I miss?"

Like a true nerd, Connor had also seen the similarities between this culture, and the one found in one of his favored games. Unlike Alex, he had been stealthy, used a bow, and was morally gray. He'd always had a thing for the stealthier arts. His Greninja suited him perfectly.

Jess looked ready to chew him out, when her brother snapped his fingers. Gren appeared, suddenly, and judging by the gazes of the many women in the spring with him, they were impressed.

Gren offered an egg to Jess, not fooled by the illusion around her, and she stared at it as it began to
shiver in her hands. A crack appeared on the shell, and she looked slightly panicked, thinking her touch had somehow ruined an egg, until she looked at the women sharing the spring with her brother. The girl's faces had gained smiles at the sight of the egg, their eyes wide with wonder. This was expected, then.

Realizing what was likely about to hatch, Alex put a hand on her shoulder, and told her his suspicions, via their link. She grinned. No one on record had ever seen a baby Articuno. No one, on record, had even seen an egg, let alone a hatching one. The sound of lovely chirping filled the immediate room, and the shell didn't last long as a small burst of icy breath split it apart.

Like her kin, the little female was a lighter blue than the Articuno seen in other parts of the world. Each talon stood unsteadily on Jess' hands as the baby bird met her Trainer's lovely eyes. She chirped happily, and lifted her damp wings towards Jess' face. Her Trainer didn't seem to care that the baby was covered in egg juice still, they nuzzled each other, and knew their bond was permanent. She named the baby Articuno in the tongue of her homeland. Folokraan, or Fo, for short. She pressed a blue and gold Luxury Ball to the little Pokémon, and it dinged shut almost immediately. The bond was cemented.

She let the baby out again immediately, and it chirped, happy to see her again. It was a lovely sound. She walked out of the hall then, and onto the unoccupied wooden walkways that surrounded the main hall of the village, and allowed its inhabitants to traverse it by foot. Not that many of them walked.

She pulled out her Froslass, and showed her the Articuno. Then, Jess asked the Froslass to consider staying in this place, to train, and live. There were signs all over the village about missing daughters, but nobody seemed to be investigating them.

Lassi looked around at the entirely female paradise, and then at one of the posters. She nodded. Using her powers over the night, and over the cold, would likely overwhelm whoever was stealing little girls. This village was, also, beautiful. She could spend eternity looking at it.

She looked at her Trainer, and then her Articuno. She would be safe with a Legendary Bird by her side. Her voice was light and airy in Jess' head as she floated away into the paradise. "This is where I shall spend my eternity. Thank you, Trainer, for bringing me. The Snorunt will always be your friends."

Jess turned to find Alex behind her, watching the ghost float away. "It's quite an honor, you know, to be allowed to spend your afterlife in Sovallah. This place...this is the hall that guards the gate."

Jess and the adorable little bird stared at him. Alex had a feeling she understood them perfectly. Jess spoke then, "I don't know about you, but I don't see a hall...I mean the village is nice, but it's not exactly Thor's Hall." She knew the legends as well as he did. They both could trace their lineage to Germania, a land known for worship of the 'old gods'. They'd been stamped out, buried, lost to time, and then recovered, but the stories had never left. With the recovery of the Old Net, they had simply regained their old names, which was fine, for they had always possessed many.

Alex found his gaze drawn back to the ominous lake of dark blue below the village. "There's...something about this place. I need to...look around." He'd been feeling a pull towards the lake below the village since they arrived. As if something in there demanded to see him. Shruikan felt it as well. Exactly as his Trainer did. It was a call to the dragon, and one who would call himself such. A challenge. He knew it then, as he watched Jess with her newest, and now fluffiest, party
member. Percival's gift was calling to one of them more than the other.

He stepped close to Jess then, and lifted his helmet, effortlessly. His eyes snared hers for once, and they kissed. The helmet came back down by itself once they'd parted, and he winked at her. "Train your new partner. I have a feeling this is going to take a while."

With that, he raised a fist toward the heavens. He spoke the tongue of the dragons. "Rise."

Shruikan's massive form shot past him, and he grabbed a head spike as it did. He climbed atop the dragon's thick neck, and the two flew out, slowly, over the basin below. Their senses tingled as they spied hundreds of icy, watchful eyes from the Articuno above.

As they hovered over the lake, Alex sighed. He saw the telling shimmer of massive white feathers, and Lokra, upon her mighty mount, descended to their level. She spoke in the tongue of Norstad as well. "I thought I recognized your armor. It is not what you wore last time, Unova Champion."

Alex nodded. "I went to see your High King. He gave me this, and the...title of Dragonborn. This...Well is calling to me...I must face it."

Lokra regarded him for a long time. "The High King...pagh...fine. If the Fairy thinks you ready, by all means, awaken Nidhogg."

Alex tilted his helmet-horned head at her. "Sorry...Nidhogg?"

Lokra nodded. "The dragon the locals call Alduin. He Who Sleeps At The Foot Of Yggdrasil. Go on then, Dragonborn. Summon him with your Shout!"

Alex looked down at the well's churning, black waters, and nodded. Lokra ascended, and raised her hand. The riders, and their mounts, began to sing. He let the breath build within him as he prepared his Hyper Voice. His first Hyper Voice.

He didn't know what he would say, and as he hesitated, he noticed something. A small flame, coming fast over the mountains to the west. Only one flying species had a flame-tail like that, and Alex let the breath go. That Charizard was coming straight for him. He decided to wait.

The song faded as the fiery tailed intruder soared down beside the bone-covered Dragonborn, and his black scaled partner. As the song started to pick up again at Lokra's command, the man upon the smaller Charizard's back opened his mouth.

Thunder boomed. The air itself shook, and any trace of the song the riders had been singing faded under the force of his power.

"Not. Yet." The very air shimmered between himself and Alex as they met gazes.

Alex nodded, and looked to Lokra. She swooped down to them, saw the man, sighed, and then flew up once more. "Sisters! The Graybeards come to interrupt our challenger. They mean to train him before the test commences." She turned to the old man. "You have a week. That is how long Nidhogg can wait for his meal, now that he has their scent."

With a grunt that was more of a snarl, the gray-robed man yanked Shruikan along as he and the
Charizard took off. Alex looked at Jess, finding her easily despite not having the hair of flame to catch his eye. He nodded, and she did the same.

They would stay connected, but it wouldn't be as…intimate as a connection was when in close proximity. That had been one of the first tricks Alex had asked Tao to teach him properly. Jess had agreed as well, and he'd finally relented. The Dragon had also generally refrained from giving Alex too many advancements where his psychic power was concerned, as he was well aware the Sage was teaching him, but communicating across thousands of miles was useful, and, the dragon had surmised, necessary for Norstad.

Shruikan followed the smaller Charizard until they came over the stormy peaks of the western mountains, sometimes referred to as 'Alduin's Wings'. The sky darkened, and the man on the Charizard began to speak.

An approximation of his face appeared in the clouds as they rode along, and Alex just stared, impressed.

"This is the only method by which I may speak without a whisper…"

His words boomed for miles, but luckily, this was Norstad. Nobody was around. These mountains were deadly, and inhospitable.

"I understand." Alex said in a more normal tone. Shruikan was next to the Charizard now, and the bearded man's ears would be able to hear him without having to shout. "Can you tell me how to use the Hyper Voice?"

The old man looked at him for a moment, and then Shouted. A wave of Unrelenting Force pushed against Shruikan, and while it hurt, his flight was uninterrupted. Alex and his dragon shared a look.

"I guess he doesn't understand." Alex smirked, and looked back at the bearded man with sunken eyes as he reached for his own power, and finally Shouted, "Dovah! Nagah! Qo!" His Voice harnessed the power he and Shruikan had at their disposal, dragon, psychic, and electric. The Sediidah.

Shruikan channeled the summoned power as Rayquaza had against Groudon, and unleashed a Hyper Beam level move. The man and Charizard were blown away by the Taijitu move as the three energies combined into one intensely powerful attack. To Alex, it seemed that the long hours of endless training under Tao had finally started paying off where it mattered. In battle.

Zuwuth hadn't appointed Koraaviik the Scroll Reader for nothing. His Charizard, though damaged, was revived by a whisper from the old man. His gray form bent slightly, and the Charizard was fully healed once more.

They faced off again against the dragon and his equally fierce rider. The clouds spoke once more. "My apologies…Dragonborn. You are as the High King has said. Forgive our…skepticism. The Fairy King is devious and sly."

Alex simply nodded. It made sense that these men would fear Percy. They were dual typed, as normal and dragon. The inherent fear of fairy types was ingrained in all dragons. Not because of their cute, fluffy, adorable shapes, but because of their total immunity to dragon energy, which as a rule, could bind or enhance the other types as its wielders saw fit. When he'd asked the First Dragon why Arceus had decided to make his most powerful creations weak to such fluffy, but rather rare
creatures, he'd simply rumbled something about going down notches, and moved on with his lesson. In human form, Alex had first hand experience of how irritating such energy could be. He was after all, at that moment, encased but a glamour that would not come off. He'd lifted his helmet by pure instinct earlier, but hadn't actually expected it to move.

"He shared his knowledge of your Speech, and the knowledge of Hyper Voice. Combining the elemental energy of combination moves is something I've long since mastered." Alex let his eyes flare with his psychic power. "Go ahead. Test me. And when I pass…you share your knowledge of a particular ability…"

A single agreeable boom of thunder answered him from the clouds, as the face disappeared. The Graybeard and the Trainer flew on, back to the fortress of Hrothofkiin. As they landed, the clouds darkened to signal the speech of the Graybeard, but Alex paused him with a tap on his shoulder.

He gave Shruikan a nod, and had him continue on behind the fortress. There was probably a training area there. The fortress shook as the massive dragon landed, and as the inhabitants of the fortress rushed to the main chamber to investigate the shudders, they came upon a sight straight from legend. They had all heard the scroll-read prophecy of how the next dragon-blooded human would appear. A figure clad in the bones of dragons, his brothers, who his Force had overpowered, would come to the summit of this fortress, and shake the island to its core with his training in the Voice.

Zuwuth stepped forward from the crowd of men, and Alex faced him down, standing several inches over him, as he did with most humans. He opened his mouth, and requested a taste of his Voice. Traditionally, that would be his shouting of Force, which was essentially what a regular Hyper Voice attack was, but Alex had tapped into another word he knew quite well, thanks to Koraaviik. Yol.

The small wave of flame that appeared from nowhere singed the bearded man, and Alex chuckled. The fortress chuckled with him. Shruikan found the little human's reactions amusing. They thought themselves powerful because they had learned an old trick of the dragons.

His kind had legends of Alduin too, and the mocking tone of his downfall in these human's songs irritated Shruikan. Humans always knew just enough of the truth to be dangerous. They couldn’t all be like his Trainer, it seemed.

Zuwuth eyed the shaking fortress suspiciously. Then looked at Alex again. "You are the foreigner the High King has named Dragonborn…I admit your Voice is powerful…” he paused as Koraaviik whispered to him. "Yes. Right. Quite powerful. Oh?"

He looked at the foreigner again. "Let the Trials begin, then."

Four Graybeards, Zuwuth, Koraaviik, Arngeir, and Bjorn surrounded him, and as one, unleashed the power of their Hyper Voice. And with it, they awakened a Dragonborn. Alex looked down at himself as the smoke and dust of the shivering fortress obscured him for a moment. The sheer power these men were producing with this attack appeared, visibly, as waves of air, and from four directions, they slammed into his form relentlessly.

Yet, he was unhurt. He stood before the unbridled power of four trained Hyper Voices, and didn't flinch. Instead, his eyes flared, and the familiar psychic blue glow deepened into something else entirely. His irises retained the light blue of his psychic typing, but the power of dragons was surging
within him. His aura became more of a combination of blue and purple, and the overwhelming presence he was giving off as he pushed the change further almost overpowered the men responsible for testing him. There were limits yet to break with this energy, he thought as he clenched a glowing fist with immense satisfaction, but for now, this would do.

He blinked, and as he looked down, he couldn't deny it anymore. It had been staring him in the face, really, throughout his journey. Dragon types always seemed to have a connection with him. He could even, technically, breathe fire now. Soon, that ember would become an inferno, in the form of a Flamethrower. Gone was the normal typing common to almost every member of his race that his psychic eyes had seen. He was part dragon, part psychic now.

He eyed his skin, but no changes were visible. As far as he knew, he would appear normal amongst humans. He felt he could tap into this new power though. Push it to its limits. Who knew, perhaps he'd even gain a proper dragon form. His granduncle had investigated rumors of people who could change their shapes into those of dragons. It was a myth from foreign lands, but it had ended in disappointment, and with the assumption that such things simply weren't possible.

As he looked around the chamber, Alex realized the sound had vanished. The fortress still shook, as the Graybeards focused their power on him, and he stood in the midst of it, unfazed. Shruikan's voice echoed in his skull. "Finally…I knew there was power akin to mine in you. I knew it from the moment we locked eyes…dragon and psychic…hmm. You will be strong, even among our kind…few are able to combine those types together."

He thanked his draconic brother, and as the old men ceased shouting, for they'd done so for roughly a minute by now, their leader stepped forward. "You are, indeed, Dragonborn!" He said, shaking the fortress with his proclamation in the tongue of the Dovah. "The Dragon of the West…it is an honor to be in your presence."

As their leader bowed, so too did the other bearded men. "Alok." Rise. Alex said the word, and it rippled through the gathered men. None could deny that his Voice had serious power…but it still needed training.

"Come." Zuwuth said, turning and heading for the courtyard. "We begin your training immediately." Koraaviik had informed him of what the Dragonborn had started, and they had little time to waste.

"Brother…you might want to see this…" Alex heard Shruikan's voice again as he headed up the steps within the fortress, to the doors leading to the back. Even the design of this temple was uncannily similar. His suspicions rose as he sensed his dragon bow his head to…whatever awaited them outside. That was strange. Shruikan had only ever bowed to Tao.

As Alex joined the Graybeards outside, they looked up, startled by both the huge, black scaled Salamence, and the figure it was bowing towards. Arcing through the ash-filled sky was the green form of the First Rayquaza.

"So." His voice thundered in the sky, clearing it of smoke and ash. "I see you have found my home away from Unova." He spoke the language of Norstad better than Alex did, as if he'd been born to it.

The Graybeards had all bowed as well, but the Dragonborn walked towards the large dragon, smirking. "It's been a while. How is-"
"There will be time for that later." The Rayquaza snarled. "You have set into motion events you cannot understand. Because of that, I must train you far sooner than we had intended."

"Y-you intend to train him, master? Personally?" Zuwuth asked, daring to look upon the jade colored dragon.

The Rayquaza nodded. "The training of his Voice will be left to me, and me alone. You are strong, for mortals, but you are not dragons. Not yet. Shruikan, join us." A giant green paw enveloped Alex as he stepped into it.

The great dragon then arced into the sky, and headed for his home on this island, the biggest volcano, recently erupted. It was also close to the fortress. Within the lava below, which glowed blue for some reason, not red, was the resting form of the red Rayquaza Brad had tamed. It was still injured, as the battle with Groudon had been somewhat recent.

Once they landed, the dragon looked them over, and nodded. "I see. Tao trained you. That makes some sense. In any case, you were not supposed to learn of this for several years yet…you've only just acquired psychic abilities."

The massive green dragon brought his eye to their level then. It was as tall as Shruikan. "But…you have shown remarkable restraint, control, and prowess already…Dragonborn…" The large dragon chuckled. "I hardly even recognize you. You've changed much in the space of a few weeks."

Alex had to agree. He'd been expecting to relax with this time away from the Swamp. Not that he minded getting stronger. His team was full of powerhouses, and he knew that he was the weakest link in it. Oranguru had said as much, but had refused to make him stronger. Now, in some ways, he'd made up for his weakness.

Alex met the dragon's eye, nodding. He could see the similarity to Tao's. Not in color, for none had the golden eyes Tao possessed, but in the very shape. This Rayquaza, more than any other, was as close to a copy of the First Dragon as one could get. Others had been formed from their surroundings, like Brad's, and had taken on different attributes. This one had been a piece of Tao himself, and like the dragon, did not require a female to procreate.

"Train us." He said in the tongue of their kind, "Teach us to use this power."

The dragon eyed the two young ones, and smirked. "Very well. Let us transform your Hyper Voice into what it was meant to be. The Strunzul."

---

**Valaskjalf, Upper Cliffs - Norstad Region**

The armored form of Shor, the God of Thunder, looked down upon the village below, and grinned. These women were notoriously…eager…when powerful male strangers visited. Or so his sources had said. He would blend in quietly, and work his way to their leader.

As he walked into the first inn he found, the eyes of every female rider there stared at him. He walked up to the counter, smirked, and said, "By Woden's saggy left testicle, give me some Nor Mead."

That brought on a familiar drinking song, and he proved he could 'chugga'mugga'mead' like no mortal could ever hope to. In short, he blended perfectly. Several weeks passed and the season
slowly shifted to the heat of spring in the small village. Jess didn't mind it though, her 'Lil' Fo' kept her quite comfy.

There had been some hesitation when Connor suggested the villagers give his sister an Articuno as thanks for him giving them many daughters. The village's seer had eventually agreed to his skillful persuasion. She was the only one he'd been denied access to, to keep her 'pure' or something. Apparently, like most ancient cultures, these riders valued the preservation of 'innocence' that they attributed to certain aspects of the female genitalia.

With her golden locks, she was easily one of the loveliest women around. She was a strong fighter, too, and often she and Connor would spar for roughly eight hours at a time. He would be lying if he'd claimed that he hadn't been interested. He'd had more than a few partners in the days Alex and Jess had been away, and like any breathing male, he'd enjoyed himself. The whole situation had gotten stale quickly though, as he realized that, while the riders enjoyed themselves, reproduction was regarded as necessary, and emotions were kept out of it.

The seer was different though, for out of all of them, she'd actually regarded him with more than lust, and had proven to be as skilled at battling as he was. Jess had explained, poorly, the thrill she got from sparring with Alex, but Connor hadn't quite understood what she'd been referring to until he battled the seer. Judging by the looks she'd given him in return, the attraction was mutual, but custom kept him from pushing their dynamic further.

Then, 'Shor' had appeared, and his golden-haired beauty had been stolen away with little more than a glance. Connor was furious, but none of the elders seemed to care. One did not deny a 'god' his desires, and it was well known that Shor needed a wife.

After that, they'd given him an egg, and said that if it hatched for his sister, she could keep it, provided she raise it for two weeks around the village, to learn how to properly handle a Legendary Bird's care.

As time passed, Connor grew to have doubts about this Shor character. Like his sister, and Alex, he had learned the old stories as well. They were the myths of their ancestors, carried on by songs. Those mythical beings had many names. Shor also went by Thor. Woden was sometimes Odin.

This Shor acted nothing like the character portrayed. He was dark, brooding, and clearly hiding something. Connor was not alone in his suspicion. Lokra suspected this figure as well. He was far too interested in her daughter, who she'd skillfully paired with the strong Trainer for a reason. She knew men well, as she knew her offspring, and the taboo denial would only, eventually, result in a vigorous, and likely fruitful furthering of their bloodline. Someone would have to replace her eventually, after all. Iizlokraan would need a new rider, and someone else would become the Chief Flyer. Despite the expected pair, the seeress avoided Shor whenever she could, and Lokra kept him from their sacred spaces, declaring they were very much women only.

She too had suspicions about this incarnation of Shor.

Lokra was one of the few to have actually seen Shor before. While this pale imitation made a good visual recreation, it lacked the thunderous power the true being emanated. She did not have the words to describe a holographic projector, but she could smell Tauros dung a mile away.

Finally, when she had kept him from her daughter for as long as she could manage, Lokra challenged him. "Mighty Shor. If you have truly returned to us to rule in Woden's stead, open the
Gates to your Hall, and the Life Pokémon." That, had got his attention, and he asked to be reminded of the exact procedure required to open the gate. He didn't want to mess up.

Shor had stood once he heard the relatively simple steps involved, and nodded, then walked outside. He had sensed the growing power of the presence in this place over the weeks he'd stayed here. He had a feeling subduing it would lead to what he truly sought.

What looked like storm clouds surrounded him then, and he floated out over the deep lake. The riders watched, but Lokra stayed perched, shaking her head. "Nidhogg does not want this one. He wants the Dragonborn that was promised."

Pravus looked at the elderly chief, and noticed a small Pachirisu chattering to her, on her shoulder. It then ran away, disappearing into a crack in the ice her mount perched on.

She grinned, continuing. "He says this one has an aura that would taste foul. Nidhogg desires a Dragonborn."

Shor looked at the well, fuming. He couldn't just whip out Pokéballs as the God of Thunder. He only had one option. He drew his hammer, and pitifully small sparks of electricity played over it. They had impressed in the taverns, but right now, he needed more. More his belt simply could not provide.

A familiar Voice cracked the air over the fjord. "If the World Eater wants a Dragonborn…he shall get one!" Thunder boomed, and then, riding a bolt of electricity down to Pravus, Shruikan appeared, carrying the large dragon-bone armored form of his Trainer.

They pulled to a stop in front of him, but held off on attacking. He was still Shor, God of Thunder…for the moment. Shor gestured to the well, but Alex shook his head. His Voice reached every rider, who like before, had gathered on the cliffs. "I would dishonor myself and our hosts by taking a God's sport from him. By all means, summon the World Eater." At his words, Lokra had the riders begin singing again. Their song filled the fjord.

Pravus stared in disbelief. He knew that smirk. He'd faced this human before…but something was different. Just different enough for him not to realize who was playing the part of Dovahkiin. For a moment. It was as the look of recognition came over his now-helmetless red-bearded face, that Alex Shouted, "Ahzulomnos!" Thunder boomed as the fury of his Shout echoed into the water.

A dark chuckle echoed through the fjord. "Heh…heh…heh…ahst laat…" A pair of truly enormous wings lifted out of the well, and as they rose, they expanded, darkening the sky. Rayquaza had warned them of the World Eater's size, but he'd left out just how gargantuan he really was.

The rider's song faded as they realized not even the magic of old could cage this dragon now. He would either be defeated here, or once more rule over their land with a scaled fist. His power had, after millennia, finally built up enough for this. The Dragonborn whelp would help him regain what he had lost over the eons.

Every aspect of him was black. Wings, scales, everything but his eyes, which burned yellow, and seemed to spark with electricity. He was a Black Salamence, though his similarity to Shruikan ended there.

The fjord shook as the beast's head rose, and then, after four thunderous booms, the dragon was standing in the well's water, finally free of his icy prison. The fjord was barely big enough for him
anymore. "Go ahead, mighty Shor!" Alex let his voice carry. "Show us all the power of Woden's own son!" His words reached everyone watching, and as Shor remained motionless, murmurs began to rise. The true God of Thunder would never hesitate to battle his nemesis. Or battle in general, really.

Shor was instead staring down Alex as he hovered in the air, fists locked in what was undoubtedly white-knuckled fury. Alex smirked at him. He could do many things with his Voice now, and not all of them had to split the sky with thunderous power. Those kinds of Shouts were, admittedly, his favorite though.

In a desperate attempt to stay in character, Shor twirled his sparkling hammer, and shot towards Nidhogg. It was like trying to take a brick wall down with a small coin. His 'hammer' bounced off the dragon's snout harmlessly, and it didn't take long for the dragon's massive black paw to swat him into a nearby building.

Alex saw Jess and her Articuno, who was almost half her height now, head for the ruined building. She knew Alex had a plan, as right before arriving they'd shared information, amongst the feelings of joy now that they were close again. Now she played her part: keeping the disguised entity that was probably Pravus from slipping away.

With the nuisance gone, Alex turned to his own part of the plan. Subduing Nidhogg so that the way into Uppsalir would be open once more. Permanently.

Before he could act, the dragon turned his gaze up, and snarled. "For your words, you will die!" His roar shook the entire mountain chain. In this instance, his fury was well justified. There were two last lines of defense for Valaskjalf, a Braviary, and a Talonflame, a pair of birds charged with guarding the gate and the lake by Woden himself.

Over the years, they had, naturally, become bored, and had convinced a Pachirisu to ferry messages to the trapped Nidhogg for them. Or be eaten. The electric squirrel had done as it was told, but the contents of what it had said to the caged dragon, via electric shock, was always antagonizing, infuriating, and mocking in nature.

In that moment, the Pachirisu in question had fled when it realized Nidhogg was going to probably be free soon. The pair of birds had only seconds to cry their rage at the betrayal before a blast of lightning obliterated them. They had been told Nidhogg was actually doing fine, trapped beneath the water, and was grateful the birds bothered to speak to him at all in his solitude. They had been wrong in their assumptions.

His millennia long irritant disposed of, the dragon turned his focus back to Alex, and the other Black Salamence that dared to challenge him. Another amused chuckle filled the fjord, and the dragon pulled in his wings. They still blocked out most of the sky, for Alex, but keeping them extended constantly was unnecessary.

His words shook the entire fjord as two gargantuan yellow eyes stared them down. "You are the Dragonblood? Ha! I thought you'd be bigger…"

Alex looked up at the massive dragon, arms crossed. "I could honestly say the same thing. The songs say your wings 'darken the sky', but from what I can tell, you could maybe block the sun for a few miles. If that."
The dragon snarled. "Ignorant worm…I am the night!" He puffed his chest up, and roared again. Everyone and everything held their ear orifices as the dragon's furious Hyper Voice raged through the area.

Alex waited until he was done, unfazed. "You are the night, hmm? Impressive, considering this is the land of the midnight sun. You are aware it doesn't set at this time of year, right?" His Voice echoed in every ear gathered, especially the dragon's, the hate-filled eyes focused on him, and his smirk, as he stood arms crossed atop a smaller version of his own kind.

There were chuckles from the surrounding village on the walls, and the dragon glared at the human females. The World Eater's Voice needed no enhancement to be heard, but somehow, this gnat's words were just as loud. The dragon snarled again. He'd had enough Tinvaak.

Alex and Shruikan had been waiting for the very moment his eyes narrowed and began to spark again. They zipped up, high, and Alex Shouted down at the still land-bound dragon. "Come, wyrm! Your destiny has arrived!"

Nidhogg flapped once, and the concussive blasts tore apart several of the houses near the water. He flapped again, and every thatched roof in the village blew away like dandelion seeds. His head turned towards his prison, and his Shout was heard for miles. "Viidost! Praakem! Fonaar!"

The well of water bubbled, and then, slowly, the heads of thousands of Pokémon began to break the surface. Arbok and Ekans, though they were now dual poison and ice types. They dwelt in the lowest parts of Norstad, preferring to hunt in the dark, but over the long centuries, Nidhogg had become a source of warmth and life for them.

Then he had left, only to call them to the surface. The day had finally come. The gate would open, and the snake's rage would ravage the land as much as their draconic master's.

"Blaze Kick!"

As the first slithering intruder crept forth from the well, it found itself facing down a flaming foot, which fainted it easily. In numbers, the snakes were unbeatable, but there was only so much room on this shoreline.

Ardor flipped back into the line of defense as his opponent fell, and he stood side-by-side with Gar, and Sophos. Being the Champion of Kalos, Connor was more than capable of handling a swarming mass of poisonous, icy snakes.

As the eternal light of the midnight sun shone down on them, more than a few ran back to the water, rather than faint. They lived underground, and the light was irritating. As was the heat. Their master did not notice however, for the massive dragon had followed his dinner into the clouds.

Only then did he realize his mistake. Norstad's airspace was always full of dark, snowy clouds, and today was no exception. Even over Valaskjalf, they were present. Though they wouldn't affect the land with yet more snow until they descended from the mountainous heights.

Given his massive size, Nidhogg had long since lost the rapid speed and maneuverability most Salamence had, but there was another advantage he and his Trainer had that the large dragon did not. Mega Evolution.
The dragon's eyes widened as he saw the smaller dragon change, and grow considerably stronger, and faster. "What!? No! Where did a mortal gain such power!?"

The clouds lit with his fury as he fired a Charge Beam, but it might as well have been moving in slow motion against the smaller, faster dragon.

As the apocalyptic battle raged above, giving only brief glimpses of the massive dragon's form hidden within the clouds, the snakes of the Hvergelom began to slowly overwhelm Connor, and his three defenders. The cleverer ones had slithered up the rocks, and the less clever ones had followed. The cries of Articuno filled the air as they joined the battle, and pelted the snakes with their Ancient Power.

Jess stood beside Folokraan, glancing at the two battles. Alex could use ice against a dragon, but Connor needed all the aid he could get. He was already burning through elixirs. Jess looked down at her newest partner, and then nodded. There was really only one choice they could make in a situation like this.
The World Eater

The World Forge – Mountain Adjacent to Hrothofkiin, Several Weeks Earlier

"Show me what you already know. Let me taste of your Voice, 'hero'." His Rayquaza's semi-mocking tone echoed throughout the volcano. For some reason, Alex could not sense the Legendary Dragon, and it made battling him much more difficult. Even Shruikan could not follow his stealthy movements through the smoke-filled air.

The inside of the volcano was largely obscured, and had Alex not spent so much time around smoke, both from the Leaf and a certain super powerful dragon, he likely would've coughed himself raw, but it didn't seem to bother him. Whatever the Graybeards had done had changed him, it seemed. He was eager to test his new limits.

Suddenly, Alex's vision shifted, and he recognized sight through Leo's eyes, which cut through the obscuring smoke, and were all but immune to trickery. Alex gave the mental equivalent of a glance to his Luxray, who preferred to keep his eyes closed and napping.

"Teach me this 'dragon-tongue' of yours and Shruikan's. In return for my Sight Beyond Sight." Alex rolled his eyes. He was really nicknaming his ability. He wasn't the only team member to do so. Blaze echoed that he wanted to speak it as well. The fact that he couldn't speak the language of what his own species supposedly was, was irritating.

Arthur wanted in as well, and soon the entirety of their team had made their wish to understand this strange tongue for themselves known. They had second-hand knowledge of what was going on in this region from Alex's interpretation of what he saw and shared, but it wasn't enough.

Eventually, Shruikan caved to their wishes, and shared with all of them, the trick many dragon types used to make themselves seem Legendary. Not the Hyper Voice, but the very words it used to shape reality. Tao informed Alex that he would be drawing on his knowledge of this tongue as well. It was a strangely familiar toy, but it was also new and unexplored. The Dragon's Tamer could only imagine how the white scaled behemoth was using this new power.

Alex glanced at his disguised staff, wondering if what he sensed about Tao, and this language, was true, but he put that thought on hold for now. Tao could wait, his patience was literally infinite. It was good that he focused, for as his eyes had moved, distracted by his internal shenanigans, Rayquaza had decided to strike his distracted pupil, and his Dragon Tail, limned with purplish-blue energy, came hurtling towards Alex.

He was reminded of Lizardon's attack, and had a feeling the similarities were purposeful. Using his borrowed visual prowess, he dodged the tail, which seemed to move in slow motion to Leo's vision. It really was almost unfair how much slower everything else was to him these days. No wonder he napped so often.

His eyes tracked the Rayquaza, and as requested, he unleashed his Hyper Voice. "Yol! Toor! SHUL!" The Rayquaza raised his brow at his pupil's choice of words as a torrent of bright flame, on par with a Flamethrower, not an ember, hit the dragon squarely in the face.
He was singed, clearly, and even had small, but still irritating burns. So much for fire not harming dragons. The burns healed instantly, but the dragon was still impressed he'd even needed his regenerative ability at all. Every human he had trained over his long life had always started with small Voices.

Then again, he realized, he had never actually properly felt the Voice of a true Dragonblooded mortal. They were rather rare. He'd been in their presence, but none had unleashed their power on him. It sent a chill through his ancient bones, bones so similar to his apprentice's attire. This power, unchecked, could devastate his race. He grumbled. Tao had been right, the Sages were indeed crucial to dragons, and every other living thing on the planet.

They kept events like that from ever occurring, trusting that their powerful human pupils would not, if put in a true position of leadership, abuse the powers that set them so far above most of their kin. Oranguru had told the green scaled dragon, on his latest visit to the Swamp, of the human from Unova and his potential, and so far, he had been correct. The human showed no signs of dark temptation. Yet.

He was calm, easygoing, sarcastically witty, and clever. When he needed to be. His use of this newest power would be a truer test of his right to rule. Dragonborn always had an inborn desire to lead. Power was intoxicating to them. That did not always end well for them, and more than one empire had been founded by such a person.

"Good. Very good. You understand the flames well..." The dragon eyed his pupil and Alex shrugged, smirking.

"I had the Graybeard who collected me share his knowledge of stringing a few particular words together...though, I knew what these, when combined, would do." The dragon raised his scaly brow further, and Alex chuckled once more. "Well...it was more like an educated guess."

The dragon stayed silent, hovering in the air as he usually did, resting on his coils.

After several long minutes in the sweltering heat of the volcano, he finally spoke. "I see. That silly game has prepared you already, somewhat, but you must have noticed by now. The reality of using the Hyper Voice is a bit different, isn't it."

Alex nodded. The first chance he had, he'd tried breathing ice, electricity, speaking words of death, combining words of death into three-word Shouts that, usually, were devastating. Many had not worked. The few that did either did something completely different, or didn't have a visible effect.

Moreover, there were words in Norstad's tongue that he simply didn't recognize the origin of, though he knew the meaning. Many times, as he'd examined his new vocabulary, he had noticed that there were often two words, with identical meanings, but were definitely not rooted in prior languages, like so many other tongues were. The most universal was 'Common', originating from Galar, but it was standard practice to teach youngsters the language of their homeland as well as Common. Thankfully, Unova had always spoken it.

Tao's voice echoed in his head again. "When your kinsmen worshiped me, and followed my guidance to govern them, they too spoke the dragon tongue...my memories of that time are...still clouded."
Alex focused on the dragon, as he was being unusually talkative. He'd sensed Tao's thoughts, more or less, through their bond, and this 'dragon tongue' was naggingly familiar. "I shall help you gain clarity...when I return."

He heard the Tao's chuckle echo in his skull. "If you return. You've stepped in it this time, apprentice." The human's unease swelled, but the First Dragon continued, "But, you are more or less prepared...or you will be, once Rayquaza trains you. Listen well, do as instructed, and you will find victory again."

The large, coiled green dragon sighed again. "You are not the first human to have some prior knowledge of this power, but you need to listen, and listen well. This is not the Shouting you know, forget everything you were taught by your fantasy world. The real one is quite a bit different, and if you continue blindly with guesses and improper verbiage, you are going to kill someone."

Alex stared at the dragon in return for a moment, and then nodded, deciding to trust Tao's advice as well. Neither of them had steered him wrong. He regarded Rayquaza again, and for the first time, sensed just how much stronger the dragon was. He was a dragon type now as well, but Rayquaza was far older. Wiser. And his looks matched his typing. Alex still appeared as a normal human, albeit one in heavy bone armor.

Alex bowed in the Unovan style, fist to palm, towards the dragon. "Teach me properly. Master."

The dragon grinned, and acquiesced.

Over the next several weeks, Rayquaza began molding the flood of knowledge Alex had gained, giving it the structure of an actual language. The difference between learning this one and, say, Japanese, was that after each lesson he could use these new words in varying combinations. Between that and repetition, his Hyper Voice grew stronger at an alarming rate. The Graybeards would have feared such rapid progress, but Rayquaza had other fears. Nidhogg, Alduin, The World Eater, this being had many names even amongst dragons. Even with such rapid progress, he feared it would not be enough.

It was through this ancient tongue that Arceus had imbued his dragons with the ability to manipulate their world with ease that no other Pokémon type had. With naught but their Voice, they could stop natural disasters, provide water for humans and Pokémon alike, even heal. Evidently, the humans of old had also discovered it at one point, but thankfully, none had possessed the power of Hyper Voice needed to activate them.

The Hyper Voice, when empowered with draconic energy, had the ability to manipulate the other types, provided there was a source for them. Alex had then realized that his crystals could serve as such sources, and just like that, he felt the need to collect the rest. He knew he'd eventually need all of them, but had put them from mind when Tao warned him of greed.

With this great ability, the dragons of their world had kept the peace, devastated violent armies bent on conquest, and had even battled against the Sucessor's minions. But few of those yet lived, and those that did, did so in prisons no mortal was likely to find.

Unless they gained knowledge from a fairy king and flew to one such prison that happened to have a village around it.

Nidhogg was another subject of his training, for the human had blundered onto him, and the
imprisoned dragon had finally sensed a source of raw, unrefined power that he could use to regain his own. Even when newly formed, Dragonborn had immense power buried within them. Alex had felt it during the long hours of training under Rayquaza. The dragon warned him that it was indeed finite, but even after hours of Shouting, he felt he could do more, if he needed to.

To better prepare him against his foe, Rayquaza gave the human and his team a crash course in history. Not human history, full of holes, inaccuracies, lies, and agenda's, but history as viewed through the very eyes of the Sky Guardian, and his kin, over uncountable years.

He started, with Giratina. Ever since the discovery that the white Arceus both did exist and were actually clones of the true Arceus, which presumably resided within his own dimension, the rumors and legends around the ghostly dragon had only increased.

Some said he was the destroyer, the opposite force of Arceus, who brought creation and life. That could only mean Giratina was the harbinger of death and destruction, surely. The truth was much more complicated, and as they were short on time, Rayquaza gave the young human just enough to whet his appetite for the full legend.

Arceus was as much a force of destruction as he was creation. He did as he pleased. He was the Alpha. There were twenty-three other such powerful Pokémon, or so Rayquaza said, each coming from a piece of Arceus' infinite power. Despite some being older and some younger, they were all more or less matched when it came to power, but all fell short of Arceus. Twenty-three beings on Tao's level was still a lot to grasp, but Alex filed much of this information away for later. His Gruncle would love it.

Giratina had been designated the Omega, but instead of being created last, had spent much of the early ages of creation as a valued, loved, and trusted friend of the masters of reality, time, and space. Then, came his betrayal. For reasons Rayquaza had glossed over, despite loud protests from the human and his partners, Giratina had been imprisoned.

This imprisonment came with a cost, however. Beings that held his kind of power were not so easily un-made, as Arceus soon learned, and thus, an entire dimension had been created to imprison Giratina. From there, he could watch as creation grew ever-brighter. That hadn't been enough for Giratina though, Rayquaza had said, so he had used his dimensional prison to his advantage, infecting one world after another with the essence of his own power. Shadow.

All throughout creation, aberrations began appearing. Pokémon sometimes turned inexplicably dark, enraged, powerful, but the cost was high. Their very minds were warped by this new force, and often, those infected with the Shadow would eventually fade back into the nothingness from whence they were created. Some Pokémon possessed the ability to cleanse them, but they were usually on par with Legendary Pokémon, and as such, weren't commonly found. Much like their creator, they required long naps to keep their power from fading entirely.

This Shadow energy was not like the dark type energy some Pokémon had, and such Pokémon were not, automatically, drawn towards those with evil intentions. In reality, it was the very antithesis of existence. Anti-matter. The domain over which Giratina claimed lordship, for not even Arceus could handle the volatile substance with ease. With enough anti-matter, ghost energy, and dark energy, one could manifest the Shadow's power. The wise ones of the past had abandoned such research when the Shadow had started talking to them, but the not so wise had listened eagerly, and grabbed at power as soon as they had the chance.
Nidhogg was, in Rayquaza's own words, a 'unique' situation. As a Black Salamence, he had been extremely strong, especially amongst his own kin, and like most dragons with such an advantage, had come to rule over them. Norstad had, once, been green and lush, with marshes, ancient forests, and fertile coastal islands.

A human wielding the power of Giratina had come then, and through trickery, infused the black dragon with Shadow. Unlike the Arceans, this wielder had known what she was doing, and thus, the Shadow and the dragon had become one, a perfectly closed heart that science still could not quite reach.

Nidhogg, then named Alduin by the locals, had entered into an unstoppable frenzy of raw emotion, a true tyrant, a second tyrant, for he first appeared not long after Arceus had Judged the primitive human warlord from Norstad, his Tyrantrum, and his army of bloodthirsty conquerors. Up until his infusion, he'd killed the humans that tried to slay or tame him, but otherwise let them go about their lives in relative peace. Dragons did not often concern themselves with the opinions, or lives, of humans. Many considered them lesser beings, hampered by their mortality.

Rayquaza had been tasked by Tao with helping to put Alduin down once it had been devised that the Renegade's Shadow had infected him. Indeed, forces from across the planet had united, at the Sage's behest usually, and the battle had been epic…but costly. Norstad had become a frozen wasteland after that conflict. Xerneas had gone to sleep, expending her remaining energy to save her land from becoming entirely desolate, and the Dark Times had begun in earnest.

Alex had been eager to know more, but his mentor would not budge. The rest of that tale was too long to speak of at the moment. He knew what he needed to know about Nidhogg. Now, he would gain the power that might suffice against his weakened, imprisoned form.

Rayquaza warned that even with the Strunzul, or Storm Voice, Nidhogg was unlikely to be an easy opponent. He was not at his peak, but each moment he spent free of his cage would see his dark power restored. This would not be a battle to the faint. There was only one outcome now.

In truth, they had simply not possessed the strength to end Nidhogg back when he was imprisoned. He had been too unstoppable. After millennia in the Hvergelom though, he might have been weak enough for a Dragonborn to handle. Taming, subduing, and in unfortunate cases, slaying, was something they were literally born to do. A counter-balance to the dragon's powerful Voices, so that one evil minded dragon did not dominate humanity with no hope of ever unseating such a beast.

Slowly, Alex began to grasp how to properly wield the dragon's tongue, and with that understanding came a new level of strength. The entire fiery island had quaked as he practiced his Hyper Voice, and eventually, even the sky thundered at his words. That was when Rayquaza had deemed him ready.

The red scaled Rayquaza, now somewhat healed after a few items from Alex's bag helped stabilize him, had vacated the pool of blue lava in the caldera known as the World Forge. Rayquaza claimed to live here, but Alex didn't entirely believe him. His mentors were sly, and the details they gave about themselves were usually lies to avoid the question entirely.

The two dragons circled the mountain's peak, and once more, the Graybeards had gathered in their courtyard. Something was about to happen, they just did not know what, exactly. "Step into the lava." The green dragon's voice echoed in his head, and Alex nodded.
He would've stripped, but aside from his helmet, his armor was thoroughly stubborn when it came to removal. He'd found that it would shift when he needed to badly relieve himself, but then it would reform shortly after, and once more be unmovable. As it was, he'd left his bag with Shruikan, as well as his belt.

His team watched him now, from the relative safety of the rock surrounding the pool of strange blue lava. Whatever this was, he'd said, he would face it alone. He'd kept his staff however, and it still looked like a Greatsword, strapped to his back.

He'd expected heat once he stepped into the pool, but was instead met with a tolerable, invigorating warmth. "You know the words." His Rayquaza thundered. "Use them."

Alex glanced at the sky then, and inhaled slowly, then exhaled. Using this attack, he'd learned, required near-perfect breath control. Something he'd long since unknowingly mastered thanks to his shenanigans with the Leaf.

He drew in a deep breath then, and the clouds darkened. His Rayquaza smirked. It was time. Alex's trained Voice rocked the skies. "Naal viilut do dii sos, faal Strun Du'ul engein wah zey!"

The clouds parted with each word of his Hyper Voice, forming a circular hole in the stormy gray clouds. Then, from the center of the hole in the dark clouds, a massive bolt of pure white lightning shot down, striking his form. As his mentor had instructed, he called upon both his psychic and dragon power for this moment. It was a good thing he had, for his form was still very much susceptible to that much raw energy, and being torn apart by it.

He looked down as the pool glowed bright with a fierce bluish-purple color, electricity sparked over it and his own body, and Alex lifted his head to the sky again. A torrent of flame erupted from the volcano as his human yell became something much deeper, a true roar.

He looked down again, but aside from a few admittedly cool looking sparks of electricity arcing over his armored façade at various points across his body, there was no physical change. Mentally though, he felt renewed. The long green form of Rayquaza, followed by the red-scaled form of his younger western counterpart, descended to the pool once more.

"The Storm Crown has accepted you, Dragonborn. Cherish it, for in these times, you will be challenged for it. Unique individuals are appearing all over the world lately, even in Norstad." Alex nodded, listening to the dragon carefully. Rayquaza was usually not so forthcoming with facts like this. More and more he had a feeling there was some sort of global communication setup used by Sages and other such powerful Pokémon, but he kept his curiosity in check for the moment.

"So what exactly does this 'Storm Crown' do?" The dragon sighed at the Trainer. Humans truly understood little, and always having to re-educate them was tedious. Then again, now, this one would actually live long enough to pass on this knowledge to many generations. Dragons, while immortal, could still be slain.

"You are a newly formed Dragonborn, and while your Voice is strong, it alone is not enough. The Graybeards awakened your potential to wear this, and now that you have it, you can harness the power to bring down the World Eater." The large green snake brought his giant eye so close to Alex, it towered over him. This seemed to be some sort of 'thing' dragons did for emphasis in Tinvaak.

"I know of the Sage's reluctance to enhance your psychic potential. Dragons, however, are beholden
to no psychic type. And you, now, are a dragon as well. Until you age a few centuries, this 'crown' will keep your body from degrading. It takes time for humans to gain the immortality of this typing, and many Dragonborn before you have failed to attain it. Mostly because they tried building an empire too early, and were slain in the name of greed.

Alex looked down, but even then, the giant eye was unavoidable. He started to understand. To dragons like Tao and this Rayquaza, he was a hatchling. All dragons helped younger ones, when they were this small. It was a general fact amongst their kind that their numbers had dwindled during the Dark Times. All newborns needed to be given the chance to fully mature, at least. Where they would live was another matter, but any dragon worth their scales could defend their territory from a young upstart, and if they couldn't, many simply disappeared to pass on quietly, knowing their time was ending. This behavior had been observed by the humans, of course.

Once the Pokédex became a standard item to hand out to new Trainers, many of the myths about dragon types had faded. Professor Dracaena, of Fornia supposedly, was the one responsible for discovering most of the new info on them. Nobody knew where her lab was, though. For beginners clever enough to find her, it was rumored she gave out rare dragon types.

"So…it makes me immortal? Just like that? I don't think I believe it…" He met the eye's stare, then.

"You were just struck by the natural fury of lightning and lived, unscathed, while standing in a pool of molten rock." The dragon smirked as he spoke.

"Good point…" Alex sighed, and Rayquaza rose again as he spoke. "Moreover, you can now summon the power of your crystals, with naught but your Voice. You won't have to rely on your partner's power alone to fire beams of energy at my Scroll Reader."

As Alex awkwardly chuckled, he noticed six bright flashes from the ring around the pool of lava he still stood in. He smirked. His team had, upon hearing this news, attempted to speak the name of the elemental type they controlled, and the result, had been Mega Evolution.

No longer did they have to wait for him to connect them to the power. They were always connected, and as long as the stones were on his person, they could draw from them. Only Terra and Blaze had done this previously, on their own, back when they'd faced down Kyurem, but they'd both admitted it had been pure instinct, and had been unable to do it again.

Alex looked up at the large green dragon once more. "This will likely make us stronger, true, but from what you told me, it took an entire planet's worth of unique and powerful Pokémon to bring Nidhogg down before. How are seven of us going to manage that?"

The dragon again smirked, and then, hatched a plan.

---

Valaskjalf – Present Day, Norstad Region

Folokraan and Chari launched into the air, and since Fo was still too small to ride, Jess remained on her almost red Charizard, who even then, mega evolved as they headed towards Alex, and the monstrous outline of Alduin in the clouds. The rest of her team had followed her orders, joining Connor's below against the horde of ice and poison snakes.

Delphi alone was making short work of them with her cunning mind. Her flames bathed the cliffs in
fire, and when that wasn't enough, she and Gar combined their power to rain fiery meteors on the lake. Along with Sophos, she was also distributing items to those who needed them via telekinesis. With the cliffs out of the fight, the snakes soon found themselves in a very large barrel, and many fled beneath the water before ice or fire or ground attacks could make them faint. Getting her own stash of healing potions and elixirs had been the first thing Jess had done once she'd left Alex for the first half of her own final semester, and now, the decision to build up her own stockpile was paying off.

As her Charizard took her up into the dark clouds, she came upon a sight straight out of a legend passed down from her ancestors. Many Unovans hailed from the supercontinent, and in the northern parts, full of mountains, snow, and danger, the people had, in the absence of society, reverted to following the beliefs of their ancestors, preserved in stories older than any existing civilization. It was in this way, with a bit of help from the Old Net, that the stories of the 'old gods' as they were commonly called, lived on. Now, she saw the bone-armored form of the awkward, tall farmer next door facing down a dragon that could probably eat a mountain, and still hunger.

There was something different this time though, and as she took a closer look at Alex and his dragon, she sighed. He'd gotten stronger. Again. Just when she finally had an edge thanks to Delphi, he'd gone and unlocked something new.

Then, she saw it. His shiny new typing. He'd told her that most humans had normal as a default, and he'd never seen anyone that proved otherwise. Somehow, it seemed, he'd either gained a dragon's power, or awakened what had already been inside. Her own psychic power had given her vision akin to a psychic type's, a useful trick for someone who hadn't memorized the Pokédex. Unlike some Trainers, she'd had a social life, while her brother and Alex spent their days playing games in between bouts of extensively reading Pokédex entries. They claimed it was the best way to study. Given their grades, she couldn't really argue.

The plan they'd cooked up rather quickly soon became void as she realized even an ice attack from Fo would do next to nothing against a beast like this. She felt her lover's focus turn to her for a moment, as his dragon continued the admittedly beautiful spectacle of dodging and weaving between Charge Beams that could likely tear apart mountain ranges. With each dodge, a Dragon Pulse would slam into Alduin's face, hitting his eyes or nose. It was full of soft parts, and breaks in the armor that was his massive scales.

"Don't worry, the plan will still work. Find Terra below. Rayquaza gave us a strategy to bring him down, and we're going to need ice." His focus shifted again as Alduin's maw lit up with electricity, and the dragon, enraged, charged at the irritating gnat with enough persistent rage to keep him attacking constantly. Seeing this, Shruikan began flying ahead of him, only outpacing the massive beast thanks to the speed of his Mega Form.

While Jess was initially worried for him, she'd felt better once she'd heard his Rayquaza returned, and had trained his 'voice'. Whatever that meant. She'd tried using Percy's knowledge too of course, but nothing had happened. She looked down again, and spied the three riders that Lokra had left to keep 'Shor' confined. He was, to all appearances, still encased in ice.

Nodding to herself, she took off towards where she sensed Alex's earth turtle was patiently waiting in the cold. He'd been reluctant to come out during this adventure, as he had no desire to experience winter, and while he had Thick Fat to protect against attacks, that did little to mitigate the freezing temperatures of Norstad. He was, after all, still a grass type at heart, and they hated the cold.
While his lover may have been worried about the gargantuan dragon snapping at them now, it was in
truth what Alex and Shruikan had been goading the Shadow-infused dragon into. Blind rage.

In this way he would hopefully waste his power, enough for their final attacks to bring him down.
For once, his belt was empty, as the rest of his team was positioned around a perimeter that was
several miles long, and just outside the sacred forest. He'd been leading the dragon from the
Hvergelom for several long minutes now, mocking him with each missed bite from the massive
Thunder Fangs. Just one hit was likely to seriously injure both of them.

He glanced back again, and the scene had not changed. Nidhogg was still furious, and still using his
Thunder Fang to snap uselessly at where he thought his opponent would be. He was having a hard
time adjusting for the speed of Shruikan’s Mega Form, and while he was smaller, he was definitely
faster. Though, as their course had been somewhat straight, the massive dragon had gained more and
more speed. It seemed, in a straight line and with enough build-up, a dragon this massive could
indeed still be fast.

Finally, Alex took Shruikan down below the clouds, emerging right over the remains of the Arcean’s
ship. He felt his team sound off as they caught sight of them, and then felt the numerous reactions to
the sight of an enormous Black Salamence descending right behind them from the clouds, attacking
with blind fury. The massive jaws snapped shut again with an ominous snap, but both Alex and
Shruikan were focused on getting where they needed to be, as quickly as possible.

"He’s using a Charge Beam!" The warning came from Arthur, who had perched in one of the forest’s
trees. Already in his own Mega Form, as were the rest of them, he began moving towards where he
felt the dragon was likely to fall. His role was the most important, for out of all of them, only he
possessed a weapon capable of truly ending Alduin’s rage. Or so they hoped.

Now only feet from the snow-covered ground, Shruikan turned in mid-flight, and saw the familiar
build-up of the move in question. He launched his own Charge Beam into the sphere, and the
cancellation of the moves caused an explosion within the beast’s mouth. The dragon roared in pain,
and Alex spied serious burns on the insides of his mouth. "Hmm…not so fireproof on the inside…
noted."

Pained as he was, the angry, hungry, and now wounded dragon slammed into the ground, from his
perspective, out of nowhere. He let his left front limb stop his momentum, and as he slid along the
frozen tundra, he made giant hills of ice and dirt in his wake. He looked around, and what little of his
former self that remained stared in horror at the wasteland his home had become. Even when he’d
been locked away, it had never been this bad. What little ember of hope had remained for his
homeland faded. It was all dead. There was no point in holding back anymore.

The dragon’s shock was short-lived, as he felt a super-effective attack slam into him. The gnat had
launched a Dragon Pulse, rather than use his own electric power against his. If he wanted a battle of
type advantages, that was no problem for Alduin. He raised his massive, spined tail and it began to
glow with the purplish-blue energy of dragon type moves.

"Dragon Pulse!" The command came from Alex who, atop Shruikan’s head, had a good view of the
dragon. Shruikan, Blaze, and Chari all responded, and as the Dragon Tail came moving forward, it
faltered, and the power faded as Alduin’s tail was left minus the power he’d summoned. It slammed
into the ground uselessly, as Shruikan once more avoided it.

The dragon’s sparking eyes looked around, but failed to find the source of the other two pulses.
Then, he remembered he was on the ground. His wings rose to propel himself up once more, and then stopped, frozen in place. He looked up only to find his wings lifting into a Blizzard attack, followed closely by three more Dragon Pulses. The attacks tore through the thin wing membranes, and he roared in pain. A quick look at the damage told him he wouldn't be flying for a while. That was fine. These gnats would taste just as good on the ground.

Another Charge Beam lit the area, as the dragon shot in vain at where he suspected his enemies were hiding. The massive torrent of electricity tore an almost circular shape in the landscape, but Blaze and Chari had kept moving as soon as they'd attacked. Because they had such useful moves, and were ranged special attackers, they were key to bringing this dragon down. Now that he couldn't fly, Alex felt victory was more realistic. When he'd seen the sheer size of the World Eater, he'd been convinced they would fail, and everyone would die, but now…they had a chance.

As the Charge Beam faded, the Dragon Pulses came once more, from three different directions. Furious, Alduin ignored the other two, and charged the one he could see. Shruikan. Alex and his dragon had chosen their location for a reason, though.

The earth shook whenever he breathed, and after millennia of such things, Alduin rarely took notice of it anymore. He flew in battle, and did not fear ground attacks, he'd grown in Norstad, and did not fear the ice, and dragons alone could not hope to outmatch him. Not with the power the witch had bestowed on him. He'd been reluctant to accept it at first, but he could not, in that moment, recall why.

It was as the ground shattered that he remembered the warning of the Black Witch. If he stayed on the ground against clever opponents, he would die. She had seen it. Suddenly finding himself knee deep in rubble, and at least fifty feet below the surface of Norstad's tundra, the dragon snarled, deep and low. Deep as the hole was, his head still poked out of it, and he glared at the smaller Salamence, and his rider. He was tiring of these games. This Dragonborn had more than one creature at his command, and this fight, while initially in his favor, was rapidly turning.

He saw the earth turtle with the massive Ash Tree in the center of its shell stomp out through the snow, where it was soon joined by four other Pokémon, all surrounding the new pit the turtle had created. It was large, for a gnat, and powerful judging by the size of the Earthquake it had caused. But that would not be enough.

Shadows began rising from his scales, and a purple fog leaked from his mouth. He'd never gotten a chance to truly use the dark powers the witch had granted him, but now was as good a time as any. He would not be imprisoned again, and if he was truly to fall here, he would make the songs of his death worthy of his glorious life.

The dragon roared, and a foul stench filled the air, one Alex, Shruikan, and Blaze were all instinctually familiar with. They'd scented it before, though this was far more...pungent. Lizardon had given off a similar stink...right before mega evolving.

"All of you! Attack! NOW!" Using his Voice rather than telepathy, there was no hesitation. Even Fo joined in with her own Ice Beam alongside the Taijitu swirls of numerous dual-typed spheres of power that were even then slamming into the dragon. Many had a type advantage over him...and yet, they did little to stop him.

One massive black claw gripped the edge of the pit. Then another. The dragon's head rose further from it as well, into the sky, and where once there had been remarkable eyes of pure electricity, there
was now only two vacant sockets leaking what could only be described as pure Shadow energy. Rayquaza had been correct then. Someone had infected Alduin with it, and now, he was benefiting from it.

Alex raised a hand, and the attacks stopped. The dragon continued to rise over them. His wings stretched once more, and blobs of shadow filled in the holes in his wings. "Umm…Alex…do something!" Jess' voice filled his mind, but he stayed motionless. They needed perfect timing. There wouldn't be a second chance.

The dragon rose further, and his horned head blocked out the midnight sun of Norstad, blanketing the upturned snowy battlefield in darkness similar, but different from the night's. The dragon opened his maw, and a ball of pure black energy formed within it. Anti-matter.

Basic physics was a staple of any education in their world, and one did not need to be a scientist to know that an attack composed of antiparticles slamming into normal ones would create an explosion far greater than one caused by slamming a single regular particle into its' opposite. The ball forming in this dragon's maw would, quite possibly, literally eat the world, and at the very least, decimate Norstad.

Alex nodded at Shruikan. Now was the time. He raised a fist, and from the sky, a bolt of white lightning struck and illuminated both of them. "Dragon Rush!" Shruikan shot forward, sparking all over, and limned in the energy of his kind, straight towards the dragon, but as he came close, his trajectory shifted, and the attack shot past the dragon's head with no effect.

Jess stared for a moment, shocked, awed, and then terrified. The attack had missed, and that ball of death was only growing. Yet, all she sensed from Alex was calm, and intense focus usually only required for Taijitu moves…suddenly suspicious, she glanced at the massive dragon's neck, and grinned.

While Alex wished to comfort his lover, and the few others he sensed watching this battle, he didn't have the luxury. He and Shruikan had a part to play, if Arthur was to have a chance. The electricity still sparked over them, and Shruikan held the power.

Then, with a roar of 'Dovah', the smaller dragon shot back towards Alduin. Instead of a Dragon Pulse or Claw however, his fangs were limned with the bluish-purple energy this time. They sank into the scales of the dragon's neck easily, and then, Shruikan's form began to grow. Fifteen feet…twenty…as he absorbed the millennia of built up draconic energy, Alduin rapidly shrunk. Rayquaza had not lied when he said the prison had weakened the beast. Only consuming a Dragonborn would let Alduin's body stay as large as it had been. Now, Shruikan and his rider took a piece for themselves, leaving the dragon withered.

He was still large, almost forty feet tall, and as Shruikan's fangs left his neck, he began to plummet into the pit. Arthur, who had jumped onto Shruikan and then Alduin, suddenly found himself without a dragon to stand on.

That too however, was part of the plan. Sacred Sword alone was not enough…but a Sacred Sword attack from several stories up might be. Arthur glanced at the shriveled dragon below him. He was smaller, his muscle gone, and his skin hung on his frame loosely. Their eyes met, and the World Eater closed his. He knew this was his end. Arthur smirked. His friends had given him a perfect target. Now, all he had to do was let gravity make the hit connect.
He poured as much power as he could manage into his right arm, and then combined the fighting type energy with his psychic power. Neither had an advantage, but Sacred Sword was not a normal move, and the additional psychic power only sped his form towards his target. He was a streak of blue and blinding gold in an otherwise gray sky as he shot down towards his prey with a burst of speed.

He drove the sword home, into the dragon's skull, right between his massive horns, and his Sacred Sword cut through shadow, scale, sinew, bone, and then brain. With a final, terrible, almost pitiable cry, the World Eater departed from the mortal plane. His last act was to launch the death sphere he'd been building up towards the sky. Eventually, it would connect with something that would spark a reaction. What it met first though, was Arthur's second sword arm, and with a perfect thrust, the ball of darkness dissipated before the light.

Alex recalled the rest of his team, save Arthur and Shruikan. His Gallade floated victoriously over the pit, Excalibur raised in victory, as Shruikan landed beside Chari, Folokraan, and her rider. They had all had attacks hit the dragon, the victory belonged to all of them. Alone, they would've surely perished.

As Alex dropped from Shruikan's new lofty height of thirty feet, at his best guess, and landed on the snowy ground with a thump, he felt himself immediately tackled into it by a familiar presence, in feel if not looks. "Forget what I said earlier. I'm glad you got stronger. You had me worried for a minute…"

Alex sighed, relaxing into the snow which, against his otherworldly garb and 'enchanted' armor, felt cool, not freezing. He brushed a brown lock of hair from her face, only to realize it was mostly braided now, not unlike the other riders. Evidently, they'd accepted her into their fold quite easily. It hadn't been especially hard, as she now looked like a native, retained her beauty, and had a knack for battling. Upon hearing Unova had many female Trainers, held in just as high regard as their males, the riders had considered, for the first time, making use of the outside world's technology. Having multiple magical Pokémon on hand was, as demonstrated, incredibly useful in preventing world-sized disasters. Perhaps if they had held more Pokémon, then Norstad would've been able to handle this reawakened menace on its own power.

"Pfft. No need to worry. This is what top-tier Trainers do." He let his speech switch to telepathy, which was by its very nature, far more intimate. "Besides…you should know by now, I'd die, gladly, before I let anything harm you. Even world-devouring dragons." She rolled her eyes, but her face flushed regardless, which was all he'd been trying to see, really. A few weeks apart hadn't seemed all that long, but he had, quite literally, missed her face.

Once the following session of intense kissing had ended, the two headed towards the pit, and looked down. Shruikan and Arthur joined them. Alex spoke softly, glancing down at their fallen foe. "I know he was destruction incarnate…but it's still a shame such a powerful dragon had to die like this…"

A mental voice thundered in their skulls, and the four looked up to see a pair of Rayquaza descending from the clouds. "Do not mourn him. His tale may seem tragic, but that traitorous egg-breaker deserved this. We will take care of his remains." The green dragon winked at Alex as he and his red counterpart used their combined telekinesis to lift the massive form from its grave. "We will bury him where he hatched. It is the very least we can do…and even that he does not deserve." As they eyed the body, Jess winced in disgust as the green Rayquaza reached a claw into the dead dragon's skull, through his eye socket, and pulled from it a small, shining orb. He tossed it to Alex,
who pocketed it without a word.

Alex and the pair of Legendary Dragons had discussed what was to be done in the event of their success, namely with the World Eater's corpse. They had also made contingency plans for failure, but those were no longer needed. Alex had been the one to argue against burning the corpse. Dragons had their own rituals for death, and while he did not know them, Tao had offhandedly mentioned it during the training on his extra-dimensional plane. The pair of Legendary Dragons would set what remained of his essence to rest, and then they would make good use of the World Forge, and all that spare dragon bone.

With the body safely handled, Alex and Jess headed back to Valaskjalfl on their Charizard. Shruikan was exhausted, and needed time for his body to adjust to the sudden growth spurt. The rest of his team was tired as well, but Blaze always had strength to fly with Chari. Many of his partners had fired multiple Taijitu attacks, and Alex had no illusions that, without them, and the final Sacred Sword, it wouldn't have been enough to end Alduin.

The village was mostly intact, save for where a few of the ice snakes had climbed up. As they reappeared, Alex withdrew the orb Rayquaza had tossed to him. Jess eyed him quietly, as he'd promised to explain it later. As they flew over the Hvergelom, every eye in the village once more was drawn to the lake.

The orb in Alex's hand flared, and then shot forward, arcing over the village, and slamming into a stone wall behind the main hall. Runes appeared around it, a door became visible, and the massive stone slabs that comprised it slid open.

For the first time in quite a few centuries, a male Voice rang through the village of the riders. "Behold, Riders of Valaskjalfl! The way to Uppsalir is open once more! Your charge remains the same: guard it with your lives." His Voice reached all of them, but none moved towards the shining doorway. Beyond it, even more red and gold leaves could be seen. Green, untouched grass made a path through it, but beyond that, the view was obscured by light.

Lokra's massive Articuno met them over the lake. "You…you retrieved Woden's Eye?" Alex nodded, and the Chief Flyer looked him over again, as if just then gaining a measure of true respect for him. Both siblings had spoken of his strength, but Lokra was the kind of woman that believed what her eyes told her, and the Trainer had not appeared all that intimidating when they'd first met. Strong, yes, enough for breeding, but respect was another matter entirely. "You will be sung about for all of our days…Dovahkiin."

Alex chuckled. "Thank you. I've always wanted that, honestly. Your songs will outlive all of us. They've done so before."

Lokra glanced at Jess then, and sighed. "You were right. I will not doubt your words again. All of you, despite being foreigners, did everything in your power to keep this village intact. To keep this world intact. You may consider the Riders of Valaskjalfl your friends until your days end."

Alex smirked, and enjoyed the moment, but soon, the smirk faded to a look of dark determination. "There is one more matter we must address…the changeling in your midst…"

The two women followed his eyes, and Lokra's narrowed. "Aye, you speak true. The deceiver will pay for his crimes…"
The three flew towards where Folokraan had imprisoned the 'mighty' Shor with her Ice Beam. The armored man stayed silent as they landed, and then grinned, showing blinding white teeth once he saw Alex.

"You've much to answer for, Pravus." Alex said, as he made a three-point landing from Blaze's neck. "You can't wriggle free this time. Unova knows your true colors, as does Kalos, and by now, the world. Your cult will never recover from this."

"Won't it?"

The voice came from behind them, and not from the figure trapped in ice. Alex turned, and glared. Of course he'd escaped. Arceans always managed to slip free. "No tangible evidence exists to tie the deaths in Kalos to me, or my people. They're casualties of the mighty Yveltal…and as for Unova…well, the world knows how you people view my glorious western coastline." Pravus was floating as he spoke, and the disguise was gone. His figure was outlined in darkness, and his grin was entirely too confident. "Imagine what they'll think when they hear fair, equal Unova has denounced Fornia for their beliefs."

Alex raised a brow. "We haven't-"

Pravus cut him off with his sinister, almost greasy baritone. "Oh but you have." He held up a black baton that had hung at his side, and presumably served as a base for the hammer he'd used earlier. He clicked a button just above the handle. Alex's voice came out, easily recognizable, but filled with pauses, and clearly out of context. "I- swear, I will- see- the- Arceans- fall! Their- cult will never recover from this!"

The Prophet laughed as he saw the rage in the boy's eyes. "You must thank your granduncle for me, he gave me the idea. Having recording devices on hand is so very convenient…"

"Yol! Yolos! Sook!" Though his Shout was quick, Pravus' form easily moved to the side as a spinning torrent of flames shot up around the space he'd just been floating in. "I see you've learned a new trick…irritating, but it matters not. You cannot hit me…and I have better places to be."

He moved like Arthur did in the air, quickly, and able to suddenly adjust his trajectory. In the space of an eye blink, he was out over the Hvergelom again, and heading straight for the newly made door. Alex made a move to follow, as did Jess, but Lokra held them both back with a hand on their shoulders. "Patience, young ones. Do not think us unprepared for filth of his kind."

Alex looked at her. "He's after Xerneas! If he gets through that door, he may very well attain immortality!"

Lokra shook her head. "You should listen well to my words, Dovahkiin. I know my home better than you do. Besides…our king wishes a word with that one."

Alex and Jess shared a look. "King?"

---

**Faarangar, Hall of The King - Uppsalir, Norstad**

Pravus sailed victoriously through the gap in the stone walls. He'd discovered the spot days earlier, but had known it needed a key. He'd wheedled the information from some of the more infatuated riders, about the key's location. The dragon Nidhogg held it, and had done so since his
imprisonment. The way to Uppsalir had been closed for millennia, and though the riders were loath to admit it, without the Life Pokémon's power freely flowing from that sacred place, Valaskjalf would eventually suffer the fate of the rest of Norstad. Only the Articuno had prevented it thus far.

He ignored the beauty of the place, the large, gorgeous trees with their equally gorgeous leaves, the warm, green grass that seemed to invite him to lie upon it and rest. His Darkrai, ever present in his shadow, propelled him through all of it, until they came before a massive hall. "What is it? Xerneas? Why do you stop?" Pravus' words were directed towards his 'mount', but his questions were answered as thunder boomed, and lightning cracked the sky.

A massive torrent of volatile plasma arced down from the top of the hall, and slammed into the ground before Pravus' hovering form. It was a figure, male, by the build, clad in a dark cloak in hood. He rose slowly from the smoking crater his arrival created. A strong baritone echoed through the glade surrounding the nordic hall. "No further will ye tread here, Shadow minion."

Pravus glared at the man. "Who are you, to bar my way?"

A light breeze blew the hood back, revealing an all-too-familiar face. Long, red hair, a long, red beard, and burning crimson eyes met his own. For the first time in a long while, fear crawled up Pravus' spine. The man grinned, letting the cloak fall behind him, and as it fell, he drew a weapon.

It was, of course, a hammer. The hammer. The true God of Thunder raised it towards the ever-present gray clouds that surrounded Norstad, and bolts of electricity arced down towards it. Electricity sparked over the God's form, and he gripped the hammer by a sturdy looking bit of leather hanging from the short handle. The weapon began to spin, glowing with the white-blue shine of lightning as it did, and Pravus swore, silently.
The Best Laid Plans

Valaskjalf's Main Hall - Uppsalir, Norstad

Alex and Jess looked up at the sky, as the clouds had suddenly turned dark, not dissimilar from when he used the Strunzul. Then, the sounds of battle became clear. Heavy booms of thunder echoed from the gap in the newly formed door behind the village's main hall.

Alex shouldered his way free of Lokra's grip, and met her gaze. "No offense to your…king, but Pravus is our quarry on this hunt."

He glanced at the sky again, as the clouds arced with streaks of lightning. He remembered then something his granduncle had told him once about this particular weather formation, when he'd been younger. When the clouds boomed and lightning cracked the sky, it meant Thor was hammering away at something. Growing older, he'd learned his ancestors had also considered it a sign of rage sometimes, and a bad omen at sea.

Jess picked up on his thoughts, and the same underlying excitement was shared by her as well. She'd heard the same legends, and the chance to see one literally smiting evil before their very eyes could not be passed up. She gently moved the Chief's hand as well. "We will try not to interfere with, or disrespect your king…but Alex is correct. Pravus is the sole reason we came here. We cannot let him gain what he seeks."

Lokra sighed, and then shrugged. "Fine." Then, she jerked a thumb at the red haired, red bearded figure behind her, still grinning, and still encased in ice. "What do we do with this?"

Alex opened his mouth to say something, but Arthur popped free of his ball instead, his voice echoed to all within earshot, but his mouth did not move. His arms extended into swords as he glared down at the figure. "I will handle this." His eyes narrowed, and Alex raised a brow as he sensed his partner's thoughts. "I am well acquainted with the trickery of Zoroark…the one thing they can never hide is their foul stench."

The man hissed at Arthur's words, and then, changed form. As the form that had been entrapped was rather bulky and muscled, the lithe form it took then was easily able to slip free of the ice, but not before Arthur had mega evolved, and leapt after it, arms shining gold. As was the running theme with Pravus' team, the Zoroark had not been the color most of its species shared, appearing instead with fur that was black and purple. It had also appeared infected with Shadow, but of all of his team, Arthur was best prepared for that. His sword arm had, after all, stabbed Alduin's ball of dark matter, and dissipated it.

"I...think he can handle it." Alex said, watching as the malleable form of his Gallade caught up to the creature easily, and delivered a spinning roundhouse kick, whilst hovering, to its jaw, sending it sailing into one of the many rock cliff faces that surrounded the village.

The women nodded, and Lokra spoke then, "If you are intent on intruding upon the king's sport, I shall go with you. He is not aware that you are allies…and he sometimes sees treachery where there is none."

Alex and Jess shared a glance. If the legends were true, the god in question had a 'brother' well
known for mischief and redirection. Such a sibling would make anyone paranoid. The excitement only grew, and they had to struggle not to fly ahead, propelled by their power. Lokra could’ve kept up with them regardless, as she was quite fast, and ran in a manner similar to Connor, though where his form was perfected, hers was somewhat unsteady.

Eventually, they came upon a sight that awed them, as it seemed straight out of an old legend. It was indeed Thor, or Shor, as the locals had named him, and he was going blow for blow with Pravus, whose form had…mutated, into an approximation of himself, and what looked like parts of a Darkrai.

Massive fists of dark energy met the thunderous fury of what could only be Mjolnir, and as the three watched, smiles slowly came to their faces. The God of Thunder was toying with the man, laughing as he swung away at the energy hands. As they arrived, he glanced their way, eyes widening as he saw Lokra. The glance was exactly what Pravus had been waiting for.

The wind picked up and howled with ominous fury, as Pravus' arms, which were purple and identical to a Darkrai's, spun in slow, circular motions as balls of pure black energy formed within them, and then merged together, growing larger. Alex's eyes widened, as he recognized the move. "Watch out! That attack will put you to sleep!"

The ball of darkness shot forth, and Shor swung his hammer, sending it skyward, where it dissipated harmlessly.

Snarling in irritation, Pravus glanced his way, noticing the intruders for the first time. His eyes were glowing a lighter green, but the irises were still human, and still as dark as ever.

The God of Thunder gave him what seemed like an appreciative nod, and Alex had to fight down the fanboyish excitement. It was just a nod. No reason to lose his cool. "If you start calling him 'Senpai', we're over." His love's mocking tone echoed in his head, and he fought down a chuckle.

Instead of rushing forward with his hammer, Shor raised it above his head, and began spinning it by the leather bit attached to the handle. "You like to play with the wind…let us see if you truly know its' fury…” At his words, a tornado rapidly formed and surrounded the pair, almost obscuring them from sight. Thankfully, Leo was interested in watching as well, and he shared his sight freely. He was an electric Pokémon after all. This 'God of Thunder' could be a fantastic opponent.

Pravus and his opponent glared at each other, and slowly, a black haze began to fill the swirling air, coming from Pravus' own body. Even to Leo's sight, it made things murky. It seemed that the Prophet had yet more up his sleeve.

For his part, Pravus had deemed this whole venture a failure. He had not expected a God, or whatever this red haired being was, to be waiting at the threshold of his prize. He was so close, he could feel the Fairy Aura. It permeated everything in this place. Life bloomed all around him. He needed that power.

At that moment, two things happened at exactly the same time. An airship, no doubt Percy's borrowed one, de-cloaked over the forest, further in, and dark figures began dropping from it. Pravus grinned. Perhaps his minions weren't as inherently useless as he'd thought…though he'd need to keep their task from being interfered with. The Unova Champion and that older woman with him were fierce fighters. He did not recognize the brunette beside the Champion, but assumed she would be capable of defeating his people as well. Why else would they bring her?
As he took a moment to ponder his options, his Darkrai's instinct caused it to suddenly shrivel up, and fade back into his shadow. Pravus fell to the ground, powerless, and snarled at his shadow. Then, he noticed. The area around himself and Shor had turned pink and glowed with the power of the fairy typing. He recognized the move as one of Xerneas' own.

Then, it appeared. The clattering of hooves echoed through the glade, and a kind, almost motherly voice echoed to all within earshot. "You come for that which your foul form cannot take in, human."

Shor looked up as well, at the topmost roof of his hall, and he caught his hammer, causing the tornado to fade as well. The gold and red leaves of the glade swirled atop Shor's Hall in a miniature cyclone, and slowly, a form manifested within them. Within moments, Xerneas, she who gave life eternal, stood upon on the hall's roof, and gazed down at them with x-shaped irises.

She was, in a word, lovely. White fur, light blue in some places, and deep blue horns that lacked the rainbow coloring at that moment. Xerneas' grace was unmatched as she leapt down to the pair of fighters, and trotted right up to Pravus.

Nobody moved.

"You have gained the dark typing. My power would drive you to utter, crippling madness. Forever. Take your forces, and leave. I will not have fighting in my own grove." The hind spoke, and as she did, Shor grimaced, but otherwise stayed silent.

Pravus stared at Xerneas, his own expression unreadable, save for an eye twitch. Here she was, the one Pokémon capable of granting him what he'd sought for years, and now, it was beyond him because of his past choices. He was furious. His shadow formed a perfect circle around his feet, and the air grew colder. The stench of death filled the area, and the pure, undiluted rage that was of his very core, surfaced.

"It…matters…not…" Pravus snarled, glaring at the Life Pokemon. "I will draw what I need from you by force…if necessary. Or, you could give me what I seek, and I shall leave…"

Xerneas stared the human down, towering above him. "Your kind has not changed. You do not listen. You do not pay heed. You are as greedy and vile as every other human who has come here before you, seeking my power, all but drooling at the thought of living forever…" The hind lowered her head to Pravus' height, meeting his gaze directly. "You know not what you meddle with…nor what you are truly asking for…" Her horns began to glow, and Shor stepped back several paces. "It is better for all, if you simply…cease."

"You Guardians are all the same..." Pravus said, looking down at the pink terrain surrounding him. "You think you have a choice in any of this...you think the decision is yours..." He looked up again, and Xerneas flinched, visibly. His eyes shifted color, and now burned with red energy, radiating from them in wavy lines of power. "You are tools on my belt...nothing more..." He drew a Pokéball that was entirely black from his pocket. "Now, get into your ball..."

The Life Pokémon brought her head up again, horns radiating with power. Being so close, Alex resisted the urge to fidget. Then, he remembered. Fairy types and dragons mixed poorly. What she said of Pravus was likely true of himself, as well.

The sky, for once, cleared over the area above them, and Xerneas was no doubt responsible. From behind the clouds, the moon appeared, despite the ever-present light of the sun during this season. It
was full, and seemed to glow as Xerneas drew more and more power.

"Cease." An orb of light blue, similar in appearance to the moon in many ways, formed between Xerneas' horns, and at almost point-blank range, the Life Pokémon launched the Moonblast at Pravus. The man grinned, and opened his Dark Ball.

Much like the Ultra Ball, the Dark Ball had undergone a series of advancements as well, despite being highly illegal. In the Fornia region, they had increased its ability to capture Pokémon beyond that of any other Pokéball, going as far as to include move-dampeners, and not even require it to touch the Pokémon it was aimed at. In a show of cleverness, Doctor Ein had turned the opening of the ball into a vortex, of a kind, that had the power to draw in even those considered Legendary. The first one it absorbed would be the one it caught, and Xerneas was directly in front of him.

Pravus grinned as the ball began to drag the massive hind towards it. The fairy type attack had been completely swallowed, and it looked as though the Life Pokémon would be as well. The four onlookers leapt into action, as they'd been waiting for the man to either retreat, or try something.

Alex and Jess, having expected Pravus to attempt a final, desperate act to catch Xerneas, launched a combined Psychic attack at Pravus' ball. It was the immediate threat, after all, but it was intercepted as his Darkrai rose from his shadow, and canceled the attack out with a Dark Pulse.

Jess' eyes widened as she met the Darkrai's gaze. "Wait...that Darkrai is-" Her words were cut off by the sound of thunder, booming almost directly beside them. Both Shor and Lokra had leapt into action as well. Shor's hammer created a fissure in the ground, and Pravus' Darkrai retreated into his shadow once more, levitating him above the attack.

Xerneas' hooves dug deep into the lush grass, but the ball's pull was incredibly strong. It had been made with the sole intention of capturing Legendary Pokémon, and Alex began to understand how the Arceans always seemed to have a Legendary up their sleeve. Even Tao would be susceptible to such a thing, if his defenses were down.

Seeing his attack had failed, Shor spun the hammer quickly, and let it pull him through the air towards his target. Lokra, for her part, had kept her spear handy, but the dark limned man moved away from it easily as she cast it towards him. She pulled it back to her hand with a yank upon what looked like a rope of some kind, but was pure white. Fallen tail feathers from Iizlokraan no doubt.

The ball pulled Xerneas ever closer, and the Life Pokémon became truly desperate as her capture became inevitable. Before anyone had time to do anything more, she turned into a swirl of red light, entered the ball, and after a violent series of shakes, was caught with a ding that sounded more like a tolling bell than anything else. The Fairy Terrain faded, and Pravus grinned, eyeing his prize, only then remembering that an increasingly furious 'God' was hurtling towards him. The fun was over now, and it was time for this foul entity to feel his wrath.

Shor's hammer smashed into the Dark Ball with unerring accuracy, causing it to smoke and spark in Pravus' equally smashed hand. It released its occupant as the man dropped the ball, and snarled in pain. The Life Pokémon appeared again, horns once more lacking their golden color. She was motionless, and her head was lowered, but she seemed unharmed.

With a battle cry that echoed through the glade, Shor brought Mjolnir around in all its sparkling glory once more, intent on finishing this, but Pravus dodged it gracefully in the air, and once he did, a
familiar looking hand reached out from Pravus' knee, and grabbed the god's leg. Pravus spun, and
the hand threw Shor towards his hall. The armored form of the Thunder God's body sailed through
the air, and smashed through the wood of his hall easily, as he disappeared from sight.

Pravus' triumph was short lived though. Alex had called out the first ball he reached for, which
meant Terra was now on the scene, and had mega evolved. An Energy Ball containing the power of
the ground and grass typing slammed into Pravus, and with its sheer size, drove him into the air, and
over the trees. He snarled and pushed, but could not free himself from the massive, spinning Taijitu
sphere of balanced green and brown energy. Of all his team, Terra remained the best at condensing
the layers of his Energy Ball.

All eyes went to Xerneas, but she hadn't moved, and looked more like a statue than a living
Pokémon. Her x-shaped irises didn't move either, her gaze was locked on the spot Pravus had been.
In the distance, they heard a pained yell, and a loud boom. Then, from the trees, a pillar of swirling
dark energy rose into the sky. They could all guess its source.

Dark energy began to rise from Xerneas' form in small wisps, but before anyone could notice, Pravus
once more appeared in the air, furious, and hurtling towards them. He was changed again. Alex
began to wonder just how many transformations he had.

Dark energy covered his body like a robe, flaring out behind him as he flew through the air towards
them, eyes burning with rage. Literally. The sound of splintering wood and thunder boomed from
behind them as once more Shor flew into the air, and met the man wrapped in darkness. Finally,
Mjolnir met its' mark, and Pravus sailed towards the ground, impacting with a boom that shook the
area.

Shor followed, as did more thunderous crashes, the sound of truly titanic combat. It said much that
Pravus was able to hold his own at all against a being that was called a God, and had, if the legends
were to be believed, been alive for countless millennia. The sound of cracking branches filled the
area near them, and seconds later, the two men came hurtling out of the nearby forest, and back to
the front of the hall. Pravus' jaw was askew, and already bruising, no doubt from a hammer blow.

Pravus bounced across the grass once Shor stopped, and groaned as he slowly rose again. "I don't
know...what you are...but you will not...win this..." He raised both hands towards the red-haired
figure, and a look of pure rage came across his frightening countenance, black and red lightning
arced from each fingertip towards his quarry.

At first, Shor laughed, loud and booming, until the first sparks touched his form. His visage grew
grim then. "You meddle with power you do not comprehend..." He spoke through gritted teeth, and
slowly raised Mjolnir to intercept the streams of burning plasma. Though it arced across his skin, it
left almost no trace upon it, in fact, his skin appeared more like metal than anything else, in that
moment.

"I am Power!" The lightning grew larger, more uncontrolled as Pravus poured everything he had
into it. It was striking Mjolnir now, and Shor was doing everything he could to not be blown away
by the ferocity of the attack. It had definitely caught him off guard.

Xerneas watched the display while remaining motionless.

"Qo! Ner! Kaask!" The Storm Voice boomed through the glade, louder than anything so far, and the
power of it warped Pravus' lightning back on himself. It formed a spherical cage of volatile plasma,
and burned both the ground and the air as it entrapped Pravus. He turned, slowly, towards Alex.

"You…are going to die…slowly…" His entire form was trembling, and small cracks had appeared by his burning red eyes, sundering his very skin. Blood had begun to drip from each of them. Finally, he was reaching a limit of some kind. Hopefully.

"Not today…" Pravus' head turned suddenly at the voice to behold Shor, hammer in hand, smirking. With another mighty upwards swing, Mjolnir sent the spherical cage of lightning into the air, but this time, in the direction of Valaskjalf itself.

Pravus gripped the electric 'bars' of his cage, searing his hands as he screamed at them in a manic frenzy, "You will all perish for this! Grrraaagh!" He shook the bars with a rage that could only be described as manic, but the Storm Voice had effectively entrapped him. For now.

"For the Prophet!" A new cry from a new voice came from their left, in the woods, and from the trees came Pravus' lackeys, surrounded by their Pokémon. By this point, anything resembling the 'rules of battle' had long since been discarded. Every Pokémon they had was out, and the sheer numbers looked to be ready to overwhelm them.

That is, until an enormous beam of ice formed a massive wall in front of the newcomers, and around Shor and the three humans. Iizlokraan's telepathic voice echoed to all, "They are safe, begin the purge!"

The four looked up as the sky filled with what seemed to be all of Valaskjalf's riders. Ice Beams and flying type attacks began to rain down upon the comparatively small group of Arceans. Hydrus and Leo joined Terra, as they were the ones with the most energy left, and soon the Arceans had once more been effectively corralled by the riders.

More than a few openly and loudly complained about being frozen in the same manner twice, but before anyone could give orders for what to do with these new captives, a blur of black and purple zipped through them, freeing many of the Trainers, but only some of the Pokémon. As before, many had been cleansed of the Shadow's influence by the Articuno, but those who hadn't were now free, and were quickly recalled as cries of "Retreat!" echoed through their ranks.

A green and white blur followed the black and purple one, and they began to clash atop the wall of ice. It was, of course, Arthur, still engaged in battle with Pravus' Zoroark. At first it had seemed at a disadvantage, but now, the cunning fox-like creature was taunting the Gallade, who despite his speed, could not land his sword strike on it.

In seconds, Leo joined Arthur atop the ice wall, and with a combination of Iron Tail and Sacred Sword, kept the Zoroark from escaping. The tail of Leo's Mega Form, when using Iron Tail, became shaped like a scythe. He also gained saber-teeth, which made his Thunder Fang quite a bit stronger. He was even just as fast as the other two, a fact the Zoroark soon became aware of.

Alex glanced at how the dark fox fought, and then noticed something. It was using Night Slash to cancel out Leo's Iron Tail, but the other claw was bright with white energy, which parried the Sacred Sword, and kept Arthur at bay. Of course it knew Aerial Ace.

Iizlokraan landed before them, and Lokra hopped on her back, and then nodded at Shor. The God gave a nod as well, and then the Chief joined her fliers in the air. Various fire and rock attacks kept most of the Articuno at bay, but the dwindling group of Arceans soon found themselves between
two walls of ice, as Iizlokraan created another, and prevented retreat into the forest.

The few who had gotten away were dropped back amongst their fellows, and their hard landings caused havoc and broken bones as they slammed into their comrades. It was as close to seriously attacking the Trainers as the Articuno came. Seeing the tide turning, the battling Zoroark suddenly vanished as Sacred Sword and Iron Tail bisected the dark, grinning figure. It vanished in a wisp of darkness, little more than an illusion. One that had fooled even Leo's eyes. The sly fox appeared again atop the Thunder God's hall, and let out a chilling howl that echoed for miles.

Arthur and Leo quickly leapt after their prey, only to find it recalled into a Dark Ball. They looked up, and beheld a very haggard, very burned Caleb Pravus. He called down to his minions, "Enough. We have what we need. Retreat." With that the man, who was still clad in a robe of dark energy, flew further upwards, before vanishing entirely.

Leo shared his sight with his Trainer, and Alex grimaced. "Their ship is above us."

"Not for long!" Lokra and Iizlokraan launched into the air beside Shor, at the same time the Arceans were ascending towards the ship as well. Some had what appeared to be jetpacks, but most rode their Pokémon up.

"Sandstorm…" The air around the ship became filled with harsh sand, enough to make even the massive Articuno, and Shor, pause. "Power Gem." The voice was Pravus', and it echoed through the area, but the Pokémon launching these attacks was nowhere to be found. Thus, the rock type energy slammed into Iizlokraan from seemingly out of nowhere, and brought the massive bird down, hard. She was wounded, by the joint that connected her left wing to her body, but she managed to land relatively safe on the grass below.

Shor, for his part, had smashed the beam meant for him away with Mjolnir, and continued upwards, towards the faint outline of the ship in the whirling sand. Suddenly, with no warning, a massive Gigalith appeared above Shor, and though he paused for a moment, he continued towards the dropping mass of rock Pokémon.

"Explosion."

The grin on the God's face faded as the Pokémon did the only thing it could do: obey. A massive explosion usually would not have harmed him so much, but at that point, it was too close to avoid. Shor took the hit full force. The sound of engines burning filled the air as the smoking form of Shor fell earthward, alongside the fainted form of the Gigalith, which slowly faded into nothingness as the Shadow energy claimed another life. Pravus did not even bother trying to recall it. There were plenty of replacements, in the Fornia region. The ship powered through the fading vestiges of the Sandstorm, and then, was gone.

Before Alex could spring into action to save the Thunder God, he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and glanced at Jess, who pointed. In the ensuing battle and confusion, Xerneas had been momentarily forgotten. Now, it was evident that had been a mistake. The Life Pokémon was almost entirely dark purple, and Shadow was radiating from her form. Her white fur was slowly turning purple, and still, she remained utterly motionless.

Alex moved towards Iizlokraan, potion in hand. If anyone could cleanse the Life Pokémon, it surely would be this Articuno, but another of the Legendary Birds got to the massive hind before he even reached her, and her rider. Up above, a pair of riders caught the falling form of their king, and carried
him to the ground. He too would need healing.

Jess and Folokraan approached the Life Pokémon. She remembered the last time she'd faced down a Legendary Pokémon battling with the corruptive power of the Shadow. The Life Pokémon's horns glowed with a dark power, and a ball of bluish-purple energy formed between them. Jess' eyes widened. She'd recalled reading about Xerneas being able to use Outrage, but nobody had ever survived seeing such a thing. She'd hesitated the last time, against Tao, when Alex hadn't. She would not make the same error twice.

She nodded at Fo, and despite being young, the little Articuno flapped towards the Life Pokémon, and touched her beak to the hind's snout. The purifying light was all Xerneas needed. The orb of dragon energy faded back into her body, and the Shadow burned away in the face of her multicolored power. With her horns once more golden, the giant deer shook her antlered head before regarding the ones who had saved her.

"Thank you, little ones…I almost lost myself…" She looked between Jess and Fo and almost seemed to smile.

"We should've acted sooner…we're sorry for not doing so." Jess bowed low, and her Articuno copied her as best it could.

The Life Pokémon eyed them for a long moment, and then seemed to nod. "I understand, human… things often become confused in battle…now tell me…why do you and your mate wear a veil of Percival's power atop your clothing? What has the Fairy King done now?"

Jess began explaining the events leading up to the most recent battle, while Alex tended Iizlokraan's wing with a Max Potion. Soon after, he rejoined Jess, patting the smaller Articuno once he did. She chirped, and pushed into his hand. It was nice to see even Legendary Pokémon enjoyed it when he patted them. Magic fingers indeed. "…and that's how we ended up here." Jess finished.

"Percy asked us to try to convince you to end his imprisonment…" Alex said, picking up the conversation, "He wanted us to capture you, but I have a feeling doing so would be the wrong way to free him."

The large Pokémon brought her gaze to him now, eyes widening slightly as she saw his typing. As with all Legendary Pokémon, she too had the sight psychic types used. "And do you believe the Fairy King has changed? Will letting him out benefit, or cause strife to the world? From what I have heard, you have not known him long."

Alex shrugged. "I can't claim to understand fairy types, but I do know this: His mind and mine touched, briefly, and in that moment, I saw true, honest regret. It's buried, but it's there, and he feels it daily. He's desperate to be free again…desperate enough to ally with a lunatic like Pravus, and convince him to bring you to the tower. The thought of freedom consumes him. If he was actually released, he'd probably be fine." Alex looked down for a moment, subconsciously stroking his beard as he thought. "How about a compromise? Free him, and if he returns to his darker persuasions, I will personally help you jail him again, in a much smaller tower."

Xerneas took a moment to think as well. She had curled up on the grass as Jess had told the story, and then, finally, nodded. "Very well, Dovahkiin. If you speak true, I will release him from his imprisonment…in truth, I did not intend it to last so long…but I was…waylaid. If you speak true, and he has repented, I shall grant him his freedom. But I will need to see this for myself, before I believe it."
Alex nodded, glad that they'd at least managed to fulfill one mission successfully. He had no idea why Pravus had suddenly retreated, but it couldn't be a good thing. He wasn't the type to leave empty handed. "Thank you…I'm sure he will do anything to avoid imprisonment again…now that's settled…can you make these outfits disappear?"

The Life Pokémon seemed to chuckle, a light huffing sound, and then nodded. Her horns glowed for an instant, and Alex and Jess sighed in relief as the armor faded away. They made a show of stretching, and Alex shoved his now once more iron helmet into his bag, trading it for his hat. He avoided making eye contact with Jess though. Now that they were free of the armor, weeks of suppressed urges were rapidly bubbling to the surface. The danger was gone, but the adrenaline was still pumping.

Xerneas stood and a small smirk appeared on her mouth. "I will grant another favor. To the both of you." She focused her x-shaped irises on Jess. "Your mate has acquired the immortality of the dragons. For saving me from that…pestilence, I grant you the same. You can still be wounded, maimed, or slain, but should you avoid such things, you will live a span of years akin to Percival's." The antlers upon her head began to shine. "Be warned, human. That which I give, I can also take. Do not squander this gift. And always remember…every living thing has an end…do not think you have avoided death. It comes for us all, eventually."

Jess knelt, both knees resting on the grass. "I understand. You have my word…I will not waste my chance for longer life."

The golden light flared, and from each of the seven multicolored orbs on Xerneas' antlers, a drop fell to the ground, halting before it hit. Slowly, each drop formed above Jess' head into a multicolored orb that radiated life energy. It was pleasant, warm, but inherently infused with fairy power. It descended into Jess' head, and then she began to glow as well, though it soon faded.

"It is done." Xerneas said, looking slightly exhausted, "Now pardon me…I must see to Shor."

Alex thanked her again, and then knelt beside his love. "How do you feel?"

She shrugged. "Rejuvenated…but otherwise…the same."

Alex nodded, smirking. "I felt the same way. Who knew immortality would be so easily found…"

Jess raised a brow at him. "You call all of this easy?"

He shrugged. "No…but think about it. Some people spend their entire lives seeking out what we've gained in the space of a few weeks…"

"The difference is obvious, love." She put a hand on his cheek, "We weren't looking for it. You gained yours to fight Alduin and save the world. I gained mine by keeping the balance in check. A Shadow-infused Xerneas awake at the same time as Percy's Yveltal would bring even more death to this land…" She looked at the white and light blue hind. "The balance would've been disrupted, and the repercussions…worse than I can imagine, I'm sure."

She flushed as Alex's arms wrapped around her. "Tao would b- er, is proud." He said, as the dragon corrected his speech with the speed of thought. "Apparently, we've done well."

---

**Percival's Airship – Somewhere Over Norstad's Western Edge**
"S-sir? Not that I'm not glad but...why did we run? Xerneas was right!" The sentence was cut off as the haggard looking Prophet of the Arceans struck his lieutenant across the other side of his jaw. Now he'd have matching bruises.

"Listen when I speak, Samson. I said we had what we needed." Pravus grinned. The cloak of Shadow was gone, and the streaks under his eyes had scabbed over, the blood that had wept from them had also been washed away, yet he still knew he would need time to recover. His hands were a mess, but he had repaired them. Somewhat. Battling Shor had been more taxing than he'd anticipated, and the 'God' had very nearly killed him. The bruise on his jaw from that damnable hammer still throbbed with pain.

Pravus held up an object then, and Samson managed a small smile as well. It was damaged, sparking, and utterly useless for its original purpose, but they'd done more with less. His favored Zoroark had, out of all of his tools, performed the best. Not only had he deceived the riders, and kept the Gallade with the irritating sword at bay, he'd retrieved the Dark Ball from where Shor's hammer had knocked it to the ground.

This new generation of Dark Balls was tied directly to their lab back home, and sent a full genetic profile of whatever it captured to their lab in Sacreus. They didn't often try cloning Pokémon from said profiles, as it was a long, arduous process, but in this case, the replication of the Life Pokémon would be worth it. Though it was no longer bound to the ball, Xerneas had been within just long enough to be infected with Shadow. The ball had finally run out of power once Xerneas cleansed itself, but that no longer mattered. They would make their own Xerneas, and from it, draw the secret of immortality.

The Fairy King's Tower – Northern Norstad

Several days had passed since the fall of the World Eater. Alex, Jess, and Connor had all been welcomed as heroes in the hall of Faarangar, and had earned the aid of Shor as well, should they one day require it. Naturally, Alex had been fascinated with the 'God', for upon getting a proper look at him, not distracted by a major battle, he'd discovered that he too had a dual typing. Fighting, and electric.

Shor had soon realized that humans were no longer as...gullible as they had been in the past. They had grown up, fallen, and then rose again. Even the Earth was vastly different to how he remembered it. Eventually, after several mugs of mead, Shor hinted that his origins were in the stars, but beyond that, refused to reveal more. That night had been spent singing songs, drinking mead, smoking plants, and enjoying the hard-won victory against the dragon, and the Prophet. The fact that he'd retreated at all still nagged at Alex, but he was too comfortably numb to care at that moment.

Then, when the dawn came, they'd met once more with Xerneas, who offered Alex and Connor a reward for their part in keeping herself and her home free of the shadow's taint. For Connor, she gave a Firium crystal, and though it wasn't immortality, he still appreciated it. He'd been given an Icium by the riders, and had two more for his allies as well. A gift from the village they'd helped defend. For Alex, Xerneas' gift was a bit different, as his body was incompatible with her power, but his team's was not. For each of their Pokémon, she gave a gift of strength, and life saying, "A reward for their part in bringing down the World Eater. So long as your humans continue to live, you will be allowed to stay by their sides, well past your own normal span."

The two humans again thanked the immortality granting Legend, and then departed. That had, in truth, been their biggest fear in earning immortality. Now, that fear was allayed, and Alex fully intended to return the Life Pokémon's kindness, when he was able.
Shruikan received enough energy to forgo recuperating and adjusting to his new size entirely, while Blaze had been healed, and had grown several feet taller as well, reaching a new height of fifteen feet. Such was the power of the Life Pokémon. Shruikan and Blaze had, naturally, begun to spar, eager to test their new strength. Despite it, Blaze remained more than a match for him, for he was a cunning flier, and by far the best battler on their team. In his opinion at least.

Terra had received power as well, in his Mega Form, and the tree upon his shell had grown. He had grown bulkier, and was now easily one of the largest Torterra on record. He'd nicknamed the tree 'Yggdrasil', after Xerneas, which was what Shor called her. Much like Nidhogg, she had many names. Hydrus had been given a similar boost, and now the massive mud-fish was large in his own right. He was now as tall as his Trainer, who had gained three inches of height himself, from drawing power from the World Eater. They were both 6.5 now, and Alex guessed correctly that his Mega Form would be even taller. His little Mudkip wasn't so little anymore.

Leo had accepted a healing from the Life Pokémon and had filled out with muscle as well, but otherwise was content with his strength. Upon hearing Blaze's 'best battler' thought, he'd joined in the sparring match between the two fliers, and had brought both down rather easily, demonstrating that Shruikan had not mastered his electric power as well as he thought, and Blaze would always be weak to it. Though their pride had been bruised, the lesson appeared to stick.

Arthur had been a different story altogether. He asked not for healing or power, but rather knowledge. Unfortunately, Xerneas had not been able to answer his questions, which were focused on his true identity, or his mother's, but with her latent psychic ability, she pointed him towards one who did know such things. The Foggy Swamp Sage. Needless to say, he was now even more determined to get back to the Swamp quickly. Out of all of them, the Sage had taught him the most, and after battling that Zoroark, he knew he needed to get stronger.

Before they could all return home though, they had one last thing to take care of. Xerneas accompanied them to Percival's tower, and a trail of life stretched all the way from Valaskjalf to the circular northern wind wall. It would no doubt fade, in time, but wherever Xerneas walked, life followed. Once the three humans and the Legendary Pokémon reached the wall of wind, Xerneas took the lead. She summoned a wind of her own, and opened a path through the howling barrier. As she passed through, it faded entirely, and they continued north to the tower.

That too was surrounded by wind, but this time, Xerneas approached the north-western side of it, and waited. Then, after several minutes, the wind rapidly increased. The circular tornado surrounding the tower moved, condensing, and reaching far into the clouds. A figure descended from them then, spinning rapidly in the wind. Down it came with blinding speed, rising again just above the group as it spread its wings. The red-finned Lugia responsible for keeping Percival and his descendants behind the wind walls appeared, and dispersed the last wall of wind with ease.

"Yggdrasil. You come, at last. The king suffers. I did not think you would jail him for so long." The Lugia's telepathy reached all of them, and his baritone was soothing, and full of concern.

Xerneas responded in the same manner. "I was...waylaid. Shortly after I left, my Kalos counterpart was awakened early, forcing me into slumber. While that region grew lush, ours all but died...the time has come for Norstad to be reborn...and I would have Percival's help...if he allows it."

The Lugia descended as she spoke, and then landed, folding in his massive wing-arms. He briefly glanced at the humans, and then ignored them, focusing on the Life Pokémon. "He may not...long has his hatred of his jailors burned...he wants nothing more to do with me..." The Lugia looked
down, but the expression of sadness was easy to read.

"He may have spoken out of desperation, Sea Guardian. Do not lose hope so quickly." The white Pokémon seemed to perk up slightly at her words, but the look remained unchanged. The three humans watched quietly, but said nothing. Alex noticed Connor fidgeting, and guessed he was eager to finally capture a Lugia. This one, however, already seemed to have a Trainer.

"I will open the tower…but do not expect warmth from him…being imprisoned for so long has… changed our king." The Lugia turned then in a single graceful motion, and raised its arms. Alex held onto his hat, as he could guess what was coming next. The air moved rapidly as the Legendary Pokémon flapped its wings, and the resulting wind forced the tower's lower doors open in an instant with a loud boom.

Then, they waited. Several minutes later, Percy appeared in the doorway, Kurama was behind him, tails extended. The fire fox snarled, but Percy patted him. He stayed put as his Trainer walked out of the tower, or rather, stopped at the very edge. As he did, a faint barrier of pink energy appeared. It had been invisible before, and now began to glow in front of him as he approached. He was still trapped, for the moment.

Xerneas started forward as she saw him. "Percival…" She stopped as she noticed a Pokéball in his hand. It was entirely black, and disturbingly similar to the one that had entrapped her.

"Xerneas…you finally come…but what brings you, I wonder? You are not in a ball…nor do you appear forced…have you come to gloat, then? To mock your Trainer as he rots in this Hell?" Alex and Jess shared a look as they noticed his body language. He was tense, like a coiled spring. Or a trapped animal. Connor reached for Gren's ball. He had no doubt they could strike before this 'fairy king' tried calling out whatever was inside that ball.

Xerneas seemed to sigh, and then, her deep blue horns began to glow gold. The barrier of pink energy appeared in its entirety then, and it encased the whole building. Then, it began to shrink. The energy flowed into Xerneas' horns, and once it had faded entirely, the Life Pokémon looked renewed. To Alex's eyes, she'd seemed fine, but only now did he realize how strained she'd been. And she'd bore that strain for millennia. The power of Legendary Pokémon never ceased to amaze him.

Percy stepped into the snow, and gave a short bark of laughter, his expression one of disbelief. He then looked up at Xerneas. "Why…why, Yggy…why set me free now? I could be just as evil as before for all you know…just as twisted…"

Xerneas' horns glowed with psychic power then. A Heal Pulse. It washed over Percy, and he visibly relaxed. "I did not wish you entrapped for so long…there was a war, in Kalos…my counterpart was awakened, and thus, I was…"

"Turned into a tree…" Percy finished, sighing. "Of course…nobody could reach you while comatose, and I would guess you only awakened recently…I took your silence as a sign that you were ignoring me, content to let me rot, but you had no say in any of it…"

Xerneas nodded. "Several years ago, I awoke once more…but I was drained. It took a long time for my form to adjust to maintaining this barrier, and staying awake…I am sorry, Percy…you did not deserve to be trapped for so very long…"

Percy looked down. "I didn't…but that's just how things happened…and nothing can change it
now." He met the Life Pokémon's gaze again, and pocketed the Dark Ball. "It matters not, I suppose…I am immortal, after all…what's a few millennia to someone like me?" He managed a weak smile.

"A very long time…" Xerneas said, and she brought her snout to his forehead. "Far too long…I knew you would snap out of it eventually…now, we can finally bring our family back together." She gave a meaningful look towards the Lugia, who still sat several yards away, and kept his gaze fixed on the ground.

Percy walked over to the Lugia, and gave a sad smile. "You deserve an apology old friend…the things I said to you…I was not myself. Will you join me once more on our journey?"

The Lugia regarded him for a long time, and then nodded. "That is all I have longed for over these long centuries…" Then, the Lugia brought one of its large hands forward, and with a blink of psychic power, three Pokéballs appeared in his hand. Percy took them, and put them on his belt, before finally regarding Alex and Jess. He didn't even glance Connor's way.

"You two made good on your promise, and for that, you have gained an ally." He took his hat off, and bowed low. It was formal, perfect, the kind of bow one gives to a king. "I am at your service, whenever you require it."

Alex nodded, and Jess thanked him. Alex spoke then, "You should know, Percy…there is a condition to your release…if you turn out to have not changed at all, if all of this is a trick of some sort…" He leaned in close to the man's face, eye to eye, and his tongue shifted to the language of Norstad. "I will jail you again myself, in a much, much smaller prison. Do you hear me, Fairy King?"

Percy grinned, despite the chills running down his spine from that glare. "Ooo. The little dragon has teeth now…very well. I've no desire to be imprisoned again, nor to make an enemy of a Dragonborn. I'll be on my best behavior…" He offered his hand, and Alex glanced at it for a moment, before grasping his wrist. They shook once. "One final token, Dragonborn." Percy said, reaching into his pockets. "A reward for setting me free." He pulled out a white crystal, with the symbol of flying types within it, alongside a pink one with the symbol of fairies. "Flying for you, and Fairy for your lady. Make good use of them."

Alex eyed the pale crystal even as Jess eyed hers. "Oh…I intend to…" He could already feel Blaze's excitement. Being the only one not able to use a Taijitu move had been…irritating for the proud Charizard. Now, they could finally practice combining the two types.

Percy brought out a blue and white Luxury Ball then, and offered it to Xerneas, who entered willingly after bidding the foreigners farewell. He hopped on his Lugia then, and called down to them. "I'm leaving, I've spent far too long in this frozen hell. You have my number. If you need me, I'll be in Alola!" By that point, Kurama had been recalled as well, and with his belt now five members heavier, Percy took off on his Lugia, and shot into the sky with a loud whooping shout, arms stretched wide as he breathed the free air again.

The three Unovans decided to leave as well then, and they traveled aboard Shruikan's now much roomier metallic undercarriage. Once they'd made it halfway down the trail of life Xerneas left, Connor announced that he had a few more loose ends to tie up, and that he was leaving. He wished his sister good luck with school, gave Alex a nod with the promise of seeing him soon in the Swamp, and then leapt off of Shruikan, and into the air. His Garchomp appeared then, mega evolved, and carried him southwards, towards Valaskjalf.
The flight back to Unova was a long one, but since they were no longer in a hurry, the massive Salamence took his time. His speed, when moving in a single direction at least, had increased as well, but the whole trip still took several hours. Several hours less than it previously had. Alex knew traveling the world would be much easier with such a fast flier.

Once they were back in Unova, Alex did much the same as Connor did in Kalos. They'd had a chat in Faarangar after the battle, and had agreed that they needed to cement their reputations as Champions in their respective regions as soon as possible. Both Alain and N were still around, and they knew from past Champions that the passing of that torch would not be so easy. They were both legends and heroes in their own right. They agreed that Unova and Kalos should remain friendly rivals, but Connor made it clear that he had his own path to tread now, and he wouldn't be following Alex and his sister everywhere like a third wheel.

Unova had, thankfully, been calm in the short month or so that Alex had been gone. N had only remained for a few days after the New Year, before leaving to travel the world. With him gone, Tao had kept the region in balance, and the region had prospered as a result. Ancient ruins had been cleared out and raised, old buildings repaired, and expanded upon. Unova had always had a knack for building, but with the return of their dragon, the desire to regain their position as the head of a legitimate continent-spanning empire had returned.

Since there was yet a month remaining before Alex had to return to the Swamp and the University's second half began, he spent the time resting. For about three days, he and his team recuperated from Norstad, mostly by sleeping. They were still recovering from the effects of Tao's world as well, and Jess did the same thing he did, as did her team. Folokraan was the only one who wanted to be awake, but she learned to be patient in those long days. With nothing pressing to deal with, they and their Pokémon enjoyed a well-earned break.

Eventually, they'd started to get fidgety, it was back to training. The training weights returned, and once they were adjusted for size, Alex realized there was a limit to how effective their original method would be. At some point, the weights would simply be too heavy to transport, and even now, they were already incredibly hard to move. Still, they trained with them daily, both at the Redwood's ranch, and across Unova.

Alex and Jess had gone to Castelia first, and spent three days there in a spare room that John Crimson offered them. It was there that Alex first got the news. His granduncle had finally passed on. It was a sour blow after all he'd accomplished in Norstad, and he realized just how distant he was from his relatives once he understood he now had nobody to call home to. He returned home then, and his better half kept his family distracted as he went to have a chat with his brother.

Eric was, as usual, at the local swimming center, riding around on his Blastoise. When he saw his brother, clad in strange white and black clothes, arms crossed by the edge of the pool, he'd guided Squirt over to him, and gave the water turtle a rest. The pool was only so big, but they often swam hundreds of laps, which tired out even the strongest of his swimmers.

"Let me change. Then we can talk." His brother blew past, and headed to the locker room, while Alex was left to stand awkwardly beside his Blastoise. Several minutes passed in silence, and eventually, Squirt leapt back into the water with a content sigh.

Once he'd changed, his brother returned, wearing their granduncle's lab coat over his usual blue attire. He'd gotten glasses as well, and almost looked like a Professor. He was still too young to pull it off though. Alex also spied a familiar diamond-shaped blue crystal pinned by the collar. It seemed
the new method for mega evolution had reached even their backwater region.

"Where the Hel have you been?" Eric said, arms crossed. Alex raised a brow. He could count the number of times Eric had actually been angry with him on one hand, but he still knew that look.

"Norstad. There was…pressing business to deal with, after the New Year. Maybe you missed it, but the Arceans decided to give Ghetsis an airship, and throw him at us. Along with the Forces of Nature." Eric pinched his brow at his brother's word, and Alex only smirked. Even that looked grim, however.

He'd been more depressed than usual of late, but had put off proper mourning. Castelia had been full of fans, friends, and Trainers he'd battled on his first pass through the region, and Unova had required their Champion to keep his composure.

"You missed the funeral, you know. You missed quite a bit, actually. Malina came back, and she wasn't the only one wondering where you were." Eric's tone wavered as he spoke, and Alex looked closer at his brother. His cool demeanor was gone, and then he realized, this was hitting him just as hard. He supposed it would. His Gruncle had taught many Trainers, and had been hard not to like. He and Alex had been close, but so had the rest of their generation. The Professor had taught all of them.

Alex sighed, and they stood in silence for a moment, before he gestured for his brother to follow him outside, behind the pool building. Their conversation had been attracting too many eyes for his liking. It was especially unnerving since he knew many of those who were staring. "How did it happen?"

Alex knew he'd asked the right question as he saw his brother wince. "I…found him. He'd been missing for several days, nothing new, but he missed John Crimson's news report. Twice. When I went into his lab, I knew…I could…smell him."

Alex did the math. Two weeks. It had taken two weeks for someone to notice the Professor wasn't around. Alex fought down the sudden rage that had been mixing with his sorrow for the past three days at the thought of his favored relative literally rotting, alone and forgotten. He fought the emotions down into a clenched fist as Eric continued, "He opened the old door to his room in the basement…I found him in the bed."

Alex stayed silent for a long while. They were outside now, and he stared at the countryside of their hometown. The sky was gray, but the grass had remained gold, even under the harsh snow of winter, which was now almost entirely melted. "This is the price. He said being Champion would come with a cost. I'd even bet the old bastard knew this would happen. I'd be off on some epic journey, and he'd pass on while I was away." He swore silently.

"Have you been home yet?" Eric asked, his eyes also on the countryside. Alex shook his head. "You should go home…Malina might still be around. She missed you."

The thought of facing his favorite cousin after missing her father's funeral was too much right then. He shook his head again. "No…I'm going to leave again. Soon. There's nothing left for me here. I should've moved out years ago anyways."

"So you're just going to leave your family behind?" Eric said, turning to him.

Alex sighed. "No. Not entirely. I'll keep in touch, specifically with you. His lab is yours now. Go
home, clean it up, use it. He left it for you, and knowing you, it's still a dusty mess covered in white sheets."

Eric shifted in place uncomfortably. Once more his brother's words had been unerringly accurate. "I'm no Professor…” he mumbled, "And you should stick around."

Alex let his eyes flare blue, and his voice came out changed. His brother flinched. "I have larger concerns to deal with now." He let the power fade just as quickly as it came. "He knew that. You should all know that too. N was always the one keeping the region safe, and not just ours. The entire eastern half of the continent has been saved by him, and the other Champions. More than once. That's my job now. Keeping the world in balance."

Eric rolled his eyes. "And who gave you that job? Does it pay well? What do you earn in a year? Will it pay for the house? How about the ranch? The lab?" Alex raised a brow, but his brother continued his tirade. "You have responsibilities here that you haven't even begun to deal with, brother of mine. You need to take care of those, too."

Alex shook his head. "No, I don't think I do." Eric opened his mouth again, but Alex cut him off and Eric found his forming words crushed by the strange tone of his brother's voice. Something had definitely changed. "You have always been the favored son. We both know you are first in line to inherit the house. Not me." Eric pinched his brow again, and turned back to the view. "And yes, it does pay rather well." Alex said, resisting a smirk. While his allies in Norstad didn't use traditional currency, they had given him several artifacts that were useless to them, but were priceless to the right collectors, or museums, here in Unova. Having currency was useful, sometimes.

He watched as his brother looked up again. His demeanor had changed. The cool façade was back. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that…the whole 'favorite son' thing." Alex stared him down now, arms crossed. He'd been expecting something like this for a while, now that he'd essentially proven his skill. "You're right, of course…in hindsight, you've been right quite a few times. You are the better Trainer, Pokémon listen to you more than they do with me. You have a talent for this…and I should've helped you out a long time ago. I'm sorry."

Alex let his eyes soften. Eric had turned to him as he spoke, and Alex waved his words away. "You had your own pressures to deal with. I understand the fear of dad's wrath quite well. Even if you had gotten me a Pokémon or something…we both know what he would've done with it." He offered a hand then, and Eric went to shake it, but Alex shook his head. "Not like that. Here…"

He showed his little brother how men shared a sign of trust in Norstad, and then began regaling him with the tale of his adventure. He hadn't seemed too interested at first, shifting uncomfortably at his harsh words towards the Arceans, but after he mentioned a certain hammer-wielding 'God', Eric's attention was hooked.

Once they'd finished talking, the two brothers went home, and set about cleaning up the lab. Eric agreed to take over maintaining the PC dimensions holding their other Pokémon, something he'd been doing anyways since the Professor passed. They both avoided the basement. Alex did so because he still couldn't stomach the thought of his Gruncle rotting down there, Eric did so because he hated the stink of Leaf and dead human. Eventually he'd brought in their cousin Aria's Bellossom to fill the basement with a more tolerable odor, but without windows, it would likely hang around for a while.

The rest of the family welcomed him home, as Jess had used her charms to cut through their anger,
and explain why they'd needed to be away from Unova. What had started out as a trip that would take a few days had extended once Pravus had disappeared, and Nidhogg had woken up. His own parents were noticeably quiet, distant, and it took Alex a whole evening to realize they were avoiding him.

He guessed correctly that they were somewhat ashamed for holding him back for so long, something he'd confirmed after briefly sensing their thoughts, but he made no effort to forgive them for it. He'd spent most of his life ostracized thanks to them, a guilty conscience was the least they deserved. Twenty years, and a day. That was what he decided they could wait through, before he let the past go completely, and made any kind of attempt to reconcile.

He spent the next several days resting more, between bouts of training, alone in the lab's basement with Jess, and sometimes Eric. The door to his granduncle's room had been shut once more, and he had no desire to open it. He was more determined to fill the room with the stench of the Leaf, and after a few sessions with his Gruncle's old bong, the room returned to its usual odor. For him, at least.

He and his team had been home for a week when Leo discovered something that would once more further their journey. He'd been prowling through the barn behind the house, enjoying the unease he caused in the Tauros, Miltank, and Bouffalant. It was only right that prey should fear him, after all. That was when he noticed a pair of sad yellow eyes watching him from the rafters.

A quick sniff told him it was a Noctowl, and he briefly recalled hearing that his Trainer's now deceased relative had owned one. He was by no means the most articulate member of their little family, but he felt he should at least try to say something. Reaching out with telepathy was Arthur's domain however, so instead, he settled for 'Pokéspeech', the universally understood tongue that only Pokémon could truly speak.

"I heard of your loss, feathered one. You have my sympathy." The eyes blinked at his series of growls, and a voice echoed in his head as the Noctowl responded.

"Thank you…my partner had something for yours. Some…information. Papers. That sort of thing. He tasked me with passing it on before he…" The voice trailed off, and even Leo's usually cold hunter heart lurched for the sadness emanating from the bird.

Before he could try to comfort the Noctowl, it fluttered down from the rafters, a wooden box in one taloned foot. "Here." Came the voice again. "It is his. Now…leave me to my grief."

Leo moved towards the bird, and gave a low, rumbling purr as he nuzzled it. It was his kind's way of sharing affection, and the electrical current, while normally damaging to a flying type, only brought warmth then. The owl blinked again in thanks, and then flew out of the barn, and into the night. Leo then began the arduous task of trying to lift a large, square object with his fangs, but found his mouth too small. In this form, at least.

He mega evolved then, and picked the box up, lifting it easily. His actions did however, draw notice from his Trainer. He brought the box outside the old man's lab then, and soon, his Trainer appeared from within. The rest of his team were asleep, as only Leo ever prowled around at this hour. He dropped the box before Alex, and then let the power of the Electrium fade.

Alex gave the large cat a thorough scratch as he wiped the slime from the box, and opened it. Once he saw what was within, he walked into the abandoned lab, and took a seat in one of the lounging chairs by the back window. Inside was what the Noctowl had promised. Documents, yellow with
age, but atop them was a much newer device. A Holociever, the resulting combination of the Crosstransceiver and Lysander's Holocaster technology. Alex had one of his own of course, everyone over the age of thirteen usually did, but this one was the familiar mahogany brown of his Gruncle's.

His team had taken to lounging around outside their balls since coming home, and all of them focused as Alex got their attention. Terra and Hydrus woke from the naps they'd been taking in the puddle of mud they'd made just outside the lab. Shruikan opened one giant, yellow eye which was visible from the lab's window, and though he was otherwise occupied, Blaze paid as much attention as he could.

Arthur and Leo usually stuck by their Trainer. Arthur did so because he was fond of speaking with the other humans, especially the little ones, and Leo did so for much the same reason, though he was mainly after belly scratches and fond petting. Alex looked up at his Gallade, who had just taken a decent hit of the Leaf, and had put a sword-arm on his shoulder. The Holociever was, of course, capable of recording messages as well as sending them, and as Alex powered it on, his Gruncle's voice filled the room.

He heard dainty footsteps rushing up the stairs from the basement, and he looked up to see Jess. He paused the message, and started it over for her. He hadn't really listened anyways. He wiped away the tears in his eyes he hadn't even noticed had formed, and then played the message again, for them.

"Alex...by the time you hear this, I'll likely be gone. Cliché, I know, but it is the truth, and a sad one at that. I can only imagine what you've achieved in Norstad. Knowing you, it's something you're not ready for, but have already somewhat mastered." Alex fought down a laugh as the holo-image of the old man coughed and wheezed, then looked at the hand that had covered his mouth. He wiped the bloody smear on his coat absentmindedly, and continued on.

"I can only hope that what the Dragon taught you has helped you survive that barbaric land. And yes, I was the one who asked him to train you up. He thought you needed more time to mature, but I know better. I've seen how you get when you have new knowledge to devour. Just remember that not everyone is used to seeing supernatural power. Humans have a history of persecuting those with psychic abilities, so keep them secret, if you can." Judging by the Professor's smirk, he knew how well that would go.

The old man coughed again, and thumped his chest. He took a hit then, and Alex realized he'd recorded this in the very chair he now sat in. "Ah...I've so much to say...and not enough breath to say it. Good thing these silly devices don't have hard time limits." The bong in the image went away, and the Professor entwined his fingers. A serious look came over his old, haggard face, and Alex leaned in subconsciously. He knew that look. What came next was important.

"I don't need psychic power to guess that Pravus wormed his way away from you. He's escaped professional Pokémon Rangers with ease, and Fornia is essentially a fortress. Try not to dwell on it. I can say that if he did retreat, it's because he found a way to get what he wanted. Eternal life. Don't look so surprised, he's been after that for years." Jess chuckled then, as they had both looked surprised by the Professor's knowledge. "Listen. If he gets what he wants, then our species is doomed. Pravus has mastered the art of indoctrination through his cult, and once he has this continent, he'll move on to another. He already has roots in Sinnoh, but that's Japan's problem. Let their Champions handle it. You have more important things to do."

Alex raised a brow, but the Professor continued on, "In this box, and in my room, are several hundred hard documents that are essentially a record of what that bastard has done. You'd think anyone with a brain would burn that kind of information rather than record it, but that's just how
Arceans operate. They record *everything* so they can use it later. On their enemies, and their own. It's part of what keeps people in their cult. Blackmail and fear are powerful tools…and with them you can finally dismantle this foul cult.

A Noctowl flew into the scene then, and landed on the chair. The Professor gave him a scratch, pondering his words before speaking again. "I tried exposing the Arceans for what they were, and was labeled a pedophile because of it. But this isn't about my name anymore. After this latest attack, Unova has a good idea of what the Arceans are about, and that means the end-game is coming. Unova was never meant to be indoctrinated, it was always a scapegoat. A focus for loyal Arceans to center their hatred on. Ghetsis was supposed to lay the foundations for future conversion of Unovans, but you stopped that plan cold when you united the dragons. Now that Tao is back, Unova will never follow Pravus. He learned that the hard way when he captured Tao, and all but started a war."

The Noctowl hooted once, and the Professor nodded. "I'm getting to that, Soren." The old man shook his head. "I've already told Tao of this, and he assured me that Unova would be ready for a surprise invasion. He said he could rally the entire eastern coast if needed, but that remains to be seen. In any case, it's not where you're needed. You need to travel to Fornia, and expose this bastard for the slime he is. Without the support of his people, his empire will crumble. Pravus has always underestimated the value of his own supporters, and that is the weak point that you need to strike at."

The Professor made an imitation of a building falling with his hands. "Exposé Pravus beyond the shadow of doubt, and the entire thing comes crumbling down. The trick, as I'm sure you know, is getting Arceans to see, and believe, that their Prophet is a lunatic. I can only give you the tools lad. You'll have to figure out the rest. My advice? Start from the ground up. Most Arceans have never seen the PokéNet. They have no accurate idea of how the world sees their home. From their perspective, their cult is helping people all over the world, rooting out 'psychic warlords', and even curing 'drug addiction'." He demonstrated how effective that had been on him, by once more toking on his bong. "You'll understand how deep the indoctrination goes once you get to Fornia, and meet them. But don't give up on our western brothers. They may have the brains baked by all that sun and fire, but the people of the western regions were a part of what made the Dragon Empire so feared. If you intend to unite us, Hero of Unova, you'll need them on side too."

The Professor let out a hacking cough again, and frowned into his hand. Blood trickled from either side of his mouth, and he wiped it on his sleeve. "It seems my mortality is catching up with me, so I'll end this, and hope you return from your journey alive. I've recorded other messages on here, for the rest of the family. This is the last. Pass them on once you're done with this." Soren hooted again, and it was a low, mournful sound.

The Professor leaned back into the chair, and sighed. "I don't know what the future holds for you, lad. All I can do is help you with this enemy, but you need to understand something…there will always be another Pravus. Another madman, another power-hungry intelligent being bent on dominating the entirety of mankind. Knowing you, you're going to stop quite a few of them, but eventually, one of them will find a way to break you. This is a task too big for one Trainer, even a Champion, to handle alone."

Soren's eyes widened, but the Professor continued on, "The Pokémon League has a group of people within it, specifically, people who run things behind the scenes, and operate in the shadows against other, more…dark-minded people, in the same shadows. There's a reason only a limited number of Mewtwo clones were ever made. There's a reason there always happens to be a heroic Trainer at the right place, at the right time, to stop a disaster. Someday, this group is going to contact you, as they
did me, and when they do, I'm going to ask you to do something I told you never to do. Trust them. They may not be perfect, they're as human as we are, but they're the best hope for our race's future. At least in this old man's opinion."

The old man coughed again, and gave a weak smile to the camera. "I can't guide you on your future adventures…but they might be able to help. Good luck, lad…remember what I taught you…keep your greed in check…and don't spend too long mourning my wrinkled ass…I've lived long enough." He held up his right hand then, and split his pointer and middle fingers from his ring and pinky finger, making a V-shape as the thumb curled up against his hand. He winked. "Live long, and prosper." With that, the recording ended.

Alex choked back a laugh. Tears had started flowing down his cheeks, and his repressed emotions were rapidly demanding a release. "I can't…did he really just…ugh…he would go out on a note like that…nerdy old bastard…" He wiped his face dry, only to look up and see that Jess and Arthur had done the same.

"I…I do not understand his last sentence." Arthur said, tilting his head at his Trainer. He'd tried mimicking the symbol the old man had made, but it was hard to do with three fingers.

Alex laughed again. "Don't...don't worry about it." He shook his head, and met Jess' gaze. "Shall we have a look in the basement?"

He could see the worry she was trying to hide. She more than anyone could feel the emotional turmoil within him, but as always, his practiced stone-faced façade stayed passive and unreadable. Only his eyes gave him away, as he had to blink back more tears. "Sure…" she said, after a long moment, "Let's…see what the old nerd left for us."

Alex raised a brow towards her as the four of them headed into the basement. "Does that mean you're coming with me to Fornia?"

He knew the slap was coming, but didn't dodge it. It was a good distraction from the pain everywhere else. The back of his head still hurt, though, and he adjusted his hat. "Like you even have to ask. That old nerd should've predicted I'd be going too. Besides, I know how golden coast girls act around Trainers like you. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

The four approached the door, and as they entered the old bedroom, Leo snarled in disgust. It was faint, but the smell of decay still lingered. To his keen senses though, it seemed almost fresh. Alex gave him a pat. "Wait upstairs…but lend your eyes. I'll need them." Leo did as he was bid, and soon, the night hunter's vision became Alex's.

With a glance, he could now make out shuffling foot marks on the old brown carpet. The indentation on the bed where his granduncle had laid down. There were clues all around the room to his hiding spots. A hand on his shoulder brought his focus away from the bed, and to the closet instead. It had been opened recently, judging by the pattern on the floor, and he knew nobody but his favored relative had reason to go digging in there.

Within, he found a much larger cache of papers, and after a bit more searching, found back-ups as well. He personally wouldn't have hidden them all in the same room, but it was good enough. He dug through the first box, and at the bottom, found a folder labeled 'Elaine'. Within, he discovered why his granduncle had been so hel-bent on bringing the Arceans into the light, if not bringing them down entirely.
It was clearly a covert report, detailing the actions of one 'Doctor Ein' as he infiltrated a large soon-to-be-purchased hospital in New York City in an effort to collect more stem cells for Shadow infusion into Pokémon. Apparently, something had gone wrong while he was collecting from an unnamed 'female subject', but Alex could guess who they were talking about. The fools had even listed her room number, if not her name. Given the number was manually highlighted, Alex guessed his granduncle had known it was his wife's.

He shared what he'd found with Jess, and they both agreed then. These people needed to be stopped, or there would be more cases like Elaine's of collections gone wrong. For all they knew, there already had been. They hid the back-up caches away in different spots, and made digital copies as well. It was as they were finishing up that Alex decided to check his Gruncle's Holociever for other messages.

There were indeed more as his Gruncle had promised, including a smaller text based one for him, apparently. It read "Send these to their intended recipients lad. No peeking." There was one for everyone in the family, even his father, and he had to resist the temptation to open that one. He could only imagine what the old man had to say to him. He did as the note instructed, and knew it was likely to cause a stir in the main house.

Once everything was ready, Alex and Jess agreed that they'd need to leave at the start of the summer. That would give them time to finish school, study with the Sage a bit more, stock up on items, and prepare disguises to enter Fornia with. The last few days of their break went by swiftly, and though parting again was sad, it was made bearable by the fact that they could, if needed, reach out telepathically to each other, despite the distance.

Alex had an idea to solve the issue of distance, and after he'd helped her move into her room for the latter half of the semester, he began traveling south along the coast once more, heading for the Swamp.
Taunts, Tales, and Teleportation

Jinia Town - Transylveticut Region

The first thing Alex had done on his way south from his subtle return to his Alma mater was return home, to show Eric the cache of documents their granduncle had found on the Arceans. Once he'd read through several, including those detailing what had happened to to their aunt Elaine, Eric understood his brother's disdain for the group, and admitted he'd been skeptical about what Alex had told him a few days earlier about Norstad. It seemed like something out of a story, a cult that powerful, led by a man so blatantly evil, but he couldn't deny hard evidence when it was right in front of him. He still didn't buy into that bit about Thor though. The World Eater seemed believable enough, given what he knew of how those northern regions matched the power of Mega Evolution, and the size Shruikan had gained.

Eric had offered to go to Fornia as well, but Alex had convinced him to stay in Unova, to study, and run the lab instead. He also gave him a method of contacting Tao, and once he'd announced that the Redwood Lab was open again, something strange had happened. Applications from potential aides, who were really just students roughly Eric's age, came flooding in. Apparently, working at the lab of a Champion was a big deal, even if said Champion wasn't really running it. In fact, many people had started moving to Derrion Town, and the surrounding areas.

Curiosity about their region’s newest defender brought them, but they stayed for the gorgeous views, and clean air. Alex headed south again once he'd said his farewells to his family after a last home-cooked meal, and before he left his home region, he found Tao, who was helping to repair New Tork City, resting atop the Empire building. It was the tallest skyscraper in New Tork City, and gave a decent view of most of the Unova region's capital. From up there, the damage from the ‘civil war’ became easier to see. It had been extensive, and expensive. Saboteurs were also still an issue, as what few Arceans remained refused to give up on their Prophet's dream of bringing New Tork down.

Aside from that, Tao had things well under control. Rosa and Nate were busy hunting the cabal down, and the sly dragon had informed his Trainer that he'd ordered them to do so together because, once upon a time, he had helped Unovans find love, as well as balance. He had sensed that hunting the remaining Arceans would bring those two closer together. Hearing that from Tao had caused Alex to laugh for a full minute. Not just because after extensive discussion, Alex knew he had no conception whatsoever of what instinctual drive sparked most relationships, but because many Unovans had been waiting for that exact development. It was obvious to anyone that saw them together, except them, apparently. Hilda, he'd been told, had remained at the Plateau, and had a winning streak that was getting to be as long as his own. He'd rolled his eyes at that. He did actually lose battles. Sometimes. But never a six on six.

He asked the dragon what his infinite wisdom said about his own romantic entanglement, but the First Dragon refused to answer. That, was when Alex proposed a trade of information. He claimed to know why Tao was having such a hard time remembering the so-called 'dragon tongue', despite having access to Alex's knowledge of it, and also claimed he could solve said problem. In return for wisdom.

The dragon could easily tell when Alex was lying, but he'd agreed after a long few moments regardless. In this case, Alex wasn't bluffing. There was a benefit to being part psychic type, and sometimes, even Legendary Dragons needed an extra pair of eyes to see what their own could not.
Through their mental connection, Alex had sensed a block on what he assumed was Tao's speech center, buried deep in his brain, and locked by...something. He also sensed his new Voice could remove said block, and make the dragon even stronger. Had it been any other Legendary, he might've paused, but the last Pokémon he worried about having more power was Tao. He had always ruled fairly. There was a reason Arceus had placed him in charge of an entire continent.

Instead of shouting, Alex whispered a series of dragon-words into the ear slit of his white scaled friend, words relating to memory, blockage, and the recovering of such things. For a moment, the dragon's eyes turned half white, and half black, before swirling into a familiar circular pattern, and regaining their pure golden color. The dragon thanked his Trainer, as that particular memory block had been a result of being torn in three parts for thousands of years, and then haphazardly shoved back together as two thirds of a whole Pokémon several times. It was enough to scramble anyone's mind, and Tao had simply hadn't noticed the block upon regaining balance.

He also quickly demonstrated that, while Alex may have had the Voice of a dragon, the First Dragon's would always be superior. He did more with one word than Alex ever could, but then, that was par for the course with Legendary Pokémon. That word had been 'Yol', and the torrent of fire Tao shot into the air around them burned hotter than any Flamethrower.

What exactly he remembered of the past, he did not say. Instead, he addressed the knowledge Alex had wanted in regard to his own relationship. His response was thus: "To understand how I guide lovers to each other, you must first dismiss the fanciful nonsense your species has created around the entire institution. There is no such thing as a 'soul-mate'. The concept of 'souls' is an ancient, outdated, and entirely human one. The body and mind are always connected, not separate, and what affects one will affect the other. This is how all of existence functions. In Balance. This is why maintaining it is so important. Death. Un-death. Immortality." He grinned knowingly at his Trainer, who rolled his eyes. "They all affect the body and mind in different ways, but they affect both the body and the mind. One cannot be, without the other. Usually. The reality of my ability is simple. I use my Divine Sight to gaze into the...core...of a human, and then use my psychic abilities to divine something about their strongest, and closest, potential match. Then, I lead them to each other. The result is usually positive. But there are always exceptions. Sometimes, running across another strong match can tear the first apart."

He leaned down to his Trainer, his massive golden eye towering over him as his soothing psychic baritone thundered in his skull. "You will be hard pressed to find a better match than that of fire and dragon. Though she may not have the typing, yours is as fiery a human as I've ever seen. She burns brightest in your presence, and you in turn are fueled by hers. It is a rare match. Cherish it, for it will not come twice."

Alex pondered the dragon's words, and then finally bowed, thanking him for his insight. Evidently his opinion of Jessica Gladstone had risen during their training in his home dimension. It's not that he wasn't glad, he was more curious as to how he hadn't noticed, and then, slowly, he recalled the long hours he'd spent focused on perfecting his martial arts forms while his love and Tao had been off in the rock garden on top of the tower. He'd assumed they were meditating, but evidently, they'd talked as well. It hadn't seemed strange, as the dragon had often isolated them from each other when teaching.

Once Alex departed from the building, he continued on his way south, riding on Shruikan, who had never seen their home continent from the air. Not with his own eyes, anyways. The eastern coast of the States was, in a word, gorgeous. New Tork was not the only metropolis on the way south, but
Alex had no intention of going near a city. He got enough challenges from flying Trainers as it was. Something as unique as a Black Salamence would be mobbed in a foreign city. In Unova, the locals had quickly learned to associate the massive dragon with the Champion who rode on his back, clad in white. While many still wanted battles, far more often he was asked for autographs, or given Holociever numbers so he could set up future battles.

Jinia Town was the largest town on the eastern coast, and the last one of significance before the Swamp. Alex hadn't stopped there last time, as he'd been in a rush, but this time, he decided to pay a visit. He rode in atop Leo, though that didn't really do much to stay subtle. His golden-furred Luxray attracted almost as much attention as his giant black dragon. They stayed at the Pokémon Center that night, before heading further south towards the grassy plains north of the Swamp in the morning.

He soon discovered that he was not the only returning Trainer who wanted to continue south the next day. There were tons of other Trainers, some he knew from the last time he'd been down here. They had made it to the Sage. The vast majority however, had not, and were new Trainers who had been invited due to their skill, and not their station as Champion. Evidently, Oranguru had lowered the standards one had to meet to attempt to cross into the Swamp.

Not only that, but Alex soon discovered, over a bowl of Leaf with several other Champions, that these new Trainers were all given guides of some sort to the Sage himself, rather than wandering the Swamp aimlessly until they had a vision, or went mad from having too many. Eventually, Alex had, at the behest of the other primarily grass type Champions, singled out a girl, clearly from Unova, and used his 'natural charisma' to find out why she was here. Said charisma consisted of 'Hey', and the question 'What brings you down here?' He was clearly a wordsmith.

It was clear she recognized him, and she even claimed that they'd battled once, but after a few hundred road battles, the faces start to blur. She didn't seem to mind his lack of recognition, and answered his blunt question about her purpose for being here, claiming that she had come to learn from the Sage. He was half tempted to ask why she hadn't gone to Tao instead, but he had a feeling that was none of his business, and wisely avoided prying.

The returning trainees shared a look once Alex explained what he'd heard, and a few were understandably irritated. Getting to the Sage in the first place had been difficult for all of them, many had experienced their own personal hell as they'd relived past traumatic events, and come through them, again, unscathed. But now these new Trainers, not even Champions, were getting a free pass to an island that had been cramped with a few hundred humans. Now, there would likely be thousands.

They decided to head out at midnight, while the newbies slept, and found they weren't the only Champions with that idea. The returning students had figured space would be limited, and Arceus only knew how many had already reached the Sage. By the time their mixed group of flying types reached the Swamp's edge, the first light of dawn was filling the sky. Then, they saw her.

The purple-haired woman from their last exam was standing on the open plains before the Swamp, arms crossed, her Dragonite by her side. She waved down the group of twenty or so Champions, and once they landed, she began explaining what they'd evidently missed in the two months they'd been gone.

"I know many of you may have mixed feelings about these newcomers," she began, eyeing those who nodded at her words. Alex remained impassive, stone-faced. This woman had acted like a sifter before, separating the skilled from the unworthy. He had no doubt she was doing the same thing now. "Understand that they are here because they wish to learn from the Sage, and nothing else."
They will not be competing to become his top student, though they have that option, many have chosen to avoid potential death, and simply be guided to the Sage."

She looked ready to say more, but a familiar sound cut her off as a helicopter, blades whirring away with obnoxiously loud noise and wind, set down beside the group of Champions. They collectively groaned as they saw the symbol on the side of the machine, and Alex looked down, embarrassed. There was only one news network global enough to be interested in a story in this place. Naturally, they had a HQ in one of the largest tech-savvy cities on the planet. New Tork.

Thankfully, it wasn't John Crimson who stepped out of the chopper, but rather a woman, blonde hair, curves in all the right places. The men amongst the group eyed her openly. Some looked away quickly, fighting their instincts. Others did not. Alex just chuckled, as he recognized the woman who'd been summoned by Joey after his first attempt at an interview. He couldn't really blame the others for staring, her cleavage remained glorious, but he'd already developed an immunity. Praise Arceus.

The purple haired woman crossed her arms, and glared at the blonde. "We've already had this discussion. No."

The blonde frowned, and then turned her gaze to the crowd of Trainers, several of whom looked ready and able to 'assist' her in whatever way they could. A familiar feeling of 'oh shit' tingled up Alex's spine as he saw her eyes catch his hat, and then his face. She smiled, and waved obviously. "Champion! Alex Redwood! Remember me?" The group slowly turned to look at the white and black clad Trainer as Alex moved up to the two women.

The examiner eyed him with a severe look. "You know this…floozy?"

Alex gave the blonde a nod, and then met the examiner's sharp gaze. He had no earthly idea what a 'floozy' was, but knew a derogatory term when he heard one. "I do. She's from Unova. In fact, if it wasn't for her and her cameraman, I might never have run into Ghetsis at the PNN, Reshiram and Kyurem wouldn't have been freed, and Tao would not have been reunited."

The cameraman in question was, of course, Joey who had evidently stopped training at the Dragonspiral tower, and was now outfitted with a camera on his shoulder. His Raticate had a similar device strapped to its back. The symbol of balance remained on his t-shirt, and his shorts, as always, remained the same. He grinned, and waved over-excitedly at Alex as he saw him. Alex waved back, smirking. He knew how badly Joey was crushing on his coworker. Evidently Tao had guided him, as well.

The purple-haired proctor looked between the three of them, and then settled on Alex. That same nervous feeling returned. He had no idea why this woman always put him on edge. "They want access to the Sage, so they can…'document' his training with their devices."

At that, Alex frowned. The last thing they needed at the compound was the distraction of being on live TV. Especially with so many new, untrained recruits. He turned to the blonde then, and met her gaze evenly. "Go home, Haley. I'll give you a story when I come back, but this…this place isn't for the modern world. There's no PokéMart in there. It's literally just a Swamp. A girl like you wouldn't last five minutes in there. The Krokoroks here are human eaters."

"And this clearly dangerous Swamp is taking in thousands of skilled Trainers." Haley countered, "The world has a right to know where their loved ones are disappearing to."
Alex nodded. "It does. I agree, but this is something to learn about after the training is done. Not during it. You have my word, exclusive interview. With you, not John Crimson. But only after we're done in here. It could take a while, though, so you should go home, and find a better story. Like where the Swords of Justice have run off to."

She raised a manicured brow at him. "What, they've disappeared?"

He raised a not-so-well-kept brow at her. "Nobody has seen them since that Beheeyem invasion fiasco. Anywhere. They're not around Unova. If you really want to give people a story, find out where they've gone. We could've used their aid this year, no?"

The blonde nodded, sighed, and then snapped her fingers. "Joey, we're going home." She glanced back at Alex as she left, and he resisted watching anything but the back of her head. The view was, of course, glorious, but he had never been an 'ass man' as his fellow males so eloquently put it. He had endeavored to understand all aspects of the great mystery that was the female gender. "You'd better keep your word, Champion."

"When have I ever not?" Alex said as the chopper began taking off again, and headed north. He sighed. "Bloody reporters…"

"They're not the only ones to try to enter." The woman said, once they could hear themselves think. "But I do appreciate you getting rid of them. They've been pestering me for two weeks."

"You were about to tell us something else…?" Alex prompted, smirking.

The purple haired woman brought her plain wooden staff down towards his head. By pure instinct, he caught it, and she seemed genuinely impressed. "Not bad. You've improved."

Alex smirked. "I try."

The staff spun with a blur, and he grunted as it slammed into his stomach. He'd seen it coming, but he wasn't nearly fast enough to block it. He was however, fast enough to tighten his abdominals to take the hit. It had moved past his guard far too easily. "Do. Or do not." The woman said, smirking down at him.

"There is no try…" The Champions groaned, in unison. It was a lesson Oranguru had drilled into all of them. Painfully.

"Right, listen up!" She began again, pushing Alex back to the front of the crowd. "Things are a lot different this time around. For you veteran disciples, you have the chance to gain access to the air space over the Swamp." The Trainers shared a look. More than a few had been shot down by absurdly powerful Hyper Beams because they'd tried flying. "Don't worry, our snipers know who to target, and who to let pass…of course, this gift does not come free." She grinned down at them, and Alex noticed it was similar in many ways to the way Leo grinned at his prey before pouncing. He felt the large cat's ball hum on his belt. Evidently that was a compliment.

"To gain access to flight in the Swamp, your task is very simple." The woman gestured to her Dragonite. "Beat him, and you may fly with the best." The Champions murmured again. This woman had been absent during their first stay here, but the few times she had appeared, usually after shooting down a student breaking the 'no flying' rule, she'd let her Dragonite battle some of the more eager Champions with their own dragons.

While the absurdly proportioned dragon looked silly, its power had been monstrous. On the level of
the Sage, or at least very close to it. It had taken down renowned dragon types with a single blow, usually a Dragon Claw. Naturally, this had made everyone even more uneasy in her presence. Alex stepped forward, smirking. "Challenge accepted. One on one?"

The purple haired woman grinned. "No substitutions. Will you be using your Charizard? Or perhaps that lumbering black beast you rode in on?" Blaze and Shruikan immediately began arguing, via their telepathic link, over who would fight the Dragonite. Blaze had seen it first, but Shruikan needed the battle experience. They were silenced and shared their surprise with the examiner as Leo sprang forth from his ball, and snarled at the Dragonite.

The woman raised both eyebrows, and walked towards the Luxray, who was sparking with electricity already. "I didn't know you had such a…fierce warrior on your team…oooh…his eyes are…uncannily similar to yours, actually." She said, looking up at Alex, comparing the two.

Alex smirked, and his normally blue eyes turned red and gold. "They are, aren't they? I like his colors, too. Black and gold just…it just works."

The look of awe at his Luxray's coloring faded, but the smirk remained. It was his turn to unnerve her with his gaze, and though she'd never admit it, a chill went up her spine. Those eyes had fire in them. "Dragonite. Go." She gave the command once she returned to her side of the imaginary field they were using. There would be no 'ring outs' here.

Leo's form had begun to glow as she'd walked back, and the two fliers on their team protested. Leo had fought Kurama after all, and this Dragonite deserved to face a dragon. Leo roared as his saber-toothed Mega Form crouched down into a battle stance. "He who strikes first, gets the meal…" Leo's mental voice growled to the other two. Alex chuckled, and his two overeager battlers quieted. It was too late to change now.

Seeing his opponent had mega evolved, the Dragonite glanced at his Trainer. She shook her head. Alex fought down his disappointment. He hadn't seen a Dragonite's Mega Form, and Dragonium crystals were exceedingly rare. If anyone had one though, it would be a Trainer like this. He smirked at her. "Not a wise choice. Leo's Mega Form is…deadly."

The purple woman rolled her eyes. "You'll excuse me if I'm not intimidated. He may have a unique color, but I'll bet he's spent most of his life fighting flying and water types. He's never faced down a Dragonite." Alex just shook his head. A Black Salamence was, in his opinion at least, far deadlier than a Dragonite, and Leo often sparred with Shruikan.

Leo snarled at the woman's words, and she raised a brow. His new form's mane was, unlike his normal one, sleeker, though it extended under his jaw as well, not unlike a Pyroar's. Electricity shot through it, and it flared out. There was, in truth, a reason Alex had let his proud cat take the lead again. None of his team were as good at night battling, and though the sun was coming, the night was still their ally.

The Dragonite assumed the battle was on, and launched forward, its fists encased in fire and lightning, one claw for each. Alex frowned, as Leo dodged the fire one. The electric claw hit, and he snarled in surprise and pain. Usually such attacks didn't damage him much, but then his Trainer realized, these weren't actually punches. Fire and electric type energy had covered the dragon's true attack, Dragon Claw.

He saw the purple haired woman moving her mouth, but no sound came out. The electric claw
turned to ice, and he swore as he and Leo reached the same conclusion. She knew the dragon
tongue. Normally, he didn't use it in battles, as it put a target on his back, and was unfair against
Trainers who couldn't power their partners up with their Voice. He did much the same with
telepathy, though he kept their battle strategy silent, only shouting moves verbally.

He whispered his own words, and the sky darkened again, as dark, ominous clouds rolled in from
seemingly nowhere. His Luxray grinned, and melted into the much heavier shadows as an Ice Claw
sliced through an apparition of his form. Then, like the night hunter he was, Leo came out of the
shadows from seemingly nowhere, his massive saber-teeth wreathed in lightning. They sank into the
Dragonite's bulky leg, and then the cat disappeared just as quickly.

The woman frowned, but said nothing about his tactics. As far as using the Voice went, augmenting
one's Pokémon was more of a legitimate rule violation than changing the weather. Plenty of
Pokémon did that anyways, just by appearing. Leo struck again, this time with his claws. He and
Alex had discovered that his bones were actually quite good at conducting electricity, and since his
claws had the same composition as his teeth, they'd figured out how to use an entirely new move.
Thunder Claw, they called it. He was still getting the hang of it without mega evolving, but in this
form, Leo had no issues controlling his elemental typing.

Three red gashes appeared across the Dragonite's chest, and it roared in frustration, then glanced
back suddenly at its Trainer. It nodded once, and Alex knew they were shifting strategies. "Careful,
Leo…use a distance attack this time."

While Leo much preferred physical attacks, his special ones were just as strong. He agreed with his
Trainer, and did as ordered. He didn't take opponents this strong lightly. A bolt of Thunder arced
down from the sky, and the Dragonite hissed as he dodged it. The searing plasma had struck his tail,
but it was a minor wound.

Suddenly, the woman shifted her head, right towards where Leo was hiding. Alex had enough time
to swear, and his lithe cat was already moving in the shadows, but they might as well have been in
slow motion.

The Hyper Beam tore across the grassy plains they were battling upon, and hit Leo directly. He
began panting, and winced. It had hit his bulky abdomen, namely the muscles, and while nothing
was broken, he'd almost been taken out in a single hit. He he not been in his Mega Form, he would
not have held on, but a sliver of strength was all he needed for a counter attack.

The Dragonite was panting as well, and Leo took the chance to hit him directly with a Thunder. That
was the downside of Hyper Beam. Monstrous power, but it left a Pokémon unable to dodge, or
attack for a moment. In a battle like this, that was a dangerous strategy. Evidently, the examiner had
expected it to take Leo down.

She reached the conclusion the same time he did. Alex could see it on her face. The next hit would
decide this, and he knew what move she'd be using. "Hold your breath…” Alex said, watching her.
"She found you somehow, last time. Shield your mind, and hold your breath. Don't move."

Moments passed, as the Dragonite waited, a smirk that mirrored his Trainer's on his face. Alex
growled softly. They were waiting for him to strike, but, they didn't know where Leo was. He
hoped. "Use it." He finally said to his partner. They might as well try. Their spherical Taijitu attacks
had stopped Hyper Beams before, after all.
Leo powered up the Electro Ball, and Alex's Electrium flared from within his pocket. Leo would provide the dark type energy, as in this form, it was a part of him. The examiner narrowed her eyes. She had once mentioned her distaste for 'Z-Moves,' after thrashing a particularly cheeky trainee on one of the rare times she'd visited. He had a feeling she didn't consider his new variant any better.

---

Darkness formed one half of the condensed ball, and the Electrium flared, powering the other half. Leo swirled the energy in his maw, condensing it. That, more than anything, was what made these moves so deadly. Unfortunately, they were also a bit flashy.

The Dragonite leapt into the air and hovered there on his tiny wings as the Hyper Beam built in his own maw, and Alex suddenly had an idea. Leo growled, but affirmed that he could at least try to do it.

The sky boomed, and had the clouds not been overhead, Leo likely would've had a much harder time calling electricity down from it. Especially while he was trying to use a complicated move. The Thunder attack slammed into the Dragonite, and it gave a pitiable whine as the electricity struck its wings.

---

The Hyper Beam shot at Leo then, and seemed to make contact, but after the smoke cleared, only a crater remained. Leo appeared behind the Dragonite then, not dissimilar to the way a Greninja did. The dual-typed Electro Ball was smaller than he could make it if he had time to properly focus and prepare, but it was still quite powerful. Powerful enough to slam into the Dragonite, and send it spinning into the soft earth below them.

When the dust cleared, a crater with horizontal swirling patterns surrounded the fainted Dragonite, who was lying on the bottom. Leo landed, and let his Mega Form fade as he trotted towards his Trainer. Alex fed him one of his preferred treats, and the large cat purred, then rolled on his back, expecting a belly rub.

Alex obliged him, smirking, even as he felt the static charge run up his arms, and make his hair flair out. It was curly, so often it was deceptive as to how much he actually had up there, but when he pet his electric lion, it became quite obvious. He needed a trim. "How did you keep dodging, anyways?" Alex said, speaking mentally to his large cat. "You looked like that Zoroark for a minute."

Leo didn't respond for some time, during which the purple-haired examiner healed her partner, and made her way towards the two. "I did what the fox did. Used dark energy to make an approximation of my image that's so lifelike, it can fool the eyes of a Luxray. I call them Shadow Clones."

He purred as Alex broke into a laugh. "No. Just…no. Call them Anything but that. Please." Leo rolled onto his stomach then, purred against his Trainer, and tapped his ball's button with his nose. He rather enjoyed the inside of his Pokéball, and he'd earned a nap. And he was definitely still calling them Shadow Clones. Alex sighed. Felines.

Looking up, Alex noticed the examiner waiting for his focus to return, and once he stood, she spoke. "Well done…I admit, I didn't think you had a chance. Not without your Charizard, and a type advantage. You've improved while you've been away."

Alex nodded. "I got some training from Tao and my Rayquaza…who should be here by now…but yea. I went to Norstad, too. Saved the world. Met some Legendary Pokémon."

She gave him a smirk, and that feeling of nervousness returned. "So basically, the same thing every
Alex smirked. "It really is the best job in the world."

A smile cracked the usually stone-faced woman, and she gestured to the Swamp behind her. "Fly on in. The others know not to shoot you down."

As he stood atop his massive dragon's head, holding onto a head-spike that was taller than him, he could see he needn't have worried about Shruikan being able to fit in the Swamp. The Swamp's trees were gargantuan. They might leave a dragon-sized hole in the canopy wherever they descended, but he should be fine battling.

The air above the Swamp was, surprisingly, full of Trainers. Evidently, he really wasn't the only one who'd improved. The examiner had demonstrated early in their training that they had no chance against her, something the usually proud Champions had not accepted until they'd actually lost to her. Alex had been no exception. Now, it seemed, many had passed the test to earn the right to fly. He sensed many more Trainers below, as they flew over.

There were likely some who assumed they could follow the guides to the Sage without attracting attention, but Alex knew better. He'd spent three months in this Swamp, and had learned early on that the Swamp did what the Swamp wanted. There were no shortcuts to the Sage, not for those who, like the other Champions, had come to try and become his honored student.

Shruikan, as always, gathered looks wherever he flew, and thanks to his size, they created a swathe through the many flying types in the air. More than a few looked irritated enough to attack, but a glare from the massive dragon usually made them think otherwise. Deciding to check on his 'home' first, Alex had the large dragon descend on the western side of the Sage's Isle, only to find that his home away from home was occupied.

Alex felt Arthur's irritation rising, and sighed. He also spotted Red, and figured he could let the second most well-known Trainer in the world give a chance to explain why his Mewtwo was sitting atop his wrecked home. The cat-like psychic type was meditating in the midst of the ruins of their little 'house' that had been made of wood, bark, and no small number of vines. A psychic barrier encircled the meditating Pokémon, who had evidently landed on the roof, and then pushed it downwards, demolishing everything.

It was repairable, but it would never be the same. Hydrus was just as irritated as Arthur, and as the rest of his team noticed, all except Terra were genuinely mad that their sleeping space had been crushed by the Pokémon arrogant enough to claim to be as strong as Arceus. Red's Mewtwo was something of a legend, and after Blaine had passed on and given his ball to Red, the only Trainer he trusted with Mewtwo, the psychic type had grown…vocal. And disobedient. There was a reason Red usually kept him in his ball.

As Shruikan landed, he snarled at the meditating Pokémon, who opened one eye, and then the other as he did a double take. "You're going to pay for crushing our home…" Shruikan's snarls only made the Mewtwo smirk, and Alex patted his horn, before leaping down.

"Peace, Shruikan…" he said, speaking to the dragon's mind. "This is Arthur's fight…"

The dragon grumbled, but spoke to their Gallade. "Make sure my words ring true, sword-hands."

As if in response, Arthur popped free of his ball. He'd been quiet on the trip south, and Alex knew
Xerneas' words still rang in his head. The Sage knew who he was. Why had he not told him? That thought had steadily grown more and more irritating. Thus, now that they were finally here, he was ready for some answers, and was in no mood to deal with Red's Mewtwo.

Blue psychic power surrounded Arthur as he walked up to Mewtwo, who blinked in irritation as the Gallade marched through his Barrier with ease. Arthur stared him down, his face an inch from the genetic Pokémon's. "Get. Out. I won't ask nicely again." There was a low 'oooo' sound from the few Trainers besides Red that had come to, evidently, see what the Mewtwo would do next.

Red came up to Alex who was already moving towards the two psychic types. "I'm sorry, he just... he randomly popped free of his Pokéball a few minutes ago and vanished. Then I found him here. I have no idea why he's doing this..."

The Mewtwo gave his Trainer a brief, irritated glance. "This does not concern humans. Go away. This is between me, and the little prince. The Dragonslayer." Mewtwo smirked again, and before anyone could blink, he was suddenly sent flying to his right, and everyone else's left. Arthur's Night Slash was humming, and radiating dark type energy.

He glared towards the hole in the foliage the Mewtwo's body had caused. "I told you to get out." His right arm, the arm which had struck first, was shaking, and Alex blinked as he sensed his Gallade was dangerously close to losing himself to rage. Where had that come from?

Given that their telepathy was being broadcast audibly, everyone noticed how mad Arthur looked. Around the compound he'd been, by far, the most active of Alex's team. Sparring every day, with humans, Pokémon, anyone really. He'd trained relentlessly, as he had been convinced that he was their team's weak link at the time, due to his inability to mega evolve. That was no longer the case now, though.

This Mewtwo in particular had often mocked the Gallade, 'sparring' with him in his Mega Form, which gained the fighting type. Arthur had withstood the verbal abuse though, and kept his cool, something everyone had admired. The Gallade's noble demeanor and nickname had only irritated Mewtwo, and Arthur had become the focus of his irritation on a daily basis. It had been good training, but the harsh words often struck a nerve he had, until now, ignored.

The other Champions around the area, evidently brought by Red, or just curious to see what his Mewtwo was doing, all visibly flinched as the genetic Pokémon's voice rang through the area. "So... you've gotten proper training..." The two sides of the Mewtwo-sized hole in the foliage were wrenched apart with psychic power. His eyes were shining blue, and the Mewtwo approached Arthur slowly, levitating above the ground.

The gathered Trainers, Alex included, winced again as the Mewtwo turned his gaze towards Red, lifted the human into the air, and forcibly drew a Mega Stone from his bag. They all knew which one it was. Mewtwo raised a finger, and Red's keystone activated the Mewtwonite X. He sighed contently, as he finished mega evolving, and flexed his larger muscles as he landed before the Gallade. "Go on then, little prince. Hit me with everything you have. Make your dead mother proud."

Arthur's eyes flared blue, and the area between the two psychic types began to break apart as each one called on their power. Sparks flared as their auras brushed against each other. Arthur did not mega evolve however, despite being given the chance to do so. Mewtwo's eyes narrowed, and he began to form a sphere of black energy between his palms. Arthur did the same, and his sword arms
were glowing gold.

The gold light formed a similar orb between his palms as he condensed the energy into a sphere he knew his opponent could not match, and though Mewtwo's grew darker as he poured more of his awesome power into it, Arthur's only grew brighter.

"ENOUGH!"

The force of the psychic shout disrupted Mewtwo's concentration, but Arthur's held fast. He gave his opponent a grim smirk as the Aura Sphere Mewtwo had been forming vanished without his focus. The Foggy Swamp Sage descended through the canopy above them, staring down each fighter, before focusing on Arthur, who had kept the shining ball of power between his hands. "I said that's enough, Arthur…"

The Gallade seemed to growl, but then paused as a single, massive claw rested on his shoulder. Shruikan brought his head down to the Gallade's level, and met his gaze, blinking once. Arthur sighed, and let the energy go.

The Sage sighed, and pointed at Red, specifically one of his Pokéballs. A red light shot at the Mewtwo, who seemed ready to attack the Sage, but was forcibly returned to his ball instead. It shook violently, but the Sage's deep pinkish aura of psychic power kept it shut. He turned his gaze to the Gallade, and his Trainer.

"You two. Come with me."

Alex gave a nod, and bowed, but the Sage had vanished with what he assumed was Teleport. He let the rest of his team out of their balls, and then turned to Red. "They're going to start reconstructing my home. Help them out, if you can, hmm?" He gestured to his wrecked hovel. "This is partly your fault." Red simply nodded, keeping the brim of his hat covering his face.

Arthur gave Red a pat on the shoulder before following Alex. "I know that I blame your Mewtwo for this. I know you wouldn't do something like this with no provocation. You're a good Trainer. One of the best, in fact. Many have failed to tame a Mewtwo. Don't let this incident keep you from trying. You'll reach him…eventually." Red met the Gallade's gaze for a moment, and then nodded.

The walk to the Sage's chamber would take several minutes, and Alex spoke quietly to his Gallade as they moved. "Are you okay? I've never seen you that angry…"

The Gallade flinched, a frown on his usually happy face. "I…I just…I have no excuse. I lost control, for a moment…I let his words get to me…"

Alex stopped, and faced his Gallade, putting a hand on each shoulder. "Anyone would have. I know how much you liked meditating in your room, and I know my own emotional turmoil hasn't helped with yours."

Arthur looked up, at that. "That's no-"

Alex cut him off. "We've had a rough week, my friend. Focus on the positive. Nobody got hurt, and you kept your head, in the end. Which is good because that attack, which was incredibly cool, would've seriously hurt an Oranguru."

Arthur looked down again, and sighed. "I don't know what it was…I just used Sacred Sword and
pooled the energy…"

Alex smirked. He'd thought that's what had happened. "We'll work on it. Now let's go."

The Sage's compound was, they realized, much larger now. Several more dorm buildings had been added, and several others were yet being built, just to accommodate all the new people. There was even a second mess hall, built onto the side of the first.

The Sage's chamber seemed unchanged, at least. They found him where he usually was, meditating in his wooden bowl-throne, perfectly balanced upon one of Swamp Tree's roots. Alex reached out to the tree, grinning. "Hey, Swamp Tree."

"Redwood, my man. Welcome back."

The tree's voice was as casually chill as it always was. "Thanks Swamp Tree. How've you been?"

A hint of sarcasm entered the tree's voice as it responded. "Pretty good, you know, pretty good. I've just been sitting here for two months. Being a tree. Winters over, so that's good. I love spring. It makes me grow taller."

"Yea?" Alex said, resisting a chuckle. "Do you ever, y'know, consider maybe not growing? You're already pretty large, Swamp Tree."

"Asking a tree not to grow is like asking the sun not to shine, Redwood. Trees gotta do what a trees gotta do." Even the Sage was smirking now, though Alex could tell he was trying to hide it. "You're one to talk. Look at you. Last I saw you, you could barely lift a pebble. You were smaller, too. What happened?"

"I'll tell you all about it." Alex said, as he walked up to the throne, and bowed. Arthur did the same.

The Sage opened his eyes, examined his student, and raised a brow. "So. A dragon. Well, nobody saw that coming, I'm sure." He shifted his gaze to one of the rafters in the hall, and the lead Passimian guard dropped down, and reluctantly handed over a very large, very juicy looking Sitrus fruit.

Alex had a feeling he'd just seen the conclusion of some sort of berry bet. The Sage split the fruit in half, and offered some to Alex, who broke his piece in half, and gave some to Arthur. They munched quietly, sitting together as Alex recounted their adventures in the land of ice and snow.

"So. Tao trained you to use your psychic powers, did he." Alex nodded, and the Sage sighed. "Well, he didn't teach you anything too damaging, so that's something. Besides, you showed control in Norstad. You could have that region worshiping you as a dragon-god hero, but you didn't stay."

Alex nodded again. "Norstad's better off being led by a hero of their own. And, Jess was better at using her powers. She surpassed me during our training. She also had help from her partner. Mine refused to teach me anything because you forbade him from doing so."

"For good reason," the Sage mumbled, "You had yet to unlock the other half of your potential. Now, we can move forward. Arthur, consider my ban lifted. Teach him whatever he wants."

Arthur smirked, as did his Trainer. "With respect master," he said, "I think you already know what he wants. He's determined to learn it from you, and if I'm honest…it's been a while. I've kind of
forgotten how…and I wouldn't have the first clue about teaching it to a human…"

The Sage raised a brow, and looked between the two. "Why? What does he wish to learn now?"

Alex's smirk widened. He'd been shielding his thoughts, and it was nice to know the Sage hadn't pried, though he had no doubt his mental defenses would be no match for his power. "I want to Teleport, master. It seems like something that could be incredibly useful, to a Trainer. Especially one with a power base to manage."

The Sage tossed the last of the fruit into his mouth, and raised a brow. "How?" It was weird, seeing his mouth occupied, and yet hearing him speak, undeterred by it.

Alex blinked. "Well, for one thing, I could continue my duties as Champion, and study here."

The Sage nodded, and then a look of understanding came over his face. "I see what you're after…it also lets you visit your woman. And anywhere else you can remember. Hmmmm." The large Pokémon stroked his chin, which had a respectable white-furred beard on it. "Very well. I see no reason to keep you from such a skill. You have proven that you can handle power. I'll expect you to bring her here, for training. If what you say about Pravus is true, she will need it as well, before you venture to Fornia."

Learning to Teleport wasn't exactly difficult, as he was, after all, a psychic type. It was an ability most of them had, and one Arthur was glad to remember. It would be incredibly useful in a battle. The trick, as the Sage showed them, was to tap into the global field of energy surrounding their planet, and use their psychic power to move along it. It was, in actuality, quite simple. All you needed was a clear image of your imprinted destination, though Alex soon realized, he could only go to places he'd already been, and remembered quite well.

That was fine, as it gave him a reason to travel the world. He'd gone back to his room once he'd gotten the hang of it, and while there, grabbed extra clothes, and shoved them into his bag. His shirt, pants, and robe didn't really need washing since they were clothes from Tao's world, but having extra underwear was always a good thing. He appeared back in the Sage's hall, grinning like a child. "This…is amazing. Thank you, master." He bowed low.

The Sage seemed amused that the human was so glad to get underwear. Naturally, the Sage didn't need any. Teleportation was something most unevolved psychic types did with ease. Seeing a human use it was interesting, but his student had no issues picking it up. Once he'd done it successfully, he had the move down. "Remember there's a limit to how many times you can use it. Don't forget. Or you'll have to spend time resting wherever you end up."

Arthur glanced at his Trainer once he sat back down, and Alex nodded. "Master, there's something else…when Xerneas thanked us for saving her, and her home, she told Arthur about his origins…or rather, she told him that you knew of them."

The Sage sighed, but shifted his gaze to the Gallade, who was looking down at his crossed legs. "She was correct. Since the moment you arrived, I had a feeling, but seeing you both now…it's clear my instinct was spot on. I did not tell you because…the situation is…complicated."

Arthur looked up at the Sage. "Who am I?"

Oranguru usually prided himself on being emotionally distant. Unattached. Wise. But seeing this Gallade, the sadness in his eyes, the lack of understanding…it moved him in ways he thought he'd
been immune to. "Settle in, both of you." The Sage said, "This is going to be a long story…"

"Arthur, you hail from the land known as Albion. I'm sure you've heard of it. Small, just north of the Galar region. It's a nice place, really. Rolling fields of green, kind people, the weather is terrible, but then, that's just a part of living there. In actual fact, Albion is where your species first originated from, though you've all spread out over the eons. Your ancestral roots are in Albion, and you, young Arthur, were likely born there." The Gallade looked ready to respond, but stayed quiet. He needed to hear this.

"As I said…the situation in Albion is…complicated. Fragile. You see, the humans of that land have lived there for uncountable millennia, but, unlike any other society on the planet, they actually allowed Pokémon to rule over them, and hold positions of governmental power. Specifically, your line, Arthur. You are, in my best guess, the Lost Prince of Albion."

Arthur blinked. "What…? I…hmm…tell me about my mother."

The Sage nodded. "Your instinct serves you well. Several years ago, there was…a shift in the balance of Albion's power. A group of humans, for no discernible reason, rose up against you and your family. I know for a fact that your line always ruled with the inherent grace and kindness your species is so naturally imbued with. These humans though…they had a benefactor. A woman in the shadows, pulling their strings. She became Queen once your mother was forced to run, with a Houndoom on her heels."

Alex broke in then. There was only one quartet that could possibly fill that role. "The Swords of Justice…but they've-"

"Disappeared." Oranguru said, nodding. "I am aware. I know this much, young Arthur. Your mother fell to the hands of this group that hunts you, even now. I also know that shortly after she died, the Swords went missing. When you return to Unova, go to their grove. That is where my Future Sight led my gaze when I meditated on this. If there are answers, you will find them there."

The Gallade glanced at his Trainer, and Alex nodded. There was no question. Arthur was going to the Grove immediately, to remember what he'd forgotten. He Teleported away, and Alex sighed at his master. "He never stops."

The Sage smirked. "I know. I wonder who he gets that from."

Later that night, as Arthur handled his business, Alex returned to his 'home' to find that Terra had seriously outdone himself with reforging their hovel. The design was essentially the same, but the combined mastery of the earth and water that made up the Swamp from Terra and Hydrus allowed it to be molded in ways humans could never dream of achieving. Not without years of work. It was even big enough for Jess, and had passable shelter from the rain that would no doubt come as
summer approached.

He recalled his tired team, amazed at their work. Blaze and Leo had also helped sculpt the stone, so everyone was thoroughly exhausted, which was perfect, because Alex had a feeling his belt wouldn't be on all night.

He was finally free to Teleport wherever he wished. His possibilities were limitless. He went to Alola first, and bumped into Percy at a restaurant their family had visited on an earlier trip. Percy suggested he get something for his lover, and deciding to actually trust the fairy type, he let his random, wandering gaze, and the universe, guide him. It was a trick he'd picked up from Tao, and was often a good way to make decisions his conscious mind focused too hard on. Once his eyes read the familiar, and hilarious words on the random package they'd settled on behind the counter, Alex knew what he'd be getting her.

"Thanks for the Tapu Cocoa." Jess said, smirking. He'd returned to the lady's dorm, only to find that her new roommate had invited her boyfriend as well. Naturally, Alex had enough to share.

Her roommate smirked. "Yes, thank you…it's seriously good." She pouted at her partner. "He never gets me anything."

Jess buried her face in his chest suddenly, and she stifled a giggle fit as Alex nonchalantly sipped his drink, and said, "I know what the ladies like." The boyfriend, whose name he hadn't been told, nodded, as he got the joke. Alex chuckled as well.

They'd Teleported away then, as upon hearing he could take her anywhere, his better half had demanded to see Lumiose again, namely because she needed to shop, or something. He didn't mind. The great thing about Kalos, he discovered, was that everyone was ready to battle, and with Mega Evolution. Those battles were always interesting. Especially since he was down to Hydrus and Terra, whose stamina was quite impressive. Everyone else was still tired from constructing their home again.

Alex and Jess gave themselves three months, before they headed out for Fornia, as upon prodding its outer defenses they had learned the Professor had been correct. Fornia was a fortress, and entering it was not simple, even for Arceans. Training in the Swamp by day, and adventuring at night Alex was battling tons of Trainers, and seeing many battle styles. More than once, a wandering blackbelt had even challenged him to a battle of martial arts, and not Pokémon.

Arthur, after returning from his Grove adventure, informed his Trainer that there were many Gallade who were considered great knights in the Pokémon Leagues throughout the States. For a reason he kept private, he wanted to travel to those Leagues, and battle those Gallade. Having read the same legends Arthur had, Alex could guess why.

The Sage had been right, as always. His species had a thing for tournament battling. Shruikan and Blaze helped expand the number of places they could Teleport to, by the day. Alex was making a trail essentially, slowly reaching ever closer to Fornia. It was impressive just how massive the continent was, and he knew once he got in range of Fornia that he'd be battling Leagues all the way back to the Swamp. He wasn't trying to become Champion, but he did have a series of 6 on 6 wins against the Champions he came across.

Jess was with him, of course, and despite being trained by Alex, Arthur, and even Delphi, she just couldn't grasp how they used Teleport. She'd the hardest time grasping the universal energy web that she was supposed to reach out to, and move along. She hadn't realized just how connected she was
to the planet at large, and Alex teased her for it all the time. Being a rancher, he'd always known he was a part of larger, interconnected web of life.

One night, they'd visited Percy, who'd heard about Jess' inability to learn Teleport. He gave them Tapu Cocoa, and had then told Jess that the key to understanding teleportation was understanding how every living thing was connected, and tapping into that web to move through space. He'd finished his lecture with the words "Life needs life, to live." She giggled for a moment, pondered them, and then blinked away. Moments later, she returned, still smirking.

Once she learned how to Teleport, Alex brought her towards the Swamp, as instructed. She was eager to learn, of course, but with their new ability to be literally anywhere at any time, they'd been rather distracted on the way down.

With sudden access to places the world over, Alex felt less guilty about catching multiple partners. Being able to Teleport, and only needing four hours of sleep, meant he could finally train his other partners, or at least tell his cousins to let them out. It was summer, after all. He'd found the right evolutions for each of the Eevee he'd caught together, and once they were all trained up, he set them to guard the ranch from their tree-home in the nearby forest. With powerful moves learned by way of TM, and perfected with training.

At first, the proud group of genetic variants claimed to have better things to do, then they'd realized just how many reporters, tourists, rabid fans, and even wild Pokémon came around the Redwood Ranch lately, and would, if ignored, trample the wild Pokémon's homes. More than once a Pokémon intelligent enough to pay attention to human media had sought him out, for training. Sometimes they wished to be caught, other times, they left after learning to incorporate elements of the Dragon Style into their battles. His eeveelutions grew stronger as they battled off more and more people, but the two that shone strongest were his Espeon and Umbreon. He wasn't all that surprised. One guarded the ranch during the day, and the other took the night. Always their patrols were in balance. He was glad at least two had picked up his lessons.

Alex gave similar tasks to his other partners as he had with the Eevee, and slowly, his family noticed that certain chores were just randomly being taken care of by his Pokémon. His Muk and Garbodor cleared the garbage by splitting it between themselves fairly, before wandering away to find more. His Machamp helped with ranching. His Squirtle and Bulbasaur tended the plants. He also knew that his cousins could find uses for those he sent over. More than once now, they'd bonded with the Pokémon in question, and he'd simply given them to the relative in question. Slowly and subtly, the younger generation of Redwoods gained full belts from the prolific Champion. Evidently, all those hours chucking pebbles at the now-exploded stump just outside their home were paying off.

Thus, it was well into summer by the time Alex and Jess finally arrived at the edge of the massive Swamp. She too battled the dragon woman, and earned the right to fly in on her Articuno. Fo was quite large now, and had proven herself by beating down a certain Dragonite with ease. Once they returned home, Arthur had popped out, just in case a certain Mewtwo decided to make an appearance again. It didn't.

Connor did eventually make his way to the Sage, and then back through the Swamp again to earn the right to fly. There was a reason Garchomp was feared, and a favorite of Champion level teams. He'd smirked at Alex and his sister, who were in the middle of sparring, as he sliced down through the canopy of the island. Evidently, he'd been victorious against the Dragonite as well, and had also acquired power he supposedly wasn't ready for.
Once Alex, Jess, and Connor had all arrived, finally, it wasn't long until Hilbert showed up as well. N remained nowhere to be found. Since Alex could Teleport now, Hilda didn't have to battle quite so many Trainers, which had given her time to finally visit this Swamp her brother constantly pestered her about. She was surprised to learn that the Champion could travel so far so fast, and hadn't expected him in the Swamp, but her brother was glad she'd finally made it down. Naturally, the other Champions were quite eager to 'get to know' the girl who'd beaten down the original Team Plasma. When they asked Alex for an introduction, he'd smirk, and send them to Hilbert. He knew how that would end. The elder twin was overprotective, and ruthlessly strong.

When everyone had finally returned, they were almost halfway through the summer. The Sage gathered his first generation of pupils, and told them, and other worthy disciples, why so many regular Trainers had been allowed to the Swamp. They weren't unskilled persay, they just hadn't all won a League yet.

Part of proving one could be the honored student of a Sage was being able to teach, as well as learn. In fact, often the advanced lessons on inner peace were based solely on how well you could train a pupil.

Alex had been doing this already, in a fashion, and once he had time, he'd organized the Trainers who wanted to learn from the man who'd united the Unovan Dragon. A change happened in the training ground over the next few weeks, after the Sage told them to let those who wished to learn, do so. With the influx of Trainers had come plenty of fan bases, and Unova's was, naturally, rather large. Even though all the Champions had not come down, the Trainers who showed seemed more than eager to learn.

Some Champions had convinced others to learn from them, but the more Alex taught about balance and especially the martial arts of the Dragon Style, and how they were related, the more trainees he had who were both newcomers, and old Champions. Everyone was eager to learn 'Kung Fu', which was where Connor had chimed in.

His meteoric rise to the rank of being able to fly had been impressive, and he too claimed that he could teach Kung Fu. Apparently, he'd also said the Tiger Style could easily beat the Dragon, but Alex hadn't much cared. His disciples spoke for themselves. It also helped having Jess around, for her skills were almost as good as his. When it came to using psychic power however, he was entirely outclassed.

In truth, he'd essentially copied Tao's method, though it would take much, much longer to complete on this plane. Some students didn't care, and went weeks without rest, determined to master everything they could be taught.

Those were the disciples who soon unlocked a second typing, like their mentor had. Dragon and psychic was rare enough that Alex was the only human around the Sage's compound who'd had that combination. He also soon noticed that the Sage didn't care if his honored disciple was a psychic type or not. He trained and groomed many Trainers personally, and Alex gained a bad habit of beating them in battles of Pokémon, and fist.

Eventually, Oranguru had Alex battle his longtime neighbor, and the scarlet headed Champion had grinned at the offer to battle. He opted for a battle of fists. Evidently, he knew how a six on six would go. The so-called 'masters' of the Tiger and Dragon styles met on the Pokémon field towards the back of the island. It was surrounded by bamboo dorm buildings now, and almost felt like a stadium.
Connor summoned his Raikou, and Alex rolled his eyes. Evidently, he wanted his mentor to watch. That was fine by him. Tao appeared in a psychic Teleportation flash, towering over Alex, and setting the crowd watching them abuzz with murmuring. Many people still hadn't seen the First Dragon in the flesh, but he always made an impression. The massive white and black dragon grinned at the tiger-like Legendary. This was a bet long in the making.

As the two humans clashed after sharing a nod, it soon became obvious who the more skilled fighter was. Alex hit Connor's balance points with every move, and the explosive strikes, which made the tiger so deadly, simply couldn't hit his opponent in return. The Champion of Unova was a black and white blur. He moved like water, and struck like thunder. He almost reached for his staff, but Connor hadn't allowed that.

Seeing defeat looming, Connor had given a shout of "Haaaa!", and flared his second typing's power, and as fighting type energy claws formed around his fists, Alex smirked at him, and mouthed a word in the tongue of the Dragons.

"Dovah."

His eyes shifted from shades of light blue and bluish-purple to almost pure white. His power flared, and then condensed around his form, and the smirking dragon launched forward again, as he began to, finally, attack without pulling his punches. Everything thus far had been a warm up.

Though Connor scratched his opponent many times, his claws never seemed to leave much more than a few marks, and each time Alex struck in return, Connor nearly doubled over. He glared at his rival, and wondered when he'd gotten this good.

Connor flared his fighting type aura again, with more shouting, and as he did, it turned yellow, and began sparking with electricity. Alex's smirk grew as he recognized the trick Thor used in battle.

"Really? Are we going there?"

Connor grinned. "Come and find out." He dropped into his stance again, and Alex sighed. His opponent didn't seem to get it.

Though the Kalos Champion's muscles had grown exponentially, he was simply not fast enough for the advantage Teleport gave to his opponent. Each strike from the 'dragon' slammed into his target, and given that he had limited uses of Teleport, he didn't pull his punches. There was a reason he preferred fighting with a staff. Such bouts lasted longer.

As his fighting type energy faded, revealing just how hurt his body was, Connor grinned at his rival, who remained seemingly immune to the bloodless slashes all over his face, chest, back, and legs.

"Alright, I give. I know when I'm beaten."

Alex let the power fade, and smirked at his rival. "You have much learning to do." The numerous slashes sparked as the skin sewed itself closed, and the tears in his robe sewed themselves shut. He stretched then, and glanced at Tao, who glanced at Raikou, who snarled in irritation.

The large tiger stalked over, and placed something at Alex's feet. Ghost, Dark, Steel, and Fighting type crystals. Each flared as Alex connected to them, and lifted them up via telekinesis. "Thank you. We should battle again in the future. I still need more of these." The tiger glared at the human, and then blinked, as Tao snarled at him in return.

He stalked back to Connor, and returned to his ball without a word. He'd had enough of draconic
smugness for one day.

The dragon had followed him back to his 'home' of course, and watched him pocket his new prizes. "You should have Arthur bond to them. And there is more to know, before you set off for Fornia."

The retrieval of these particular Plate crystals had been the final step in their plan to leave. The Swamp was unbearably hot, as it was the middle of the summer, but they knew Fornia would be hotter. Alex had mentioned that they planned to look at Albion, assuming they survived Fornia, and the Dragon hadn't missed a beat.

Arthur had practiced forming 'energy balls' of many types now, but only ghost and psychic ever really worked. Once he had access to a fighting crystal, his 'Excalibur Sphere' as he called it, was easy to use. Especially in his Mega Form. He knew he needed to be stronger than Mordred. He'd read the legends, and, he remembered just how close their first encounter had been.

Once he'd bonded to each, and formed spheres with each, he'd returned to his ball to continue practicing. It was safer in there, and it was designed to help his power grow. Perfect for training. Alex and Tao chuckled at his behavior. He really was always on the move.

Jess had been busy gathering crystals as well, like Steel, Water, Electric, and Grass. They would need to find more before reaching Fornia, but they'd manage. It was no secret that the regions Fornia controlled were literally brimming with ancient stones and fossils. Archaeologists were more than willing to join the Church, if it meant discovering and reviving an extinct species of Pokémon.

Scientists had hypothesized that the Stoney Mountains were some of the first places Mew began to copy DNA from. Life flourished in those regions, but the Arceans kept a lock on all of it. One thing Alex was looking forward to most, was finding all those new species nobody had yet been able to freely catalogue.

Tao looked between the two Trainers, and sighed. "You're ready to leave, and yet you aren't disguised." Jess smirked at the dragon, and summoned the fairy type energy from her crystal. Ever since being immortalized by Xerneas, she'd had a knack for using it to disguise things, which was good, for she had no Pokémon that could make use of it. Yet.

With a wave, their appearance changed, and they gained the dark tanned skin, and golden hair so common in the Fornia region. At least among Arceans, which was who they were trying to infiltrate. Their features had changed as well, though to those who knew them, like family, it was still a bit obvious.

The dragon nodded, seemingly satisfied by their attempt at disguise. "Very well. The first thing you'll want to do is gather the other plate crystals. If you do that, Pravus will never overpower you. Next, comes having Pokémon who can use those crystals. In times long passed, Battlers carried ten partners, and the strongest among them was decided by going head to head in clashes of ten on ten. This, will be the same rule set in the upcoming World Tournament."

The Sage descended then, floating down through the foliage on his fan, and yawning. "Mm. You're telling him? Fine." The tired eyes shifted to Alex, and the Sage spoke again. "For this particular tournament, Trainers and Pokémon are encouraged to use as many moves as they're capable of remembering, in whatever style they wish. Items and healing implements will not be allowed, with the exception of Full Heals. Status conditions should not decide strength."
Alex arched a brow at his two towering mentors. "What's the purpose of such a tournament? Ten Pokémon? Most people can barely go six on six."

The Oranguru chuckled, and munched on what appeared to be a Pinap berry, seemingly immune to the rough exterior, the massive, flat teeth crushed it without a thought. "This tournament is meant to draw out the strongest Trainer in the world. What happens after will be for that individual to find out. To that end, the League's founder wanted this particular test to be as fair as possible, with a focus on making participants relying on strategizing with what abilities their Pokémon have, without item usage getting in the way. Essentially...it will be battle in the style of the ancient world, in a time when humans were able to draw much, much more from Pokémon in terms of power. This competition will reawaken that knowledge, and set the stage for the final act."

Alex's brow rose further. "Final act?"

The Sage chuckled. "You'll find out. For now...gather your four new team members, and prepare."

Alex nodded, as the Sage floated off to dispense more wisdom, and Tao returned home with a flash. He already had several Pokémon in mind.

His original six would be used for full battles, and the other four would be useful in Fornia. He fully intended on training the new four just as hard as the rest of his team. He needed battle-hardened partners who could use the other crystals in his possession. Jess was still trying to decide what she wanted for her team, but Alex already had his first pick. He needed an Aron. An Aron from the mountains around his home region, of course.

It was as he began searching the mountain closest to the ranch, and caught the gaze of a particularly ravenous Aron, that he knew he'd found his partner. He needed an Aggron that was powerful, and hungry. It was literally the key to his plan working. He offered the Aron an Ultra Ball, once he'd convinced it that it wasn't food. The little Pokémon asked to see his team.

They appeared behind him, smirking, and the little steel type's eyes widened as he saw just how outclassed he was by his new teammates. Hydrus terrified the little one, but the others he didn't mind. Blaze was only slightly impressed at how fearless the little Pokémon seemed around him. Steel types usually took one look at the Charizard and refused to battle. His flames often turned blue against real opponents.

Alex knelt down to the still-chewing Aron, and smirked. "Come with me. The time is right, and there's no better team." The Aron blinked, and then pushed the Ultra Ball button, which dinged shut. One down. Alex smirked at the ball. "I'll call you Cenomons."
Once Alex had his Aron, he'd visited his brother, who was in the middle of a summer-long experiment at the University's lab. He looked around as he entered the lab building, and he felt his team drawing his gaze towards one of the lab's habitats. Then, he saw why.

It was an Amaura, clearly a hatchling, and it was as white as the snow within its habitat. It looked to have once produced berries, like the other Amaura and Aurorus habitats nearby, but evidently the little one had frozen all of it.

Each of his team told him to go to the little one, and Alex approached the Pokémon, reaching out to it in a manner not unlike a Ralts, with emotion. Good feels flowed into the shivering Pokémon, and that was when Alex noticed. This Amaura was pure ice type.

"He's the most recent hatchling in this line that we've been breeding specifically for Special Attack power. Moreover, like most 'fossil' Pokémon these days, the rock typing impurities have been lost. We have their entire genome, finally." Eric said, approaching as he noticed his brother, staring at the tiny Pokémon.

Alex smirked. "My team insisted that I pet him. He doesn't seem to mind." Indeed, the habitat had started to look slightly greener since the Trainer had started scratching the hatchling. The sounds of enjoyment the little male was making were adorable.

He'd almost thought it was female, but had then noticed the tips of the frilly ridges along its neck. They were more of a deep blue, rather than pink. There was that, and the electronic sign on the door of the habitat that had listed his gender with true Pokédex accuracy. The ridges had been pure white a moment before, but the blue was actually working nicely with the pure white of the skin. He was adorable.

He felt Terra give the mental equivalent of a nudge. "Can we keep him?"

Alex smirked. His team was becoming clever. They knew he'd be reluctant to take an ice type because of Terra's dislike for it. Having him ask, was supposed to remove that hesitation, apparently.

He spoke directly to his first partner then, and stared at his oldest partner, with his third eye, for a long moment. "They freeze the air around them, and you heard Eric. He'll be strong. Are you sure you want an ice type like that around?"

Terra seemed to chuckle. "If I did not, I would not have asked." He gave the mental equivalent of an eyeroll. "Humans."

Eric handed the Pokémon an Oran berry as Alex's focus snapped back to his surroundings, and the little long-neck stared at the lab-coated student, motionless. Alex scratched the spot under his chin again, and then gave him a Sitrus berry. It made adorable sounds of enjoyment as it devoured the fruit, and Alex smirked at his brother. "Is this the first time he hasn't frozen what you've given him to eat?"
Eric rolled his eyes. "We get it. You're psychic."

Alex smirked. "You don't need psychic power to know a hungry hatchling. Where's the mother?"

Eric's expression grew dark for a moment. "Frozen. Passed on. The others abandoned him after that. He needs a social learning environment, or he's going to end up losing control of that power. He needs to learn his limit, and not fear it…"

The Professor-in-training paused, as he saw his brother's smirk shift to a grin.

"No."

"Oh come on!" Alex said, chuckling as the tiny Pokémon rolled on its back, and demanded a belly rub. Leo had joined him, for that. They all enjoyed their Trainer's hand scratches, but sadly, they all could not fit in the lab. "Look at him, he needs us. And, I need an ice type. As well as my crystal."

He looked at Eric, and Eric sighed, pinching his brow. After a moment, he pushed his glasses up, and the lighting in the lab turned them white. Alex resisted laughing. "Fine. He's yours. But I expect regular reports on his health. I'll get your crystal." Since returning from Norstad, he'd had three whole months while Alex was off 'preparing' to study it. Evidently, it had come from a village of Articuno riders. He'd supposed if anyone would have shards of an Ice Plate, it would be such a village.

Alex was painting a Luxury Ball in the white and blue colors of his new partner, who seemed eager to enter the ball for some reason. Finally, he booped his nose against the button, and it dinged shut immediately. It twitched in his hand then, and made sounds of enjoyment as the little Pokémon ran around within his new home. Alex smirked. Hatchlings. At least this one wouldn't eat his ball. Four times.

Cenomons, or 'Ceno' for short, was now in a Heavy Ball, one that had stood up to his jaw strength. Evidently the Ultra Ball had been unacceptable, so the little Pokémon kept eating through them until his Trainer got the message. Alex had brought him into the mental 'web' that made up his team then, and the little one learned to use words, rather than brute force. At least with them.

As Eric finally returned, crystal in hand, he eyed the newly painted ball. It wasn't so much 'paint' as it was using a stylus to draw, color, and pattern Pokéballs to suit their Trainer's preferences. Naturally, the woman who'd invented this tech had made a fortune when the Pokéball companies bought it from her. By this point, it was standard with most balls. Styluses were, of course, sold separately.

Alex eyed the Icium crystal, and Eric sighed again as he handed it over. "Don't teach him anything ridiculously powerful right off. His affinity for special attacks is…off the charts." Alex rolled his eyes, and his brother glared at him. "Seriously. Don't teach him Ice Beam until he learns it on his own."

Alex smirked, and gave Leo a scratch. The large cat had come for the belly rub, but had stayed, waiting for a moment like this. He gave Eric a feral grin, and the Professor-in-training shifted uncomfortably as he recalled how well Leo had handled such attacks.

Alex smirked. "I think he can handle it. If he can't, I'll teach him." In reality, he was planning to let the little one mature a bit. Pokémon grew faster than humans, as a rule, so a few weeks wouldn't be too long of a wait.
Eric raised a brow. "Teach him what? Those overpowered C-Moves?"

Alex held up a finger. "No. Just no."

Eric's brow rose higher. "But the 'c' is for cryst-"

Alex's finger pushed against his brother's nose, booping it. "I said...No."

The younger brother waved his sibling's finger away in disgust. It reeked of Leaf. Of course he'd had a bowl before coming. Typical Alex. "Fine. Tye-jeo-to moves." He mumbled something about 'foreign moon languages', and then his gaze fell to the crystal. "Do you really need it so soon? We're learning so much. That thing literally gave us the perfected Aurorus genome. I touched it to mine, and it turned pure ice type. It literally rewrote strands of DNA. With a touch! It's incredible."

Alex shrugged. "I'm sorry, I need it back. It's high time we got to Fornia. We've given Pravus far too much time with...whatever he managed to escape with."

Though he'd gone over the events a hundred times, Alex still couldn't figure out why the Arcean Prophet had retreated. He'd gained the upper hand with his Gigalith, and then just vanished. It defied logic. Most likely because Pravus knew something he was as yet unaware of. Finding out what he'd learned or retrieved was their main objective. For now. And it required quite a bit of stealth.

Eric pushed his glasses up by the center rim, and sighed. "Alex, those crystals are shooting pure Arceus-level creation energy into the Pokémon who use them. For attacks, and for evolution. It can't be healthy."

"If it isn't, we'll soon find out." Alex said, eyeing his new Pokéball, as he teased it with his mind. It glowed blue, and was rocking slowly. The hatchling within was already sleepy. After going so long without food, or family, he needed a nap. "I've been monitoring those using the crystals for evolution for a while now. Where I can, anyways. There's rumors of problems with Mega Evolution in general, but I can never find anything solid on it. When and if there is a case, I'll deal with it. Personally. Then I'll stop it from repeating."

Eric stared his brother down. "And what if your 'case' ends up being unfixable? What if every case results in a death? Will it be worth the risk then? What if it can't be fixed?"

Alex smirked at his brother. "Can't? There is no can't. There is no try. If something needs to be fixed, I'll find a way to fix it. It's that simple."

Alex shrugged. "Tell your Sage that giving you Teleport was a bad idea." Alex smirked.

Several Days Later – Victory Plateau, Unova

Alex waited patiently at the top of the Victory Plateau. He'd Teleported in five minutes ago, and this Challenger was still walking up the stairs. The Unova League tournament had just ended, and this summer's newest hotshot had fast tracked his way to the Champion. Through the Four.

Five minutes became ten, and though the wind howled across the barren battlefield, Alex didn't mind it. It was cold on the plateau, true, but Norstad was much colder, he could wait hours up here, despite the relatively hard wind. It was rather nice, when one had it to oneself. Finally, the Challenger came in, looking confident. They always did.
Being the Champion of the hardest League in the world, Alex had the option to give his challengers a choice.

Battle six on six against his team, and claim victory over the entire Victory Plateau, or, battle six on one...against the Unovan Dragon, and become the Champion. Given that they had enough Champions already, Tao had come up with this system early on in Alex's reign, and nobody in the League had objected. Tao knew what having too many Champions could do, and even Hilbert had agreed that there were enough, for their League at least. The Victory League was not the only League in Unova, but it was home to the strongest Trainers they had.

All who fought the First Dragon, lost. Alex refused to battle them again immediately after that, not that the six on six match would've helped. Alex's team was, supposedly, just as strong as Tao.

Stronger even, if one believed such rumors. Most Challengers went for the dragon, always staring blankly in surprise as their Master Balls failed to capture the dragon that already had an 'owner'. It was depressing how many Trainers with enough skill to beat the Four opted to try for an easy victory to claim the title of Champion. Those, did not get invites to the Dragsonspiral Tower.

What few Challengers that did decide to battle Alex, or whichever Champion was available, also usually lost. Alex had a perfect record in such battles, and only Hilbert's, who had a much, much longer string of wins, came close. Having one loss would always keep him below a perfect streak, but they remained far above the other Champions, each of whom had many more losses. Evidently Hilbert had not been the 'easy pick', though Nate and the others were very much on his level. Being the Champion, Alex had naturally practiced with each of them, and the Four. After several hours long sessions, and with training from Tao as well, challenging Trainers were usually sent home, or if they showed promise and a compatible attitude, to the tower. Some came solely because they'd heard that was one way to receive training from the Unovan Dragon.

Others, simply wanted the prestige beating the Victory Plateau's Four would bring them. A record like that, especially with a win against a Unova Champion, could open doors for a Trainer. Alex's own record had caught more than a few eyes over the past several months, as he had many wins. He'd stopped keeping track of the exact numbers ages ago, but evidently one of his devices was just automatically recording the data.

Hilda had all but ordered him to start 'marketing himself', and once he realized just how much demand there was for random Champ-themed merchandise, for some reason, and he'd allowed her 'marketing guy' to start 'selling his image' or whatever. Evidently, that meant giving him shelf space next to the other Champions on the Join Boulevard.

He didn't understand half of the obscure business-like nature of selling these random products, so he'd left it to the strange man who seemed to gleefully enjoy and revel in it. As long as the impressively large paychecks kept coming in from the sales, he didn't mind doing the occasional cameo in Pokéstar Studios, either. Whenever the strange man called, it was usually with such an offer. Or to talk about how comfortable his 'ball-room pants' were.

Finally, the Challenger crested the top of the stairs, but before Alex had a chance to speak, the Trainer on the opposite end of the field spoke first, as he stepped into the light, and pointed a finger at the Champion. "I want you Redwood. Not the Dragon."

Alex glanced at the Trainer harder. He seemed familiar…and then the Emboar on his undershirt, below the black leather biker jacket, reminded him. The kid from Aspertia, with the Tepig he'd passed over for Terra.
He hadn't lost any of his protagonistic charm. The flame tips of his hair were now done all the way to the roots. He'd acquired black sunglasses, and Alex didn't need psychic power to know he had a motorcycle downstairs.

Alex shrugged, still clad in the robes from Tao's otherworldly tower. "Fine. Single or double? I don't do triple battles up here, or any of that rotating nonsense...sometimes, less is more."

The flame haired kid, who had to be fifteen going on sixteen, swiped his thumb across his nose, and smirked. "Double, then. Doesn't matter, I'll crush you in any battle!"

Alex rolled his eyes. Then again, for all he knew, he was about to be blindsided by a plot armored protagonist. Unova had a habit of making Trainers who, sometimes literally, bulldozed through every Trainer they met on the road. He kept his guard up, suspiciously. The kid was only normal typed... still, he had managed to beat the Four.

Alex had recently begun to help each of them, including Nick, to embrace their inner power, and gain the ability to use Plate crystals. Then, he'd taught them how to do one Taijitu move. The others, they would need to learn on their own, if indeed they could learn them at all. Most Trainers seemed to be able to handle one or two.

Down in the Swamp, it was another story. Everyone there was a professional, and almost all of them had every kind of Plate crystal. Alex hadn't believed there were so many crystal users in one place, until he'd lost several matches to Trainers who outmatched him because of their versatility with attacks and combinations, all fueled by crystal power.

Alex had surmised that there were only a limited number of types, and thus, a limited combination of balanced energy attacks. Some, like fire and flying, he'd discovered, had simply been incompatible. Blaze could power up his Flamethrower with the flight crystal, but forming a balanced sphere of fire and air, was quite difficult. The result was usually an explosion.

Many Trainers had begun to spread word of what this supposedly super-strong Champion had on his team, and he knew there would be Trainers designed to break him, but that was what his other four were for. Honestly, they needed the experience more than his original six.

They were his best kept secret, though they were still quite young. His newly evolved Lairon had lived up to his name, and devoured everything he could in the obscure, un-mineable mountains Alex discovered via Teleport. He'd needed quite a bit of metal to evolve, but there was always metal being formed on this planet. The humans of this era did not want for resources.

The Aron species was often where builders got their materials from. They literally shed metal, and were quite good at battling. It was just common sense to have them around work sites. There were more than a few decent Trainers who also worked construction.

Focusing on the Challenger again, Alex shrugged. He hadn't noticed that he'd been silent for a good minute. The intimidation factor was starting to wear off as the Challenger waited, impatiently.

Hilda and Rosa always gave him crap for not being 'menacing enough' to scare off most Challengers. Back when Kanto had held the title for 'hardest League in the world', Lance, their leader, had been shrouded in mystery, and dragon types. The Champions who beat him were likewise rumored to be strong. After battling against Red in the Swamp, he understood.

He decided he could always attempt the 'edgy but cool' thing Lance and even Gary Oak had done, at
one time, and this poor kid would help spread his reputation. He'd send him to Tao, as well. He'd be
fierce, with a bit of training.

"Very well. A double. That'll make it shorter." The flame kid's smirk faltered, as he saw Alex's. It
was way too confident.

A flash of green and black came from the belt of the Champion, and he spoke to his team, "Hold off.
Let's see if this one is worth evolving for." He could hear the cameras whirring around them as they
floated into the air, and began recording.

The League ref's voice came over the intercom, hidden both out of sight, and away from anything
the Champion could break. "This League match will be a Double Battle. The Champion may not
substitute. The Challenger may do so as often as he desires. Begin!"

"Verrignus! Leif! Go!" The same Emboar from last time appeared alongside a Leafeon now. They
both looked strong, but Alex saw no reason to worry. Terra and Shruikan were quite tough, and
made an excellent team.

"Flamethrower."

Shruikan flapped into the air, and as he bathed the plateau in flame, Terra looked unfazed. Ground
types could handle fire easily, and this wasn't directed at him. The air became distorted by the heat.
The Leafeon countered with a Razor Leaf, only to find that in the new heat of their battlefield, the
leaves were all but useless, as they turned to ash halfway across.

That applied to Terra as well, but that didn't matter much for this battle. He wasn't using Razor Leaf,
or kid gloves. "Earthquake." Alex spoke again, and his starter reared up onto his hind legs, before
coming down. The force of the slam shattered the ground. Massive, steaming boulders rocked both
of their opponents.

"Verr, punch the boulders!" The Emboar turned, smashing them apart with Brick Break as the attack
rocked him. He managed to take less damage, but his Leafeon partner was down. "Bufo, you're up!"

A Seismitoad appeared next to the Emboar now. "Hyper Voice!" Alex tried not to smirk, and failed.

The large frog's seismic tones were rather impressive, as they shattered the rest of the boulders,
flattening the field once more, and while his Voice was untrained, it was actually somewhat strong.
The Emboar ignited his fists on the flaming beard around his chin, and charged as his Trainer pointed
at Terra and shouted, "Fire Punch!"

"Aerial Ace." Alex kept his arms crossed as he gave the orders, and stayed completely unreadable.
Both Terra and Shruikan knew many moves by now in preparation for the World Tournament, so
did his entire team, but usually he tried to limit himself to four. In League battles, at least. Perhaps if
the World Tournament proved appealing enough, he'd change Unova's ruleset, it would certainly
make things more interesting, but also had the potential for abuse. He made a note to find a specific
rule book on the tournament. Since it had been announced, in a new building and once more in
Unova, the rules had been available for purchase.

Thunder boomed through the clouds above the plateau as his enormous black dragon arced down,
and slammed the fire pig, hard, with a type advantaged move. His punch never even came close to
searing his scales, such was his speed, even with all his added size. The darkness of the night also
helped. Shruikan was quite hard to see, when he didn't want to be seen.
The Emboar smashed into what was left of the stairs Challengers ascended to reach the plateau, and Alex sighed. Aside from not being menacing, constantly breaking the plateau's marble foundations was another thing he received crap for. He could fix the earth of the field itself, but marble and stone were different. Apparently. He took Terra's word for it.

"Energy Ball." Terra's attack shot towards the Seismitoad, who managed to catch it for a moment with the vibrations from his hands. It eventually overpowered him with the sheer amount of density layered into the move, and he too went sailing backwards, unconscious.

Alex glanced at the fainted pair of Pokémon. He knew one of them was the kid's starter, and when your first Pokémon went down, it usually meant the battle was as good as done. He'd been wrong before, though.

"You can back out now, if you like. Your record will still have four victories on it. Nothing to sneeze at, since they're from this League." The Champion still had his arms crossed, as he waited for the Trainer's response.

"I still have three left-"

Alex cut him off. "That's your first Pokémon lying by the stairs there. Do you really want to make your other three fight a battle your strongest couldn't win?"

The spiky, flame haired kid called his three out then, and Alex eyed them. A Noivern, Weavile, and Aegislash, all fairly strong. He had to admit, the kid's team had most of the types covered for. It was balanced well.

"What do you guys think?" The kid asked, as the three eyed their opponents.

Alex gave the command, mentally, and had to resist a smirk. "Rise with storm, my 'Viking Gods'." It was the nickname Percival had given the pair when he'd wanted a double battle, thinking it would be any different from a single. Given that it had been practice, they had decided against mega evolving. Terra had actually fainted, as he usually did against ice Trainers, when he didn't Mega Evolve, but Shruikan had won the day in fiery retaliation.

The plate on his Salamence's chest flared, and his form became that of a Mega Salamence. The storm clouds around the Plateau increased in size and darkness. The heavens thundered at his arrival, and his roar was just as loud and intimidating as the fury of nature. Terra was similarly changed as the light from the Grassium shot into his form, and helped him ascend to the next level. The tree on his back moved to the center, and three more spikes, the same size as his others, sprouted from the shell. The now clubbed tail, ideal for Woodhammer, rose into the air.

One roared, and the heavens roared with him. The sky flashed, and the massive form of the Mega Salamence glared down at the three remaining Pokémon. Terra, for his part, slammed the plateau with his clubbed tail, shaking the entire conical mountain their League was perched upon. The very earth felt ready to shatter under the power of that Torterra.

Whatever enduring confidence the kid's team had, vanished in the face of these masters of the earth and sky. These battles were as much a head game as they were a contest of strength and skill. Too many people forgot that.

He was being kind again, though, and he knew it. Lance would've crushed his opponent's entire
team with the ferocity of his dragons, and sent them back to the Pokémon Center. Laughing.

He decided then to be the Champion he'd always wanted to be. A kind one, a strong one, someone Unova could rely on, just like N. If everyone became too afraid to battle, he'd never get challenged. Still, there were times, like now, when a Challenger's team simply had no chance, and needed more training, lest they get seriously hurt.

"Go to the Dragonspiral Tower. Train there. The Unovan Dragon will make you strong enough to challenge me, team to team." The two Trainers locked eyes. "After all, that's what made my team so strong." He left out the whole traveling dimensions and space-time differentials thing. Years of training had the same effect, no matter the plane you were on.

The kid glanced at his Emboar again, then nodded. "Right…we'll be back for you. My Emboar will never stop until he proves that you should've chosen him."

Alex raised a brow. "Your Emboar will never win until he accepts the Trainer he has, not the Trainer he wanted, a very long time ago. Good luck getting that through to him, though. There's a reason I didn't choose a stubborn Tepig."

The kid chuckled, wearily. "A wise choice…but I can handle his stubbornness. I'll take your advice, Champion. Then we will return." The two bowed in the Unovan style, fist to palm, grinning. They shared a vegemite sandwich and a bowl of Leaf grown on Terra's shell before parting, in true Unovan Trainer fashion. Alex had even given him a small bag of it. He called this strain 'Green Monster'. Terra didn't seem to mind.

Alex watched them go, and let the power fade, and his partners returned to normal. He patted each of them. "Well done, you two. At this rate, we'll run out of Challengers."

"You've got to be Mukking kidding me! Again!?!" Alex shared a look with his partners as the enraged tones of Rosa climbed up the stairs to the mostly-smashed entrance. He sniffed, and the familiar scent of burned Leaf was still hanging around. That too was another thing Rosa had forbidden both him and Hilbert from doing up here. He glared at the cameras, which were still on. Bloody robots never turned off.

He chuckled, "Time to go!" With that, he recalled his partners, and Teleported himself and his team back to Jess' room. It had become their unofficial preparation area for the impending cross-continent journey. She'd gotten the room to herself, as after a month of listening to the 'famous couple' going at it in the privacy of the bathroom (what little there was), her roommate had requested a transfer. Being ultra-rich, Jess hadn't seemed to mind that the price of renting her room doubled for the rest of the semester.

They'd spent a lot of time in the room over the course of the semester, though it was mostly sans clothing. Being able to Teleport almost anywhere gave them a wide range of places to enjoy each other, but they both agreed her room was nicer. Cozier.

Final exams were over by now, and the only students left on campus were either flunkies, or people who really needed to take a break. Eric was in the latter category, as were his lab buddies. Alex had taken to calling them the 'Brain Trust', and the nickname had stuck. Even amongst their Professors.

With him sleeping on campus, Alex's hovel in the Swamp had turned into the island's local recreational area, and had grown to include more beds. Battles were held, Leaf was smoked, naps
were taken.

After finding crumbs and what he sincerely hoped was jam in the hammock that passed as his bed, he’d decided to sleep in civilized quarters at night. Jess hadn’t seemed to mind. They’d tried looking for a real house somewhere, but the prices were truly insane, and the upkeep was even more so. And, why should they pay for a view they could get just by visiting a memorable spot they could Teleport to?

Eventually he’d offered to build her a house, something his instincts immediately regretted, as he saw the look in her eye. She’d kept her thoughts on the matter hidden as well, a hard thing to do given that they were but a thought away from each other all the time these days. She’d accepted his offer, which had led to research, some math, and the conclusion that Cenomons would need well over forty years of shedding, as an Aggron, just to get him some of the materials he’d need for such an endeavor.

Then there was everything else that went into buildings that he’d never considered, as he’d literally built a home out of mud and vines, and had been content with it. Now he had to account for plumbing, wiring, heating, power, air flow, location and thousands of other tiny yet important things.

Needless to say, he put it on the back burner. They’d be camping for a while anyways, until they found lodging in Fornia, though he supposed they could always sleep elsewhere, and Teleport back in the morning. The only problem with that was risking not remembering where they’d stopped the day before, and losing yet more time playing catch-up.

Thus, they’d decided to try to camp out as they crossed the Stoney Mountains, sneak into Fornia, and then find a hotel or something they could use as an anchor. The reason they didn’t already have one had been yet another factor in what had kept them waiting well into June to depart. The only way to get into Fornia was by land, or sea.

The sea routes were all thoroughly patrolled by the many battle-capable yachts that the Arceans used to advertise how well-off and prosperous being one of them was. Given how well their airships had been constructed, Alex didn’t really consider their navy a threat. Not yet, anyways. Sacreus, Fornia’s capital, was landlocked so it made little difference.

With the sea cut off, and no desire for plane travel and the level of danger it brought, as Arceans had a bad habit of bringing down unfriendly aircraft, that left traveling over the land, and after a test-incursion, they realized just how famous Blaze had become. He’d been recognized and chased for miles outside Fornian territory, and only a quick recall and Teleport had saved their bacon.

The footage of him battling Lizardon was still one of the most popular things on the PokéNet, even though a year had almost passed. Evidently, they’d seen it in Fornia too. Alex hadn’t even tried Shruikan, much to the dragon’s dislike. He’d claimed the night could conceal him, and Alex had countered that his ‘hundred-foot wingspan’ blotting out the stars would give them away. As would literally any light, for the night was dark blue, not entirely black.

Thus, they’d decided on going full tourist, and playing the role of conversion-friendly newlyweds. Two tan, blonde, blue eyed strangers on the precipice of breeding. The Arcean who’d approved them for travel in their territories had practically drooled when he realized the potential. Evidently, recruiting couples was a big deal.

Now, everything was ready, packed, and as Alex bamfed into the dorm room again, he blinked, as he noticed his love, talking to a strange man. It took him longer than it should have to recognize the
student in charge of dorm housing, but he was kind of proud that his paranoid, skeptical mind hadn't immediately leapt to worries of backstabbing.

The man just stared at him, and Jess sighed. They'd tried keeping the ability to Teleport somewhat secret. Like most secrets, it had gotten out almost immediately that the Champion could get where he needed to instantaneously. Apparently, Unovans thought that was a good idea, and he supposed having a defender who could pop in literally whenever was a somewhat comforting thought. And probably a decent deterrent against crime.

"Don't mind him. He's carrying the bags. Here's the key." Jess said, as she handed it over. The man nodded, and then promptly left.

He was glad to be rid of them, honestly. They were quite loud, and had stayed well over a month past the end of the year. Since the girl was rich, the increasingly absurd room rent hadn't driven her off, and since her lover was the Champion, and an Alumni, they couldn't really just tell him to scram. Especially since he could just poof right back five seconds later, and nobody would be the wiser. Thus, the University had quietly accepted the ever increasing rent, and had then proceeded to do what schools usually did in the summer months.

There were four bags in all, their usual two, and two solely for sleeping bags. They hadn't bothered with a tent, as that was what Shruikan's massive wings were for. Arthur popped free of his ball to grab the extra bags, and then they all Teleported once more, to the rendezvous spot.

The Sage had informed them, after some deep meditation, that their journey would go as well as it needed to if there were three entering Fornia, not two. Tao had divined much the same, and even had a suggestion as to who else should come along. He'd grown up in Fornia after all, and though he'd needed a better disguise than tanned skin, Brad had still proven himself somewhat capable.

He'd had only a Charmeleon when Alex first found him, and as the son sparred with his father, Blaze, the two humans had talked. Brad had been reluctant, at first, to go back to the region that had essentially controlled his entire life. After but a few months in Unova, he'd started to understand just how bad things were back home. Just how strong the delusion really was, and what kind of effort would be needed to remove it.

Alex had reminded him that his family, though they likely claimed to be willing to serve, were still under that regime, and his disappearance had likely made life difficult for them. That, more than anything else, was what convinced the Trainer to come along. If they'd been mistreated, there was a good chance some of them would defect as well. Alex had tasked his rival with securing aid from the north of the massive region, and while he was doing so, he could find his family as well, for that was where they'd lived. Once he had them, he'd send word to Alex and Jess, and they would help free them.

Alex hadn't really wanted a third wheel, but he supposed it would keep himself and his woman from lusting after each other all day on the golden coast's famous beaches. They'd still be doing that, of course. They were 'honeymooning' after all, and he had no doubt the Arceans watched everybody they let in.

Brad had promised to build up his team, in preparation for the journey west. With only three months, he'd actually managed to pull a decent one together. There were several species most Fornians had, like Lycanroc, Ursaring, Gogoat, and the regional variant of Marowak that was both fire, and ghost. Alola and Fornia were culturally similar, but Alolans always said their neighbors were a bit…weird.
They too could see through the devout façade. This hadn't stopped the Fornians from acquiring, and then breeding, the rare variants of known species found on the islands, though.

For her part in gaining four new members, Jess had found a Swablu, who she'd called Aria after they sang together, near the University's campus while Alex had been hunting for an Aron. The randomness of the universe had guided him to the little Amaura, who he'd nicknamed Gelauros. Eric had immediately shortened it further to 'lil G', and it had been Alex's turn to sigh as every other lab student had agreed it was better. This was the future of the scientific world.

Brad was surprised when they showed up with belts carrying over six Pokémon. Then, he saw them unstrap their bags, and begin to pack their balls away.

Alex put his main six balls in his bag, as Jess did the same, leaving them with their newer partners. The others hadn't particularly liked being shoved in darkness, as they wanted to see what was going on themselves, but until the plan came to fruition, they could wait. For now, their function was helping their newer, younger teammates, and Alex was glad that his team was mature enough to be okay with waiting a few weeks. Of course, if he needed them, they could pop free and help, but they had all agreed that should be a last resort.

Once the balls were away, they donned their disguises. Brad's had gained pale skin, and blue hair, for some reason. He'd stick out in Fornia, but nobody would recognize him. No Arcean would associate with such a person, or so the former Champion had said. As long as nobody official took a harder look at him, he could blend in perfectly.

He entered the region at the northern port where the Kanadia, Fornia, and Dakota regions all intersected. Being one of the larger ports of entry, Brad could slip in amongst the hordes of people unnoticed, and once in Arcean territory, he could once more act like a loyal Arcean. He was more worried about the 'newlyweds' blending in.

The other pair had gone in the southern route, and had been forced to blend in to the mind-numbing obliviousness of the local population of the Sippi region, which was heavily influenced by the Arceans, and would likely join them soon. Some of the hardcore ideologies, and pure hate, towards Unova in particular, had given the pair pause as they started to subtly listen for rumors of rebellion.

Evidently, the residents of the Sippi region believed that the Unovans had, somehow, caused the massive Swamp that now covered their ancestral homelands to grow out of control. Apparently, many of the people here had once lived in those southern areas near Floria, or what was left of it.

Since they couldn't actually blame nature for stealing their homes, this 'theory' of why the Swamp had grown so large had gained massive popularity once the Prophet claimed, through 'Divine Insight' apparently, to know beyond the shadow of doubt that Unova and the Swamp were connected. From there, the people of Sippi had run with the theories, and hadn't stopped.

As the two realized the extent of this kind of zealot-like thinking, they both agreed that, even though they had to gain allies, they were better off working ideological change from the inside out. The people here were angry over a 'crime' that had likely been 'committed' millennia past, and were speaking of war with Unova based on what essentially amounted to a rumor from a foreign government. If Fornia changed, it was likely that these 'support states' as they referred to them, would change as well. Eventually.

Thus, they did not actually look for trouble on their way through the lush Arciana region's plains once they crossed the border. Despite this purposeful obliviousness, cracks in the Arcean façade
were literally everywhere, as were posters of their faces, untanned, and unchanged, listing them as 'threats to the Prophet'. Those, more than anything, had forced them to silently, angrily, ignore the perversions they came across, even here.

They could've gone through Utado, which had once owned the Arciana region, but anyone who entered Nevouri from Utado was closely watched by the Arceans. Being as yet 'unconverted', the further they went into Nevouri, the more looks they received.

They would've gladly pretended to convert to blend in, the only problem was that doing so took months, and thousands of units of currency. They had an alternate plan.

After a last look through his granduncle's room, Alex discovered a note, with a name, location, and Holociever number. The words 'Do not call until in Fornia' were underlined below it. As were the words 'trusted contact'.

This, more than anything, was the riskiest part of their plan. They had no idea what this contact could do for them, and planning alternate routes of hiding in Fornia's wild, Stoney Mountains had taken time, but they had agreed having multiple places to flee to was always a good idea.

Fading into the background of Nevouri had been simple, and as Cenomons dug them a tunnel towards the iron-rich mountains, he was all but drooling. Usually, he was hard to motivate, but the promise of these ore rich mountains had always gotten him going again, as he learned to battle. His patience was finally being rewarded.

Once the voracious Lairon had found his way into an ore-rich cave within the massive mountain chain, the two humans had made camp. Cenomons continued munching away, until he discovered something that was rock, but unlike anything he'd seen before.

He grunted for his human, as he'd learned to show things like this to him, and the human stared back at the Pokémon. "Holy…Ceno just found a fossil. A Pokémon fossil." He held up his Pokédex, and the device scanned it, then came up blank. It beeped loudly then, echoing through the cave, and the words: New Species appeared on the screen.

Then, came a blank space, for a name. The two humans just stared, and shared a look. "Let's find out what it is before we start naming species…"

"Redwoodsaurus." Alex said, smirking. He grunted, as an Iron Tail sent him flying towards the tunnel they'd entered through. He'd just laughed, as it had been kind of fun, smashing through various rock formations and feeling almost none of it. He hadn't realized how much tougher his body had become since Norstad, but evidently, the Storm Crown was doing its work in making him more durable, and eventually immortal.

Once he returned, he found Jess scouring the Pokéweb, and then as he sat down, she showed him what she'd found. "I thought it looked familiar. See? The ancients have data on this. The horns are identical."

Alex glanced at the name, and then at the creature. Three horns, located on the western part of the very same continent, herbivore, quadrupedal, and not actually unlike an Aggron, save that it apparently couldn't stand on two legs.

While the two humans stared at the glowing noise maker, Ceno returned to eating, as he was
ravenous. His Trainer's regimen was exhausting, but the results showed, and he'd rather enjoyed winning what few road battles they'd come across.

Even Fornians challenged each other, it seemed. None offered to share a bowl, however. The Leaf was strictly outlawed, but Alexander Redwood had long ago perfected hiding his stash. It was nice to see his instinct for choosing smoking spots held up to even government-level scrutiny.

It was as Ceno returned to the fossil's spot, that he noticed something. Another one. Another horn shape, all but identical to the first. He was both curious, and ravenous, though mostly ravenous. With about a second of hesitation, he began loudly crunching the rock and bones, and as he did, he ingested the crystallized life-force of the Pokémon that had once been. Since the Pokémon had been a direct descendant of one of the first Mew, as were most fossil Pokémon, the latent gene-altering power had a peculiar reaction with the Lairon's own genetic make-up.

He didn't notice any immediate changes, except that now some ores looked more appealing than others. Pure instinct guided him to a specific blend, but his Trainer barely noticed as he and his counterpart smoked a bowl, and then fell into their usual grunting session. Ceno had also learned to not bug them during those. Humans could be gross.

The next day was mostly spent waiting for Ceno, who hadn't slept, to stop eating, so he could tunnel them out again. Alex had asked for patience from his lover, as he'd seen the look in his young partner's eye, and his responses, and emotions, labeled the meticulous munching of specific ores as incredibly important. Something was up, but Alex didn't bug him.

Jess was eager, because she'd found a Shield fossil. She'd never resurrected one before, but Alex had a feeling it wouldn't be so easy in Fornia. He didn't let that dampen her excitement though. A Bastiodon would fill out her team nicely.

She'd also found a lone Nidoran, and while she hadn't been entirely newborn, she'd still been a bit young to be on her own. Jess had decided to copy Alex at that moment, and tried asking if she wanted to come along. While she was off winning a partner through trust, Alex had decided to ignore his methods for once, as he spotted something unique within the many cave tunnels.

Typically, Drapion on the eastern side of the continent were more popular, as they were strong, versatile, and purple. Many good teams had Drapion, many villains also seemed to enjoy using them. Alex had spied a red Skorupi however, and realized that was simply the color they took here in Fornia, as he spotted a whole nest's worth.

Now the trick would be isolating one that wasn't too young, or too weak. Seeing his Trainer hesitate, Gelauros, or Gel, as he'd started being called, simply walked into the nest, all smiles. All of the Skorupi immediately began hissing at it, but backed down when they felt the young one's Frost Breath.

Gel went from one to the other, his Trainer in tow, until eventually he pointed at one Skorupi in particular. It had been near the back of the nest, silently working on perfecting its strikes. Alex noticed it was a male, though he guessed he couldn't have been too much older than Gel.

The two had locked eyes, and it had taken Alex a moment to realize that his little long neck wanted to battle as badly as the Skorupi. The others watched, the hissing muted as they took in the strange white Pokémon, and the human it dragged with it.
The Skorupi accepted the challenge, and the battle was fierce, but short. Thankfully, the pair had practiced turning the little dinosaur’s Rock Throw into a Rock Slide, and thus, the advantage was his. The Skorupi was utterly blindsided by the rocks, buried even, and the little long neck essentially pounded him with Rock Throw, for fun, until he agreed to give up, and let the hatchling win.

Gelauros crowed, triumphant, and before he could blink, there was a maroon-colored Net Ball freeing the Skorupi from the rocks by taking it inside. Surprisingly, the ball dinged shut with only a few shakes, and Alex quietly retrieved it as he suddenly noticed the thousands of eyes staring at him. Gel nudged him, and they left quickly, but unharmed. The battle had been fair, after all, and their brother had accepted the challenge against a Trainer. Trainers caught Pokémon. If he hadn't wanted a Trainer, he could've refused easily.

Despite all of that, Alex called him out anyways as they began the trek back to their camp, and explained exactly what he needed from the Skorupi, and if that was too much, he could easily return home. Much like Ceno, he'd asked to see his teammates, but was less impressed by the Lairon and Amaura. Gel's hatching eyes had eventually convinced the scorpion, at which point, it returned to the ball. With only one member left, and since he really only needed a ghost type now, he decided to let the universe guide him to his last partner.

Jess had been somewhat disappointed when she returned with Nidoran of both genders, only to find Alex already had a Skorupi. She'd named her Nidoran Maria, and had called her partner Tony, because it was adorable and nostalgic. Alex agreed to let the Nidoran male stay regardless. Neither of the humans wanted to split them up. There was more room in Jess' bag, so he typically stayed there as they moved through the mountains, but Alex trained him as well. He was a good sparring partner for his team of younger Pokémon, and he knew he would never mind having a Nidoking around, in the future. Tony didn't seem to mind, as his partner was clearly the better battler. He was just happy to stay with her, grow stronger, and be a part of a larger family.

Once they'd packed up camp, Ceno had agreed to tunnel, and eat as they went. He was still picky about what he ate, so the going was slow, but Alex had a feeling it would be worth it. Eventually, he'd had to let the Lairon roam solo, just so progress could be made through the caves.

Being what he was, he had no trouble finding the group for an occasional nap, but for most of those long days under millions of tons of rock, Cenomons was absent, eating away at the endless supply of ore. The other Lairon he encountered were more relaxed, and less willing to battle, given the abundance of food. Ceno ignored those too weak willed to fight for good ore, and thrashed those who tried to take it from him. In this way, he beat those Lairon worth beating, and earned his experience. His Trainer had taught him useful moves, but he did notice that without him, battling was a lot harder. Despite that, he relished the challenge.

Finally, after almost a week within the mountainous tunnels, which were largely quite far away from any kind of dig site, the two humans emerged from the darkness, and several minutes later, Ceno joined them. He was finally content, his voracious appetite sated…for now. It was good timing.

Ceno used his mastery of the rock to make a platform for the humans to stand on, as they'd been clinging to a relatively steep cliff side, and as they took in their first look at Fornia, Alex burst out laughing. His hand, halfway to his Holociever, paused.

Before him was a valley filled with trees, and not just any trees, of course. The tallest, the oldest, the biggest. The species from which his family was named. A stand of Sequoia sempervirens trailed through the valley below them, in a very obvious line, only visible from such a high perch, or from the air. As oblivious as he was, Alex knew a sign from the universe when he saw one. He pocketed
the Holociever number, and then the pair began to follow the very obvious line of massive but also rather young trees.

---

**Several Hours Later...**

"There's no sign of them. Report back to HQ. The Rebels have them."

The captain of the Arcean Task Force, or A.T.F. as it was sometimes called, spoke into his Holociever. He'd been perched up here for hours, alongside his Mega Lucario, keeping tabs on the strange 'married couple' that had gotten quite deep in Arcean lands, without joining the Church, before vanishing for almost a week.

When they'd reappeared, he'd almost missed them, but their classic Fornian looks made them stick out against the gray stone of the mountain they'd perched on. Once they disappeared into the Redwoods, he knew it was only a matter of time. The only people who went to such places were those who wished to rebel against the Church.

Once the new face of Fornia's so called 'great enemy' had actually forced their Prophet out of Norstad, a strange thing had occurred in the Fornia region. Those who were tired of the blatant lies and mistreatment gathered in groves of ancient Redwood trees, where they met a people who shared their views on the rulers of their lands.

Though it had been centuries since any of the Tribes had been recognized as a people, they still remained in what areas of the massive Fornia region the Arceans had not yet plundered in the name of resources. Together, those Fornians who wished to rebel made an alliance, a Rebellion of sorts, and small bases and outposts full of these so-called Rebels had been popping up all over the region, causing havoc to the Church.

Tourists were especially dangerous, for the A.F.O was in charge of keeping them oblivious to the goings on of the government. Once the Arcean Fossil Organization had lost track of the couple, they'd called in the Task Force. They dealt with threats to security.

A response came over his Holociever, "Stay where you are. This hunt is being given to the Hand of Death." The captain stared at his communication device, mouth agape. A Hand of the Prophet? For two random tourists who probably got lost in the caves? At most, they'd meet the native tribes and find a way to go home, he didn't understand why such a response was warranted, but then, this was a Hand who was coming, the Hand of Death, who was supposed to be a rumor. A bad nightmare.

Despite the grisly nature his missions no doubt entailed, if he was being sent in, it meant the Prophet himself wanted these tourists. He nodded at his Lucario, and the loyal hound leapt down from their own perch to follow the tourist's scent. They needed to be useful to the Hand, or he would likely dispatch them as well, for incompetence. Given the strength of the couple's aura, something the Lucario found strange, but was unable to comment on, tracking them was easy. When the Hand appeared, he would have a strong trail to follow, and hopefully, his Trainer would continue to live.

---

**Yavano Tribe Lands - Eastern Fornia Region**

Alex and Jess had all but stumbled into the local Yavano Tribe's main camp, and after giving them a moment to cool their surprise and lower their strange metal spears, they'd used words to avoid a
conflict, though, as he'd told them something of who they really were, and that they were Pokémon Trainers, several of the 'red-skinned' men had grinned. Even here, there were people up for a battle.

After hearing they were from Unova, the tribe's Chief, Long-Fang, had made an appearance, and invited them to enjoy some of their Leaf. It was quite a bit stronger than anything they usually smoked, but it went a long way to easing the tension of a first contact. The Chief himself had unusually large canine teeth, but given that Alex had a fair bit of strangeness himself, most notably the tips of his ears which became more pointed by the day, he didn't comment, or stare. Jess hadn't seemed to mind either, and found his ears amusing, claiming that now, he could follow his granduncle, and become a 'full Vulcan'. He considered that a noble goal, but his hair kept them hidden all the same.

The tribesmen, over the flames of Chari's tail, explained the current state of Fornia, and the Rebellion they'd created with other 'pale-skins', and after a night of rest and a proper wake-and-bake, the tribe gave them food, supplies, and then pointed them towards the nearest 'Rebel Base'.

The base, as it turned out, was none other than the Majestic Canyon. Surrounded by the massive Great Mohave Desert, the canyon was a massive series of red rock walls, carved away by a river that was older than any tree, person, or Pokémon, and would likely outlast them all. It was at least a thousand miles long, or so the Yavano had said, and if you didn't have a guide, getting lost was easy. Many Pokémon also lived in the canyons and waters of the area, that had no qualms about killing humans. Usually, they were fine with subsisting on the enormous Wepear berries that grew in abundance amongst the rocky crags.

Within one of the many smaller canyons that made up the massive one, the local Tribes and Fornians had created a base from which to operate. In an amusing twist of fate, they'd also given them a Holociever number to call to get in contact with the Rebel's headquarters, and it was identical to the one they'd been given by Alex's granduncle. They'd told him to use it near the canyon, so he'd waited to do so.

Jess had found a Heracross on their way down to the Canyon, and the powerful female, who she'd called Hera, had been quite useful. Not being able to fly was rather irritating, especially for skilled Trainers. Having a partner that could carry you really was incredibly useful. Especially on stealth missions. She'd proven her strength to the skeptical Redwood by carrying both of them to the Canyon. Evidently, drinking the essence of Redwood trees had made these Heracross quite strong. Jess had remarked that she had done something similar, and had also grown stronger soon after. They'd had to land, as the ensuing laughing fit from the pair made flying hard. Thankfully, they had already arrived.

Alex ignored the giggling females as he dialed the number. The conversation was as awkward and brief as any random phone call, but once he'd mentioned the Yavano, and his granduncle, he'd been told to stay put. Someone was coming out to meet them, apparently.

That someone turned out to be the Dragon Type Expert, Professor Dracaena. She'd rode in on a female Charizard that truly highlighted just how much of a runt Chari was, despite her strength and almost crimson coloring.

More than that, there was something familiar about her coloration. It took Alex longer than it should have to notice that it was identical to Blaze's, which had always been a bit more red-orange than most. Considering the amount of variation in scale patterns Charizard had these days, that hadn't been too noticeable. Pokémaniacs didn't exactly ooze excitement when facing a slightly-deeper-orange-than-normal Charizard.
The Professor approached, leaving her own Charizard to laze in the hot sun. She was an older woman, who looked ready to raid a tomb, and had the gear to do it. The traditional white lab coat was shortened, just barely longer than her beige shorts, and a pair of what looked like a hybrid of goggles and glasses hung from the neck of her ordinary white undershirt.

As she looked the pair of them over, she focused on Alex, and smirked. "Now that's a Redwood. I'd know those eyes anywhere. I'm Professor Dracaena, an expert on dragon types. I knew your granduncle. I heard he passed on."

Alex nodded, his face as impassive as ever. He nodded at Jess. "This is Jessica Gladstone. She's helping me liberate this region." The two women shook hands, but otherwise didn't speak. He couldn't tell if they liked each other or not. They were as unreadable as cats, and he had long since given up trying to divine the many moods of the fairer sex.

The Professor raised an eyebrow. "Liberation, hmm?" She glanced at Jess again, who kept her own face as impassive as Alex's, and then, the Professor shrugged. "If that really is your goal...you've come to the right base."

They all flew in on their Charizard then, as the Professor had assured them that this was one place Arceans avoided. Jess left Alex to take the lead in asking questions this time, and after explaining why they'd come, the Professor agreed to help them. When asked why the Arceans avoided such a gorgeous canyon, she answered.

"There was once a city out here, in the desert, around three centuries ago now. Vega. Or so the ruin experts call it. It was a hub of...entertainment. Music. Lights. Food. Water shortages. People from all over the world came to enjoy themselves in Vega City. Then, in the space of one night, the Prophet himself obliterated the city, claiming that it was the 'Will of Arceus' that such a hive of scum and villainy be erased from the world."

Alex raised a brow. "Was it?"

The Professor shrugged. "Apparently. Officially, the Church blamed the tragedy on the 'unknowable will of Arceus', but the Tribes remember who committed the act. They have a good idea of how exactly how Vega became a ruin."

Jess chimed in then, "How would we hear it?"

The Professor smirked. "If you really want to know, all you need to do is ask. Chief Sike has a powerful Noctowl. With his help, they've shared what they know of the 'Vega Event' with whoever wishes to see."

Having learned several of the customs from the Yavano, such as how to properly greet a Chief, and interact with their fellow tribespeople, the couple had managed to surprise the local tribe here, as well, by showing genuine respect. They were led into one of the many caves the tribespeople used for smoking, and once they'd settled into a circle around Blaze's tail, as he'd offered it freely, the flames shifted to blue, and the napping fire lizard smirked. Alex rolled his eyes. At least he hadn't mega evolved in the middle of the Chief's toke on the pipe.

The Chief was an elderly man, though whether he was actually feeling his age, or just had wrinkled, weathered skin from the sun and desert, was hard to say. His hair was entirely black, but then, Alex had yet to see a tribal elder with grays.
A smirk appeared on the old man's weathered face as he eyed the Charizard supplying their fire. He looked harder, as he recognized something he hadn't seen for a long, long time, but then remembered he was in the presence of foreigners. He kept his composure as he spoke, "His fire is strong. Eastern Trainers are as powerful as the legends say they are."

Alex shrugged, and then looked around the circle. Jess glared at him as she read his intentions, but he ignored her, for the moment, as he took in the people they were sitting with. A brief, cautious glance at their minds told him all he needed to know about these people.

Their mental defenses were quite strong, as strong as their own at least, and actually reading their thoughts would be a challenge. Alex had discovered a new dislike for crowds after acquiring and developing his psychic senses, for many of the huddled masses of Unova kept their minds completely unguarded. It was hard to ignore, and he'd begun to understand why the Sage lived isolated in a Swamp.

That was when he finally noticed, since actually going undercover and suppressing his power, everything was so much quieter. It was strange, in a good way. "Thank you. I was wondering, Chief, if you wouldn't mind sharing the tale of Vega's destruction with us. We haven't heard of it in the east, and I have a feeling we should have already."

The Chief eyed the stereotypical Fornian tan and blonde hair, but those eyes...those, looked genuine. The Chief nodded, and as he did, the was a low hoot above them. As his Noctowl used its power on the fire, images appeared in the flames, and they shifted as the Chief spoke. "To understand Vega, you must understand the history of Fornia. Long ago, there was peace between the entirety of the western lands. We had peace with the east as well, for the Dragon God ruled us fairly, and maintained the balance of nature, upon which all of us live. His Empire was vast, and his Tamer fair in judgement. Those were good days."

Alex looked down then. He knew what came next, and resisted sighing as the Chief continued to speak, "Then, over time the Dragon was passed down his family line, most ignoring his wisdom entirely, until finally, the One Dragon was torn apart by his current Tamer's two sons. Their rivalry split the dragon in three, darkness chose one brother, light championed the other, and the balance was lost." He packed a long, wooden pipe as he spoke, but Alex couldn't get a clear look at it.

"At first, we of 'western Unova' did not experience any noticeable difference. Indeed, after several centuries of peace and prosperity, the Dragon became a myth, and the fertility of the planet was attributed to the planet itself, and its connection with Nature, rather than a Pokémon that may or may not have existed, long ago. Protecting the wilderness became a top priority of the newly forming governments who, since the Unovan Empire had collapsed, began to govern themselves."

"We were a naïve group of nations, young, enjoying the new freedom from heavy imperial taxes. No longer did we have to fund a war in the capital that did not concern us. Our wealthy grew great in number...but we had no idea what our wealth would attract. Eventually, these new, rich, former farmers gathered in a single place to enjoy their surplus of currency from selling their surplus of crops. Without an empire to give them to, they had seized the power from the dead empire's infrastructure, and set themselves up as large kingdoms."

The Chief's eyes narrowed, slightly. "Basically...we were a region ripe for conquest. Nobody remembers exactly how long ago Pravus took power, but he's well past his normal span. Though, recently, it's been rumored that his 'immortality' is fading."

The old man focused on the two foreigners then. "When he first arrived here, he was weak. He
destroyed Vega, and all living things around it for thousands and thousands of miles. This desert quadrupled in size because of him, and this Canyon is but a shadow of what this land used to look like. I have a feeling he's going to try something more drastic, now. To make sure he doesn't have to deal with the consequences of destroying a city again. Immortality is his sole desire, and he would gladly disrupt the Balance of the world to gain it."

Alex's eyes narrowed then. He'd had a feeling this might be the case. "He's dangerous, and he has to go down. I understand."

He looked around the circle again, and decided to trust these people, if only a little. He knew removing his disguise would be painful, for it was fairy type in nature, and Jess could always force him to keep it on, for she had no issues using the crystal. For him, it seared his skin, and ignored his attempts to connect with it. He'd had difficulty with the ice crystal as well, for it made him quite chilled, but in Fornia's heat, it was a perfect balance of temperature.

"Thank you, for sharing that with us. There is something you should know, too. The One Dragon has returned, and I am the one who made him whole once more. Understand who you're allying with, because the only way a Cult like this comes down is with coordinated strikes at its' foundations." Jess gave him the mental equivalent of a hard pinch, but he resisted wincing as he took his own toke, and let those gathered absorb that information.

That, was when his obedient partner and friend for life decided to tap into the power of Arceus, and Mega Evolve. Alex barely dodged the sudden increase of the blue flames, but the other tribe members just stared in awe. He still had eyebrows, but the pipe had been a bit scorched. He glared at Blaze, who continued to nap, and smirk.

The chief was silent for a long while, and as the silence grew, he felt the room's eyes upon him. Unova's Champion was, supposedly, as strong as the dragon he'd reunited. A dragon in his own right, apparently, or so the newest rumors claimed. Those rumors had also come with a title. The Dragon of the West.

A long look at the awakened form of the Charizard bonded to this Trainer finally convinced him of what was needed. "The Arceans have much hate for you, Champion… I don't know what you did to Pravus, but I have never seen him so…openly furious at a person. You are, quite literally, the face of the Unovan threat he's preparing his people to fight against. Normally, I would decline your aid, for it is costly, but you come to us with trust, titles, and a Charizard from this very region. Even your surname hails from here. I would be a fool to ignore these signs, but I would also be a fool to ally with you, for when the Arceans discover you, and it is a when, not an if, they will use everything they have to eradicate you. Their Prophet recently labeled you as the Spawn of Giratina, and commanded your death. You'll be hard pressed to find true allies among his Cult."

Alex passed the pipe on as the Chief spoke, and the Trainer beside him, a member of the tribe, took his own toke from the newer, stronger flames eagerly. The scent of their Leaf was similar to the Unovan variants, but stronger. Alex eyed the Chief, but his weathered face was as unreadable as his own usually was. "So…what will you do?"

The Chief grinned as the Redwood spoke. "I'll test you, and your Charizard, and if you prove worthy, you will have our support, now, and should your mission succeed, forever."

One of the female tribe members around their fire coughed hard, as she'd been in the middle of a toke of her own when she'd heard the Chief's idea. "But they're ignorant foreigners! They can't face that
The Chief smirked at the woman. "Our Alolan cousins survived it."

The young woman's brown eyes narrowed. "They had a full set of crystals. And Plates. You know well that these two do not.

The Chief eyed the foreigners again, and Alex suppressed a shiver up his spine as he felt the man's gaze staring straight through his disguise. The Chief smiled slightly, and shrugged. "They have what they need."

---

The Majestic Canyon - Fornia Region

After some sleep and some breakfast, the Chief led the two foreigners to where the Trial was held. Deep within the Majestic Canyon, even deeper than the Rebel's base, was a series of large valleys that were home to Fornia's Charizard. They were known for being hard to control, as well as for their love of battling. The only other concentration of their species large enough to rival these canyons was the Charicific Valley, in Japan, who were known for exactly the same thing. This was a place for their species to grow stronger.

The Dragon Mountain of Unova was considered a home for them as well, but in truth, Charizard were not as abundant there as they were in these valleys, given that the mountain was shared by many species. Here, only one predator reigned supreme, and the only other carnivorous species were ones who fed on the remains of what the fire lizards ate. When it wasn't entirely ash.

It was a perfect environment for them, really. The sun burned brightly, and made the battles that much more intense. Alex stared down into one valley in particular. Most of them were lush and green on their narrow bottoms, save for the dots of orange and red that marked the younger members of their species. Caves marked the sides of these fertile areas, and flashes of orange could be seen within them, as well. Nests, then. Avoiding them would be a good idea.

The tribespeople had a tradition of battling the strong Charizard, and instead of capturing them in Pokéballs, they were given an egg, if victorious, and judged worthy. It was what made this particular tribe able to live so close to Arcean territory. As long as nobody outright attacked them, their partner's flames wouldn't be a threat to 'civilized society'. That hadn't stopped Pravus from trying, but in recent years, he had focused on fossil hunting, rather than the potential tourism the Canyon could bring in.

The threat of annihilation didn't stop the tribes from helping the Rebels, for they knew well that there needed to be peace, trust, and above all unity between their people, and their pale-skinned neighbors. They could not ignore Pravus. He wasn't going away. Tales from eras so far past the modern world had forgotten them always kept the tribespeople wary, and while in the beginning there had been suffering, eventually, peace had been reached. The fall of the human race had ensured that. In the chaotic aftermath of humanity's downfall, they had been faced with a similar decision: ally and work together with the pale-skins, or die.

"Why do your people wish to help the Rebellion?" Alex asked the Chief, as they hiked. Though it was easy to mistake from up above, these valleys were truly massive in scale, and traversing them on foot was sweaty work under the blazing sun. Still, this too, was a tradition. He had no intention of disrespecting the tribe's ways. From what he'd learned of them, there was likely a very good reason
they needed to walk.

"Caleb Pravus is a blight upon the land. His cult has mined the earth relentlessly for fossils, though, recently they've lessened… rumor is, they found what they were mining for. But they've ignored the cost. Homes, destroyed. Pokémon, captured… or worse. This land needs to heal, and it will not be able to until the Arceans are no longer spurred into destroying it in the name of their leader." The Chief's tone was even, calm, but Alex could feel the latent tension in his words, a simpering rage. The Arcean's Prophet had done… something to earn the Tribe's fury.

"If you'll pardon my bluntness, Chief… this seems to go beyond a simple desire for a change in leadership. Your people are as involved in the base's operations as the former cult members. The Yavano educated me, somewhat, on my way here. I know how much you're risking."

The Chief paused in his walking, and then turned his head towards Alex. Given that they were at the back of their group, which included several other Trainers, the others kept going. "Mmmmm. Your words are indeed blunt... but honest. Your... insight... serves you well, Champion of Unova." He continued walking, and speaking, for their journey was long. "You are correct. My people have a personal stake in seeing Pravus brought down."

Alex kept his words short, and direct. "Why?"

The Chief did not answer for a long time, but eventually, he spoke, "When he first came here, Pravus convinced your fellow pale-skins to follow him with... disturbing ease. We suspected treachery, for even then the Arceans began slandering us, despite our long-standing friendship. Their attitudes changed... almost overnight. Then, Vega was destroyed. For well over a century, he had his minions persecute and belittle our people, making us out to be worse than savages. Any who associated with us, were shunned. Trade stopped, and tensions grew... then, one day, many years ago, we received a message. An offer for peace, an apology, and the promise of trade. The first in generations."

He was silent for a long time again, but Alex let him think. He hadn't been lying when he said he'd understood just how much they risked by helping the Rebels so much. His entire tribe, if things went poorly, would likely be wiped out. All their history, stories, practices unique to them, and their home, gone. He was, in short, risking everything to help stop a tyrant. They all were.

"My... daughter offered to meet with Pravus when he sent word that he wished to establish more... concrete ties to our tribes, and to stop the slanderous lies his followers perpetrated about us. I told her not to go. I told her it was a trap. She did not listen. She went to the Oasis of Glory, and for a while... we had peace." He almost spat the word.

Alex couldn't see his face, but he did notice the reddish skin on the Chief's knuckles turn white as he gripped the staff that marked his station, a long metal rod essentially, decorated and carved with runes he couldn't rightly place. It also served as his 'belt', for Pokéballs in the colors of his tribe, brownish red, yellow, green, and blue, filled each slot on the staff. Alex did a double take as he noticed there were ten balls, not six.

His distracted gaze took in something else, a symbol of sorts on each ball. A circle split into four parts, depicting what looked like the waterfall that hid the entrance to the Rebel's base, rocky outcroppings in the red stone of their home, an image of the food they grew, Cornn Berries, amongst other things, and an image of a Gogoat with a Charizard circling above it in the sky. Each image surrounded another circle, and he had to resist a smile. He'd know that symbol anywhere. Tao's influence still remained here, even after so very long.
It was good that the Chief paused for long periods of time between speaking, but as he spoke again, Alex's attention refocused. "One day…we received a summons to the Oasis, the place where, supposedly, Arceans go to relax and enjoy the fruits of their toil, for a time. Pravus and my daughter had decided to wed, and he invited every member of every tribe in the region..." The Chief sighed, heavily. "With one hand, he offered peace, and all the while his followers continued to call us savages. I did not go, as I did not approve. I could not speak to my daughter either, for Pravus had his claws in her, and she refused to speak to someone who wasn't a part of 'Arceus' calling'."

"Obviously, it was a trap. I warned my fellow Chieftains, but even our combined words of caution could not dissuade all of our people who were curious, angry, or a mix of both, from going. I…am told that my…my daughter addressed the crowd of her own people who came to see a ceremony our tribes simply do not practice, and with a word…betrayed them. The Arceans in this 'Oasis of Glory' are little more than soldiers, and underneath the pretty resort façade, lies a labor camp, full of prisoners…and anyone Pravus doesn't want causing trouble. To this day, he claims my people can leave whenever they wish, and yet they do not return. The bars and electric fences make that rather difficult, as do the armed humans, and their Pokémon. Only a few have managed to escape, and apparently, many do not survive their attempts."

The Chief glanced at Alex again, as their group stopped before the edge of the flame-marked valley of rock that served as the arena for the fiercesome fire lizards that called this place home. "This is why every tribe has agreed to help this Rebellion. We must free our people…and theirs. Fornia must be free, again. Then, perhaps, balance can return to our home."

Alex pulled out Tao's Pokéball, and he resisted a smirk as he heard the other Trainers, mainly those of the tribe, inhale sharply at the symbol upon it. They had all listened quietly as they realized the Chief was telling a story, essentially. Now, this foreigner pulled out a ball that, to their eyes, was infused with the One Dragon's power. Or rather, a trace of it.

This ball had held him at one time, evidently, but this Trainer had wisely kept him free of it. Alex offered the ball, and the Chief eyed it closer, and then handed it back. Alex held his hand on it, for a moment, as he spoke "I am the bringer of that balance. The Dragon's will works through me. You have my word, Chieftain, I will see your people free. We will set them all free."

He took the ball back then, pocketing it. The Chief nodded, once, and then stopped walking, and raised his staff. "We shall see. Behold. We are here."

The valley in the center of this area was a canyon in its own right. It was also where most of the contests of strength were held, and as a result, the once red rocks had turned black from centuries of fire duels. As they looked into the blackened valley of stone, they saw him. Every colony has a leader, and this one was no exception to the rule that such leaders were, usually, large, powerful, and stronger than normal.

The Charizard that served as the king of these fierce Pokémon, for no other title fit his bearing, was massive, and napping. As the group approached the edge of the blackened canyon, the massive fire lizard opened one eye, and in an instant, a fiery Aura of red and white surrounded his form. Alex swore, loudly. He had no illusions as to what this trial would likely entail. Battling a beast like that, that had mastered its own power to such a degree, promised to be a challenge.

The Charizard of the tribe's Trainers popped free of their balls as they watched, and the two foreigner's partners were called out. Blaze and Chari twisted high into the air, before heading down towards the Totem Pokémon. Apparently, that was what they were called here, as well.
As Blaze landed before his opponent, he glanced at his Trainer, and nodded. Alex called on the crystal again, and empowered his partner, who took what he needed to Mega Evolve, and then cloak himself in a similar aura. The power faded, and the magma colored aura held perfectly. Alex smirked. Blaze had been trying to perfect that for months. Naturally, he understood it when he needed to. That was how he'd always learned, after all.

As the older Charizard stood, Alex noticed that they weren't all that different in size. It was the shape that was different. His wings were smaller, but his claws were enormous. He could likely fly when he needed to, but this Charizard obviously preferred the ground. That meant he likely preferred physical moves as well.

A torrent of Flamethrower burned over Blaze, and the fire lizard yawned, as he inhaled the intense flames, and grinned. His tail flame turned blue, and his claws became shrouded in deep red, and orange colored energy. The same as the magma from which he'd evolved.

The older Pokémon shot forward, and after a flash of red, Chari was behind him. The older Charizard glanced at the pair, and snarled. Technically, one's mate could join a duel. If it was to the death, or for leadership. He glanced at the humans, and then understood. They wanted his help for something, and they were fighting to prove they were worthy of it.

The older Charizard smirked, and rapidly spun in place. A tornado of flames shot into the air, then, a similarly red pair of Dragon Claws rose out of the flames, towards the two fighters. Though the claws were massive, they missed Blaze, or rather, skirled off his aura. Chari went down, landing hard, but relatively uninjured, save for her wing which had taken the impact. Blaze eyed her, and then bid her to stay put as he rejoined the battle and roared.

The female did as she'd been asked, as she'd smashed a wing into the canyon's hard rock wall after being hit. There was no reason to go in now. In the air, Blaze would have to defend her and also attack, and on the ground…well, this Charizard could handle her there, too. She stayed back, as the two males smashed together repeatedly.

For all the fire and claws, neither one seemed to be damaged much, and once it was clear they were drawing towards a stalemate, Alex gave his partner useful information, and a strategy. Battles were as much mind games as they were fights, in contests like this, anyways. A moment's distraction would tip it.

Blaze smirked as he heard and agreed with the plan. His Trainer was convinced that this Charizard was his sire, or at the very least, related by blood. They shared the same facial features, though Blaze's wings were nowhere near as small.

Blaze's Dragon Tail canceled out another Dragon Claw, and the younger fire lizard snarled in the tongue of their species to the older one. "You…are related to me, aren't you…we are similar…"

The elder paused, and the battle did as well, as he eyed his opponent properly, and then nodded. "I did not smell it, but now I see it. You are of my blood…a son I thought lost." He raised a claw and it burst to life with red draconic energy, "But that changes nothing. You started this battle…I will finish it!"

Blaze then did his best imitation of a human shrug, which actually looked halfway decent. He fell backwards in the air as he dodged under the enormous claw. His own Dragon Claw ran along the outer edge of his opponent's. "Very well. I just thought you should know, I have offspring as well."
The older fire lizard's attack paused, eyes widening at the news, for it was always a wonderful thing to have more family. Blaze took the second he needed, and slid his Dragon claw up the older Charizard's burly arm, neck, and then face, in a powerful upwards slash.

The two broke apart then, and the elder was panting. A critical hit, and one that had taken out an eye. Not permanently, but it would need to heal. The claws hadn't actually cut his skin, either. Only faint black marks showed where they'd passed, scraping against the elder's aura shield. Blaze had actually gotten through it around the neck area, and it had not re-formed. In fact, the aura had dissipated entirely now.

Slightly irritated with this new injury, the elder snarled. "Enough, whelp. What do you and your humans want of me?"

Blaze glanced up at his Trainer as he mumbled softer growls. "Something about a Trial…"

The older fire lizard grinned. "Ahh. The Trial…why didn't you say so?" He rose again, and though the aura didn't re-form, two other, smaller, Charizard stepped forward to join him. They were comparatively large, but against the King and his offspring, everyone was small. The two arrivals engaged Blaze immediately, but he had fought battles like this before. He could handle a pair of his kin, but he flew higher into the smoky air regardless, as their flames followed him. He didn't want his sire interfering as he dispatched these two.

Occupied as he was, for the two the King had chosen were skilled aerial fighters, Blaze did not notice what went on below. Five other Charizard, each an elder in their own right, surrounded their King, and freely gave their power…so that he might attain the same level as one bonded to a human. Fire type energy poured into the massive Charizard, and like his offspring, he retained his typing and colors as he Mega Evolved. He was stronger now yes, but most importantly, his wings were now capable of lifting his massive form, which was mostly muscle.

The air boomed as he lifted off, and the weakened elders below curled into circular piles of orange scale, their wings forming a tent above them as they meditated, and kept their own power supplying their King's.

Luckily for Blaze, he had a pair of eyes with a cliff-side view, and saw his sire coming. There was a layer of thin cloud between them, though it was mostly just smoke, it obscured one's vision regardless. Blaze maneuvered his opponents into position, and then kept them there, as his father ascended.

He burst through the clouds with a powerful Dragon Tail, unable to pause as he realized who he was swinging at. The two new opponents went down, and once more, the battle was even. Like Chari, they had smashed into the stone canyon walls, and would need time to recover in order to battle again.

Father and son clashed again and again as the sun turned the sky red, and the sun began to set. Getting here had taken almost a full day, and the days had begun to grow shorter. The summer was halfway finished, and the days were once more shortening to reasonable length.

Seeing another stalemate approaching, Blaze knew this would likely be it. Though he wouldn't admit it, those two had damaged him, almost as much as he'd damaged his sire. The next decisive blow would finish this contest, and he intended to win.
"Wait for an opening…do not rush…" His Trainer's words echoed in his skull, and this time, he listened. His partner had become a skilled fighter of his own kind, and what worked well in battle for him had often translated just as well into his team's battles. "Move with the wind, and let him strike the air. He is tired, though his stamina will likely outlast yours. Use your speed to deliver a blow, you can't match him physically."

Blaze did as ordered, looping through the air as his sire's claws furiously slashed through it. He was picking up speed now, and could feel his wings starting to strain. Moving fast enough just to dodge was taking a lot of focus. He would need that focus for a useful attack. Then, he had an idea of his own. His Trainer, smirked, and encouraged him to go for it. His battle instincts were great, after all.

He flew high then, high into the smog-filled clouds over this part of the Canyon. Each wing beat cleared it away, and Blaze knew he couldn't use it a second time. He'd need a different trick.

Finally, he flew straight up, and in a masterful display of aerial maneuvering, he came down at his still ascending opponent with a Dragon Tail propelled by gravity. Two large claws came towards him, and then his sire launched them at his progeny in an x-shaped cris-cross of their uniquely colored dragon type energy that flew through the air. Blaze smashed through the energy claws with his tail, and circled around into his own Dragon Claw.

The elder had let his upwards momentum stop, but Blaze had far more after falling. Smashing through the dragon energy had slowed him only slightly, and once more the offspring scored a hit upon the King, who grunted, and fell back first towards the ground. He turned slowly in the air, and let his massive wings stop him, but he still slammed onto the ground quite hard, and did not rise to battle again. His Mega Form faded, and he lifted his tail up into the air, the sign amongst their species that told their enemy they were done battling. Charizard did not typically kill fellow Charizard, after all.

Up on the cliff's edge, the Chief turned to Alex, and smiled. "You have trained that one well. If all of your partners are that strong, Pravus is doomed."

Alex shrugged, scratching his blonde hair. "Well, six of them are. The other three are a work in progress…and I still need my last one."

The Chief eyed him again, and then nodded. "A ghost type…I think I know one who will work well with you…if you can convince him to battle."

Alex raised a brow, but the Chief spoke before he could. "But we will see to that in the morning. For now, let us feast among our fiery brethren!" The other fire lizards shot their flames into the air, and as they did, Blaze flew past them, spinning into the air, and then fanning his wings out as came down again, and landed on the cliff. Chari followed soon after, favoring her wing, but still capable of flying straight up. It was, after all, one of the easier maneuvers fliers used.

That night was spent around the King's tail flames, and as the entire group of humans gathered around, their own partners joined their tails with his. Blaze did as well, and together, they shared and recovered energy as the humans partook of their intense fire to burn and inhale their smelly plants.
"Tell me the odds again, Ein." Caleb Pravus stared down at his prize, grinning.

The lab coated doctor would've flipped his brown hair flick, if Pravus hadn't made him cut it off. Instead, he pushed his glasses up by the brim. "Given the species' popularity, incompetent archeological skills of our race at the time, and the tectonic upheaval of the Stoney Mountains, the odds of finding an intact specimen, let alone one a Mew fused with..."

He was silent for a good thirty seconds as his brain mathed out the numbers. Finally, he sighed, his monotone voice sounded bored. "Astronomically small."

Pravus gave him a look, but let it slide. They had other things to discuss. "Gender?"

"He hasn't figured that out yet." Ein said, smirking.

Pravus rolled his eyes. "Spare me the politically correct BS, and just say 'male', or 'plug' if we must use analogies."

Ein sighed, looking down at his creation. "It doesn't really matter. He's the only one we can make. We used all the other samples to make this one. And he's still part rock type."

Pravus grinned. "Oh, don't worry, we'll have a dragon crystal soon enough. It's on its way here as we speak." Ein rolled his eyes. One didn't need to be a genius to know how that encounter would go. Hundreds of team bosses, every bit as strong as Pravus, had fallen to younger Trainers, with less experience. All of whom had also gone on to be Champions as well. Unova especially, had a habit of forging strong Champions. As did Kalos.

Ein looked down at his creation again, and sighed. Pravus did have numbers though, and when it came to Pokémon, that was all one really needed. Empires like this cult were what made creating beings like his Veloraptar possible, and he would be perfect to lead their numbers... when he was finished.

The Pokémon being admired by the two men high above his paddock smelled delicious to the creature within. He eyed them, still hungry after devouring the Gogoat they'd all but dangled in front of him. He knew they'd been testing his leaping height, and soon after that first meal, the metal bar had been built overhead.

He hated how it loomed over him, but he especially hated the 'human' that eyed him like a meal. When he had been alive before, the humans had run from him in terror, but then, he'd been much faster, almost able to fly in those days. This new body, while physically stronger, was still flawed. He could run roughly the same, but he always felt slow. Imperfect.

His eyes turned to thin vertical slits as he scented more prey. Evidently, this...circular...thing they'd trapped him in had prey within it. He trotted off through the foliage, wincing at how loud his steps were. How was he supposed to hunt like this?
Brad had, like his partners on this endeavor, made contact with friendly allies in Fornia's northern areas. The north was a natural forested buffer between the Takoma region and most of Fornia, and with the exception of the city of Pravia to the east, the Arceans didn't seem to mind the tribe's presence to the west.

Brad had trained his Charmeleon against the Rebel Trainers, and he had finally evolved the previous evening. They'd camped out that night, with the young Charizard folding his wings into a tent, as his father had shown him. Evidently, it was something Alex had him do often, though usually Shruikan was the better choice, as he was now enormous.

It had been a jarring thing, being shoved back into Arcean society, falling into old habits, like praising the Prophet in every sentence he was mentioned. From his new perspective, he now saw how deviously ingenious Pravus' set-up was. It was designed for subtle, effective brainwashing. So subtle, the average person couldn't even tell they were being molded. Some resisted, of course…but they soon either fit in the mold, or vanished. This was why everyone wanted to stay out of trouble. Justice in Fornia had a tendency to be swift.

Though he'd initially entertained thoughts of rejoining his people, the corruption in the world Pravus had built soon became obvious, and fear no longer made him ignore it. Taking a cover job as a member of one of the Church's many 'media branches' had been tedious, but the monotony of doing seemingly meaningless tasks had been broken up one day when a group of Task Force members entered the writing room of their little studio, by force.

They'd asked for a specific writer of a specific article that, evidently, Pravus himself had read, and not liked. The consequences for producing 'sub-par work' involved every member of the twenty-man squad taking their chance to beat on the writer in question, long after he'd lost consciousness.

The job, which Brad had admittedly lingered at due to his feelings of nostalgia, was quickly abandoned soon after that incident. Indeed, Brad had simply vanished one day, and nobody, not even the security in charge of keeping the writers writing, could tell how he'd left. Nobody knew what Pokémon he had at home, as he was new, and Pokémon were not for the workplace. Not at their level, anyways.

Brad had put the Sage's training to good use, and eventually, had discovered the northernmost Tribe in Fornia after wandering blindly through the wilderness. The more he had thought during his trek, the more he'd noticed. The Arceans had seemingly no interest in this beautiful, fertile land. It was hard to find in southern Fornia, but the areas he'd hiked through were full of mountains, forests, and even rare Pokémon. It was entirely out of character for Pravus to ignore it.

When he discovered Colville, a city among the massive trees that grew throughout the region, he began to understand. The tribespeople here were not only expert Trainers, they could also move stealthily through the trees of their land with almost unnatural skill. Their guerrilla tactics were all but unstoppable, and every time the Arceans had tried setting up a site to dig for fossils or cut lumber, the tribe had stopped them. Given how far they had to transport everything, the losses in equipment, fuel, and even manpower were significant.

Eventually, Pravus had given up on the area, though why, nobody quite knew. Some guessed he would deal with it later, after the Unova threat was taken care of. Most Arceans didn't seem to care either, for they only had cities on their borders, and were happy to leave the wilderness to the
Colville was not unlike the base hidden within the Majestic Canyon. Though most of the people and supplies moved through the massive trees with a relatively complex pulley system, those who could, preferred having their partners use Vine Whip to swing through the trees. These were usually the stronger Trainers, sent on guerilla strike missions at supply lines.

Like Alex and Jess, Brad had acquired a fossil on his way to this city in the trees, and after some training, his new Archeops moved through them just as silently. Once his newly assembled team was ready, after he'd caught, trained, and evolved the partners he needed, Brad asked the Tribe to help him with another mission that required stealth.

Tracking down his family had taken days, and he'd already stayed in Colville longer than planned. Alex and Jess were likely on their way to Mewsia, the only city on Fornia's lovely coast that wasn't entirely under Pravus' thumb. It was through this port that foreigners were allowed to trade and converse with specially selected Arceans, who would give the best impression of the culture their leader envisioned. Their loyalty was, apparently, unbreakable.

Alex had said to take as long as he needed, though. They were going to contact him when they made their move. Until then, he didn't have to rendezvous, so he stayed, and he searched. The Pineus family, to which Bradley belonged, had owned a simple estate in the mountainous area of north-eastern Fornia. An entire mountainside, which had been in their family for generations.

Proud Arceans had been raised there, but none had risen like Bradley. He'd been the only Hand of the Prophet, but not the only Champion level Trainer. He could only imagine what was left of his home after defecting, but he wasn't expecting what he found. Ash covered everything, and the entire mountain had been burned bare. Machinery belonging to the Arcean's fossil recovery branch was already boring into the mountain, and from the looks of the lights over where his home had stood, they had met with success.

Brad smirked, as he mentally whispered to his Archeops. "What do you want to bet they've found elemental Plates and crystals?" His smirk widened. He'd memorized what the three of them still needed, and aside from dragon, and probably psychic, the other crystals could be found.

Brad had always known that his family's mountain contained power. The Pokémon raised on those once fertile slopes had always been powerful. He had not however, expected to find at least ten of every elemental plate, just lying around the camp. It made some sense, as in reality, nobody but Brad and his family lived out here, but it still seemed careless. Evidently, the leader of this operation was a 'fun boss', and rewarded hard work before safely storing assets. Brad's smirk grew grim as he eyed the plates. That was definitely against protocol.

Taking them all but guaranteed ruining someone's life, career, even marriage potentially. Some worker here would talk, the overseer would be replaced…ruined, and the digging would continue. But then, if he did nothing, what had already been dug up would be exploited further. The Arcean Fossil Organization was famous for digging deeper than they should.

A familiar voice echoed in his head. "Examine the man whose life you fear to ruin. He has no mental defenses. These people's minds are wide open. Go. Look."

Brad tensed atop his mount as he replied in the same manner. "Yes, Master." He reached out, and examined the man's mind. Thankfully, the illegal alcoholic beverages, and other substances, were
clouding what senses the man did possess. Brad's intrusion went unnoticed, as he examined each memory, each thought, feeling, emotion.

What he found sickened him. This was a man who enjoyed his power, and while he could keep his workers happy, he enjoyed those who needed to be punished in truly disturbing ways. He reached for the Plates, when he paused. "I'm not seeing every angle." He felt the Sage's approval.

The bad emotions were easy to notice because they stood out. Among the kinder memories were his children. But even here, Brad was disappointed. They were far too reminiscent of his own childhood. He'd never seen his parents enough, as he'd been off being educated, at their expense. It had all paid off when he'd become Champion of the Arceus League, and had attained the rank of Hand of the Prophet, but that had almost been worse than being a strong Trainer with a Rayquaza.

He saw that this man's own offspring truly mattered little to him. Beyond making sure they were decent Arceans, he didn't seem to acknowledge their existence. The work he did, for the fate of the planet, was far more important. Finally, Brad left the man's head, his hope in humanity fading slightly after such a thorough look. He shoved the Plates into his bag, but surprisingly, they were incredibly light. His eyes counted each of the types, three times over. No need to be greedy after all.

As he looked at just how many there were though, he reconsidered. The Rebellion could use Trainers with Plates…and the knowledge of how to tap them. Between his Marowak and Scizor, the stealthy trio managed to grab many sets of Plates, before he'd felt they'd pushed their luck. They left when someone shouted, drunkenly, that the pile of Plates had shrunk.

The overseer had laughed, and said they'd just dig up more, but nobody had cheered at that. They'd just finished working, dammit. They needed, earned, this reprieve. As the mood in the camp turned dark and mutiny-ish, Brad and his loyal flying, stealthy partner headed south.

He'd found the remains of his home, of course, and had been able to access some of the tech that survived in the mostly stone and metal interior. They may have been isolated out here, but his family had never lacked for gadgets. The last record, from several months prior, said they'd been moved south. So south they went, following the trail.

Though the area around the massive desert in the region was sparsely populated, what towns did exist, Brad searched through. There had indeed been a large truck with his family name on it that passed through. On their way to Sacreus, or so they said. Brad swore.

Sacreus was a unique city, in that it had once existed in an age before Pokémon. Then, a meteor had struck it, leaving nothing but death and destruction. Some said it was that event that sparked the final fall for humanity, but nobody really remembered why their race had fallen anymore. The ancient past was the ancient past. They hadn't even had Pokémon, so why learn about them? The ancient's way of life had failed. To most modern people, they were irrelevant, save for the rebooted entertainment franchises resurrected from the remains of the Old Net.

Sacreus had been rebuilt over time, as people came to live in the crater. It had once been fertile, but the city that grew within the crater soon drowned out what natural life had come from the ancient impact and destruction. Sacreus had natural defenses, hills for miles around it, and a plasma shield that could cover the city in times of need. Just in case of impending meteor strikes.

The city had, over the years, also extended downwards. For hundreds of miles, it was said to be a steel under-city that people actually lived in, sometimes for their entire lives. Pravus' headquarters
was at the bottom-most level, and reaching it any other way but through the Cult required one to magically dig through tons of rock, and then several feet of metal. Thankfully, they'd brought a mountain-eater with them. But he was, if the plan was on track, still training.

Alex had wanted to avoid Sacreus entirely, as being recognized in Pravus' home turf would be quite bad. The city was thoroughly checked for traitors, and people were switched out all the time if they became suspects of some usually imaginary crime.

Ignoring the upper levels and going for the head of the snake via Cenomons was the best option while they had stealth on their side. Brad had agreed. Much of Arcean society depended on the Prophet. He was a 'holy' man, touched by Arceus, and blessed with apparent immortality. He was the will of the 'God Pokémon' as the locals called him, made manifest. He was also what everyone secretly feared.

Anyone who went against Pravus tended to vanish. But the mere thought of betraying their leader was, to many Arceans, unimaginable. A concept they couldn't even consider...not while he yet lived, at least. Oddly enough though, a few of the latest generation had begun to outright leave because of the rampant abuse within the system. Brad hadn't seen many of them in Colville, but those Fornians were the ones who'd sparked this Rebellion. He didn't wonder how they might react to seeing their cult leader fall, for from his point of view, anyone who'd suffered at his hands knew there could only be one fate for such a person.

With his parents likely sequestered within the fortress crater-city, Brad resigned himself to waiting. His siblings though, he knew exactly where they'd be. He was quite familiar with where the Church put children with 'suppressive' relatives. He'd wanted more than his parent's aid to free them, as he was familiar with how heavy security was at the living quarters for children, but he could manage on his own.

He had his stealthy Scizor zip around the camp, once he'd reached it. They called it a dig site, but it reality, it was a work camp, where children of loyal Arceans toiled away, mostly mining useless rocks for enough shards to make a Plate. They were considered done when they found enough shards for Plates of every type, but naturally, 'accidents' regularly occurred, and kept those mining from freedom when their caches of mined shards vanished from the storage sheds, and returned their count to zero. Occasionally some would find a fossil, but those were always taken away quickly. His Scizor returned several minutes later. It had been hard finding two specific blonde, blue-eyed tan children amongst so many others, but the intelligent bug had managed it.

Brad eyed the building for a long time, and eventually recalled his Scizor. He would do this himself. He reached out with the psychic power he'd previously ignored. It was a part of him, and now one he embraced. Upon learning from the other Champions in the Swamp that humans could not, in fact, reproduce with Pokémon, he'd come to terms with psychic types. It was hard to claim they were evil when they could speak to you, and emanated genuine kind emotions. It was more emotion than his Arcean handlers had ever shown, and after failing again against Redwood, he'd accepted the truth. Using the PokéNet, he'd gained answers to most of his worldly questions, and also learned that checking one's sources was always a good idea. Biased views existed outside of the Church too, it seemed. After several minutes of mental scanning, Brad found the mind that he recognized as his youngest brother's, and made contact.

"Sam. Wake up. It's your brother. Think your responses, and I'll hear them. Do you understand?" It took a few moments for the groggy preteen to come to consciousness, and realize he was not in fact dreaming.
"Brad? How are you…"

"Later. Listen to me, you need to get ready to leave. Bring our sister." He sensed their youngest sister lying near him, but of the elder there was no sign.

The boy’s mind lit up at the thought of not being in the living hell that was the labor camp, but fear kept him hesitant. It was, after all, the Church’s strongest tool. "We can't just walk out. The guards will see us. The others will tell. We'll get beaten again..."

"Don't worry about them, just pack your bags. I'm getting you both far away from here. Where's Lisa?"

The younger brother paused for a moment, and then thought, "I don't know…she's…changed, Brad. She's on the fast track to becoming a Hand of the Prophet."

Brad sighed. He knew what that meant. His defection had only served to inspire 'loyalty' to the cause, and Pravus was all too glad to keep a potential hostage nearby. The fact that she was also rather attractive certainly had nothing to do with her meteoric rise to the Prophet's side.

That meant that over half of his family, his parents and sister, as well as any aunts or other relatives who hadn't cut ties already were likely to disconnect from them once it was discovered they'd escaped. Still, he'd decided early on that if he could only save a few, he'd want to get the young ones out first. He knew far too well what teenage years in the Arcean Church were really like.

His Lycanroc and Cloyster had taken out the guards around this particular building, and while those who were unconscious would recover, those frozen in ice would have a long wait to melt, at least until the sun rose over Fornia. But sunrise was far off. Brad had his Lycanroc guide the two children out, and once they were out of the building, he put them on the wolf’s back, and had him carry them to Archeops.

He covered their tracks, mended the barbed wire fence that surrounded the work camp, and left no trace of which direction they'd gone. The security here was competent enough to follow tracks, but if there were no tracks to follow, they'd be significantly slowed. Enough for them to get away.

As his large, female Archeops carried them into the sky, his brother babbled away about fossil Pokémon he’d found, while his youngest sister, who was six and considered old enough to work, simply clung to her big brother. She would likely be pretty as well, though Brad also knew the camps were home to many with darker perversions. Such people had an unfortunate tendency to rise to positions of power within the Church. He sincerely hoped she'd avoided such men, but didn't have the courage to sift through her memories and find out. She’d been through enough already.

As his Archeops flew north, towards the relative safety of Colville, she flew just high enough for Sam to reach up into a cloud, and discover they were rather wet, not fluffy. Then, the large Pokémon stopped, and squawked for her master's attention.

They went into a steep, gliding dive and came out over the forests of the north-eastern part of Fornia. Brad swore, and quickly turned the ancient bird around. It would be a longer flight, but he could use his Charizard if necessary. The Canyon Base was now the largest one the Rebellion had left.

Deep Within the Majestic Canyon – Fornia Region
Alex approached the strange orb at the end of the cave the Chief had led them to. Jess had remained at the base, and began the arduous task of learning who everyone was. She wasn't irritated though, as she knew he'd be joining her very soon.

As he looked at the orb, he noticed that it was black on the edges, and white within. Alex glanced at the Chief, who watched him, silently, probably musing to himself with his inner monologue. He did that a lot, and never noticed his tendency to mutter aloud when he mused after toking his pipe.

Alex put a hand on the orb, and smirked. The strange sphere shifted to a familiar swirling pattern of Eternal Balance, and the Pokémon within woke up.

Electric and ghost. That was the first thing Alex saw, and then he realized what he was looking at. It was Rotom, of course, but its black and white form was tied to a similarly colored crystal at the bottom. As the ghost saw the human, it reflexively melded with its' crystal, and a pair of golden eyes stared at him from the object he currently possessed.

Alex knelt down and lifted the crystal up. The ghost within eyed him the entire time. "Hello there." The crystal blinked its golden eyes once. "I'm Alex. The Champion of Unova. The one who reunited the Dragon of Unova." At the dragon's title, the eyes grew brighter.

"The dragon is whole?" The voice was almost incoherent, and faint.

"He is, Old One." The Chief said from the back of the cave, waiting patiently.

The Rotom seemed to stare through him as it processed his words. Alex had no illusions about the intelligence of the Pokémon before him. He could sense the power the ghost had, and knew it was at least as intelligent as Tao, and probably almost as old. The ghost's mind felt ancient.

The crystal suddenly flared with electricity, searing his skin, and he winced. He'd learned to hold in a reaction to pain early in his martial training with the dragon. He noticed the small crystal mirroring his smirk, and Alex arched a brow. "Is that it?"

The Pokémon stared at him, and the voltage increased. He was ready now, though. His eyes flared as he guided the current harmlessly through the parts of his body that could handle such intense shock, and into the stone below him.

The ground flared in a familiar Taijitu swirl as electricity poured into it, and revealed a hidden carving below them, as the two bonded. Sparks began arcing through the air as the tiny Pokémon gave the human as much as he dared. The equivalent of a Thunder attack. Hopefully, it would only knock the human out, but he could never judge how much they could really take.

Finally, it stopped. The crystal shivered in approval, and then glowed entirely white. Alex stared at the crystal for a long time before deciding it was too similar. He tossed the crystal into the air, on a hunch, and the Rotom within burst free with a satisfying, and sparky, yawn. "I really hate not being able to leave that thing! At least you figured out how to open it. The last guy took two weeks." His voice was higher now that he was free, and he sounded like his new Trainer when he spoke. It was, somehow, both familiar and strange at the same time.

The small ghost type continued arcing his plasma body in ever more twisted shapes. Alex's eyes were on the crystal though. He'd heard of ancient devices that could contain Pokémon, and those that still existed always had unusual Pokémon within.
Alex pocketed the strange crystal, and shrugged. A Pokéball was a Pokéball. It was common knowledge that ancient civilizations from the early years of the Dark Times had been able to capture and battle with Pokémon. Devices like the crystal had been common, and far more unique than Pokéballs could ever really be. Battling, as a sport, was ancient in their world. An honored tradition that went back to the rebirth of the human race. In a time of chaos, it had united the world. For a time.

He found the small ghost eyeing him, and where his crystal went. He valued it, clearly. Alex reached out then, and brought the new member of their team into the mental web that connected his partners. He could tell the ghost was impressed, and Alex smirked. The plasma being was already conversing with several of his partners, and giving them battle advice.

The Chief approached the suddenly still pair of Trainer and Pokémon, tapping Alex's shoulder. The two blinked, in unison. "He sounds like you..." the Chief remarked. Alex simply nodded, flexing his hand as he focused on healing the burns. Recover was, unfortunately, still a mystery to him, move wise. He could make it seem easy, as he had against Connor, but if he was honest, Tao had mainly healed those wounds. They'd been rather serious. "We should return to the base. Your partner apparently just checked in...with news."

Alex raised a brow, momentarily blank on who was being referred to. "My partner...? Not Jess... then...oh. Ohhhh. Brad? What news does he bring?"

The Chief stared at the Unovan for a long moment, then sighed. "Nothing good..." He pointed to the north then, as they'd reached the top of the footpath that led up the canyon wall.

Alex's team joined them, staring in disbelief, and perhaps for the first time understanding just how depraved their foe was, and the lengths he would go to in order to crush rebellion.

The entire sky was turning black, and not with electricity. That, he could've handled. These clouds had something dark drifting down from them, and, they were blowing in from the north. The Chief grimaced. "It has begun. Colville has fallen."

Alex shared the Chief's grim look. He recalled everyone, Rotom included, as Shruikan leapt into the valley below, and circled around for rapid ascension. "I need a better look. I'll meet you back at the base." Before the Chief could respond, the Unovan Champion had grabbed his Salamence's tail, and was already in the air, climbing the massive back of his black dragon. The huge beast flapped into the sky, through the ashy clouds, and then above them.

Shruikan picked up speed by the time Alex had grabbed onto one of his head horns. Dragon energy surrounded both of them as he mega evolved, and accelerated. A normal Salamence in this form could cross continents in mere hours. Flying a few hundred miles north was easy.

It took an hour, but eventually they figured out where the smoke was coming from. Ash clouds blanketed the area for miles around them, and as Alex recalled his dragon, he fell through the foul clouds, and let gravity control him for a minute.

He had time before he'd need to float, so he fell, and as he did, he saw. Normally, he imagined, the trees that had made up this base of tribespeople were likely invisible. Now though, there was a disturbingly perfect circle of charred trees, miles in diameter, that had encompassed the entire settlement. Nobody had run away unscathed.
Just as he was wondering what sort of Pokémon could unleash this kind of flame in such a perfect circle, he felt eyes upon him from below, and reached for his power. His large form stopped, hovering in the air, and he rapidly ascended towards the clouds again.

It was already too late, though. Blaze popped free of his ball, wings and body enveloping his Trainer as the cone of flames shot up at them from the ground. Though they were intense, it would take far more than that to take his Charizard down. Alex slid onto his back, as his partner glowed with red energy from the Firium crystal. They shot into the clouds, and waited above.

They heard the wing flaps as whatever had struck at them rose into the clouds, and Alex felt a familiar sensation of 'oh shit' run up his spine as he spied his opponent, and what he was riding. It was a Noivern, but something about it was…off. It had traded the flying typing for dark, and shadow energy emanated from it. Its eyes only wanted to kill, and as it saw Blaze, it began to drool. Its mouth was covered in blood, and it took Alex a moment to realize where it was likely from. Picking off stragglers of a disaster. This was a special kind of depraved Trainer then, and likely one of Pravus' chosen Hands. He fit the description.

The man atop the monstrous dragon was clad in similar garb to what the examiners in the Swamp wore, though where theirs was 'camouflaged' this man's was entirely black. Though he wore a similarly colored beret, and Alex had always found them a bit silly, it did nothing to detract from the imposing presence he gave off. A familiar chill in the air. That sense of dread that so often accompanied death. It seemed Pravus wasn't the only one with tricks.

The man wore a green monocle-type device over his left eye, and as he stared at Blaze, his smile grew. "That's the one." He said to the Noivern. He raised a gloved hand, and it flared with dark type energy. "Feast, Carporian."

At the man's words, an almost invisible crystal, for it blended with the man's choice of attire, began to glow, and the Noivern began to change. A smaller pair of wings sprouted from its sides, and the tail gained fin-like appendages. Most notable however, were the pair of massive fangs the dragon now sported. It panted as the change finished, ready to run wild.

Normally, Alex would've enjoyed seeing a new Mega Form, but he knew a bit about Noivern, and could only imagine what their Mega Form was like, let alone under such a dark Trainer. It was very likely that he'd lose control of that dragon. Even Blaze could tell it was growing annoyed with its rider. It had grown larger, angrier, as his Trainer formed a leash of dark energy from the crystal, and wrapped it about the dragon's neck.

Shruikan, for his part, agreed with their assessment, and used it to his advantage. He'd been called out again once they'd come up in the clouds, and had been told to fly even higher. Now, the low thrumming sound of his wings slicing through the air was the only prelude to the Charge Beam that followed. The Noivern glared at where the sound came from, but did not expect what was streaking down from the sky to be a Salamence.

The electric beam struck the Noivern with deadly precision as the massive dragon zipped past. Not only was the beast weakened, but his rider was struggling to stay on, and cursing at his mount for being so blind. Preoccupied with his Trainer and his injuries, the Noivern did not see the Dragon Tail Shruikan aimed their way as an afterthought. The sheer size of it caused the bat-like dragon to sail rapidly through the air before slamming into the ground below with a thunderous boom.

"Time to leave." Alex said, as he recalled Blaze, and hopped once more on Shruikan. He headed
south again, before the Noivern could recover. By the time it did eventually fly up again, they were
long gone. The bat-like dragon was furious, and with a single sonic-flap, it cleared the ash clouds for
miles. It hadn't had a chance to use its power at all. The other dragon had robbed it of a battle.

The Hand of Death, now once more perched on the dragon, grimaced. He hadn't even had time for
banter. He loved banter. Of course to him, banter was the screams of pain he drew from his targets.
His dark expression shifted to one that could cause pure terror in even the manliest of men. The grin
of a hunter who sees prey. By pure chance, the clouds obscuring the black Salamence had been
within Carporian's range. Though the attack probably hadn't damaged the dragon from so far away,
it had revealed him, and his rider. They had yet further to go until the undisturbed clouds of ash
could cover them again.

His hunter was already moving, for he'd spotted the prey as well. Though to him this would be more
of a match between rivals, rather than a hunt. The Noivern had felt the thunder of that dragon first
hand, and he would not underestimate him again. Each flap of his wings propelled him towards his
target, and from below, the annoyingly fast hatchling followed. It was bound to the land, but had
proven effective in hunting down the humans that had fled from the tree-city.

The Noivern ignored it, and instead unleashed the power of his Voice, now that they were in range.
The boom had shocked Shruikan, making his entire system tense up from the sheer power of the
vibrations behind the attack. The dragon had continued soaring, but was slowly descending, and
couldn't dodge. Alex had been trying to find the pressure point by the back of his skull that would
release his tensed muscles for several minutes, but his scales were too thick in his Mega Form.

He'd had Shruikan drop it, and of course as soon as he let the power go, the damned Noivern cleared
the sky. By the time Alex pressed the pressure point, causing Shruikan's wings to work again, they
had fallen several hundred feet, and the fanged dragon had gained on them with speed. Then, they
heard its Voice. It was untrained, but the sheer power of it was all that was really needed. Shruikan
took the hit hard, and Alex knew they needed to turn this around quickly.

Shruikan used his own Hyper Voice, and Alex smirked at his choice of words. So that was what
he'd learned from Rayquaza. He'd been keeping it a secret for a while, from everyone. "Dovah
Envok!" The black dragon's eyes flared, and an aura of bluish-purple energy formed around him as
he circled in the air, and rapidly moved towards the Noivern.

A familiar cone of flame came for them, but Shruikan cut through it. His Dragon Ascent wasn't
perfect like Rayquaza's, but it was still strong. Where the Legendary dragons Like Rayquaza could
use such a move to Mega Evolve, other dragons manifested it as a powerful physical attack, but used
dragon typed energy to fuel it.

The energy hit the Noivern hard, and this time, his Trainer knew there would be no second wind.
The Hand leapt off his mount, and let it crash below in the mountainous forests that made up much
of this part of the region. The Hand himself floated, a dark aura surrounding him. Much like his
servant, he simply hadn't had time to use it before. The black dragon had been too quick.

He drew another ball from his belt, and Alex recalled his own partner, as he floated with his own
power as well. Apparently, this battle was happening. The black clad man grinned at him. "There's
no running from Trainer battles."

Alex rolled his eyes, and as he did, the man threw a Dark Ball. An Absol appeared, as dark and
shadowy as the Noivern it was partnered with. This one's expression was entirely different. It took
one look at Alex, and began trying to resist its Trainer. To no avail. The power that controlled it now, and bonded it to the Hand, was too strong. It looked on helplessly as its Trainer commanded a Razor Wind.

Arthur appeared in a flash of purple then, from the ball Alex had drawn as well. A Psycho Cut canceled out the attack, but that didn't stop the Absol. It kept shooting the bursts of wind, but luckily, Arthur could use Psycho Cut just as much. It was one of his favored moves now, mostly because of its versatility.

Eventually, the fight had devolved into a Night Slash tradeoff, between the Absol's horn, and Arthur's blades. When he tried a Shadow Ball to gain some distance, the Absol copied him, and the resulting explosion pushed both back. That, was when they mega evolved. Arthur's arms began glowing gold as soon as he finished, but the Absol looked downright miserable.

Arthur reached out to it. "It's okay…I know you can't stop attacking. Don't stop fighting his control. I can free you of this curse, but you need to keep resisting!" The Absol blinked as it processed the words.

"Aerial Ace." The Absol shot forward at the command, and Arthur met the attack with a Night Slash, cancelling it out. The stalemate resumed, and the usually smirking knight, this time, had a look of irritation on his face as the battle dragged on. Neither Pokemon could get an edge, and what kindness Arthur had shown at first had melted away in the ferocity of the pointless, yet epic clash. "I don't have time for this..." His irritation echoed in his telepathy.


Alex watched his Gallade, one eyebrow raised. Where in the hells did he want to be so badly? They'd been preparing for battles like this for weeks, but evidently Arthur didn't care at the moment. He did Teleport away often enough, but he always came back. That was the unspoken agreement. His Trainer didn't care what he did, so long as he was there when battle called. He supposed everyone might get sick of that, though. Especially as strong a spirit as Arthur. He was royalty, after all.

The Gallade glared at his Trainer, and then focused on his Sacred Sword. The Absol, seeing an opening, powered up an Aerial Ace. Or rather, he tried. His horn simply didn't glow as he charged forward and struck regardless. He'd run out of power, but his Trainer's commands were still absolute. Arthur's strike caught the Absol as they passed in the air, and the Mega Form dissolved.

The Gallade wasn't done, though. He landed and turned in one smooth movement, arms still ablaze with golden light. He dropped into a fighting stance then, and with a shout, began building the fighting type energy for something. Changing the fighting type into something else entirely as he pushed it further, and his sword-arms began shining. His Trainer nodded, as he understood what his eyes were showing him.

The energy had a familiar symbol psychically associated with the attack, the symbol of Arceus. This could only be one kind of energy. Light energy. He supposed it made some sense... legendary fighters usually ascended to the heavens, in the legends. He guessed it was fairly rare though, but if anything could counteract Dark Matter... that would be it. It'd worked before, after all.
The Gallade touched a burning sword tip to the downed Absol's bluish-black oval on its forehead. The Shadow faded, in the face of the Light. The Pokémon sighed, then collapsed, fainted. It could've gone several more rounds, like Arthur, but the removal of the shadow had knocked it out cold.

The smile Arthur had gained shifted to an expression of cold rage as a black light hit the Absol, and recalled it. "Pointless." The Hand said, smirking. "I admit...I did not expect this kind of strength. I should've brought my Legendaries. Pravus suggested as much. You're yet another monstrously strong Trainer that's appeared from nowhere. I get it. But that doesn't mean we'll give up. Not even someone like you can take all of us down. We are relentless. We are immortal. We are legion. You cannot win."

He flung another ball. "Go! Tyrannus!" The Tyranitar had barely appeared, before its master forced it to the next level of power. It roared not in rage, but agony. Alex stared, trying not to wince. He'd wanted to see what mega evolving with these stones could cause, and now, it was obvious. He had no illusions about who had started this crystal evolution trend. The Arceans were the kind of group to analyze and then copy their enemies. What didn't take them out, made them stronger.

He'd battled other Tyranitar, though, who'd achieved this state the right way. Their power had been even greater, because the crystals could empower attacks. What had been learned in the Swamp was spreading, but it didn't have to result in harm. They just needed a way to keep this kind of power away from people like Pravus and his Hands.

"Send as many as you want, I'll take them all down!" Arthur rushed in again, swords blazing, and right as the Tyranitar loomed over him, the Gallade Teleported, and reappeared behind the Hand himself. The swords crossed over his neck like a blazing guillotine. He stared down at the Tyranitar then, as they were still floating in the air. "You don't need to obey him anymore." His arms moved, and the man's head fell. Then, it started to chuckle.

"That's adorable. So righteous. Tyrannus, remove the princeling. Sweep his legs." As ordered, the giant Pokémon turned his sights on Arthur, who frowned. It was clearly obeying, not rampaging. "It's not out of control...it's loyal..." Arthur confirmed to his Trainer, as his opponent's form charged forward, claws wreathed in ghost type energy.

Where a normal Sacred Sword used fighting energy, Light energy evidently had a strong effect on ghost. The attacks cancelled out, but the Tyranitar was relentless. Several claws got through Arthur's guard, hammering him onto his knees. Alex recalled him as the Tyranitar formed a Hyper Beam with one intent. It shot the energy anyway, not caring that its opponent had escaped, and set its sights on the Trainer that had robbed him of his kill.

His master's head, which had been caught by his body, now smirked from the palm of his hand. "End him."

The Tyranitar paused, panting, which gave Alex the time he needed. "Hydrus. Finish this." He drew the ball, smirked, and then threw.

The Swampert in question shifted almost as rapidly as the Tyranitar had. Their method was definitely slower, though. The dark shift had been almost instant. Tyrannus recovered, and charged once more. The dark claws returned, but Hydrus smashed them away with Hammer Arms, and followed that with a Water Pulse immediately after opening his opponent's guard.

The Tyranitar went soaring back into the wilderness they were fighting in, unable to stop the
powerful ball of condensed water energy. The flames from Colville and the dark clouds made the setting ominous. All it needed was lightning. An Ice Beam froze the Pokémon solid where it lay, and before the Hand could recall it, another Ice Beam froze him.

Alex recalled Hydrus and Teleported, to the tent he'd been given at the Rebel's base. He'd recalled everyone and left quickly more times than he'd like to admit, but being able to be somewhere else instantly made terrifying situations a lot more interesting.

He looked around the tent, and then smirked, as he spied his lover. It shifted to a frown of disapproval as he saw his newest partner was here as well, and not in his ball...crystal...thing. Apparently, he'd snuck away with the Chief, rather than join the others in danger.

"You need a name, don't you... hmm." He eyed the ghost, who shook its head as it spoke.

"If you rename me, I'll have to change crystals. It's an ancient tech thing. Just call me Rotom, human. It's easy, and you can pronounce it."

Alex raised a brow. "Are you telling me I couldn't pronounce your name?"

The ghost stared at him, deadpan. "I'm saying my name, and your language, aren't even compatible."

Alex smirked. "You're not a Terran Pokémon are you..." The Rotom's eyes went wide. "Hah! I knew it. Your mind felt different to any other Pokémon I'd sensed, but after that battle we just had, I noticed. Your life energy, what's left of it, is from a different world."

The Rotom sighed. "I mean...technically...not really...but if that's how you want to understand it, you can work with that." The Plasma ghost yawned then, and twirled something between his plasma appendages. Alex blinked.

"You little...did you steal my staff!?" Jess giggled from across the room doing...whatever she was doing to her hair. Beauty products. Girl things. It was foreign to him. She usually didn't speak during these morning rituals, but now, she did. "He totally stole your staff. We've been toying with it all morning."

He eyed it, but it didn't appear to be covered in unidentifiable liquids. So that was something. He stared at the Pokémon holding it, and then got an idea. An idea that just felt right. He sent it to Tao, who approved, and chuckled as he did so.

"Phaspiro." He said, smirking. "That's your name."

"Phaspiro? Did you take 'phasma' and add 'iro' to it? Why? Because it sounded cool? If we're going for cool, why not call me Stormageddon, Destroyer of Worlds? Honestly, you Trainers-"

Alex shrugged, cutting him off. "I like it. Round Table?" He said to their partners. Arthur had been given a Max Revive, but was still tired. He gave an 'aye', though. Everyone did. Alex smirked. "It is decided. I dub thee Stormageddon. Welcome to the team, Stormy...you can reside in this...now."

He made a gesture with his hand, and wrenched the staff free of the ghost's grip easily. With a thought, it formed an opening just the size of the ghost's crystal. The Rotom's eyes went wide.

"Waaaait wait wait, that crystal has untapped electrical power, to control it you'd need-"

Alex cut him off again. "The essence of the Master of Fire, Ice, and Electricity." The Rotom tilted his
head, then nodded, as he agreed that would probably work. Before he could say as much, the plasma
ghost was recalled into the crystal, as Alex pushed it in, and the staff closed around it.

It gained a pair of eyes, and grinned at the Trainer. "Oh, I can work with this…" The staff began to
change from within from something simple, to a container with much more…potential. It retained the
colors, but shrunk. There was a hollow center, through which, Alex could see the shine of the
crystal. Something was obscuring it though, that almost looked like…wiring? "Don't look directly
into it, you idiot."

Alex turned the strange device away from him, and then noticed a button on the small object. He
hadn't been expecting the Rotom to change his staff so much, but he let the Pokémon do as he
wished. He only wanted to make them stronger, or so he'd claimed. Stormy's eyes and smirk
appeared above the button he'd created. "Push it. Push the button, little human."

Alex gave the ghost a look. "It's not going to fire some plasma projectile, right?" He asked,
remembering how the ghost Pokémon was classified.

The ghost grinned. "Not a projectile."

Alex's eyes went wide as he realized what he was probably holding. "Ohh…yes. So very much
yes…" He looked around, realizing their tent was a bit cramped. "This needed a more dramatic
reveal anyway. Outside we go!"

He ran out, object in hand, grinning like a child. Jess was behind him, more curious than anything.
Evidently, she'd fixed whatever needed fixing. "What exactly are you up to? I was only half paying
attention in there."

Alex simply smirked. "You'll see." He ran to the topmost cliff of the base, and then shot into the air,
not caring about hiding his power at that moment. Once he found a suitably far, suitably high ledge
to perch on, he pressed the button.

The smaller former-staff blazed to life, as a dual colored beam of plasma extended from the hilt
where the crystal now resided. Alex laughed in disbelief. It was a fairly long black and white blade.
Deadly looking. It hummed as he twirled it around, still not quite believing this was actually
happening.

The hilt of the sword-like weapon smirked at him. "You can call me Lux. Luxundus is the closest
approximation in your tongue, but literally everybody calls me Lux. You probably should've asked
my name, rather than assumed I needed one."

Alex rolled his eyes. "I was irritated. You stole my staff."

The hilt grinned. "And turned it into a plasma sword."

"Fair point." Alex twirled it around again. "You know…I've heard some of these can extend from
both ends…"

The ghost laughed. "Find another super rare extraterrestrial crystal whose origins are a mystery to
you, then. I'll make another blade."

Alex smirked, and lifted his sleeve, revealing where he kept most of his crystals. Each fit into the
edge of his gloves, around his wrists in an obvious homage to a certain first season of a certain old
Earth anime involving cards, dueling, and monsters, but were less bulky. The gloves were, like the
rest of Tao's clothing, super comfortable, and form fitting. "I have thirteen."

The ghost eyed them, then blinked affirmatively. "I can use all of those. With this container, anyways."

Alex chuckled, "I just found our secret weapon." He turned to Jess, who'd followed him, and had thus far been staring with a knowing smirk. She'd been in his head. He'd always wanted a laser sword. They were iconic. And so very useful.

He pressed the button again, and let the hilt hang from his belt. Under his robe-like jacket. He smirked, trying not to laugh at the similarities to his childhood heroes of the ancient past. There were some differences, though. The nine miniaturized balls that hung alongside the hilt on his belt. He wasn't going to hide them anymore. Their surprise advantage had literally gone up in smoke. Had he been wearing regular pants, they would've surely fallen with all the extra weight, and he wondered if that was why the League limited Trainers, usually, to six partners.

He turned his gaze northward, towards the clouds of ash. "I found one of Pravus' Hands. He managed to take Arthur down. Hydrus cleaned up, though. Whatever chance we had at stealth is gone, now. We don't have time to wait in enemy territory while we train Ceno."

Jess stood next to him, eyes wide as she saw the sheer scope of it. "That just came from Colville alone?"

Alex shook his head. "It's spreading. The entire northern part of the region is probably catching fire."

She looked up at him, eyebrow raised. "So, what do we do now, wise leader?"

He gave her a look. "Plan B, obviously. That one's more fun anyways."

Jess rolled her lovely blue eyes. "You only think it's fun because you and the Council of Dorks like smoking together."

He winked at her. "You could join us…but I know how you get around that much testosterone. And Leaf."

She sighed. "Just tell your dragon. I'll go talk to the people I already know. You get the Chief."

Alex nodded, and then reached out to Tao. While he was a part of their mental web, he was more… web-adjacent, if only so the stray thoughts of a Legendary and ancient mind, full of things best left forgotten, did not reach the ears of his impressionable hatchling of a Trainer.

"Plan A failed. Pravus burned the north." Alex gave the dragon a moment, either to process his words, or finish whatever business he was in the middle of.

Finally, a response. "Plan B it is, then. Come home, young hero…there's something you need to face here. A challenge that you are finally ready for, I think."

Alex let the contact fall, and smirked. There was always something else to face. It had a habit of making him stronger. He opened his Pokédex, out of habit as he checked the time, then paused as he saw the date. They'd been in Fornia much longer than he'd realized. Almost half the summer, which was now ending. "Two years to the day…huh. It feels longer. Right Terra?"

The giant turtle joined him with a flash of green, and inhaled the warmth of the late summer day. "It
does…but I would not change a second of it.”

His Trainer gave him a scratch under his mossy, dirty chin, and then hopped on his back. He began packing a bowl of the Leaf as the turtle brought him down towards the other humans the long way, so he could enjoy the sunlight while the sun yet shone. The clouds were clearly unnatural, and they were spreading. Alex knew this was likely the first step of whatever Pravus had planned for Unova, and knowing him, it would be brutally effective.
Word reached the One Dragon that the Governors of the thirteen 'States' that had come when he'd called, had finally arrived. Tao had expected the first plan to fail. They'd given Pravus too much time while trying to penetrate Fornia's defenses. Time to mobilize his Cult. His army. Whatever he'd escaped Norstad with. He'd had half a summer to set things in motion, and he certainly had now. As soon as Alex entered Fornia, the Prophet had started mobilizing. The Rebel spies had been fed false information, and the 'holy army' formed undisturbed. Now, they'd illegally invaded Orre, made their way up Mount Battle, and had claimed it in the name of the Church. Evidently, it was now a part of Fornia.

Almost immediately after hearing this news of aggressive action by the massive Fornian army, the other Governors not under Pravus' thumb had received the Unovan Dragon's summons to the ancient seat of his empire. The Dragonspiral Tower. It was now much as it had once been in ancient times, a castle that awed those who looked upon it, as well as a fortified seat of power that could, if necessary, house the citizens of Unova in times of strife. Tao had been working to clear the underground levels as well, which were just as numerous as the upper levels, and much wider. Much of Icirrus Town's plumbing and other services had been disrupted by the excavation, but Tao had been able to re-work them with minimal inconvenience.

The followers of the dragon attended to their guests between martial and Pokémon sparring sessions. After a night of rest, for many had traveled far, they'd gathered at the top of the tower, which now acted as an open-air meditation area under a dragon-sized pagoda-esque structure. Like his tower in his separate dimension, this one was covered with trees and grass at its top, and served as a place to meditate. Today though, it held a meeting of the strongest political forces on the eastern coast.

"Thank you for coming. We've much to discuss." Tao was upright, resting on his coiled body much like a Rayquaza did whilst sleeping. "As you've no doubt heard, the Arcean Church is mobilizing. They're determined to spark a war with the east. They've raised a massive army to do so. Make no mistake, their ultimate goal is to conquer us, State by State, and reform the old empire under the Prophet."

The leader of the Kanadians spoke then, an elderly man of tribal descent with the classic black hair, and darker skin tones. Kanadia had several tribes that sailed on its frosty oceans, and this man's garb marked him as one of them. "Is there no way for peace to be maintained?"

The dragon shook his head. "They're marketing it as a 'holy war'. Their soldiers are devout, and fanatical, to the point of violence. Evidently, my powers and philosophy are the antithesis of everything the Alpha Pokémon stands for. So sayeth the Arcean Church."

The room stayed awkwardly quiet before someone among the crowd of leaders spoke. "Are they?"

The golden eyes of the massive dragon arced over the suddenly slightly terrified men who, in that moment, suddenly remembered they were very very small compared to this Pokémon straight from prehistory. His massive eye stopped beside the Governor of Transylveticut. A thin man in a nice suit, with a thin moustache, that curled up at the edges into little swirls.

Of course. The man who lived in daily fear of the Swamp. Transylveticut was famous for its massive
Swamp, which was too deadly to enter, and its superstitions, that most of the other States simply found silly in this age of rationality and reality-bending science. The dragon spoke once more. "I will forgive that, for it has been millennia since I was last whole, and you humans have a tendency to forget, what with your short life spans."

The dragon rose slowly as he spoke, wings expanding, as he towered over all of them. His eyes flashed with psychic power. "See now, leaders of the States, and behold the history you have forgotten." He linked to each of their minds, and was pleased to see that among the many emotions the group of leaders were feeling, treachery was not one of them. These were hard-working men who wanted to see their people safe, and live through a time of peace. Unfortunately, nobody ever really wanted to be the target of a madman with an army. This was simply another stumbling block they needed to surpass. Tao had a feeling it would make them stronger.

The scenes he displayed for the gathered leaders showed the details, at least some, of his own creation by Arceus himself, a melding of three dying dragons, unified in a single balanced whole. Time skipped forward, and next the humans watched as Tao was bid to guard this continent, and use his awesome power to promote peace, and balance. Of course, in those days, the people who lived upon the continent had other ideas as to who should rule it. The wars of the ancient past had been large, and brutal, but Tao had sought out those who did not want to fight, who did not give in to their anger, bigotry, and base, greedy emotions. He taught them the secret of true power. They were his first students, and they were legendary for being all but unstoppable in those ancient conflicts. The combination of divine wisdom, and power had made them superior to any foe.

Tao spoke then, to each of them. "I have always been a peaceful minded being. I do not like violence. I do not like killing that which I've no intention of eating. I do not like wasting life. But mark me, if the balance is disturbed, I will do what I must. Every time, regardless of who my foe is."

"What if Arceus broke the balance?" Someone asked.

Tao gave a heavy sigh, and the smoke from his nostrils filled the pagoda, and covered the round wooden table they'd gathered at. Thankfully the windy benefits of being thousands of feet high meant that it didn't linger. He didn't bother looking for the speaker. "If the Alpha Pokémon ever willingly disrupts the balance, then weep, little human. For the end of existence will be nigh."

What he showed next was a series of disturbing images. Humans, and Pokémon, who could not be dissuaded, lay dead by the thousands as Tao hovered over their battlefield. His sparkling claws were covered in blood, as was his maw, and he wept openly at what he'd been forced to do to quell the senseless bloodlust of those ancient days, and restore balance to his new land.

From that senseless destruction though, came something truly impressive. The Dragon Empire. The golden age of the land that would eventually be known as Unova, which stretched from coast to coast, and flourished under the One Dragon's guidance. Each of the leaders was treated to a sped-up view of the Empire growing, flourishing, and many could not believe just how large it had truly been. The history books didn't do it justice. Coast to coast, their continent had once glowed with the light of civilization, and peace, for the Dragon Empire was not once successfully invaded in all its long years.

As the visions began to fade, the men were given an aerial view of three spires on a recognizable chunk of land. Unova's center, the capital, so created and named in the days of the Dragon Empire's apex, the glorified capital alienated many, and would eventually become the stage upon which all Tao had wrought was undone. The Dragonspiral Tower stood to the west, the Imperial Palace had stood on the easternmost coast, and finally, one massive tower that, to this day, stood over Castelia as
a home to visiting foreigners of political importance. Unity Tower. There had even been a city around the one in the past, as well. In fact, as the men looked closer, they saw that all of what was generally referred to as Unova's capital had, at one point, been one single massive city. Seeing this, and knowing what the region currently looked like, was humbling. Nature had reclaimed their dying ruins of an empire in the chaos that had followed the dragon’s split.

"You asked if my power and philosophy went against the Alpha." The dragon spoke, "My power is of the Alpha, as are my teachings. None understands the importance of maintaining balance, and the price it takes to do so, better than Arceus."

The Governors looked amongst themselves, as they spoke quietly, even though many assumed the dragon could hear them anyways, which of course, he could. He let them bicker though. They were politicians after all. Arguing was their forte. Finally, Unova's Governor stepped forward. He gave a bow in the old style, right fist to left open palm. The dragon returned it, and then, the man spoke. "What do suggest we do, Dragon of Unova?"

The dragon, who had remained hovering over the group, now rearranged himself as he returned from stretching over them, and gave the man a grin that sent…not fear, but a chill of what could almost be excitement up his spine. It only grew as he processed what the ancient Pokémon said.

"Reform the Empire."

Thankfully, nobody seemed to outright reject the dragon's words, though there were more than a few rumbles of discontent. It warranted discussion at least, and it wasn't like everyone in the room hadn't considered it before. There had always been one point of contention, though. The Unovan Governor repeated it to the One Dragon. "And who would be our Emperor?"

The dragon's grin only grew. He found it amusing that humans, even after thousands of years, had changed so little. A taste of power, real power, and many would salivate at the thought of ruling it all. Several were right that very moment, their twisted egos mentally listing reasons they just knew the dragon would say their name, and catapult them into the position they deserved over their rivals. His response shattered their ambitions. "I've already chosen my Champion. And given that he's just spent the summer in enemy territory, and is quite frankly the strongest Trainer we have available, he's the right General to lead our forces."

"What about N?" Someone asked. The Dragon's eyes softened.

"He has returned to the wilds…defending Unova for so many years against the shadow of his father…it took a toll on him. He realized that his obsession with hunting Ghetsis down had caused him to ignore something as obvious as reforming the three dragons into One. Once Ghetsis finally passed, his drive to battle faded. Consider him unavailable, for this conflict. It will take time for his team to draw him out of this, but when they do, he will be...fierce." The dragon retained his unsettling and entirely too confident grin as he mused, silently. The men took in his words, and began to bicker. Ghetsis himself had almost accomplished it, albeit in a twisted manner. Yet it had avoided the former Champion's notice entirely.

Every aspect of himself had liked N. He'd saved Unova, and several other regions, many times over the years. He'd said he was leaving to train, to find a new level of power the bond between humans and Pokémon could give, but Tao doubted he would have success. Not any time soon, at least. Only one other power truly rivaled the potential of Infinity Energy, and Mega Evolution, but nobody had rediscovered that method. It had been effectively purged from history, and for good reason. Some things were best left forgotten.
The Governor's debate was far more intense this time. The majority were opposed to the dragon's suggestion. Unova, and a few other State leaders, remained neutral for the moment. There would need to be a vote, but it seemed obvious how that would go. The leader of the eastern half of Texico spoke up then. "We've always seen fit t'govern ourselves, pard. Why would we put a whelp in charge of our people? Any ijit can battle Pokémon."

The dragon's golden gaze fixed on the man with the classic Texican hat, which was white, and matched the rest of his fancy suit. Few of these men had issues with flaunting their material wealth. He resisted a sigh. "Because he is the one among you who proved himself worthy. Billions of humans on this continent. Thousands of years, and yet not one of you managed to do what he did. I lost count of how many times the balance of the world nearly fell because one of your kind found one of the Orbs and tried to use it to take over. Even when both parts of me were awake, you viewed me as two separate dragons, and that was how I remained. Even N did this, though he more than anyone understood my situation."

The dragon stared at each of them as his commanding mental voice rang through their skulls. "Redwood is...different. He looked at me, and saw a being torn apart. He had the power, and the instinct, to reunite what was sundered, and ever since, he's done nothing but use his considerable strength to keep the peace. Only one other human has ever absorbed my lessons so...thoroughly. The First Dragon Emperor." The Governors who opposed, quieted then. All knew the legends of the last three Emperors who had ruled Unova. They'd been reduced to kings by that point, but the difference had been minimal. They'd still held power enough to call up armies, and sunder not only the dragon, but their land as well.

But the first Emperor had been a dragon of a different scale. Wise, powerful, and fair he had crossed the continent on foot, and slowly, convinced the warring people to unite. It had taken a lifetime, but when he'd finished, his offspring had inherited the largest empire the Earth had seen since the old civilizations fell so very long ago.

Were it not for the curse of mortality, he could have gone on to unite the planet. Alas, his daughter did not possess his abilities, and despite Tao's best efforts, her...desires...had led the burgeoning superpower to the brink of civil war when the time came to name a successor. Thus, the Trials had been devised, first by humans, then by the dragon. Seven times they'd passed the rules between them, until it was finally done, but the results spoke for themselves. Peace and prosperity reigned for millennia in a world darkened by madness, until the dragon was torn apart, but given that the last Emperor's sons had not faced the Trials, many Unovans still believed them to be infallible at picking a successor. They had never failed.

The men huddled again, and while a few had changed their minds at the dragon's words, most remained unconvinced. Unova's Governor spoke again. "Wise dragon, we would like the opportunity to examine your choice, if we may, if only so that those with doubts may have them assuaged. I know how strong your Champion is, I've met him. I agree with your choice. With guidance from us, and yourself, he could be a fine Emperor, but the others are proud, independent leaders. They need more than a voucher for something this...monumental. With your blessing, we wish to test his capabilities. As we did in the old days."

The dragon pretended to ponder for a moment, and hid his smirk. He did feel slightly guilty using the human leaders like this, cleverly baiting them down the path he wished this conversation to take. It was necessary though. Fornia was a legitimate threat, and the east needed a figure to rally around, if they were to have any chance of stopping Pravus. "Very well. How will you test him?" He already
knew, but he knew how humans got when they realized he could read their minds.

After another huddle, though this one only lasted five minutes instead of twenty, they agreed, and told the dragon what they intended. He'd tried not to break into laughter, and as always, kept his composure. He told the group that he would summon the Champion, and that they were free to enjoy his tower as his honored guests.

Once they'd all left, he began packing a bowl in his favored piece, the storm-forged glass he'd made but recently. Though it was new, it was growing on him. He'd almost decided on a nickname for it, even. He chuckled quietly to himself as he puffed the clouds of smoke into the cold autumn afternoon. "Humanssss…sssso very predictable." He shook his head, and then turned his golden gaze east across his barely recognizable lands. His divine gaze could just make out the murk of what the humans now called the Abyssal Ruins. Once, it had been a palace so lovely, even Arceus had enjoyed visiting it. Now…nothing remained but sand and ruin. The dragon grinned to himself. For now.

Rebel Canyon Base - Fornia Region

Alex stood from the shell of his Torterra, who many admired with long looks. He was rather pleasant to observe. The perfect melding of earth and life was…calming, almost. This was fortunate, for his Trainer's words would likely confirm their worst fears.

"Fornians, Tribespeople, Rebels, I know I am new here, but bend your ears for a moment. It's important." He was in the main room of the base, a massive cave, really. It was full of tech, supplies, and equipment. A gleam of something bright and multicolored caught his eye. He did a double take. Were those Plates? What were elemental Plates doing here? And how were there so many? So many questions. He buried them, for the moment, as the base gathered around. The Chief had told several of his underlings to run down the halls when the Unovan began speaking, and they had done so. Within minutes, the entirety of the Rebellion, or most of it, had gathered in the cave. There was almost not enough room.

"Many of you have seen the clouds." He started, and the murmurs began immediately. The sun had just begun to set, but rumor was that the sky had been darkening unnaturally all day. Given the intense and oppressive heat outside the canyon, many did not leave the caves. "They are ash clouds, from the trees of Colville. That's where it started, from what I discovered when I ventured north. The northern Tribe's lands burn, and the Prophet's own Hand lit the blaze." He'd kept his battle cam recorder on, as it had proven incredibly useful, and now was no exception. He expected footage of what was basically a zombie would go viral quite quickly. He'd let someone else put it on the PokéNet this time. Like the media. He had enough eyes on him already.

The murmurs increased to panic, as the most common first thought was 'what if we're next?' A few former Arceans even started shaking where they stood. "This is what we get for defying the Prophet!" Someone shouted, but she quickly clamped her hands on her mouth as everyone glared in her general direction. "Sorry…old habits…" She was trying not to break down completely. Fear had that effect.

"Rest easy, Rebels. I did not say he'd come here next, though he will eventually." The growing hysteria died down slightly as Alex used his Voice in a different manner. Tao had taught him the trick, and he had to admit, it was useful. A bit of power, the right tone, and humans were naturally, subtly influenced to focus harder on what he was saying. Naturally, the result was silence.
"I have a way out of this place, a direct line to Unova. We can get there today. All of us, even those in the other bases." He gave them his best smirk, and tried not to shudder with anticipation himself. He’d been preparing for this for months, and now, the war scenario was actually happening. A bit quicker than any of them had expected Pravus to attempt, but it was happening all the same.

"How?" Someone asked.

Alex gave the dragon the mental equivalent of a nudge, and in an instant, the One Dragon appeared within the massive cave. He floated above them in a long circle, and had just enough space between the crowd and the pointy, potentially deadly stalactites above him. His scales would protect him, but the humans below looked somewhat fragile. But then, they always did.

The dragon smiled as, almost in unison, the people put their fists to their palms, and bowed in the old style. It was a style that was universal on this continent. Vestiges of his Empire were everywhere. If he could but unite them, they could rebuild rather quickly. His serpentine form arced gracefully over all of them, taking in their faces, and already noticing some hereditary features from his time. For whatever reason, even with Arceus' own blessing, the human race seemed unable to physically change their form much. Their minds had grown, but their bodies remained largely the same. All that really changed was how well the humans took care of them in this age. Though he supposed that millennia of eating nothing but berries and Pokémon, two things Arceus' gift had directly effected on an evolutionary level, might also be a factor in their longer, if still pitiful life spans.

"Hello again, children of the land. It has been some time. Come, and I will once more take you to the safety of Unova, with the same promise that we will one day return. Though your homes may be burned..." He trailed off, hoping one among them would yet remember the ancient words.

Chief Sike stepped forward, and smiled. "The land endures. We remember your lessons, great dragon. Our loyalty is, as it was in those golden years, yours. And your Tamer's. We will follow your counsel, and the ancient accords, when the conflict ends."

The Dragon eyed the Chief. "If this conflict goes poorly, it may mean the enslavement of everyone that is not an 'Arcean'. That is how close we are to Unbalancing, my friends."

The Chief’s eyes were wide, as were all of the tribe's. "Are we so far gone already? How did we not see?"

A massive talon, currently not on fire or sparking with electricity, rested upon the Chief’s shoulder, and a golden light filled the cavern. Every human there, sighed softly as it filled them. "Have hope. Every night must have a dawn." With that, he lifted back into his circling in the air, and then spoke to them all. "Gather your possessions, little humans. We Teleport to safety in five minutes." He knew it would likely take them longer, but he could wait. His patience was infinite. He scanned for his Tamer, and sensed his thoughts.

The dragon's voice echoed in his skull. "Where are these Plates? Show me."

Alex directed his gaze, and the dragon followed it. He floated over, and the people around watched, clearly interested, but also tried to pack at the same time. The dragon looked at each, and then glanced to his left. "These are from a cache. Evidently, one of those tasked with safeguarding these did not do their job well enough."

"Do not be in a rush to judge, mighty dragon." Came Brad's voice, as he came around the left corner, and stepped next to the pile. "The Arceans dug these up, and I can guarantee you that if they had a
guardian, it's either enslaved and corrupted with Dark Matter, or was killed off for resisting too much."

The dragon's eyes went wide. "They would not dare kill mythical species. They are unique, precious, powerful. Pokémon born of the fusion of Arceus and the infinite potential of the evolutionary spiral."

Alex blinked. "The what now?"

The dragon literally brushed him off, with his massive tail, the way a male Pyroar did to its cubs. He forgot how attentive his latest Tamer was. It was almost irritating, not being worshiped as a deity anymore. In the past, humans had simply smiled, nodded, and accepted that he sometimes used strange terms they could not dream of understanding. But then, he'd never asked to be deified in the first place. The humans had done that by themselves, and they'd outgrown most of those tendencies over the millennia. He had no intention of dragging them backwards. "Never mind. You, Fornian, are familiar with where these were dug up. Now tell me. Did you ever hear legends of who specifically guarded your mountain?"

The once more tan and blonde Trainer thought for a moment. Like Alex and Jess, he'd ditched the disguise once subtlety had been thrown out the window. "Azelf, I think. There was a crater-lake atop the mountain…but I guess the Arceans drained it. Before they burned everything."

The dragon sighed. "If they have one of the Lake Guardians, we may be in serious trouble." The two Trainers raised a brow as the dragon spoke to them, and them alone. "As you know, Mew was one of the first Pokémon Arceus created. As such, it's quite powerful, and you've seen how messing with the base genetics can increase its strength. The Lake Guardians appeared not long after interacting with humans, and they settled by lakes the world over. Typically, there are three on every continental landmass."

Brad spoke then, also within his mind. "So they're strong. And? Pravus has plenty of Pokémon stronger than Azelf."

The dragon sighed, as he shook his massive head. "You don't understand, and I do not have time to enlighten you. Just know that if Pravus has Azelf, and the other two, he could very well tame me, and force me to obey him. Like the Spear Pillar incident."

The two Trainers shared a look, as they both very much understood. Everyone had heard the rumors of the mysterious power that had literally bound Time and Space in one place, and summoned Giratina's epic wrath. Pravus could not be allowed to create another chain. This time Alex spoke. "I have an idea of where Uxie resides. Jess knows about Mesprit…but she refuses to talk about it."

The dragon stared at him. "Have her go confirm whether Mesprit is still in her lake. You do the same for Uxie. Send Arthur to check."

Alex nodded, and called the Gallade out. He affixed a Psychic Plate to the horn on his chest, and the two merged, turning it to a more scarlet color. Then, Arthur mega evolved, and Teleported to where they'd once come across traces of the mythical psychic type, as they were traveling west. Alex picked up a crystal from the nearby pile, and raised a brow at the dragon. "I thought these felt weird…they're dead. Just rock. Fakes?"

The dragon shook his head. "Merely dormant. Their energy is infinite. It would take divine energy, like mine, to wake them up again."
Alex nodded. "Then we should take what we need, and you can give the rest to the Trainers you
deed worthy of leading. I trust your judgment, oh wise dragon." He couldn't resist his smirk.

The dragon sighed, and stretched a massive claw over the pile. The plates and crystals were
illuminated by a golden circle of light that appeared on the rock surrounding them. A golden triangle
outlined it, and various runes not based on Unown filled in the gaps between as the dragon,
offhandedly, constructed this magic circle. The Light flared, and then, Alex felt it. Any human within
a hundred miles that had any kind of latent psychic senses, felt it. It was power. The infinite power of
the Alpha.

As Alex and Brad took what crystals they needed, Brad eyed one of the Plates. "What do these even
do, anyways? I get how the crystals work, but these seem…different."

Tao took the Plates and crystals the two Champions did not require, and with a twist of his claw, hid
them somewhere safe. A temporal pocket dimension that he alone could reach into from anywhere.
"The Plates are essentially just crystals, and the crystals are shards of one of Arceus' own Plates."

Alex blinked. "What? What do you mean? How are there so many if they belonged to the Alpha?"

The dragon's massive eye focused on him, as it usually did when the dragon grew irritated at his
constant questions. "Arceus had to shrink his form to interact with this planet, and even then, he was
still so large, his mass accidentally pulled in a planet-killer of a meteor towards the Earth. He
shattered it with ease, and then noted how the remnants covered the planet, albeit briefly, before
burning up. He then decided to give this Fallen world a gift. He used his Judgement, and found the
Earth worth saving. Then, he combined each of his Plates into a single orb, and shattered it above
your planet, not unlike the meteor he'd dealt with. That, little human, is why there are so many shards
over your planet. With them scattered, the Alpha infused them with enough Infinity Energy to restore
the Earth ten times over, and the result is the fecundity of Pokémon and natural resources that your
race continues to squander."

Alex opened his mouth to speak again, but Tao cut him off, reading his thoughts, and simply
answering. As he did, when the questions of the secret history of their world could not cease from
spewing from his Tamer's mouth. His hunger for knowledge was ravenous, but then, most of his
student's shared that trait. The promising ones, anyways. "Your burned, frozen, and drowned husk of
a world was so out of balance when the Alpha found it, his gift was necessary. It was the sorry state
of your world that had even garnered his notice at all. This is why most of these Plates have grown
dormant over millennia. Much of the Light powering them was drained to help nature regain balance,
but that which was lost can be re-awakened, by a being such as myself."

Alex simply nodded then, as Tao continued. "Your ancestors, while not as advanced technologically,
had a very good grasp of how to wield and manipulate the energy introduced to them by the Alpha.
With this knowledge, they took the broken shards of Arceus' power, and made them into items that
boost the power of a Pokémon's attacks just by holding them. They mistakenly named them Plates,
as they assumed that was what they originally looked like. The real ones were much, much bigger,
and had differing shapes, but the re-forged ones work with about twenty percent of the power they
once had, while attached to the Alpha."

The two Champions shared a look again, and Brad nodded, then spoke again. "I knew that much…but
given what they are, I figured there was…more…to them."

The dragon brought his massive golden eye down to the humans, and they remembered just how
small they were. "There is more to them, but if you wish to draw out that power, you will have to
figure out how by yourselves."
The two simply nodded, and began attaching the Plates to their partners. All save Shruikan, who could not fit in this cavern anyways, and Gelauros, who was still a bit young for such power. As with Shruikan, each of the plates bonded to the Pokémon it touched, and infused them with power. They stayed where they’d been affixed, melding seamlessly, and apparently painlessly, to the Pokémon in question.

Once everything was finally gathered, Tao Teleported.

Icirrus City - Unova Region

Moving objects and humans to a space thousands of miles away wasn't hard, persay, it simply took energy, depending on what was being Teleported. After several trips back and forth to each of the bases, Tao was genuinely tired. The results though, were impressive.

The entirety of the Fornian Rebellion sat in the shadow of the Dragonspiral Tower. There was a wide, circular moat that enclosed the base of the massive structure now, and to the immediate north, a forest. One which had grown to immense size, despite the upheaval the raising of the tower had caused. The Pokémon that had once resided within the tower had been relocated, at the behest of Tao, to the forest. They hadn't seemed to mind.

Icirrus Town had changed quite a bit since Tao's return. In the space of a year, the population of the usually remote town had exploded, and the locals soon became a minority, forgotten in the flood of Unovans desperate for the dragon's wisdom. Now, the newly crowded town, and all its inhabitants, surrounded the new arrivals as word spread that the One Dragon arrived. His long snaking body was obvious, even from a distance.

There were a few murmurs as the Unovans noticed the Rebel's weapons and tech, which had been Teleported with them, when possible. There was a flash of green in front of the new arrivals, and then the very earth shook.

Slowly, the unmistakable form of the Champion rose above them all on a rising pillar of earth. He was standing, arms crossed, on his Torterra's shell, newly adorned with a beautiful jade colored Plate. Once he was high enough, the turtle stopped lifting the ground. "Unova! Welcome our friends from the west. These are the people who stood against Caleb Pravus when fear held back all others. Consider them our allies." The crowd murmured, at first, but it wasn't long before those of the east walked forward to help those of the west move their supplies and technology to the old fighting gym that had only served as a place to smoke Leaf and practice martial arts thus far. Now, it seemed like a good place to house these Rebels, for the moment.

Alex reached out to his media connections then, reporters and the like that he'd met and befriended as he'd traveled towards Fornia over the course of the summer. It didn't take long for them to respond to his summons, as Alex had advised each of them via text messages, Haley included, to stay around Icirrus once Plan B had been pushed into effect. As he saw the blonde amongst the varying trendy neon colored hair styles her cohorts were sporting walking through the crowd, he smirked. They stopped at the edge of his 'pillar', and then they gasped in unison as their bodies were raised into the air by a strange blue power.

Once they reached the top, a few looked disgruntled, but Haley cut off any words of anger with her eagerness. "Champion! You've…returned." The look of excitement faded into one of disbelief as she
saw their mysterious Champion sitting on the shell of his Torterra, several cups of steaming tea floating by his head.

He sipped his own nonchalantly, and smirked as the cups floated to each of them. "I did promise a story…"

"You said you'd tell us about the Swamp." She remarked, crossing her arms as the others joined her, each taking their cup.

"Wow! This is good…sorry…” Haley glared at the one who'd spoken, and sipped her own tea. She blinked. It was actually delicious, and her brain said, 'drink more of this immediately', but there was a story here. That came before all else. She raised a brow at the Champion, expectantly.

"And I will tell you of the Swamp, for it's a point of contention among those who would war with us. But right now I need all of you rolling. This is important. For those of you who haven't noticed yet, there's a reporter here from every State not currently under the sway of the Arcean Church." A few of them shifted uncomfortably at his words. He took another sip as the cameramen with the reporters switched their equipment on.

"Look, Alex, we don't want to get in the mid-"

"It's too late for that." Alex interrupted whoever had started speaking. "War has broken out, and the front lines are already being drawn. The east and the west are once more headed towards war." He gave them a moment to process. "This isn't about me, or my feelings on the Church. Or their issues with me. This is about Caleb Pravus' ambition to become the next Emperor."

Haley spoke, once they were ready to start recording, "What do you mean?"

"Tao has informed me; the time has come. One way or another, this continent will once more be united. Either under the Dragon, and whoever he names Emperor, or under Pravus, who will force his doctrine on all of his subjects, one way or another."

"Wait a minute," the man he'd invited from Kanadia spoke up now, "Are you saying there's a chance Tao would name you our Emperor? Politics and Pokémon are two very different things, Redwood. I will freely admit you're very good at battling, but what do you know of running an Empire? Our Emperors of old were trained from birth to rule fairly."

"And look how that turned out." Alex retorted. "It doesn't matter if it's me, or N, or Hilbert, or any other worthy candidate in the eastern states at the moment. The point, is that we're on the brink of war. The Governors are in the Dragonspiral Tower at this very moment, waiting for word on who the Dragon will name."

"Not quite."

The two words thundered in the air as the massive serpentine form of Tao arced down from the fog of wonderful smelling clouds that had subtly sprung up around him as the humans dithered. "You have their eyes?" He spoke mentally, to his Tamer. Alex nodded.

"Behold humans!" His telepathic baritone thundered for all to hear then, "Your leaders have an announcement." The massive dragon circled the entirety of Icirrus, his equivalent to hovering, and the fog he’d created faded under the beat of his enormous wings. The gathered leaders of the eastern States had come onto the balcony right above the tower's entrance for their announcement.
Unova's Governor stepped forward then, and bowed to the dragon above before addressing the Champion, and the gathered media representatives. By now, most eyes were upon them. Word of war traveled like wildfire. "After some advisement from the One Dragon, we have agreed. With this brazen move by Pravus and his Church, especially after the burning of Colville, we cannot ignore it any longer. War is inevitable."

Kanadia's Governor spoke then, looking down at the new arrivals. "Fornians, brothers of the west, who would you follow in reclaiming your home?"

Each of the Chiefs had been gathered, all save for Colville's, and it was the Canyon's Chief, Sike, who spoke for them then. "We support the Dragon, my northern brother. We will support his Tamer, the one you call Redwood."

"We are all in agreement, then."

Unova's Governor said again, "The Dragon has chosen, and as in ancient times, his candidate will be tested. Champion, do you accept this test? Understand that you may very well die if you even attempt it."

Alex finished his tea, and placed it on Terra's shell. The grassy surface covering the shell swirled around the cup, holding it in place as his Trainer launched into the air, surrounded by psychic energy. He floated up to the tower, and bowed in the air, fist to palm. "If you are all in agreement with Tao's choice, then I accept. What is my task?"

The Governor nodded at the Champion. "Go to the Abyssal Ruins. Find the centermost chamber, and retrieve what lies within. You will know it when you see it. If you are worthy, we will know. If you are not...you will never leave that place. Good luck."

If the Champion was concerned, he didn't show it. He instead nodded, and floated back down beside Terra. He motioned for the gathered representatives of the media to come down from the shell. Luckily, they'd finished their tea. The cups were rather tiny.

Haley crossed her arms under the ever-impressive cleavage. "You promised a story."

Alex smirked, and flashed a pair of UPBs, or Universal Poké Bus. "On these, you will find a firsthand account not only of hard evidence that Caleb Pravus' own Hand lit the fire that burned Colville, the source of the darkness that now blankets Fornia, but also of several...let's call them 'indiscretions' committed by several of the Arcean Church's own higher ups." He offered them to the group. None of them moved. At the mention of the Prophet, all but Haley and Joey, who was still filming all of this, had gained expressions of reluctance.

"Listen, Champion, I know I owe you and your Swampert for stopping that avalanche back in Ontarec, but I don't want to get involved with the Arceans. The rest of Unova has no interest in this ego war between you and their holy man." The man who spoke then looked little different from most other Unovans with his black hair, pale skin, medium build and brown eyes, but then, beyond incorporating elements of black and white in their outfits, they didn't really have 'cultural clothing'. Unova was huge, and humans came in many varieties.

Alex sighed, and then walked forward to the only one of them who still had fire in her eyes, that instinctive need that would drive her to dig into this. He nodded once at Haley, and then looked at the man who'd spoken. "Watch the videos, Kyle. You'll understand then what Tao and I already know. What our enemy really is. This is unedited, first-person viewing of the people Pravus knowingly puts in positions of power. You can't fake this level of realism." He looked down at the pair of devices in his comparatively oversized, white gloved hand. "I wasn't able to stop any of it
over the summer. Not without revealing myself neck deep in unfriendly lands. But I did leave my BR in the rooms they used to commit these acts. Triggered by the door opening. I had to shorten the recordings to thirty minutes, rather than just let them record indefinitely. The battery burnt out the first few times…but I soon discovered I didn't need thirty minutes. These…pathetic excuses for men didn't waste time. Ever."

After a reluctant nod from Kyle, Alex recalled Terra, packed his cups and teapot away into his bag, and shot into the air on his own power, headed east. He hadn't noticed at first, but flying was ridiculously easy now. In fact, most of his abilities had seemed stronger, since he'd stopped hiding them.

Picking up on his thoughts, he heard the dragon, who yet circled the city, speak to him as they passed in the air, with the speed of thought.

"It's the build-up. You've expanded your reserves by not constantly draining them with training. Now, lifting even your large form is easy. You'll find your special attacks are stronger as well."

The Champion smirked, and patted his unlit plasma sword. "I'm better in close range anyways. I always wondered why you taught me the sword and the staff. Did you foresee this or something?"

He saw the dragon smirk, "No. I trained you in the sword because, if you recall, you were so bad with the staff, you accidentally knocked Arthur out while practicing basic moves. Twice. A practice sword is essentially half of a staff. If you could master one, I knew you could grasp the other. Eventually."

Alex rolled his eyes, and continued flying further away from Icirrus. The dragon coiled directly above the growing city, and shot an awe-inspiring spectacle of ice, fire, and lightning into the air with a single breath. "Go. I know you will overcome this. Dovahkiin."

The Word reverberated in his head in a familiar, and not unpleasant way. He'd gone far too long without practicing his Shouting, too. Tao had stirred the urges he'd buried through the long summer, but now, he felt like one peep could crack open the sky. He decided to take a minute to balance the motivation with the calm he needed for battle. That, more than anything else, was the key to Tao's fighting style.

The gathered crowd of people, which had only grown larger as word had spread like a Fornian wildfire across the region, gave wild cheers. Some even chanted, though they didn't seem to be able to agree on shouting 'champion', 'emperor', his name, or any of the other titles he'd evidently gained, but couldn't make out in the din. The people seemed to agree with the dragon's choice as well. He only hoped he was worthy of their admiration.

The cheers audibly faded as he flew away from the town, and he hovered on the outskirts. After discovering a shared love of the Leaf, the Fornian Trainers within the Rebellion had introduced the Unovan to something they called a 'vape'. With this strange pen-like device, they inhaled the oils derived from the Leaf in a relatively harmless fashion. It had a stronger effect, a lack of smell, and was incredibly portable. He had to admit he liked the ease of access, but he'd always prefer a bong. Still, it was convenient to have on hand, for times like now, when he had to give Jess a minute or five to realize that they were leaving. He'd just finished packing the absurdly portable device back in its safety-container within his backpack when a familiar ball of red hurtled into him with the full speed of a psychic-powered tackle.
By pure coincidence, he'd parked himself by a clearing within the forest that spread between Icirrus and the center of the region. They landed hard on soft grass, but since he'd manage to toss his pack somewhat safely out of harm's way, Alex didn't mind taking the hit on his back. Nor did he mind the beautiful, smirking redhead who shifted into a straddling position atop him.

"Emperor!? Seriously? When the hel did you two come up with this?" She was trying to sound irritated, but she kept giggling. The good mood was infectious. Their surroundings also helped. Golden grass, leaves with fall colors all around. As spots went, it was not bad at all.

"It was Tao's idea. He said the east needed someone to rally behind, or they'd end up fighting each other." Alex smirked up at her, though it faded slightly. "Even with me leading our forces, he thinks there's a strong chance Pravus could win this. Fornia is a fortress. The best the east has is Unova, and they've attacked directly several times now. The closest thing we have to Sacreus is the Dragonspiral, and that's surrounded by innocent bystanders these days."

Jess shook her head, and suddenly, Alex found himself surrounded by hair. Not that he minded. She always managed to smell amazing. "You'll be fine. You have a plasma sword. That pretty much beats everything. Especially when combined with psychic powers."

Alex rolled his eyes. "We don't even know what Pravus is. From what the Chief showed us, he seemed to devour the very life around Vega. What kind of…thing…can even do that?"

"Whatever it is, I'm willing to bet it's susceptible to being sliced in half. By plasma. Have I mentioned how much I love your sword?" She sighed, and laid her head on his chest.

"You know, some people could take that as innuendo." His words had a sarcastic tinge to them.

"With you, everything is innuendo." The redhead tilted vertically to look at him. "Make me an Empress. Then you can have your 'innuendo'."

He let the quiet grow for a moment, holding his tongue until he felt her gasp slightly. He smirked, and winked for good measure. "If that is what you wish." He reached for the power needed for Teleportation, but she stopped him, with the speed of thought.

Her face was crimson after that. "On second thought…you should probably take care of that before you go wandering into underwater ruins…that you might not come back from…"

He rolled his eyes, and their bodies as well, and smirked down at her. "Stop. You know my tendency to survive these things. Besides, every other Unovan Champion has already gone down there. I'm probably not going to be able to find anything, they picked it clean."

Mentally, they both doubted that, as he always found something, but it was having the same thought at the same time that made them pause in amusement. She smirked up at him. "Stop talking."

---

**Sacreus – Fornia Region**

"Turn it off."

It was a brief command, but like all of his commands, it was obeyed with machine-like swiftness. Caleb Pravus, Arceus' own Prophet, sat on the obsidian throne-like structure within his command center, thousands of miles below the fortress that was Sacreus. Shrouded as he was in a spherical
blob of darkness that was deeper than the rest of the red tinted command room, all that was visible to his obedient minions of their Prophet was his eyes, which flared a deep purple when he spoke.

The glow faded, as it did when he went silent, and the room waited for his commands. His Hands, the important ones anyways, flanked him on either side. The room was octagonal, and filled with various screens showing different data. The one that was now silenced, had been broadcasting one of several eastern media networks.

Redwood's message had reached the entirety of the east, which presented an opportunity. "Why didn't you interrupt it?" A female voice, belonging to the sister of his former Right Hand, a position she had now willingly filled, broke the silence. It was a long moment before the eyes flared again, and the prophet answered, his mental, ethereal sounding baritone echoed in their ears with sarcasm and hints of mirth.

"Did you not hear? War is...inevitable. And their Champion is on his way to the ruins." The eyes shifted in the shadowy blob, and stared down the Hand of Death. "Make sure the ruins play home to yet another failed candidate. Understand that there will be no more 'mistakes'. Accomplish your mission, or die trying."

The Hand in question was sporting a new scar on his neck, the edges of which peeked just enough over his uniform to be seen. His pale skin made the sutures holding his head on stand out rather obviously. His words were monotone, and low as they rumbled through the room. "What is dead, may never die." His eyes narrowed. "But…the Redwood whelp yet lives. I will correct this...oversight. They do tend to happen when I am not properly equipped. I need my team. For all the ridiculous rumors around him, I will grant that his tools are quite strong."

After a long moment, the eyes blinked once in acceptance. "Granted. Use them well. I do not have time to waste replacing them." The Hand bowed, and left the chamber to begin the long trip to Sacreus' surface. The eyes turned to one of the minions working the tech that served as a direct line to the Arcean forces currently in Orre. The posturing had done exactly what he'd wanted. His enemies had gathered. Now all he needed on this fire was fuel.

"Tell General Marius the time has come. I want the stone as soon as possible. Don't let the locals hide it." His words were followed by the usual 'yes sir', and those assembled watched as the blips representing their troops surged down Mount Battle. Taking it had been easy, and after cutting power to Phenac City, the residents of Orre were essentially blind to their presence, and even if they had noticed the army, they had no method of sending word of the attack to their allies. None that would arrive in time, anyways.

In one fell swoop, Fornia gained thousands of miles of land. Most of it was desert true, but the border was all the Arcean Prophet was focused on. For the first time in centuries, the western states had a hard border. They also could now easily defend Fornia from both sides. It had taken longer than he'd wanted, to solidify his western coast, but it had been done. Now, he didn't have to worry about an attack from two sides.

It was about five hours before the 'mission accomplished' signal came from the General in charge of the southern lines. If the shadowy prophet was pleased, he didn't show it. "Good. Have them split in half between Texico Point and Utado's border. Any word from the Dakota region?"

The response was quick. "Yes, my Prophet. The Dakotans have pledged fealty. All criteria have been met."
The shadowy ball that had encased the Prophet since the burning of Colville swelled, and then faded away. Pravus sat comfortably on his throne, and the grin upon his unblemished face could cause nightmares. "Send word to our media, then. The time has come."

The shadows faded as the tech crew set up the lighting the public would need to see their leader on screen. Finally, the lights turned green, and the Prophet stood. He was the picture of what every Arcean strived to be, and as his charismatic crowd-wooing tone began being echoed across the western states, it wasn't hard to see why his people loved him so much. While in public, he was quite charming.

"My people! Faithful Arceans, trainees, converts, and new allies, I have an announcement. The Alpha spoke to me last night, by way of a vision. He showed me who was responsible for burning our forests, and blackening our skies." He paused for effect, and then focused his dark eyes on the camera directly. "Unova. More specifically, their Champion. My own Hand confirmed his presence in the area. His crimes are obvious, and he cares not. Now, I know many of you have heard rumors, of our 'aggressive actions' in Orre, but know this. The people of Orre have always claimed to be peaceful. Loving. Uninterested in politics between the east and west. This reputation is nothing but a farce. After sending my own Hands to figure out the true intentions of our neighboring region, we found hard evidence of correspondence with Unova, and those who would oppose our Alpha. They were the ones who let the psychic puppet into our lands so he could enact his nefarious deed for his deranged psychic overlords."

The Prophet's tone grew grim as he steepled his fingers, and leaned towards the main camera. "Though it pained me to do so, my only option was to take their lands quickly, before the Unovans entrenched themselves, and began spreading their nonsense about nature, and balance. I am proud to report that our forces were able to take the region without the loss of life. Now, we have a strong, united eastern border that will keep our enemies at bay."

The Prophet stood then, raising both arms as he continued orating. "This is not the only news. With the blessing of the Alpha, the Church has decided to erase the borders separating our allies' lands. They are no longer necessary. Nor is any reading material, digital or otherwise, originating from Rebellious sources, like Unova. Stay tuned to your Church-approved channels, and you will know the Alpha's rewards." Pravus lowered his left arm, and the right's hand curled into a fist as he continued his tirade. "The Alpha has decreed it! With the removal of these restrictive, unnecessary borders and new policies, once more, our land will be whole. We will not roll over for the Unovans, we will take their lands, by force if necessary, and show them the true Path to the Alpha! One Fornia, under Arceus, now and forever!"

The Prophet made a motion across his throat with his hand, and the recording lights switched off. "Send word to the Kipnuk and Arciana regions. The time has come. They know their objectives." The person he'd commanded fiddled with his device for a moment, before nodding to his Prophet. The word was given. Pravus grinned. "Now then…give me a report on our star player."

A female minion, clad in the usual navy-blue suit that bore all sorts of medals, proving her years of dedication and loyalty to the Church, and the Prophet, came forward at his words. "The subject was extremely effective in combat, exceeding even our lowest parameters…however…he did hit…a snag…on his return from Colville."

The Prophet's eyes flared red as he recognized the tone of fear that accompanied news of incompetence in his subordinates. "What kind of snag…"
The White Wolf looked down upon the Dakota region's capital city of Fargo as the latest blast of freezing winter air slammed into him once more. Judging by how early the winds were rising, he knew this one would be a bad one. Typical. Winter was always worst during wars, and nobody had ever really wondered why. Close as they were to Kanadia, the city was perpetually covered in snow, and the gray stone buildings made the entire city look bleak, and sketchy. Tonight though, something had changed. The streets were alight with golden beacons bearing a symbol that once stood for peace. The people rallied around these light-bearers, despite the cold.

Even in the howling wind of the year's first snowstorm, Geralt Redwood's sharp ears could hear the chanting, and it wasn't staying civil. Quickly it had gone from Arceus, to something about Unova, which involved blood, and then devolved into continued, unnerving chants of just 'blood' as they started marching en mass towards the west. He pressed the device in his ear. "This is Wolf. You can consider the Prophet's words in this regard to be true. Fargo is lit up with their symbol. They're whipping the locals into a frenzy, and taking them west..."

A woman's voice responded in his ear after a large yawn. "Copy, Wolf. You can go to sleep now, you know. It's four in the morning."

He tried to think of a clever quip, and then realized he had nothing. Being awake for over a hundred and fifty hours took a toll on one's creativity and witiness. "Perhaps you're right." He muttered into the device. "Wolf out."

His ears twitched as he heard crunching snow behind him. Two footsteps. Then, as it came closer, the two became four. His partner's evolved form had taken on an appearance similar to their species' Day Form, but anyone with eyes could see that Ghost was special. By the time they figured out how, the battle was usually over. Geralt gave his huge, pure white Lycanroc a thorough neck scratch as they eyed the city. "Find anything?" The wolf huffed, irritated. "Lycan."

Geralt sighed. "I figured...come, Ghost. Let's get some rest. You've more than earned it." The large wolf yawned, displaying his long, sharp fangs, before huffing in agreement. Though neither would ever admit it, they were both exhausted.

Scouting Arcean territory had become quite difficult of late, but the Pokémon Rangers were a part of the League as a whole, and they didn't skimp on winter gear. It wasn't his usual dark leather, but he didn't mind. It was warm enough.

He and Ghost had been all along the 'new' border between east and west, and what they'd seen had not been promising. The League had wanted a situation report, before deciding whether to aid a side, or withdraw from the north-western quadrant of the world until things calmed down.

Either way, it seemed that either Fornia or Unova would become the next superpower to control these lands. He wished them luck. Those who claimed that mantle, with the exception of the divinely created One Dragon, had a tendency to overreach with their power, and eventually collapse. It was historical fact that, before the dragon first came, his ancestors had tried re-establishing old world powers, with little success. Once the land had fractured, it had stayed that way until Tao appeared,
despite humanity's best efforts.

Everyone had, apparently, had their own idea of how to govern properly. Naturally, the result had been a war that ravaged the land from coast to coast. A war so bloody, only the One Dragon had been able to stop it, and only after taking out almost all of the armies who'd opposed him. Even then, the ideologies of the past had clung on, only to eventually, finally, disappear in the wake of the dragon's enlightened teachings.

Geralt sighed in disgust at the city below, and turned, heading towards his partner's massive form, easily big enough for a human or two to ride comfortably. "And so once more, humanity repeats the past, blood is spilled, families are torn apart…and none of them will remember how terrible it truly was in about three centuries."

He felt a freezing nose push at his ear, for Ghost stood as tall as his shoulders. "Lycanroc. Roc, Lycanroc."

"Hmph. If you say so, but whatever hope I had in them vanished a long time ago. Be honest, Ghost. You've seen what I've seen. Humanity's only special power is to choose incompetent leaders." The wolf grabbed his fuzzy white hood, and stopped him for a moment. He made a high-pitched sound, almost like a whine, but with more of a questioning inflection.

Geralt laughed, yanked his hood free from his partner's jaws, and then shook his head. "What about him? The goofy kid I knew was always more interested in where his supply of Leaf was going to come from, than politics. His first decree as Emperor would probably be Leaf dispensaries in every high school. No. I don't believe Alex can handle this. He is in way, way over his head."

Ghost snorted, and then moved his massive head between his Trainer's legs, lifting him up effortlessly onto his back. The white furred wolf trotted atop the snow, which was reaching four feet of height, minimum, as they headed down a slope, through the dead trees. "Lycan. Lycanroc."

Geralt settled into his usual riding position, and sighed. "A fair point, but what if he's changed for the worse? What if who he's become is little better than the man he's fighting?" The wolf turned his head, looking at his Trainer with one eye, while the other navigated. "Roc? Lycan. Lycanroc." He snorted, and picked up his pace. Evidently, he remembered the kindness he'd sensed in his Trainer's relative, and doubted it had turned so sour so quickly.

It was Geralt's turn to snort now. "I suppose you have a point…and last I saw him, he didn't seem too different…but again, that just means our new 'Emperor' is probably more focused on Leaf than politics." He felt the growl from his partner, and sighed, letting the issue drop. "Fine. I'll be skeptically optimistic, but you know what those ruins hold. If nobody tells him, he's going to die in there."

Ghost gave a softer growl, of agreement, as they cleared the trees that covered the rise they'd perched on for several hours now. Any further conversation was put on hold as the wind began to pick up again, and howl. Ghost howled in return, and then began sprinting across the snow. It was risky, but in a storm like this, especially at night, he doubted any Arcean would see their white-furred figures against the blinding white of the snow. This was a satellite territory for them, and a newly gained one at that.

His doubts were proven incorrect as, after several hours of running towards their rendezvous, a hail of red tipped arrows arced down in front of Ghost, forcing the large wolf to stop hard. A quick
glance told the Ranger that they were being toyed with. The arrows had formed a perfect circle around them, and then he saw the brown feathers that served as the arrow's fletching. "Muk."

They came quickly then, roughly six Trainers, each with a Decidueye. The leader of this merry band of soldiers, atop a blue and black feathered Decidueye, hopped down into the snow, and crossed his arms as he looked Geralt over. "What business have you in the Prophet's lands, stranger?"

He was thankful the gear he had on was concealing the League emblem on his usual attire. Not only did it show who he served, it marked him as a Top Ranger. One of two, assigned to this part of the world. He raised his hands, showing open, empty palms. "I'm just passing through with my partner here. We're not looking for trouble."

The man, who was as blonde and tan as most other Fornians Geralt had seen, gave a smirk that told Geralt this was going to devolve quickly. Still, he might as well attempt to avoid a fight. The officer speaking was as tall as Geralt, and clad in similarly white clothing, suited for winter. He was still deep in the Dakota region, as they'd been heading east after moving far enough south of Fargo to, he had hoped, avoid detection. The fact that they'd even seen himself and ghost in the snow and storm was a credit to their Pokémon's sharp eyes.

"Trouble has found you, stranger. I'll need to see your ID. War is brewing, and we can't abide spies. You understand." He gave another smirk, and then raised a fist. His squad was garbed much the same as he was, and though they lacked the adornments that marked their leader as an officer of the Church, they each had helmets, whereas their leader only had what appeared to be a naval cap that didn't look like it could repel the cold very well. Arceus' emblem was emblazoned on the forehead of each of the squad's white helmets, and though he hated to admit it, he rather liked the look of their black T-shaped visors. What they lacked in manners was made up for in aesthetic, and as he looked closer, he grimaced. Cipher's hand was in their armor's design. It made some sense, given where they'd fled to avoid the Jennies. Had he been a normal Trainer, he might've been intimidated.

Ghost gave a low growl as the men approached, and Geralt hopped off of him, patting his raised hackles. "Easy, boy. They're just doing their jobs." He looked at the soldiers, and then their leader. "I'll cooperate, there's no need to get rough."

The man chuckled, and Geralt fell to his knees as one of the men smashed the stave he carried against the Ranger's back. Each had ten slots for Pokéballs, and was adorned with Arceus' symbol at the top. He doubted the metal was high quality, but then, that didn't make it hurt any less.

"There isn't. But we're going to be rough anyways...search him." Their leader had approached, seemingly immune to the ever-increasing sound of Ghost's snarls. Ghost was eyeing the Decidueye, each of whom had an arrow trained on the large Lycanroc.

Geralt smirked as two of the soldiers tried to find pockets on his jacket, and then remove said jacket, but doing that while he was on his hands and knees was rather difficult. He met their leader's eye, and in that moment, decided he'd had enough of playing nice. He sat up onto his knees, slowly. "One would think...with all that 'divine guidance' you people wouldn't la-"

He was cut off as the squad leader backhanded his face with a clenched fist. "I'm sorry, I missed that last bit. What were you saying?" The smirk had returned, and Geralt's reluctance to injure these men was rapidly fading. He'd been awake too long, and these idiots were keeping him from his bunk. Worse, his mouth was going to taste like blood for quite some time. The bastard hadn't been gentle.
His eyes met the leader's, and the man flinched, as they'd turned into thin vertical slits, like a cat's. The whites of his eyes had turned an icy blue. "I said... you lack Manners." At his words, Ghost lunged, and the snow around them turned red with blood and feathers.

---

**Unova University – Unova Region**

The tumble in the autumnal trees and golden grass had lasted well into the night, and though Alex had been eager to move on to the ruins, a text from his brother via his Holociever stopped him. He was needed at the University's lab. Immediately. The time stamp marked the missed calls and message itself around right after he'd flown out of Icirrus, and he hoped whatever his brother needed didn't take too long, but then he remembered he needed to pay the lab a visit regardless. The sooner the better.

Thankfully, Teleporting cut his travel time down to nothing. He appeared in the middle of Gelauros' old pen, and the little Amaura popped free of his ball, crying with delight as he recognized his old home.

He looked up at his Trainer, and made a questioning noise. "Go ahead, bud. But don't get too distracted. We're leaving soon." The little Pokémon had run off to the other nearby members of his species as soon as he'd heard 'go ahead'. For all his training, he still had the ability to ignore commands that all hatchlings and young Pokémon seemed to share. They did as they pleased, and had a blast doing so.

"Finally." Came the irritated tone of his brother. "I sent that four hours ago. I thought you'd be in the ruins by now, and that we'd missed you. What were you doing?" Eric's arms were crossed, and the blue eyes, so similar to his own, examined him through the glasses on his face.


Eric rolled his eyes. "You're the one that found four hours to... jump in a pile of leaves?"

Alex looked down at his clothes, and sighed. He'd removed the leaves in his hair, but a few had evidently managed to hide in his pants. It wasn't all that surprising. He'd tossed them aside, and the wind had picked up several times. He yanked them free of his belt and pockets as he spoke. "Something like that. What do you want, brother?"

"Well, first, I guess I should congratulate you? Does this make us royalty now?" He had a teasing tone and smirk. Alex had no patience for either. He'd dallied enough, and only because Jess had kept refusing to let him get dressed. Not that he'd minded.

"I have no idea. What. Do. You. Want?" He repeated, letting the irritation show, slightly.

Finally, the all-business-no-nonsense look came over his brother. "Your plasma sword. Jess mentioned you had one. May I see it?"

Alex gave the mental equivalent of a glance to Lux, who gave the mental equivalent of a nod. He tossed the hilt to his brother. "I was planning to show it to you anyways. I want you to-"

Eric cut him off as he examined the hilt. "Reverse engineer it, and distribute copies to those the dragon deems worthy?" Alex nodded. "Well...we'll take a scan, and then see what we can do."
"Lux." Alex said, as Eric turned towards the part of the lab that held the equipment, as well as the rest of the still-working Brain Trust. "Come on out. I don't want your energy messing with their scans."

"Oh fine." Eric jumped in surprise as the black and white Rotom departed his container. "I was going to have some fun with them. The smart humans always get so panicky when their little machines stop working."

"I know." Alex said, smirking. "But we just don't have time, and they need these machines. War is brewing, and knowledge is going to help us more than pranks."

The ghost, much like his Amaura, had stopped listening and floated over to the group of Aurorus and their young who had welcomed Gel back with reserved warmth. When it became clear he wasn't going to freeze them all by accident, they each nuzzled him, murmuring apologies for their past behavior. Gel, from his emotions, just seemed happy to finally be able to socialize and not freeze everything solid. Teaching him to control his power had taken Fornia's heat, and most of the summer though.

Alex sighed. "Champion of Unova…Tamer of the One Dragon…and these are my ever-loyal partners." He shook his head. They were still new. He wandered over to the rest of the Brain Trust. There were five in all, including his brother, who was currently working on the scanning device. It would examine his plasma sword's composition down to the core, and more importantly, provide the bones of what would become a schematic, hopefully.

"How goes it, Frankie?" He asked, casually leaning against the side of his workstation.

Frankie was as thin as Eric, though he lacked glasses, and a proper lab coat. His attire was sufficiently nerdy though. The green eyes met his, and the Professor-in-training grinned. "Alex. Always a pleasure. In short…it's not going well. But it could be worse."

Alex raised a brow. "Oh? What have I missed?"

"Professor Juniper came out of retirement for this, and Professor Bianca gave us the Elektross data you said we'd need. Moreover, Professors from all the other eastern states are arriving every day. I could name them for you, but honestly, a Tao is putting them to good use, or so I hear, but we're still woefully unprepared for this war. There's already been blood."

Alex's eyes went wide. "Already? Where?"

Frankie shrugged. "Not sure, but skirmishes are happening all over. Utado has already fallen, and Texico is apparently where most of the fighting is happening for the moment."

Alex chuckled. "Well that's not too surprising. They've been ready for this for centuries."

"True, and that's why they're still holding." Frankie nodded, and then sighed. "But everyone else is not. The Illinowa and Tenina regions are also reporting attacks, asking for aid. They're likely to be overrun before we can reach them, though. The Prophet's army is enormous, early estimates are saying it's in the hundreds of thousands, and those are the low estimates of those on the border."

Alex glanced at his brother. "Then I need to move quicker. I could be out there, on Tao, stopping them. We could halt their advance fairly easy..."
David, another of the Brain Trust, chimed in then as his station was next to Frankie's. "Are you insane? That's the worst thing you could do!"

Alex raised a brow, and David continued. "What kind of General marches onto the front lines, no army, no support? Even if you do become the King, it's wasted effort if you're killed off in the first skirmishes." The Champion shifted uncomfortably. The words rang with logic.

"You really think they could take on the One Dragon?" He said, quietly.

David, who was as pale and nerdy as the rest of them, made even more so by his green sweater-vest and tan khaki-esque pants, simply shrugged. "You'd know that better than I would, but this isn't the ancient past. Generals don't go one on one in this era. We have weapons capable of handling Legendary class Pokémon. You need to assume Pravus already has access to such things, and is hoping you fly out to make yourself, and the dragon, a target."

Alex sighed. "I bow to your wisdom. Regardless, I need to move. Brother, are you done yet?"

"Aannnnd…yes." Eric said, as the scan dinged, and flashed a green light, showing a successful compositional analysis. He tossed the hilt back to Alex. "As expected, the scans indicate that we can indeed reverse-engineer these. The power source is going to be an issue, though. Your Rotom's crystal is…unlike anything I've ever seen. It's from the old civilizations. We won't be able to replicate that."

Alex nodded, and pointed the hilt at Lux, who was absorbed by the black and white beam of light, not dissimilar to a Pokéball's, that recalled him. He recalled Gel as well, giving the young Pokémon a moment to say his goodbyes. He chirped cheerfully once he had, and returned to his ball as well.

"Hmm. Call up the scan data."

His brother did so, and the two eyed the information, which was now displayed on the large screen that each of their work stations was placed around.

Eric began chattering away, as he assumed it was too complicated for his brother to grasp with a glance. "You can see here how each of these…let's call them wires…connect to the crystal. It acts as both the focusing lens, and the power source. I can make a suitably sized replacement for focusing the beam, the real issue is a suitable power source."

Alex eyed the data. While it was, for the most part, beyond him, he'd had enough basic engineering lessons from his Gruncle, who'd given them while he'd worked on his old car. During his years in high school and then University, it had been his main mode of transportation, and fixing it had been his job. His father refused to pay for maintenance, and had told him he could always walk if he didn't want to bother learning how to fix various car parts. That had backfired, when he'd not only maintained the vehicle, but upgraded it with tandem rotors, and hover technology.

"So…if I'm reading this right, it's going to require a crystal regardless?" He was absentmindedly stroking his bearded chin, eyes still on the data.

Eric nodded. "I tried punching in the calculations for the Plate crystals, but for some reason, they won't work, apparently."

Alex reached out to Lux. "Is there a way around this?"

The ghost seemed to chuckle in his head, and the hilt of his sword floated before him, the face once
more appearing on the handle as it spoke to all of them. "Those crystals contain infinite energy. Without a Pokémon to control them inhabiting the weapon, activating it would be like turning on an infinitely powerful laser. It would slice through anything in whatever direction you pointed it at. Before exploding with overloaded energy."

"So we need crystals like yours...or with less power...damn." Eric sighed, and pushed the brim of his glasses up. "I don't think this is realistically possible anymore, brother."

Alex, however, was smirking. He walked over to the machine, and began typing in commands. It was easy enough to run a simulation. Such things were covered in the basic science classes the University taught. "I disagree. You forget, we're in Unova. We have an entire mountain's worth of...viable crystals." He said, as the simulation flashed green with acceptable parameters.

Frankie spoke up then. "Of course! Chargestones! That's...kind of brilliant."

Alex continued on. "They should have enough energy to last twelve hours, and if you add a way of recharging them, we'll be fine. Moreover, the crystals grow quick enough to give us a suitable supply without ruining the cave. The Pokémon that rely on the magnetic field they give off will likely be undisturbed."

Eric shook his head. "Mining them is going to be tricky. If anything disturbs the Pokémon, it'll be the equipment."

The six of them sighed, quiet in thought as they tried to think of a way to avoid permanent damage. Alex spoke first. "Then don't mine them."

Five pairs of eyes looked at them, and more than a few had eyebrows raised to Spockian levels. He continued on when nobody interrupted. "These blades shouldn't be mass-produced. In fact..." He punched in more numbers to the simulation, a base estimate cost for the materials they would need. They all gasped at the number of zeros. "That's what I thought. The metal components are precious, but we should have enough in reserve to arm those Tao wants to lead our troops. Have the Trainers go into the cave themselves. They can find their own crystal. If they're competent enough for the dragon, they should be able to retrieve one without harming the local wildlife. Hmm...we could even make a test out of it, were we so inclined...maybe when we're not on the precipice of war."

Eric nodded, and then took over, punching in yet more to the simulation. "It'll take some time to finalize the schematics but...this could work." His voice took on a tone of command, and Alex watched, somewhat impressed, as he started giving orders. "Sarah, get to work on the recharging station. It'll have to be in the hilt, and don't skimp on the quality. We can't have these become unusable with wear and tear. They need to last. Also, account for the effect of temperature. It's going to be a long winter, and our leaders shouldn't need to worry about the battery dying from the cold."

Sarah, who looked as masculine as the rest of them thanks to her short haircut, nodded, and then Eric pointed towards Frankie. "David, you and Frank focus on the emitter. It shouldn't be too complicated, but make sure the length of the blade can be adjusted. The people using these are going to come in various sizes." The two nodded, and then began chatting quietly as they called up the data, and began to work. "Zack," Eric said, turning to the last of their group. "You and I are on materials. We need to figure out what these components are going to be made from, they need to be relatively cheap, durable, and easy to acquire. Furthermore, we need to make sure that, when combined, the metal doesn't melt, or negatively impact the weapon's function."

Zack, the only one among them who didn't have brown hair, but instead sported a fauxhawk of light
blonde got to work as well, and Eric turned back to his brother. "Why are you still here? Go! Become an Emperor. All of this is pointless if you can't rally the people."

"Good luck!" The Brain Trust said, with remarkable cohesion and timing, despite the fact they were working. "Don't die." Eric added. Alex gave a nod, put Lux's hilt back on his belt, and then Teleported.

---

Scandaga Lake – Unova Region

While Alex had focused on getting the Fornian Rebellion to Unova, Arthur had been tasked with finding Uxie, the Lake Guardian of Knowledge. During the first part of the summer, Alex and Jess had come to this lake for a few days, mainly to recover from Norstad. During said stay, the Giver of Knowledge had made himself known to the Gallade, and his Trainer. He'd even had a name, given to him by a Trainer now long passed.

"Merlin!" Arthur let his telepathy echo over the water. "Wake up! Azelf has been captured!"

The lake was silent, the water calm. Arthur scanned it with his third eye, and found nothing. He was still sleeping, then. Sitting cross-legged by the lovely shore, Arthur began to meditate, keeping track of his Trainer, while simultaneously scanning the lake, inch by inch, for the telltale disturbance that would mark where the mythical Uxie rested.

It took the better part of the day, and the sun had set before Arthur finally located the mythical being. He nudged the sleeping Uxie mentally, and felt the mind of the creature stir. He nudged again, but it remained asleep. Having an idea then, Arthur tapped into his newly acquired Psychic Plate, which had fused with the now scarlet horn on his chest, and let the energy flow through him, as he mega evolved.

He raised an arm then, and moved it in a slow circle. Within minutes, the water of the lake was churning in a clockwise spiral around where he sensed Merlin resting. This, combined with a third persistent nudge, awakened the Lake Guardian.

Uxie appeared, rising from the waters by the shore. "Well well. The young prince returns. Alone this time, are you?" Arthur nodded as the small Pokémon stretched and yawned. "I know of Azelf already. I also know that Mesprit has been caught, though not by the humans who took Azelf."

Arthur's eyes went wide. "Caught!? By who?"

The powerful psychic type smirked. "It's not important. What matters, is that she is safe. Now, given these developments, I have decided. You and your Trainer could benefit from my wisdom, especially in this, a time of war. Take me to him."

Arthur shook his head. "I'm to take you to the One Dragon. He asked for you specifically. By name."

The Uxie tilted his head at that, though his eyes remained shut. "Did he now? I see. Very well, take me to Tao, then." Merlin floated over, and one of his tails touched the Gallade's unsharpened hand. With that, they Teleported.

---

The Dragonspiral Tower – Unova Region
They appeared instantly before the Dragonspiral Tower, and there were murmurs around them as they did. Arthur sensed his Trainer nearby, rapidly heading east over Unova. He'd only half focused on what Alex had been doing once he finally got a response.

As he looked around, he noticed the humans from Fornia had set up in the old fighting type gym, and since it had largely been empty, it suited them well. The two psychic types floated into the air then, and shot towards the top of the tower, where the massive form of Tao encircled the top. He was meeting with the human leaders, and even at rest, his length encircled the topmost tower of the castle-like structure three times over.

"Here they are now." Came the dragon's pleasant mental baritone. "Welcome back to civilization, Merlin. Your skills are sorely needed."

The Uxie made a bow to the dragon, and then to the humans, who seemed surprised by it. "I am at your service, great dragon."

"Let me bring you up to speed." One of Tao's tendril-like whiskers, which dangled down from his snout, reached out to tap the psychic type on his forehead.

Merlin nodded, then. "I see. Things are dire indeed if they're strong enough to block your vision. Let us determine the state of Illinowa and Tenina."

Merlin raised his stubby arms, and between them, an orb of psychic energy formed, not unlike the various ball attacks that served as the base for Taijitu moves. It floated over the round mahogany wood table the humans were sitting around, and expanded. Electricity sparked over the orb at first, but then Merlin opened his eyes, focusing them on the orb alone, and the sparks faded, revealing the two regions.

They all gasped, collectively. The view was aerial, and even from the height Uxie displayed, they could make out many of the cities and towns of the two regions, engulfed in flame. A low growl rumbled through the pagoda as Tao saw the destruction.

"He burns territory he would claim as his own?" Unova's Governor spoke then, disbelief in his voice. "How does he expect to quell rebellion?" He spoke again, as Uxie's view zoomed in, and showed what must have been the Illinowa region's militia being marched towards an encampment surrounded by strong bars of metal, and covered with razor wire. Within, the citizens of the region were huddled together. It was cramped, cold, and muddy as most prison camps were. Such things had not been used in ages, however. They'd been deemed too cruel. In wartime, non-combative civilians were supposed to be locked in their homes, but evidently the Church was done pretending to care.

Merlin answered the Governor, as he enjoyed answering questions. It was his nature to share knowledge. "The Arcean Church will likely subject them to long hours of indoctrination. Given their past success rate, the locals will likely bend the knee to the Prophet in a matter of days."

Illinowa's Governor, who had attended this meeting late, and out of desperation spoke up then. "Surely his people will decry this…barbarism. Burning homes? Imprisoning soldiers? Indoctrination? The Arceans I know would never stand for any of this."

Tao's eyes flashed, and gathered the attention of the group. "The Arceans you know are little more than delusional puppets, fed only enough information to keep them sincere. Most of the Prophet's
followers are completely oblivious to what their army is actually doing, and Caleb Pravus is a master of manipulation. Observe."

They sat in silence for a moment, before a portable Television set floated up to the pagoda by way of telekinesis. One of Tao's tendrils switched it on, revealing the dark suited form of the ever-charismatic Prophet of Arceus. He'd added to his attire, presumably under the pretext of being at war. A symbol of the Alpha Pokémon now hovered directly behind his head, unaided, encircling the man's head like a halo of sorts. Tao's nose tendrils lashed, angrily at the sight of the Alpha's symbol adorning the head of a madman willing to trade lives for property.

He had his hands raised, as he was in the middle of orating. The soothing tone of the Prophet's words filled the small building. "Many of you have sent in questions. The most common of these is 'Do the Tenina and Illinowa regions belong to the Arcean Church?'" The Prophet chuckled for a moment. "Do you think Arceus wonders if this tiny ball of a planet is loyal to him? No! Because it does not matter. Tenina and Illinowa are both a part of the world we're going to build with the power of our righteous Crusaders!"

He raised his hands higher, and the cheesy triumphant-sounding music that had been in the background as he spoke swelled. "The future belongs to Arceus' chosen people! We will do whatever we must to achieve the world we dream of!" A grim look came over his face. "No matter how many psychic heretics stand in our path."

The broadcast ended, returning to a view of a standard media news set, with a pair of Church officials dispensing news to the populace. As they started gushing over their 'brave Prophet's words of wisdom' Tao flicked the screen off, in disgust. "We are dealing with a man who has mastered illusions, and has been preparing for this conflict for over a century at least. Do not expect aid or sympathy from his people. To them, we are all heretical blasphemers, and short of Church-officiated rehabilitation, all we have earned for our 'sinful actions' is death."

Unova's Governor looked around the table, meeting the gaze of each of his counterparts, and nodding. "We are agreed, great dragon. Our forces will answer to you, and your Tamer."

Tao nodded, but otherwise remained silent, his eyes instead focused on Merlin. "Arthur." He said suddenly, breaking the silence, "Your brother has arrived at the ruins. Join him. He's going to need your aid." With a formal bow, the still mega evolved Gallade Teleported to the city closest to the ruins, one he was thankfully familiar with. Humilau.

Merlin tilted his head at the dragon. "You never told them? Either of them?"

Tao shook his head. "If they are to be proven worthy, they must overcome the Trial by themselves. We've given all the aid we can. Now, it is up to them."

---

**The Abyssal Ruins – Unova Region**

Arthur zipped through the air with impressive speed. By levitating his lighter body, he was able to fly faster than either of the humans with whom he usually spent his time. As he came over Undella Bay, the full moon was reflected on the water's surface, and in the bright night, the primarily white robed form of his Trainer hovered over the gentle sea.

The Gallade joined his Trainer, and the two eyed the ruins below. From where they hovered, the
structure was little more than a slightly darker blue blob, just barely visible thanks to the faint glow of the Marine Tube. "This lack of light is going to hinder us." Arthur spoke through their link, and the rest of their team welcomed him back. Gelauros had been included now as well, though his mental voice was still child-like, he was learning as quickly as Cenomons had.

Alex nodded, and then descended. Arthur lowered himself as well, and the two stood on what passed for a beach in this area. Arthur whirled, glaring at the cliffside above and behind them. "Alex…we have gawkers."

He gave the mental equivalent of a nonchalant hand wave. He'd sensed them as well. "Let them gawk. As long as nobody interferes, I don't really care who watches." He wasn't all that surprised they had a crowd. Undella Town was right behind them, for the ruins were directly east of the coastal town. They'd had time to gather, and despite the late hour, his ears told him many had made the trek. This did, he realized, have the potential to make history. He was only reviving the ancient culture of his entire people. No pressure.

"Alright boys." Alex spoke softly, "Come on out."

At his words, nine Pokémon appeared beside him and his Gallade, and all but Gel ignored the murmurs of the crowd behind them. Shruikan flew over them all, and circled in the air as the sliver of a sandbar would never support his size. The little Amaura gave a happy shout, and when those watching waved at him, he let loose a Frost Breath, which received a smattering of applause.

Alex chuckled, and let the youngling do as he wished, for the moment. The others would be enough. "Terra. We've never been able to get a proper scan of these ruins. Reach deep. I want to know how far down this structure has been covered by three thousand years of silt and dirt." The earth turtle slammed his feet into the beach, and closed his eyes. His entire form glowed with brown energy as he merged with the earth.

"Arthur, take Lux, and Blaze. Clear the water of bystanders, as well as the beach to our south. Don't terrify them. Be polite." He eyed his Charizard more than his Gallade, but they both nodded, and flew off.

Lux stayed, however. "I think you're going to be needing the sparky kitten and I." He said, yawning, and stretching his plasma arms.

Alex shrugged, for once, not in the mood to argue with the plasma ghost. "Ictus, Ceno, Leo, keep an eye on Gel. I'll let you know if we need you. And make sure nobody comes down the beach."

At his words, his Lairon moved towards the sliver of sand that connected their sandbar to Undella Town. One Rockslide later, and the path was sufficiently blocked from bystanders. Ceno marched back then, and dug into the sand, which was still warm just under the surface. Leo joined him, thoroughly enjoying the sand, as felines do, while the crimson Skorupi and Amaura had a sparring match, much to the delight of the onlooking crowd.

For his part, Alex had Hydrus Mega Evolve, and then set off across the water, the white and black ghost trailing behind him. Eventually, he zipped back into the hilt, as Hydrus' swim speed made it hard to keep pace while floating.

Under the darkened water they went, and Alex's eyes flared blue as he looked around. The glow kept the water from interfering, and his vision was surprisingly decent. He attributed it to the brilliant
full moon above the bay. On any other night, he would've preferred to find a solitary spot and enjoy
the stars.

Instead, he moved through the cold water, ignoring the foul salty taste leaking into his mouth, thanks
to the speed at which Hydrus was zipping through the water. There were faint traces of power all
over, and as they approached the first, he knew what he had to do.

Each of the other Champions had visited these ruins before, or so they'd told him, and they had all
agreed that while the area certainly had interesting and mysterious history, anything of worth had
already been 'recovered' by themselves, and other divers.

As usual though, his eyes spotted something the others had missed. To him, someone who had
grown up with RPGs, and the various puzzles therein, it was obvious. To Trainers who'd been doing
this since they were ten, he could understand how they might miss something like this.

He turned Hydrus towards the Marine Tube, and smirked as he saw the triangular 'rocks' by the edge
of the enormous trench the tube had been built over. Evidently, they had not been disturbed, which
was fortunate. He spoke mentally to his mudfish, "Can you lift those?" He gestured at the stone
pyramids, and the Mega Swampert swam over.

He nodded. "Heavy…but not too heavy. I'll be slow, though."

"That's fine." Alex said, hopping off his back. "I can swim on my own. Big hands. Bring these to
each entrance of the Ruins. I think you'll find there's exactly enough for two apiece."

The mudfish blinked, and then raised a brow at his Trainer. "How did you know these were here?"

Alex smirked, crossing his arms. "Every kid sees the Marine Tube at least once. I did tell you we've
vacationed here, did I not?" Hydrus shook his head. "Hmm. Well, you were still a bit young the last
time we came through. Right before Nimbasa, remember?"

Hydrus thought for a moment, then nodded, and smiled. "I was so…small."

Alex gave his head fins a pat. "We were all small. Now get moving, bud. The others should be done
by now." Hydrus nodded, and then further impressed his Trainer by lifting two of the pyramidal
objects at once.

Though his hands, and thus the jets on his upper wrists, were occupied Hydrus could alternate
between which sacs held his oxygen, and which propelled him through the water. The ones on his
shoulders folded open, and two streams of water shot behind him from his shoulders as they carried
his form towards the dark outline of the ruins, his large tail-fin guiding his trajectory.

After surfacing, and inhaling deeply, Alex propelled himself over towards the ruins once more,
hovering above them. His unearthly clothes were already dry, and his bag was watertight. It made
diving much easier. Lux floated beside him, his ghostly tail still attached to the hilt of the blade he
called home. "What makes you so certain those pyramids belong by the ruins?"

Alex shrugged. "I noticed that when I was younger. My brother and I went diving by the ruins. I
couldn't go inside, as I didn't have a Pokémon, which meant wandering around underwater for a few
hours."

The floating ghost raised what passed for an eyebrow for his species. "Wait…you're guessing?"
He smirked. "Something like that. Just trust my instincts on this." The small ghost sighed, and returned to the hilt. Alex flew back towards the sandbar, and took a closer look at the people occupying the cliff.

They were cheering, as the rest of his team had indeed finished, and now Arthur and Blaze were sparring, though they'd refrained from using moves. It was an impressive display, seeing a Mega Gallade go hand-to-claw with a Mega Charizard. He gave Ictus and Gel an Elixir, and then recalled everyone but Terra, Leo, and Cenomons. Shruikan still circled above them, his massive form occasionally blocking out the moon.

The giant earth turtle blinked once at his Trainer, and his Lairon yawned, then trotted over. He scratched them both under the chin. "How does it look Terra?"

"It goes down quite a way…further than the records say it should. There is a secret within, and the land below feels…odd." He looked over at the dark blob beneath the moonlit waves. "I sense much power within…old power. The kind the Sage warned us not to test."

Alex nodded. "I expected as much. Well done." He shifted his eyes to Ceno. "Can you make eight long, straight rods of metal?"

The Lairon tilted his head. "Why?"

"I…you know what? You'll see." He winked at his partner. "Trust me. It'll be quite the show."

Ceno grunted. "Mph. How long?"

Alex glanced back towards the bay, and made a generous guess. "Fifty feet apiece should do it. They don't need to be high quality, they just need to break the ocean's surface."

The Lairon looked at the mountains just west of the bay, then nodded. "I can do it. Will take some time."

His Trainer nodded. "Go then, find the ore. We can wait."

It took the better part of several hours, during which Alex meditated, floating over the sand and sitting cross-legged in the air. The voices from the cliff had grown quieter, and he resisted the smell of food that occasionally wafted down. Evidently there was a party up there. Finally, he blinked out of his trance-like state as he felt the cold metal nose of his Lairon nudge him. "It is done." Ceno yawned. "I need a nap." He pushed the button to his ball, and returned to it.

Alex stood, and stretched. Hydrus had finished some time ago, and contented himself by burrowing into the sand by the edge of the risen tide. Now, he rose as well, and lumbered over, still in his Mega Form. Each of the long rods floated into the air, surrounded by blue energy, and he ignored the shouts from above as he set out across the bay again.

The speed of his Swampert made placing each of the unwieldy rods relatively easy, though if he was honest, Hydrus did all the work. They placed each one in front of the pyramids, and once that was done, he gave his mudfish a well-earned rest.

Floating into the air, he got the attention of his team. Lux and Leo woke from their naps, and after a few moments, Shruikan appeared in the sky once more. He'd been hunting while they'd waited. Thankfully, Wailord was not an endangered species in this part of the world.
"Leo, you have the one closest to the shore. Shruikan, take the north. Lux, the south. I'll get the eastern one." As each of his team moved into position, he nodded at his dragon, and the black Salamence turned his maw to the sky. With a roar that sounded more like a thunderclap, dark clouds rolled across the otherwise beautiful night sky. "Ready? All together now…Thunder!"

His Pokémon summoned the energy for the attack with ease, and with a Shout of his own, Alex managed a similar effect. Eight bolts of searing plasma struck the rods, traveling down their length, and into the sand below. Then, eight glowing triangles appeared in the dark water.

"Again!" The Thunder attacks struck once more, and the glow increased. It took five in all, but eventually, eight beams of white-blue light shone up from below the water, and into the sky. He didn't feel the earth rumble, but he could hear it, and once it stopped, he smirked. It was the ever-welcome sound of a door, far away for the moment, being opened. "Well done, all of you. Return."

Lux didn't need to be told twice, and once Leo and Shruikan were in their balls as well, the Champion flew over the ruins. Thunder sounded again, but this time, it cleared the roiling clouds the dragon had summoned, once more illuminating the bay. The moon was hanging low in the sky by now, but he was finally ready.

He raised two fingers in the victory sign towards the cliff full of gawking Trainers, and then dove into the water. Originally, people had been against excavating the ruins, but over the years, and completely by accident, the eight square stones by each entrance had been uncovered. Usually, one's path through the ruins depended on where one dived into the water, but now, the deceptive structure revealed its four entrances, and from each one, a soft light radiated.

Alex smirked, and headed in. He waited for the telltale click that would signal he'd set off whatever trap lurked in these ruins, and expelled would-be trespassers, but evidently powering the pyramids had not only disabled said trap, but drained the water from the interior as well.

Each entrance was covered by a strange, malleable membrane that admitted his form with ease, and after seeing that, and the cuneiform symbols on the wall, he realized which written language they belonged to. "Atlantican? Odd…nothing in our history suggests we had much contact with them…"

There was a theory proposed by leading anthropologists that suggested the people of Atlantica had migrated from Unova, but both Unovans and Atlanticans had found said theory either ridiculous, or unlikely. Then again, he realized, Unova and Atlantica both had lost large portions of their history when the old empire fell. It couldn't be a coincidence that both had gaps in their history centered around three millennia past.

The Dragon Empire had been little more than a small kingdom, in the end. Who knew how many people had fractured away from the it over the course of its violent decline. He walked through the ruins at his leisure, navigating by way of one of the numerous maps that detailed the insides. As expected, the area had indeed been picked clean by scavengers, but now that the water had vanished, and the trap was inactive, he could explore at his leisure.

Eventually, he made his way to where the map marked a path upwards, and while there was indeed a hole in the ceiling, there was one in the floor, as well. Given that it appeared to be new, Alex jumped in, and floated down slowly. Or rather, he started slow. About halfway down, something interrupted his power.

Thankfully, he only dropped ten feet or so, landing in a three-point pose, hard enough to bruise his knee, but otherwise unscathed. He stood slowly, looking around, and as he did the blocks that made
up the chamber began to glow with the same whitish-blue energy as the fields above. Comparing this room to the ones he'd gotten maps for, he realized he was indeed off the map.

It was a smaller room than the maze of tunnels upstairs, but like the upstairs, it had several blocks containing script. Thankfully, the cuneiform did not seem to extend down here. Instead, he noticed the letters were written with the shapes of Unown, the very creatures that the language spoken the world over, known only as 'Common', were derived from.

There was only one exit from this room, only one path forward. Above it, he softly spoke the words that had been placed there. "To restore Balance to the world, you must first find Balance within yourself. Hmm…"

He crossed the threshold into the next room, and stared in awe. There was no doubt now. This was the Throne of the Dragon Emperor. The chamber itself was large, larger than anything the maps had detailed, and the room was shaped much the same as a ziggurat, save for the ceiling, which was flat. No doubt, that was what served as a floor for the upper levels. As with most pyramidal structures, it became much, much wider underneath.

Perched atop a smaller, and yet equally flat-topped ziggurat within the chamber was the throne itself. The rooms above had to be newer additions, because despite three millennia of ocean currents passing over them, the stones that made up this room were much, much older, judging by how eroded everything was.

The throne was in a state of disrepair as well. He'd begun climbing the smooth-edged steps, and found that the back part of it had been shattered in some other time. The arm rests and seat itself were also rounded and marked with signs of wear.

Who dares to approach the Dragon Throne?

The voice echoed through the ancient chamber, sourceless by its very nature, though he was sure he'd heard multiple voices layered within the question. He stepped before the throne, and then turned, eyeing the vast chamber beyond.

He let his Voice echo through the chamber, as he Shouted back. "One who would be King!"

The white-blue energy suffusing the ancient stones shifted then, almost seeming to move. Then he noticed, it was moving. Towards him. It gathered in eight spherical blobs on the stones around him, as the light was drawn from the entirety of the chamber, darkening it to his eyes, and illuminating only the throne now.

He is no Harmonia. It was the centermost orb of light that spoke now, Leave, intruder. You are not welcome here. Be glad to have seen what you have seen, and depart with your life intact. Seemingly finished, the central orb floated away from him, but the other seven remained. It paused, almost like it was watching them. The seven spoke in unison.

Speak, Tamer. Why have you so diligently sought out this chamber? What quest brings you here?

"The One Dragon has been revived." Each of the orbs seemed to shimmer, and glow a little brighter at his words. The one that floated away coalesced into a humanoid figure.

Each of them did, and Alex knew as he saw their robes that these were the Sages upon which Ghetsis had based his own. The central figure wore a crown, though it was as phantasmal as the rest
of his form. That marked him as the last true Harmonia. N had declined to even examine the Relic Crown.

The ancient King floated back towards him, hovering over all of them, above the final steps before the throne itself. His hair was long, and unremarkably styled, and his beard went about halfway down his chest. His eyes though, were what held Alex's attention. He knew them. There was no mistaking the familial similarities, the inherent kindness, and sadness as well. This had to be one of N's ancestors.

As his form coalesced, so too did his words. "Who? Who has reunited the dragon? Name him, so that we may prepare the Trial."

Alex bowed properly, as Jess had shown him, and then glanced upward at the King, smirking. "You're looking at him. Alexander Redwood, at your service."

The King blinked. "You? Impossible. You are nothing. Where is my heir? He's the one who really reunited the dragon, isn't he?"

"A lucky guess." The King snarled, and the Sages looked at him, several raising eyebrows at the venom in his tone. "Speak then, if you know so much. Where is my heir?"

Alex sighed, softly. "Gone, now. Traveling the world, seeking greater wisdom and power to draw forth from his partners."

The King's eyes narrowed. "Then we shall await his return as he gathers wisdom. Your news is appreciated. Now leave, and be glad you do so with your life. We usually take it from those who see this place. Leave the dead to rest."

"I cannot. Your heir, known to us only as N, failed to unite the dragon. he couldn't even envision it, after what Ghetsis subjected him to." The King's eyes went wide, and the rage in them was obvious, but he kept speaking. "I'm guessing you told Ghetsis where to find your heir, but I know what he did after. All of Unova does, N himself told us as much." In reality, it had been more due to John Crimson's determination to unveil the story of Unova's greatest hero, but the result was the same. Unova had only cheered their Champion more once they knew his origins.

He went on then, to explain what he knew of N's history, how he'd grown up, and what Ghetsis had forged him into. How he'd eventually freed himself of that destiny, but never quite finished walking that path. How he'd become the Champion, and kept Unova safe from Ghetsis' madness for years. How he'd traveled across the lands that had once also been called a part of Unova, and kept them safe as well, and finally, how he and N had battled, faced down Kyurem, and reunited the dragon.

"So you see," Alex said, finishing his tale, "He never had the chance to become the King you wished for. He was diverted from that path the moment Ghetsis found him, turned into little more
than a puppet with just enough knowledge to be a competent leader. He never understood humans, he barely understood Pokémon, and even as the Champion, the idea that the three dragons were One was simply never considered."

The rage in the King's eyes had faded to sorrow once more as the tale had continued. Once Alex finished speaking, he resumed the form of an orb, and left without a word, sinking deeper into the pyramidal structure, to the floors that were presumably below.

The seven remaining figures shared a look, and then as one, nodded. One of the Sages, whose green tinged clothing bore a green circle with a square within it on his shoulders and chest spoke then. "You have proven your worth, Tamer. By your hand you restored the dragon's balance, and kept Unova safe. You succeeded where our King's own bloodline failed. At the very least, you have proven worthy of taking the Trial of Eight Paths. We will determine if you are worthy of bearing the crown."

"And if I fail?" Alex asked.

The man's countenance grew grim, and this time the Sage whose red tinged clothing bore a circle with a red flame within it spoke. "Failure means death. You must be willing to give everything, to become this land's rightful King. Will you face the Trial?"

Alex nodded.

The man with the green markings spoke again, as the six other ghosts did as the King had, and floated into the lower levels. "Come, then. I will be your first challenge." With that, he vanished as well, and below the steps leading to the throne, another staircase of stone appeared. Though it seemed just as old, it had not been exposed to millennia of water, that much was evident.

The Path of Earth

Alex descended the stairs, until he came to a doorway that lacked a door. Above it, the words 'Path of Earth' appeared in the language of the Unown. He stepped through the doorway, and a wall of hardened stone rose behind him, sealing it off.

The ghost from before appeared again. Though it was hard to tell in the light of the throne room, he'd noticed each of the sage's phantasmal forms had a colored tint to them. This was what had made their clothing appeared colored, despite being ghosts. "Welcome. I expect you have many questions."

Alex smirked. "You have no idea."

The ghost seemed to chuckle at that. "Ask then, and I will do my best to sate your curiosity."

Though a torrent of questions came to mind, Alex paused, until he thought of one that seemed more important on an instinctual level. "What is the nature of this Trial?"

The ghost tilted his transparent head, as if eyeing the Trainer for the first time. "What a question. This Trial was designed by the dragon, and ourselves, to test the aptitude of those who would be King of Unova."

Alex smirked. "But there's more to it, isn't there?"
The ghost nodded. "By traveling each of the Eight Paths successfully, you will unlock your true power. Each of the dragon's candidates possesses such potential, always, but only this Trial will draw it forth."

"How, exactly?" Alex said, arching a brow. "I'm already stronger than most humans, and I don't really need more strength. Nor do I desire it."

"Oh, but you will require it, and soon, should you succeed here." The ghost said, nodding as only a Sage could, "There are many humans who can match, and surpass, your current level. A true King must transcend all others. Now, let us begin."

The ghost's form sank into the floor, and the square blocks that made up the simple chamber flared green, before fading away to white nothingness. Alex looked around, reminded of Tao's world. The Sage's voice echoed again, "Kings are brave. Kings never lose hope. No matter what they face."

The blankness shifted, and an image straight from his memory appeared around him. The green tinged ghost stood beside him, as they watched the memory unfold. There he was, younger and with a patchy face full of newly grown beard, as he stood in the midst of an icy cavern, surrounded by his Pokémon, and aided by his childhood hero. Kyurem stared him down, and beckoned him forward for battle.

The scene shifted again. Arceus floated before him this time, and the Sage gasped in shock as it unleashed a Judgement attack upon the figure before it, who spread his arms wide, and welcomed it. Only now, seeing it from a different perspective, did Alex recall actually raising his arms. He'd done it on instinct, then. He hadn't even noticed. He'd been more focused on his failure and imminent death at the time.

More scenes followed. He faced down Tao himself, on the verge of rampaging, and calmed him. He flew into battle atop his Charizard as they faced down a golden Groudon. He faced down the Forces of Nature, and willingly battled them. He flew headlong into the enormous wind wall that surrounded Norstad, atop his black Salamence.

As the scene shifted to him stepping into Rayquaza's volcano and being struck by the Storm Crown's power, the Sage turned and looked at him. The scene paused, and stopped moving forward. "You bear the Storm Crown?" Alex nodded. "I see…then the dragon's will is made clearer." He waved a hand, and the visions continued.

Another slight gasp came as he saw the maw of the World Eater snap behind Alex and Shruikan, as they led the great beast towards his doom. He'd never realized just how close those jaws had come. It was a matter of inches. The memories increased in speed as they flew by, more for the ghost's benefit than his own by this point, or so he assumed. His journey across the continent had included several close calls, and eventually, the room portrayed his current predicament.

The shadowy form of what could only be Caleb Pravus loomed over him, and those terrifying red eyes he'd displayed in Uppsalir filled the room. The ghost nodded. "I understand now. War has come once more. You were right to take this Trial." He pondered for a minute, and then spoke again. "You have faced down dangers most Tamers of my era would have run from. Even some of our Kings would not have held fast before the World Eater himself."

He gestured to the still-looming presence of Pravus. "This fear is different, though. You've seen the effect he has on the common people, and how easily he controls them. You've seen him go toe-to-toe
with a being our species once labeled a deity. Your fear is justified, but you must let it go. Do not allow it to hinder you, to cause you to pause. You faced down each of these tests by remaining steadfast. Your actions were well-intentioned, and honorable. Hold true to your courage, Tamer, and you will make a fine King."

Alex, for his part, nodded, and let the apprehension he'd had about facing Pravus down melt away. He might very well die if he faced him as Thor had. But if nobody faced him at all, his home, his people, his allies, would all be turned to little more than slaves. Jess entered his thoughts. There were worse fates as well. He felt his resolve burn to life, and a surge of energy ran up his spine from its base, giving him chills.

"What…what was that?" He asked the ghost.

The green tinged figured grinned. "That, was the first step on your path to awakening. You have traversed the Path of Earth. Go on, Champion. Face your next trial, and be aware, my counterparts share my knowledge. The more they learn of you, the harder this will become."

---

**The Path of Fire**

"Great…" Alex muttered, as the room returned to normal. One of the walls opened, and he moved towards it. Another doorway without a door. Another inscription in the language of the ancients. 'Path of Fire'.

Within the next room, he found the red tinged ghost, bearing the mark of fire, meditating the same way he did. Legs crossed, floating in the air. Though each of the Sages looked different, this one had been the only one to have a long, thin mustache that dangled down past his chin. Long beards that would be at home on a storybook mage's countenance had been the norm with his peers.

The Sage did not waste time as Alex stepped before him. "A true King has the willpower to remain good and moral in the face of overwhelming evil. Shame, doubt, anger, fear, sorrow, these emotions will cloud your judgement, and make you susceptible to corrupting influences." He opened his eyes, and examined Alex. "I sense much anger in you, though you bury it well."

The room flared white, and once more, an image from his memory came forth. One he'd repressed. He couldn't be more than four or five, but unlike some of the other visions he'd seen in the previous chamber, this one had crystal clarity to it. It made sense. Negative events always left a larger impression, and were more easily recalled.

His younger self was on the playground of his local school, building a castle that, he realized now, looked remarkably similar to the Dragonspiral Tower. An ordinary day, at least for him. And like most of his early days, this one included the arrival of a group of older children, each flanked by a Pokémon, as they circled him.

Their leader, a typical brat with a bandage across his nose, clad in red and black, stepped forward, stomping on his castle. "Alright Redwood. What've you got for us today?" His younger self held up handfuls of now-crushed sand, that slipped through his fingers. "Not good enough." The older boy bent to lift him up, but his younger self stood, instead.

He'd been taller than most, even back then, and he glared the boy down. "String Shot!" The boy's Cascoon sprayed his younger self with the sticky, purple substance, and his younger self struggled to move. The boy pushed him over then, and delivered a swift kick to his stomach. Alex winced, and
he could swear he felt something stir in his stomach as well, but he was too focused on the image of his younger self.

With each kick, the sensation increased. That had been but one day, in the middle of years of such taunting. Always he was at a disadvantage, for he'd always lacked a partner. He felt sympathy from his team, but he ignored it. The old feeling of painful solitude was returning with a vengeance within him.

The red ghost eyed him, and the scene shifted. It was his father's study, back in their house, and he immediately knew which memory this was. "What were you thinking!?" His father shouted, slamming the desk angrily. "Sneaking off after we told you not to! Shirking your chores! All so you could do what, play around in the woods!? You are not a Trainer, Alex. You will never be a Trainer!"

The memory faded suddenly, and the room was empty. Normal. Even the red tinged ghost had vanished.

"We sure showed him, didn't we."

A cold chill went up Alex's spine, as his own voice came from behind him. He turned, and beheld a perfect likeness of himself, but something was off. He couldn't figure out what, though. The doppelganger kept speaking. "We were quite the little rebel! Playing with Pokémon every chance we had. Trying to battle…though it wasn't like real battling, was it?"

His clone chuckled. "Oh no, nothing could compare to that thrill. Well, almost nothing, right Leafhead!?" Alex glared at himself. "Don't deny it. I'm you. We spent our wonderful teenage years getting stoned in Gruncle's basement, just so that we could get through every single mukky day we were forced to live through without a Pokémon of our own."

Despite himself, Alex looked away from his clone. His words rang with too much truth. The copy of himself was in his vision though, no matter where he turned. "Now now, don't ignore me…I've been ignored enough! You remember, don't you? The pure, undiluted rage we felt for father…you never wanted to admit it, but it felt good to hate him. It was right. He wronged us, and you know it. It's his fault we spent half our life in misery! You might have repressed the past, but I recall it clearly! A few good years will never change that…"

"And what are you?" Alex said, finally forcing himself to speak. "An illusion, nothing more. A trick. An amalgamation of bad memories."

The red ghost appeared then, standing between the two of them. "Not quite." He gestured to the clone. "He is as real as you are. He feels your feelings, thinks your thoughts, and if you fail to overcome him, it is he who will go on to walk the other paths. You, will remain here, and when he leaves, you will vanish into nothingness." The ghost grinned. "This is your Trial…" he raised his ghostly hands, and Alex looked down, noticing a familiar looking hilt in his palm. His plasma sword.

The snap-hiss of his blade filled the room, but it had not come from his weapon. Though similar to Lux's container, it was simpler in design, a combination of gray and black metal. His doppelganger's blade was pure red, and it sparked with electricity. He activated his own, and found it to be similar, though the color was blue.

He barely moved his blade up in time, as the red-illuminated face of his clone struck, and forced a
blade-lock, as he sneered. "Finally...I will be free...no more repression...no more being buried under your other emotions, forgotten, and left to fester...I will right the wrongs done to us, and I'll start with our dear old dad." The clone struck again, and it took Alex a second to realize his fighting style was the same as his own. His clone's eyes flared with psychic power, and the two identical humans clashed within the small room, moving with impressive speed. They spun into a blade lock, and then spun away, each using the spiraling motions that made up Tao's fighting style.

"Perhaps some music, to make this more appropriate!" His clone said, grinning as he gestured to the room. A familiar tune echoed in the chamber, and his opponent grinned, dragging the crimson blade along the stone of the floor as he stalked ever closer, not caring for the damage it did. "Remember this? From those old Earth games you enjoyed so much. You immersed yourself in them to dull the ache of your life, your lack of friends and Pokémon. Do you remember what this one was called?" His clone smirked.

Alex grimaced. He knew as well as his doppelganger did, the name of this particular song, and as the music swelled, he finally gave in. He hated fighting. Battling was one thing. It was sport, to his people. A contest of strength, but always one that had good natured emotions behind it. It wasn't about winning or losing. It never had been. It was about the thrill of battling alongside the partners of one's heart and mind. This, however, was not a battle. This was a duel.

He took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. He met his own gaze, and smirked, as he saw an unnerved expression cross his own face. His clone hid it well, but these were his own features. He knew what he looked like when he was worried. He fell into the stance Tao had drilled into his muscle memory, and let his power course through him. It flared off his large form in waves.

"Duel of the Fates." He looked down at his sword, and his smirk widened. "Appropriate. I couldn't have chosen better."

Rage came over his clone's expression, and with a yell, the two clashed once more. Sparks flew from their blades each time they hit. The speed of the music increased, and so did their strikes. The room shook, and Alex realized that his clone was every bit as good as he was. He needed an edge.

"Is this really the best I can do?" Alex smirked, as he yawned, and made a circular motion, disentangling their latest blade lock with one hand, as the other covered his mouth. "I thought you were supposed to be the embodiment of my wrath." He smirked at his clone, and raised his sword above his head, holding it horizontally, as his free hand made the universal gesture for 'bring it'.

"You want wrath!?" The veins in the clone's head bulged, and his psychic aura of power coalesced from faint waves, to a proper aura, not unlike Connor's had been. It was rounded at the bottom, and flared uncontrollably at the top. The color changed as well, from a lighter blue, to a deeper bluish-purple, more akin to dragon energy. "Repress this!"

His clone lunged again, and Alex barely managed to deflect the first strike. The others were just as strong, and his arms ached as they took the repeated impacts. Still, it had the desired effect. His was form sloppier. Slightly. He needed more goading. Alex gripped the blade with both hands now, and the impacts were slightly easier to handle. He forced them into a lock again, and the plasma hissed and screeched as the swords met.

"Is that it?" He managed, still outwardly smirking. "Years of being kicked around. Mocked. Insulted daily. Cast aside like a worthless dimwit without even being given a chance! Perhaps you're not as full of rage as you let on." He swallowed, as he saw the look in his clone's eyes change from
incoherent fury, to the cold stare he'd reserved for those who had truly managed to piss him off. A chill went up his spine. Was that what he'd done to those who'd been on the business end of this glare?

"You want to see our rage? *I'll show you our mukking rage!*" A wave of energy slammed into the real Alex, sending him flying back into the stonework by the entrance to this chamber. He hadn't noticed, but this time, the door was blocked by fire. Another chill went up his spine as his doppelganger began speaking in the Dragon Tongue.

The draconic energy flared as the clone Shouted, "Mul! Qah! Diiv!" While the effects were not identical, they were close enough to the original Shout his other self was purposefully copying. His teeth grew longer, sharper, his hands were clawed, and red scales appeared across his face, and presumably, the rest of his body. His ears were pointed, and a pair of horns jutted up from his brow, and curled backwards, slightly. The copy of his hat had fallen to the ground, and his hair had become a similarly colored crest of red scales that trailed down under the white robe that covered his clone.

Alex grimaced as he looked over that which had once been himself. Twisted, and evil. That was what he would become if this clone was allowed to leave. Though, whether he could match him anymore was a mystery. He got his answer, as the crimson scaled form of his clone seemed to vanish, and he barely had time to duck as the crimson blade cut horizontally across the wall where he'd been standing a moment before.

He spun away, once more in his dragon stance, but he might as well have been hopping on one foot for all the good it did him. "*They will all PAY!*" his clone screeched as he slammed their blades together, and effortlessly forced his large form toward the other end of the room. Looking down, he saw that the cloned shoes had been tore apart by a pair of massive, clawed feet that could only be described as draconic. There were only three claws on them, but they had better traction than his shoes, and Alex grunted as the draconic aspect of himself slammed him into the other wall. He could feel the heat of his own blade pushing ever closer.

That, was when he recalled a useful trick from the aforementioned games their epic music had originated from. He Teleported behind the furious copy of himself, and once more fell into his stance. His own power flared, and instead of wildly billowing above him, it coalesced around him like armor, outlining his form with at least an inch of protection. Though how well it would hold up against focused plasma remained to be seen.

His clone charged him again, and once more, their blades locked. Once more, he was being driven towards a wall. A corner, this time. Evidently his clone planned on doing this as many times as it took to work. He knew as well as Alex did that his Teleport had limited uses, and he'd used quite a few of them today.

That was when he switched his blade off, ducked under the slash that followed with his opponent's momentum, and elbowed his clone in the abdomen. Despite being scaled and durable, he'd hit with enough force to make the dragon-man gasp and let out a hacking cough. It stopped midway through, becoming a soft sigh as Alex reignited his weapon under his opponent's guard, and felt his sword slash across the abdomen, dealing a serious, if not fatal blow. Evidently, not even his scales would protect him from a weapon like this.

The power faded in a red mist, as his clone doubled over. His eyes were bloodshot, but they still retained some of the blue. Alex caught his clone as he fell, letting the blade he'd used for this fall to the ground. His doppelganger still seethed with rage, but it was dying out quickly. "Make…them
Alex nodded. "We didn't. But we never gave up, did we? Every single person in our life, save one relative, told us to give up on being a Trainer. And we became the Champion anyways. These emotions you revel in…they helped get us there." He brought his clone close, in an embrace. "I never forgot you. All the rage, anger, sorrow…I always felt it. But I balanced it with the joy and love we gained once we finally had our chance…” He met his own eyes. "You are as much a part of me as every other emotion. Now come home." There was a warm sensation in his stomach as he felt the weight in his arms vanish, and once more, he felt power surge through his entire being, originating from his stomach.

The soft sigh of his clone was all that was left of him as his body vanished. Alex found himself kneeling in the red tinged chamber, and the similarly colored ghost rose up from the floor, arms crossed. "I've rarely seen a manifestation with such raw power…and you still tamed it. You have walked the Path of Fire and come through unburnt. Advance to your next challenge."

---

**The Path of Water**

Alex bowed, and moved on to the door that appeared on one of the chamber's walls. Once he approached the next chamber, he looked up, reading the words once more. 'Path of Water'. He entered the chamber, and found it cooler, more refreshing than the previous one. The orb of spectral energy that was the blue ghost coalesced before him, and he blinked in surprise.

He hadn't noticed before, as he'd been placating the former King, but this ghost was undeniably female. Her voice was softer than the others, but just as confident and inherently wise. "Hmm. I was sure the fire would end you."

Alex raised a brow, and then smirked. "Fire cannot truly harm a dragon. Let alone one who would be King."

The ghost seemed to chuckle. "Keep telling yourself that, 'your highness'. A true King acts with love, and accepts all of his subjects. I've seen your memories. How do you expect to rule a people whose defining aspect of their society is the antithesis to everything you believe?"

Alex tilted his head. "I don't follow your thinking…"

The blue ghost walked around him in a clockwise circle. Like her counterparts, her ornate robes bore a symbol within a circle. A crescent moon, and three wavy lines that no doubt represented water, or the ocean. Like the others, it marked her shoulders, and her chest. There was no cleavage to speak of, which was in line with the clothing of ancient times, if he recalled correctly.

"The people of the west view Arceus in a manner that is entirely foreign, both to you, and the dragon. They worship him with blind devotion, and are so bound to their Prophet, they would, and have, gladly maimed themselves to demonstrate their loyalty." As she spoke, the room shifted with her words, though this time, the image was not from his memory.

It was the interior of an Arcean Church. Having never been inside one, Alex looked around, curious, and realized that it was disturbingly similar to the numerous Pokémon Stadiums that littered the world. A circle of plain chairs in rows that stretched to the building's ceiling surrounded a central raised dais, upon which was a pulpit for speaking. Behind it, was the Arcean Cross, supporting the
The ghost spoke again. "You've seen how the Church negatively impacts its followers, but you've completely ignored the beneficial aspects of cult worship that the Fornians have incorporated into their cultural psyche."

Alex frowned. "I fail to see how forced brainwashing is beneficial to anyone."

The ghost nodded. "And thus you've remained blind to a potential weak spot in an enemy, or even a beneficial way of thinking for your own would-be empire."

Alex's frown deepened. "I will not subject my people to brainwashing. Of any kind. I couldn't care less what they believe in, it's what that belief drives them to do that I intend to stop."

The ghost's arms were linked in her kimono-esque robes. She raised a perfect eyebrow at him. "And what happens when you claim victory over Fornia? Let us pretend for a moment that you win this war you are not prepared for. You march into Sacreus, burn the city, and kill the Prophet in an epic clash that will be sung about in Unova for millennia to come. Is the Church going to disappear because you've cut off its' head?"

"Well I-" Alex started, but the ghost cut him off.

"Is the faith and belief in Arceus going to vanish from the hearts of Fornians simply because you, an invading and victorious conqueror, tell them to stop believing so blindly? What are you going to offer them in its place? Science? They know more about genetics than your Professors could learn in a lifetime. They have machines capable of shooting elemental energy as easily as projectile weapons fire bullets. Your scientific mindset is not going to sway them. Pravus has already blended their beliefs with the basic truths of the universe. Are they going to stop following the Prophet of Arceus' command to kill you on sight simply because you dismantle their Church?" The ghost eyed him expectantly, and he was allowed to answer this time.

"I expect not."

The ghost sighed. "Consider this your Trial then, you who would be King. Half of a continent's worth of human lives will be affected by your actions. Many already have been. The people of Fornia have held these beliefs for centuries. How do you expect to free them from this?"

"I don't know!" Alex finally said, raising his voice. He looked down at his feet. "If I had my way, they would have never been subjected to this foulness in the first place."

"And many would likely be happier for that." The ghost said. "But you cannot change what has already happened. Not without angering the God of Time. Bad things happen. All over the world, and many of these things are much, much worse than indoctrination into a Cult that fills the basic needs of living for millions of people. What do you intend to do about these terrible things? As King, your actions will eventually affect the world as a whole as well. Can you truly handle that responsibility?"

Alex thought for a long moment, and as he always did when faced with a philosophical question that stumped him, he relied on Tao's teachings. "What can I do, but try to prevent what atrocities I am able to stop? I can't be everywhere. Even as a King. Even if I could Teleport freely, anywhere in the world, I could never stop all of it."
The ghost nodded, and smiled. "The dragon's wisdom has reached you, then. That is promising. Now, answer the question I first posed. How do you expect to free the people of Fornia from the stranglehold their Church has on them? How will you prevent the rise of another Pravus?"

He thought again, and then the ghost's own words echoed in his skull. "A true King acts with love, and accepts his subjects, no matter who, or what, they are." He nodded, feeling more confident in his answer, though the ghost's face was as impassive as his own usually was. "All I can do is try to show the people of Fornia what they have lost in their blind pursuit of their Church's 'divine truth'. Families torn asunder. Childhoods ruined. Murder, destruction of the land, these are just a few of the Church's own actions that, without Pravus, I can illuminate. They can't ignore my words forever. Even if I have to go to every single one of them and convince them face to face, I will free them from this oppressive mindset."

As he spoke, he felt a strange sensation in his stomach. Then, he realized it wasn't his stomach, but his abdomen. A surge of energy moved through him, cooling the heat that the Path of Fire had seared him with. The ghost smiled again. "I believe you. I've seen the strength of your willpower, as well as the power of your Voice. If anyone can reach the Fornians and help them rejoin the world in peace and prosperity, I believe it is you. The dragon has, as always, chosen well. Remember my words, Champion, and move on to your next test."

The Path of Air

The wall of water that blocked his path backward remained in place, and another entrance appeared on the opposite wall of the chamber. Alex bowed, and continued on. If he was being truthful, the issue of the Fornian's indoctrination had been one both he and Tao had been unable to find a solution to, but after this, he expected the dragon would agree with using Words over violence.

He was, like Alex, not a violent creature. Pravus had earned his fate, but his followers yet had a chance to be redeemed. He sighed, pausing against the wall of the tunnel that connected the Path of Water to wherever he was heading next. He almost would've preferred another plasma duel. Almost. He hummed the tune of the Duel of the Fates as he moved on to the next room.

As with the others, the door to the next room bore the same lettering. It read 'Path of Air'. He moved into the room, and blinked, as it resembled, strongly, the rock garden that Tao had in his other Tower, the one that resided on another plane.

"Look familiar?"

The voice that echoed through the square room was lighter, but unmistakably masculine. An airy spherical orb floated before him, and coalesced into the pale gray form of a bald man, with a short beard that resembled a chin strap. On his robes was a circle similar to the other three, though this one had a swirl of gray and blue within it, that evidently represented air.

Alex nodded. "It looks like the one Tao has in his…other tower."

"So it does." The ghost nodded, and smiled. "What brings you to me, you who would be King?"

Alex blinked. "Erm. I'm trying to complete the Trial. I'm here to walk the Path of Air."

The ghost nodded, still smiling. He was also sitting cross-legged in the air, and his hands, both curled into fists, joined at the knuckles. They weren't threatening, however, as the pose seemed more
meditative than anything. "And how do you think one walks such a Path?"

Alex thought for a moment, and then floated into the air, mimicking the ghost's sitting position with a smirk. This brought a chuckle from him, that devolved into a full-bellied laugh. "Oh... oh that's good. I set my self up for that one. It's been an age since I've had such a clever challenger. Literally."

Alex smiled as well. This ghost was one he inherently liked, and he suspected he'd been friendly with Tao as well. Had he yet lived, he expected the two of them would've become good friends. "I'm glad I could entertain you. Now then, might I ask what this test will entail?"

The ghost nodded. "To open your next Chakra, there are several lessons you need to know, though judging by your partners, you already know them!" He chuckled again.

Alex blinked. "Open my what now?"

The ghost blinked as well. "Has... nobody told you? Surely you've studied the secret behind the ancient King's powers. Nay, you must have felt them opening. You wouldn't be here if they were still closed."

Alex shook his head. "Most of the knowledge of the old empire was lost in the war that the two brothers started. What we know now was only kept alive via oral traditions, until someone wrote it all down again, but much of that is considered historically questionable, and with the return of Tao, much has been revealed to be false."

The ghost sighed. "I see. I never liked those boys, but I believe the one who sought truth would have ruled us better. I have always been partial to living in the light, though." He shook his head, and put aside the topic of the ancient 'heroes' for a moment. "The surges of power you've been feeling after each test. Have you not wondered what they are? Has the increase in your strength not been significant?"

Alex shrugged. "I was told that this test would grant me more power. I just assumed it came in bursts. Evidently there's more to it...?"

"So much more!" The ghost exclaimed. "I would've thought the dragon would tell you of what exactly this Trial does, no?" His eyes went wide. "You do know what happens if you fail to open them all, right?" Seeing the blank look on Alex's face, the man frowned. "How has nobody explained this to you!? This is why I should go first. Air is first in the cycle anyways!" He sighed again.

"Perhaps..." Alex said carefully, "You should start from the beginning. Explain it now. Knowledge acquired late is better than total ignorance."

That brightened the ghost's expression, and his demeanor became cheerful again. His moods seemed to shift as often as the wind changed direction. Which was appropriate, he assumed. "True enough! Knowledge is indeed power, and if the empire's knowledge is gone, you must not know anything! Do we at least still have contact with Koria?"

Alex raised a brow. "Koria? They're on the other side of the planet. Moreover, that's Imperium territory. If you value your freedom, you avoid the Imperium. That's just common sense."

The ghost stared at him for a minute. "Imperium? Wait... the Imperium of Man? They're still around!? How in the name of the Dragon's divine dong did the Imperium of Man outlast our own empire!?"
Alex blinked. "Tao has a dong? Odd. He implied he didn't have...parts." When it came to typically
genderless Legendary Pokémon, he went by the tone of their psychic voice. They could, after all,
change it on a whim. He'd always assumed it was based on preference.

The ghost laughed again. "Oh, he does, hence the masculine terms we use to refer to him. He simply
lacks the urges that drive humanity. Well. Not so much 'lacks' as ignores entirely. Anyways!" he
said, waving a hand, "On to the topic of Chakras."

Alex nodded, listening attentively. It wasn't all that different from how he'd been educated by Tao
himself. Many of their philosophical lessons had occurred in his rock garden. The ghost began
explaining. "Chakras are pools of energy within oneself. They flow throughout your body...much
like a river. Unfortunately, some aspects of this material world can block the flow of this energy, and
without training, it becomes blocked off, and useless, trapped behind the emotional baggage of one's
life."

Understanding flooded Alex, and he spoke as the ghost paused. "And this Trial is meant to unclog
those...energy pools, and thus, the King appears to be powerful..."

"When in reality, he is as strong as anyone who has learned to let their energy flow." The ghost
finished. "For you though, there is much more energy than normal. Such is always the case with the
candidates the dragon chooses. This too, is why the Kings of old were so strong. The dragon would
seek out these powerful individuals, and teach them his ways, unlock their power, and with it, they
maintained peace in the empire. The last King's sons never took this Trial, and while they were
educated in the dragon's teachings, they never proved worthy of the crown, or attained the power
their father did. Instead of making one of them face the Trial, the dragon chose to side with both of
them, rather than tear the empire apart. Alas...it tore apart anyway."

Alex nodded. "I think I get it...so how do I open this...Air Chakra?"

The ghost chuckled. "A true King lets love and good emotions guide his actions. He uses them, to
fight against the hatred that is unfortunately so common in the world. Or rather...used to be. I sense
much has changed over the millennia. This is not a bad thing. This Chakra's energy is located in the
heart, and is blocked by grief. I sense much grief within you, though you've buried it deep. What
makes your heart so heavy?"

Alex looked away, face becoming impassive. "My...granduncle. He passed, recently. Not even Tao
could heal him."

The ghost tilted his head. "Tao?"

Alex nodded. "The One Dragon. I gave him a name."

At that, the ghost burst into laughter again. "Oh! The stones on this one! You gave a nickname to a
creature of the Alpha, formed from the energy of Creation itself! Oh, oh ho ho. That is...genuinely
amusing. But fitting! Very well. Tao. It works, I think." He made an 'ahem' sound. "Now then, you
were speaking of your granduncle?"

Alex looked away again, then sighed. It had taken a Trial he couldn't afford to fail to finally face this
particular demon, and as he felt the grief, he understood how it was blocking his energy. "He was the
only family I had that believed I could be a Trainer. He never gave up on me. He taught me
everything I know. It's...a darker world without him in it."
The ghost nodded, his jovial amusement faded now. "I see. You are versed in…Tao's teachings, yes?" Alex nodded. "Then you know about the energy that makes up…" He gestured to Alex.

Alex blinked. "You just gestured to all of me."

The ghost chuckled lightly. "Indeed, and that is exactly the point. All of what makes you who you are, the energy that formed in the unique pattern that is your conscious mind, that never truly fades away. Energy cannot be destroyed, young Redwood. Only changed in form. The energy of life is infinite." He gave the Trainer a minute to process his words. It was something he'd already learned, as it was literally basic science, but hearing it again drove the ghost's point home.

An ephemeral hand touched his shoulder. "The love your granduncle had for you has not left this world. It still lives, within you, within your memories of him, and perhaps, even in Arceus' own realm. He is a loving Alpha, and if your granduncle is the kind of man who could produce a student that has passed three of these Trials, I think he has found a spot amongst those of our kin the Alpha deems worthy to spend eternity with.

Alex smirked. "I don't think he'd like spending an eternity with a deity."

The ghost nodded. "Indeed, I got the sense from your recollections that he was a man of science and knowledge. Fret not though, Arceus is a being who can be...very rational. Now, as I said, energy can only change in form, and should one wish it, one may re-enter the world as whatever they wish. A bug. A Pokémon. Another human. Some stay in the Alpha's realm for uncountable millennia, but eventually, everyone wants to experience this prime material plane once more. Even if doing so causes them to forget who they are...for a time. The urge to live…it's instinctual, even for a ghost."

Alex raised a brow. "What of you then? Do you not want to re-enter the cycle?"

The ghost nodded. "I feel the pull every day. The urge to come back. But if I did, the Trial would be incomplete. My knowledge would vanish until whatever I returned as passed on, and even then, who knows if I would ever remember all of it. No, the dragon commanded I stay to test and educate the Kings of the future, and if my happiness must pay the price for that, then I pay it gladly."

"Thank you…" Alex said, forcing himself to smile. Slightly. "Perhaps someday I can find another to take your place. Then you can all, finally, move on, hmm?"

The ghost shook his head. "My duty is eternal, young Redwood. I will be here, even after you and your long legacy are gone. But I appreciate the sentiment."

The ghost removed his hand, and nodded at the Trainer. "Now, let the sorrow and the grief flow away. You may yet meet your granduncle again. Or you may not. Either way, I do not believe he would want your thoughts of him to hinder you. Remember the kindness he showed you, and go forward knowing that it will never truly leave you. More than most, it has shaped who you have become."

It took several minutes, but eventually, as the ghost said, the memories of the many, many fun times they'd shared eased the heaviness in his heart. He felt the energy surge again, and noticed that it was indeed quite a large pool. If the ghost was to be believed, it would only grow larger. He hoped he could contain it.

"So passes another walker on the Path of Air. Move forward, Champion, and remember what you have learned." Alex stood as the ghost spoke, and let his feet touch the ground once more, though if
he wished it, he felt he could've floated with ease. Even with his oversized body.

He bowed, fist to palm. "Thank you, wise ghost. I will keep what you've taught me in my heart."

---

**The Path of Light**

He moved on to the next room, genuinely curious as to what it would be, now the four basic elements had been covered. He read the letters at the entrance of the next door. 'Path of Light'. That, more than anything, piqued his interest. Learning about Light energy would be invaluable against a man who'd found a way to infuse Shadow into eggs, amongst other things. He stepped quickly past the threshold, into yet another square room. At least, he assumed it was square. The blinding golden light within seared his vision, and he brought the brim of his hat down, though it did little to help.

Eventually, the light coalesced into a golden colored ghost, who bowed to him in the Unovan style. Arceus’ symbol adorned his robes where the elemental symbols had adorned the others, on the shoulders, and the front of the chest. His beard easily went down to his waist, and his ephemeral eyes were kind. "Greetings, you who would be King. Welcome, to the Path of the Light."

Alex bowed as well. "Thank you. Tell me, what must I do to…wait a minute…I know you!"

The ghost blinked. "What? You…do?"

Alex nodded. "We lost much knowledge in the ancient war, but not all. Not the face of the man who advanced our world's technological capabilities by leaps and bounds thank to his scientific research!"

He bowed again, lower this time, and in the formal style Jess had made him practice to perfection. "It is an honor to meet you, Professor Aristole."

The man smirked under his golden beard. It was full and curly, and unlike the other ghosts, he'd apparently kept his hair fairly short. "It is…a relief, I will admit, to know my work has not been forgotten, or unappreciated. Now then, on to the Trial. I've learned much of you, Alexander Redwood, over the course of these trials. I know you have the ability to Teleport, as I once did, and this means you must already possess part of the understanding required to unlock this Chakra."

Alex nodded, and the ghost continued on, one finger raised, as if he were lecturing. It was, in fact, the exact pose the Aristole Archive in Castelia City had him immortalized in by way of a statue. "Tell me, Tamer. Why do you wish to be King?"

Alex tilted his head. "Unova needs a leader, and the dragon has deemed that the time to reunite our fractured land has finally come. He's chosen me to lead them. Or die trying."

The golden ghost nodded, and looked him over a second time. "And what of when this war ends, hmm? For one way or another, it must surely end. What then will you do with your Kingly title? Pass it off to another?"

Alex blinked. "I…hadn't really considered that."

"Consider it now, young defender of men. One must always be mindful of the future, especially a King." The ghost gave him another smile, but there was a glint of light in his eyes that seemed to indicate he was enjoying this.

Alex thought over what he knew of the man, and then nodded. He'd been famous for teaching, and
his students had been a large part of what held Unova together after the empire fell apart. Now, he was likely going to try to educate him, as well. He met the ghost's eyes. "Defender of men?"

The ghost nodded. "Your name. Were you not aware of its meaning?"

Alex shook his head. "No…but it's starting to seem appropriate…very well…once this war ends, I suppose I'll do my best to rule. If I turn out to be terrible at it, someone else will be taking this Trial I imagine."

The ancient Professor chuckled. "And what if you turn out to be great at it? What if, under your rule, this continent flourishes in a manner it hasn't experienced since last the dragon was whole?"

Alex frowned, slightly. "Speak plainly, Professor. If there's a point you're trying to get at, I'm not seeing it."

The room shifted to blinding white, and then, as with the others, displayed an image. An image of the world. "Consider our planet." The ghost began, gesturing at the world. Lines appeared across it, and it took him a minute to realize they were the boundaries humans had drawn on their maps. "Many cultures, many peoples, many civilizations. For eons, we have fought each other in the name of one of these things. One culture does not like another. One kingdom invades a neighbor to gain more resources, power, and land." The lines shifted as he spoke, and he blinked at Unova and Fornia. They were the more recently drawn ones. "Over and over the cycle repeats, and when a leader dies, the result is usually a fracturing of everything said leader created. Our last King is no exception to this rule. Nor, I expect, will you be."

Alex shrugged. "Tao told me the Storm Crown would turn my body immortal, provided I'm not slain by way of a weapon. In fact, he implied disintegration would be the only thing that would stop my regeneration."

The ghost nodded. "Such is the power of the Storm Crown. What do you know of its history?"

Alex shrugged again. "Very little. Rayquaza and Tao have never told me much of it."

The ghost chuckled. "I expect they haven't. If you were aware of it, you might not want to bear it. Yet bear it you must." Alex raised a brow, but the ghost continued on. "Once donned, the Crown cannot be removed. In you, our wise dragon has finally created a human with a lifespan long enough to, perhaps, realize his ultimate dream."

Alex crossed his arms. "He hasn't mentioned this dream to me."

Another chuckle. "I expect he wouldn't. The dragon is a private being, always waiting for the right moment to impart knowledge so that he may turn things in his favor, but always remember, his dream is what guides his actions and words. It is the base of his truths, the heart of his ideals."

"And what dream would that be?" Alex asked.

The ghostly Professor gestured at the world, and Alex watched. Slowly, the lines began to shift. First, Unova covered the whole continent it had once reigned over. Then, the border stretched south. Then across the ocean. Slowly, to every region, land, and government. The end result was a single, unified empire.

Alex stared, not quite believing what he was seeing. "Are you telling me the most peaceful being I
The ghost laughed then, and nodded. "Indeed. Though I imagine that phrase still carries the negative connotations it once did. The dragon confided in me during my life, and told me of the world he envisioned. A utopia, where all of humanity and Pokémon could live and flourish together. But not just on this planet. Across the stars, as well."

Alex shook his head. "I...I don't believe it. Humanity already tried the interstellar empire thing. It didn't even last a century before the colonies demanded independence, and started a war. That's basic history."

A subtle change came over the ghost, and Alex had a feeling he was about to finally reach his main point. "This is true. But do you know what happened to those colonies, after their war?"

Alex shrugged. "I imagine the old governments of Earth eradicated them, their families, and then nuked their planets. We were...a very violent people. Nothing good happened to them."

The Professor shook his head. "In actual fact, one of my students discovered an ancient document. 'The Mars Accord'. Evidently, all of the colonies, and the Earth, agreed to a ceasefire and to cut all communications and trade. Given what we know of pre-history, this was likely around the time our home planet was rapidly falling into chaos as the environment lost its balance, and pushed humanity to the edge of survival."

Alex stared at the ghost. "So...what, you expect me to conquer the world, head into space, reunite the old colonies, if they even live still, and then...what? Spread across the universe?"

"If you manage to achieve world peace on Earth, would you not want that to be shared by our forgotten brethren? What of other sentient species? What if our human methods of unity could help them keep from murdering each other as well? Is this not an ideal future to pursue?" The ghost eyed him, expectantly.

"I mean..." Alex thought for a moment. Then a longer moment. A minute. Five. The more he thought about it, the less absurd it seemed. He was, according to beings created by a genuine deity, a human who'd achieved immortality. At the very least, his span of years would be longer than most. He asked himself, for the first time since donning the Storm Crown, what kind of immortal he intended to be. One like Percy? Going around the world, influencing people, entire cultures, with knowledge from old video games? He could, he realized, do more. A lot more.

Then, his realistic skeptic side kicked in. Humanity would never stop killing each other long enough to get along. There was too much hate. He'd likely be killed by it long before he ever made it to space. "It is a good dream." He said, finally, "But no more than a dream. You are not an idiot, you know how our species acts. Our default is violence. We stab each other in the back the first chance we get, all so that we may climb to heights of power and wealth on the backs of others, and live in absurd comfort for our brief span of years. Humanity will never overcome its greed."

"Those..." the ghost said, "Are not your words. They are your granduncle's. Realism can be a useful thing to have. Skepticism has it uses as well, but you should know by now, all it takes for the greedy to control our world is good men, like you, with the power to change what we are, standing aside and doing nothing to stop them. Do you intend to spend your years watching humanity devour itself over and over again?"
"No." Alex said, before he could contemplate the question. He knew he was the kind of person who would act. He'd never hesitated in trying to help before.

"Will you stand idly by as unworthy men try to achieve this dream before you?" The ghost asked.

Alex blinked. "What do you mean?"

"The Storm Crown is a unique item. It was bestowed by the Alpha unto the human he deemed worthy of taming him." Alex's eyes went wide, but the ghost continued, "Once he died, it passed to another, who revealed in its power and brought destruction wherever he went. Others saw this power, and claimed it for themselves. Ninety-nine times it passed through the hands of different humans, each one killing their predecessor just so that they could enjoy the crown's gifts. Eventually, Tao had your Rayquaza take it from them, the way a parent takes a dangerous item from a child. We were not ready to bear it during the Dark Times, but now, here you stand, crowned and tested. Unless my instincts are wrong for the first time in my afterlife, you will pass this Trial."

Alex stayed silent as the Professor continued. "I ask again, Champion of Unova. What do you intend to do with these gifts of life and power?"

He sighed. "What can I do that better men have not already tried? I can't erase the borders." He said, gesturing to the Earth. At his words, the lines reappeared. "We're too divided. The Imperium and Eous alone would be impossible. They've been fighting for centuries. There is too much hate. Too many divisions. One person can't remove all of them."

"The last one to Tame Arceus did." The Professor's words were quiet, and Alex realized his tone had risen above civilized levels. "For a brief time, he managed to unite the world. Would that the Storm Crown had been on his head longer. By the time he donned it, he was already lost to our mortal coil. You, though, have a chance to succeed where he failed."

Alex opened his mouth to speak, but the ghost cut him off, and gestured at their planet. "You should know this already, you who would be King. These lines..." He gestured at them, and they vanished, revealing the Earth as it was. "They are human inventions. Little more than an illusion. A true King accepts all beings. Something you are more than capable of doing, based on your training so far."

Seeing it before him drove it home, and he felt a surge of energy in his forehead. His third eye opened, and the world took on a new appearance. He gasped. Lines of energy surrounded and connected the planet, gathering at various points across the globe. Everything was connected, and he realized that unless he did something, humans and Pokémon would continue to walk down the same violent path they always came back to. They'd be trapped in this cycle forever, as they had for the past three millennia. They would continue to rise and fall in an endless cycle. Unless someone broke it.

"I understand." He said, finally. "I will remember your words, Professor. I have to ask, though...N seems like he was far, far better prepared to achieve this...ultimate destiny of our people. He can do things with numbers that make my head throb. How am I supposed to lead without that kind of knowledge?"

At his words, the Professor frowned. "That knowledge was passed to the one you call Ghetsis by our last King, but this did not ensure Ghetsis in turn prepared the Harmonia heir with everything he learned here. The King is capable of passing it to you, as well. He has the means. Whether he will actually give it, is another question entirely. One that depends on you, and your actions. Now go. Your next challenge awaits."
The Path of Resonance

Alex continued on from the chamber, pondering the ancient Professor's words. After that, he genuinely had no idea what awaited him next, and as he approached the next doorway, every bit as identical as the other five had been, he read the words at the top. The 'Path of Resonance'. He blinked. A sound-based trial?

He supposed he'd find out, and he continued on to the chamber itself. He found yet another square room, and the only thing that made it unique was a spiraling staircase that ascended upwards, with no railing to keep one who ascended it safely on the steps. A familiar orb of light hovered by the stairs, and it gave off a twinkling sound as it bobbed in the air, and then ascended upwards.

Alex followed, and soon realized the stairs did not require a railing. They were surrounded on all sides by rock once they reached the ceiling. He kept climbing, eventually floating as the monotony of climbing steps was straining even his legs, made strong by countless hours of training and travel.

Finally, he came to a much larger room, and as he glanced at the floor, he realized it was the very room he'd entered through when he'd first come to the ruins. It had changed, though. The walls had sunk into the floor, and a staircase had appeared in the center, not far from the one he'd just left.

The ghost manifested before the stairs, and he was greeted not by a man or woman, but by a mask, plain and unreadable. The figure's robes bore a G-clef on the chest and shoulders, and said robes did much to hide the shape of the ghost.

As it spoke, Alex's usual method of determining gender failed, as it had two voices, and they blended together perfectly. "Welcome, you who would be King. You have already unlocked your Voice's power, so for this Trial, you shall aid me in setting the stage for your final tests."

Alex gave a short bow to the figure. "I am at your service."

The ghost seemed to chuckle, and its voice switched to the Dragon Tongue. "A true King can stir the hearts of their people with their Words. A true King does not speak lies, and refrains from divisive speech. This is something you have not always succeeded with, and even now, your Voice is being twisted, Dragonborn."

Alex blinked, but before he could ask how, the chamber was alight with Pravus' voice, crowing to his followers about how he'd captured 'hard evidence' of the Unovan Champion's supposed bigotry. Said evidence was, quite obviously, pieced together from different recordings but he supposed with enough fear and delusion, one could believe it was genuine.

The ghost's mask shifted to a sly, smirking expression as it watched him fidget uncomfortably. "Is your skill at Tinvaak so weak that you will let it be turned by a machine?"

"Nid."

The Word reverberated through the chamber, and the ghost shuddered visibly. "Interesting…the Storm Voice has grown strong within you, who would be King…unleash it. Raise this ancient ruin, and show your people the power of your Voice!"

Alex looked around the room, but saw no other path forward. He only hoped the raising of this
structure didn't accidentally hurt anyone. He let his Su'um build, and then, began to speak. As he did, he felt the newly gathered energy in his body flow through his throat, and his Words seemed stronger than they ever had before.

"Alok, hil do faal Lokoltei.

(Rise, heart of the Empire.)

Naal dii Zul dreh hi daal wah lein. Alok.

(By my Voice do you return to the world. Rise.)

Naal dii Su'um fen faal Dovah Lokoltei daal. Alok.

(By my Breath will the Dragon Empire return. Rise.)

Naal dii Fen dreh faal Dovah Krund daasin ont zos. Alok.

(By my Will does the Dragon Throne surface once more. Rise.)

Aal nunon bahlaan praal voknau nii."

(May only the worthy sit upon it.)

The ghost eyed him as he spoke, head tilting at his choice of words. The mask shifted to a smile though, so he assumed that was a good thing. It took a moment for the reverberating Words to stop echoing in the chamber, but as they did, the entire room began to shine, and the ghost gave a bow as the entire structure rumbled, and did as it was commanded.

"You have mastered the ancient tongue. Normally, this part of the Trial would take days. I have never seen it finished so quickly." The ghost bowed. "Ascend to the final challenge, you who would be King. Rise…or die." The figure vanished then with a genuinely disturbing giggle, and Alex headed towards the staircase to the top, even as the building continued to shake of millennia of silt and dirt build-up. It said much of his Voice that it continued to rise, despite the metric tons of weight upon it. Not even Tao's tower had been so deeply buried, but then, nobody had wanted to bury the Dragonspiral.

The last King Harmonia had not been a popular man, once his sons and grandsons tore their capital, and their dragon, apart with genuinely senseless war.

The Path of Battle

The stairs led up to another level, and seemed to continue. Alex would have gone straight up, had something not caught his Trainer's eye. A familiar shape, a battlefield, and an opponent upon it. Their eyes met, and Alex stopped ascending. It was too late to back off now. He didn't need a sign to guess what kind of Trial this would be. His team, thus far watching his progress, stirred from their earned rest, ready to battle. Their Trainer's new power had revitalized them, and the surging energy had only made them all eager to prove their worth. Even the young ones.

The palace structure stopped shaking by the time Alex reached his side of the field. His opponent was another ghost, one Alex hadn't been able to make out clearly before. Now, he knew why. An appearance like this would've distracted him. She was clad as he was, in robes from Tao's tower, in
the same pattern of white and black. Her hair was as black and curly as his, though it was longer. Even her eyes were blue, and intense, like a Luxray's. The woman smirked at him. "Hello there. Care to battle?"

Alex decided to take the advantage. If this ghost, presumably some sort of shape changer, was going to mock him by gender-bending his own appearance, he was going to make use of the absurdity. "Ladies first."

The ghost chuckled, and as she did, her skinned turned pale white, and the rest of her became equal parts black. The most noticeable change was her eyes, unnerving, and devoid of pupils. "So be it. One on one...no substitutions. Best of three." She called out a Pokémon then, and it coalesced in a flash of green. A Tropius appeared, and he found his hand drawn on instinct to Gel's ball. He paused, as he saw the smirk on his opponent's face. He had a feeling then, that she knew exactly what was on his team, and what was needed to counter it. The Tropius was a lure, judging by how strong it was. It had been trained, but not nearly as thoroughly as his team.

He sent Gel out then, and nodded at the ice type, as they joined their minds. Alex shivered, but he could endure the close contact for this. "If you feel the urge this time, my friend, do not repress it. The time has come. Give it all you have."

The white and blue Amaura gave a battle cry, and the air around the field turned cold. The Tropius fidgeted in discomfort. "Sunny Day!" The long-necked grass type, no doubt a distant genetic relation to the Amaurus before it, raised its head high in the room, and suddenly, heat filled the field. It felt not entirely unlike Fornia had, during the daytime hours of the summer.

That, was what Gelauros had trained in. He breathed deep, and exhaled frost, keeping his core as cold as he needed. The Amaurus had a feeling he knew what was coming next. Against orders, he fired an Ice Beam at the Solar Beam the Tropius shot towards him, and the two moves canceled out in an explosion of energy.

The two Pokémon fired another series of beams, each one colliding with the other, and Alex found himself smirking. The ghosts knew what was on his team, but they hadn't accounted for Gel not having the rock typing that evidently even their era had been unable to remove entirely. In short, they were not as omnipotent as they appeared. He gave Gel the plan then, and the Amaura sighed, but agreed it would be worth it.

The Tropius prepared another Solar Beam, and this time Gel took the hit as he leapt into the air, and found a shot on this particular opponent's weak spot. For Tropius, it was usually between their wings, or their fruit. Either would do. The blast from the solar beam faded, leaving the white skin of the Amaura smoking with heat, but otherwise, he seemed unharmed.

The little mouth opened, and a powerful orb of ice formed within it. With pinpoint accuracy, a thin beam of ice slammed into the Tropius, and froze it solid. Given how much damage it had done, the battle was over. Gel began to glow as he ascended to his adult phase, and grew larger, taller, Alex guessed, than even his kin back at the lab. He pulled out the Pokédex, and it listed his height at an impressive nine feet, five inches. Growth patterns suggested he'd max out at twelve, when he'd aged a bit.

The air around them, despite the move from Tropius that yet lingered, was freezing cold. Especially on Alex's side of the field. He gave Gel the affectionate scratch he was looking for, and then recalled the tall Aurorus, who'd retained his coloring of pure white, and deep blue.
Next up came a Feraligator, and Alex answered with Hydrus, rather than his Torterra, to the evident surprise of his opponent. Within moments, the two Pokémon mega evolved. Having not seen a Feraligator ascend before, both he and Hydrus took it in. It was most comfortable on all fours now, and seemed to have reversed along its evolutionary path, rather than gone forward.

Now part water, part rock, the light blue plates covered the Pokémon's form completely. Hydrus charged forward, only to, in the blink of an eye, find both hands occupied and wounded as the bulging arms struggled to keep the predator's deadly jaws from crunching shut. They had barely seen it move, and Hydrus had relied more on instinct that battle technique to avoid being seriously chomped.

Hydrus glanced at his Trainer, and Alex nodded. The Swampert focused then, and Pokémon and Trainer glowed a deep blue as an aura of power settled over his Mega Form. Hydrus wrenched the jaws open with sudden strength, and then rotated in place, tossing the Feraligator into the nearest wall with a seismic impact. With a new unfamiliar weakness to fighting moves, the gator winced in pain, long enough for the aura-covered form of the Swampert to appear behind him as he struggled to stand.

Hydrus eyes shone an ominous blue as he ended the match with one swift, merciless punch.

Alex flashed the victory sign. "Best of three. What am I unlocking next?"

The black and white figure turned into a blur of gray then, vaguely in the shape of a humanoid. A mouth appeared on the head, but only when it spoke. It was unnerving to watch it move as the ghost spoke. "This Trial is not for a Chakra. The others do not care for me, because I represent something they all detest. Combat. Conflict. And the honor inherent to battling in this world. If they had their way, I would simply not exist, but they cannot deny our species' will to compete. This is the drive I test in all applicants. Tell me, you who would be King, are they right? Would our world be less prone to violence if battling for sport was not so commonplace?"

Alex smirked. Unovans in particular had already had this dilemma before, not surprisingly, from N. "I would argue that because everyone, more or less, knows how to battle, the world is less...unfair. Those who are otherwise weak can become strong with the right partner. They don't need to sit idly by, trampled by those who are stronger. They have a chance to resist, and it is that very chance that dissuades so many would-be criminals."

"And what of Trainers like you? Do you not crush all who oppose you? I know your record, you know. Not bad at all. But to an average Trainer, they have a better experience not facing you at all. Defeat stings." The ghost paused, which was the only way Alex knew it was time for a response. There was no face to read, which was also unnerving.

"Defeat does sting...but I generally try to leave those I beat with some sort of wisdom. If they want it. If they don't ask, I don't push it on them." He shrugged. "Some times a reality check is useful. I've needed one more than once, and I've lost as well. I know exactly where my strength is, more or less, though I expect I'll have to re-evaluate it once I'm out of here."

The strange mouth smirked. "Don't assume you'll get out so easily...our king is not likely to surrender his family's legacy."

Alex glanced towards the stairs then, "We will see about that." He turned back to the ghost. "To answer your question, Trainers like me have an obligation to not run around crushing the hopes and dreams of whoever we meet. Obviously, sometimes only a battle from someone on their level is the
only thing that can set them straight. Those are the kind of Trainers I enjoy beating the most. They're always a challenge."

The ghost-smirk widened. "You understand, then, the responsibility of power. Intriguing. If only there was an organization in this world that could monitor and keep such Trainers in check."

Alex smirked back at the ghost. "If only." He headed for the stairs then, more than ready to finally pass this test, and start turning the tide of this conflict.

---

**The Path of the King**

Alex glanced briefly at the words above the door to this, the final challenge. He knew he should've felt tired, but seven pools of energy within his large form had been awakened, and now flowed freely. They demanded release, though he knew not what would occur when and if they were finally freed.

He stepped into the final chamber, and knew from his map that it was where Hilda had found the Relic Crown. Evidently, that had not been the real one. The ancient King from earlier stood before him now, crownless. He gripped the ethereal crown with his right hand, and as Alex eyed it, it became corporeal.

"So. You've actually made it." The ancient King gestured at the walls of the room, and they lowered, revealing the topmost room of the ancient ruins for what it was. The ancient lighthouse of Unova's eastern coast, once regarded as one of the Wonders of the ancient world, and one thought lost to war. Four pillars supported the crest of the ruins, and as the King gestured again, blinding light formed where the walls once stood.

"A true King must always be mindful of how their actions can, and will, effect the world at large. They see the consequences of said actions, and with that sight, are able to guide their people towards the path they deem worth following." The ghost had his back to Alex, but then, he turned, and the two locked their gazes. "A true King remains detached, impartial, and chooses what he believes to be the right course of action. This is his duty. His curse."

Alex met the ghost's eyes evenly. "I accept the burden."

The ghost chuckled. "Do you? Heavy is the head that wears the crown. You will never be rid of it. As long as you live, and you will live for a very, very long time Redwood, you will be bound to Unova in ways you cannot possibly understand. Not yet, anyways."

Alex let his smirk play across his normally impassive face. "I accept the burden."

The King's sad eyes narrowed. "A true King inspires hope. In himself. In the future. Do you have any comprehension of what that means? Do you have any idea of what awaits you, once you take this crown?"

Before he knew it, Alex was standing directly before the old man. He could read every line on his face. His psychic gaze was telling him far more than ever before. Each of the ghosts had possessed dual typing, not surprising, given who must have trained them, and the King was no exception. Ghost and psychic. He could tell this specter of a bygone age longed for his own heir to be here, standing before him, but that was simply not how events had unfolded.

"I accept the burden."
With those words, the ancient King sighed, and the crown vanished from his hand. His ghostly form faded into nothingness as he whispered his final words. "Then may you carry it better than we did. For Unova."

Alex bowed again. "For Unova." As he straightened, he felt the gathered powered surge once more, rising high into the sky where it touched...something. The normally blue energy he used shifted to gold, and his power formed in a familiar shape atop his head. The crown reappeared, and thunder boomed while lightning cracked the sky outside the now risen palace.

Eight bolts of plasma arced down from the heavens, and struck the glowing chamber, and its sole occupant. The crown pulsed with power, as the incorporeal Storm Crown merged with the corporeal vessel that could contain its awesome power. A circular opening appeared in the top of the room, and Alex ascended through it, lifting his form easily. He didn't even notice the weight of his large build anymore. Indeed, as the energy flowed freely through his body, his eyes saw what he imagined N must see regularly. Numbers that would have made his head spin but a few hours earlier. Patterns. Shapes. Paths half seen, and yet still very much there. It would take time to be able to read them properly.

Then, he looked down, and his good mood shifted to one of unease. Undella Town was thoroughly wrecked. The Marine Tube had shattered, and now only a small salty lake, directly south of the upturned town, was what remained of the beautiful bay that had once drawn crowds of rich tourists. The pyramidal structure that was the Dragon Palace rested atop a newly risen land mass, and as golden light shone through it from the inside out, the weathered stone renewed.

Ancient carvings made themselves clear again, and the damage of eons of water flow faded before the energy surging through the building. Seven orbs of light joined him in the air above the palace, forming into the various ghosts he'd seen below.

For your service, a second life I grant. Use it well.

A quick glance at the Sages told Alex that they had not, in fact, expected the hauntingly familiar tone of pure power that came from the heavens at that moment. Each of their multicolored forms shone bright with blinding gold light, and in the space of an eye blink, the seven of them were transported to the main entrance of the palace, now once more revealed and made whole. A pair of dragons were carved into both sides of it, one black, one white, and both reminiscent of the One they'd no doubt been made to resemble.

Alex looked again at the Sages, and smirked. Each now once more possessed a body, though their skin tone remained the same color their ghostly forms had been. Evidently their 'service' would continue, even after these new forms expired. But for now, the pleasures of corporeal existence were theirs to once more enjoy.

As one, they bowed towards him in Unovan fashion, and with one voice said, "All hail the return of the King!" A roar followed their words, and Alex glanced up to see a familiar dragon, arcing through the sky. Tao smiled down at them, and then, went sailing through the air as a purple colored Outrage attack slammed into his left side, catching him completely off guard. Alex followed the trail of the beam, and spied a familiar Noivern, with a familiar Trainer on its back, head once more attached. Pravus' Hand of Death. Below him, running quickly over the mountains in the distance, he made out figures garbed entirely in black armored suits, their features covered by helmets with T-shaped visors.

"Muk."
"Work, damn you." Eric Redwood muttered to himself as the fabrication machine, which usually produced Pokéballs, attempted to create yet another plasma sword.

The screen before him flashed green, all the components were in place, but once more it all shifted to red, and gave an error message, despite the handle, made from precious metals, it produced. The probability of the finished product exploding on ignition had lowered by three percent, but unfortunately the whole number remained in the low eighties. An almost assured malfunction.

The younger Redwood sighed, and ran the faulty blade through the machine dedicated to deconstructing the parts, and it spat them back out in small re-usable piles. The rest of his team had long since passed out, and the sun was rising on a new day. He knew his brother would likely be done soon, one way or another, and he was determined to not be completely outshone.

A loud, powerful, and yet somehow calming mental baritone thundered in his skull, "How goes the work?"

Eric didn't need to ask who or what was speaking, as this was at least the eighth time the Dragon God of his homeland had asked. All night he'd been putting off giving up completely, but he was at his limit now. The last configuration had failed.

He knew it was no coincidence that Tao had reached out to him moments later. His understanding of focusing the power of Chargestones had helped reduce the probability of failure from the ninety-nine that had demoralized his team into mental exhaustion.

Beyond that though, the dragon's knowledge ended. He responded in his head, somewhat familiar with it by now. He could almost vaguely sense the same feeling he had when in the dragon's presence, but in his head.

It was a strange feeling, and he had no idea how his brother had gotten used to it so quickly. It was almost too calm. "I'm out of ideas, great Dragon. The tesla lenses are converting plasma fine, and the crystals can handle the energy flow. The insulators keep overheating though, and we simply don't have the kind of heat sink necessary to handle focused plasma. The emitters are fine, theoretically, but with such limited insulators we haven't really been able to test them. As it stands, they'll blow apart in our hand after roughly five seconds. The containment field has the same heat problem."

The dragon seemed to rumble in his head, a noise he'd come to associate with pondering. "I think I know how to give you some aid. Only one other, that I know of, has wielded a weapon like this before."

Eric waited patiently, but Tao remained silent. Five minutes passed. Then ten. Eric began to drift off, and soon, he'd joined the rest of his team in deep slumber. They were all awoken by a thunderous boom from the back of the lab, near Gelauros' old pen. Eric groggily made his way towards the noise, and his brow rose to Spockian heights as he beheld the smoking form of the figure that had appeared in their lab.

He was a thin man, skin as pale as snow, which almost matched his hair. That, however, was tinged
with the golden color of a blonde, though it was hard to see. His clothes were a strange mix of white, blue, and whitish-gold, and as he rose from the three-point stance he'd landed in, he raised a fist in the air.

"You'll pay for that, you pompous *lizard*! Bloody dragon ty-" His words paused, as he saw the five nerds standing before him, half asleep. "Hm. So you're the 'group of experts' trying to cash in on my expertise, eh?" His eyes settled on Eric. "You must be the little brother. He wasn't kidding when he said you were total opposites. Same eyes, though."

The man sighed, then glanced skyward. "Fine. But you *owe* me, Dragon. You, and your whelp. Twice now I've had to get involved in his affairs." He paused, as Tao presumably responded. A genuine smile came over the man's features. "Now *that* is the kind of gratitude I deserve! Very well." His gaze turned back to the Brain Trust, and he gave a flourishing bow. "Percival von Guterstein Velhavende Locuples the Third, at your service." He grinned up at them, golden eyes alight with mischief and maybe a hint of madness. "But you can call me-"

"Percy."

Eric said, breaking the 'spell' the charismatic figure had over them, that had kept them silent through his shenanigans. He gave a bow in the Unovan style, and the other members of the Brain Trust did the same.

Alex had, in recounting his frankly ridiculous trip to Norstad involving demigods and giant dragons, mentioned the aid and irritation the 'fairy king' had given them. He'd also mentioned that he was Xerneas' Tamer. That likely meant that he was immortal. He only knew of one other such Trainer, blessed by the Legendary hind's Kalosian counterpart, but he'd disappeared after Alain dethroned him from his seat as Champion of Kalos.

Percy's unsettling grin focused on Eric, and the younger Redwood again wondered how his brother kept meeting such ancient beings. And befriending them. "So, my fame runs before me. Alright little Redwood, show me what you have so far, and I'll make it work."

Eric's brow rose higher. "Just like that?"

Percy nodded. "I am now *extremely* invested in getting the lizard's minions properly outfitted, though, if you ask me, you're all doomed. Pravus' troops carry mass-produced weapons that are essentially advanced, portable versions of what they used to keep all of Unova from retrieving the One Dragon, in the middle of Castelia. Pravus may be madder than a hatter, but he's been preparing for this. By the time Unova is ready, assuming you get even that far, you'll be in for a long, bloody, war."

Eric pushed his glasses up with one finger, and let the fluorescent lighting hide his eyes. "With respect, 'Fairy King', we're not going to lay down and let him conquer us. This is Unova. We bow only to One. Before we're through, the Fornians *will* remember why."

Percy's grin widened. "Even if that One is your brother?"

Eric flinched, but nodded again. "If even half of what he told me about Norstad is true, he can… handle it. With the Dragon's help."

Percy chuckled softly. "Fighting spirit in the face of hopeless odds. I like it."

By now, they'd walked over to the machine responsible solely for testing the components that would make up the blades. Percy's golden eyes flew over the data, and he smirked. "Having heat trouble,
hmm? I ran into a similar problem. And Chargestones? Interesting choice...but it works. I guess. If you like blue."

A tired looking Frankie yawned, and joined the two, followed by the others. "Can you fix it?"

Percy's grin returned. "Do Ursaring defecate in forests? I have a solution, little nerd, but you're not going to like it."

The group looked at him expectantly, and he continued. "There exists on this planet a type of metal suitable for handling high powered currents of energy. It's actually quite plentiful...if you know where to look."

---

Eric spoke up then. "And where, exactly, would we find this metal?"

Percy chuckled. "On this continent? Only one source exists, and Caleb Pravus has been...thorough...in keeping it all for himself. Where do you think he got so much for Sacreus' bunker? His troop's armor and weapons? Where do you think all that ore the Church has been mining goes?" The five tired nerds stared at the fairy king, too tired to deal with this kind of high-energy pep at the break of dawn.

Percy raised a finger, and gave his best impression of a Professor. "There exists a special Pokémon, in some parts of the world, worshiped since ancient times for giving humanity the means to rebuild their towers that scrape the sky. On this continent, they exist only in one place, and any others that are discovered, or that manage to escape, are rounded up by the Prophet's own Hands."

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose. "Muk."

They'd all heard the stories, of course. Of the living fields of metal that the Arcean Church used to build their infrastructure so quickly. Naturally, such absurdities were common amongst the many conspiracy theories made by those who claimed to have successfully left the Church, and were convinced that they needed to 'spread the truth'. The problem, was that the Church had countered them by releasing pretend conspiracists, until any and all rumor involving them was seen as most likely baseless. They'd buried the truth behind nonsense. It was brilliant, really.

The Church had, of course, denied the existence of such efforts, or people making them. Now though, much of what had once been considered 'hate speech' from 'disgruntled thieves, unworthy of the Church' now rang with an unnerving air of truth.

Percy gave a dark chuckle. "The word came from the Church's own members. At Unova's peril, you all ignored it." He glanced at the main monitor, and smirked. "Here. Pictures will do better than words. You lot have at least one satellite, aye?"

"Yes..." Eric said, recalling how Alex had spoken of the reason Percy had been in his tower. "But they don't like us using it..."

Percy immediately began typing commands into the console, grinning like a madman. "Please. They won't even know I was in here." The screen flashed, as he easily bypassed the passwords both for the computer, and control of the satellite. Usually used by students whose goal was to one day report the weather with some accuracy, it didn't have the best zooming-in capabilities, but Percy made do.

The screen lit up with the University's campus, and then moved thousands of miles in the space of a few seconds. They gasped, as they saw Fornia, and the thin man swore in a language that none of them knew. Fornia was, in a word, on fire. The entire northern part of the region now burned, with
The exception of a few small patches of green, due to water Pokémon no doubt.

The problem, was that most of the sky was now covered in smoke, for the winds favored Pravus' plan, and were blowing in a southern and eastern direction. They were winter winds, and they had come early this year. Once over the Stoney Mountains, the air currents brought it all east, in an ever-encroaching blanket of ash-filled darkness. The cloud avoided the populated areas of the regions under Arcean control, namely the cities, but as it moved ever eastward it would, eventually, cover Unova as well.

After zooming in through the ash clouds, they witnessed a scene straight out of one of old Earth's fairytales. It looked, for all intents and purposes, like a scene from tales of Armageddon, or Ragnarok. Fire, smoke, entire herds of local Pokémon heading in whatever direction they thought would provide safety. Too many hadn't escaped the flames, but thankfully, the region's many ground types seemed to be capable of extinguishing the wounded, and clearing temporary paths in the flames.

"Enough." Eric finally managed, after noticing the looks on the faces of his team. Those images would likely haunt them, but as Percy shifted the camera, a new horror covered the screen. Fornia's southernmost peninsula, to the west of their half of Texico, was mostly desert and scrub.

The only city of note that far south was Arcino, but with their aerial view, they spotted something else, silver against the reddish brown of the ground. Percy zoomed in, and again, the group gasped.

While a relatively new discovery, the Hex Nut Pokémon had exploded in popularity…on other continents. Unovans, amongst others, had eagerly waited for more to appear in their regions after their discovery in Alola, and yet, very few had. Within a few years, they'd all seemingly vanished completely, even from the islands. Now, from an aerial view, they saw where they'd all wound up.

Meltan had a tendency to explode in population, and their evolution was, in some places, considered a mythical Pokémon. The large silver pools, visible from orbit, appeared to be filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of the species, all forced together as molten ooze, stuffed in giant craters upon the ground. Unable to form singular bodies, the nuts that passed for their heads floated helplessly in the pools.

Percy's tone was grim. "This, is where the Arceans get their metal from. I have it on good authority that, through means I'll leave you all to imagine, they've managed to make the Melmetal produce something much stronger than iron. In my day, such a thing was accomplished by a bond with a Tamer, and an appropriate diet."

David spoke up then, looking just as pale and disturbed as the other four. "So how are we supposed to get what we need?"

Percy chuckled. "Leave that to the professionals." He set the satellite back to its original position, and left as tracelessly as he'd entered, even going as far as deleting the logs of the machine's use and movement. He turned then, to the fabrication machine, and examined the in-progress schematic. "I'll handle it, at any rate, but first…let's adjust this…"

His fingers flew over the keyboard, and the other five watched, somewhat amazed, as the strange man with the fancy clothes and hat reduced the percentage of failure upon completion to acceptable parameters. Once they had the materials they needed. "The holy lizard wants you five focused on armor, now. The east has great Trainers, and strong Pokémon, but they keep dying because their
opponents are far better equipped. Solve that, while I get your metal."

"And how do we do that?" One of the nerds asked.

Percy chuckled again. "Speak with Rayquaza. The older one...er, you may know it as the 'eastern one' as well. He's the one in charge of supplying your...materials. Get to it!"

Percy gave another flourish with his hat as he bowed, and then vanished with a flash of energy the five had come to associate with those who could Teleport. "Bloody psychics..." Eric muttered, still eyeing the schematic, and what changes had been made. He couldn't argue with the fact that Percy was either brilliant, or knew what he was doing. Or both. He glanced at the others. "You heard him. Back to work. I'm going to take a nap."

The Dragon Emperor's Palace – Unova Region

Tao, thankfully, was not so weak as to go down from one Outrage attack. His scales were scorched, but he managed to right himself over the ruined, empty buildings of Undella, only to find that the focus of his awakened fury was already going claw-to-claw with Shruikan, in a rematch both had evidently wanted. A Tyranitar and the Swampert called Hydrus were engaged as well, trading titanic punches. Both were surrounded in a shield of aura, but the Tyranitar's was blackish purple, and shocked to the touch. Thankfully, Hydrus was part ground type, but it still stung with every hit.

Alex had been surrounded by seven multicolored lights once the mega evolved Noivern had struck Tao. His team had popped free on their own, their power surging as their Trainer's did. He split his mental focus with ease, and helped each of them fight simultaneously as they moved to engage the Hand's team, including his younger members, who had teamed up, and taken on a group of black clad Arceans that had made their way onto the remnants of the beach.

He'd worried, for a moment, until he sensed Ictus. Evidently the surge of power, and fresh victory with Fell Stinger, had been enough for the crimson scorpion to evolve. Between him, Gel, and Ceno, they could handle things.

Alex's eyes were still burning with golden light, and the Sages each withdrew a crystalline spherical 'Pokéball' that was evidently common to their era three millennia past. They had called out their revived partners once the Arceans had begun charging the palace. Evidently, they were here for the new 'Dragon Emperor', but capturing the newly risen seat of the Empire would deal a telling blow to morale.

The nearby Trainers perched on the cliffs above Undella, who'd sensibly hauled ass once the ground started shaking, were now engaged as well. From seemingly nowhere, the Hand had appeared with a small army of elite Trainers. Blaze joined Shruikan in the sky, and the three dragons cartwheeled over the former bay, lighting the area up with their flames and beams of energy.

The Seven Sage's Pokémon went forth to help as well, only to be met by three figures who appeared seemingly out of nowhere, in the blink of an eye. Evidently, the Shadow Triad had found new employers.

Lux spoke then, eyes widening at what he sensed. "Go to the dragon! Merge your power with his. That will...handle this." The ghost flitted back into the hilt, which Alex then ignited, as he sailed
through the air towards the One Dragon.

The Hand of Death chuckled, appearing before him from seemingly nowhere. Alex shifted in mid-air, and zipped past him, but he followed behind, shouting, "What is it with you, and running from battle? I bet N never turned his back to his enemies so frequently!"

Alex ignored the obvious goading, meant only to distract him from uniting with the dragon. He was Tao's Tamer, and it was time Fornia understood exactly what that meant. It was a lesson Unova had learned long ago, and it was one that had stuck in their cultural psyche.

Spiraling through the air towards Alex, the two met, and the human landed atop his icy crest, that made up his horns, and formed a ridge down his back. Ice swirled up around his shoes, holding him in place. The dragon snarled, glaring at the sky. "We're too low…"

Alex was busy focusing on his plasma sword, as the base opened to admit his Dragonium crystal, when an ear-splitting screech tore through the sky. His focus was broken. There was power in that cry, that could only have been a Hyper Voice. From above the clouds gathered by the lightning that had struck the still-glowing lighthouse atop the palace, a figure straight from pre-history appeared.

Where the east coast had Tao, the western coast had, quite by accident, found a Legendary Guardian of their own, in the distant past. Legends said that the Pokémon known only as Ignavis had been the product of 'dark sorcerers' in the western regions, created by infusing Shadow into a Moltres egg via ancient and lost magical arts. The stories claimed that Tao had slain the bird after it scorched half the Empire, but evidently, it had risen again.

Where once flames of red, orange and white had covered the wings, purple now dominated. Alex could see the resemblance to Moltres in the gold and red feathers, now tainted with blackish purple, but this creature was now far beyond that species, cursed to an existence of constant and painful rebirth if the legends were true. Evidently, Tao had clashed with the beast many times, over the centuries. The enormous bird's blue eyes were, even from this distance, filled with pain. The dark form of the Hand of Death appeared atop the bird's head, and he guided it towards the pair. It let out a shriek of rage as it spotted Tao, and once more, the dragon and the firebird dueled in the sky.

Ice formed in a protective block around Alex as he knelt low to avoid the flaming, razor sharp beak of the Legendary bird. "Focus on empowering the crystal." Tao's voice came, calm as ever, even though he currently was whirling and slashing about in the clouds so quickly Alex could hardly follow his spiraling movements. "It will take much for me to achieve the next level."

Alex smirked. He'd figured as much. He began chanting low, in the dragon tongue, hilt grasped with both hands as dark fire met the three elements at the dragon's command just beyond his icy protection. Finally, he felt Lux give him the signal. It was ready.

His eyes shifted back to blue, though he hardly noticed, as he raised the hilt, ignited it, and sliced through his shield. Tao had just forced the shadow-infused bird back with a torrent of fire that sparkled with blue electricity, and the hilt flared as the One Dragon's Tamer finished his incantation, and activated the power. "Dovah Envok!"

The Light energy that had been surging through him now transferred into the One Dragon though his sword's hilt, and his form turned pure white as the infinite power of the Alpha remade him. A second pair of wings jutted out from above his hind legs, and the icy crest began to burn with blue flame. Thankfully, it did not harm his Tamer. His facial tendrils now constantly sparked, and a pair of blue
flames that looked suspiciously like eyebrows now adorned the dragon's scaly brow.

The most notable change however, aside from a noticeable increase in size, was his tail. Where before it had resembled a lizard's save for the tuft of long white fur on the end, it now split apart, blue flames appearing between each gap in the scales, and from beneath, came a wicked looking serpent-like appendage that resembled a tail with the head of a lance, which sparked with electricity. His wings were covered on their edges with icy spikes, and his claws were now much the same as the crest running down his back, in that they too burned with fire.

Tao gave a roar that echoed across the former bay, now embroiled in a proper skirmish. That got everyone's attention, and many paused to stare in awe at the dragon above them. The Unovans cheered, and the tide began to turn as Tao's tail roared like a rocket engine, and sent the dragon and his Tamer straight towards the dark bird.

Like Alex, Pravus' Hand had come prepared, and while each of their teams were battling, the two of them were yet perched atop their Legendary partners. That is, until a powerful Air Slash, which was also somehow sporting dark purple flames, slammed into the dragon's head, and sent his Trainer plummeting.

Tao focused on fighting the dark phoenix, as he assumed his human would be fine. He'd survived the Trials after all, and had successfully walked each path. He could handle the corpse-being that, at that very moment, followed the Champion through the air, down into the forests just south of Undella. The two massive Pokémon had drifted further south, as they clashed, and there was no doubt that Nimbasa was getting quite a show.

Alex managed to halt his fall, stopping his momentum at the last second, and then landing gently. The Hand of Death had no such respect for their terrain. He came hurtling down, and his landing left a crater within the small, wooded clearing they'd found. There was a small river just behind it, that sounded like it connected to a waterfall of some description not far from them.

Finally down to just his sword, but still, even then, aiding his team in their own respective battles, Alex ignited the blade once more, as he connected with his Rotom, and fell into his usual fighting stance. He had no doubt the Hand had orders to take him alive. Though he imagined dead would work just as well.

The man gave a dark chuckle, and black energy swirled in his palms, coalescing into a deadly, and admittedly cool looking pair of scythes that curved up along each of the man's arms perfectly. Fighting him in melee combat would be unwise, it seemed. "Come quietly, Redwood…I don't want to be in this backwater region when the army gets here. The Blitz has already begun. It's not going to be pretty…but you were all given plenty of time to join us."

Alex gave the plasma sword a twirl, and the lower end of it sprang to life as well. The new blade remained the same black and white color, but an aura of draconic energy surrounded the entire weapon as Lux drew on the crystal still within the hilt. "We were never going to join your cult…not by force. We value our freedoms too much on this side of the continent."

"Exactly..." One of the dark blades sliced towards him, but it seemed to be moving in slow motion to his new, strange vision, and he dodged it with ease. Alex chalked it up the recent power-increase, and let the energy of the universe flow through his eight opened chakra points. His eyes shifted to dark blue as he reached for the energy, and formed an aura shield of dragon and psychic typing over his form. Not unlike the ones most of his team was slowly getting the hang of controlling. "You all value your pointless freedoms far too much...you have no structure, no goals, your governments are
weak, and your Trainers...leave much to be desired."

Alex decided to strike then, or try to, only to find that the strange black metal repelled his dual-bladed sword. So far, it was the only thing it hadn't cut clean through. Their exchange of blows occurred faster than normal eyes could follow, but in the end, Alex only managed a small singe mark on the man's thigh. It healed before his eyes, and he grimaced.

The Hand found it amusing, though. "Cut me as much as you like...it will make no difference. I'm just toying with you." Another furious exchange of blows came then, and the truth of the Hand's words became evident as Alex realized who the better fighter was.

He forced himself to smirk, despite the increasingly dire circumstances. "I had a feeling you were holding back...time to stop playing around, then." Though his words were confident, the bravado was empty, as yet another lightning fast exchange resulted in yet another stalemate. He couldn't break the man's guard, but neither did he seem able to get through his own as easily as he claimed.

The Hand chuckled. "If that's the best you've got, we started this war early for nothing."

"You haven't even seen a glimpse of what I have in store for your Prophet...and I'm not expending it on you." Alex's smirk widened, and the Hand's face went cold, neutral, unreadable.

"Then you shall die."

The blows came faster then, and the man assaulted Alex's dual-bladed guard with the relentless power only undeath could give. He was a corpse. He would keep fighting long after Redwood was exhausted. For his part, Alex tried every combination of moves he could, but it was never enough. No shift in fighting style worked, and he could barely keep the incoming blows from cutting him.

The Hand's scythes dripped with crimson, and the pale man licked one. His eyes widened, slightly. "So...that's the difference...interesting...but not enough, Dragonborn." The Prophet's Hand stopped playing around then, as both blades forced the dual-bladed plasma sword up, leaving the little hero's midsection open, for a moment. A moment was all he needed.

Alex watched the scythes twirl impossibly fast. His new, and still unfamiliar heightened perception could track such things easily, but his body was nowhere near fast enough to dodge this. Not after the injuries he'd taken. His arms and legs bore the most cuts, but Tao's clothing really was invaluable, as it stitched back together, it also mended his skin with makeshift stitching, made of pieces of the strange fabric. It would need tending later, but for the battle at hand, it was useful, and kept him from bleeding out.

The Hand's weapons did something strange as he arced his weapons up for the finishing blow. They came together at each handle, and formed a proper length scythe, right as the man brought it down towards his tired opponent with a horizontal two-handed strike. The pale Hand growled in his throat as he saw his weapon stopped by a blade similar in curve to his own, one that was black, and bore streaks of red.

"Not today!" A triumphant voice crowed. Alex glanced up to see a black scaled Haxorus blocking the path of the deadly scythe's blade with a blade of his own. "Dual-Chop!" The dragon began smashing his head at the man, who struggled to hold it off, for a moment. Long enough for the Haxorus' Trainer to jump down, grab the large form of the Champion, and leap away.

Alex only got a brief glance at his would-be rescuer, before their escape was halted. A gleaming
metal shackle had the man around the ankle, and as Alex got a proper look at him, his eyes widened. "Lance?"

It was indeed the blue haired boy he'd battled some years before, the grandson who'd been named for his famous relative, and apparently puberty had finally hit him. Moreover, his attire seemed familiar, and it took Alex a minute to recognize the Opeleucid Gym's new outfits. A quick movement of his sword, and the shackle fell away, giving the lad a chance to leap a short distance away.

"Glad you remember me." The Dragon Tamer said, somewhat sarcastically. "The Dragon called for reinforcements. Nate answered." He gestured at the sky then, and Alex stared, as did Pravus' Hand. The skies over Undella, and the area immediately south and west, were teeming with dragon types, each fully evolved, and raised by Nate's own hand. Leading them, arms crossed atop his Hydreigon, was the Champion turned Gym Leader, and one of Unova's many heroes. A man arguably as strong as Hilbert, who was set on becoming a true Dragon Tamer.

The battle between Tao and his shadowy opponent quickly turned. A hard crunch on the phoenix's neck stunned it long enough for the barbed, sparking appendage to stab it in the heart. Blue flames overwhelmed purple, and the firebird fell from the sky, landing in the salty puddle just south of Undella's ruins, and all that remained of the bay. The heat from the Pokémon's passing burned away any remaining water, but thankfully, any Pokémon in the bay had quickly followed their instincts, and swam east, towards Unova's harbor. There was plenty of room for them there.

Sensing the conflict had shifted, the Hand of Death began to move to escape, only to find himself wrapped up by a pair of Dragonair. Lance's equally blue-haired sister came through the foliage surrounding their little clearing then, and gave a nod towards Alex. "I'll make sure he stays put. With the others we've captured."

"Keep him wrapped up." Alex said, caution in his tone, "If we give him a chance to flee, he will take it. My team has his Pokémon handled." Indeed, each of them had subdued the Hand's Pokémon, usually by way of fainting. Only the Tyranitar had escaped underground, quickly outpacing his Lairon in digging speed.

Blue light surrounded their little group, as Alex lifted them into the air, ignoring the cries of surprise. They paused, as they saw the field of battle. Plenty of Trainers had, evidently, fallen to the surprise attack. Most had been out, hoping to see history, not die in the first skirmish of the war. Only the strong had survived the Arcean's unified brutality. This would not be the first time their better equipment and tactics would kill all but the strong, and indeed, it was happening even at that moment, all along the newly established front between east and west.

Alex landed them next to Tao, who was still in his Mega Form. His long neck turned towards them, and focused on the prisoner they'd brought with them. The eyes narrowed, and began to glow with bright golden Purging Light as they focused on the Hand of Death, who began to laugh.

It was an unnerving sound, one that almost hurt to hear, but eventually it was silenced by the thundering Voice of the One Dragon. "Ahvakaar..." The eyes flared, burning with impossibly bright Light energy, and the laughs turned to a brief, pitiable scream as the Hand was incinerated. The Dragonair, who to their credit had not moved, had been untouched, and even healed, in the Light the One Dragon now wielded.

Tao raised his head again, and snorted in distaste. His eyes focused on his Tamer, and he spoke only to him, then. "If ever you doubt why Pravus needs to die...remember the creature you just saw."
Undeath is the antithesis of what we stand for. There is life, there is death, always in balance. Undeath disrupts that balance, usually by increasing the amount of death, and the world around such creatures suffers as a result. They are beings to be pitied, for they should not be, but are."

Alex nodded, responding the same way. "I hadn't intended to like it, but...it really is inevitable. If he takes total control, the number of things like that Hand is only going to increase. But that does make me wonder...what of ghost types?"

The dragon's eyes glanced away, "They...are quite different. Mainly for guiding the dead who get lost or diverted on their path to Arceus' realm, though they can also be lost themselves, and be very powerful because of it. Some, like your little spark, were simply composed of ghost type energy originally, and imbued with sentience by something. What gives it varies between ghosts. Undeath is...different. Ghost types come to be when those with normal typing pass on. Usually, their energy goes straight to their ghost realm, but there are always exceptions. Abominations are...different. They can only be raised with the Shadow energy you've seen. It's not surprising Pravus figured out how to bind the dead to his will. There may yet be more of these."

Alex raised a brow at that, his third eye glaring at the dragon. "And if I encounter them, what am I supposed to do? Slicing this one didn't really work."

The dragon sighed. "It would have, if you'd found an opening...but his form was impressive, even I have to admit. Most can't use dual-scythes so effectively. If you want to put these creatures down, you will need to Purge them, as I did. You meet their gaze, you hold it, and then you summon the Light. If they are not part of the natural order, they will be burned away. It has other uses as well, but stick to using it to cleanse the abomination's partners for now. I will make sure they do not cause more trouble."

Alex mulled that over as he did as instructed. The Hand's team had eventually been corralled, and all but the Noivern had accepted being bound. Once they were free of the Shadow's taint, they each apologized for what they'd been unable to control. With the team cleansed and the purple egg of the phoenix in the Sage's capable hands, Alex climbed onto the dragon's back, after thanking the siblings, and the two soared towards the palace. It was covered with lazing dragon types, all who had an eye on the massive form of Shruikan circling them overhead, like death itself. Alex spied Nate by the front entrance, speaking with the Sages.

The newly raised palace had been hit quite hard, but the Sages had earned their keep, and had kept any Arceans from entering. Now, they were barring Nate's way. Alex hopped off of Tao, who then perched by wrapping around the building. In his evolved state, he encircled all of it, easily. The dragon gave Shruikan a look then, and the massive dragon landed on the newly raised earth, then curled up for a nap.

Nate nodded at the Champion, and the two gave nods of mutual respect. He hadn't been around as often as Hilbert, and Alex hadn't made too strong of an effort to hang more. Namely because of the man's obnoxiously loud friend who hung around him almost every day, trying to beat the Champion turned Gym Leader. He had not, according to Hilda, beaten Nate even once, but that hadn't stopped him. Nate hadn't seemed to mind their lack of contact, as he'd been focused on Rosa at the time, and little else.

Alex spoke first, "Thank you, for responding so quick. Without the dragons, we would've tasted defeat, not victory."

Tao chuckled, and a murmur of draconic laughter rumbled from those also perched on the steps of
the enormous pyramidal palace. The two humans stared up at him. "Victory? No…not victory. Not yet. This is only the first of many sparks that will ignite the flames Pravus craves." The dragon's eyes focused on the Gym Leader then. "You're going to need her. Wake her up." Nate bowed, and nodded.

He turned to Alex then, and shrugged. "Tao told me to guard our homeland. That's what I've been doing. I hunt them, and Rosa jails them." His expression seemed to indicate he didn't care for the current state of affairs, and neither, frankly, did Alex. Tao sent a mental wave of agreement as well, though his mind was engaged now with the Sages, who had each floated up to him, and bowed in unison.

Alex spoke then, "I think it's time we change that. I don't need Arceans in Unova. Not while we're at war, at least. They've demonstrated that they'll do whatever their cult leaders order them to. No matter how morally questionable. They're a risk to our people, while this conflict exists."

Nate raised an eyebrow of his own as the Champion spoke. "So what do you intend to do about them?"

Alex gave the man a grim smirk. "I'm going to give them a chance to redeem themselves…and I have a feeling many will take it."

Nate flinched as the Champion summoned his napping Salamence. The man leapt atop the dragon's head with a jump that no normal human could ever match and took off, Nate followed on his Hydreigon, as Tao and the Seven Sages properly conversed for the first time in millennia. Other dragons followed them into the sky, each carrying several prisoners bound to their backs by rope.

Now cleansed of the Shadow, the Hand's formerly enslaved Pokémon had agreed that, with their master gone, their loyalty to the human's cult was void. They'd taken off south, to the verdant forests, with Absol leading them.

The thunder of dragons headed north, towards Lacunosa, and as Alex landed, recalling his massive partner to the comfort of his ball, and a resumed nap, he grimaced at what the town had become. Gone was the sleepy little walled village. After being turned into a prison by the Arceans under Ghetsis, and then reclaimed by the Unovan residents, the town had become the unofficial holding area for any Arceans that had been deemed a threat by the Unovan's police forces, and newly expanding military.

Conditions were, compared to the Church's prisons, luxurious. Three meals, time for exercise, and even access to TV. Nobody…official had come to the quietly forgotten town, and thus the 'prisoners' had never been interrogated.

"I'll need to see them one at a time." Alex said to Nate, as they headed toward the now militaristic camp's main building.

Nate chuckled, as he saw who'd come out to meet them. "That's not really my call."

The two Champions were as awkward and flustered as they'd ever been in the other's presence, and Alex waited patiently as the awkward small talk between he and Rosa dragged on. When there was a painful pause, he spoke. "It's time we freed up these people for the front line. You included, Rosa. One way or another, today, these Arceans are no longer our burden. I need a room. Soundproofed. Send them to me one at a time."
The woman glanced between him, and then Nate, who just shrugged, and then she nodded, seemingly glad for the chance to be free of watching these people. After weeks of hearing them whine and threaten litigation, which due to the current state of war, and governmental reorganization, would be pointless, she was ready to push them on someone else.

He ended up being given the mess hall, which had once been one of the townspeople's homes. The original occupants had been 'transferred' to Fornia, and the new Arcean occupants had been trampled to death in an icy stampede from Kyurem. Thus, it had been repurposed.

The first of the two hundred or so people he'd be forced to speak with came in, and set the tone for how most of the 'interrogations' would go. She was evidently someone who'd been captured from Castelia, in the sewers, amongst other militant Arceans who had been planning sabotage for use in this very conflict.

To his credit, Alex tried every other method first. He asked about her family. She had a husband, and three children. He asked where they were, and found they'd been scattered effectively around the Church's territory. He asked when she'd last seen them. She hadn't answered. He asked if that was what she'd wanted, and he came to learn that she'd been raised in this cult, and didn't know better. Staying apart was what families did. Saving the planet was too important.

He'd turned on the TV he'd had brought in then, and showed her the video that he'd asked Haley to work on over the summer. A guide for someone who'd been brainwashed into the Arcean cult and the many, many things they didn't know about it. He knew it needed some updating now, but it got the point across, once she watched. She saw how easily Pravus had whipped her deluded countrymen into a bloody frenzy. Getting her to watch had been a conflict in itself. Only by forcing her eyes and ears open by way of psychic power did she finally see the long history of sketchy violence and practices her Church was party to.

In truth, he'd only forced her eyes for a moment. Once they'd seen the screen, they'd stayed open out of pure human curiosity, and she'd been engrossed in the hard, disturbing evidence behind the Church's activities, much of which she knew the Church had already very specifically denied. From her perspective, it had been a little odd. At random times, the Church-run news network would make announcements about events they hadn't been involved in starting, with no other information about said incident being released. Most of their people hadn't known about the incidents in the first place, but they just assumed that the Prophet, for whatever reason, knew they had to be aware of this information. If they were going to Save the world.

It took several hours, but eventually, he felt certain that the woman understood, to a degree, the truth of things. Her resistance towards him had eroded to irritated acceptance, rather than outright shunning. He gave her a choice then, in exchange for turning infiltrator, Unova would find her relations, free them, and show them what she'd seen as well. He offered to help de-program them to the falsehoods they'd been fed, and eventually she agreed. She would claim to have escaped custody, and would be churned back into the machine that was the Church.

From there, the Rebels would guide her, as they were most familiar with what they needed to find. Tao had them focused on gathering as much intel on their foes as possible, though those among the Tribe that had wanted to fight, had been encouraged to do so. They were the ones currently in charge of whipping Unova's many skilled Trainers into shape, and some semblance of an army.

Alex called in the next candidate, and after a few more hours of similar tactics, he'd convinced the man in question to settle a farm somewhere in Unova, and leave saving his family from the Church to the Dragon Emperor himself. He suddenly had a long list of names and locations to memorize, but
he found that it was actually quite easy. His mind categorized information in a useful, and entirely new way. He found he could feasibly Teleport close enough to many of the people in question, and for those he couldn't, he always had other methods of travel.

Sorting through the entire ‘camp' took several days, but Tao assured him that he had the war handled, for the moment, and that what he was doing was more important. There were billions of Fornians under the Church. The better he became at breaking their delusions, the quicker this war would end.

In the end only eighteen had refused his offers, even after learning, and more disturbingly, accepting, what their Church had done. They'd told him that it was the only way the Prophet could Save the planet. Before he could, he needed to dominate it, and because he was immortal, in time, he would. They had believed that they were the first generation of an army that would one day spread Arceus' Word to the stars as well. A Star Crusade, they called it. Where humanity would expand rapidly under the Church's influence, and cleanse any unworthy sentients or psychic-heretics they encountered. According to them, Pravus already had a working ship as well, one that could travel the stars in hours, rather than years.

It was a convincing tale, Alex admitted, and one he might very well have believed if he, like these people, had grown up with indoctrination in every hour of his early life. The more he broke their illusions however, the more he wondered. His granduncle had nurtured his skeptic side, but he'd always had a rational outlook. He probably wouldn't have fit in, in Fornia.

That thought prompted a final round of interrogation. He let them each ramble on for five minutes exactly, before cutting through whatever parroted nonsense they were spewing with a Word that silenced them as it shook the very air. He'd then asked what became of kids like him, who were inherently skeptical. Or at the very least doubtful, of what the adults claimed was truth.

Each of the men had grinned at the question. It was a disturbing look, one his instincts told him was genuinely evil. The worst side humanity had to offer. What they told him was, in so many words, the same. Children like him were shipped off, sometimes for years at a time, to the Navy. There, trapped on a ship with naught but open sea for miles, they would learn to obey…or be thrown overboard.

It was entirely coincidental that genuine herds of Sharpedo happened to swarm around every Arcean Ship they encountered. Many grew quite massive, and the strongest of those, were captured and infused with Shadow. The Navy had held their largely unnecessary blockade of the ocean for years. Japan had no interest in their land, and Eous was busy fighting the Imperium. Alola was isolated, but they hadn't weighed in on the current conflict yet. Word of it probably hadn't even reached them.

It seemed once again the Prophet had engineered a useful tool that accomplished several things at once. A powerful navy, which would keep the Alolans from going anywhere near the western coast regardless of what they decided, and a system that sorted the weak, and created strong water type Trainers. Still unnerved, he'd finally asked Tao what he thought, and the dragon seemed surprised. Evidently emperors of old believed their decisions were the right ones. Rarely did they consult him, after taking power.

The dragon had mentally watched his protégé interrogate the Fornians, and he had quietly grown cold in dread. This rhetoric was being spewed from low-level information gatherers. He knew, based on what he'd learned of the organization, that this 'devotion' would only be stronger the higher ranked one was. The army of ‘Crusaders' were considered soldiers, and therefore were relatively high in the pecking order. They, and their families, were given the best lives the Church could offer in return for service, and thus, their loyalty was quite strong.
Finally, he gave his Tamer an answer. "Men like these are going to be the majority in those who've taken up arms against us. Their...certainty will be much stronger, their faith unquestioning. You will need your Voice to make them listen...or...you can try to Purge them. It is not always an attack, but can sometimes remove a being's inner conflict with...let's call it 'divine insight'. Once purged, even their Bishops are likely to bow to you."

He could feel the dislike of the option in the human, and it was a long while before he responded. "And what would those Purged be like when this war ends? Will I be ruling over a bunch of devoutly loyal subjects missing half their natural emotions?" The dragon let silence speak for itself, and he sensed the human sigh. "That's what I thought. I can Purge men like these...the infiltrators, the soldiers...they'll never turn...but for the general masses, the civilians, I will need the right Words. First, I think I need to visit someone whose likely found them before...."

**Shor's Hall, Uppsalir – Norstad Region**

The grip hurt less, Alex noticed, as he and the Thunder God clasped the other by the wrist, in the manner of his people. "Welcome back, Dovahkiin. What brings you again into mine hall?"

He met the god's eyes then, and saw them widen. "You may have heard...I recently became the ruler of my people. You may have also heard that we're at war...and it is not going well. Not yet, anyways, or so the Dragon says. He claims to have a plan, and I trust his word." He saw the being casually rest a hand on the hilt of his hammer as he listened and nodded. "I come seeking your help with...a matter of the Voice. I know your people would usually just charge in, fight, and let nature decide who the strongest is, but I don't want to kill millions of people. Especially as I intend to rule them, as well. If I don't kill as many of their relatives, I'll have less...revenge-driven enemies, in the long run."

The Thunder God nodded his golden-haired head once more, "I understand. You believe the power of the Storm Voice will sway them from their...religious indoctrination. You would be correct. This means you are also aware, or at least assume, my people did something similar once."

Alex nodded. "Something like that...but from what the legends say, it wasn't a hostile takeover. The Aesir and humans interacted plenty without...too much senseless violence."

That got a chuckle from the Asgardian, as they sat, and ate of the feast that took up most of the central room of the hall. To Alex's knowledge, the food was always fresh, and always present. And always delicious.

"The humans were not that difficult to bend...we came to this world, shooting lightning and healing wounds, stopping natural disasters with skills we all, to a degree, possess. The belief that we were superior, and therefore divine, came naturally, in many cases." The gold-skinned being put a hand on his shoulder then. "I know you hesitate to cause more bloodshed, and more violent cycles of revenge, but you need to understand something. These...Fornians, they are not like the humans we encountered so very, very long ago shivering in the cold of this very land under straw-thatched roofs. They are smart. Cunning. Aware of the natural forces, and unnatural ones, at work around them. They are more like the Jotuns. And I assume you have heard tell of how many of those we had to kill. Many by mine own hammer. There are some minions of Shadow that will not break, not even to a Hyper Voice."

Alex munched quietly on a random piece of meat, attached to a perfectly sized bone jutting from it. It was delicious, easy to chew, and none of the meat got on his hand, for the bone-like protrusion
accommodated his ridiculously large fingers. Seeing the young human still in distress, Thor sighed.

"Very well…to know the Word to break them, you must know who they are. What the bedrock of their belief is. You must shatter the wrongness of it in an impactful way…then, at least, they will be confused, and hesitant to fight. They will think, and in that moment, many will understand what they are a part of. The good ones will rebel, and the number of dead will…lessen. The good news is that you are fighting a cult mentality. What breaks one thoroughly enough will likely work on most of them. But first…"

The Dragon Emperor smirked then, as the understanding slowly came across his features. "I must know my enemy. Thank you, Thor…I do appreciate the wisdom. And the food." They both chuckled at that, and bit into their respect hunks of meat. Alex caught the god's eye then, and saw the golden eyebrow rise. He rolled his eyes, but swung his backpack around anyways.

After several minutes of casual chatting, and setting up the instruments involved with enjoying the Leaf, the Aesir spoke, "And you say this…bong…can be fashioned of thunderclouds?"

Alex shrugged, but then nodded. "That's how the Dragon made this one. It's practically unbreakable. Do not." He said, as he saw the grinning god reaching for his hammer. He had a bad habit of smashing it into unbreakable things.

"I will forge you a new one!" Thor said, grinning at the dark grey instrument. He wanted to try Mjolnir's strength against that of the One Dragon's. He'd heard legend of the serpent's power, and now there was a chance to test himself against it right in front of him.

"After we smoke. I have a spare he made as well, just as useful, and a bit cleaner if I'm honest. It is always wise to carry a spare. You can bang on that one." That, thankfully, kept the God of Thunder from smashing the already packed instrument, and the two enjoyed the brief hours of peace, before the war that was to come.

Norstad had changed quite a bit since Alduin fell. The Everwinter had finally broken. Sun returned to the land, and Percy had made great efforts to regrow the forests. It was still cold, of course, but nothing compared to what had once been. When the Fairy King had rounded up the strongest of Norstad's new Trainers, each of whom had been inspired by the songs regarding the Fall of Alduin, and the role a Trainer had played in it, Thor had promised himself, and a squad of Articuno flyers to reinforce their Unovan friends as well. They were due to rendezvous with Professor Buckeye's forces in Ohiana over the next few days.

That only left Kalos unusually quiet. In all the long years the two had been allies, whenever the Imperium threatened Kalos, Unova would come to aid. When previous incarnations of Fornia had done the same as the current one, Kalos had come to Unova's aid, but now, after four attacks on the capital, and the outbreak of war, there was naught from Kalos but silence.

Lumiose City – Kalos Region

"It is time, Venu. Dark Burst." Four shadowy wings, akin to a Venemoth's, surrounded the figure under the full moon. He was a man, garbed now in a skin-tight suit that looked quite breathable, despite the skin-tightness. It was mainly purple in color, though there were hints of black as well. In the night sky, he was hard to see.
He soared high over Lumiose, and grinned. "Finally…those Hearts will be mine…"

The darkness in his wings flared as they continued to carry him ever higher. A voice came quietly from them, one he'd rarely heard of late. *Do not forget to whom you promised those artifacts, Dark Moth…*

"I remember, hag…” The man muttered. The legends said that whoever possessed both would be granted unlimited power, and while he'd been tempted to use that himself, another had made her interest in them known. She had been quite persuasive in convincing him that having ultimate power all the time was something that, inevitably, would ruin his relationship with the one he wanted revived. Therefore, he would bring the Hearts of Light and Darkness to her, and she would revive, in all capacities, the woman he'd lost.

"It is time…Shadow Spore!" The wings flared again, and orbs of darkness descended upon the sleeping citizens of Lumiose. Over the past few weeks, incidents involving people turned into 'super villains' had been an almost daily occurrence. It hadn't been long before most of the city had been affected by the oddness.

Normally, the Gym Leader would call in the League's help, but Clemont had, supposedly, locked himself in Lumiose Tower. In reality, nobody had seen him in public for quite a while. It wasn't all that unusual, as he'd created an automatic Gym Leader to handle his challengers while he invented, but it had been months now with no word from anyone in the Gym. Aside from the machine, who wasn't programmed to answer questions about his maker.

With the absence of any official response, two Trainers answered the call to action. In their own words, these citizens turned dark called themselves villains. The two who stood against them figured there might as well be heroes, too. Nobody knew how the two heroes had acquired the Hearts the turned citizens always seemed obsessed with stealing, but they'd given the ability to fuse a Trainer with their Pokémon, and become something new altogether. When normal Mega Evolution had failed, they'd stepped up, continuously, to drive off the strangely strong opponents, and eventually cleanse them of the Shadow.

Now, most of those who'd been cleansed were once more given the power, and once more, the Moth's minions rose. The abilities his own Heart gave empowered both the citizen in question, and their Pokémon partner with varied supernatural abilities that made them quite strong. As expected, this usually led to chaos, but thus far, it had been relatively isolated chaos as the Moth tested his powers. It wasn't long before Lumiose was alight with the sounds of battle, as the local Trainers rose to meet the overwhelming numbers.

Thankfully, the two Trainers who had become Kalos' newest faces of justice hadn't been slouching when it came to figuring out what was causing these transformations. They'd discussed the possibility of what might happen if the Shadows hit more than one person at once. After that, they'd reached out to the League itself by physically visiting the Elite Four's home, and in response, the Champion had been sent.

He'd rallied the other Gym Leaders of course, and their mission was to break into the tower, to find Clemont, and have him activate the city's defenses. They had a stun setting, as well as a violent one, for when the invaders came for blood, and plunder. Given that the people attacking currently were citizens, stunning would be enough.

The Champion however, had joined the two 'heroes', and quickly realized this…'Heart power' was easily as strong as Mega Evolution. Ardor had put up a good fight against the dark-winged moth...
man, but it was soon clear that their side needed a boost. That was when the female Trainer, who was part Ledian at that moment, handed him an empty Heart. Since it belonged to another, they could only use it once, but given that it was empty, it would work. Maybe.

The fused combination of Trainer and Pokémon on a Champion's level quickly brought the villain down, hard. They'd only traded a few blows, and that had been all the burning ape man had needed. Raikou's fighting style, and their shared fighting typing, had enhanced the fusion, and Connor was almost disappointed that they could only use it this once. It would definitely smash through Alex's aura shield.

The 'Ledi Girl' proceeded to use what appeared to be some variation of Silver Wind, and managed to engulf all of Lumiose within it, effectively cleansing the town of the shadowy balls of energy driving the citizens mad. Connor let the power fade, and both he and Ardor stretched, still in sync, as they became themselves once more.

"Oof. That's going to be sore for a bit. You two do this all the time, hmm?" He approached the girl, and her partner, a Trainer who evidently had a Liepard, who'd held the swarm of powerful minions off while the Champion removed the source of their power. He handed the girl the empty Heart, and she stuffed it away.

The Liepard boy spoke then, "Our Pokémon fused with the Hearts when we found them. One was, apparently, once Xerneas', and the other held Yveltal. We inherited some of their power. When a Pokémon becomes tied to a Heart, it's…painful to remove them from it. But it can be done, the plus side though, is no lingering side-effects. Borrowing the power of a Heart not your own can be…strenuous, on both the Trainer and the Heart crystal. It's best not to do it too often."

Connor frowned at that, mulling over the information. Kalos' entities of life and destruction had likely been subjected to significant pain, if it was true. Perhaps that was what made them so much more shy than their Norstad counterparts. The heroes left then, to protect their 'secret identity', and Connor joined the Gym Leaders in Lumiose Tower.

They were in the midst of tying up a struggling Clemont, whose entire body was radiating a dark, visible aura. His eyes were constantly rolled back, and he appeared to be unconscious, like a puppet almost, when he moved. The struggling ceased as Connor stood before him. Clemont grinned then. "Ahh! The Champion…good, good. I'm glad you're here. Now my collection of Heroes is complete…I finally have the entire Kalosian set!"

Connor raised a dark crimson brow, as the others readied their Pokéballs. Despite being tied up, Clemont rose into the air, and his face's grin was…unsettling. "What do you mean? You're speaking nonsense…"

Clemont raised his arms then, and the Champion swore as the three heroes of his homeland, the Swords of Justice, stepped from the shadow. They were engulfed in the same purple energy as Clemont, but none more so than Cobalion. The steel and fighting type's eyes looked tortured, and the veins around them had taken on the same color as the energy coursing through him, and his counterparts.

"Fall back!" Connor ordered, and the Gym Leaders quickly did so, before the Swords could strike. Kalos was no stranger to strategic withdrawal. They moved into the Gym's battle arena then, and summoned their partners. All of them. Clemont's own team of a Diggersby and a Luxray joined the Swords, burning as dark as they did, and the battle quickly devolved into chaos.
Then, tearing through all of it, came a dark purple Flamethrower that threatened to engulf the Champion's whole party. An aura of scarlet-pink energy surrounded each of them, as well as their partners, and moved each of them away as another equally large, but normal colored Flamethrower collided with the first.

The pair of Delphox who'd cast the attacks stepped onto the Gym's field then, and Connor stared as a member of his own Elite Four, and hero in her own right, came shambling out to stand beside Clemont. He was busy reviving his partners, who had not been shielded or moved. The Swords had each defended themselves, seemingly on pure instinct, with their Sacred Swords. It had diverted most of the flames from them.

Kalos' newest Champion turned to see their rescuer then, and pinched his brow. It was, of course, his sister, once more in a different outfit. It was frilly and Kalosian, but she'd kept the black and white color scheme. "I had it handled, sister."

Jess smirked at him as she joined her partner in the Trainer's box. It seemed they'd be doing this properly, as Clemont had shambled backwards alongside the Swords, leaving only Serena to face her. "If you'd had that handled, you wouldn't have been falling back to this entrance. Take care of Clemont, would you? Bind him. I can cleanse them all once we settle this…"

Connor followed his sister's gaze, and raised a brow as he eyed the two Delphox. They both had unsettling grins on their sly features, and their eyes burned with psychic power. He summoned his Garchomp, and moved for the electric type Gym Leader.

The two foxes made an unseeable motion with their arms, and two more massive Flamethrowers collided. By now, their field was clear, which was good, for the intense heat had charred it, thoroughly.

The Delphox who opposed them had an aura that seethed with Shadow, and it flared as the voice from before spoke again in the same unsettling tones, tilting the Fox's head sideways as it spoke. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours…"

She brought out a staff of dark wood then, another Flamethrower already prepared. Delphi brought her own staff out, a similar attack readied as well, which manifested as a small but intense burning sphere within the reddish brown colored wood claws that made up the tip.

The voice's owner laughed. "What the Hel is that supposed to be?"

Delphi glanced at her Trainer, nodded, then turned her sly eyes back to her opponent. "A Redwood staff." She seemed to chuckle as she attacked, and her opponent quickly did the same, only to find that she'd been outclassed. The Blast Burn tore through the Flamethrower, and hit the enemy fox, her Trainer, and Clemont as well. Of the Swords, there was no sign.

Gar had been handling the Luxray, and Connor let him battle on his own instinct, as he knew it would be good practice for the real Luxray they were preparing for. Gren had struck the Diggersby from the shadows, only to be countered by a quick Thunder from the electric lion.

Strong as Gren was, he was not the hardest of Pokémon, and though he managed to hang on through the critical hit, Connor recalled him. Gar could handle the Luxray alone, and as Clemont fell, singed by magical fire, The Luxray in mid Thunder Fang had paused, instinctually drawn by the pain from his Trainer despite his being possessed. Gar gained the distraction he needed to strike, and he
brought the thunder cat down, hard, shaking the entire gym with his Earthquake.

The dragon type roared triumphantly, and Connor used an escape rope to bind the possessed Gym Leader, as Jess did the same to Serena. She brought out the Articuno, then. Though it was nearing winter, it very much felt as though it had arrived as Folokraan materialized from her ball.

Gone was the hatchling, as after she'd begun to battle, she'd grown rapidly in size. Few could withstand the power of a Legendary bird. Compared to her kin in her village, she was still noticeably young, but given that most people never got the chance to see an Articuno this close, it wasn't very noticeable.

The spectacle she put on was enough of a distraction. Icy blue light enveloped the Trainers, and their partners, and the Shadow burned away as it burned intensely white. The humans regained consciousness, but their partners remained fainted.

Connor stared at his sister in disbelief. "When did she learn that? Is that a move?"

Jess nodded. "Purge. The sisters already know it. The strongest of them can cleanse Shadow with it." She left out picking it up from the One Dragon, when he'd assigned her to call on Kalos' aid. Officially. She'd dressed for Kalos, but hadn't expected to be ambushed by civilian 'super villains', and then face down one of the Elite Four in Clemont's gym. Despite all the flames, she'd managed to remain unsinged.

"Useful..." Connor muttered. His own lover, the village's seeress, hadn't mentioned that it was an actual move. She'd claimed it was just something Articuno could do. Moves could be shared, with enough training, and having a partner that could cleanse Shadow would be useful. He glanced at their cleansed allies, and then back to her. "Why are you here, anyway?"

She raised a crimson brow at him. "Because Pravus is invading us, idiote. Unova calls for aid."

Connor chuckled. "The 'Dragon Emperor' needs help eh? Well I'm employed by the Pokémon League. And they are, for the moment, taking a neutral stance. If you want Kalos' aid, you need to speak to their Prince."

Jess rolled her eyes at them, patting her Articuno, and then recalling her to the recolored Luxury Ball that she seemed to enjoy. "And where is Calem, hmm? I'd heard he vanished."

Connor glared at her. The only ones who knew the Prince's public identity were the Elite Four, and the Champion, and he had a feeling she'd been reading minds again. The League had an agreement with those who governed Kalos. Their people would both protect and train their royalty, and nobility, and in return the League had gotten to use one of the region's oldest castles for their Elite Four to face challengers in.

Calem had certainly proved that the region's royals could still battle with the best of them after he'd gone from helping Professor Sycamore to being dragged into the Flare Incident, but after his Chesnaught had fallen to Alain's flames, he'd simply vanished. "Probably at the palace. Good luck getting in." Connor muttered, as he looked around for the Swords of Justice. It seemed in the chaos, whoever was puppetting them had made a strategic retreat.

Jess smirked, recalled her partner, and headed for the exit. "Compared to this, getting in there will be cake."
The encircling form of the One Dragon shifted outside of the window as the room within was a mix of chaos and activity. From the tower, the eastern forces had been coordinating. They were retreating on all fronts, save for the Kanadian one. Their border wall proved quite useful in repelling the Crusaders, and the Trainers manning it were some of the best Kanadia had produced.

Each of the eastern Trainers who now found themselves soldiers in a reborn empire were given leave to, if they desired, take ten partners, rather than six. Their enemies had capitalized on the trend once the World Tournament had announced the raised limit cap. Most serious Trainers had enough partners in their storage systems to fill four slots, and the One Dragon himself had given them leave to expand their belts, as soon as possible. Statistically, larger teams meant more squads surviving. Being the largest population on the planet had its advantages, and new Trainers from the 'homeland' were arriving to reinforce what remained of the State's militias by the day. Slowly, something resembling a proper front had formed, but the advance was relentless. It was also slow.

It had troubled Tao that these Crusaders, all decent Trainers who had full teams of ten, only ever walked towards their forces, on foot. Plenty had capable mounts, who would make useful firepower as well, but the Church's legions remained on foot as they marched. When his Tamer had mentioned the abomination's talk of a Blitz, he'd called in his ace in this war.

From the east, Norstad specifically, Rayquaza came at the head of roughly fifty Graybeards, each of whom had been trained for, and seen, war. They had been busy as, at Tao's request, they had taken the Bones of World Eater, purified them of any potentially lingering taint, and then forged them into armor the likes of which hadn't been seen this far west.

It wasn't long before Texico too eventually called in the retreat east. Despite being prepared, the Crusaders were too relentless, and the desert didn't provide the kind of food the greener lands to the north did. Tao had told them to retreat towards the Swamp, which had, of course, been met with trepidation.

Many who lived in the central areas of the continent could trace their roots back to that salty, ever-growing Swamp. It had forced their ancestors west, towards lands not occupied by humans for quite some time. They had flourished, especially under the dragon's empire, but they never forgot, and the Swamp grew larger all the time.

It was from the Swamp, that their secret weapons were coming. The Champions of the east, many of whom had thus far been forced to sit by, training, as their homes were invaded, had been summoned. The Sage had given them a choice when war broke out, and panic, as well as anger at those whose States had willingly turned, surged through the now bustling island-city. They could stay, and be considered allies in the war to come, or they could go home, end up in a camp, and help no one. Only a few had left, and contact had quickly been lost.

Gone were the mud huts that had littered the island, as the clever Champions, ever in search of more ideal places to chill, had learned that combining certain energies created useful, sturdy building material. The dormitories had changed as well, becoming properly furnished apartments that eventually rivaled the Swamp Tree in size.

With such a large surge in population, getting everyone comfortable had been their first priority, and everyone had helped build, if they wanted a roof over their head when the rain came. Slowly, the long days of hard work, and equally frustrating training, drove out many who had come to the Sage
seeking 'magic powers'.

By the time Tao called on the Sage, they were mostly ready. A squad of the hundred strongest Champions had been drawn together, Trainers who had, like their 'Emperor', awakened a typing-based power. Some had even changed their normal typing as well. It was these hundred that Tao had called to the tower in their capital.

There, they had met the Dragon Emperor, and had each, eventually, pledged to help. In some capacity. He wasn't the only Unovan there, however. Nate, Rosa, Hilda, and even her brother was there with him. Evidently, they were all being given command, as they had all successfully bonded with the Dragon of Unova at some point, and understood his methods and battle style quite well by this point.

Their confidence was reinforced when Tao addressed them with his thundering mental baritone. "Champions. Each of you has been called here because the very Balance of our land now lies with whoever wins this unfortunate conflict." His head rose slowly as he spoke, and his Tamer smirked, long familiar with how the dragon manipulated his fellow humans.

"I am forming a force of…elite fighters, in both martial combat, and battling. You have each demonstrated a gift for both. Now, I am calling on you to fight. Unova requires your aid…and should you choose to accept, we will outfit you with the…appropriate gear for the station you'll be holding." The dragon gave his Tamer a nod, and the Champions of Unova each smirked.

Eric had explained how the armor was compressed into the device on his belt, but Alex had lost track after he'd sidetracked into explaining something involving 'nanofiber-bots'. Evidently, he'd copied the usefulness of Tao's clothing into the mesh joint-coverings each suit had, and the suits would, upon being damaged, attempt to repair both the wearer and itself. The pieces of dragonbone had been forged into unique designs, and given 'enchantments', based on the Champion who'd be wearing the armor. Many had held their titles for years, but nobody had questioned how the Graybeards had acquired a list of traits and abilities that could only have come from the League.

The Dragon Emperor stepped forward then, and addressed the group as he hit the new bone-white belt, and activated the armor. It covered his tall form from head to toe, and the white bone armor made a good contrast with the black mesh beneath it. Each fist sported a carved Salamence head with its jaws open, though thankfully the carved teeth didn't obstruct his hand's mobility. Each step clanked heavily on the metal roof as he strode towards them. His fellow Champions activated their own armor, which formed up from their belts in the same manner his had, namely with a flash of energy as the belts reconstructed the protective coverings around their wearers.

Alex saw many of the hundred gathered smirk, as they recognized his helmet's design, as well as the armor's. Spiky protrusions of dragonbone adorned the man's wide shoulders now, and he brought forward the leathery black cloak that hung from the back, concealing most of the armor from sight. He raised his right hand then, and the other Champions did the same. "Who will join us?" They ignited their plasma blades then, all but one of them as light-blue as the Chargestone powering them.

The hands rose quickly, and the Dragon Emperor smirked. His mouth was the only part of his face still visible, aside from the intense, and bluish-purple eyes, now burning with energy. "I'm glad you're all ready…you'll have to find your own Chargestones, but once you do…you will have your sword. It will be a symbol of your rank out in the field. Do. Not. Lose. It. And don't forget to keep it charged."
They were each given armor then, and they soon discovered that each suit had already been tailored
to their fighting styles. Their emperor then bid them to go into the Chargestone caves, and come out
with a crystal that felt right to their senses. They had each gained a heightened perception from the
Sage's training, despite it not always being psychic. It took several hours, but eventually each
candidate returned with a crystal. No one was harmed, and the wildlife remained somewhat
undisturbed. Galvantula had a reputation as a fast special attacker, and many 'foreign' Champions
had been eager to add an electric spider to their teams.

When they returned to the top of the Unity tower, they found the Unovan Champions, each covered
with a leathery black cloak similar to the Dragon Emperor's, in that it concealed their forms well.
Each set of the armor came with one, but nobody else had figured out how to activate theirs yet.
They were called down to a certain level of the tower then, and it didn't take long for the Champions
to realize they were being sorted by region, as each floor of the tower had been repurposed to
connect with and coordinate the forces in the corresponding region.

The Dragon Emperor met with them once they came in, and gave each a freshly fabricated hilt.
Evidently, Percy had returned only hours earlier, but his Melmetal were already proving invaluable.
He'd been given a blade as well, though according to Eric, he'd somehow changed it to be pink,
before rushing off somewhere else.

Once the Champion in question managed to ignite their new blade, Alex welcomed them into the
Scales of Balance. They were then sorted, by preference, to one of the Unovan Champions, and put
into their squad. After some minor shuffling, they each had sixteen fellow Champions under their
banner. Nate and Rosa were deployed to reinforce the south then, and would be getting those the
Sage next deemed ready. There were several who were worthy, but an even hundred had been
required first. Now, the others would be called up, outfitted, and split between the two commanders
in the south.

The twins were sent to the north and center part of the lines, where they had been told to dig in when
possible, and combine the local militias into a proper force. Jess had left picking her squad to Alex
while she was off in Kalos, and naturally, she'd ended up with an all-female team, with an even split
of Champions and Articuno Riders she'd befriended. They had agreed to join this new fighting force,
and were given blades as well. Armor, they declined, as the claimed they did not need to wear
Alduin's bones to be safe. Alex's own squad was comprised of mostly men, for there hadn't been an
even split in genders. Many of the female Champions had learned quicker than their male
counterparts, and thus, there were more of them amongst the first hundred.

Those under him were the comrades he'd known best while training, and fellow Leaf heads, one
from each of the eastern regions currently being invaded. By no coincidence, they were also, usually,
the strongest of the Champions from their homeland. For the moment, he led both his squad and his
lover's. They would be in charge of relieving the Kanadians in the far west, and taking the arctic
regions there. Then, they would push down into Fornia itself, and force the Church to defend, rather
than attack. The Blitz had, according to the dragon, begun in earnest. Crusaders had begun running
down exposed eastern camps, and the Scales were needed desperately. Within a day, roughly four
after the first conflicts erupted, the Dragon Empire had managed to provide an answer to the soldiers
charging towards them. It remained to be seen if they would be enough.
Doctor Ein made a noise of disgust, as the name 'Wes' was read aloud from the report that had just come in. Their scouts had discovered where the Veloraptar had gone in only a few short days. Evidently, the presumed-dead Trainer had come out of retirement for this conflict, and somehow, had stolen his prized creation. Ein assumed he felt somewhat embarrassed that his own state of Orre had fallen so…quickly. This was retaliation. His precious Veloraptar had been 'snagged' apparently, or so the locals who'd witnessed the event claimed.

Though the beast had been fast, the time power of a nearby Celebi, one thought previously to be only rumor, had given the aged Trainer a fair chance at catching the Pokémon. He was too young, and frankly unstable, to handle a Dark Ball, and thus the capture had worked. The promised Dragon Plates had been delayed by some seemingly random act of thievery, and now, the chance to mold the Pokémon's mind, and evolution, was gone.

He turned to his ridiculously garbed employer, who quite literally fancied himself a demigod, and said with all the reverence he could muster, "We need to retrieve him, my Prophet. Without that specimen, we have no chance of de-thr-"

The doctor was interrupted by a fist, encased in shadow energy, slamming across his cheek. He was on the ground then, and Pravus loomed over him, glaring down with those awful eyes of red. "Do not presume to give me orders, Doctor. You'll get your pet back…or we'll mine up another. Our destiny is before us…do not spoil it by having such a loose tongue. His eyes glared at the technicians around them, working at their stations. Most, the smart ones, simply tuned out events like this, and focused on work, unless specifically called by name.

The ones who did not last long at their posts, and there were always a few, were the ones who listened too obviously, or in some cases, dared to watch said events unfold.

The room turned an eerie red, as black and red arcs of lightning flew from the Prophet's outstretched fingers, and into the workers who'd let their eyes wander. The Prophet had not been gentle, and many of the burns were serious. He had expected things in Unova to, finally, work to his advantage. But evidently, a sky full of enemy dragons was impossible to fool.

"It is time we put the whelp in his place. Begin marching the line east. Tell the General the time for the Blitz has come. No stopping! No rest! I want this land conquered before the Unovans can form a hard defensive line." The Prophet's words had a hard edge, and his loyal minions worked rather quickly, despite their injuries, to accomplish the Leader's orders, and send out messages to the commanders on the border.

They had already begun pushing, though in reality, they had been marching rather slowly. Now, each of the Crusaders would summon a Pokémon to ride into battle, and the already retreating easterners would quickly be overwhelmed by their combined speed. All across the border, the Arceans advanced.
His lieutenant stepped forward then. "My Prophet." He bowed his head. "The Texicans have known this was coming for a while...their Champion learned far more than he should have in Orre. I'm afraid this has caused a drive for unity amongst their people. As far north as Kentu's borders, we've had reports of organized resistance...and Ohiana has Buckeye, and his Suicune."

That got the Prophet's attention. "He's summoned the North Wind? It seems the first part of this war may begin in earnest. Prepare a ship, a fighter. Make sure there are plenty of Dark Balls. I'm going to declaw his forces, too."

The lieutenant saluted, quietly glad that, for once, relatively bad news hadn't been met with a random, brutal beating. "Yes, my Prophet." The man might've felt sympathy for the Trainers about to lose their beloved partners to the shadow, but they were heretics. They deserved no less for daring to oppose the savior of mankind.

---

Fifty Miles East of Arcino – Fornia Region

"You know, when I said you could disguise me, I had something else in mind..." The voice belonged to Wes, the unofficial 'hero' of the Orre region, and the man he was speaking to was quite a long way from home. But Percy had a task to complete. And a promise to cash in on.

The Fairy King smirked at his last-minute partner, who was now guised as a little girl. Cute, blonde, and complete with pigtails. He'd bumped into Percy on the only road that went into this part of the desert, and they'd found that their destinations were the same. Thus, they had joined forces, for a time. Everything had gone smoothly until they came closer to their goal. Percy had insisted on disguises, and though they'd made good time with them, Wes had been demanding a different guise for over an hour now, as they'd traveled across the dry brush landscape to their destination.

Percy was guised as an old man, with a beard of gray that covered most of his face. He'd even gone with an eyepatch, over his right eye. The story was, supposedly, that this random grandfather just happened to be wandering through a desert with his relative. Completely believable.

His argument had been that people in Norstad traveled across vast swathes of wastes just to survive all the time, but Wes had a feeling Arceans avoided that. Their Church paid for everything, which included transportation to wherever they were 'assigned'.

In the end, it hadn't mattered. They came upon their destination without encountering anyone. Now up close, Percy could see many details his abrupt satellite scan of the area hadn't picked up on. The facility was in what had once been a crater, which could only have come from a meteoric impact. Pools of undulating silvery metal were all over the crater, and had plenty of space between them. Oddly enough, there was no wall, not even a fence, surrounding the crater. Only several large, and easily avoidable turrets, placed about the rim.

"I can feel the heat from here..." Wes muttered, his adult man's voice sounding entirely unnatural coming from the little girl he currently was.

"Hush." Old Percy said, smirking. The Trainer had a point, though. It was hot down there. That was likely what was keeping the Meltan, and their evolutions, in a constant liquid state. Then, the wind shifted, and the two shared a look. There was a...noise, of a kind, on the wind. A terrible high pitched groaning sound. The sound of hundreds of Melmetal, and their prior evolutions, crying out in pain. Apparently being forcibly melted together in burning holes in the ground was something they..."
didn't like. "If we can free them…they would make powerful allies."

The little girl glared at the old man. "Or, they could run amok, and be disintegrated by those turrets. We need to find a way to help them out of those holes and disable the heat, as well as take out those guns. Seems we have two tasks."

Percy was already moving. "Dibs on the heater. Have fun with the giant guns!" He gave a casual wave as he strolled down the crater's steep edge, moving slowly, and letting his magic camouflage him. Wes was on his own. As a rare act of mercy, he dispelled the poor man's fairy disguise, and gave him a robe of shadows instead. It wasn't as stealthy as a genuine one, but tricking one's perception was a trademark of fairy energy.

Knowing the Arceans as he did, for Caleb Pravus had sent many a brainwasher to his tower, over the years, he knew their buildings typically went for a fortified underground approach. After many failed attempts to convert him, Percy had been given inside secrets usually only reserved for Church members who'd put in their time, and worked for it. Evidently Pravus' reasoning was that he'd already done his time, and was still doing it, thus he could be trusted. If he joined. The Prophet himself never actually visited him though, not until he'd been useful.

Eventually, Percy had acquiesced to their requests to 'ally' with their organization. It was better than rotting away in that tower, forgotten by the mortals of all but his home region. Technically, he was considered to be at 'stage eight' of twelve on their Church's 'path to enlightenment'. The completion of which, made one 'immune' to disease, and supposedly death. There was, of course, not one shred of evidence that completing each stage, something the people had to pay thousands, if not millions, of units of currency for, actually worked. The first Prophet, the man who'd founded the cult, and set up most of the current rules and regulations, had himself died of a sudden heart attack. Then, Pravus had seized control, and those who questioned him were disappeared. Or so the rumors claimed.

It was an unusual death, to non-Arceans at least. In those early days, they'd been the largest of several regions in what was now Fornia, and the east kept an eye on them. Under Pravus, they had dominated, and expanded, uniting the Fornia region under one banner in a matter of years. The Prophet's.

Evidently the first Prophet, a normal, if charismatic human by all accounts, had been sequestered on one of his naval ships after their cult was sued into becoming ocean-bound refugees, and the advanced medical technology that could've saved him was too far away to do anything. Or so Pravus had told his mourning followers. All anyone knew of the man assuming control of what the original Prophet left behind was that he'd appeared one day on the coastal beaches, and had been helped by the Prophet, who'd just happened to be strolling by that morning.

It wasn't long before the strange castaway had befriended the first Prophet, become his confidant, and upon his death, took over the, at that point, almost entirely naval cult whose only land holding had been the port only known as 'Land', close to the Kanadian border. The official Church statement had been that Pravus' predecessor had been called to Arceus' side, and therefor had to abandon his body. Or something. Getting those details had been a slog, for many had not wished to speak of the first Prophet. Only the current one mattered, apparently. After well over two centuries of control, it wasn't surprising that the current generation was so unflinchingly loyal. Percy knew how malleable humans could be, if one influenced them young enough. It was why immortals and long-lived tyrants were so effective.

Once Percy finally found a bunker entrance, he used what skill he'd honed over the long millennia to
subdue a guard, examine his mind, and take his place in the order of things by way of disguise. In this manner, he slowly made his way through the rank and file, until he made his way lower into the facility, broke a machine, and then found a maintenance worker, and took his identity as well. The illusions hiding their unconscious (and possibly deceased) bodies would hopefully last as long as their mission here would.

The room he was looking for, he had learned, was indeed located deep underground. A furnace, evidently powered by not one, but two male Heatran. As he finally came upon the chamber in question however, he found the armed guards, in standard soldier attire, already dispatched. Someone was inside, mumbling to themselves.

The room only had one entrance, from a walkway that, thanks to the technician's knowledge, Percy knew was over sixty percent Dolomite, a durable, heat resistant blending of metal. The walkway was above the chamber, most of which was taken up by the machine within. The two Heatran were there, and they were massive, held unmoving in some kind of stasis, constantly giving off as much heat as they could manage.

Percy decided on stealth at that moment, and listened in. "No…No. No. Nonono. Where the hell are they? I know there's *burp* some here." The man speaking, and belching in between sentences, looked like a Professor, and had the hair for it. Wild, spiky, with a bald spot only visible from behind. It was pink, save for faint streaks of white within. For the most part, he seemed like a normal human, but he'd already taken down four soldiers of the Church's Task Force. Looks were deceiving.

Another, far more annoying voice came then. "Aw geeze, Rick. I don't think this guy is alive. Rick? Rick! I don't want to be an accomplice to murder, Rick! I want- I want to go to school!"

A loud belch filled the small underground cavern, followed by more speech from this Rick person. "School? You want be some *belch* miiindless sheep that comes at the call of a *burp* bell? Fine. If all you're going to do is *burp* biiiitch, then you can go. Here. Go on, Grampa is right behind you." Percy glanced down, and his eyes widened as he saw the man fire a device with a pink swirl of energy powering it tear open a portal in reality. It was a pinkish scarlet color, but the smaller owner of the annoying voice walked through without complaint.

The belching figure went back to rummaging, and moments later exclaimed, "Woahoho! Jackpot!"

Deciding he'd had enough stealth he dispelled his illusion as he leapt the stairs down to the machine, and winced at the intensity of the heat. He turned to his fellow intruder, who hadn't noticed him, and said, "Hello there."

Rick stood and turned slowly, and Percy got his first good look at him. Bored expression. Bloodshot eyes. Pink hair. Professor's labcoat. In one hand was the device that had torn a hole in the very fabric of space for travel. In the other was a large, almost plant-like seed looking object that seemed to pulse with heat. Rick handed him the seed then.

"Here. *Burp* Hoooold this. I can only carry two." He reached down to grab more of the strange objects, and Percy winced as he examined it in his reluctant grasp.

"I'm Percy by the way… erm, What…exactly am I holding? And why?"

"Heatran Seeds. The only thing that *burp* burns hotter than these babies is my eternal devotion to Szechuan Sauce. I need them for my…uhh…science. Just follow me through the *burp* portal,
quick trip, in and out." Rick stood then, and Percy observed that his 'seeds' seemed to be more… fresh, as they were dripping some kind of ichor.

"Not so fast…" A new voice crowed from above them. The two men looked up to behold a new figure, another man, though almost as flamboyant as Percy. He had a long brown coat, and under it, a suit of clothes whose color scheme seemed oddly familiar. Deep blue, steel gray, and a light blue as well.

He too held a device. It was thinner than Rick's and had a crystal embedded at the tip that was the same light blue hue as his clothes. He was staring at them with what seemed like disbelief, as he pointed it at them, and it buzzed for a moment, then stopped. Percy felt a brief intrusion into his mind, but it was so quick, he almost missed it.

The man spoke again than. "Ahh…humans. Of course, it's humans." He stared down at them with sad, angry eyes. "I thought you'd been wiped out…all that effort, and you destroyed yourselves anyways. Gave in to your 'inevitable doom'. It's enough to make a man give up…for a time. The running never really stops."

Percy raised a brow at him, ignoring the unsettling throbbing from the seed that, the more he looked at it, seemed more flesh than plant. "You seem to have outdated information. We bounced back. Have you really not seen a human since Old Earth fell? How old are you?"

The red headed man adjusted his bowtie then and smirked, "Old enough, actually…right. Humans. Earth. House call. Imprisoned Meltan in a hellish crater." He looked down at his side then. "You never said you were from Earth. But I'm here now. The Doctor is in."

He strode down the steps then, past Percy and a silent, unnerved Rick. He had visibly tensed at the man's words, specifically 'Doctor', and was looking at the strange man like he knew him, but the newcomer no longer seemed to care they existed. In the palm of the redhead was a Meltan, who was struggling to stay somewhat solid in the intense heat the machine holding the Heatran gave off.

There was a familiar noise as a pink portal opened, and then closed rapidly, as Rick stepped through, leaving Percy holding the throbbing seed. "That's not a plant seed you know." The 'doctor' said as he scanned the machine with his tiny stick, and appeared to, somehow, read what it had to say about it.

"What is it then?" Percy asked, holding it away from him.

"It seems humanity is as brutal as ever. Heatran give off the most heat when they're in intense pain. What you're holding in your hand is what whoever put these poor fellows in there cut off, to keep that pain fresh, to keep the heat coming, to keep…the Meltan melted." He stared at Percy then, as if noticing him for the first time. It wasn't an unpleasant stare, nor was the man ugly. Not Percy's type, for he'd had both sexes in his time, but attractive enough. "Where am I, anyway? Location, Year, etcetera? All I found was empty tunnels on the way in."

Percy set the 'seed' down, and then summoned his Glaceon, who formed a Water Pulse in a small, spinning sphere that he could wash his hands clean with. "You're some miles west of Arcino, in the Fornia region, some giant underground crater facility. The people running this operation are called Arceans. They're a…religious group. Big on militancy."

The doctor sighed, voice dripping with sarcasm as he examined the machine's controls. "Fan-tas-tic. I love a cult. Militant, eh? Let me guess. Plenty of guns?"
Percy shrugged. "A few firearms, like pistols perhaps, but their main weapon is the staves they make from the metal here. They're capable of shooting elemental beam attacks in the form of flame, ice, or lightning. They're quite strong. Are you telling me you just appeared in this place with no idea what was going on?"

The redhead nodded again, then blinked. "That's kind of my MO. Wait. What? Are you telling me you've all already gone and surpassed projectile weaponry for beam energy?" He looked at his bare wrist the way one might look for a watch, paused for a moment, then shook his head clear of old habits.

Percy chuckled. "Most modern regions are capable of producing capture-spheres that hold their partners in their own pocket dimensions. They're quite cozy, too."

The doctor raised a brow, and then lifted his dark brown long jacket, revealing a team of his own. "You mean like these?"

The Pokéballs looked rather old, to Percy's eyes, a bit knackered, but ordinary, to him. A nice combination of red and white in the classic style. He'd quickly reacquainted himself with the modern world's capture technology, and had even begun sneaking it to those in Norstad he knew could benefit from having them. This 'doctor' and his team looked several decades off, but then, some claimed the older balls worked better than the new. He hadn't been around for that era, so he didn't know if such things were true.

"Humans who can Battle…right. That…complicates matters. Deal with that later…for now, friend Percy, white-clothed, pale-skinned Percy, you have ice types yes? I want you to have them use Ice Beam on this console here." He gestured to it, and then took several steps back.

Percy's Glaceon, who was already out and listening, used Ice Beam then. While it did cool, it evidently wasn't enough. His Beartic got involved as well then, and that was when the doctor deemed it ready. "Alright…we should be all set. L-9 would you do the honors?"

A Lucario materialized from his belt then, shaking his head as he once more became corporeal, and not energy. He gave his partner a nod, and with a motion so fast even Percy's eyes had trouble following, the console split in half diagonally. The Lucario gave his aura-bone a twirl, and it faded then. The redhead gave his friend a pat on the head, and then eyed the tanks.

"Oh…that seems to have woken them up…" He slowly turned to Percy, awkward smile on his face. The kind one makes when they know they've accidentally messed up.

His Glaceon began growling at the tanks, and Percy glanced from her, to the doctor. "What does that mean?"

"Well, do you know what happens to cold glass when it's rapidly heated?" The glass on both tanks began to crack, as the fluid holding the Heatran began to boil once more, now it was free of the twin Ice Beams. "It means run!" The doctor shouted as he bolted for the stairs and Percy sprinted after the redhead. He wasn't all that worried about stealth, for not many people were authorized to be this far down, and the roars of the pained Heatran began echoing through the tunnels as they broke free of their prison, incoherent with rage. Anyone with sense, would run from a sound like that.

"Not that I don't like exercise…" Percy said, panting after several minutes of running, "But do we have a destination in mind?"
"We do!" The doctor said, taking a sudden right. He led them into a large cavern, big enough for aircraft, and with an equally large exit, which was open. On the 'landing area' outside, little more than a slab of poorly made metal, was the sleeping form of a God. Or the closest thing Pokémon, and humans, had to one. The beast that controlled and maintained the very flow of time. Dialga.

They sprinted out of the enormous hangar, for indeed there were several aircraft which were currently stored away in the walls of the red stone common to the area. Behind them, almost forty feet of wall rapidly melted, as a pair of massive Heatran, eyes burning with purple shadows, came charging after them.

Dialga opened one eye as the doctor approached it, and Percy, who had run before with other Tamers of Legendary Pokémon, found himself suddenly cautious as he saw the sad, angry eyes of the Time Deity.

"Right…" The doctor said, as he raised a hand. The two massive Heatran prepared another Magma Storm as they rapidly approached. "This is where it gets complicated." The man snapped his fingers, and Dialga Roared.

Meanwhile…

Wes had decided to test his recently snagged Pokémon on the Arceans guarding the large, imposing energy cannons that encircled the base. Having had an interest in fossils and the creatures his ancestors had named 'dinosaurs' since he learned that was what Orre was most famous for, he knew exactly what species this Pokémon had come from. That was why he'd laughed when he saw the ID on the vest he'd been wearing, and the name the Arceans had evidently given this revived species. He'd called the Pokémon out some hours after escaping the Arcean onslaught, but quickly realized that bonding with a Pokémon like this could help turn the tide of the oncoming war.

After taking down the entire crater rim's defenses in less than twenty minutes, he knew he'd made the right choice. Oddly enough, he hadn't been tainted with Shadow, which was a nice change of pace from the ones he usually took from Arceans. He'd tied them to continued Shadow infusion for years, had even told the League, but nobody had acted on the information. Now, his home had paid the price.

He gave the raptor a scratch under his thin chin as he came trotting back, and the beast made a trilling sound that anyone could tell contained joy. "Not bad. Not bad at all. Now we go get ready to help the Meltan. This way."

The creature did something then that surprised the Trainer. It crouched low, and stared directly at him with an unnerving amount of intelligence. He wondered what exactly the Arceans had dug up, but decided to trust the inherent kindness of every Pokémon he'd ever befriended. He climbed onto the creature's back, and wrapped his arms around his neck.

They began running then, and though he was slowed by the weight, the Pokémon's speed was still, especially for a part rock type, quite impressive. They assaulted each pool quickly, and Wes called out his Espeon and Umbreon to give them a hand once they quickly found their opponents overwhelming them by disregarding any kind of battle etiquette, or rules.

There was a reason he was a top-ranked Trainer, even if he did come from the sparsely populated Orre region. He'd handled far more grunts in his time than the Church had garrisoned here.
Thankfully, this was only half of the population. The others were, he had learned after studying a map and shift schedule by one of the turrets, all garrisoned in the tunnels below, and were off-duty.

Once they were done, they could only sit and wait, until Percy disabled the heat. A few of the Nut Pokémon had, upon seeing their torturers beaten, tried climbing out of their rocky prison. The heat always melted them however, and they oozed back down into the pool of silver and eyes.

After five minutes of pacing, Wes sighed. "I'm done waiting. I'm doing what I came here to do." His Pokémon perked up at his words, which had broken the 'silence' between them. In truth, this close to the pools, the Meltan and their evolutions drowned out the chance for conversation. They sensed freedom near, and all of them yearned for it. "You three stand guard, and help them up when the heat goes off. I'll be back."

With that, he dashed into the nearest tunnel. His connections had given him a map of the complex that revealed enough of the structure to get him where he wanted to go, and nowhere else. Thankfully, it was easy enough to follow.

When the Arcean Crusaders had overwhelmed Mt. Battle, and then the entire Orre region in a few hours, and claimed the region theirs, they had taken prisoners to ensure that the 'heroes' of the region didn't stir up any trouble.

Naturally, this had meant kidnapping the girl who could see auras. Rui. Dear to both her cousin Michael and Wes, the Church had claimed that she was in a safe place, being well treated, as long as everyone obeyed the new order. Before long, what few residents the region had were suddenly giving their conquerors their hard-earned money, to take 'classes' on the cult they were now paying to be part of. Those who resisted usually conformed once they were threatened with being shipped away to a mining camp. Even in Orre, the locals had heard dark rumors of the Church's protocols in such places. War had, undoubtedly, made them worse. It always did.

Only a few had persistently resisted the Church, but it was enough for Wes to decide he'd had enough of sitting around. The disappearances had started slow, but eventually, he kept an eye on those who did defy the Church, and it wasn't long before he had tailed the black clad Task Force members to the only road that existed in this part of the desert.

Now, finally, he was here. After hearing the Meltan's cries, he doubted these people were treating her well. Humans who could do that to innocent Pokémon were the worst kind of scum. He needed to free as many people as possible.

The tunnel before him read 'Prison', but the letters were in the shape of Unown. After hearing several rumors about such things, Wes moved slowly past them, down the hall, and towards the cells, which were little more than Iron bars and melted out caves. It was oppressively hot, and the entire place stank of unwashed, sweaty human.

Forcing himself to ignore the stink, he listened, and his ears caught a hint of her voice. He knew it quite well. Wes stalked towards the noise, until finally, he found Rui's cell.

She was repeating something. Over and over, hunched in a corner of the small cage carved into the rock. As cells went, it was rather nice. A real bed. A real pillow. A toilet that evidently had been cleaned, and recently. He raised a brow as he tried to make out what she was mumbling. "Rui?"
She twitched at the sound of his voice, and began rocking in place. "I can't see them, I promise…I can't see them… I can't…"

Wes glanced at the bars, and then called out his Typhlosion. The air shimmered, and the bars melted quickly as the Pokémon turned his back to them, and snorted, causing his flames to rise. He then moved to stand guard in the tunnel, hiding low on all fours.

Wes gave the bars a second to cool, and then stepped into the cell. The entire time, she had kept repeating the same words. "Rui? It's me. I'm getting you out of here."

She stopped rocking in place, and glanced at him, eyes wide in terror. "No…please Doctor…I can't see them, I promise…I can't…"

Wes' eyes narrowed. "Doctor who?"

Rui looked back at the corner, still repeating the words. He moved to touch her, and when she didn't strike at him, he picked her up, and set her on his Typhlosion. "Typho…get her out of here. Run all the way back home if you have to. But keep her safe."

The Pokémon nodded, but followed behind his Trainer as they tried to quietly move back through the tunnels. Rui kept whispering however, and every few minutes, she'd grow louder. Typho would calm her by generating some heat from his neck, but it never stopped her mouth from moving.

They parted as they returned to the central hallway of the prison. After examining the locks he hadn't melted, Wes figured there was an electronic 'open' switch somewhere, and indeed there was. He defeated the man guarding it, who called himself a 'Bishop', and had claimed superiority to a Trainer like him. After a quick battle, Wes took the man's ID card with the bored expression of a man who'd done this several hundred times, and eventually, found the switch to open the cells. He smirked as he saw many residents of Orre stumbling free.

They each looked tired, but determined as they recognized the Snatcher, and it wasn't long before they began rushing for the exit. Wes joined them, and led them out of the tunnels. Right as they ran out, and returned to the craters of Meltan, the entire complex began to shake, and roars of pure rage echoed throughout.

Wes told everyone not fit to battle to flee, and all but a small group of Trainers did. They had Pokémon partners that had been taken, and refused to give up on them. Wes had explained that they were likely infused with Shadow now, and lent them his Snag Machine. At least until they recaptured their friends, and left this hellish place.

Once they'd left, his Espeon got his attention. The Melmetal were climbing up, forming cohesive bodies. The craters glowed with the white energy of evolution, as many of the Meltan came together to reach the next stage. They'd been unable while melted, but now, they all sought revenge.

In the end, the craters produced roughly twenty of the giant living metal beings, who began moving, unified, in each compass direction of their crater prison. They would cleanse all of it. They moved into the shaking tunnels, and exacted revenge upon the humans that had inflicted unimaginable pain upon them for decades now. Each giant had been surrounded by a crowd of Meltan at their feet, who aided their evolved kin with unified and timely Flash Cannons. Collapsed tunnels were easily fixed as they moved through the complex, but the metal used to prop them open was weak, and would eventually break if the shaking continued.
With Typho and the residents of Orre on their long way home, Wes recalled his eeveelutions, and decided to try to find Percy. He had no love for the man, but it felt wrong to abandon a fellow traveler when they'd come here together, and he wouldn't wish being captured by this cult on anyone after getting a firsthand look at their prison. Thankfully, he didn't have to look far once he climbed to the crater's rim again. The exploding hangar caught his attention, as did the unmistakable figure of Dialga, facing down two giant Heatran.

He was already moving towards the massive figures atop his raptor, but quickly realized he was too far to do anything. Dialga roared, and Wes watched as he ran. The two Heatran shrank in size as the Roar's power surrounded them, and seemed to calm them, slightly, though they still attacked with a pair of Magma Storms. He saw a Glaceon freeze the waves, and then watched as a Lucario smashed them to pieces with a single strike from a bone club that looked like it was made of pure energy.

Things seemed to calm down then, and by the time Wes had run over, the same Lucario had subdued the pair by using its aura waves to keep them calm, and somewhat docile. Percy was speaking to a red-haired man with unique fashion sense. "And they won't remember any of it?"

The man grinned. "Nope. It's like their trauma never happened. Now, all I have to do is bring them home, and their sense of time will return fairly quick. They'll have a few nightmares…but in time, they'll fade. Provided they're not disturbed."

The doctor chuckled as he saw Wes approach them, and raised a brow at his choice of mount. "Is that...what I think it is? Oh you are...gorgeous!" Wes opened his mouth to warn the stranger away, but the initially hesitant Veloraptar allowed the man to touch his snout, and then trilled as he began scratching the underside of his neck. "You'll want to get him right under the jaw, back here...that's the spot he likes best. Isn't it you beauty."

Wes raised a brow at the man. "How do you know that, exactly?"

The man winked at him as he gave the beast, whose tongue now lolled out of his razor-sharp maw, a thorough scratching. "I speak raptor."

Wes shifted, and he glanced down at the raptor's legs. Dangerous looking claws adorned each limb, perfect for gripping and tearing prey, but now, one of them was twitching, in direct time to the man's attentions. He felt himself laugh, despite the absurdity of the situation, and the looming form of the Time God above them.

Percy and Wes gave a bow as the man made his way towards Dialga, though they didn't quite know why. It seemed right. The doctor placed a hand on Dialga then and gave them a wave with the other. The two were then encased in a cube of blue energy that floated into the air, and shot skyward, where it shortly disappeared. Percy smirked, as he'd heard the strange doctor shout with glee as they vanished.

Wes raised a brow at him. "Was...was that Dialga's Tamer?"

Percy nodded. "He called himself the doctor..."

Wes' eyes slowly hardened, and he glared up at where the cube had vanished. "Doctor who, exactly?"

The Fairy King shrugged. "He never gave a name, just...doctor. Why?"

Wes went on to fill in the events he'd dealt with while Percy had chatted up strangers who seemed to be able to warp space and time as they pleased.
Once he was finished, the light blonde man shook his head, and recalled his Glaceon. "I don't think that doctor was the one your Rui mentioned...he's not tied to this place, in fact, he seemed surprised that humans still even existed on Earth."

They had begun walking again, on their way from the base. The crater now smoked from every entrance, and destruction was everywhere. Wes followed Percy, as he seemed to have a destination in mind for them. "Really? Well then who was she talking about?"

Percy glanced at him. "Like you have to ask. There's only one doctor I know of that meddles with Shadow infusion. That would have the...depraved idea of creating a place like this. You've met him, if the legends are true."

"Ein..." Wes spoke the name like a curse.

"Exactly." Percy said as he crossed his arms, and stopped. The Meltan beside him jiggled with excitement. They were before one of the larger rock formations just outside of the crater. Before Wes could ask why they'd come to stare at a rock, he got an answer.

The stone exploded outward, as a roughly ten-foot-tall hole appeared in the side of it. From it, came no less than twenty lumbering Melmetal, all surrounded by small groups of their prior evolution. Dark red drops circulated through each of their bodies, and Percy didn't have to ask where they'd came from. There was a reason humans had been warned not to anger powerful Pokémon. This was often the result. The Meltan that had been with them thus far rejoined its kin, and was soon lost in the swarm of golden hex nut heads, and silver.

Percy spread his arms as each of the giants stood before them, forming a semicircle. "Hello Melmetal! And hello Meltan as well. I expect your revenge went well, aye?"

Each of the creatures began readying an all-too-familiar sphere of normal type energy that presaged the use of a move absurdly common to powerful Pokémon like these. "Now now, no need for that...I'm Percy. This is Wes. With efforts from both of us, we freed you, and now, we'd like your help."

The balls of energy stopped growing in size, but still remained. One of the Meltan by the centermost giant wobbled forward, and Percy touched its mind.

*Gratitude for freedom. Let us live in peace.*

The Pokémon let their attacks fade, and turned then, but not before Percy spoke. "I'm afraid it's not that simple. Hear me out, please." The giant's eyes moved back to him, and waited, motionless.

Percy took the pause to speak, "I for one, am fully behind letting you all get back to what you were doing before you were imprisoned here, however, I imagine quite a few of you still yet hunger for revenge, yes? I saw...I saw the data for how many Meltan had simply fallen, dissolved to the heat. You have my condolences...as well as an opportunity to strike back at those who've been abusing you. Unova and Fornia are at war, and the east could use a supply of metal, gathered properly of course. In return for your aid, I'm told that the One Dragon intends to give you land in which to live, undisturbed, once this is all over."

The Melmetal looked at each other, and three of them wandered away, evidently not interested in revenge, only rest. Percy didn't blame them for leaving, but thankfully, the Meltan following them stayed, and began to shine, as they combined with the other swarms around the giants to form another Melmetal. That left them with eighteen.
"Good." Percy said, smirking now that he had their attention. "The lizard will work out the details with each of you. You will have your chance for revenge."

The newest Melmetal intruded on his mind then, and Percy winced. The contact was powerful, and, he realized slowly, boiling with rage for all those who'd died senselessly. *There are others. Must find them.*

"Leave that to myself, and my allies. Your prison was obvious, easily found from orbit, but if there are others, they will be harder to track. They're all likely underground. We'll begin searching for them as soon as we return to Unova." A single Meltan oozed from one of the giants as Percy spoke.

This one knows of others. Give them same agreement? Land? Home?

Percy nodded. "I'm sure the dragon won't have an issue with that. I'll use this one's memories to find the others. Now prepare yourselves…this might feel strange."

Each of the Melmetal placed their fists on the ground, and knelt on both 'knees', as they sensed what Percy was about to do. He turned to Wes then, and chuckled. "It seems this is where we part ways. Tao will move you to Orre…since apparently that's what you want. Are you sure you wouldn't prefer somewhere less…hostilely occupied?"

It was Wes' turn to chuckle. "If I wanted unoccupied, I wouldn't go east. That's where the soldiers went. My moneys on south. No Church down there."

Percy shrugged. "South of Orre, and free of Arceans eh? Well, if you really want to test the legend of the 'Dark Continent', you go right ahead. I'm bound for Unova…I've a debt to collect on." Percy offered a hand then, and Wes gave it a shake, before taking the three-point stance he'd been told, by Percy, was the best way to survive Teleporting, as it could be tricky.

He reached out to Tao, then linked with each of the Melmetal, and with the dragon's aid, Teleported all of them to Unova.

Wes was redirected to Orre with little more than a thought from the One Dragon. It was where he'd wanted to go, and he didn't mind when he reappeared in Phenac City. It was close enough, and, his ride was parked here, conveniently.

The Trainers from earlier approached him, and returned his machine. Evidently they had gotten their partners back and flown home. They had even cleared them of Shadow with nothing but the strength of their bonds, and rather quickly at that.

He'd half expected them to take the machine for themselves, but the people of Orre had come to associate such things with two particular Trainers they considered heroes. Nobody would willingly rob their remote region's icons of their ability to cleanse captured Shadow Pokémon.

Back in Unova, Percy set to work on getting the Melmetal comfortable, and it wasn't long at all until the Brain Trust began fabricating the war's first plasma swords. Only time would tell if they would be enough to shift the oncoming tide in the east's favor.
There was a knock on the ancient mahogany door that marked the entrance to the quarters that had, historically, played host to all manner of Kalosian nobility. "My Prince your, erm, Grandfather has requested your presence in the... 'space between war and peace'... He said you would know what that meant..."

"Of course he did..." Calem muttered, but the servant who'd delivered the message was already gone. He was no longer the young teen he'd been when he'd first met his 'legendary' relative. After they'd battled before most of Lumiose, he'd revealed that they shared blood, though how many generations separated them was a mystery. Realizing Lysander was likely also a relative had taken a long time to come to terms with, but it made sense, in hindsight. He too had been tall. Calem hadn't gained bulk however, just size. He'd already been tall before Xerneas had blessed him, but in the years following, he'd grown to one hundred and ninety-six centimeters last he'd checked, which admittedly, had been some time ago.

After regaining his beloved partner, the returned King of Kalos had reclaimed his Palace, and took charge of the complex and delicate system of power the Kalosians had been peacefully ruled under since the last war, three centuries past. Nobles of their region were expected to be expert Trainers, for the King had decreed that only those with strong bonds with their partners were fit to lead.

Up until the Team Flare incident, Mega Evolution had been a closely guarded secret of the Kalos nobility, several Gym Leaders, and usually the region's Champion. When he'd gone to aid the very man who made Kalos' secret power so popular with his research, Calem had gained a bad reputation with the nobles, which had included his parents. That hadn't stopped him from thrashing them, however.

He'd been given the title of Grand Duke thanks to his skills, but any influence he might've had only became significant when the King returned, and publicly revealed their blood ties. Kalos was now once more ruled by a single figure, and he'd suddenly found himself a target of every noble in the region, who had, for the past three centuries, enjoyed the absence of taxes to a giant, ill-tempered monarch.

He might've been crushed, had his Chesnaught not become his bodyguard. Surprise hit-and-run Hyper Beam attacks had become far too common, and lately, he'd been forced to stay in his room.

"Come, Chesalier. I expect we have more battles to win..." The sleeping form of his Chesnaught, which took up a large portion of his palatial quarters with his size, slowly unfolded, and the irritated, half-awake eyes of the massive Pokémon fell upon his Trainer. He opened his mouth expectantly, and received an Oran Berry.

Now smirking, and munching happily, he wiped the sleep from his eyes and lumbered after his Trainer, ready to form a protective shield around him at a second's notice. Calem glanced up at the ceiling as they walked, and were joined by the only missing member of their newly extended party of ten. Like many Trainers, he definitely intended to join the next World Tournament, since he'd missed the last one, though lately, it seemed like the next site for it would be a war zone before long. Or so the rumors said.
"Anything, Guivre?" The Noivern dropped from the ceiling in an elegant and spiraling movement that, in the dim lighting of the Palace, was hard to follow. He gave the dragon a jaw scratch as he rose up before his Trainer, and blinked his eyes once. Nobody around, this time. It seemed his route to the Hall would be clear today.

He recalled the dragon into his Luxury Ball, and continued on. The Hall of Mirrors, as it was sometimes called, was typically used, in ages past, to hold peace summits. The one that had ended the last war had been held here, and ever since, the nobles had preferred it when battling each other for political power, as they did almost daily, to further their personal agendas.

It seemed it was empty today though, save for his gigantic relative. AZ had said that, thanks to Xerneas, he too would one day grow to tower over his fellow humans, that like him, the power of the Legendary Pokémon had done more than make him immortal. He had been proven correct, despite Calem's initial skepticism. He'd hinted at some strange power related to their blood, but they'd been interrupted before he could say more, and they hadn't spoke of it since.

The King had cleaned up since his return to power, and looked eerily similar to how he had several centuries past, though his hair was definitely grayer. Calem had walked by giant paintings of the man's face numerous times in his childhood, and talking to the man himself often made things seem surreal to the young Prince.

The ancient King was staring out of one of the windows that were as tall as he was, his Floette perched on his shoulder, as usual. AZ's attire once more befit a ruler, though his young relative still looked like a Trainer, albeit a well-dressed one. He'd matched his Chesnaught's color scheme, and hadn't regretted the change.

"Good. You've come quickly...there is much to say. As you may have noticed...we have a guest." The giant man gestured, and a new figure joined them, separating smoothly from the few shadows in the room. Calem beheld the only other woman he'd ever classify as being anywhere near Serena's level of beauty, though comparatively she was still rather young, and a decade at the very least separated them in age. The more he looked, the more he realized the two women really were quite similar, though this one had sharper eyes, a satisfied smirk, and hair as red as fire.

Jessica Gladstone introduced herself with all the proper manners of one born to high society, and though she hid it well, Calem knew a Kalosian accent when he heard one. He returned the introduction with a bow, and his own list of titles. Once the niceties were done, a silent pause filled the room, and Calem resisted smirking. He knew a bit about the current Champion's sister. She was a good Trainer too, or so rumor said.

He quickly glanced between them, as his Chesnaught, sensing no danger, curled up into a spiky sphere once more to snooze while the humans talked endlessly. They both wanted him to speak first, or so it seemed, and he did. "So. What brings the youngest Kalos Queen in a decade back home, hmm? Your...crown was already claimed by another. A long time ago, actually. Last I heard, you and that new Unovan Champion were enjoying the homeland... though I expect things have changed..."

"They have." She absently ran a hand through the fiery mane, and adjusted her hat. That was when the Prince's instinct-driven eyes finally noticed the color scheme of her outfit. Black and white. Of course. Unovans never changed, it seemed. "Fornia has declared all-out war...and they're letting their Church pay for the whole thing. Their...'Crusaders' are hitting us hard...in short, my Prince, Unova calls for aid."
Calem glanced at AZ, who had resumed staring out the window. He nodded, once. Calem gave his best smile, and as always, it drew a faint flush to the woman on the receiving end of it. "Then Kalos will answer. Though what aid we give will be up to the King…"

AZ finally turned then, and regarded the woman properly for the first time since meeting her, as his gaze often drifted towards the sky. Slowly, his eyes widened. "So…the Tree of Life gave another gift…let us hope you wield its power better than her first choice…" The giant began pacing then, and the two humans watched, and waited. "Unova has ever been our ally…and in ages past, even when split, the Dragon has aided my people against the Imperium's encroachment… I will send our Prince, and a legion of our best Trainers. I will ready them myself. Will that satisfy your needs, Dragon Empress?"

The woman blinked once, and then smirked. Her voice seemed to purr as she bowed low, in the Unovan style. "Thoroughly. Thus, the ancient pact is honored again. You have our gratitude, King of Kalos."

"That's…the thing." AZ said, interrupting what sounded like the woman's exit. She seemed eager to get moving, and given the current dire situation, or what little Kalos knew of it, it made some sense. "I no longer desire to be the King of this region, indeed, even the nobles grow tired of my ancient games. My Kalos has moved on in my…absence. This is no longer my little kingdom…it's grown much larger…but it still requires a leader."

The giant turned and approached the redhead. "Send your…Dragon Emperor…to speak with me, when this conflict abides… I wish to…test his mettle. If it's good enough for your Dragon…it may be good enough for my Kalos."

Calem and Jess' eyes went wide at his words, and their implication. "I'll inform him as soon as possible. You have my word…thank you, again. Truly. It's nice to have reliable allies."

With that, and to the Prince's shock, the woman vanished in a flash of light that he'd only ever seen his Gallade use. "Did…did she just Teleport?"

AZ chuckled at the Prince's expression. "Yes…it seems the next stage of our species' evolution is upon us my young Prince…those with intensified psychic power are becoming more and more common."

His eyes began to shine with a familiar blue and white glow. "It is a trait you too possess…and before we honor our ancient alliance, I will unlock your…potential."

The Prince raised a brow. "Is it just psychic powers that have been appearing? Or are there other types as well?"

The King grinned. "Clever clever grandson. Come…summon your Gallade…we are short on time…"

Calem threw the Luxury Ball, colored green and white, into the air. "Sol! Come." He turned to his relative as his partner appeared. He'd almost gone with a Meowstic, but when he'd learned his old neighbor Serena had acquired a Gardevoir from traveling in Hoenn, a Gallade had been the only logical choice for him. "Do you really intend to hand over Kalos to the Dragon Empire?"

AZ shrugged, as he finished bumping forearms with the young, but eager Gallade. "Potentially…yes. I do have a method to my madness…but we'll deal with all of that when and if he manages to make it here...for now, focus."
Calem nodded, and with a flash, his Gallade mega evolved. Nodding in approval, the giant human met the Gallade's eye and said, "Show him."

Meanwhile, in Unova…

They were tearing the eastern forces apart. The Arcean's Crusaders were almost unstoppable, for each of them had strong teams of ten Pokémon, as well as a staff that could fire three kinds of energy. The same three that had subjugated an empire in ages past. Fire, ice, and lightning. Evidently, the Arceans brief, strange, and also completely denied capture of the One Dragon had yielded something. Most of the Arceans never had to draw their Pokémon, so outmatched were the Unovans, in those early days.

As in all conflicts, the hard toll of war separated the weak from the strong, but the eastern forces could never muster a force to match their foes in a proper battle line. Their superior weapons, literal beams of energy that could take out squads of ten humans in a single shot, had forced a hard retreat in every such conflict, and the eastern commanders who survived had been forced to adapt. The mainly militia forces had been quite effective at evacuating, though.

Every Gym Leader throughout the eastern states had, without a word from the League, acted in unison, and moved as many people as possible eastward, towards the supposed 'capital' of this new empire. Those soldiers who had been Trainers tended to excel, and many suspected they were funded by the League, for those who stood out against the invading army were somehow always well equipped.

In Texico, the east's knowledge of sailing the Texican Gulf came in handy, as the west half of the land had not held control of the waters for some time. The tides had changed after Champion Rosa and her Scales had reinforced the Texicans. After scavenging more than a few of the Church's own weapons, the Texicans of the east had forced a hard border line between both sides, one that had extended from Texico up to the center of the continent. That was where Champion Nate and his dragons ruled the air with a string of unbroken and overpowering victories.

While the Church had manufactured planes equipped for war, they proved inferior to Nate's dragons, who could fell over ten at a time with a well-placed Hyper Beam. It wasn't long before the advancing Crusaders with flying partners were organized into proper air squadrons, but superiority belonged to the dragons, who dove on the ranks of mainly ground-bound Crusaders with devastating Outrage attacks every chance they got. The front lines shifted most in the middle, and Nate was the first to lose Scales under his command when the Church had ordered a regimental shift to ice typing, and filled the sky with beams of ice.

The Unovan's new elite forces were, thankfully, hard to kill. Their armor proved invaluable, so much so that the head Professors of Unova University had granted their creators the rank of lab assistants. Eric Redwood, the leader of the so-called Brain Trust, was supposedly at that moment taking the exams to become a proper Professor, but while he did, the war raged on.

Illinowa and Tenina had fallen, willingly according to rumor, but the Kanadian border held as strong as it ever had. Their wall's strength was legend, for it had even resisted the Dragon Empire, though truthfully, Tao himself had never tried to take it. When the Dragon had led armies, they had won, and in the past Kanadia had willingly joined the Empire with the promise that their culture would be kept intact, along with their border, should the empire fall. Kanadians usually laughed, whenever 'southerners' mentioned the wall and asked after its origins. The Kanadians would then tell them, almost verbatim in each encounter, that the two hundred foot tall structure, made mostly of steel and
old world building methods, had been built 'ironically' by their ancestors in ages past. Whatever that meant.

Their northern neighbors were a bit...odd, but to their credit, they had taken in many who had begun running as soon as they heard the Arcean's 'holy army' was invading. The Kanadians found themselves reinforced by the Dragon Emperor himself, several days into the conflict. He'd led thirty-five of his heavily armored troops along the border, using the Black Death called Shruikan to eradicate entire companies of enemy Crusaders with massive Charge Beam attacks.

They eventually learned to shield themselves, but by the time Shruikan struck, he was usually gone, and the damage was already done. These men too had tried shifting to ice typing, and while effective, Shruikan would always make them regret their choice when he demonstrated that he could unleash a torrent of flame, as well as electricity. Alex charged him with helping to guard the wall, a task he accepted, for it both provided food in the way of Wailord in the icy waters of the north, and entertainment, when the Arceans would try, and then fail, to take his wall.

While the Kanadians along the massive structure appreciated the reinforcement, the new Emperor was something of an unknown, in their region. Rumor had spread, of course, of the 'first skirmish' of the war, in Unova's own territory. None had been surprised at the outcome, for Unova had always created powerful Trainers, by the dragon-load. While the new Gym Leader of Opeleucid City had undoubtedly distinguished himself, their Champion had, quite publicly apparently, dismembered one of the Prophet's own Hands by way of incineration. He never bothered correcting the tale tellers by saying it had actually been Tao who'd removed the abomination. He would've done the same if the dragon hesitated, but Tao never did.

Indeed, the dragon was proving invaluable as a commander. He had retained his Mega Form, and from Unity Tower, mentally guided the thousands of troops under his command, usually by way of mental contact. Every human he spoke with, and the soldiers under them, fought ten times harder after hearing his Words of inspiration, and though many innocents were saved by noble sacrifice, many more continued to die to the relentless advance of the Arcean's Blitz.

It was an old practice in Unova, but after several days of besieging the border wall all along their territories, the Kanadians had, at the giant black Salamence's suggestion, adorned the wall with the enemy dead. Those with weak stomachs declined to help, but there were plenty who'd suffered under the relentless march of the Church who were willing to do the grisly work. The corpses placed atop the Kanadian's wall sent a clear message. Death awaited anyone who tried to take the north, and the attacks all but ceased. Any attempts were routed whenever Shruikan would so much as scratch his neck. He had proven he could strike the humans whenever he wished, day or night, but he was defending, and that meant staying put. For the moment.

Most easterners had latched on to the news of a new Dragon Emperor, for every State had legends involving the first. The governments of each eastern State quickly reaffirmed their loyalty to the Dragon in writing, as they had quite openly supported the trade between the eastern states for years, hoping for this exact development. The people were ready to start growing again, all they had needed, was a spark.

A spark was exactly what the Dragon Emperor had created. Most didn't believe the rumors, about him taking on a Hand, alone, and living, unless they saw him in battle. The Prophet's 'limbs' had made a lasting and early impression in this war, striking many States on their own turf free of easterners, before vanishing in a hail of destruction, and usually carnage.

The rumors came to slowly be believed however, once the Scales of Balance arrived to even the
odds all across the front. Wielding plasma swords straight from a combination of science fiction and fantasy, as well as 'magic' powers and teams of incredibly strong Pokémon, the Champions were almost impossible to stop, especially when they struck in force. Rumor had it that they could even slice through the energy beams of their enemies, deflecting them from their soldiers, but nobody quite believed that one.

It took a long, bloody week for the Blitz to ground to a halt against the Scales and the invigorated eastern forces, but it wasn't long before the Church's drums of war thundered once more. The Arceans set their sights on the Ohiana region, and the straightest path towards Unova, by reinforcing the northern border Crusaders with what remained of the attempts on the Kanadian Wall, and charging once more. Conflict erupted, as the head Professor for the region commonly referred to as the 'breadbasket of the north' resisted the invaders with surprisingly effective guerilla attacks.

Professor Buckeye, the man leading the militia, and Trainers, resisting the invasion quickly became a legend. This was mostly due to the Legend of his own, which he had summoned. As the days had begun turning colder, everyone knew winter was coming, and in the north, it had come early. Though the fact that a Suicune was nearby may have had something to do with the sudden shift in weather. At the very least, the snows were bad enough to make the Crusaders pause. Those who were sent out anyway, returned with ice burns, and tales of a ferocious 'snow demon'. If they returned at all.

With the north shutting down for the oncoming cold, and the border being held by Unova's Champions, Alex had taken his comrades to where they had been needed most, first. With a brutal takeover of the far north-western state of Kodiak, all the way up in the arctic, the Yukon and Takoma regions had joined the Kanadian soldiers, who had slowly been gathering on their new, unwalled western border, ready to reinforce it.

Winter was a constant in those lands, but given that these were the harshest months, the Arceans in the far north west seemed content to wait in their metallic bunker-fortresses along the border once they'd taken control of the sparsely populated regions. The Church, in truth, technically owned part of the Kanadian's wall, and were bombarding the men manning it on both sides. The call for help had gone out, and Tao had sent an answer.

Arcean Northern Command – The Border of the Yukon and Kodiak Regions

Their black cloaks made them stand out against the snow, though thankfully, with a little psychic manipulation from their Emperor, they were able to walk above the waist deep, or higher, drifts. Each of their feet glowed blue as they walked, yet unlike most armed forces, they left almost no trace of their passing.

The Arceans, naturally, had them surrounded in short order, popping up from the snow around the entrance to their aesthetically simple tall, round fortresses. Most of their forces had Beartic as partners, for little else could survive this far north, and still be strong enough to meet Church standards. Their leader, the only man with a gold-furred hood surrounding his white T-visor, stepped forward, his staff raised. It was quite imposing, for a mass-produced weapon, and the black-cloaked figures knew, this was the type of man who 'modified' his weaponry for 'effectiveness in battle'.

"State your purpose here, strangers." He said, leveling the stave at them. Evidently, this far west, the Arceans hadn't yet heard about the east's 'secret weapons'. That, would be their undoing.

One of the cloaked figures stepped forward, a woman, judging by the shape hidden under the
strange, almost leathery garment she seemed to be wearing. It was entirely black, and hid much of
the person underneath. The woman spoke, and what could be seen of her mouth beneath the bone-
white helmet, which sported a tail of blue material from the back, was smirking. "Haven't you heard?
There's a war on."

The wind gusted then, and even the heavy leather-like cloaks flapped in the ferocity of the arctic
blast. The strangers didn't seem to notice, though. After the heat and intense training of the Swamp in
summer, arctic blasts were refreshing. What they wore beneath their cloaks was bone white armor,
with some sort of black suit beneath the molded bones, and protecting the joints. Evidently, it made
moving the incredibly heavy dragonbone less arduous.

When it came to headwear, some of the cloaked figures had gone with various Trainer hats, always
in a mix of black and white coloring. The one leading them however, needed no hat. She drew back
the leathery hood, and her hair billowed like fire in the intensity of the wind as she raised her blade,
and ignited it. The Arcean did the same with their weapons, as they switched from ranged to melee.
"Come, Champions…we fight!" The low hum of fifteen or so plasma swords burning to life filled
the air, and each gave off a pale blue glow against the snow beneath them. The one leading them
narrowed her Serperior-esque eyes against the wind, as she marched forward with purpose. "In the
Emperor's name."

Chaos erupted, as the Crusaders found their beams of energy, regardless of type, sliced in half as
each of the cloaked figures bisected the attacks of those who had not prepared for close combat.
Then, the Scales fell upon their enemies, and gave no quarter. Nearby, a similar conflict had broken
out. Alex had split his group of thirty-five into three units, and given command of the third to the
leader of the Norstad Trainers Percy had called up, a man by the name of Bjalfari. His group was
more of a motley combination, as his people used steel weapons, and the Scales among them had
plasma blades.

After a brief battle, Alex had allowed the eager Norstadder to craft his own plasma blade, since he'd
been using a longsword anyways. He knew how not to cut himself, which was valuable, as many
were still adjusting their combat styles to avoid accidental loss of limb.

As the three giant monolithic structures fell to the Scales, the call went out to the Kanadians behind
them. It took almost two weeks from that initial encounter, during which much of the rest of the war
was stuck in a freezing, bloody stalemate. Alex led his forces all across the north-western territories,
and reclaimed them for the Empire. As soon as the sparse regions were claimed and manned with yet
more Kanadians, he rushed to aid the Kanadians on the border wall that had, thus far, been
bombarded from two sides.

Over the course of a day, he and his Scales had eradicated the soldiers north of the wall with brutal
efficiency, losing not a single member of their company. This was namely thanks to Jess' skill with
using Recover, and the Emperor's refusal to let his comrades die. More than once he'd had to channel
energy through his Chakras, and unleash a storm of psychic power on their foes. Confusion and
terror had gripped the Crusaders, and their terror was mercifully ended by his Scales. That night, not
one of the Scales had joined the celebrations of the men who were no longer besieged, and evidently
forgotten this far out west.

Taking the northern areas had been easy enough, and they'd taken several hundred soldiers as
prisoners before they were through. None of the Champions turned super-soldier had yet
experienced true, pitched battle against the Crusaders who, as it turned out, were just as effective in
melee as they were from a distance. That hadn't kept them from being cut down like wheat before the
burning plasma of the Scales, and after seeing, and often causing, such horrific wounds the former Champions had recoiled at what they had wrought. In the end, the battlefield had been littered with cauterized limbs and bisected human. What bugged Alex most though, had been the smell. He could still scent it with every breath, and resisting the urge to hurl was growing tiresome.

That night, as they sat within one of the many barracks that lined the interior of the Kanadian Wall, a familiar voice came to each of them.

"Now you know the horrors of war, my Champions. I apologize…truly…I could not prepare any of you for this."

Alex, for his part, had been wearing the same grim 'smirk' since ordering the end of the bloody conflict. His body count had, easily, outstripped those under him as he'd been in the vanguard, and he'd gone quite quiet after they'd returned. As the Sage's words echoed in their heads, he stood, and addressed them all. "Those of you who wish to leave…may do so. None of you signed up for…for that…and I expect that I, and those under me, will have to experience that kind of senseless slaughter quite a few times before we're done. We're the strongest soldiers the east has…which means our body counts will be large indeed. This is your chance to avoid a future of blood and death."

The gathered humans looked around, and his grim look faded as none moved to leave. He went quiet then, expressionless as he spoke softly. "Run, you fools…avoid this…you still have a chance…"

One of his Scales stood then, and Alex recognized him as a League Challenger who he'd sent on to the Dragonspiral Tower, and had then apparently made his way to the Swamp. His armor was much the same in general body design as the rest of them, but his helmet had horns that swept up and curved, not unlike Tao's.

The man, whose name was Nikolai if Alex recalled rightly, saluted him then, by pounding his right fist across his chest, and against his heart. "We already got this speech, Redwood. You weren't there for it…but we knew what we were signing up for. We've had plenty of chances to leave before now…and we haven't. We're fighting for the Empire, for the chance of peace. If that means bloodying my hands on those overzealous Arceans, so be it. They started this…they burned Colville, attacked a crowd of innocents in our own capital by enslaving the Forces of Nature, and even had the nerve to bind our Dragon, and try to use his power against his own people."

The others stood then, and the Emperor felt each of their eyes on him as the man continued. "I will never enjoy what we had to do today…I know their faces are going to haunt me. Forever. If it means my family stays safe though…I'm okay with that. I'm trusting you to lead us sensibly, so we don't have to do this too often…so if there must be battle…let us make it swift."

Alex glanced around at each of them, and saw not one single eye waver. "Very well…but understand this…these weapons, this armor, they are going to be central to what the Scales become when and if this conflict ends…you will never be free of them. The only way out of this little group of ours will be death, and it likely will not be a peaceful one…this is your last chance to leave."

None took it.

He felt the Sage address him, specifically. "Heed their advice, student of mine. Revel not in battle, but accept the necessity of it."

Alex looked at each of them once more as he replied mentally, "I understand the necessity. I am
Dragonborn…I have a better idea of what that means, now. I need soldiers who also understand… and it seems that these wonderful Trainers do…thank you, for training them so well."

He heard the Sage chuckle. "You're quite welcome…it was difficult, and without Instruct we never would've come close to giving an even hundred…but it seems it was all worth it. I'll have more for you before long. Many more." With that, the connection ceased, and the Scales retired for the evening.

The next day, Tao gave them new orders. It seemed the Arceans were once more fortifying for a hard push straight for Unova, through Ohiana. The winter storm had finally let up, and it was rumored that Pravus himself was leading the attack, alongside no less than ten of his Hands.

---

**The Border Between Urbe Monachus and Ventosus**

With the reinforced border between Kanadia and the blackened northern Fornia region taken care of, as Shruikan claimed he could guard the entirety of the wall easily thanks to his speed, Alex moved his Scales to join with the defenders in Ohiana. Hilbert and Hilda had been given the northern parts of the border line, and along with Nate, Hilda had kept the center from collapsing. She had evidently, at some point before the conflict, gone through the same training her brother and Alex had, one Champion among many who had been Instructed in the Swamp.

Hilbert had drawn the short straw, and had been given the northernmost area, the very one Pravus now intended on charging through. The Champion turned General hadn't been idle, though. They had, while the storm raged, built several underground hide-outs for the inhabitants of the region, who were mainly farmers, not fighters. That didn't mean they'd been short on volunteers though. Many had fallen however, in the early hours of the Blitz, and until Professor Buckeye arrived, the local forces had been in the process of being routed.

As Alex brought his combined group of Scales in, he realized that Tao had called in as many special units to this area as possible. The rest of the Norstad forces were already here, and it was mainly they and the Scales who had done the fighting thus far for the defense of Ventosus, the largest city bordering the Great Lake. Neither group had minded the cold winds or heavy snowfall. Newly reinforcing them were Trainers from what he assumed was Kalos, judging by their clothing. They were a small group, but as he looked closer, he recognized several faces. Old or semi-retired Gym Leaders who had been all too eager to come to the aid of their Unovan allies. It seemed Buckeye was leading them, as he appeared to know them, and Alex became more convinced that all old people knew each other. Not that it was a bad thing, given their circumstance.

He met with Hilbert, and found that he too had not lost anyone in his squad yet. This was mostly because they had, for the majority of the early weeks of the war, been stuck in a blizzard. Festivus would have already begun, had a war not been raging. Ventosus had the unique benefit of bordering the Great Lake, as well as the Kanadian's wall, and their skirmish lines extended south from the lake's shore.

Hilda had, apparently, sent word that she was coming from the south, but thus far there had been no news. The rumor was that the central fighting had suddenly flared again. She'd likely been distracted. They weren't alone though, for Kanadia's Champion, who'd diverted from Alex's squad as they'd passed over his sea-bound home island, had brought his own battalion of skilled Trainers from the icy north to reinforce Buckeye as well.

Alex noted that everyone bowed when he entered the command tent, even the League-employed
Professor, who had no reason to, as far as he knew. That was going to take getting used to. Having been mostly among trusted friends who had dropped the 'yes, my Emperor' nonsense on day one, he was still getting used to having authority, and having people many years his senior acknowledge it.

He sensed the Dragon as he took his place at the rounded table, and had to resist smirking. He felt a current of psychic energy between Tao's imposing mental presence, and his belt. Arthur joined them then, sitting beside his Trainer at the rounded, foldable metal table.

"You again have my gratitude for coming. I do not forget my friends and allies. Should we prevail, you will not regret joining us. Now then, what spies we do have recently confirmed that the Prophet is in Urbe Monachus. A city that, judging by its name, will have no shortage of his followers." The Dragon went quiet for a moment, presumably to deal with something on his end. "We are expecting him to come to us much the same way the Blitz did. He will be fast, relentless, and if he gets through our line, he could devastate many of our farmer's land. The less damage he does now, the easier recovery will be. With that said, we will likely never have a better chance than now to strike him down, and that is why I have gathered you here. Thor will engage him first, as he has experience battling the man in close combat, and Mjolnir can certainly do damage."

The red-bearded giant with gleaming skin smirked. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, but he seemed focused on the moment. "I may have to break out mine second hammer for this." He chuckled, and then elbow nudged Percy, who was to his right.

Alex, who had removed the imposing dragonbone helmet, raised a brow at the demigod. "You have two? I thought those stories were made up."

The God of Thunder laughed, and the booming sound echoed loudly in the ears of those gathered. "I usually only use one because it is more of a challenge! But against that one...yes, I think two should do."

Percy chimed in then. "Just how many bloody hammers do you have anyways?"

Thor just winked at him, and laughed again. The others gathered seemed to sigh. He was, thus far, enjoying this war a bit too much. Not that they minded. When he exercised his boredom, enemy troops died. Every little bit helped.

The group of gathered leaders was interrupted then, as a courier entered the tent. "Sorry to disturb sirs, my Emperor, but you...you need to hear this. It's Pravus." Tao remained quiet, and his Tamer had a feeling the dragon already knew what was going on. The courier produced a miniaturized TV screen then from his giant, square backpack. The 'Unovan Army' as it was being called, didn't have much of a standard uniform yet, but the color scheme was to be expected, and this man was no exception. His heavy leather coat was primarily white, but underneath, his clothes were shades of black, with more white as well. At the very least, they blended with the snow, and could, like most modern clothing, be turned inside out for longer use, or a change of color.

The screen displayed a feed direct from the Arcean's Church-run media network that was considered mandatory viewing for all 'loyal followers'. Through it, the people living, working, and even flourishing, despite the current 'conflict', were given a steadily monitored version of events as the Church displayed their 'Enlightened Crusade' for all to see from monitors that were in every home, workplace, outpost, work camp, or even ship. The Prophet had ensured he would always have an audience.
In reality, what was displayed was indeed battle cam footage, but only scenes that did not contain 'subversive content' were ever allowed to be shown. One of the Prophet's own Hands was in charge of making sure nothing slipped into the public's attention, and her skill was legendary. Despite numerous hacking attempts, she'd thwarted any and all content that would display the war for the atrocity it really was.

Rumors still spread of course. Of camps, full of civilians from central states that wanted no part of any of it. The Prophet himself often addressed such rumors, live on his own network, and it demonstrated to his people that he was indeed listening to their concerns, and knew what to say to keep them loyal. If his charisma ever failed, there were always PokéMeters on hand for 'private sessions' as well as people who knew how to use them properly.

It was a touted fact that the Prophet's PokéMeter was different from others, and the Church considered it a holy relic, infallible in its accuracy. All who beheld it agreed, there had to be a touch of Creation in that machine. Only one man had ever successfully used it, or so the legends claimed.

The screen showed the Prophet in yet another of his 'private chats' with his people, and the PokéMeter in question sat before him. The gathered eastern forces exchanged glances. It was radiating what could only be Light energy, and as Tao sensed the thoughts of his allies, a pair of golden, similarly glowing eyes manifested above the table they'd gathered at.

The eyes flew into the screen then, and reproduced the video's feed, but in a four-dimensional manner that, no matter what angle you looked at it from, was centered properly, as it had been on the screen. It gave them all a much clearer look at their opponent, and they realized, he was on a presumably mobile set, made to look like his 'home quarters'. With their unique display angles, they could see the city around it. A city teeming with the all too familiar T-visored faces of the Church's own armed forces.

An alarm rang outside their tent, as the military was mobilized by a direct order from the Dragon. It did nothing to impede the leader's view of the scene though. The opening theme music, which strangely lacked the edited in title that usually accompanied this ridiculous 'show', finally finished, and the Prophet smirked at the cameras.

"Hello again, loyal followers...as is expected in time of war, there are many questions, and each day, more arise. I'll do my best to answer your concerns, going by majority. Many of you have called your Church, warning of a massive fire, raging in the north. Worry not." He winked at the camera. "Forests must sometimes burn away the old, Deadwood so that newer, better trees may grow from the ashes." He smirked, and gestured with a purple, hand-fitting gauntlet that was part of his standard 'war outfit', at what was presumably an image that remained empty to the easterners sneaking a peak. "Now, it is true this blaze is particularly large; however, our land has always had enormous fires, and it has always recovered. Your cities will be protected by our strongest water Trainers, and those of you who live in the afflicted area will be relocated, as soon as possible. Until then, we have many Optimal Org building facilities that will not only house you, but allow you to contribute to the cause as well." He paused, to enjoy one of his notoriously long tea sips, common to his broadcasts.

"Slave labor." Professor Buckeye snarled, before spitting on the dirt 'floor' of the command tent. "The only people who live in forests like that are people tryin' to escape notice. The Church'll tak'em back all right, but they'll be shipped to a mining facility within a week." He shot a glare at Percy. "They've been doing the same to our people, the ones they captured, but in far worse conditions. It's only grown worse as their sources of metal vanish."

Percy shrugged. "I consider the lives of Mythical Pokémon above those of humans who have
absolutely no right to claim they're 'more important' after how they've been treated." He gave the Professor a glare of his own, and the older man flinched at the ice within it. "You haven't seen what I have. Every facility finds a new way to...sicken me."

"Relax, both of you." Alex said, and his voice cut through the growing argument the Professor was forming. He raised a brow at the now unhelmeted Emperor. "We'll save all of them. Percy, you yourself told me that the number of remaining camps is becoming 'manageable'. Finish freeing the Hex Nuts, and then focus on freeing our people. It's going to take time to find the camps anyways, let alone infiltrate them."

One of the fliers from Valaskjalf, the right hand of the Chief, who had better things to do than talk endlessly, spoke then. "We have found several, Dovahkiin. My people alone could free all of them."

Alex smirked. "I don't doubt it...but you're too valuable to send in alone. What if they ambush you? What if they manage to capture your mounts, infect them with Shadow. You really want them to have that kind of power? In the winter? No. Patience. Scout their defenses, learn how many Crusaders the Church has deigned to put on guard duty, and then we will give you enough firepower to overwhelm them in one swift attack. And realistically, by the time we set that up, Percy will likely be done. He's rather fast."

"That he is..." Buckeye grumbled. "Fine, but just remember, the longer we take, the more of our people break...many might even turn. These are center region dwellers after all, and bowing to the invaders is easier than resisting their new order."

Tao rumbled then, filling their heads. "The center regions have always chosen the path which grants the most stability, as it suited them. In war, they turned the tide always, and often, and kept both east and west from obliterating each other more than once. Do not underestimate their cleverness. Now quiet, he speaks."

The Prophet lowered his stein full of...whatever he was drinking. It certainly didn't look like 'tea'. He wiped away the red stain on his mouth, and grinned at the camera with what seemed like genuine, slightly mad, amusement. "Now that's addressed, let us move on to current events! Behold!" A disembodied sound that, for lack of a better description, sounded like lasers from a sci-fi movie, played as the Prophet made a grand gesture, and the set folded down, revealing the entirety of the scene.

Tao cursed, loudly, and his irritation was felt by all of them. Behind the charismatic ruler, was a large group of seemingly normal people. They had the look of people who did not like where they currently were, but were here because the large men with armor told them to accompany them. Or be dragged.

"Long have I denied that the policy of disconnecting from family members who leave the Church, quietly or not, exists. My enemies would have you believe that this old, and admittedly abhorrent practice is still very much enforced. The truth, however, is that the only people my Church orders cut off, are those who are traitors to the Fornian Alliance. These people, gathered here before you, had relatives who were chosen by one of my own Hands to live in Unova, and try to show these backward primitives an enlightened way of living. Instead, their relatives largely turned traitor, and tried spying on us...and we all know what happens to spies, unfortunate as it may be. This...is war."

The Prophet gestured then, and a blade of pure dark type energy formed in his hand. He leveled it at the crowd of guilty-by-relation civilians, and stared into the camera. "Not all of the traitors died,
however…” He grinned. "Many came home, to be forgiven…Purged of their sins, you might say."

His free hand gestured, and each of the eastern leaders flinched as they beheld what a Purged human really looked like. "Behold, those touched by the Light of Arceus! They have ascended to a new form of being, and will now serve the Church more devoutly than ever before!"

The humans in question lumbered onto the scene then, which had turned out to actually be placed on a raised dais, surrounded by Crusaders, as the Prophet delivered his almost daily 'chat'. It was large, as it had much to fit, and it seemed recently made, but their view was too focused to see much of the city beyond. It certainly looked like Urbe Monachus, going by the ever-present ever-darkening clouds.

One of the relatives of the Purged cried out as they saw what their loved one had become. As they came into clearer focus, one could see their pale, white eyes, and almost corpse-like gray skin. They moved as if on strings, mouths hanging open, and each breath rasping in their throats.

The woman who'd shrieked was immediately enveloped in Shadow, and then vanished, with but a wave from the Prophet's weapon. "Those who are guilty of Crimes and dark Sins cannot help but flinch at the sight of those touched by the Creator! Rejoice for them, for they have experienced Divine Truth…though it cost them their sight. They will still be used effectively, for the furtherance of our divine Mission!"

The gathered Crusaders around the dais, in one uniformed motion, rested their imposing staves in the crook of their left arms, and began to clap in perfect unison. The result was applause that definitely sounded forced.

"Now, you may be wondering why I have gathered all these people here. As it turns out, the Enemy enticed these people with promises of freedom for their families. He and his psychic Serpent are tyrants indeed, for now, he cannot fulfill his promises. I possess their families, and to be sure we have no heretics or traitors among them, I will be personally Monitoring them over the next few hours, one by one, until their Crimes are revealed, and the traitors among them are Judged." He gave the camera a look then. "As Meter sessions are considered sacred, and one's privacy within one Divinely protected, we will not be airing them. Until then, my loyal followers, enjoy your regularly scheduled cultural entertainment, developed here, in Fornia."

The scene vanished then as the feed turned off, and the Light faded from the TV, though Tao's mental presence did not. The screen now displayed a movie, a generic superhero tale that, in actual fact, starred Rosa as the protagonist. Which meant it had been made in Unova. Alex heard Hilbert sigh, as he watched. He'd starred in several movies himself, in his time, and reportedly loved acting. The past few years had been focused on training however, as the World Tournament once more approached.

Tao's voice echoed again in their minds. "I received a report while we've been talking…as it turns out, Pravus does indeed have the families you promised to free Alex, but most of our spies evaded capture. The only Purged are those he showed us…probably. Some may have chosen suicide over capture, and some might have simply run off. Most, however, are reportedly safe. This means his little show was meant for us to see…their network has never been that easy to access."

"So it's a trap." Percy said, frowning. Thor nodded in agreement. "He's baiting you, Redwood, but, those private sessions are probably going to leave those innocent people worse off than the Purged. Somehow, he has access to a Light wielder. Shouldn't that be impossible, serpent?" He said, looking
"No…the Alpha's Light works and responds to those who open themselves to it. For psychic types, they can open their energy pools, and absorb it from the general flow of the universe. Fighting types tap into it by embracing their emotions, and pushing their power past its limits. Not unlike Legendary Pokémon who also use Light energy. For normal humans however, at least in this era, devout belief may have a similar enough effect, enough to be usable. The Light cannot be used to kill senselessly, but it can most certainly purge a human of thoughts and beliefs another human may consider to be 'corruption'. This is very hard to do though, as the human in question must have both unshakeable trust in the Alpha, and a righteous heart. Whoever Purged those people has been practicing for a while. They're just sentient enough to be profitable. That is no accident. That's practice."

The Dragon Emperor spoke then, as Alex put the helmet on once more, and the bluish-purple eyes flared to life. "And you said there is no way to save them?"

The dragon radiated genuine sorrow. "No…what the Light burns away, it burns away entirely, if not properly shielded. It surged through their brain's circuitry. That doesn't grow back, not without treatment anyways, and given the Arcean standard of living for prisoners, they will likely deteriorate over time, if they haven't already."

There was a low rumble in the tent that radiated from their Emperor. The dragonbone sections had begun to glow. Fused by the Voice with elemental Plate shards common enough in the lands of Norstad, Germania, and Kalos, they acted similarly to the crystals. Alex had hidden his in a safe place once he realized he could evolve his partners by using parts of the armor. His set had been customized specifically with his team in mind, and it gave his outline a unique glow of their many colors.

The light hardened into a proper Aura shield as the dragon energy in the bones bent the other types to its indomitable will. "Those people are only there because I gave prisoners a chance to be decent humans…they're going to become little better than vegetables, because of my kindness." He looked around at his gathered allies. "I don't know about you all, but I'm not going to let it happen. I'll charge Monachus alone if I have to. I guess what I'm trying to say is…who wants to come with me?"

"Aye, I'll come. And I'll bring enough wind to fill the sail of that ego of yours." Buckeye said, smirking. "I only chatted with your granduncle a few times…but I never got the impression the dark rumors were true. I've seen what his wife looked like. Do you think he'd approve of you charging into the enemy's headquarters?"

Alex smirked. "Not at all. He'd say it was a 'damn fool suicide mission', or something. And he'd keep saying it, all the way there, until he saw people in danger. That's when he'd become a Trainer, and try to save them. He was too good. That's what got him involved in their business in the first place. I guess it runs in the family…"

Percy chuckled. "I'm out. I have things to do. You have fun fighting in a city though, Redwood. Maybe after, you'll understand why I forbid them in my region." Thor and the Articuno Rider gave him a look.

"Valaskjalf is as much a city as any-" The rider had begun to speak, but Thor raised a hand.

"It does not matter. Norstad will regrow regardless, and eventually, the humans will form cities. You know this, Fairy King. You are the one who lengthened their lives by lifting the technology ban."
Percy gave the flame-haired 'god' a blank stare. "I made a promise, didn't I." He stood then, and left with a sigh.

The Rider stood as well, shaking her head. "I have camps to scout. Good luck, Dovahkiin."

Thor stayed, grinning as he said, "Whatever we find in that city, I shall smash. Two hammers!" He left then to go prepare for the imminent glorious combat, and kept laughing all the way to his own tent, his loud voice still very much in their range.

"Tao will be ready to join us by way of Teleport, if necessary. And if they block that, somehow, he can also just fly over. Many like to forget, but he can ignite his tail still. It just makes it sore, apparently." He smirked, and the remaining leaders chuckled. "Go then, you know your assignments…the Scales can handle this with Norstad's aid."

They each departed then, and all along the line, the word went out. Another strike was coming for Ohiana, and both sides had brought their best. What the north did not know though, was that communications had been cut in the center and southern regions, all the way down to Texico. The Church was leading another simultaneous offensive, and had begun to attack before the Prophet had. It was good strategy, as those areas had, thus far, held the longest under the onslaught.

Alex went to his own tent, and loaded his cloak's various ball holders with many of the partners he had captured in the past, and recently begun training. The old training bracers his original six had used had been passed on, and now he slotted in those who had proven themselves strong in the many battles he faced daily. There were always Scales willing to spar with him, which was nice, as they were usually as strong as his trainees. Sometimes, stronger.

Percy had apparently been consulted for the cloaks as well, and had somehow managed to create a link between one's PC boxes, and the small four-pronged metallic ball holders that lined the interior of the dragonhide cloaks the Scales wore. Once a Trainer put their partner's ball in, they would be ready to be retrieved from their PC, and if the cloak was damaged in battle and the sockets with it, they would remain safe, though their ball would need to be retrieved physically at a Pokémon center.

Naturally, due to the expensive nature of this new and almost absurd technology, only the Scales had been outfitted, and many among them had begun training more partners to fill their cloaks. It was always nice to have backup on the battlefield, if they needed it. Alex hopped onto Blaze, once he was ready, and he'd memorized where each of his partners were with his new, strange mental abilities to compartmentalize basic information in massive quantities.

It had been a while since he'd ridden his Charizard, and he was surprised at how wide his neck had become over the past few months. He bore his Trainer, armor and all, into the air with ease, and roared into the sky as he ascended to the next level with a flash of red. Echoes came from the Pokémon of the other Scales, and Hilbert joined him on his Braviary. Chari followed as well, and then the three Unovan's squads ascended after them, each on unique mounts, though there was some species overlap of course.

A horn sounded to their west, and they saw Thor, riding what looked like an iron chariot, pulled by two flaming Gogoat, soaring through the air just above his loyal soldiers. Each of those was armed with a sword and shield, and covered in golden armor that was from the same culture that had created Thor's regalia, judging by aesthetics. They were all mounted atop a Rapidash with blue flames for manes. Though the breeds of Norstad retained their fire, their home region had made them considerably more burly than their kin across the planet. That, and their additional pair of legs, for a
total of six, and evidently, more speed. Their supposedly immortal riders roared as they followed after the Thunder God, and once they left the camp, just outside of Ventosus, they spread out in a proper 'flame wall', as they called it. The Scales joined them, alongside the other fighters from Norstad.

It was a short trip to the enemy, and they knew they were seen long before they came up to the Sippi river. Thor's men leapt it with ease, as did the Scales. The normal Norstad forces, most of whom had thus far kept pace on foot, steamed in the cold night. Hot as they were though, they knew that entering that river would mean death. It was still flowing, despite the cold.

Their leader, Bjalfari, stepped forward then, and summoned his Wailord. A generally unchanged species across the world's oceans, the massive creatures had the fecundity of rabbits. This was good, for many ocean dwelling Pokémon were indeed carnivores, and had limited berries to draw from as an alternative. The men climbed atop the creature quickly, and with one flap of its limbs, it crossed the river that all but bisected the continent. They still had to sprint along the slippery length of its back, but none of them had too much trouble.

The sky above them seemed red, which meant it was dawn, or dusk. Given the nearly perpetual cloud cover that was becoming darker by the day, time had become wobbly for those who'd not seen the sun, only battle and snow, for over a month now. Thor was the brightest object for miles, but Alex wasn't concerned. They'd crossed the river. If the Arceans wanted to stall them, they'd lost their best chance.

Another horn from Thor split the air, and the Rapidash riders sped up to attack speed, leaving their mortal comrades even further behind. Eventually, they saw why. Urbe Monachus lay before them. It didn't have much in the way of a skyline, being more of a spread-out grid like deal, but they didn't have to wonder where the Prophet's dais was.

A recently made 'pyramid' of circular edifices, each of which seemed to hold yet more Crusaders, was lit up like a beacon on the city's skyline. A shield of blackish purple energy appeared seemingly from nowhere at the edge of the city limits, where it met the urban sprawl that was, evidently, abandoned. The riders charged through, doing their best not to cause wanton destruction. There would be plenty of that once they got into the city.

Thor leapt from his chariot and smashed both hammers into the shield. It wavered, and then reformed itself. A voice rang out above them.

"Ah yes, the 'thunder deity'. I was hoping the Dragon would send you to me...and with all your precious warriors no less. You haven't yet seen what my Crusaders can do, have you? This weather...inconvenient for war maybe, but not for the determined workers of the Church. I wish to negotiate, Asgardian. Send in your Emperor."

"Not alone!" Thor shouted, smashing Mjolnir into the shield again. Cracks across the opaque purplish darkness formed where it struck, and lightning moved across the entirety of it in seconds. "Your defense is not so great that it can withstand me, worm...but if ye wish to parlay, I'll...resist killing your men. For a time..."

The Scales caught up to the host of the Thunder God then, at the edge of the shield. They'd moved in formation, and Blaze had kept pace with them. "By all means..." The Prophet's voice continued. "Bring all your little friends...we've been expecting them." The shield vanished then, and without its opaqueness obscuring their vision, even to their psychically enhanced eyes, they saw now what lay
beneath.

Crusaders lined the main avenue into the city, on each side of the street, where normally citizens parked their vehicular transport. None were around today however, in fact, there was no sign, physical or mental, of anyone, aside from the hardened minds of the Crusaders. They waited for the warriors on foot, and then moved together, through the city, weapons drawn, but relaxed.

"This be most definitely a trap…" The crimson-haired Asgardian growled under his breath.

Alex nodded in agreement. "Look at their mouths." The mental words came from Jess, and as he did, his glacially slow to awaken anger, twitched. He knew his smirk well, and whether by individual practice or hidden holoprojector, it was plastered on the face of every helmetless officer they passed.

---

Alex ignored it, after a mental nudge from the First Dragon, and continued onward, pretending to ignore the armed enemies around him. He was tense though, and he knew it. It was more due to the cold than anything, as it was low enough in temperature for ice to have formed over the smirking soldier's armor and visors.

The temperature only lowered as they neared Pravus' monument to the effectiveness of forced labor. The laborers were, like the city's civilians, evidently hidden, likely by dark type energy. Only Merlin's power had, to Alex's knowledge, been able to see through such things before.

Pravus stood atop the dais, at the end of the only ramp that allowed access to each rim, and of course, the top. "We have a special treat today, loyal viewers." Alex, Jess, Hilbert, Bjalfari, and even Thor sighed in unison, along with their squads and assembled fighters. The Prophet glared at them, and then smiled, continuing on with his speech.

"It seems the Dragon Emperor wishes to have a word about our last broadcast, and being the peaceful man that I am, I've decided to hold a summit, here, in the city of our most devout monks!" He gestured then, and suddenly, those with psychic senses knew exactly where the civilians and laborers were.

The city had a fair amount of high-rise buildings for one of the smaller cities on the continent, and atop each of the lit buildings, was the population. They each appeared to be wearing the same blank white robes, adorned only with Arceus' symbol, and nothing else. He felt Tao's revulsion then, and the Dragon's voice echoed among his troops. "They are…they are all Purged…" Righteous fury at the sheer amount of wasted, discarded life spread through each of them, and Thor twirled his hammers as he shouted at the Prophet.

"Oi! You and I have a score to settle, Vul Sos. And I am more than pleased to be able to smash your foul face live, on your own bloody show!" The Asgardian bolted forward with the speed of a lightning bolt, and a pair of massive hands, formed of pure dark energy, and shaped like a Darkrai, grabbed the heads of each. Thor pushed him across the dais slowly, grinning as his golden muscles strained under his battle armor. It was Asgardian tech, and was barely distinguishable from his skin in color.

"See what your beloved Prophet really is, Formians!" He shouted, and Pravus made a cutting gesture with his own hand. True to form however, 'technical difficulties' had begun as soon as Thor charged. For once, it hadn't been entirely untrue, as the lightning from the god's presence was making the tech atop the dais go wild.
"Look." Jess said in his mind. "The energy. I saw it last time, but I wasn't sure…it's definitely a
Darkrai, but those eyes-" "Are human." Alex finished. They'd been disguised by the usual
invisibility of the Pokémon's form which seemed to have been merged to the back of Pravus in an
all-encompassing shield. "The question becomes then…whose eyes are those…"

He had the thought at the same time the Dragon did. "I will show the Chief, do not move your gaze."
Thankfully, Pravus and the dual-wielding Thunder God were trading blows, and had, after several
minutes, each gained grins of genuine amusement. They were both powerful fighters that rarely, if
ever, had a chance to go all out.

Tao's voice returned a moment later. "We were correct in our suspicions. The Chief was deeply
shocked by the sight of that Darkrai, and her eyes…there is only one place in the world that has,
ever, successfully created, and fused with, the Pitch-Black Pokémon." He paused for effect, and
spoke then only to Alex, Hilbert, and Jess.

"There is a reason the lands on the continent to our south were given the title of 'Dark Continent'. It's
mostly covered in jungle, though the coast is taken up by Rio's size, or rather, the ruins of it. It is a
place where dark types and grass types flourish. Just south of Fornia's side of Texico, there was a
civilization that, around three thousand years ago, began fusing their entire population with Darkrai
they created through means that eventually got them wiped out. The Guardian of that land was split
in the fury of the conflict, but the fused humans were all turned to ghosts, vengeful ones, able only to
lash out at those brave, or foolish, enough to venture into their ruined city in the mountains. It was
believed, that after a few centuries of starving, the ghosts would fade back to the ghost dimension.
The last I heard, Rio fell into some kind of internal city-wide civil war that wiped out almost all of
them. Now their city is mostly ruins as well, though evidently they yet occupy a small part of them."

"So…you're saying Pravus is what, some kind of Darkrai enhanced human who…swam out to sea?
Perhaps to escape whatever wrath was brought on his people…but he was dragged north by the
current to…oh…" Alex paused as, the more he thought about it, the more the facts fit into place. It
would explain why he'd known how to fuse with a Darkrai, and evidently make one as well. "So if
he had to create the one Thor's fighting now…presumably by using energy from Vega, and a…
suitable human…"

Jess finished for him this time. "What happened to the first?"

They looked up as the two whirling, dueling figures having, and evidently enjoying, their epic clash
split apart with a forceful boom that had come from Mjolnir and its twin smashing into a Dark Pulse
that Pravus had evidently been attempting to condense into a much heavier, damaging attack. He felt
Arthur's amusement, for he too had struggled with the absurd density of condensed dark energy.
Until he'd infused a bit of psychic to keep it light enough to move. In his experience, the orb
devoured what little psychic energy he put into it long before it made contact with whatever he was
striking. Such was the nature between the two types.

Thor's crimson cape had been torn away in the fierce clashes of energy between electric and dark,
but the god himself looked unhurt elsewhere. Pravus similarly was all but unscathed, for whenever
Mjolnir came close to smashing him once more, one of the hands would reform, catch it, and push it
away.

Furious at the constant redirection, Thor hit harder, using both hammers at once, over and over. The
hands slowly withered as the Darkrai took damage, and seeing his chance for final victory, an end to
the war, and even more fame and glory from humanity, he swung them both up with a flourish, and
brought them down.
Or he would have, if the dark arms hadn't reformed suddenly, very much still corporeal, and caught Thor's burly arms in each hand. That left his chest open to the Prophet's dark sword, and it was as he struck that the man's private show came back on, the tiny robotic drones once more whizzing to life and recording. On the Fornian's side, the Prophet's aura, powers, and other such abilities were always, always shaded to be portrayed as golden light. The same held true for his Crusaders. Only the soldiers themselves, and those who saw them in person, knew the truth of his 'divine power'.

The smart ones hadn't questioned the disconnect from television and reality, and had reasoned that one must use both darkness and light to fulfill the Alpha's mission. It wasn't all that different from what Tao taught, though true to form, the cult structure had abused their people's honest devotion at every single turn. The ones who dared to suggest that using the 'essence of evil on our friends' was wrong, were the ones who ended up in labor camps for asking questions above their station about the Leader, and the wisdom of his decisions.

Thor's armor proved its worth as the Prophet struck the struggling Asgardian, but the Darkrai had a firm grip, and refused to let go. Thor shifted his chest, causing the blade tip to slide harmlessly along his golden breastplate, and kept the sword from piercing him by finding a seam in the alien metal. For the moment.

Snarling in irritation, and seeing the eastern forces starting to rush in to aid their ally, and potentially end the war, Pravus let the darkness envelop him, the sword grew larger, the hilt formed a v shape just below where the wide, black blade grew, and it took the man two hands to swing. He thrust up at Thor from a low angle, and the Asgardian gave a breathless gasp as the blade tore right through him.

Alex was at the top just in time for the spray that followed, and then the sickening sound of the heavy body hitting the ground as the blade phased through it. He glanced at his armor, covered in the blood of one he considered a friend. He stared Pravus down, and the dark purple-blue energy shift to golden Light.

"Now now, little dragon, you might not want to Purge me in front of the entirety of my following… I'll only come back stronger, and the people's faith will be rewarded again and again. I have a different proposition…" He gestured to three bodies that lay, smoking, besides his PokéMeter, at the back part of the rounded stone dais. "Have a session on my PokéMeter. We'll even lift the rules, for this one special circumstance, and show it live for the first time ever…lives are on the line after all, and this is history." His smirk widened to a grin.

Alex gripped the ignited plasma sword, and felt Lux' eyes on him. Thor's blood had, apparently, brought out the electric type's rage. He was urging his Trainer to use him, and strike the darkness dead. This game was what he wanted, it was all part of the trap. He took a deep breath, and made a third option. He met the Prophet's grin with his usual smirk, and powered down his sword. Pravus did the same, and they both moved towards the machine, eyes never moving from eachother.

"I don't understand what you get out of…this…” Alex said, gesturing to the elaborate measures that had evidently been taken just to get him on this machine. It was undoubtedly from a source of Light, but this close, his third eye could see how skewed it had become. Twisted, until it could do little more than burn those who touched it, or not, at the reader's command. He resisted laughing, as he had a feeling that was what the Prophet intended. Pretend to give him a fair, honest, meter session, a hallmark of his people's culture and religion, and have him 'die accidentally' as a result. Evidently it wasn't unexpected, on this machine. He supposed it was a good plan, given that his Hand hadn't got the job done.
"My people consider these sessions sacred, young Redwood." Pravus said, sitting properly, as he powered up the machine. The camera drones buzzed around him, and from behind each of the sitting leaders, Scales and Crusaders flanked their backs, staring the others down, ready to start fighting if something went awry. They all knew it was a trap, there was no way things wouldn't go sideways. They were ready for sideways.

"This Machine, and those descended from its Most Holy design, are specifically tuned to hone in on one's Crimes, and advise a Judgement for the severity of them. The Light, praise be, is merciful, and usually only leaves small burns that heal in short amounts of time, but sometimes, one's crimes are so great, the Light eradicates them on the spot." He smirked. "Down to the last atom. This Judgement, we have determined through our advanced science and technology, comes straight from the Alpha himself. Therefore…it cannot be wrong. Once we are done here, it is my hope that this war will finally end, and my loyal soldiers can stop dying."

Alex nodded quietly as the Prophet spoke, and casually glanced upwards at the clouded sky. Reassurance flooded him, and the Scales behind him shifted. "Very well. I agree to your tests. If I prove worthy of the Alpha's Judgement, you will stand down, at once. We all serve the same Maker, we do not need to keep killing each other."

"My thoughts exactly." Pravus said, grinning, and gesturing to the silvery metal cannisters at the opposite end of the PokéMeter. "After this, there will be no reason to keep fighting."

"You're running out of time, Alex..." Tao muttered in his head, both amused and satisfied that they had just gotten more than enough from the Prophet for future de-escalation. The Dragon had warned that the clever villain might not use his silvered tongue, but in hindsight, there was no way his ego would've let him stay quiet. He appeared confident in victory, or at the very least, winning this part of the battle, and then charging straight for Unova, and total domination.

"Then let there be peace." Alex said, winking at the floating cameras as he gripped the cylindrical canisters of Melmetal essence. Tao had taught him much about how energy could flow, any energy, theoretically. If one knew how to harness it, one could turn it on their opponent. Such tactics were a trademark of the Dragon's fighting style. Control, balance, and upsetting that balance, in combat, making it work for you instead of your opponent.

Moreover, he and his enhanced brain had gotten familiar with what they were using to make the plasma swords function, and he could, and had, often repaired those that had been damaged after a hard battle. The best part of Melmetal's gifts were that, if you used a steel type crystal or plate, you could repair damaged parts in the field relatively quickly.

Thankfully, such a crystal had been fused by way of the Voice to his armor, as an Aggron would, eventually, be part of his team. Cenomons still had yet to evolve, though he was a good battler in his own right. He braced himself, and felt the cylinders grow hot beneath the black mesh that also protected his hands, as well as his joints.

The Prophet smirked, and began to read the instrument. "This isn't the first time you've been on a PokéMeter...you've done this before, haven't you?"

Alex glared at him, and the grip on the canisters tightened. The smirking Prophet knew full damn well that it wasn't. The last time he'd been on such a machine, albeit a normal, non-glowing one, he'd lost his chance to be a Trainer. Or so he'd believed, for a very long time.
"I have. It may interest your people to know that you sabotage the futures of innocent children, whose only crime is being related to an old man that subverted your 'legendary security' after being wrongfully imprisoned." He stared at the cameras then, for they were indeed still rolling. By the Church's own rules, a session could not be interrupted, and this one had been ordered to be performed live, by the Prophet himself. "I doubt those you've put in your labor camps are seeing this…but if they are, I want them to know that escape is still very much possible…and even if you fail, worry not." He shifted his smirk and gaze back to Pravus. "I'll free you myself, soon enough…"

"Oh, will you…" A surge of what could only have been Light energy came from the machine then, surprising Alex entirely as it broke through his Aura shield with little to no effort. He quickly guided the energy, and kept it in his arms, before forcing it back from whence it came, through the canisters, but the meter seemed unchanged. Pravus appeared satisfied though, for all intents and purposes, it seemed as though the sturdy Dragon Emperor had been thoroughly shocked. "How about now?"

Another surge came, and he played along, the snarls of pain were real enough, but he kept his posture, and his grip. His hands were on fire, but he didn't release the canisters. That would give the Prophet an excuse to end things early, rather than continue toying with him. A quick glance at the man's not unpleasant face told him what he needed to know.

The Darkrai around Pravus, still invisible, seemed to be looking down at him with sorrow. He winked at it, too, as another surge of energy traveled further up his arms than he would've liked. Both were shaking now, and flaring streams of light energy escaped from the joints between the dragonbone of his armor.

"I've bought you a few minutes…" Tao's voice came, and Alex got the mental image of the dragon, likely from centuries past, bashing a plain leather ball, evidently from a human, higher and higher into the sky with his tail. He started to chuckle, and immediately regretted it as another surge of Light ran up his arms. He controlled it once more, and forced it back into the machine. The pain was intense, and he bit his lip. He couldn't feel it though; his brain was preoccupied with the intense pain in his arms. No distractions, then.

"Seven bursts, and the Dragon Emperor still retains consciousness. Impressive, to say the least. Only my Hands have ever endured so much. Admit to your Crimes, Alexander Redwood…and you may yet be forgiven…I'll even offer a one-time chance to join me, my people, my Church. We don't need to kill each other, right?" The carefully controlled sarcasm irked Alex, but to his followers, sounded as genuine as everything else their beloved leader said.

"What…crimes..." He said, surprised at how hard talking had become. Another surge, but he'd been expecting it, this time. Once more he let the energy travel up his tortured limbs, and then guided it back down, which was just as painful, straight into the machine. Finally, he sensed a shift within it. An imbalance, small, but enough.

Pravus raised an eyebrow at his reading, but continued on anyways. "Come now, use that clever brain…everyone has things they regret. Choices, they wish they could undo. Share yours with us. There is no judgement, at least from us, during a session. You are with friends…"

The Prophet's voice seemed to cut through the pain he felt in his arms, which trembled every few seconds now. Still, his grip remained iron. He glanced up again, and hid a smirk as he 'pretended' to double over in pain before another surge of Light. He felt a strange, unnatural compulsion in his mind, to share his pain, things he would normally never utter aloud, to let all of it spill out, and let the Light decide if he was too terrible to keep living. He could see why normal people, without crystals
or armor or psychic powers, fell to a machine like this so easily.

The metal cylinders had, he'd slowly realized, formed a direct connection to his nervous system, piercing his gloves, as the session went on. Normally harmless, this connection allowed the reader to measure the potential of the human linked to the machine, though in this era, meter readers had strict orders to extract secrets from their parishioners, which were then used to the Church's benefit, and the result had been the PokéMeters becoming little more than lie detectors. The promise of privacy was, as with so much else in their cult, an illusion meant to reassure the person on the receiving end of the meter that what they said would be kept hidden.

Thankfully, the Light was not a mindless, all-destroying force that left death in its path when unleashed. It only came from one known source, and Arceus was a merciful deity. Alex knew if it reached his brain, as Pravus likely assumed it already had, he wouldn't be able to recover. Another surge came through his nerves, and the pain was almost too much. He'd retreated from his mental link to Jess and his partners, as he knew them well, and knew they wouldn't be able to sit by if they had any idea of just how bad he was hurting. Arthur knew, of course, as their link was far more ingrained thanks to his typing, but the Gallade also knew he had to resist the urge to charge in and help. For now.

Sweat fell from his jaw and beard as he panted, but his arms, he forced to stay in place. Slowly, he sat up again. Pravus gave him a magnanimous smile. "Confess, and the session will be over."

When another burst was slow to come, he waited. A minute passed. He waited. Another, and he knew time was fading fast. He forced himself to sit up. "You want…to hear what I am guilty of? What I regret?" He looked down again, composed himself, only to hunch further forward as another burst of Light surged into him. That was all he needed. Sadistic types like Pravus likely didn't know just how ineffective torture was, as a rule, but instead of lying to end it, he had other plans.

Part of his leg armor began to glow with steel type energy, but he kept it out of sight below the table, hoping the man wouldn't notice. He widened the connection to the cylinders, and redirected as much Light as he could through them. One more, he thought, as he sensed the imbalance in the device grow. One more…he could handle one more. But, he realized, he was out of time.

The sky above them took on a dark red hue, and the Prophet looked up, eyes narrowing. "All I regret…" Alex said, letting the pain fade from his mind, and replacing it with his growing rage. "Is that I let a worm like you control my life for so long…my biggest regret? Giving up my Venusaur, when I earned my ID…that's the only time I've ever been forced to abandon a friend…" The eyes narrowed, and the dragon energy flared to life again as he focused his anger. Pravus stood, rage coming over his features as he realized, somehow, his opponent was not as weak as he should be. "And you are the reason I had to in the first place!"

He focused his power, let the Light energy flow into him from the universe, and his entire form began shining with golden light. He directed it into the machine's imbalanced internal energy, overloading it. "What!?" Pravus switched the knob that powered the machine off, but the needle displaying the energy reading remained where it was, entirely too far to the right side of the display, in the red. Nobody had ever forced the needle into the red before. He took half a step back as he realized he couldn't stop it, only to have it explode in his face with a flash of blinding Light.

When the flash faded, Alex found himself on his knees, arms hanging limp, still panting. He slowly reconnected to his team, and assured them that he was okay. Jess hadn't waited, reforging their link herself, and shielding him with a Barrier right before the machine went critical. She too, had seen the imbalance, what he'd been trying to do, and as usual, he'd forgotten to leave enough energy to
defend himself.

His entire form was smoking, as he slowly stood, and he looked over at Pravus. The man was on his back, obscured by the table, and smoking more than he was. It was at that moment that his whispered Shout manifested. Coming down from the clouds, seven massive meteor-like objects, wreathed in crimson flame, hurtled towards the dais, in a disturbingly perfect circle. The Crusaders, who had begun powering up their staves when the light exploded, barely had time to react before the massive fireballs, summoned with naught but a whisper hidden in a deep breath at the start of this charade, came down on them.

The smart ones had shifted their weapons to fire type energy, and formed personal shields around themselves. Unfortunately for their comrades, panic had won out by majority, and once the smoke blew away in the fierce winter wind, the dais stood all but unoccupied, as it was covered with burned, wounded men. The Scales moved through them with brutal efficiency, and ended their pain with merciful strikes to vital organs.

With the dais suddenly free of their control, and their Prophet's status unknown, the remaining forces in the city began to converge on them, and the eastern forces reinforced the top level of the structure, turning the long ramp down into a killing zone. Eventually, Crusaders stopped charging blindly into the various attacks from the gathered Scales, and bided their time to make a concentrated charge.

In short order, they began climbing, alternating positions to form defensive spheres of elemental energy powered by their armor, which joined together when close enough. The Scales drove them back rather easily though, as those defending were Champions, and had their powerful partners using rock type attacks, which both severely damaged or cut through the Crusader's fire and ice counter-attacks, and were entirely immune to electricity. Moreover, they could also make the ramp very smooth, and difficult for the heavy humans to climb, especially while defending themselves.

The gathered host of Thor ran to their fallen leader, only to find he was comatose, self-induced to begin the healing process. Evidently, he expected his allies to stabilize him in time, which they did, though how exactly, the others could not see, as the tall riders obscured any foreign eyes from peeking through. When asked how they were going to heal a wound like that, the only answer the stone-faced warriors gave was, "Asgardian technology."

The remaining eastern forces spread out atop the large stone structure, as Alex and Jess went to examine Pravus, to make sure he'd been fully ended. She'd already managed to use Recover on his right arm, and was tending to his left, as he froze, and shifted back to combat readiness. The spot where Pravus had lain was empty, only a charred mark on the stone remained where he'd been lying only moments before. "Bloody Darkrai…we need to separate him from it. Every time, it saves him."

"We need…" Jess said, as she focused her scarlet-pink energy on his arm, "To get out of this city alive. And figure out how he fused himself to a Darkrai in the first place."

Alex reached out to Tao then. "How did that go? Did they cut off broadcasting?"

"No. The feed is still live, somehow." Tao responded, sounding perplexed. The camera drones were, like everything else after the explosion of power, smoldering wrecks. He ordered the most tech savvy of his Scales to secret them away, for they needed a back door into the Church's propaganda machine. "As far as I can tell, they gave your abilities the opposite coloration of the Prophet's."

"So it looks like I just blew him up with a giant darkness bomb. Great. Even when we win, we
lose…” Alex muttered, flexing his hands as Jess finished. He used them both to hug her, murmuring, "I'm fine, really…” before letting her go.

An irritatingly familiar voice echoed above them. "Win? You have won nothing, half-breed." They looked up at the dark cover of the ash-filled clouds, as a familiar looking ship descended from the upper atmosphere. It was Percy's but it had been given the Arcean treatment. That meant more guns, more shielding, and a giant symbol of the Alpha, jutting up from the rear this time. "I'll give you points for being clever, overloading my machine with too much energy…you would've made a powerful Hand. Now, all you'll make is a corpse. Such a waste…”

Singing came through the sounds of battle by the edges of the dais, and they glanced to the rooftops of the city's few skyscrapers. The shield from earlier reformed, once the Prophet's ship was low enough. It began heading straight for them.

The pair of bow-mounted triple barreled canons on the formerly stealthy airship formed six orbs of energy, two for each typing the Church had adopted as weaponry. Bjalfari gave a sharp whistle then. "Mount up with Thor's men, lads! We're getting out of here!" He met Alex's gaze, and the Ænovan tilted his head questioningly. "Thor is severely hurt, and, well…” Bjalfari gestured, and the city below them teemed with the white armor and visored faces of thousands of soldiers, all heading towards them.

"Right." Alex said, shaking his head. "Of course…fall back, all of you! Quick!" Hilbert took his Scales into the air, and headed southeast, over the city, and towards the battle lines that, presumably, needed reinforcing. The rest of them leapt atop their mounts as well, just as the beams from the ship fired. The entire top half of the stone monument was blown away, but the resulting dust and rubble only hindered the Church's troops, and gave the easterners cover to get away.

Thor's men had retained their Rapidash, and each of the blue-maned beasts had Bounced high into the air with the rest of them, some gaining additional height as massive chunks of stone flew past them. Not all escaped unscathed however, but they all knew that anyone who fell to the teeming horde of Crusaders below was already lost. They didn't take non-civilian prisoners very often. Alex's squad, which was essentially three in one at this point, saw where the Thunder God's warriors were landing, and battle erupted as they cleared the space for the descending fire horses. They were surrounded before long, all of them fighting and blocking as best they could.

Each of the Scales had called out their partners then, and many had bolstered their ranks by summoning Pokémon from their cloak holders. With unity acquired through practice in combat, those who could defend, merged their defenses, were mainly rock type, and any ice attacks that came close to hitting their barriers were burned away by the Charizard, Talonflame, and other aerial fighters as well. Blaze was leading them, and the Scales entire defensive strategy worked like a well-oiled machine as they covered for each other's weaknesses. None of them fell, and once the Rapidash were all down, they needed an exit.

As if on cue, a pair of very angry, very on fire goats burst through the Crusaders on their eastern side. Bjalfari and two other warriors helped Thor into his cart, though in the chaos it was hard to see how the red-haired Asgardian was faring. Once loaded up, the Gogoat both reared up, and then began charging back down the path of fire and death they'd created to reach the embattled eastern soldiers. The Rapidash needed no urging, and the gathered forces began moving as they beat a hasty retreat.

Then, for the first time in their brief history, the Emperor's own squad suffered losses. Moving so quickly back towards their lines had left gaps in their defense, which the Arceans abused to great
effect. Bjalfari lost three of his Scales, and ten of his warriors, Jess lost two of her own, and Alex's own squad lost three. The Sippi region had only contributed eight Champions to the cause. Some regions had as many as twenty, others as few as two. They had, evidently, formed a plan in the quiet of their minds, and had chosen to sacrifice themselves, and their partners, to the hordes of angry Crusaders to buy the others more time.

Alex felt each of them fall, his sense of helplessness and anger rising with each death, and as the third of his own squad gave her life, he'd had enough. Eight Champions, and over eighty Pokémon at their command…all brought down with merciless efficiency by the Church's loyal men, and their own partners. Any rules of battle had been utterly tossed out the window. He reached out to his ace in the hole as they approached the wall of opaque darkness. "Are you here, yet?"

He smirked, as he was answered with a thundering roar, that made the Crusaders pause. Jess had reached the opaque barrier first, and with a single enhanced punch, had smashed a usable hole in the darkness with focused fighting energy. Rapidash began streaming through, and she moved to open another. Above them, thunder boomed as the upper part of the shield was blasted apart. Many had been sent against the Kanadian Wall before now, and that roar haunted their nightmares. A cry escaped from one of the soldiers, a woman, who sounded several rows away from the current mob of chaotic Pokémon battling and combat. "Black Death comes! Switch shields to-"

The words were cut off as a massive pillar of electricity came down from the darkened heavens, and obliterated the speaker, and any who'd been near her general vicinity. Night had fallen by now, and the night was where the Black Death had earned his nickname. The Charge Beam moved in a tight circle around the easterners, and those fighting made short work of the few who escaped unscathed, before continuing to retreat after the fiery column of Norstadders following the unstoppable charge of Thor's Gogoat.

For the first time, Alex actually saw the Crusaders pause. They'd switched their weapons to ice typing, but the sky was a mess of reforming smoke, and chaotic Pokémon battles. The moon reappeared abruptly as Shruikan winged away for another destructive pass. As he circled, which took him just outside the city, and out of range, he mega evolved.

The Crusaders, instead of aiming for him, aimed for the similarly glowing Trainer giving him power, only to find their ice attacks smashed apart by blade arms, burning with Light energy from the Emperor's Gallade. Just as quickly as they'd struck, the Gallade retaliated, and entire squads of Crusaders fell to the whirling dervish of death that was Arthur. There were always more to replace them, though. Alex fell back as he let the others run the final stretch to the suburban outskirts, as he turned in the middle of the main road leading out of the city, and prepared to stall their foes. Otherwise, they'd chase them all the way back to command.

As Shruikan turned to deal with the advancing airship firing ice beams at him at a rapid pace, Cenomons appeared before his Trainer from underground, where he'd been making well-timed Dig attacks against soldiers who shifted their energy to electric. He'd followed the current then, and struck at the source. Usually, it wasn't an ally, and he'd have to dig again before retaliatory flames hit him. Thankfully, he was still rather fast. When it came to digging, at least.

"Alright Ceno, just like we practiced. Bearing Shot! Spread it as wide as possible!" The Lairon hunched his entire body, growling as the enemy, and their Pokémon, came closer. With a sound like cannon fire, tiny balls of glowing steel shot from each of the Pokémon's holes, along his back and head. Five times he repeated it, and the Crusaders paused, as the orbs stuck themselves to the nearest enemy target that the Lairon had marked. It was possible to hit allies with this as well, but he could
usually spot friends from foes, with his Trainer's help. A piece of his attention was always there for him, in the back of his mind, if he needed it. It was nice.

The Dragon Emperor raised a hand towards the Church forces who, upon seeing the orbs didn't really do anything but stick to them and glow, began charging him once more, intent on ending the war by taking his head. These were no back-western soldiers, and they knew how to kill Scales. Overwhelming them with varied melee strikes was the easiest, while one had their Pokémon firing from mid to long range behind them as well. Their swords couldn't block everything.

The smirking horn-helmed figure's eyes flared as he summoned the power of electricity, and the surrounding area took on a yellow hue. Sparks flared along every surface, and the internal systems of the Crusader's armor went screwy...for a few moments. They had been built to channel this very element after all. The fingers snapped, and the gathered forces, who were only a Sportball field's distance from him now, glanced skyward as they heard an all too familiar whooshing sound. The sound of Death inhaling.

The now mega evolved Shruikan had once more blocked the moon, and given the nature of formations that were chasing fleeing soldiers, a long line of the fastest had formed while the slower soldiers swarmed in behind them. The dragon opened his maw, but instead of a pillar of electrical death that only left charred, useless armor and smoking skeletons, the very clouds bent to his will as he used his Thunder.

He took his best shot at the closest opponent who'd been marked, and as the bolt struck home, it spread. Like a line of macabre dominoes, the Crusaders fell one after the other as the deadly energy spread through the silvery orbs, through the line of the fastest soldiers, and then into a good portion of the advancing front. Chaos erupted as divisions were left leaderless, and the charge faltered. Alex raised his hand again, and grabbed on to the tail that was all but invisible in the dark night to human eyes as Shruikan picked him up, and quickly matched pace with the rest of their war party.

"Not again! Fire everything!" Pravus' mad voice failed to hide the pain the eruption of Light had evidently caused him. It made some sense, as he'd discovered dark types were weak to that kind of energy. Alex recalled the various partners who had, thanks to his eeveelutions, not lost a single member. Between his Sylveon and Espeon, they had been an effective force, both defending and healing, as well as attacking when the moment came, but now was the time to pull back.

It was good he did, for Percy's ship had begun firing random beams of energy at any remaining enemy forces, which at this point, were his own partners. Eventually though, he recalled all of them from Shruikan's back. Seeing his prey fleeing, Pravus gave another command. "All soldiers! All ships! Ice type attacks now! Fill the sky with them! Fire at will!"

Alex swore, and ran up the length of his dragon's neck, leaping off his snout, and recalling him as ice energy filled the air. His aura flared, and he propelled himself towards his troops, who were waiting by the Sippi River. While delayed, the Crusaders had regained marching patterns minutes after the Emperor's attack, and were now marching in pace with Pravus' newest flagship.

Alex raised a brow as he landed, and saw Jess and her squad ascending into the air. He found Hilbert, and their squads merged as they formed a defensive perimeter. "What are they up to then?"

Hilbert looked at him. "She said you were the one who gave her orders to fly into the air..."

Alex glanced up quickly. "I did not...wait, she's shielding herself from me." He went quiet as he gave her the mental equivalent of a loud knocking sound. He knew he'd made her wince. So she
He sensed her wink at him. "Hush…and enjoy the show."

He raised a brow, and then turned his gaze towards what she'd mentally gestured to. His eyes went wide. He'd never seen a Suicune up close, but there was no way they were supposed to be this big. Moreover, its mane was blue, rather than purple just as Connor's partner was orange furred, and not yellow. Even Connor's Raikou hadn't been so…imposing though. Professor Buckeye was atop the Legendary Pokémon, and he gave Alex a nod as they trotted by, following after Jess and her Scales.

She'd found her lover's choice of squadmates for her amusing, and had run with it, going as far as bringing in five additional Articuno riders she'd befriended in her time at their village. They stood out among her Scales, and flew in a v formation just above them. Jess was on Fo now, and Chari was amongst the Scales. Below them, there was a soft boom, and a cloud of dust as Suicune accelerated towards the enemy.

When both it and the Professor were about ten miles from the river, the old man let out a sharp whistle. The fliers above began circling him, and from the distance, came their foe. Pravus' ship continued to charge towards them as fast as it could, laden down as it was with all the upgrades. It had lost any chance of being stealthy, but it still fired ice energy beams as it advanced.

Below the ship, the Crusaders came as well, once more mounted as they had been for their initial Blitz. This was, evidently, meant to be their second attempt. A howl tore through the air, and the relatively barren grassy plains that made up this part of the continent were flooded with mist that rose from the river, and encompassed what was supposed to be the battlefield.

Thor's forces led the charge back to Ventosus, their main focus on healing Thor. Alex didn't mind though, for he agreed with their priorities. His Scales could handle this. "Everyone heal up! If you need items, come to me. I want full health, and power on all your partners. Don't worry about how much you use, just give anyone who fought what they need to handle another round."

Arthur handled using items on their own team, and Shruikan made a brief appearance as well, healed himself, and then rapidly headed north once more to make sure the Church hadn't grown bold in his brief absence from the wall. The air had suddenly grown colder, and snow fell anew. He knew Jess had something to do with it. She was still being dodgy about what they were up to.

As the Scales healed and restored their frankly absurd number of usable partners, Jess and her squad prepared to stall the advance, and perhaps end the battle before it properly began. Percy's ship fired beams uselessly into the fog, and eventually ceased. Beams of ice fired back at the Arcean lines, and the Crusaders adjusted as necessary. Once they had ice shields however, a massive Blast Burn tore through most of their front line. Even the airship smoked after that attack, and other fire moves immediately followed it. The Crusaders shifted again, and were met with ground and water moves.

Rightly assuming their attackers were on flying types, beams of electricity filled the air, and actually managed to pierce the mist. Only a few were hit, and those managed to land and recover to get back in the fight. The cover was invaluable, but Suicune wasn't done.

Suddenly, the ship halted its forward momentum, as did the winded, and diminished lines of Crusaders. More streamed in from the city, and it became clear Pravus was giving his slower men a chance to mass up. When bunched together and shielding themselves in unison, few attacks could bring down the Church's soldiers. Or even manage to hit them.
As the Church forces regained their composure and formed a proper front, as they had in the first Blitz, they charged again towards Ventosus, and entered the mist covered battlefield. They knew where they were headed, and it was Pravus’ belief that they could handle whatever surprise the easterners had prepared. Without the Thunder God, they would be mowed down.

Another howl filled the air around them, and the mist turned into a Blizzard. There was a faint icy blue flash ahead of them within the storm, and without warning, the Blizzard became something else entirely, as the five Articuno riders took control of the energy. That was when the Crusaders heard something on the wind.

It wasn't a howl this time, but a song, one in a deep, unknown tongue. Those aboard Pravus' ship knew it well, for many had been in Norstad, and hadn't left their posts in the months since. Flying type energy exploded from the airship in a circular wave that dispelled the clouds, if not the snow. Above them, the large once more full moon hung in the sky, and blocking their view of it was a rider, with fire for hair.

She raised a dragonbone covered fist, and the snow whited out the Church force's vision with its intensity. The temperature dropped, rapidly, and Pravus gave the command. "All forces, switch to fire typing." The airship, for it had defenses as well, extended its shield, and merged it with the cohesive blob the soldiers made up just below them. The result was a rather warm, comfortable dome that would burn away any ice attack. Or so they'd believed.

"Kun Iirik!" The Shout echoed across the battlefield, even through the shield of fire, and from the white void surrounding them, came an Ice Beam. It didn't look normal however, and it was Doctor Ein who realized what it was, though he couldn't convey it quick enough to matter.

When infused with Shadow, an Articuno could use a devastatingly powerful move that was, essentially, just an Ice Beam enhanced by Shadow energy. Now, it seemed, one of the irritating riders from before had thought to combine it with Light energy. The beam shattered the shield, and as a result, the enhanced armor of every Crusader suddenly lost power, burnt out by the overheating power units built into the back of each Crusader's armor. The suits had tried to output enough heat to match the frigid beam, but between it and the rapidly dropping temperature, the heat had been too much for the suits to sustain. Their weapons still worked though, and their leaders immediately ordered a barrage of fire typed beams into the sky.

It wasn't enough, though. The Sheer Cold attack from no less than five Articuno, each much larger than the one that had broken their enemy's shield, struck home as their defenses failed, and the beams of fire were swallowed up into the howling storm of ice and snow. As the roughly two hundred thousand Crusaders began to freeze, those at the back of their respective division began to flee for the city.

Seeing the first few lines already frozen solid in painful, horrific death poses, morale shattered, and the entire army began to flee. Or rather, they tried. Suicune had not been idle, and the impossibly fast Pokémon had run around the entirety of the Arcean lines, forming a barrier of ice with its Ice Beam as it ran.

Buckeye kept his partner healed and energized as they penned in the troops, and closed the jaws around the trap Tao had set. The Dragon had expected his forces would need a fast exit, and fast exits against men like Pravus meant a hard charge to follow. Using the river, and a Legendary, the clever Dragon had cut off his opponent's sight, attack and defense strength, and now had sealed off their escape as well, as the first fleeing soldiers soon found out.
Regular soldiers from Ohiana itself, made of mostly Trainers and militia who had thus far been under Buckeye's command, quickly traveled along the flat top of the new wall of ice, and began firing down at the soldiers quick-witted enough to realize that this wall was going to turn the battlefield before it into a killing zone if they didn't bring it down.

Some reinforced it with rock type moves, while others moved all the way to the far end, to make sure everything was covered. They knew it likely wouldn't hold if the entire field army began retreating, but they'd been told most of the soldiers would be frozen before they ever reached the barrier.

Tao, who had spent several minutes filling in Alex on what exactly the hell their plan was, sent his Scales back into battle, and Alex and Hilbert's squad's once more joined with the ladies. They charged through the ranks of frozen dead, their armor protecting them from the worst of the still ongoing attack.

They did come upon the edge of it however, and as they saw the Riders of Valaskjalf freezing entire battle companies solid they also once more found the Prophet's ship. It was ascending, rapidly. Evidently Pravus realized his people below were already lost. Jess gave the order for the Sheer Cold to cease, but the damage had been done. Out of the two hundred thousand loyal Crusaders who'd followed their Prophet into the latest battle of this war, only two divisions, roughly fifty thousand men, remained.

Twin Ice Beams shot from either side of the field then, illuminating the sky with their brilliance as the clouds and snow faded. They struck the airship on each tandem wing rotor, freezing them both solid, and the massive ship began to plummet. This, more than anything, was what killed most of the soldiers.

Pravus did not, however, go down with his ship. Indeed, it seemed the wreckage was entirely empty of non-frozen or Crusader helmed victims. As usual, the slippery Shadow abomination had a way of quick escape, if it was necessary. Alex knew though, that the fact that he'd had to use it would likely mean incredible rage from the man, and new bruises for his subordinates.

Once the Prophet's ship crashed and the Scales hit it with several Hyper Beams, and elemental variations of similarly powerful attacks, the remaining Crusaders had surrendered, after a grisly chain of murdered lieutenants, and anyone with any kind of authority in the Church. The man who'd led his fellow soldiers in rebelling against a suicidal charge on the Dragon Emperor, called 'Reggie' or 'Reg' by his companions, had offered conditions to Alex that he'd accepted.

They would renounce their ties to the Church, and in return, the Unovans would imprison them somewhere far, far away from all the death and murder until the war ended. At that point, he said, he would like to return home, but he would leave that decision to Alex.

The Dragon Emperor had thoroughly shocked them all when he'd accepted the terms, and began speaking to them. "I know you all have heard plenty of things about me from your Church. Well the leader of that same Church just abandoned you to, presumably, die by my hand. The thing is, I don't want to kill you. Any of you. We never wanted this conflict. We wanted Pravus, for all the atrocities he has allowed in his long reign, and as you will soon see my Fornian foes, we had good reason to want to take him down. I will speak to each of you, when and if this conflict ends in a Unovan victory…if it doesn't, I'll be sure to leave the coordinates of your prison in a…obvious and easily found database. Somewhere. Maybe the Church will bother rescuing you. But don't count on it." He gestured then to the field around them. "Your frozen comrades who weren't shattered by your own airship will be thawed, but we'll leave convincing them to follow your lead up to you…they're not going to believe anything I tell them."
If he'd made an impact on the Crusaders, it didn't show, but given that they all had visors on, that was expected. He pulled Reg aside once he'd finished addressing their new prisoners. "You're going somewhere near Ontarec. It'll be cold, damp, and probably cloudy, but you'll all be alive. I need you to figure out who the...dangerous ones among the frozen are. We have different facilities for them. You give me their names once you're all settled in, and our deal will stand. If you decide to try to betray me, or escape your new prison, you will all die. Do you understand me, Reggie?"

The man, who'd removed his own helmet, nodded. He had the usual Fornian features, though the tan had faded back to pasty white skin, from all the snow and near-constant cover from his armor, and his hair was black. "I hear you, Dragon Emperor...you don't need to convince me. I saw what you did...what your woman did...tell me something. Honestly. Are your powers evil?"

Alex chuckled, and shook his head. "Not...inherently. Obviously, not all with abilities like mine are...good natured, but I like to think I'm good at resisting the urge to brainwash people with them." The man seemed to chuckle at that, but it faded as he saw the Emperor's mouth grow grim. "I think you understand...there are more ways to brainwash people than with psychic abilities, and don't think your Prophet isn't using them, either. He has a Gallade of his own, you know."

"I'll take your word for it..." The man muttered, seemingly ready to return to his comrades.

Alex smirked. "You'll see for yourself. We have a practice, developed since this war began, for those Fornians we happen to capture. We show you the unedited truth of what your government and your Church have been up to for the past few centuries."

That piqued the man's attention again. "And does that kind of tactic work?"

Alex chuckled again. "About as well as you'd expect. Around fifty percent usually refuse to watch. The other half that do, don't take very long to deconvert. We offer a chance to save their family members then." He gestured again, and the very people Pravus had captured earlier, who'd been spirited away somewhat unwillingly by Thor's riders, were huddled around the Scales, and the fire Pokémon with them. "We don't always succeed. Most of the time, they're already dead, but sometimes...sometimes we have a happy ending, a family reunion, and people who won't try to unravel my government when and if this all ends." He met Reg's eyes then. "I don't want your people to die, Reg. I want your people to flourish, as they should have been, for the past three centuries."

The Crusader looked down again, shook his head, and sighed. "It's...a lot to process..."

Alex chuckled. "You'll have time to think it over. But the offer stands for you as well. Soldier or civilian, spy or diplomat. We offer the chance to be free to those who have the will to take it. Good luck...and may the Alpha's Light guide you truly."

The common Arcean ending to a conversation seemed to startle the Crusader, as it had come from the very man he'd been told had zero respect for his people's culture or beliefs, and wanted to see all of it in ruins. They would all have much to think about.

For his part, Alex had floated into the air, and headed for the windy city's Encampment, that was serving as the military's headquarters. As he landed and entered the command tent, Tao's voice filled his skull. "We have a problem. The other fronts have been cut off by dark type interference. For all we know, there's several divisions heading our way from the southern lines. All we've been able to
divine is that the Church launched a second wave while we were focused on Monachus."

"Well…muk." Alex said, sighing. "Focus on re-establishing our communications. See if Merlin can't pierce whatever barriers are blocking us."

"Arthur can handle that…" Tao said, sounding slightly amused. The Gallade popped free of his ball then, bumped fists with his Trainer, and then Teleported. "There is more, though…I was wondering why we had such an easy time today…"

"You call that easy?" Jess said, shaking her head. "You try fusing an Ice Beam with Light energy without being able to 'summon it from the universe'." She'd added air quotes, but mostly for the benefit of the leaders present. Bjalfari had survived, but Hilbert was being treated for a harsh burn to his shoulder. Evidently he'd run afoul of a Crusader's Arcanine while fighting and leading the melee on the ground.

"I never said you weren't impressive. Regardless, did none of you notice something was missing? What does the Prophet always have with him, according to reports?" Alex glanced at the others, but Jess figured it out first.

"His Hands…we didn't see any. That is strange. All reports from his past appearances on the field have had him surrounded by at least ten, with five in reserve." She glanced at Alex then, sensing his own thoughts.

He spoke them aloud for those not psychically connected to him. "I imagine some are leading the offensives in the south, to counter the Scales, but…he's supposed to have thousands right? Where are the rest?"

"Unfortunately…" Tao said to all of them, "We know that, too…they're in Sinnoh. They've been in Sinnoh this entire time, and until today…Sinnoh's Champions were holding them off but…we just received word, from the PNN no less. Reports are coming in from Japan…there's a second Blitz, apparently, and it's heading down the entire island chain."

Alex's eyes went wide, "But why? Why make another enemy, fight a war on two fronts, when he's barely been able to secure the land his Church has claimed here?"

"I imagine this was supposed to happen before we were ever engaged, but given Fornia's industrial might, they can handle two fronts. Especially since one has evidently been planned for a very long time…Sinnoh was betrayed from within, and the locals apparently surrendered without fighting in almost every city…the Crusaders there are already heading south." The Dragon seemed to pause, and as it dragged, Alex fidgeted.

Finally, he spoke. "I'm sending Red. I'm sending Red, and whoever he wants with him. Kanto is going to be their ultimate target…so let's keep it from them. Japan is no industrial slouch either…and I'd rather not give them a chance to brainwash their stronger Trainers."

The Dragon radiated agreement, and was silent for several more moments. Then, "It is done. He and a squad's worth of Scales will have to be enough reinforcement. He said he would mention the Empire's wish to aid them in this sudden invasion to the local governments, but until they actually accept, sending our troops there en mass would technically be an invasion as well."

Alex glanced back to the map on the table. "So what now? Pravus is probably healing in a bunker somewhere. Where do you need me next?"
Tao's eyes manifested once more, as he got a better look at his Tamer. "Rio. We need to learn more about that city Pravus came from, and my information is three millennia out of date. Go there, find out what you can, and if possible...bring home some allies."

Alex stared at the pair of golden orbs. "You're kidding me. Rio? People are going to think I'm vacationing in the middle of a war!"

Tao's voice was silent to the others then, even to the female he'd bound himself so close to. "You can't hide it from my Divine Gaze. You're exhausted. I can see your eyes. When was the last time you slept?"

The dragon energy flaring from his eyes shifted to Light, obscuring even Tao's sight, and the others in the tent exchanged looks. Alex responded in the same manner though, so the others heard nothing. "I can sleep when this war is over...or at least, until we free the civilians they've captured."

"Leave them to me. I have led many wars more difficult than this. Pravus has overextended, as we demonstrated today by taking out the northern part of his army...or most of them, anyways. I'm sure the city is still well fortified. In any case, you're not a military general. I can still take you with four moves in chess."

"Five." Alex interrupted.

The Dragon continued. "Everyone has a mission to accomplish if we want victory. Yours, right now, is to find out who exactly our enemy is...the people of Rio may have a way of killing these abominations of Pokémon and human. You detonated a relic of Arceus in his face, and he came away with mild burns. We need to know what he's vulnerable to."

"Fine." Alex growled, severing the connection. He turned his focus back to the others. "Jess. Your Scales and mine are going on a little...trip. First, back to Unova. Bjalfari, you remain here and help Hilbert. Once Thor gets up, have him take Monachus. Without Pravus and his highest-ranking goons there, they'll be weak for a while."

He left the tent then, smirking as the redhead pestered him for details, mentally of course. Eventually, he admitted that they wouldn't need their armor, for a time, and he'd then proceeded to retract his, for the first time in at least three days, into his belt. They would need to be less noticeable, where they were going. Many Champions in their squads had been quite famous in their time, or still were, so disguises were necessary.

They made good time to Unova, and were on their way south as the sun rose. The ship was a luxury yacht that Jess had actually owned, or rather her father did, but she insisted he wouldn't mind lending it to the cause. Having also been to Rio in her time, she claimed they'd fit right in. The ship was littered with the sleeping, now casually dressed forms of the Champions. They were all exhausted.

Only one of them stirred, the only one who ever remained up this late. Normally, he'd be training, but he'd gotten his four hours of rest, and was fully recharged. His eyes had even become slightly less bloodshot, though the bowl of Leaf he was enjoying didn't help with that.

Alex looked up as Arthur Teleported beside him. Being able to recall to his Pokéball was a useful skill that Alex wished he could use. The closest he had was his room at home, which he'd flown out of more than once when a recall failed.

His Gallade joined him at the top of the ship's cabin. The captain, a salty old man by the name of
Fergus who was enjoying his golden years captaining leisure cruises, had joined him for a spot of Leaf, and had even shown him how to properly blow smoke rings, a skill that had eluded him for years. He taught Arthur, as the Gallade took his own hit from the bowl, and the two filled the morning sea air with the foul Skunky-esque scent of the herb as the dawn finally came.
The man inhaled and sighed with what seemed like relief. Or that's what it sounded like. It was muffled, by his once pale white helmet, fitted with the standard t-shaped black visor every Church Crusader bore. It was gray now though, which meant they were somewhere under the ash clouds the winter winds were bringing east.

"Full moon tonight." He said, with what sounded like amusement. His prisoner snarled. Often his torturer had begun their sessions like this, with that very phrase…but this time, if he was right, was genuine. The moon was indeed full. As usual his luck had seen him imprisoned on the night of a half moon. He'd missed his first chance to escape, as this very Crusader had been busy with him, and he'd still been…sensitive, and barely conscious. Now though, he had adapted to the pain, and forced himself to ignore it. He could writhe in agony once he was free of these damned chains. Tonight, he was finally getting out of this hell, or dying in the attempt.

"Let us see if we can't remove that gem of yours on this special night…." The prisoner chuckled mirthlessly at the man's words, and met his captor's eyes. The pupils had narrowed again, like a very angry feline. His fangs were more akin to a canine's though, or so the science nerds had claimed when first examining his newest, most durable pet. The icy blue stare always held the promise of death, during their sessions, but that would require the mutant to be able to escape, first. That, of course, was impossible.

Tonight, as with so many nights before, the man's focus was on the wolf-head shaped crystal embedded in Geralt's chest. Whatever experimentation had been done had given the man's body a healing factor greater than any normal human. While he'd been unconscious, he'd healed as quickly as he'd been cut open, and the closer he'd cut to the crystal, the quicker the wounds had mended, eventually becoming too tough for even his instruments after many failed attempts. His skin and muscles had adapted, and even hardened after so much abuse and regrowth.

It had taken a few weeks, but his tools from home had finally arrived. The Church was already analyzing the 'Scale Swords' captured from the Unovan's special forces, and focusing beams of plasma had already been achieved. Unfortunately, they were nowhere near the length of the Scale's blades, but the Church had given their medical and…otherwise inclined staff the use of such devices as soon as they'd been able to mass produce them. Given Fornia's status as an industrial and scientific giant, the whole process hadn't taken more than a few weeks after the first blades were recovered.

A low hum filled the blank, ceracrete chamber, as simple in design as it was in aesthetics. No windows, one entryway, and locked with a genetic scanner. Moreover, the hall outside was fifty yards in a single direction, and lined with death-spitting turrets embedded in the wall. Once they'd learned who their newest prisoner was, no chances had been taken. The Prophet himself had wanted him imprisoned, studied, and then replicated once he'd read the report on his capture.

The plasma burned white between the emitters on the scalpel-sized instrument that had yet to be given a name. Thus far, the Church had been labeling them as 'Plasma Scalpels', and nobody saw a reason to call them anything else. The masked Crusader began to cut around the top of the gem, and Geralt snarled in pain, but his restraints kept him from shifting an inch. This was precise work.
Everything they had learned of the strange man suggested that this gem, whatever it was, gave not only a power to rival Mega Evolution, but was the source of the physiological changes in whomever it was implanted within. They needed it intact, for replication.

As the plasma parted flesh, Geralt tensed up, his entire body going taut. The Crusader lifted his instrument, watching with masked interest as the flesh regrew, and then began to produce something that looked akin to fur. Then, it began to spread. The gem flared to life, and within, the Crusader saw the crimson eyes of a Lycanroc, mad with rage. "Of course…" He said, chuckling in a slightly manic manner as he back away from the now entirely white-furred human. "A Burst Heart…we thought those all destroyed…"

The chuckle became a full-on laugh, despite the fact that the man was yet reaching for the door, rather than his stave weapon. It was usually too bulky for him, a man who delighted in precise incisions and symmetry. "You're linked to your Lycanroc, aren't you? Oh Arceus, this is delightful… now we'll have two…"

Geralt's features had begun shifting into a passable replication of his Lycanroc's two-legged form. He could shift between this, and one resembling the Midday Form, but on nights like tonight, the ferocity demanded release. He had no doubt Ghost had given them trouble the last time the moon had risen. In fact, his torturer mentioning it in a previous session had been the only thing to get more than two words out of him that weren't "Muk yourself."

Geralt had warned the man not to infuse his partner with shadow energy, as the transformation, empowered by such darkness, would be more than they could ever leash safely. Naturally, these idiots had gone and infused him with Shadow anyways, and gloated about it. Now, things would end with blood. "Idiot…" He snarled as his entire form went taut, "You're all going to die! Run!"

He doubled over then, and the iron chains holding his arms tore from the wall, and then snapped off as the man's limbs became much bulkier. His entire form had gained similar definition and any trace of the human was gone. His eyes flared with darkness, and from his wolf-like face, the white fur became a mix of black and purple.

The door slammed, and the dark wolf's eyes snapped into focus at the sound, jarring him from the dazed state transforming had left him in. A howl of rage echoed down the tunnel, followed shortly by the sound of crumpling metal.

The turret defenses activated, firing various beams of fire, electric, and ice energy, but Geralt plowed through all of them, as his massive form easily lifted the now bent door, and used it as a shield. The fire and ice tended to cancel out, but he was glad he was resistant to electric energy. At least in this form. He yet retained some control over his limbs, though he felt his body moving on instinct towards the one to whom it was bonded.

He'd snarled when rocklike protrusions had, taking longer than they usually did thanks to the new scar tissue on his…everywhere, burst from Geralt's much wider and now brawny neck to hit the turrets he passed with Accelerock before they could fire on his backside.

He cleared the tunnel of death in a few bounds, and then doubled over, as the overwhelming desire to rampage filled him. His instinct took over completely then. All Geralt could do was urge his rapidly enraged body towards Ghost. That was their only chance for surviving really, but together, they could escape. Probably.
It was this single-minded determination that kept Geralt from killing anyone who might not have deserved it. He managed to shift his gaze away from those in the garb of prisoners, and those not wearing armor, though several times he’d had to take out what had appeared to be a lieutenant or leader of some description sans armor. It would make sense that they trained their men to stay fit in the same place they’d keep dangerous prisoners. Arceans never wasted space.

Eventually, the dark furred wolf loped into a large, hangar like room, within which were several aircraft. The human in him wanted to try escaping in one of those, but Ghost knew better. His instinct told him that he and his Trainer were more durable than a human and a Pokéball inside a metal machine. They often believed their constructs stronger than the natural forces of the earth. As a Rockruff, he'd demonstrated that his rocks beat metal every time, much to the irritation of his Trainer.

Geralt went still as his eyes locked with Ghost's, and then, at once, their hackles rose. Light flooded the room, and Geralt saw the truth. Ghost was bound, the same manner that the One Dragon had been subjected to, and he'd needed help to get free…but help hadn't come. The Shadow flared in his eyes, and Geralt moved towards his partner. Ghost growled, and to Geralt's ears, it sounded like a very pained 'Don't'. His altered form stopped then, and stomped the ground hard, cracking the cerarete beneath his foot. The movement, by way of what Geralt could only describe as 'rock sight', revealed what Ghost was trying to warn them of. Namely, the Arceans hiding above them.

Arcean Crusaders descended, as they sprung what was evidently meant to be an ambush. Geralt let his body dispatch the armored men, tearing them apart with ease. He didn't have time to lament at the lost life however, he needed to get Ghost, and escape. He was impeded of course, as best the Crusaders could manage, but his body's single-minded focus would not be denied. A power stronger than all of them was urging the two to become one, so that they might both survive. Some part of the Wolf was worried about how many men he was ending, and that he couldn't even recall if he'd done his torturer in, but none of that mattered now. Ghost needed him.

His body raised both fists, and brought them down, hard, shattering the floor of the hangar with an Earthquake. His form had no problem traversing the newly raised bloody boulders, but before he'd made two leaps, he paused, and dug into one that had, moments before, been host to a lingering soldier. There was a chill in the air, an unnatural one.

His ears twitched, as he heard what seemed like singing. Ghost shared his curiosity, and as they were both relying on instinct at this point, they couldn't ignore it. Those Words stuck in their ears too long, and they only grew louder before the massive fifty-foot doors leading outside were blown apart by a pair of Pokémon using Sky Attack.

Instinctual fear went through Geralt and his suffering partner. A Legendary Pokémon would make anything pause, rampage or no. Before the attacks had faded, revealing the light blue feathers of the Articuno, and the forms of their riders, Geralt's form had moved for Ghost. He was so close.

His arms lit with the power of Stone Edge, and once more, the Lycanroc demonstrated that human contraptions would always fall before the raw power of rock and stone. "Don't let them merge!" The now freed Ghost looked up at the same instant Geralt did at the source of the voice. A rider with hair like a raven, standing out amongst her primarily red and blonde kin. Their eyes counted five in all. Each of the riders was dressed for war, including the dark haired one. Now free, Ghost moved before Geralt did, rising slowly, and snarling with pure, undiluted rage. He smelled his Trainer, but the wolf before him looked more like a rival, than an ally. For his part, Geralt returned the snarl, by pure instinctual response to a challenge. The enraged wolves soon fell into a savage melee of claws and fangs as man-made rage overcame their bond.
To the rider's eyes, they knew what was necessary. They formed a circle around the fighting wolves, and ended what straggling Arceans remained amongst the rubble. Several had tried hitting with fire energy beams, but the riders were quick enough to call a Reflect. The charred bones of the soldiers spoke to the latent power of the Articuno's psychic abilities. As one, they began to summon the Light, and their riders sang in unison.

All but one, that is. Geralt found his gaze focused on her for reasons he couldn't fathom, even as his best friend was tearing away at his arms. His eyes shut as he saw the growing light, and once more by instinct, his claws clashed with Ghost's, locking together as they struggled against each other in a contest of muscle and rage.

The combined Purge hit them before Geralt met Ghost's gaze, which was lucky, for that was all they'd needed to finish fusing. Now both once more white furred, the two came together in a flash of light as a massive two-headed wolf. Both heads unleashed a howl that split the air, gave the Articuno a nod, and then sprinted for the exit. This was a prison after all, preventing escape was in its design.

Another howl split the air, followed by what sounded like meat in a grinder, as the soldiers stationed outside, who hadn't been frozen, or who'd thus been thawed once the birds moved on, tried to prevent their prisoners from escaping. Once more, Geralt felt himself covered with human blood as their new combined form used Drill Run through anything they ran into, and this time, the stench made both he and Ghost wince in disgust. Still, he was glad they were alive.

The Articuno soon joined them, several minutes after they saw, on the horizon, a massive glacier split the prison in two. Not by accident had the prisoner and 'work detail' quarters been missed, and eastern prisoners as well as disillusioned Fornians who'd been pressed into a work detail as punishment ran together towards the rising sun in the east, and the rumor of safety under the One Dragon.

Even the central region dwellers among them, for there were more than a few, agreed that the east was their best bet. The Dragon had ever ruled them fairly, and the riders had born his mark on their shoulders. He'd likely had a claw in this series of events, and frankly, anything was better than toiling away pointlessly for a cult they didn't wish to be a part of, or had entirely lost faith in.

The further the two ran as one, the more exhausted they grew. Ghost had barely been fed during his imprisonment, and Geralt had endured mind-altering pain. They needed to rest for a few hours, or days, and then report to the League. Geralt had no idea what he'd say, and left figuring that out to his future, well-rested self.

When running in such a large form, they'd covered much ground, and the Articuno riders never strayed far behind them, though they kept a respectful distance. Eventually, the sun hung in the morning sky, and the dawn finally brought an end to the bloody night. Ghost had mainly guided them, following his nose to a wild Lycanroc den that, from the smell and numerous jagged stone protrusions scattered about, was used for raising Rockruff.

It wasn't pup season thankfully, and all the wild packs were wintering in their Stoney Mountain dens, ones much older and larger, that had housed their species for millennia. The two headed white wolf became two separate entities once more, and Ghost wasted no time in falling straight asleep. Geralt did the same despite being nude, as he was human once more and Ghost was a fine pillow. Though they both heard the riders land not long after, they were already asleep. If Ghost wasn't worried about the riders or their mounts, Geralt decided not to be either. His wolf had far better senses for such things, and he trusted them.
Several Days Later, Pokémon World Tournament Building – Unova Region

The riders had indeed turned out to be allies, scouting for, of all people, Geralt's own cousin. He'd singled out the raven-haired rider, as lovely as he'd come to expect from those females who tended to save his rear. Prying for information about the supposed 'Dragon Emperor' had led to a very stern informing of exactly what had transpired in Norstad. An awkward pause had risen when he'd questioned why Pravus would ever venture so far from his home region, and reluctantly, she'd told him of Yggdrasil, and the Fairy King's role in events as well.

He'd stayed quiet, retaining all of the information the League was, as far as he knew, yet unaware of. He was unable to read the woman, who'd named herself as 'Yen', and given no other titles. The other riders hadn't given him half as much information, preferring to mock him while he washed the month and a half or so of dried blood and grime from his still rather tender wounds in the only nearby stream. Never mind that their birds had chilled it to near freezing just by sitting near the water.

When he was done, he'd discovered that much of his torso was scarred now, and he'd gained several small marks on his face for good measure. It had taken three days for Ghost to be well enough to travel to the spot where they'd stashed the rest of their team members, and then finally report in. They had done just that, and Geralt had used his skills as a Ranger to give the wolf a longer rest and not have to carry his Trainer. The Shadow had twisted his thoughts, and Geralt knew it would take time for the Lycanroc to sort them.

He had a job to do in the meantime. He'd arrived in front of the as-yet still under construction League building, meant to one day hold the next World Tournament, though he'd remarked that after he gave the information he'd gathered, it would likely be some time before such sport was held again.

He'd landed atop a Latios, and after thanking the creature, sent him on his way. He identified himself as the Top Ranger to the guards out front, though he'd long since lost his ID. He suspected that, upon finding it, that damned card had been the reason for his thorough security. He would've left it with his belt and other assorted tools he'd secreted away in the unlikely event of his capture, but that was against 'protocol'.

It didn't take long for Unova's League Chairman to summon, by way of Holociever usually, the other high-ranking members of the Pokémon Rangers, and Interpol, as well as the men who invested in keeping them funded. Though they'd somewhat recently joined together, they'd decided remaining as separate branches with specified roles and jobs would cause less chaos. What was mainly exchanged, was information, and nobody could deny that the two groups had been far more effective in recent years.

Geralt highlighted the events surrounding his capture, as well as what he'd witnessed and been subjected to as a captive of the Church. When he'd finished, the gathered men conversed quietly, and Geralt waited patiently. Finally, the Victory League's chairman addressed him again. "Top Ranger, what do you think the League's response should be? We have ever stayed out of wars, leaving other countries to handle them, however…the League representatives in Sinnoh have gone dark. We've lost communications with Almia, then Fiore, then Holon. Kanto is their next likely target, and this very building is very much in the war path as well. Many among us wish to throw our neutrality away, but I hesitate. I would hear your opinion."

Geralt regarded the man, short in stature, but long in his pompadour-esque hairstyle and thin curled moustache. Like the others, he was in a dark colored suit, all business, but his eyes seemed genuine. Geralt decided to be blunt and honest. He liked to think they expected that from him by now. "My
opinion? The Pokémon League has stood against evil, and those who abuse Pokémon, since its inception. This is no different, really. The Arcean Church is just as culpable in crimes of abuse and mistreatment as every other team we've dismantled, only they're much larger, and have entire regions supporting their goals. The main difference is that these Arceans know your weaknesses, and are abusing them. They know you won't fight back for fear of political entanglement, and by the time you realize you need to, they're counting on it being far too late to turn the tide. If you want to maintain your presence in Japan and Unova, help the Dragon."

The men conferred again, and this time an older gentlemen with thinning auburn hair addressed him. "And what if, when all this is over, the Dragon demands yet more aid from us? How long until the Pokémon League becomes a part of the Dragon Empire?"

Geralt chuckled. "You're already technically a part of it. We're in imperial territory right now, this entire building only exists because Unova has always been your ally. These people are brainwashing civilians, Trainers, and Pokémon into joining their little cult, and those who resist?" He opened his jacket, and lifted his shirt, though not high enough to show his crystal. His abdomen was enough, as that had been where his torturer had inflicted punishment for his failure to respond to questions. The gathered men recoiled in appropriate disgust and looks of discomfort. "These people have helped you, and looked to you for guidance in the past. Let me ask you all a question. Do you intend to let them continue, here and in Japan?"

The man looked at the Chairman, who glanced at the others. As one, they nodded, and answered. "No."

Geralt grinned. "And that, gentlemen, is why you have my loyalty, and aid. I understand your hesitation, and mark me, I will personally make sure my idiot cousin doesn't abuse your aid or future trust. If it comes to that. For right now though…we need to help. Immediately."

One of the men who was physically present, who Geralt hadn't noticed until now due to his quiet demeanor and simple features, snorted. "And what if we do, and we still lose? The Arceans have been preparing for this conflict for centuries. They have hordes of Crusaders in Fornia, and are always making more to send our way. Meanwhile, the east can barely call up a hundred 'Scales' to match them. War is a numbers game my friends, and the math has spoken."

Unova's League Chairman answered him with narrowed eyes and obvious dislike. "One Scale is easily worth a hundred Crusaders. At least. They're the bravest Trainers we have, and, most of them are our own Champions. Would you really have us abandon them, Charles?"

The thin man sneered. "I would have us live. Since when has the League bowed to the wishes of its Champions? If we did, we'd be in chaos, and no small amount of debt. The point of this organization, as some of you seem to have forgotten, is to ensure that there will always be Trainers to rise up, and prevent disaster when a Legendary Guardian goes berserk, usually from human interference. If we get involved, the Arceans will dismantle us. Then who will be around to train the next generation, to prepare them?"

Arguments erupted then, and Geralt marked those who were for, and those who were against. The latter was the minority, but there were enough of them to make the others pause. Geralt sighed, and let them fight. He'd said his piece, and that was all he could do. At least they'd respected his position as a Ranger this time. When he'd first joined up, the newly established organization in the States hadn't had a very good rep, or a very large team. He had endeavored to change that, but ultimately, he still had little real influence in a nation that was still figuring out exactly where Rangers belonged in the social pecking order.
A sharp whistle blew from behind him, and Geralt turned to look at the source, glanced at the men, who'd paused in their argument, and then looked again, as his male instincts told him a second look was required, immediately. Had his weakness not been darker haired women, he might've considered making an effort to woo this one. Beautiful didn't begin to do justice to her features, but he at least, resisted staring at her cleavage. Unlike the rest of the room. To be fair, her endowments had nowhere to go in the formal suits the League gave to employees, and the result was, in a word, glorious.

Finally, the Chairman spoke. "Ahh, Haley. I'm glad you're here. Gentlemen, our newest hire, one we snagged from the PNN. I knew as soon as I saw her work she was wasted on John Crimson. I assume you have something important, my dear?" Geralt looked the man over quickly, and his opinion of him rose further. It was genuine, almost grandfatherly eyes that were on the girl, entirely devoid of lust. As far as he could tell. The rest of the room was making little effort to hide where they were staring, though he couldn't blame them too much. Even his eyes were drawn like magnets, despite his focus on her face, ear, anything above the neck, really.

The blonde nodded, and then made a gesture on the tablet device she carried. She raised a hand then, and tossed something invisible towards the back wall of the room, upon which an image was projected. Not missing a trick, the Chairman, with aid from his taller compatriots, set the screen up. "You're missing the Prophet's latest speech...and seeing as how our Top Ranger has a personal mention, you should probably watch too..."

The video buffered for several increasingly awkward minutes, until finally, it played from the start. The opening title cards for the Church's programs had not lessened in absurdity over the past two months, but eventually the alluring baritone of Caleb Pravus, now taking on a tone of fake empathy, at least to Geralt's ears, filled the room. His visible skin seemed rather shiny and pink, as though he were sweating or covered with water, but evidently make-up had not been enough to cover the slight aberration in the usual bad tan. Caleb Pravus was far too pale to pull off the 'classic Fornia' look, but naturally, nobody said anything.

"My people...these past few nights we have suffered several setbacks, it is true. Many have asked what happened at Urbe Monachus and Straviken. Rumors abound, stories are flying, and I am here, as always, to set the public's record straight. This is a glorious time for us, and events should be recorded in detail, and in proper order." He gestured to an image on the screen, and Geralt's insides went cold with dread. It was a standard Arcean command center, one he'd charged through whilst transformed...and it was drenched in blood. Various body parts still lay strewn about, despite the numerous Crusaders who were, even as the cameras rolled, cleaning the mess.

"The Slayer of Straviken is responsible for this. Who is this foul creature you ask? An abomination, created by Unovan scientists, part man, part Lycanroc, and every bit as evil as the psychic types who no doubt pull his strings. More importantly...he is the Top Ranger of this continent, and a man held in high esteem by the Pokémon League. After this bloody night's events, and the resistance from the League in Sinnoh's glorious conversion, the Church has decided. The Pokémon League are now among those we consider our enemies." There was a crowd before him this time, and he appeared to be speaking from the inside of an Arcean Church. A raised dais bore the solid gold pulpit from which he was orating.

Murmurs filled the room, and the Prophet silenced them with a glance. "Many of you are no doubt concerned. The League has ever been a close ally of Fornia, even though they refused to fund our gyms and Champion halls, many of you have friends among their ranks. There is no word appropriate for a House of Arceus that encapsulates the kind of organization that would hide such dark deeds with so many kind ones, but alas, any kindness from them is but a mask, a distraction
from what they don't want you to see. It may also interest you all to know that this Butcher is the Dragon Puppet's own cousin. I have told you all time and again of the foulness in the Redwood line, and now…unfortunately, I have hard evidence of their murderous tendencies. But the men we lost will not have given their lives in vain. Rest assured my people; your Church will not relent until our enemies are ground to dust before our righteous crusade!" He raised his arms, and cheering filled the air, as did applause.

The video ended, and all eyes shifted to Geralt. Finally, he moved his gaze from the floor, to the Chairman. "Don't bother explaining. I know something of your…abilities, and after seeing those scars, I imagine whatever you had to do to get out was ultimately necessary. They were the ones who decided to prick our hide by capturing you, it's their fault they couldn't hold you." Geralt had shifted his gaze to the floor again, as hazy memories of death rose from his subconscious. He looked up as he felt a small, but still masculine hand pat his arm. "Any men who were caught in the madness of your escape likely knew full well who they were guarding. That Pravus has a serious hatred for your family. In either case…the situation has already changed. We've no choice, now. He's forced our hand. All in favor of allying with the One Dragon?"

The hands of those not present went up first, and though Charles was the last to raise his, he eventually did as well when it became clear nobody would support another refusal. To deny the others now would only cause more pointless dithering. The Arceans had already demonstrated what happened to governing bodies who didn't organize a response against them, after being declared enemies. None of the other State officials from the Arcean's new territories, League or governmental, had contacted them either.

When they'd asked Tao to look for them, for they'd heard rumors that he was quite adept at finding seemingly random Fornian citizens, usually families, with his awesome sight. He'd told them that by now, they were likely Arceans themselves, or prisoners slaving away under them. He'd added their names to whatever list governed which Fornians he personally had a claw in saving though, so it was better than nothing. Looking around, the Chairman nodded. "It is decided, then. Facilities in Kalos, Unova, and the remaining regions of Japan will mobilize to aid the local governments in repelling the Church's 'crusade'."

His gaze moved back to Geralt. "I hope you're ready for more, because I have a feeling we'll need you, my boy."

A voice interrupted them then, as Haley set about gathering her equipment. Oddly enough, she was the only one among them who hadn't flinched at the sheer power in the mental baritone thundering in their heads. Even those joining them by Holociever hadn't been immune. "I will be utilizing the Wolf. His skills are needed for the next phase of this conflict."

While most of the gathered men looked about in confusion, Unova's Victory League Chairman didn't miss a beat. He addressed the air above the table, "Then he is at your disposal, mighty Dragon, as are we all. It is unanimous, as you wished it to be. The League will aid you. Without you, we would all be dead and conquered by now anyways."

"You would." A pair of golden eyes manifested above the table, and scanned each of them. Finally, they rested on Haley. "I will be borrowing her as well. She will be useful, down south."

Haley glanced up at the eyes, seemingly irritated rather than honored. "Really? You're sending me to Texico?"

There was a deep chuckle, and a pause. "Much further south."
The room went quiet, and the occupants shifted uncomfortably. Everyone knew what going to the Dark Continent brought, unless one went by cruise ship. Only the coast of that foul place played host to humanity now, and their city was almost entirely ruins, though admittedly, the parts of it yet inhabited were reportedly quite nice. Typically, Unovans tended to head for Alola or Kalos when they vacationed. Nothing good was ever reported about the Dark Continent, in fact, most reports involving it, as well as news, were only related to those who had ventured south into the jungle on a journey, and had not returned.

"My Tamer will know how best to use your skills. I will send you to him, when you are ready."

Haley frowned. "I'd have to go home and get my ba-" and with a flash of psychic power, she vanished. The eyes shifted to Geralt then, and the dragon's voice, somewhat muted as it was now confined to just his head, echoed loudly.

"You know of the Trainer called Wes? One of the Orre region's strongest?" Geralt had uncertainty, but as the Dragon shared a mental image of the man, albeit a bit older than when he'd brought down Cipher, Geralt recalled what stories he'd heard of the 'Snatcher'. "He has the key to bringing Fornia's technological advancements to a halt. Find him, and then I will share what task I have for the two of you."

What Alex had described of speaking to the One Dragon helped here, and Geralt responded with his thoughts directing them as best he could, towards the Dragon. "And what if he says no?"

Another chuckle, though this one seemed, to his mind, a little sinister. "Worry not. He'll agree. Go, Wolf."

The eyes vanished then, and Geralt was left staring at the assembled men who, the more he looked at them, seemed to represent more organizations than just the League. Several had logos of the major businesses in Unova, specifically the ones with the large, memorable buildings dotting New Tork's skyline. "I have my mission. I, erm…need a lift to Orre."

The men shared another look, then chuckled. "Orre is enemy territory now, lad. We can get you to Aweston down in Texico, but beyond that, is a war zone. One of the Scales might be willing to help you, if you can find'em." Geralt nodded, and then gestured to the door, seemingly undisturbed about the idea of charging through enemy lines.

---

**Rio – The Dark Continent**

After reclaiming Shruikan, the east's Rayquaza had taken charge of the Wall's defense, and the 'Emperor's Scales' had split into numerous smaller groups as their leader for most of this war went south to gather information. After several days of travel, their luxury ship had cruised up to the free port city of Rio, famously known for their hospitality, though rumor had it that, if you wanted to leave, you should avoid drinking the water. Nobody ever seemed to quite know why, but more than a few tourists who had ignored that advisory had ended up moving in over the years, after visiting. Once more the Dark Continent proved that it kept those from the north who visited it.

For all the sketchy rumors though, compared to Black City, Rio was rather welcoming. There were familiar clouds of skunky-esque haze, and other flamboyantly dressed Trainers aboard other, and usually smaller, ships waved at them as they joined the clustermuk of ships that made up the massive city's harbor. The harbor itself was home to even more strange, floating sights. More than a few men
in flamboyantly colored suits on little more than rafts seemed to be playing an admittedly smooth jam on what appeared to be Saxophones as they cruised through the wake of the many passing ships who, as they listened, they realized were usually singing along, though the words were hazy, the beat was catchy. Once they found a dock, they realized that, comparatively, they were one of the smaller ships here. Rio's Fleet was legendary, though they evidently hadn't seen real action for quite a few centuries. That didn't make the resting and numerous gargantuan cannons any less imposing to dock near.

They had finished their morning bowl, and had donned disguises via the Scale's on hand Fairy Crystal. The basic facial changes, along with clothing, and the usual perception filter Fairy disguises had, were enough to blend in against Arcean level security. Here, for once, nobody was supposed to be looking for them. Seeing the sky was filled with Trainers and flying types, usually battling, Alex and Arthur had hopped on Blaze, as they surveyed the city in a casual manner. For a Trainer, anyways. Nobody seemed to notice or pay any extra attention to as they went high, and looked down.

"Holy…that's the biggest one I've ever seen…" Arthur said, "I thought New Tork was supposed to be the biggest. This…covers the entire coast."

Alex gained a grim look, and nudged his Gallade with an elbow. "Look closer. Most of it is in ruins…and those who can't afford to inhabit the good buildings, reside in those. If we stick to the areas that have legitimate ship traffic it shouldn't be an issue."

Arthur nodded, after taking a closer look. "We should find a place to scan from…Blaze, see anything?"

The Charizard growled. "There's a pedestal on a nearby mountain supporting what looks like giant white two-legs feet. A little jagged maybe, but I could perch on it."

As they arced towards it, Alex glanced around. Nobody seemed to live within ten miles of this mountain peak, and the closest 'houses' were more jungle than shack. It was strange, because literally every other inch of available coast by the harbor had primarily tall white buildings shoved together to save as much room as possible. Several such clusters had even grown into something resembling a sky scraper, though the towering Fleet ships were bigger than all of them.

"Alex…what are you doing…?"

He chuckled as he heard Jess' voice in his ear. "We're going to scan the habitable areas around the harbor for…I don't know, something interesting. You know how this works."

She gave the mental equivalent of a sigh. "This is how you get involved in regional affairs. Every time!"

"I'm just a casual dude riding a Charizard. Obviously, a Trainer. Obviously foreign. But totally normal. If you worry about sticking out too much, you will." He felt his partners nod, agreeing with that logic. Blaze had been disguised as well, as no amount of Fairy energy could hide Shruikan, and nobody else could fly so well. They had been thorough in their preparations.

Another sigh. "Casual. Right. You're just landing a massive fire lizard on the most noticeable mountain peak for miles. If you need us, we'll be doing the subtle approach." Alex's Scales had been given assignments from Tao in squads of two or three, usually paired with women from Jessica's squad, and sent throughout the many areas that needed reinforcement once contact with the south
had been re-established. Only a few of hers had joined them on this trip, as had Haley, a day earlier by way of Teleport. Evidently, holding a piece of the Dragon was enough for him to make an accurate transfer.

Slightly more aware, the three came upon the peak in question, but as with the air space around it, nobody was here. No security, no Pokémon, no sentient minds. Just them, and whatever this strange pedestal thing was. "Land in a manner that suggests we're taking a pause before flying towards our real destination...what direction we face won't matter. Arthur, let's do it."

Blaze landed, folding in his wings, and sniffed at the air. It seemed like a relatively nice peak, a bit misty this early in the day, but he couldn't smell anything that would explain the lack of life in the immediate area. Even plant life hadn't grown here, which was a large part of what made it such a good landing spot.

As soon as their ride steadied himself, the two psychic types had begun. Immediately, they noticed something strange in the ground around them. "Fairy aura..." Arthur said, and Alex sighed in annoyance. He left scanning it to primarily psychic typed Arthur, as he'd long since given up trying to fight a type advantage directly. "It's...containing something...something foul...human made...we shouldn't linger...but if we don't poke at it, we should be fine."

Alex was still staring at the aura covered mountain, as Arthur turned his third eye to the city. He felt the Gallade's extended elbow smack his head. "I said no poking, silly human. Leave it. We have a task, remember? If we waste time, more people die."

They both looked then, and immediately, their eyes were drawn towards the eastern parts of the massive city, just at the edge of what buildings seemed lived in still, and the ruins of the ancient megalopolis that extended northward, along the continent's curve. Rio truly had been quite massive. The area in question was teeming with powerful minds. Shielded minds. That was good enough for both of them, as the rest of the city seemed sparsely populated, only showing the usual latent psychic signatures of the humans living within.

Blaze flapped into the air again, and once more, nothing hindered them as they flew towards the jungle, and prepared to curve around the long way. They'd fly over ruins, but they wouldn't come close enough to be attacked until they'd reached the area with the other strong minds. They stayed very high over the massive rainforest below, but even from so high up, they could see it teeming with life.

"The river..." Blaze rumbled, and he shared his sight with the two on his back. A massive form of what could only have been a snake, or creature akin to one, moved as a dark shadow through the largest river in the area below them. Alex guided them to the opposite direction of the creature, as he had no wish to test something that strong this early. Eventually, they curved around, and came down the ruined coast line.

Then, they saw the structure within which they'd sensed others with similar abilities. It was a palace of sorts, pyramidal in shape, but ultimately made of several larger white stone circles stacked atop each other, with only one set of stairs leading to what appeared to be the main entrance. Water flowed down every other side of it, and into massive tunnel-like structures that, presumably, brought the water throughout the city.

Blaze sniffed the air, and Arthur glanced around as they flew over the ruins, and came down near the sea for a better view of the building. "We are not alone."
Something moved in Alex's vision, and Arthur's eyes locked onto it, easily seeing through the invisibility the intruder had hidden herself with. Before his Trainer could utter a word, he'd leapt into the air, and began flying on his own power. The figure stopped, and Alex finally got a look as well, though he didn't need enhanced eyes as Arthur approached the figure, and booped it on the nose, before shooting backwards with a mirthful cry.

The Latias he'd poked became visible, shivering all over from the touch and the good feels that came with it, and then with a smirk of her own, chased after the Gallade. The two zipped through the air, and it soon became clear Arthur was more maneuverable, barely, and the Latias had a speed advantage over him. That is, until his heart piece flared with psychic energy.

His Mega Form took off, and the Latias had zero trouble keeping up with Arthur, though he was almost as fast. He didn't have the most stamina of their party, at least not for flying, and soon found he lacked the energy to keep outpacing the Latias who, by all appearances, was enjoying the game of tag.

For their part, Alex and Blaze had simply watched, taking note of how she flew, but also knowing full well neither of them could come anywhere near matching her speed. The Eon Duo was said to be as fast as (if not faster) than Rayquaza, but no human had ever successfully compared their flight speeds, as they varied greatly between individuals.

As the fire lizard and the human watched the two with amused smirks, their necks began to tingle, as another presence, similar to the Latias, appeared behind them. With a unified glance, the two looked up and over them as the once invisible head of the large Latios (larger than anything the Pokédex said, at any rate) appeared above them.

His eyes flared with a familiar light blue glow, and a telepathic voice echoed in their heads. "What are you…I know that typing, but…" His nostrils flared, and his eyes widened. "Dragon blood? Here? But there's another scent…"

Feeling a nudge from Lux, Alex raised the plasma sword, but didn't ignite it. The handle wasn't too obvious, but the black and white blade belonged to only one Scale. Arthur, who had stopped when he felt his partner's surprise, felt a tug on his 'cape'. Seeing the Latios, he realized this little one was much younger, and likely a direct descendant. He continued zipping through the air, playing tag, though he was more cautious with how hard he tapped her.

The Latios inhaled again, and nodded. "I see. So it is time…come to the palace when you are ready." He glanced at the Latias then, and his eyes flared once. She stopped in place effortlessly, and Arthur whizzed by, trying to avoid crashing into her.

She joined the Latios then, and the two disappeared as they headed for the castle. Alex landed on the beach then, and as he brought Blaze in, several Trainers stared at the fire lizard, and reached for their Pokéballs. Unlike many Unova Trainers, not one of them had kept the original red and white, and their colors and combinations were almost painful to look at.

Smirking, Alex accepted the Triple Battle, calling out his Aurorus and Lairon to help Blaze. Gelauros did the most damage with his Blizzard, as it seemed grass types were common here, and the Vileplume and Ivysaur they'd faced hadn't lasted long. An Air Slash and Crunch had been enough to finish the Azumarill, and for three more rounds, the local Trainers found themselves consistently losing to the trio. He'd kept them from mega evolving, and hoped his newer members weren't as well recognized as some of the rest of his team yet.
Nobody seemed to notice or ask his name though. The beach was full of flamboyantly dressed Trainers who, by unspoken agreement it seemed, kept talking to a minimum. They were here to train, and all one had to do to blend in was battle. True to rumor, the battles being had were typically between grass, water, and dark types. Apparently, this was the ideal habitat for them, though the jungle housed every type of Pokémon, and likely several that had never been seen before.

Eventually, Alex recalled everyone but his Lairon, and the clever steel type managed a hat trick of victories, and sometimes against a serious type advantage, as they made their way to the nearest boardwalk.

He came upon Jess and the others, and raised a hand, catching a pair of what smelled like breakfast burritos in his oversized hand. He took a seat as he tested a bite of one, and nodded, giving the other to his patiently, and eagerly, awaiting Lairon. The steel type rumbled in pleasure, vibrating the ground slightly as he enjoyed the meal.

He looked between the gathered women, and Haley pinched her brow. "Only you would consider playing with a Latias in broad daylight subtle. Seriously, we're supposed to be low-key."

Alex smirked. "Well, my low-keyness just got us an invite to the regional palace, within which said Latios and Latias currently are. Do you want to go speak with the Eon Duo, or should we keep sitting around eating the food? I don't mind either, really. This is delicious." He nommed the rest of the burrito then, and only paid half attention to her response.

She rolled her changed green-blue eyes. "We should find a…library, or something."

Jess chuckled then. "While useful, libraries aren't the best source of information in new, unfamiliar regions. The ones who've spent their lives reading from them are. I imagine a palace has plenty of myths…perhaps even ones on old enemies, that are likely to not be in the public record."

The blonde-turned-brunette relented, and the other Scales chuckled. They knew better than to test those two with 'Tinvaak'. "Fine. Let's go." Cenomons poked his ball as they began walking in the intense humidity, but the others were used to much, much worse heat and dampness.

As they casually strolled towards the palace complex, they saw the guards responsible for its security. Surprisingly, they each had ten Pokéballs, and typically blue clothing, though there was no uniform to speak of, the uniformity came from the ocean blue every outfit sported. Evidently, this place was not as flamboyant as the rest of the city. It sat between the eastern edge of habitable houses, and the western edge of the ruins that extended along the continental curve, isolated from both by a wall that included a little bit of sea, and a beach. There were other inhabited areas further north, but Rio was by far the largest of any city, having eventually absorbed all the others that had once lived on the coast as well.

The guard that appeared to be in charge waved them over as they came near. He was sporting a metallic serpent-headed helmet, that shared the deep blue coloration. An aura of that same blue spread from him, and examined each of theirs. He was surprised to find that they'd already formed shields, and could even hide them from view, when they needed to. There was potential in each of them.

"We were told of your coming. Enter as an honored guest, dragon blood."

The aura receded, not finding anything truly foul amongst them, or their partners, and the man raised
a fist. The nearby gate opened, and a pair of guards guided them, with weapons at rest. They were led to, naturally, a library several rooms within the massive white stone structure. Even here, water flowed continuously, including over the door. Though they hadn't gotten damp, their disguises had been washed away.

The sound of the constant flow made their spicy throats dry, and the numerous pools around them seemed suddenly tempting. The group of Trainers smirked at each other as they almost simultaneously reached for their personal water containers. They could all feel the urge to drink, but common sense dictated that they avoid the glowing magic water, no matter how alluring it looked.

A chuckle came from behind one of the spiral helix shaped book stacks that, on closer inspection, appeared to be floating on its own. "Northerners are always so quick to avoid our water…it really is safe, I promise…" The woman speaking came out from browsing then, and a small, redheaded girl came behind her. She ran up to Alex, who noticed she came to about his waist, and she then proceeded to press the button on Arthur's ball, though in actuality she'd raised a hand, and given it a psychic tap.

---

Arthur appeared with a flash of purple, and soon once more found himself playing tag, and keeping the energetic youngster from knocking over anything too valuable, by way of telekinesis.

Alex watched for a moment, still amused, then focused back on the woman. She shared the same deep blue coloration as her guards, and wore a dress that looked like it wouldn't be out of place in a Kalosian palace, but he knew a regional leader when he saw one. From the strength of her mind, he had a feeling she was, in some manner, tied up with this region's Legendary Guardians. Those at the top usually were. "I only know of one dragon blooded human with such a handsome Gallade. So tell me, young Redwood, what brings you to my home during these dark, and bloody days?"

He glanced around, saw they were alone, then shrugged. "Oh, you know. A bit of harmless, and entirely neutral reconnaissance. I assume you've heard of my western counterpart." The woman nodded her head, and her equally deep blue waist-length hair shifted with the motion, not unlike a pond when disturbed by a pebble. "Well as it turns out he has, somehow, managed to fuse himself with a Pitch-Black Pokémon. At least twice. A good friend suggested I'd find more on him down here, since there was, according to him, once an entire city's worth of humans who did something similar."

She nodded, and her eyes went hazy as she seemed to recall what information she did know. He sensed Jess give Haley an elbow nudge, but the reporter turned administrator was more focused on the Gallade and what she assumed was the aforementioned Latias. They'd shifted into a much more complex, and quicker, game of clapping hands together in a repetitive motion, and upon seeing the woman's gaze, the girl waved her over, all smiles. Soon, she'd joined in as well, but that didn't keep her from paying attention as the blue-haired woman began to speak.

"Around three thousand years ago, in the mountainous and largely inhospitable mountains to the west, those we deemed too…criminally inclined for our glorious Rio were sent to live out their existence in exile. Over time, the banished grew into a village, then a town, and finally a city, after we expelled a cult of foul sorcerers who, at the time, we believed to be in league with Atlantica. Zigma banished them to the west, and we thought the matter handled…" Jess coughed politely, and the woman paused, raising an equally blue eyebrow.

"Sorry, it's just…you speak as though you were there…also…Zigma?" The woman regarded them again.
"Do you really not know of Zigma up north? Do tales of the Zigman Empire not continue to inspire friendship, camaraderie, and the search for knowledge?" Seeing the puzzled looks on the faces of the women, she frowned, but Alex's was as impassive as a cliff face.

"Tao mentioned the name to me, once, but did not elaborate." He admitted with a shrug.

She raised a brow at the name, but assumed she knew of whom he spoke. "Well, since we're on the topic of names…I am Iara, leader of the free city of Rio, and Tamer of Yacuma, water aspect of our great, and long-sundered Guardian, Zigma. As Arceus left the northern continent the One Dragon for a Guardian, we were granted Zigma, and under her rule, our people flourished as no other human civilization did. The sorcerers I mentioned…they were but the first spark in the war, about three centuries past, between us and Atlantica. The war which ravaged our city, as well as the entire Atlantican civilization…once we returned to our shores, battered and exhausted, they poured from the jungle, wielding the power of darkness and nightmares. Lightning shot from their hands, and they fed on the life essence of my people as they sacked what little remained of Rio."

She paused, and her blue eyes fell to the floor. She glanced up, as the little girl, who'd temporarily abandoned Arthur and Haley, tugged on the sleeve of her flowing dress, and radiated emotions of peace and calm. Iara smiled, and tousled the red hair, before sending her back towards the Gallade. "I was indeed alive during those times…though I was still young. Zigma drove the dark ones back alone, in a battle that shook the entire jungle. For three days she barreled through the forests, attacked on all sides, but relentless in her determination. Eventually, she forced the dark ones back into their mountainous metropolis of stone, and with a display of power that killed her previous Tamer, my father, and split her in three, she turned every one of the sorcerers to ghosts, bound to the city for the rest of their unnatural existence, and doomed to die of gnawing, insatiable hunger for life."

"You said you are the Tamer of but one aspect of Zigma…who are the other two? Do they have Tamers as well?" Alex met her gaze as she looked up at his question, with some measure of surprise.

"I do not know of other Tamers, but then, I rarely leave the palace. As for other aspects…there is Mamboa…the guardian of the jungle. He is…considerably more ill-tempered than Yacuma, but beneath his scales, his heart is yet gentle…towards Pokémon, anyways. My people know how to traverse the jungles without incurring his anger, but the humans who live on the west coast, usually pirates in shoddily made port cities, have made a habit of chopping away at the forests, as our ancestors did, with reckless abandon and no regard for the damage and wanton destruction they cause. It is these humans with whom Mamboa usually interacts…and kills, for their actions. The other is Sombrador. I have never seen it, but Yacuma said that aspect of Zigma stayed behind to guard the city of ghosts, and make sure that they all died of starvation. To that end, it stayed to keep any more humans from entering…though there have been exceptions, of course. Usually, such exceptions only end up as a meal for the spirits, but a few with the Sight have made pilgrimages to our dark defender, to thank it for guarding us. Since they returned alive, we assume the dark one favors, or at least tolerates, our presence in this darkened land."

One of the other Scales spoke up then. "The Sight?"

The women nodded. "What the sorcerers wrought infected all who live here. Some among us gain eyes that can see the ghosts of this world, always. They can see more, with training, and this allows them to safely travel the jungles. Naturally, they're also our strongest Trainers."

Seeing as how she evidently already knew their identities, Alex let his eyes flare up with psychic power. The entire chamber seemed to pause in its constant flow as he did, and the foreigners shifted
nervously. "Would these eyes give us a similar immunity to death, were we to traverse them?"

The bronze skinned woman leaned in uncomfortably close, as she examined the eyes. The back of his neck tingled with instinctual fear that, he realized, he'd experienced before, when facing down an Arbok or Seviper that belonged to particularly powerful Trainers in a particularly large Swamp. Finally, she spoke, and he exhaled as subtly as he could. "Perhaps. I'd recommend some kind of armor, our Trainers have the ability to fashion such from obsidian, but I think…you would be fine. If you stay together, and don't…irritate anything. Don't try flying either. Humans irritate the aerial hunters, and I promise, you will be dead before you ever see them attack you. Travel on foot when trying to cross Selva Muerta."

Arthur, who had since rejoined them, and had apparently mega evolved at some point while playing with the Latias, chuckled as he rejoined the conversation. The little girl had taken to hanging on his various limbs now, but he could, finally, actually manage to talk despite that. "I have moves of almost every type in this head of mine. All physical, all strong. Let the dark types come. I can handle those." The arm not occupied by a young Pokémon in disguise flared up with gold, which of course drew her attention. She leapt for it, but it ceased glowing as she caught hold. His now free blade lit up instead.

If Iara was impressed, she didn't show it. "I have given the warning. I don't care if you die. Less competition, really. Unova and Albion will be... 'helped', if you perish." She gave her best unsettling grin, but the dragon blooded Emperor had grown used to the look by now. She'd had her chance to strike them, but he was still curious. "Would you really get involved if we did not return? You'd commit to aiding two foreign territories so easily? Even when one is embroiled in war and the other puppet to a witch?"

The woman raised her other brow now, "To rule them, yes. The Dragon Empire must have fallen far to not recall those over which they once held power. That would explain much, actually..."

Alex continued the conversation, satisfied that he'd learned something of the woman. From what they'd heard, not one single person, in the entire city, went without water. It was what made their seemingly immortal Queen so loved, by those in houses, and those with nothing. If she cared that much for those under her, Unova at least might not be in bad hands. But he had no intention of dying. "These former hybrid ghost sorcerers...let's say that, hypothetically, one escaped, say about three hundred years ago..." He resisted smirking as he saw her eyes widen with recognition. "Let's say, hypothetically, he landed on a beach, and met a man. A man who happened to be the leader of a cult. A cult which may or may not have grown into something truly foul, and massive enough, to cover the entire western half of our continent, when said cult leader eventually died of mortality, and his successor, did not."

It was his turn to move into her face now, and his eyes shifted again as he embraced the dragon's power. He felt his neck tingle again, seemingly from the chamber itself, but it did nothing to hinder him, and he genuinely had no intention of harming anyone. He broadcasted that intention as effectively as he could. "How would a hypothetical dragon blooded human go about killing such a creature, who let's say, hypothetically, created and fused with another Darkrai at the expense of a city."

The woman raised her right hand, and the instinctual fear faded, slightly. "Hypothetically...you would need a sword, or some other hypothetical sharp implement, to sever the connection between the two. Finding where they're fused should be easy for those eyes...but the first Darkrai, will not be able to be excised. They're fused, you see, and I imagine the new one is powering them both with
dark energy that only a Darkrai can pull directly from the Nexus, from a place as far as Fornia…"

Alex let his eyes fade, having got his point across. The flowing within the chamber resumed, though perhaps a bit slower than before. "What Nexus?"

At that, the woman glanced up. "You know more of it than I do. You were there."

The increasingly familiar fear that they'd all been feeling now had a moving source, as water fell from the ceiling, and rose from the floor, to form a truly gargantuan, deep blue scaled snake that, with a glance, they saw was both water and dragon typed.

The unease faded somewhat as the Legendary Pokémon's soothing, and unquestionably feminine, voice echoed in their skulls. "You…dragon blood…you are the one who reunited the One Dragon? Issss what Eo tellssss me true? The Dragon issss whole again?"

Alex nodded, having a fair guess at what Pokémon within this place would bear such a name, and be on speaking terms with a Legendary Dragon. "Yes. I'm the one who brought him back. Though, I had quite a bit of help."

The vertical slits within the blue eyes of the giant reptile widened slightly, as they went to his belt. "Clad in the bonesss of his brothersss indeed…very well. Pay attention, Ssscalssess of Balance," She seemed to smirk at the name, though the more she spoke the more at ease they felt. She had the ferocity of a mother, but, as they were no threat to her people, they had nothing to fear. "The Nexusss iss a human creation. Old technology, from three millennia passst, wasss ussssed to ssacrifice an unknown number of humansss from the jungless, and the southern partss of the land known asss Texico. The ssorcererss we exiled to die, endeavored to live, and eventually, found a way to form the gathered dark energy into what your ssspeciess callssss Darkrai, and fussse with it. The Nexusss is fueled when a human dieesss, and leavessss behind ghossst energy. It convertssss it to darknessss, and the ghossstss within the city persssssisssst."

She finished with an angry hiss, and looked to her Tamer, as she stroked the water serpent's leathery and slightly lighter blue underbelly.

"I tell all of my people, daily, not to venture into those mountains. The longer the Nexus exists, the longer the Sombrador must guard it, and the longer Zigma must stay split. Mamboa grows ever darker towards humans, and eventually, his rage will be sparked, enough perhaps for him to attack she who is his counterpart, and her people. If the two snakes fight, our people are doomed. That is what our last Seer prophesied, anyways." She nodded towards the Latias who, by this point, had dropped her human form, was zipping around Arthur's head, and dodging, narrowly, the sharp spike on his 'helmet' with numerous aerial barrel rolls. "That one, will be like her mother, but until she matures, we cannot get a…clearer depiction of these events, and how to avoid them. We have been without a Seer for some time, and this one only recently hatched."

Alex glanced at Jess, as she had the thought, and the redhead spoke. "So…I guess hypothetically…if this Nexus were to suddenly vanish, what would happen?"

The large snake's head tilted to one side, and they got a good look at her fangs. Naturally, they were made of ice, as like most water types, she used it frequently, and it made her and Mamboa more or less equal in strength. Were his typing to shift from grass and dragon, to grass and dark, he would have an advantage, for she had no doubt he would retain his Outrage. Even with a quadrupled weakness to ice, he had ever been difficult to keep in check. "Your foe'sss body would weaken, and he would begin relying too heavily on hisss new Darkrai for sssusstenance. Though he isss far away, the Nexusss iss large, and still sssusstainss him, assss it doesssss all hisss people, thosssse who fusssessssed themselves with manifestsssted darknessss. He would likely sssseek yet another place to ssssuck the life
from. If he addss a third Darkrai, he will become a Champion of the Sssshadowsss. I trussst you know of the lassst one…"

The Unovans nodded in unison. It had taken Arceus himself to put Giratina away, which implied that the deity either couldn't kill Giratina, or didn't want to. Many suspected it was a combination of both.

"When and if you ssucceed in sssevering him from hiss newessst acquissssition, bring him home… he will rot, with hisssss people, ass a ghossst..." Alex bowed in the Unovan fashion, and the dragon once more became water, and flowed throughout the palace, and into the city. It had never stopped, though the flow had slowed, slightly, outside of the room they'd occupied.

Iara looked them each over again, and smirked. "You have a plan to destroy the Nexus, don't you… do you know anything important about Shadow and darkness that you'd like to share?"

Alex smirked. "This is the Dark Continent, correct?" She nodded. "Then you have your answer. Think it over, it's not complicated."

Still puzzled, but not willing to show it, she pushed for more. "How did you combine the dragons of Unova again? Was it technology?"

He shook his head. That knowledge, he'd give freely. "No. Technology could only bring Kyurem and the other two together one at a time, and while those fusions are strong…they're nothing compared to the One. The means I used were…divine, though there was a bit of complex energy manipulation as well…nothing someone down here couldn't try to replicate, I'm sure. Should the Nexus say, suddenly vanish in the next few days."

She blinked at him, twice. "Well Sombrador would have to come back as well…"

A familiar voice echoed from all around them. "Mamboa would come…if Sssssombrador did."

Alex nodded. "We'll see what we can do."

The Scales left the palace, and traveled incognito once more until they came upon the jungle's edge. It wasn't hard to find. Around the populated areas, pairs of deep blue clad guards stood watch between the city and the jungle. Death within was very real…if one was not prepared. They'd waved them in with nods and rumblings of 'good fortune' for their journey.

It was at the edge that they'd split their party. Haley and two others were going to stay behind, and try to find additional information on weaknesses these western human-Darkrai hybrids had. The only three who could use Light energy, namely Alex, Jess, and one of her Scales, who was the sole Articuno rider they'd been spared for this trip. Together, they figured they could probably do something about this supposed well of darkness. They didn't need to ask Tao for guidance either, as they knew well what he would do, if the opportunity to weaken an enemy presented itself.

The two Scales waited patiently, already sweltering beneath the heavy leather-like cloaks covering the stifling armor. At the very least, it kept the smaller insects, namely mosquitos, from biting at them. They had been eradicated on the northern continent, more by damage from nuclear warfare than anything else, but it seemed here the infamously annoying bloodsuckers thrived. They were an Old Earth species that refused to die, though he imagined more than a few had become Pokémon at some point. Once their newest travel partner, who went by Svelka, had her own armor on, she'd pulled out an Ice Plate from her bag, and it fused to her chestpiece. The resulting freezing aura kept the bugs,
and many blood-sucking bug types, from going anywhere near them as they journeyed into the dark jungle.
They'd made good time through the jungle, considering they were riding a massive Torterra. After mega evolving, for they were frequently challenged by locals, some familiar, and some that made their Pokédex randomly stop working. Arthur handled the poisonous ones, as well as any with flames or flying moves. He remarked that he was becoming remarkably good with Aerial Ace, but needed more speed. They'd gone through several potions by now, for the Pokémon had, true to what they'd been told, been strong enough to not go down in a single hit. Usually. They only managed one counter hit, but the damage piled up quickly.

As the hours crept on, almost as slowly as their ride, the Gallade grew tired. The three Trainers decided to let the others get a workout from whatever challenged them next, while the Gallade meditated within the hollow on the Ash Tree that grew from Terra's back. He didn't mind the awkward angle, as he was floating.

Though Svelka eventually questioned why they were riding on, quite literally, one of the slowest Pokémon known to man, Terra had demonstrated why multiple times. Any shallow emerald green rivers they came towards, filled with what had to be water and dark typed familial relations to Krookodile, were easily crossed by the massive turtle. None seemed interested in testing a type advantage against that kind of obvious strength. There were exceptions, of course, but the Torterra would open his mouth, unleash a Seed Bomb on them, and then continue on, unfazed, and without breaking his still incredibly slow pace.

As they'd been traveling north west, they eventually came upon a gargantuan river with a name so old, even Unovans knew of it, though admittedly most knew nothing about it. Though Terra hid it well, Alex knew when his starter was tired. There was no reason to push their limits just yet. He called out Hydrus then, and Jess summoned her Empoleon. With the girls on the massive penguin, Alex had the large mud-fish, who had mega evolved as well due to the strength of the water types around them, all to himself.

He heard giggles as he began the seemingly complicated, but in reality, quite simple process of enjoying a bowl of Leaf. Having a bag that was seemingly bottomless was always useful. He was rather quick too, as the girls had, upon seeing his shenanigans, zipped ahead to the other side of the Amazon River in only a few minutes. He let them, enjoying the beauty of a slow ride. The waters were just swampy enough for his partner's liking, and the view was rather nice. He'd always liked green, and on the wide river, he saw many shades of it. The sky was clear as well, making it perfect Leaf weather.

He was packed up in roughly two minutes, with the skill of someone who'd done this many, many, many times, and Hydrus caught up to the two, who had continued on into the jungle.

Evidently, they'd intended to lose him in the trees, but his mud-fish had become rather adept at leaping from a swimming position, and hurtling towards a specific spot on the ground. He even kept his Trainer on his back. Usually.

They traveled by foot from there, and the two Unovans let their newer members test themselves against the local Pokémon. Jess had found a moment to take the fossil they'd taken from the Stoney
Mountains to Nacrene City, and the result had been a revived rock and steel type they'd taken to calling 'Triceradon' due to her similarities to Bastiodon, upon evolving from a Pokémon that the Museum's scientist had been convinced was just a slightly different, but still genetically normal Shieldon, and what differences there had been were due to her being from so far west, and were therefore probably regional, not a new species. She had proven otherwise upon evolving though, for her Trainer had then proceeded to train her newest member with repetitive battles.

Thankfully, Unova never lacked for Triple battles, and shared experiences. Upon evolving, her head had become more akin to an Aggron's, as two of the three horns the female possessed jutted forward from her skull, and the third was like an extension of her nose. She retained the metallic frill Bastiodon usually had, and it was similar in both color and pattern. The two species clearly shared a heritage.

Naturally, Jess had taken to calling her Cera, and thus, Ceno and Cera cut a path through the dense number of regularly attacking grass, and far more commonly, flying types. They were more common than bugs on this side of the Amazon for some reason, but as the sun began to set, Ceno and Alex continued training against the many dark types, namely Salandit, that jumped at them from the shadows. Since the girls were carrying their tent, they'd set it up, and left the two battle-eager boys to stand guard duty. The constant attacks, while annoying, were great experience.

Even against fire types, the Lairon had adopted a battling style that involved slowing, and then hammering with a ground move. His defense was high enough that he could withstand three attacks, typically. As the losing Salandit fell to the latest Earthquake, the remaining two began to call for help. Alex smirked, and healed his partner. They didn't wait for what was in the trees to come out. Ceno had already lifted onto two feet, and brought them down just as their opponents charged from the trees.

They got two of the Salazzle matriarchs, but the other five readied what could only be Flamethrowers. Ceno dug underground before the flames reached him, and retaliated. Then there were four. Gravity brought him back down into the tunnel he'd dug, yet another tactic he favored, by digging straight up to strike. He limited any counter attacks to one, but one was all their opponents needed. Poisonous smog filled the air as the four belched it into his hiding place, but he was already digging again.

At a suggestion from his Trainer, he'd shot up from behind the poisonous fire lizards, and as he landed, hit them with an Earthquake. This time, none dodged, and they learned the painful lesson of a quadrupled type disadvantage as the ground around them shattered and crushed them. Only one managed to hold on, barely, and she began making a similar sound to the Salandit, who had, in the series of yet more Earthquakes, also fainted.

Ceno formed a condensed Flash Cannon to silence her, but Alex held him off. The ground was shaking, and they could both sense the size of what was coming. A Full Restore brought the Lairon back to fighting strength as it cured his poisoning as well, along with a Max Elixir, for he'd used quite a few moves thus far. There was no question that they'd need to restock after this trip, but then, being able to travel in regions like this rainforest required one to have absurd numbers of items on hand. The Trainers he'd met so far never seemed to lack for them, though common courtesy seemed to suggest one didn't use their hoard to persist in a losing battle.

Ceno glanced at his Trainer, who had, after readying him for more, pulled out the reddish mahogany brown colored device he'd been pointing at fellow Pokémon all day. The red beam shot through the trees, scanning their opponent. "Salazzle…? But that's not… Are you Mukking kidding me?"
Again!?” His eyes had narrowed then, and he began typing in system commands, as their opponent finally came through the trees.

Seeing he was on his own for the moment, Ceno engaged the massive fire lizard. He was more dark than poison, and there was no doubt from the heat emanating around them that he had the fire typing as well. With yet more cursing, and a final sigh, his Trainer pointed the device at the lizard again. Their newest opponent hadn't attacked, after seeing one matriarch yet retained consciousness. He’d kept an eye on Ceno, but had growled at the nearby bushes.

A swarm of Salandit flooded around their wounded females then, feeding them more than enough Sitrus Berries for a full recovery. They wisely slinked back into the trees, and away from the strange human with the powerful mountain dweller. The Lairon had demonstrated that he was stronger, and they'd lost enough Salandit. Once the field was cleared, the massive hulking male, who probably knew some fighting type techniques as well, growled at the Lairon.

The challenge echoed through his body, and deciding that it was, finally, time the Lairon let his stockpile of evolutionary spiral energy carry him to the next stage of his species' evolution. He felt something awaken within him as he did, and the energy surged with an unexpected burst of power that almost felt divine, but not. Cenomons, true to his nature, consumed all of it. The light faded, and the Aggron rose, slowly. Alex just stared, as he easily towered over his Trainer now. Judging by his mass, he also guessed he now outweighed even Terra. His best guess put his new Aggron at twelve to fifteen feet, not counting the horns.

He did a double take, as he got a proper look at said horns, and the 'helmet' of his Aggron in general. The flared steel plates, which would shed with time, flared not unlike Cera's own, though they lacked the patterns of a Bastiodon, and remained a steel color. Feeling the enlarged crest clink awkwardly on his shoulders, Cenomons returned to all fours, and looked rather comfortable on them. The very structure of his body seemed similar enough to an Aggron, but evidently his would remain on four legs primarily. It seemed to fit, and Alex didn't mind. He had a feeling he'd be pretty fast, once he got some speed going.

It would limit what fighting moves he could use, if any, but they had more than enough coverage from Arthur, and Hydrus in that regard. Alex had told him they'd focus on rock and steel moves anyway, and they had. Overall, Ceno’s head seemed more akin to his species Mega Form than anything, though it wasn't quite there. His nose had a similar upwards curve like Cera’s for whatever reason, but the 'horn', while sharp, was shorter. His two larger horns also had a slight, but similar curve, though they were just as impressive as he’d expected them to be. Ceno had trained hard to get this strong.

Snorting, the Aggron lowered his head, as if to charge, and their opponent, who was rapidly reconsidering this battle, reared up and backwards slightly, from his usual forward slouch. The muscled arms hung low under the equally muscled chest, and ended in a pair of claws that, upon closer inspection, were indeed dripping poison. Alex slowly reached for his Pokéballs, but that slight shift had been enough for the battle to start.

Flames engulfed the lizard, bursting from the dark red markings all along the primarily black scaled body, and it charged Ceno. Much like its female counterpart, it was rather quick, when it wanted to be. As it roared, Alex listened closely for the species name, but all he got was 'Sala' before the roar made the rest incoherent.

He swore again as the two Pokémon attacked simultaneously, "Sala what!?"
The Flamethrower was blocked by a Rock Tomb, which had been placed defensively when Ceno slammed his front feet down, and made the earth rise. Alex glanced at his Pokédex. He'd manually scanned the creature, and this time, the machine had registered the unidentified species, which meant a blank page with a captured image of the body, at least. He decided to leave it for later, and focused on helping Ceno.

Temporarily obscured, Ceno proceeded to smash through his own move, turning it into more of a Rock Throw, as he crushed the boulders with ease, and assaulted the lizard with the debris. Their opponent had charged through the rocks, shrugging them off, before switching to physical attacks, and Ceno met him with an Iron Head. Fire wore away at the steel power of the move, but Ceno, like most Aggron, had plenty of stamina.

The Aggron made a rumbling sound in his metallic and rock body that one could've called laughter as he heard his Trainer's command. "Sweep the legs. Then finish it."

A Fire Fang overpowered the already weakened Iron Head, and Ceno moved back, clearly unused to his new bulky form. An Earthquake followed as he steadied himself, and it kept the lizard at bay as the ground beneath it shattered. Ceno blinked. He'd been skeptical about the strength differential between evolutionary stages, but he'd just seen evidence that his abilities were now quite a bit stronger. The Sala-whatever's claws began to glow with poison energy then, and as it charged, Ceno ducked low, and swept his now similarly strengthened Iron Tail through both of the comparatively skinny legs.

The creature fell with a loud boom that echoed through the jungle, and Ceno finished him with a Rock Tomb. Or so they'd thought. Upon smashing said rocks with Iron Head, they found a tunnel. Evidently, the lizard could dig, when it needed to, and the shattered landscape had only helped him. Terra popped free of his ball then, and guided Ceno as he showed him how species like them could repair what they tore asunder, to a degree.

The whole battle seemed to go unnoticed by the women, who had grown used to the Earthquake happy Trainer early on in the day. He insisted that the noise they made warded off the weaker ones, and those who simply didn't wish to see humans. What new or varied species he had managed to catch, had been sent to his brother's box, as the word was that he was rapidly focusing on Evolution for his final thesis, and he'd attacked the subject broadly. They'd lost anything resembling a signal after entering the jungle though, not unlike Oranguru's Swamp.

The two women went within the tent, once the outside was apparently set up, and somehow, he just knew that it too would be bigger on the inside. It was a running theme with what Jess brought from home and she'd refused to explain it. As had his granduncle, and her brother, who had a bag like his own as well.

As he mused on seemingly impossible dimensional engineering that, as a formula, confused even his new math-friendly method of thinking, his attention returned to his yet unfinished manual Pokédex entry. Naturally, his team all had opinions on a name, with the most popular being 'Saladon' at nine to one. Blaze had stuck with 'Salazard', but his Trainer had ultimately gone with the former choice due to the ruthless battling style, and the apparent influence it had over at least a hundred of its kin. He listed what moves it had used, and then filled out the rest as best he could. At the very least, the data would help anyone else with a Pokédex that ran into such a creature.

The girls came out of the black and white tent to the sight of Alex, arm wrestling his newly evolved Aggron, who was lying at ease, and yawning as his paw easily stomped his Trainer's hand. When
asked how he'd evolved, Alex was dodgy about the exact circumstances. Finally, he'd said, "We
found something leading the Salandit attacking us. They'd already called for help from their Salazzle,
so when the matriarchs began making similar calls, I had a feeling we were in trouble. The Pokédex
didn't recognize this species either, it was convinced that we were just facing another Salazzle but…it
was male. And much stronger, definitely a physical attacker. Though, once Ceno evolved, we took
care of it…it may be back though, so keep a ground type handy tonight."

Ultimately Leo and Cera had been left on watch, and the now hungry thunder cat, after sleeping all
day, made himself useful with his 'unmatched visual prowess' as he called it. Alex had no idea where
his cat was picking up these terms, but he didn't really mind them. Salandit did indeed come by, but
they were loners, not a part of the swarm from earlier, only following their scent. Nothing bugged
them once they met Leo's eyes, and saw the equally imposing, and equally foreign Cera guarding all
of them with a dead stare that suggested she would Earthquake any fool that so much as sniffed in
their general direction.

The tent had not disappointed, though it was nowhere near as luxurious as he expected of his
wealthy neighbors. The furnishings were normal rather than ornate and high-tech, and, they were
under a century old. He still resisted poking at the seams of it though, no matter how much his new
thought processes, which were still puzzling out the 'how' of his surroundings, bugged him to do
otherwise.

They rose with the sun, and continued on, making significant time since the attacks were less
frequent in the earlier hours. Eventually, they'd decided to form a 'herd' of sorts, with Terra, Hydrus,
Cenomons, Cera, and Aria, who had long since become an Altaria, and a nuisance to whoever Jess
battled. Few challenged them as they made their way ever northward, though as they came through
the latest patch of jungle, they once more found the emerald waters of the Amazon.

"How far does thees river go, again?" Svelka asked of Jess, who like Alex, smirked. Giant rivers
were a foreign concept in a land of ice and snow, though more than a few had apparently formed
with the dissipating storms, and subsequent thawing of the ancient land.

"The Amazon is, by last measurement, the largest in the world. It has apparently only grown in size,
throughout the years, so…we will likely be crossing several branches of it on our way, but this is
apparently the largest, according to Haley's map." She glanced at her Pokédex, which was storing
said map because it had the memory storage, and was practical.

The girls zipped around to Hydrus again, and they smirked at the Gallade and his Trainer sharing yet
another bowl on his back. Alex smirked back at them. "Finally decided to join us?" The arm holding
the bong and bowl in question stretched to the side, as he was tackled by the redhead, who somehow
ended up in his lap after a flurry limbs and shifting movement. She reclined on him like one might on
a Pokébean chair, and fit rather snugly in his crossed legs.

She manifested a flame of her own on her pointer finger, a trick of pyrokinesis she'd refused to share
with him, and hit the piece before passing it on. Alex, who was good by then, passed it to the
Norstadder, who'd taken a seat by Arthur. "We have thees in Valaskjalf, but ours does not smell
so…foul."

Alex smirked. "Try it. I think you'll find ours is stronger. Just don-"

She cut him off, inhaling far too deeply before he could finish, and he winced as the slow-smolder
turned into a proper 'blaze', and created enough smoke to make anyone's head spin. The only
downside was that she'd also likely just ashed the remaining Leaf in the bowl, but luckily, he had more. Svelka only managed to hold the smoke for a short while before exhaling, and devolving into a coughing fit. The other three shared a look, and then his Gallade began instructing her on the finer points of bong manipulation, as he'd all but made the process a science after finding he rather enjoyed the Leaf.

They were roughly halfway across this latest river channel, when Hydrus felt a chill run up his spine. Few things startled his Swampert anymore, so Alex glanced up from the rather gorgeous view of the emerald colored scenery, and looked at the water around them. He rose slowly alongside Jess, and as they stood, their belts flared, summoning their armor. They'd eventually had to relent to the heat and travel without it, or be forced to consume amounts of water their Pokémon would never keep up with if they wanted to keep traveling without dehydrating. As it turned out, an Aura shield had been more than enough to avoid the old Earth bugs, the diseases they carried, and various other dangers.

As he saw what now circled them within the emerald waters of the world's largest river, he knew even dragonbone was likely to do little. They were called 'Legendary' for a reason, after all. It was a snake, that much was certain, and it was undoubtedly male, judging by the mental presence which had, after they'd armored themselves, finally revealed itself.

The mind that reached out to theirs was similar, in Alex's opinion, to how Yacuma's had felt, in that it made the back of his neck stand on end. Though, where he'd felt the urge to run or fight, now, his instincts were telling him to hide. Death was all around him, and then, it spoke.

"Unovan Leaf…that…is a smell I have not ssscented in a long time. A long time. What brings Unovanssss to my domain?" Given that most of the Legendary encounters he'd had so far had mental ranges somewhere in a baritone, he was surprised to find this one was more…charismatic. Lighter, still definitively masculine, but anger seethed just beneath the surface. Hydrus stayed put as the grass and dragon type circled them below the water. A quadrupled weakness to an Ice Beam would let them get away, but any retaliation would take their ride out, and they knew enough about the river's locals to know that the following feeding frenzy would reduce them to bones in minutes. They'd been warned against swimming the Amazon themselves, as the local wildlife would typically avoid eating fellow Pokemon, but humans were evidently fair game.

Alex glanced at the other two, who had not spoken, when he realized the being that could only be Mamboa was speaking to him directly. If the massive grass snake felt threatened by the sudden boost their armor gave their natural abilities, it did not show. "We're on our way north. Yacuma…all but tasked us with taking care of the Dark Nexus."

The yellow-orange eye that rose from the water before him shared a similar structure to most other dragon types, though in this one, the most obvious relation had to be the Serperior species. The vertical slit of black focused on him, after glancing about their little group. "You think you have the sssstrength to overcome such darknessss? It has grown beyond your ancient human technology, and while your current level is impressssive, you've a ways yet to go before you can comprehend thisss. You journey to your deathssss, and you will only feed the Nexuss." Arthur stepped forward then, and bowed, as the eye focused on the Gallade. The head moved away slightly, as it appeared to recognize the Pokémon as more of a legitimate threat. All the battling thus far had definitely made him grow. It was exactly the kind of training he'd been itching to test himself against, and it paid off now as the psychic type's Aura appeared around his body, and flared blue with obvious waves of power.

Mamboa's head rose completely out of the water now, ready to strike, if needed. The fangs he bore
were longer than Yacuma's had been, and seemed to be made of an almost black wood. They were still quite sharp though, and no doubt served well when the Legendary summoned grass energy.

Arthur powered up with a flexing of his arms, and his aura shifted to Light, as he shone brightly in the center of the river. The sun had begun to set after almost a day of straight travel, and Alex didn't need to wonder who would have the advantage in the darkness. Mamboa was most likely a night hunter, like many snake species. They'd seen him before in the early morning, likely searching for somewhere to sleep, and as the current night came, he'd apparently awakened, and noticed them. The dragon type arched a scaled, but still very much leafy eyebrow, as he watched the Gallade. "I ssssee. One who wieldsss the Light. Yet, alone your strength will fail. You should know thisss..."

Two blue colored flashes later, the Gallade was joined by a pair of Articuno, who made the snake recoil. He was now a bit outmatched, as he knew the Gallade could use flying moves too. They were no longer prey, but he did not let them free just yet. There was another scent amongst these foreigners that drew the Legendary dragon's curiosity.

He moved back to where he'd smelt it, his nostrils very obviously flaring. His tongue licked the air, scenting it as the Pokémon hovering in the air watched him, and tensed as he neared their humans. "I know...that sssscent..." The eyes focused on Alex, and the nostrils flared again. Once more, he drew the plasma sword, and the snake's eyes went wide. "The One Dragon...livesss. Perhapss...now is the era. The Nexussss...to be destroyed at long lassst...yesss...it is finally time!"

The group moved back as the massive snake sank under the water again, and then exploded from it with a burst of water as he leapt through the yellow-orange sky before coiling back in the water, and surfacing away from them, but still close enough to chat. They had given him the best news he'd heard in millennia, and he could hold off on breakfast. He'd need something more than a few man-apes and a mudfish to sate his appetite anyways. His lengthy coil swished in a manner that they could only perceive as happy, as the large snake all but grinned at them.

"It is as you say, Mamboa. Yacuma wished for you to return to Rio, though she expressed doubts that you would, until Sombrador was freed..." Alex let the helmet fade, and donned his hat. The heat had already made it uncomfortable, and sweat had begun sliding down his face at annoyingly close intervals.

The grass snake's eyes darted to the symbol on the Trainer's hat, and the water rumbled as he chuckled. "Rio...it hassss been some time sssince I went there...they may not welcome me with open armsss."

"You cannot?" The snake leaned in again for another look. "No...I ssssee your logic...one of our own mussst unite what the darknessss tore apart." The snake's 'lips' formed into an approximation of a smirk. "We will have a Battle Tournament...and ssssee who issss worthy! But firssst...your partners. Summon them. If you are to dessstroy the Nexusss...you mussst be ready..."

The humans glanced at each other, and then resumed swimming towards the shore. With a sigh, Mamboa did the same. This time, it seemed they were at the westernmost edge of the river's many diversions, and the mountains that marked the western side of the continent loomed behind the large, white sand shore they came in on. Their goal was still many miles north though, and they had been
warned against trying to travel the mountains.

Mamboa soon joined them, and upon seeing their party, immediately focused on Serpi. Grass energy flowed between the two as they touched noses, and the Serperior came away looking not unlike Hilbert's Caesar, though she was much prettier. Her fronds had grown in the shape she'd desired, and the naturally elegant Pokémon pulled it off. She'd also gained at least ten feet of body length. Alex was still eyeing her, when he noticed instinctual fear from Terra.

Mamboa had shifted his gaze to his turtle now, and Alex gave his head a pat as he met the snake's gaze. "Thiss one is…crooked. A Guardian has already sssstrengthened you, but…you've grown asssskew. I will…fix thisss, and then, you will owe me a favor..." The snake hissed what was apparently a chuckle.

Before Alex could respond, vines extended from the grassy fronds that had, as he'd dried off, flared out from Mamboa's neck, making the similarities to a Serperior undoubted now. Though he looked far more regal than any of his apparent descendants could ever dream of, he still encouraged them to grow as large as they could. The vines glowed bright with grass energy as they flowed into, and slightly adjusted, the grass turtle.

With Terra, the changes were more…explosive, and a brief flare of pain seared through his bond with his Trainer as the energy of a Legendary grass type fixed what had grown askew upon his shell. Namely, this meant his straight-trunked Ash Tree had moved, shifted to the center of his shell, the roots extended down to, and encircled each of the stone-like spikes on his shell.

As the tree had moved, another three spikes had appeared on the other side, evening him out weight wise. Those were encircled by the roots as well, and Alex winced as his newest batch of Green Monster was lost in the shifting swirl of energy. He sighed, but he could always make more. He had several jars full anyways, and plenty of seeds. Still, it made him slightly sad, though that faded as he felt his starter's happiness. He no longer felt lopsided, which was what had made him hesitant to being ridden. Now though, he felt right. Balanced. Like Alex had, after the Trials in Unova. The turtle genuinely thanked the Legendary, as he moved back to dote on Serpi.

Alex glanced at his pocket as it began beeping, and he drew the Pokédex. The light centered on Torterra, and to his genuine surprise after having it spazz out and crash over ten times so far, it successfully scanned the grass turtle, and an addendum to the usual species data appeared.

*Though it is reportedly a rare mutation, individual members of this species have been known to grow an additional three spikes, without evolving, over a period of, at minimum, centuries. This usually occurs when the Torterra's tree becomes too heavy for the left side of its shell, the shell then apparently adapts, to support the weight of the ever-growing tree, by growing three additional rock spikes. It is theorized that Torterra this large also use these spikes to contain enough water to support themselves, and stay mobile. All variations with this mutation have been well over standard size.*

The device beeped again, and the words 'new mutation' appeared. He stared at the screen as it prompted him to enter a description under a still image of Terra. He smirked, typed in 'Yggdrasil Form', and then hit enter, before closing the device. He gave his turtle a chin scratch then, "We're contributing so much to science lately, aren't we," The turtle snorted in his version of a chuckle, and then moved to dig himself into the still-warm sand, and absorb what heat he could.

The grass snake eventually left them, but not before suggesting that they should visit the center of the
great river's many 'islands', and meet the Psychic Master there. They were in the Rain Sage's territory, apparently, and it would be rude not to introduce themselves, or so the snake had claimed. For his part, he'd made mention of heading to the southwest, to remind the pirates there that he was very much still around, before heading to Rio.

Traveling the jungle was no less difficult, but for every day that crept by, they traveled hundreds of miles. They had veered away from the western mountains, as they were still very much south of their goal, and had instead shifted east, following Mamboa's direction as best they could.

Serpi had replaced the fatiguing Empolia, and appeared to take to swimming the emerald waters as gracefully as Mamboa had. She carried all three of the humans easily, still brimming with the energy the Legendary had shared with her. She was not the only grass snake around though, as they had spied several other Serperior lurking in the trees as they ventured towards the subtle pull the river's current guided them towards. Mamboa had claimed that it would, if followed, lead them to the Sage.

Ultimately, it took four days to reach the center of the massive forest, and their supplies had dwindled to roughly half of what they'd started with. The battles were just as intense, the experience was just as strengthening, and Alex was more and more convinced that having Scales come down here to test themselves and train might not be a terrible idea. If they were prepared.

The others in the group that had stayed in Rio had contacted them one night as they camped. Signals were spotty at best in the jungle, but within the tent, they were rather clear. Apparently Mamboa had indeed returned to Rio, and the reunion with his watery counterpart had caused a few waves, as they'd tumbled in the shallows of the ocean, but there was little in the way of destruction. Apparently, the other half of their party had entered into the eager snake's tournament when he'd declared that the winner of said tournament would both need to be strong enough to unite the three again, and become Zigma's newest Tamer. The people of Rio had, naturally, accepted this challenge, and had begun setting up and registering the thousands of Trainers who surged forth to participate.

Rio was apparently celebrating the imminent return of Sombrador, and the atmosphere of good emotions and a chance at unity was welcomed by all, poor and housed alike. It was a common belief that Zigma would restore their city, and then everyone could have a roof, and access to water.

The two women had been worried of what might happen to the city should they fail to take on the Nexus, but Alex reassured them. If this 'Rain Sage', as Mamboa had titled them, was even half as wise as Oranguru, they would likely gain an advantage of some kind, if they heeded the Sage's wisdom. He didn't know what form said advantage would take, but his instinct said this was a good idea, though, he still tread cautiously. His own mentors had been suspiciously silent with their mental guidance on this matter, but he decided that was for the best. Oranguru had hinted that relations between the Psychic Masters were strained, more or less, and he had no idea what to expect from this one.

They came upon an island eventually, and like Oranguru's, it sat in the middle of a swirling merging of several different branches of the emerald colored Amazon. Unlike Oranguru's island, there was little in the way of structure. Where the Foggy Swamp Sage had one tree on his island, this one had many, and among them, the group saw a massive, red-furred figure lumbering about its business.

Alex summoned his Gallade, and the two leapt for the shore, projecting their mental presence as obviously, and nonthreateningly as possible. They felt a response, though instead of words, it was a simple emotion, one his Gallade read as 'hurry up and come in'.
Alex nodded to Jess, who'd also proven herself in such a place, though as Svelka made to enter, she found her way blocked by a mass of roots and vines that appeared from the ground and surrounding trees, separating her from the Unovans. A deep-toned voice rang out over them then. "If you do not have the power, you cannot enter. Wait by the shore. You will be safe in this part of the forest...for now." A flash of blue, and her Articuno joined her. She gave the two a nod, and then proceeded to start brushing her bird, as she did every night.

Alex and Jess walked towards the presence, as did Arthur, and as they approached, their eyes saw more of what appeared to be the Sage's home. What had looked like trees from the shore became revealed to have been shaped, grown, or otherwise turned into a sort of pagoda-esque structure, made entirely out of leaves, vines, and the massive tree trunks that were common to the flora of the rainforest.

The first thing that hit them was the stench, and as they winced and continued on, they realized where it was coming from. Another, far more welcome, but still ultimately foul stench covered the one emanating from the Rain Sage. It was Leaf, of that Alex was sure, and as they came upon the Sage itself, they saw a familiar sight.

Sitting comfortably against what must have been the largest tree on this isolated island buried within dense jungle foliage was a massive red-furred creature. It had four limbs, and each ended in a curved set of claws that, while sharp, seemed poorly suited for advanced bong manipulation. The Sage's device of choice seemed to be a long, simple wooden pipe, and even Alex had to admit he liked such things. They didn't need water, they were fairly easy to clean, but he knew what happened to them after hundreds of sessions of holding burning herb, and had opted for glass instead, back when he'd first taken up the hobby.

The pipe in question floated up to the shaggy head of the creature, and after a deep inhale, smoke slowly drifted from either side of the 'head', and surrounded the seemingly perpetually damp fur, covering the other foul scent entirely. A single eye, purple within an iris of gold, appeared on what he would've expected to be the forehead of the creature, and the pipe once more levitated down towards a stand, upon which it sat while the Sage enjoyed its effects.

The Leafhead within him winced at the waste of perfectly good Leaf set to smolder, but he wrenched his focus back to the task at hand, and bowed in the Unovan style. Arthur and Jess did the same, but he took the initiative in speaking. "Rain Sage, we were guided here by the grass aspect of Zigma, Mamboa. He and Yacuma have bid us to head into the northern mountains, and put an end to the Dark Nexus."

The voice that responded was neither male nor female, but also had elements of both. It seemed as loud as Oranguru's voice, but was impossible to read for emotion. The tone was even and simple. "What would you have me do, pupil of the Swamp?" There was a chuckle from the shaggy creature, and he spied an additional pair of black eyes, hidden in the fur of the creature's face, staring back at him. "You may have been away from it for a time...but the scent always lingers. In any case...my contemporary already told me of your imminent arrival..."

"Then you know our mission is good natured." Alex said, folding his arms within the white robe that had become his casual garb of choice. "We wish only to help this land...and reunite that which darkness has sundered."

"And how do you seek to accomplish this feat? The Nexus has existed for millennia, and not even Zigma and I combined could end it. I know of your Gallade, I know of your skills with the Light, but it will not be enough."
Jess spoke this time. "Then tell us what we need to do to be ready. Light energy is quite effective against darkness, and dark types. It can purge Shadow essence. Why wouldn't that work on a Nexus created by human methods?"

The creature sighed. "What your species has wrought cannot be undone by your technology. Or the Light. Too many have been sacrificed to empower the darkness. The time to strike this foul creation was before it began to manifest Darkrai."

Alex sighed as well. "I don't suppose you know of a Celebi nearby who would be willing to—"

The Sage cut him off. "No. You cannot meddle with this, it has effected too many lives, set into motion events which cannot now be undone. Not without seriously angering the God of Time. Were you to travel back to destroy it when it was yet possible, you would erase your very reason for coming this far into the jungle, and a great many other events besides. The timeline you create would be entirely foreign to you, and you, as you are, would cease to exist. Let me spare you centuries of agonizing over 'what if', and simply tell you: do not meddle with Time. You will die."

Jess eyed the red-furred figure. In body shape it was similar to Oranguru, and her eyes labeled it as a normal and psychic type as well. "There has to be a way to neutralize it. What caused it to come into being in the first place? What technology spawned this Nexus? Everyone we ask is vague on that. If we knew what started it, it could help us unmake it now, without shifting the timeline."

The Sage scratched its shaggy chin with the left claw, and tiny bugs fell from the foul-smelling fur as it did. "Hmmm. I do not know, Zigma would, but her mind and memories will be…scattered, even if successfully reunified. You have seen the same with your Dragon, no? Splitting apart Guardians has consequences." The pipe floated up to the 'head' again, but the fur covered from view anything resembling a mouth, and the smoke did not flow from where it was evidently inhaled. "There is a Time Guardian near the mountain you seek, one that has befriended Sombrador. Seek her out before you attempt to approach the dark one…Sombrador is not as…understanding as its counterparts."

The Unovans shared a look. Evidently the final aspect of Zigma would be playing the counterpart role that Kyurem had. That also meant Sombrador was likely the strongest of the three, and would be the boundary within which grass and water would be bound. Arthur spoke then, "This…Time Guardian. She can show us the past?"

The eye on the Sage's forehead focused on the Gallade, then narrowed. "You would be wise to limit what you ask her to show you…but yes, to a degree, the past can be shown to those like you, without upsetting the Time Vortex."

As Alex felt the Gallade's mind whirl at the possibilities, namely what he strongly desired to know, he bowed again to the Sage. "Thank you, Rain Sage, for your wisdom. We will leave in peace."

The red-furred creature chuckled. "It is custom to cement new friendships with a sign of good will…come, partake of my Leaf, Trainer. Your Sage mentioned that you'd probably wish to try it."

Alex glanced at the leaves that acted as a door, then Jess, who shrugged. They'd gotten here early in the day, and perhaps a few more minutes could get them a friendly Teleport. They did not know places in the jungle that were safe to bampf into, but if any would, it was the truly rancid smelling creature before them that, despite the stench, seemed genuinely good natured.

"Very well." He finally said, "We will partake, but then we must depart for this Celebi's home with
haste. Could you…?

"Teleport you? Hrmm. Yes, fine, I suppose. Speed will be needed, and Oranguru warned that the longer you take here, the more dire things become up north." A pyrokinetic spark lit the bowl of the pipe, and Alex inhaled deep as the creature kept speaking. "With that said, the news is relatively good…he mentioned something about shifting borders, but I will be honest…I do not care. You should visit him when you return."

The three spent the better part of a half hour in total with the Sage, and eventually were sent on their way. They were Teleported to a place in the north where the Amazon finally ended, in one of its many rivers, and from there, they headed west through the equally dense jungle, that was home to equally strong and unique Pokémon that, for once, tended to avoid them, rather than jump out, and start a battle.

The jungle soon mercifully gave way to relatively barren rocky mountainside, and the three paused, healing their partners. Arthur came out then, as did the two Articuno. The boys shared a ride as the birds lifted them up towards the peaks, and brought on a soft snowfall with their flight. They didn't have to look far to guess where their destination was. The castle-like structure had been carved from the stone of the surrounding mountains for simplicity rather than aesthetics, but the mile or more of death surrounding the peak the structure called home was obvious, to those who were looking for it.

The darkness permeated most of the mountains, and any life that might've normally enjoyed such a home, for there were many mountain-loving Pokémon, had been driven away by the total lack of vegetation, and foul taint on the air. They shared a look then, and wondered if something that could warp the planet might be a bit out of their league. That meant bringing in Tao, which while possible, would not be worth it until they'd exhausted every other option. They didn't want to pull him away from commanding literally everyone.

Arthur had spoken to all of them then, as only a psychic type could. "We have two Legendary Birds with us, and I have Excalibur. Moreover, our redhead can empower her partner's Ice Beam, and Chakra Master there can help too. With his help, we've definitely got this." He gave his Trainer a smirk. "Just condense the energy into a sphere. It's easy."

He gave his Gallade a look. He could form a sphere just fine. He hadn't actually tried it with Light yet, but he'd controlled that enough to avoid ruining his nerves, so theoretically, a dense energy sphere really would be easy. Theoretically. Unfortunately, Light energy was not as abundant as other types, and he'd been warned against wasting it. That meant any experience had to be gained by repeated, and genuine, use.

They spotted the Celebi's grove, for it was the only patch of vibrant green that stretched this far up into the mountains. Hiking had required putting their heavier hitters away, but the near-constant humidity had, for the moment, seemed to fade. As they approached the grove, the chill in the air only grew, as did the sense of impending death. It was muted in the Time Guardian's grove though. Like most shrines to it around the world, this one had also been carved of stone, but the patterns were ancient, and different from anything in Unova. The closest they resembled in design was the buildings of Texico City.

Jess let her own helmet, which resembled the Articuno riders to a degree but remained composed of dragonbone, fade away into the rest of the armor as she wiped her brow. "Now what do we do?"

Alex smirked. "It's the home of a time traveler. There's only one thing we can do. We must wait." She raised an eyebrow at him as she gave a familiar smirk, and he laughed. "Yes, we can do that,
too. It's a good way to pass the time." His granduncle had always told him that Celebi was, to this very day, very much a mystery. Were there multiple across the world, or were they all the same Pokémon? Did it work for Dialga, or had it been created to keep the Time God's anger, and the damage it could cause to the fabric of space and time, from tearing reality apart by accident?

One thing had been clear throughout the research he'd shown Alex. The Time Guardian appeared when and where it chose, and nothing any human could do would change that. He'd also mentioned bringing an offering, and after spending time with the Rain Sage, he had a feeling this Celebi might actually appreciate what they were about to start doing in its grove, and even wish to partake. It was a running theme, for some reason.

Bunker Beneath Sacreus – Fornia Region

It had taken the better part of a week, but the Prophet of the Arcean Church had finally recovered from the explosion of Light energy the draconic brat had ruined his PokéMeter with. More and more rumors, he had been told, had begun to spread about what exactly the events in Urbe Monachus meant. Their Bishops had always told the people that the Relic would only short out and refuse to work in the presence of one deemed worthy by Arceus himself. The Dragon Emperor had caused it to explode, to the view of the public, but only the Prophet had seen the needle's truth. There was no scripture detailing what an explosion meant, for all had assumed the divine machine could not break, but the well-spoken Unovan had done it regardless. The Church was spinning it as a bad thing, naturally, claiming it was a sign of the dragon puppet's impurity. That said, the needle had indeed moved to the red before it had blown, but nobody alive yet remembered what that signified.

Understanding the PokéMeter had taken a long time, for much of its history and the methods of proper use had been lost in the tumult of the Dark Times. Psychics good and bad had vied for the machine, and in the course of the fight for possession of it, more than a few records and notes on how to operate it had been lost, until in the end, nobody on the Earth had remembered. He had found precious few records on how to read it, and what said readings meant, but not one mentioned the needle in the red. From what he'd found, it was suggested that his relic's needle simply couldn't be pushed that far.

The 'meditation sphere' he now chilled in, Doctor Ein's newest project, and one Pravus had thus far very much enjoyed, opened, and the surrounding minions in his bunker base snapped to attention. He was in a good mood for once though, as he often was after being in the sphere. Ein had warned him that his temper was blocking his vision, making him little better than everyone else who had claimed to desire domination of the planet. This device would, so he claimed, enhance his 'mental abilities'. The sphere was crafted from the last stores of the Melmetal essence, but it was well spent. It enhanced his powers, and kept them from ravaging his body. Moreover, it could project a shield of Aura, and when empowered by Shadow, not even the Light would easily break it. It remained to be tested against the Unovans, but he had a feeling it would prove sufficient in keeping the nuisance's plasma blade from bisecting him, something his other half had warned him was quite possible, upon seeing it. As the spherical device that had, of course, incorporated his favored throne lowered, the command center beneath Sacreus went silent as the Prophet spoke. "Report."

His Lieutenant saluted, "Sir! The situation in Japan and Alola is going as well as you expected it would, though we've been…stalled…by a pair of Mewtwo north of Kanto. One belongs to Red, we were ready for that one, but the other appeared from nowhere to save it before we could successfully use a Dark Ball. Your Hands report that your intuition was correct, Red's is the ideal candidate for
Pravus eyed the Lieutenant evenly, arms folded within his black colored robe-like garments. They covered his body armor, an advanced design of the Crusader's kit that Ein was calling 'Mark II'. His crown, outlining his head in Arceus' symbol by hovering just behind him at all times, was pure gold though, and, in his mind, went nicely with the rest of his ensemble. "What of the other Mewtwo? Does hatred burn in its heart as well?"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "That one recognized your Hands as being…erm…special…as soon as it took the field, apparently. Somehow, it knew Luster Purge. The move had a similar effect to a Purge attack with Light energy…given what kind of move it is, we're theorizing that it too might be a formerly unrecognized dual-type attack. Nobody has studied it in detail, so the possibility remains. The Y strand Mewtwo took down two of the Hands before fleeing with the X strand Mewtwo."

Pravus' eyes narrowed. "Two? Hrmmph. Recall the leaders. Send Nonagon and Lucien to the front lines here, in the north and south. They will be far more…effective, on open terrain. General Marius will take over the duty of leading my Hands in Japan. Have the Navy begin blockading Kanto, Johto, and Hoenn. If Alola breaks our accord, and decides to intervene, you have my full permission to release our trump card over the region."

"But sir…what of the Kyogre Tamer? She has been a…persistent nuisance on the water." The Lieutenant spoke sheepishly, but his tendency to point out flaws Pravus missed in his plans was why he kept him around. He couldn't genuinely remember every detail of the minutia his minions considered important.

"She has." A dark grin appeared on the charismatic face. "She's been taking out valued members of our naval forces for almost a decade now. She has an idea of what transpires on our ships. Admiral Nauta will be more than eager to finally have leave to take her, and her little pet, down. Once he does, have him move in on Hoenn. That will divert their Champion's attention from Kanto, and Marius should be able to handle them once he leaves Red's little…coalition."

The Lieutenant saluted once more. "It will be done, my Prophet. What of the war here?"

Pravus glanced at the screen detailing the current state of the war on his continent, and grinned. "The Dragon overreaches in the south…and the north has not yet seen a recovered Thor take the field?"
The Lieutenant nodded. "Then unleash the aerial squadrons. Capture and convert any who try to resist…I want Ventosus. It is the gateway to Unova. When Lucien arrives, send him north. Nonagon can handle the south." The Lieutenant nodded, bowed, and then retreated to go enact the orders. Pravus watched as the majority of the squadrons he'd placed in the Stoney Mountains appeared as a mass of red dots that slowly began moving east towards Urbe Monachus on their map. They would reinforce the ground troops, and this time, their objective was to push through, or die trying.

Straviken had been but one of many bases he'd placed within the mountain chain, and now, they would empty of flying types and man-made aircraft. The Pokémon would block attacks from below, and the planes would counter by firing the one thing every eastern fighter feared coming up against. Dark Balls.

_Aweston – Texico Region (East)_

Geralt had been ordered to make his own way down to Texico, and after a helpful Teleport from a
mind that was not Tao's, he'd ended up on the shores of the Swamp, just east of the Sippi River. The massive trees behind him set his neck hairs on end, as did the many pairs of eyes watching from the swampy murk that lurked beneath the trees.

Ghost made good time to Aweston, and mostly, they came across many easterners, fleeing north towards the safety of the One Dragon, and away from the cloud of ash that covered the Crusader's advances. Naturally, he'd been asked into gathering a few items, crafting a few healing tonics, and of course, averting the regular natural disaster with the aid of whatever Pokémon happened to be around. It was nice having his full team back, as well. Most other Top Rangers sneered at him for having six, but now that ten was apparently becoming the norm, as it had been, allegedly, thousands of years before, many Rangers had done as he had, and filled out at least six slots on their belt.

Once they'd arrived in Aweston, which was acting as a critical location on this border of the war, Rosa had barely regarded them with a glance, before assigning them another Ranger as an escort to Orre. His name was Walker, and according to the grim-toned dragonbone clad Champion turned Scale of Balance, he was the best Texico had to offer. Apparently, nobody could avoid his eyes in these lands. He dressed simply, though that seemed to be the norm in Texico, even in war-time. He did, at least, have a black and white vest for a measure of protection, but his dark leather duster had gone over that, too.

He was pale skinned, but clearly well-toned, and his beard was, in a word, magnificent. He had a standard Texican hat that matched his jacket, and his Pokéballs, all normally colored, were slung diagonally across his chest. He only had three partners, but Geralt had a feeling he knew the secret of the Signs as well. Ranger protocol dictated using those only in times of duress. Though he personally was on good terms with the Latios that seemed to come every time he used the Sign. His granduncle's last gift continued to prove its worth.

Sufficiently impressed by the fellow Ranger's record, the two had made their way as only those of their skillset could towards Orre. Namely, that meant traveling through territory of angry, and notorious Pokémon, more than a few of which had body counts tied to their League given 'nicknames'. At the very least, the Pokémon in question weren't looking for them, and the Arceans seemed to keep their camps and supply lines well away from such nuisances.

He'd been told that most of the Hands had been sent to Japan, and the fact that Pokémon this strong were still untainted was a testament to just how many had to be over there. Luckily, the island nation had just as many freakishly strong Trainers as Unova did. They would be fine. Probably.

The trip through the southern half of the Stoney Mountains was enlightening, as the two men realized that, for Pokémon, it was also a war zone. Evidently, the leader of the local Nido species had come up against an Aggron that, true to rumor, was fully mega evolved, all on its own. It was a phenomenon that, as Rangers, they'd been seeing more and more of in recent years. The only explanation the League had come up with was the distortions from Arceus' dimension, ten times the size of the ones that had been recorded in the Alamos Incident. The power being given off was apparently affecting random Pokémon all over the world, and naturally, many were caught before a scientist had a chance to study them. Like other forms of Mega Evolution, this one was temporary, and usually required a power source to begin, but once started, as Tao had demonstrated for months now, a Pokémon could keep such a form as long as they wished, provided they had the energy.

They snuck by the warring species, neither of which seemed to be able to find an advantage, and made their way into the vast desert of Orre. From the perch they'd had on the mountain, Phenac City seemed not so distant, but as they traveled, they realized the heat from the sand had distorted their
vision. They'd crossed over the sands with their Staraptor and Pidgeot, and had an easy ride over the warm air. The fact that they'd hydrated helped as well. Walker had known exactly where to find water, no matter where the labyrinthine caves of the Stoney Mountains had deposited them.

They arrived in Phenac City rather quickly, avoid the Arceans patrolling it, and it didn't take long for a black clad man with a Snatching Machine to lead them to Wes. They found him standing over a young woman who seemed to be having a nightmare, deep within a random box canyon fort just outside the city.

Once they'd isolated themselves, Tao’s eyes appeared, and gave them their orders. "The three of you are to travel west, through the mountains, and into Fornia. The way has already been marked by your cousin, Geralt but things may have changed in the interim months. Stay on guard, and don't get captured. Once you make a suitable base in the mountains, move through them, and take out the 'secret hangars' I've highlighted on Walker's map."

Right as always, the dragon had indeed marked several otherwise unnoted spots within the mountain chain on the Ranger's map, and Geralt nodded. "We can hit those easily."

"Take out any aircraft that have not yet launched. If they aren't invading now, they soon will. I would prefer to cripple their ability to take our Pokémon on the front lines. We're outgunned as it is." The eyes shifted to Wes. "Once in Fornia, you will take point, Snatcher. Lead these two to Lab Ein, and you will have your justified vengeance."

Wes stared back at the eyes, clearly angry, though it seemed not to be directed solely at the Dragon. "You know what I want. How will this help?"

The eyes floated directly in front of Wes. "You will have what you desire when your mission is underway, and I have a moment to spare."

Wes' eyes narrowed. "No, please, by all means. Take your time. Nobody has their life on the line or anything."

The eyes hovered silently for thirty seconds, then, "It is done. I have dispelled the nightmares the Darkrai hit her with, but I can only do so much for psychological scars. The nightmares likely made those worse, though I have...lessened their effect, there is still psychological scarring."

Wes' expression shifted several times, and finally rested on a mixture of relief, and sadness. "Is there no way to undo the damage?"

The eyes shifted, as if they were focused on something out of the room entirely. "At the base of the path you will take to the mountains, you will find a lost Ralts. She could use a Trainer. I...cannot see if it will help, getting her another partner, but it is what will start her on a better path. That is all I can give you, Snatcher. Now be about your mission." The golden orbs vanished then, and the three men were left in awkward silence.

The silence persisted through their mission, for the three had all but nonverbally agreed that being stealthy was their best chance. The Arceans still had their Task Force, but it was no secret that their recruits had been drawn heavily upon for their Crusader's ranks. Fornia was still likely very much patrolled, especially near Sacreus, but Lab Ein was out near the coast, on the region's smaller set of mountains, tucked away where nobody decent could stop the progress of science with things like limitations and morality.
They had indeed found a young female Ralts all but on the path Walker had chosen to take them into the mountains with. Wes caught the little one, after explaining how he could help, and though the psychic type seemed to understand, Geralt privately believed that it had simply read the emotions Wes was very obviously suppressing, and drawing a conclusion from those. After explaining how Alex's own Ralts had once helped with amnesia, Wes had made sure to send the ball to Michael, who was standing guard over his cousin while Wes was away.

They made quick work of the hangars they found in the mountains, and Tao had added another three to their path as they made their way through. It took the better part of a week, but they finally emerged to see Fornia after four days within the tunnels, and found that the view was little better.

Smoke clogged the sky, and the mountain tunnel, as the winter winds moved the clouds east. Fornia was still on fire, apparently, but Rangers came equipped for travel through forest fires. Between the heat and the smoke, few would notice them, and thus they crossed most of the Fornia region undetected.

They traveled by way of the mountains that, at the start of the blaze, had burned to ash early on, but there was plenty of forest yet to go. The ash on the ground and in the sky kept the dark-clothed trio from sight as they curved around the large desert, and came down on Fornia's smaller chain of mountains. Wes told them where the Lab would be, as he'd seen it before, but Walker was the one who sighted it first, along with a pair of guards.

Before either of his partners could summon a Pokemon, the Ranger had spun in place kicking high, and taking the first easily by the chin with a Roundhouse kick, sending him spinning to the ground. The other received a jab to the stomach, doubled over, and then found a similarly merciless knee in his face. The whole thing was over in moments, but Walker still cuffed the pair, and then dragged them into the nearby woods, which had avoided the fire. He'd apparently left them by a stream, and had convinced an Ursaring to watch over the pair for a few hours.

Wes was already scrawling in the dirt when Walker returned from double checking that they were alone. "The Dragon was clear about my mission, once we arrived, and he left the task of data retrieval and destruction to you. I'm going after Ein, to make sure this evil does not regrow. Again. Download what you can, and then destroy the rest. I don't care how. I just don't want these zealots having anything left to go through."

Walker frowned at the Snatcher. "Having strong belief doesn't make them bad people...they're part of a cult. What Caleb Pravus tells them to do, they do, or they suffer for their refusal. Also remember, these are scientists." The Ranger put a hand on Wes' shoulder, and the Snatcher raised an eyebrow, but was soon drawn in to the kind but unwavering stare Walker gave him. "Doctor Ein has earned this fate, but try not to go on a murderous rampage while you deliver it to him. These people are probably just trying to do their jobs."

Wes shrugged off the rough hand of the Ranger, and glared at him. "These 'people'," He said, using genuine air quotes, "Have been infusing innocent Pokemon with Shadow energy. For years. Usually after stealing them from children. Have you even heard of what they did to the Meltan in one of the impact craters further south?" Wes shook his head. "If they have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear." He called out his Espeon then, and the psychic cat's eyes shone with wavy lines of scarlet power. "I'll determine which ones have earned their deaths...come, Typho."

Wes entered the base then, through what appeared to be, going by its size, an exit for aircraft. The hangar shook as a roar echoed within it, followed by the sounds of battle. Flames then spewed from
the hangar's exit, and the Rangers shared a glance, before hopping on their flying types, ascending high over the complex, and then dropping quite a few feet onto the ceracrete building's roof, just above what was supposed to be the record room. Once more, the inertial dampeners that could double as 'hover shoes' for a time over empty air, proved their worth in stopping serious falls. Interpol had all the best toys, and the Rangers had been instructed on how to use most of them.

Geralt's Arbok weakened the roof with Acid, and Walker proceeded to punch through it with his bare fist, making a hole big enough for them to slip through. With that, they too entered the lab, and began their work in relative isolation, as all defenses had been shifted to deal with whoever was in the hangar.
Clemont chuckled, stroking his light beard as the light hitting his glasses kept his companion from seeing his eyes. They sat in the 'guest room' of Lumiose Tower. Aside from the slightly messy decor, it had an impressive view of the city. "How long has it been since we were caught together in some villain's evil scheme?"

Serena kept her gaze focused outside the window of Clemont's private quarters within the gym's tower. "Years...so very many years."

"Did you hear who else she has? The others? My sister, Tierno, Trevor, Shauna, they all seem to have vanished." Clemont kept staring, eyes locked on Serena, but she was focused on the window.

"I wouldn't know...I remember about as much as you...though it seems there's a large gap between when she took us...going by the last date we remember." She kept her eyes on the outside, but Clemont knew her well enough to know she was genuinely shaken.

He was too, in truth. His mind had always been his, a tool that never (usually) failed him, and it had been taken away without so much as a battle. "I guess all we can do is Purge the Shadow from the aura of the others, when and if we find them. Know anyone who could do that?"

She met his eyes suddenly, and the slight smirk he'd been wearing vanished under her stare. "No." Her eyes went back to the window. "That...red haired woman, the one from Unova. She could do it, she's a strong Trainer. Like her brother, the Champion." She gave him a meaningful look, and Clemont nodded. They'd both had the pleasure of being beaten by his Greninja, and eventually his Garchomp as well.

He sat back then with a familiar smirk. "There is another...did you hear we have super heroes now?"

That brought a slight smirk of her own to the blonde's face, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "That sounds familiar."

Clemont shrugged. "They may not be taking on Yveltal, avatar of Destruction, single-handed but they're doing alright against that...Venomoth Trainer. His outfit is silly, but he's pretty strong. I have a feeling he's the one responsible for hitting me with that Shadow energy. He might've gotten you, as well..."

She nodded. "Probably. The League isn't as secure as we pretend it is, but we don't really mind intruders. We're the Elite Four. If common thieves can take us down, we deserve to be robbed."

Clemont chuckled. "I'll never get why you enjoy it up there."

The silence grew as Serena avoided answering. She was a strong Trainer herself, had been Kalos Queen at one point, and then ultimately ended up on the Elite Four when they called for a fire specialist to replace Malva. After her adventures with Calem and the Legendary Pokémon of their region, the League had deemed her strong enough to apply, at the very least. The television in the room, a standard installment in every suite of Lumiose Tower, switched on automatically, as the local PNN reporter mentioned the Lumiose Gym, and the incident. It was more
annoying than anything after so many weeks, but as Clemont moved to shut it off, he paused, and listened to the woman speaking.

"...on the Lumiose Gym has reportedly been sighted fleeing north, towards Galar. There is no word yet on whether the Galar region police will help detain the criminal, or give him sanctuary. All local Kalos police forces are..."

Clemont glanced up as he saw Serena stand, and move to one of his windows. "Hey! Wait!"

But it was too late. She was already on her Talonflame, a larger individual of the species, as she was female. They soared northward in a streak of fire and Clemont, who had moved to the window by that point, grabbed her hat with his ever-useful Aipom arm as it flew off her blonde head. They weren't wasting time, it seemed.

He shook his head, and chuckled. "I'm sorry about that. The TV interrupted before you had finished changing, and she left rather quick..."

The black and purple clad fusion of a blonde haired Trainer and a Liepard melted from the shadows, and shrugged. He was a bit slender, but as Clemont took a second look, he noticed the so called 'Night Cat' did not skip leg day. Or ab day. Or any day, for that matter, despite still being a teen, or slightly older. He still managed to keep a tan as well, despite the winter season."It's alright, I can catch her. I am curious though, who else do you know that can cleanse auras?"

Clemont grinned, and pushed his glasses up with one finger. The light hit them perfectly, hiding his eyes, and the blonde haired cat-lad sighed. "Your Ledi Girl of course! Probably. But failing that...there might be another who could help. He could catch that Venomoth...person, at least. He's fast."

The cat shook his head. "I already have a partner. Besides, stealth is important for our style of battle."

Clemont chuckled. "Oh, don't worry about stealth. He's more than your equal, I think."

The blonde sighed again, turned, and found himself face to face with a legend, in his own right. Everyone knew this Greninja.

Night Cat's smirk widened into a grin. "He'll do. Come on, froggy." He dashed out the still open window, once more leaving before Clemont could so much as utter a word.

The Greninja nodded at Clemont, and then vanished as he dashed forward with a speed that few could match, quickly catching, and surpassing, the pair of would be heroes. He eventually even caught sight of the comet that was Serena, though he knew he'd never catch it. Not without a boost.

As he reached for the link required for such a boost on instinct, the eyes, quite by accident, shared their sight with the human to whom he was bonded. Then, just like that, they were in sync once more, for the first time in years. Despite distance, despite their time apart, their bond had not eroded. The Greninja fully embraced the power as his form shifted with a flash of impossibly white light, and his speed quadrupled.

The Kalosian police in pursuit of the rapidly fleeing Dark Moth were rather good at taking down criminals with, primarily, Arcanine. As fast as their fire hounds were, the streaks of red and blue shooting past them far exceeded their pace. The Arcanine began sprinting as they realized the prey was about to be taken down. They knew how this Greninja handled villains, especially in that form.
This particular 'super villain' was, admittedly, much stronger than their usual targets. Kalos police could usually handle Mega Evolution, but whatever this madman had discovered, and then infused with Shadow energy, put him in a league of his own. He’d slipped through their forces in Lumiose with unsettling ease after being thrashed by the Champion, defeating, and then turning their own Chief with his power. He'd kept up the chase from the capital for weeks, causing chaos across the countryside, though before now, he'd been much more stealthy. Apparently, the only way to reach wherever in Galar he was heading required speed over stealth.

They never once considered that the villain might be audacious enough to try resisting. Not after so long running, at least. But resist he did, as he narrowly dodged the massive Water Shuriken that threatened to bisect him, and released a cloud of his spores into the air. To his surprise, they burnt to ash, as Serena's Talonflame burned them away with her Flame Charge. The fiery comet of a bird arced in the air, hurtling straight for the fusion of human and Venomoth.

Evidently, he shared a type weakness to the bug he partnered with, as the flames left him badly burned, and falling through the air. The Talonflame soon had him in her claws, and she returned to her Trainer, dangling the injured man before her.

She had no pity. "You're going to tell me where the others are now. Don't waste your breath on anything else."

The man chuckled, wincing as the sharp talons dug into him. The large beak moved close to one of his bug-like eyes, as her Trainer stepped closer. He spoke then, "I have...no reason to tell you that."

She raised a brow. "You're not exactly in a position to deny one of the Elite Four...now talk!"

He chuckled again, seemingly ignoring the pain now. The darkness surrounding and corrupting his aura flared. 'I may not be in position...but you are! Open fire!'

All at once, the unfolding scene became chaos, as three elemental Hyper Beams of water, grass, and fire typing surged towards Serena, her partner, and their captive. Behind them were, as expected, her friends. Shauna, Trevor, and Tierno were beside their starter Pokémon, and each of them had an eerily familiar glow to their eyes. One that still made her neck tingle. She hadn't let being possessed get to her, but seeing how it effected others for herself was profoundly unnerving.

She knew she was protected, as the bonded Greninja formed a pair of massive spinning Water Shuriken, one per fin, and deflected what he could from Serena. The Hydro Cannon spun uselessly against the powerful offensive attack turned defensive, and the Blast Burn fell to type advantage. The Frenzy Plant almost hit him, until a dark purple and yellowish blur tore through the massive vines, and covered his flank with claws of ice. Night Cat didn't have time for a witty remark though, as the Shadow-infused plants continued to attempt to strike at him. Moments later, he too was aided by a pair of red and black spotted fists. Between the two fused Trainers, the ferocious attack from the Venusaur eventually ran out of steam.

"Fine. The hard way it is." Serena raised her oldest Pokéball, and called forth her Delphox.

"Psychic."

The fire fox grinned, raised her Ashwood staff, and hit the villain full force. The man's connection to his pawns was cut as his Venomoth took the brunt of the intensely powerful attack. The damage behind the attack was nullified by the darkness protecting him, but the force behind it sent him flying into the base of a nearby mountain. They were on a thin strip of land, surrounded by river on one side, and Kalos' final mountain, the last in the Mediterra range, on the other. The weakened and exhausted Dark Moth fell to the type advantage, and his form split once more into human and
Pokémon.

Upon winning the battle, Serena had a moment to examine the help that had rushed to aid her. She knew this Greninja too, but did a double take as she saw his form, and then his eyes. The two stared at each other for an uncomfortably long time that nobody immediately around them had the nerve to interrupt. Ultimately it was the Kalos League's Elite Four member that rose first, and approached the downed criminal. No longer fused, he was far less impressive. His muscles lacked definition, but his body showed signs of battle damage, and not just from her. In truth, she had only dealt the last in a series of harsh attacks that had taken weeks to whittle this criminal's strength down.

"So they've found a way to infuse Shadow in human auras..." She looked up as the bonded Greninja joined her, and nodded. Meeting his eyes again, she instinctually looked down to hide the rising redness in her cheeks. "I guess it's time, then..."

The Greninja looked up and to the left suddenly, but Serena continued anyway. "Will you be back for the World Tourn-" She stopped, as she looked up, and realized she was just talking to a Greninja. A good friend, a wise friend, that more than understood her. He placed a webbed hand on her shoulder, and nodded once. She nodded as well, eyes hardening, and turned back towards the man lying before her. Her Delphox joined her side, and a few moments later, Kalos police had arrived, and subdued their friends. Still infected with Shadow, some resisted the restraints as the raw emotions of hate and fury overwhelmed their better judgement in attacking an officer.

The Greninja hopped away as the situation around Shauna deteriorated, with several angry Arcanine readying Flamethrowers. She was fighting the officers cuffing her, and her loud tones filled the air. "I'm not into that stuff! Perverts! Get off!" Before her Pokémon, namely her own Greninja and Venusaur could get involved as well, one they all respected, to a degree, arrived to mediate.

"I want names and locations...I'm tired of chasing false trails." Serena spoke, and her Delphox growled in acknowledgement as the staff flared with a powerful deep purple aura. She raised the staff and let the power flow, but the man before them simply laughed as the darkness surrounding him utterly dispelled the psychic power a second time.

"You want a *name*, little girl? You want a location?" He cackled again, and then went entirely still as the Shadow overtook him. Despite the enhanced possession, his face continued to smirk, and he spoke two words that made the gathered officers and Trainers flinch. "Morgana. Albion."

His chuckles grew into another laugh as he saw their expressions, and the direct control lessened. "I have one more word for you! Supersonic!"

The weakened Venemoth, apparently feigning a fainted state, flapped up suddenly, and the officers around it went still as they inhaled the dust from its bright wings. It aimed its mouth at the rest, namely Serena and the remaining officers, and loosed a screech that scrambled their world. By the time they could see straight, the man and his Pokémon had fled from sight, and given that they were in the wilderness, he could go any direction. Especially if he had other Pokémon. The word was that, in all the time they'd chased him, he'd only used a Venemoth so anything else he'd caught would be presumably ready to fly or battle as needed.

"Dammit! He got away again..." One of the officers growled, but Serena held up a hand, and the recovering law enforcement waited as she knelt low, and retrieved something from the ground.

"I just love it when they drop important things..." She eyed the Burst Heart, and spied the essence of a Venemoth within. A dark look came over her face. "I wonder what happens if we remove the
essence while its body isn't nearby...probably death, I'd imagine..." She turned to the nearby officers. "How many of your people did he kill?"

The officer blinked twice as he saw the look in her eyes. "None, actually...some serious injuries, but those were mostly caused by pursuit, not the man himself...Lumiose City is a different story."

Serena nodded, and pocketed the crystal, deciding she could determine who should have it, and when. "I need to find a way to cleanse my friend's auras."

"I think I can help with that." A new voice chimed in on their conversation, and the gathered police turned as one, and raised their Pokéballs. Some, namely the women among them, lowered their hands slightly as they saw who had arrived, and found themselves staring at, arguably, the most handsome man in the region.

Through no small effort, the Trainers one of the Elite Four called friend were brought before the new arrival. Calem, who had grown quite a bit taller since Serena had last seen him, knelt down to each of her friends, placed two fingers right between their eyes, and with a bright flash of energy she didn't recognize, cleansed their auras of the Shadow's taint.

Serena followed him as he repeated the process for their Pokémon as well. "When...did you learn how to do that? I've only seen a Legendary Bird with that kind of power..."

Calem gave her one of his better smirks, and as usual, Serena found her cheeks matching her hat in color. "It's a...family trick. Only those who awaken the power in their blood can learn it."

Serena nodded. "So Xerneas did it." Calem nodded as well. "I suppose it makes sense...but wait, does your...does the King have this power too?"

"This, and several others, though he has a difficult time using them anymore. He only regained the will to exist a few years ago, it takes time to recover from millennia of apathetic wandering. Thus, this is the only technique he was able to pass on in time. Using them multiple times in a row is especially taxing, and his recovery takes longer each time." Calem went on, as he usually did around her, spouting everything of import he thought she needed to know. It was something she enjoyed about the analytical mind of the Kalosian prince, and what had made taking on the rest of Team Flare that much easier without Clemont, Bonnie, or anyone else from her first group of traveling friends. Shauna, Tierno, and Trevor had proven themselves too, and even earned a hero's award for their willingness to face down a legend that spewed death with each wing flap.

Serena's eyebrows came together as she listened. "Why are you in such a rush?"

The Prince chuckled, and looked westward. "Haven't you heard? Unova has called for aid." Serena's eyes widened, and the prince nodded. "The King has been readying an entire legion of elite Trainers to rush to aid them. I am to lead them. The foe is apparently using mass produced Shadow Pokémon, and the power to cleanse it has never been needed more."

The Elite Four Trainer's eyes went distant as she realized he too was leaving. Unova was fairly far, and Fornia even farther. "Well, good luck...don't die...I'd go but...we've seen how much use I am against the Shadow. Besides, I have League duties."

"Actually..." Calem said, interrupting anything else, "That's one reason I'm out here. The League has been trying to reach you. Japan is under attack too, and now the Pokémon League is involved. They're calling in everyone...things are bad over in Sinnoh...and every region north of Kanto has gone dark. The Kalos League is sending aid as well, though the Unovan Dragon redirected them to
She nodded, and recalled her Delphox. "I see...so we're at that point already. Alright...let's go."

---

**The Timekeeper's Grove - Selva Muerta**

Time was a tricky medium, and Alex Redwood was fully aware that he had, at best, a minimal understanding of how it actually worked. Thankfully, he also had several mentors, each of whom spouted wisdom almost like clockwork each time they trained. The current nugget of wisdom his mind was nomming had come from the Rayquaza of the East, when he'd asked what to do, or how to behave, if he ran into a Celebi.

Evidently, the time traveler would only willingly appear in times of peace, and places full of life. If said life vanished from a place visited by Celebi, it had a habit of not returning until the flora regrew. It also apparently left a trail of blooming life behind it wherever it flew, but he personally doubted that bit. If life responded to its presence by growing, it wouldn't avoid scorched areas, that needed such energy the most. With Legendary Pokémon, there was usually more to their powers than most humans guessed.

In the grove they found themselves in, the surrounding areas were rather withered, with the grove being the exception. Though even its flora seemed weakened. The energy surrounding the relic stone in the center, a simple, pyramidal shape with tiered sides, was overwhelmed with darkness, and he didn't need to guess where it was coming from. The similarly tiered pyramidal fortress loomed over everything rather prominently, always in view.

The best way to cleanse a space's energy, he'd learned from the Dragon of Unova himself, was to have living beings, preferably Pokémon, radiate good feelings and emotions. Between the three of them, they had enough partners to heavily shift the energy of the space from one of impending death, to something else. The good vibes only flowed stronger when the Leaf smoking instruments were pulled out once more. All of them, even Shruikan, partook of the smoke, shielded from the wind by the massive wingspan of the giant black dragon.

The hours ticked by slowly, and the sun began to set as one by one, the humans watched their partners drift off into Leaf naps. Jess had fallen into one as well, though she jolted awake at the same moment Alex abruptly turned his head towards the emanation those with psychic power suddenly felt. A distortion in the very fabric of the world. Their eyes let them see what was invisible to the others, and thus they silently watched as a Celebi floated out from the portal, glancing around cautiously. A smirk appeared as the psychic and grass type grasped what they had been doing in her grove, and she floated out towards the Pokémon yet awake.

The others grew silent, and nudged those sleeping back to consciousness, as they watched the Celebi appear from seemingly thin air. The time traveler looked at each of them, arching all the way backward in mid-air as she turned to try to take in the enormity that was Shruikan. The dragon actually nodded his head in respect, but sat quietly as he watched the time traveler. He'd become quieter since the war started, and especially on this journey, as he had time to mull over just how many humans he'd felled in their efforts to take the Kanadian Wall. He had discovered he wasn't alone in such thoughts, as the rest of his team had also seen genuine warfare, and not one had been left unscarred by the sights of death and destruction for human and Pokémon alike.

They, like their Trainer, understood the necessity behind all the death, but would never be comfortable with it. Pokémon more than most creatures understood that survival meant fighting, but humanity had, with eons of advancement, tactics, and ever more powerful weapons of death, turned

Japan, not Unova."
the fight to survive into something else entirely. They called it war. When Shruikan had inquired as to just how many wars humans had fought against themselves, and heard the rough estimate, his opinion of the two legs shifted again. He was not the only Pokémon to wonder why the Alpha had given a second chance to such a violent race, but he continued to watch, as both Tao and Rayquaza had told him that there was much, much more to humans than their ability to kill each other in new and exciting ways.

Shruikan blinked out of his musing as he noticed the tiny fairy-like entity floating by his nose. The Celebi gave him a shy smile, and a pat on the nose. A feminine voice filled his head, and his alone. He did not share what the time traveler said to him, but his inner turmoil lessened, slightly. Then, finally, the eyes shifted to the humans. Alex stood with a swirling motion, and then bowed in the Unovan fashion after stepping forward several paces. The Pokémon's face had gone from smiling to unreadable, upon seeing the humans. "Time traveler...I am Alex Redwood, of Unova, and these are my companions, Jess and Svelka. We are here, in your home, on the precipice of another dark era, because we require your aid. The aspects of Zigma have tasked us with removing the Dark Nexus here, permanently, so that they may once more be whole. Will you aid us in our search for knowledge?"

The Celebi regarded him for a moment, and her mental tones were soft, feminine, but otherwise plain. "This is what they send to remove the Nexus?" Her eyes moved to Shruikan again on instinct as he adjusted his bulk. When she looked back, the human was smirking. "Very well...the locals of this land have referred to me in many timezones as Pacha. You may do the same. Now ask your questions, Trainers."

The two Unovans shared a nod and a look, and Alex addressed the mythical Pokémon. "According to the Rain Sage, we need to see how this Nexus was created if we wish to have a hope of stopping it. Can you show us without distorting the timeline?"

The Celebi eyed him again specifically, eyes shifting side to side as she read his apparent typing, and so much more. Finally, she nodded. "Do not touch anything, and stay out of sight...if you die in the past you cease in the present as well, and the humans of that era, in this part of the world at least, were rather...brutal. If they see you, they will end you, and if you try fighting them, I'll end you. We cannot interfere, no exceptions. Everyone you will see is already beyond saving. Do not try to alter their fate, or you will prematurely end your own."

The group of humans shared a look, and then Alex turned back to the Celebi. "We understand. Once we arrive, we should find a safe place to Teleport back to. That way we don't have to be tempted to save ourselves." They recalled their partners then, all save for Alex's Gallade, who very much wanted to see the past, and was providing Pokémon eyes for the rest of his team to watch through. He knew how each of his teammates saw the world, such was their link, and with his power, it was a small effort to distort what he saw for them in a manner they were familiar with. Linked like this, they had the same view they would were they not in their balls.

"Arthur, stay close to Svelka. If she needs to bampf out, you need to help her." The Gallade nodded at his Trainer, and gave another nod to the Norstad woman. Her lovely face was unreadable under her tribe's standard crested half-helmet, but after almost a week of traversing a humid jungle, the Gallade could sense she was ready for a real rest, in a hot spring, surrounded by females and only females.

Once they were ready, the Celebi raised her arms, and the gathered psychics watched as she pulled energy from the nearby Time Ripple, to open a smaller portal, just in front of them. "We will not
have long, so move quickly!" The humans rushed towards the new portal, and the time traveling Pokémon followed just behind them.

The four humanoids emerged almost instantly into the past in the middle of a dark night, at the top of a nearby mountain peak. Below, Alex spied the grove they'd just left, though it was much harder to see, as it was surrounded by jungle. Evidently in the past, the flora was much more abundant, and indeed, it seemed much healthier than it did in the present. Even the mountains still teemed with life, and Noivern, judging by the silhouettes. Not far from the edge of those trees that no longer were in his era, he saw the mountain that formed the base of the tiered pyramidal fortress that played home to the Nexus in the present.

With a view of the past, he now made out other carved structures, an entire city almost, that had seemed to be all but completely weathered away in their time. He glanced at the Celebi as she joined them, floating beside Arthur. "Just how far back did we go?"

Pacha glanced around, and shrugged. "You wouldn't understand my calendar. Time tends to cross fate at many axis, so we should be near something interesting. Most likely, the start of the Nexus. When you travel the Time Vortex, you'll usually find yourself drawn into major events if you get careless. Only madmen jump in without a heading, but this time, we were looking for such an event, so it was relatively simple. Prepare your Teleports, and let us move with haste." The Celebi flew to each of them as they focused on memorizing the immediate area, poking them, and making their forms incorporeal. "I've moved you three seconds out of time with the current era. The inhabitants will look right past you, as long as you stay quiet. Even if they catch a glimpse of you, their focus will shift from you easily, so if you think you've been seen, try to blend in, and they should return to ignoring you."

With that, the group set off towards the pyramidal top of the mountain fortress. Looking around, Alex realized he was seeing the southern continent in a very different stage of its life. The land was teeming with Pokémon, and what humans he saw walked through the jungle without constantly being attacked by them. The jungle seemed a lot more peaceful, compared to their time. The land itself felt different too, seeming more akin to Unova than the land he'd come to know over the past week.

They eventually reached the entrance to the fortress, following silently beside a slow moving line of humans dressed in rags and covered with bruises. They were being herded by other humans with pale skin, black armor that resembled a beetle, light blue eyes, and white hair. Some of their number lacked the hair, but they seemed to be apprentices, rather than whatever the people they were serving had become. He had a fair guess as to what they'd done to attain such visages. He could see the Darkrai hiding in their auras, surveying the prisoners as they march by. The menacing eyes of each guard slid right over them, and even the pitch black Pokémon, it seemed, was powerless before the trickery of time.

Within the fortress, they came upon a truly gruesome sight. The people gathered, Texico West natives, by their clothing, were being march up to an altar forebodingly covered in more lifeblood than one human could produce.

The four moved quietly through the straight entrance to the pyramid, that led directly to the central altar. Other doorways led from the pyramidal chamber that housed it, no doubt digging into the mountain itself below, but this central chamber was where these people were evidently attempting to create the Nexus. They split from the group of captives eventually, following a pair of guards who took up a post on the walkways that lined each wall of the pyramid's interior. They weren't lit up, in
fact the entire chamber and area surrounding the fortress had been consistently dark. It had aided them in passing unnoticed, but now, they could just barely see the altar, and the area immediately around it, as it was glowing with a faint whitish energy. Alex grimaced as he saw what type it was, but stayed silent.

The gathered crowd of people eventually made it all the way to the staging area immediately below the altar, where its victims waited to summoned to the top, and ended. A man appeared behind the altar, and gathered the attention of those below with a single snap of his fingers. He was garbed in a robe that was more purple than black, and he possessed the same unsettling eyes and white hair that his cohorts did. He appeared to hold some status though, as his robes were more ornate.

The man raised both hands, and in perfect Common, began orating to the crowd of captured victims. "People of Texico, welcome to our humble mountain home! Some of you may be wondering what fate could possibly await you upon a blood-soaked altar, and you are right to guess it is a rather gruesome one." Mixed looks of fear, and anger, came over the crowd, but the man continued on, his charismatic and even tone cutting effortlessly through their murmuring. "Let it not be said that we are cruel however, for before your lives are ended in the name of our glorious God, you will all understand His glory before facing the abyss!

The people within the crowd shared a look, and a pause developed as the man by the altar received information from a black-haired underling. Alex turned to their Celebi guide, and spoke in soft, entirely mental tones. "This is the ancient past right? How are they all speaking Common?"

The Celebi chuckled silently, and responded in the same quiet manner. "Thank the Holder of Arceus for that. He may not have achieved world peace, but he gave the humans of his future the two things they would need to unite. Battles to test their skill and curb humanity's bloodlust, and a language by which you could all attempt to understand each other. Many tongues once existed in your world, especially in these parts. What you are hearing is the direct result of a god's meddling with time and space to fulfill a wish. Now hush."

The man atop the raised altar had nodded at what he was told, and then grinned down at the crowd. "You are all in luck! The moon is gone tonight, and the barriers between our world and the Shadow are thin...be glad, Texicans. Tonight, your lives will finally summon our God!"

"A curse on your false god!" A man shouted from the crowd. Another took courage from him, and shouted as well. "The people of Texico follow the Alpha Pokémon, and his Guardians! We will never bow to your pale imitations!"

The man in the dark purple robe chuckled. "Blind faith in the face of certain death…" He glanced up and behind him. "They may drain natural resources at an alarming rate and breed like rabbits, but you have to admit...these humans have potential, under the right deity."

A pair of red eyes appeared from the darkness, and a silhouette formed from the shadows around them, but it was vague, lacking detail, and not unlike the Shadow energy they'd seen manifest thus far. Pacha floated backwards on instinct as she saw the eyes. "Oh no...no, no, no...we need to leave. Now!" She stared at Alex as her warning echoed in their heads. He gave her a blank look, as did the other humans. Seeing they needed prodding, she explained, while slowly urging them backwards, towards the exit. "That's the Renegade...no good can possibly come of being near it, and if it catches me, well...the universe as you know it is over. We leave. Now!"

The humans below the shadowed god cowered, as expected, but it was the unexpected and well-hidden shift in the chamber, as well as the faint tones of a psychic type's mental conversation, that
drew the attention of the final member of the Creation Trio, and its gaze. The red eyes narrowed, and a genderless voice entered the head of each of the time travelers. The unfettered hate and malice in the tone sent shivers up the spine of each human.

*Do not leave...you are going to miss the show...*

The four began being dragged towards the ominous, massive figure but thankfully his pawn didn't seem to notice. The man was preoccupied with fashioning a blade of pure Shadow energy around his hand, sharpening it into a tool appropriate for murder. Pacha tried to stop their movement towards Giratina, but the obscured Legendary had them where it wanted them. A power darker than anything they were used to, and one that was entirely immune to psychic interference, raised them into the air of the pyramidal chamber.

One of the captured locals of Texico had been dragged up to the altar by that point, and made to kneel by a pair of black robed, snowy haired men with more bulk to them than they'd seen on the other figures with such looks. The man himself was as typical a native as one could get, with his reddish bronze skin, black hair, and relatively hairless body. He was pleading silently, offering what Alex realized after a moment was prayer.

His plea for help was never answered. The blade of Shadow came down on his neck, and the contents of his body spilled out onto the altar, giving it a fresh coating of red gore. The man in the dark purple robe raised the severed head of the man, and displayed it to the people below. They recoiled in disgust, which only seemed to make the man happier. He gave them a mad grin, raised his sword-encased hand, and snapped his fingers. Blackish purple flames lit the linear lines of the chamber's roof, resulting in four straight lines of flame that coalesced at the top of the pyramid, and provided some much needed illumination to the pitch black interior.

The lights, while visually dramatic and impressive, were far overshadowed by what they revealed to the humans awaiting their turn at the altar. Each of the pyramid's four upwards slanting walls played host to skulls mounted upon metal spikes that had been carelessly driven through each of them, presumably dismembered prisoners of the past. There had to be thousands, and the humans out of their proper time could only stare in silence as they were forced to take the scene in. They could not even blink.

Alex's gaze shifted to the shadowed form of Giratina. Something still seemed off to him. Physically, the Legendary Pokémon seemed entirely focused on the ongoing, and equally gruesome sacrifices below, but there was more to this cosmos traveling entity than what he saw. Some part of the ghostly dragon was making sure that he and his companions saw every moment of this, though he could not rightly fathom why.

Despite that, Giratina still had a role to play that history, and their timeline, depended on having occur. It was as the second human lost her life, that Alex noticed. The eyes burned fiercer with every sacrifice, and as the minutes crept by, with them unable to do anything but watch, he noticed something else. Jess felt it first, but it was Alex who figured out what was causing her discomfort, something he'd become rather good at sensing, and fixing. The gravity in the room was becoming more oppressive with each lost life, but to the force keeping them suspended in the air, it was nothing. Still, the sensation on their own innards was uncomfortable, as gravity strove to force them down, and Giratina kept them stubbornly suspended in place.

One by one, the three humans, Gallade, and Celebi watched as the crowd of over a hundred human lives was sliced down to the single digits, until finally, only one remained. Young, old, weak, strong,
there had been no differentiation made by the captive's butcher. They had each fallen, their life energy passing on directly to the half-manifested ghost dragon, and they had each had their skulls added to the long gore-stained poles that made up the majority of the macabre display on the walls of the pyramid. The people responsible for these acts, whatever they called themselves, had finished their final uncovered wall with the last of the sacrifices.

There was a pause as the last Texican lost his life as well, and Alex shifted his gaze to Giratina. Maybe it was the addition of firelight, and over a hundred human lives, but the shadowed entity seemed far more corporeal than it had at the start. It turned its hateful eyes to the human who'd eagerly played the role of butcher, and the man nodded again.

He turned to the two guards that had, in turns, dragged each sacrifice to the spot of their death. "Fetch the last one...the Emergence is upon us..."

Silence filled the chamber, as the two guards left, leaving only the purple robed man, who now had a robe covered in gore. He dispensed with it, revealing a similar set of shiny black armor that, from his perspective, Alex saw resembled a Liepard's bodily features. It made some sense, as the local cruel cats they'd come across had made the Unovan's look like common housecats by comparison with their bulkier frames, saber-teeth, and downright foul temper.

The man behind the altar, presumably the leader of what appeared to be some sort of dark cult, was not alone for long. Slowly, from each of the myriad tunnels leading below, other figures joined the man in the chamber. It took a moment for the temporally hidden humans to realize they were Pokémon. Not one of them lacked the dark typing, and at their head, floating before the altar over the space the captives had until recently occupied, was a Gothitelle. She raised both arms directly upwards, towards Giratina, and spoke with telepathy audible to those gathered. "Great one! We have prepared as you have asked! The Successor has been chosen, and all is prepared. With this, your freedom is a certainty!"

The eyes shifted from the executioner at the altar, to the Pokémon in question. She shuddered, visibly. Her god was, finally, going to answer her. Giratina leaned close, an easy feat with a lengthy neck.

Well done.

The two words made the Gothitelle faint in mid-air, or pretend to, but the focus of the chamber was drawn from her antics as Giratina's head moved to take in their new arrivals. Another pair of black-armored men arrived in the chamber, dragging between them a boy in the robes of an acolyte. He yet lacked the white hair of his betters.

Alex took another look, calling on Leo as he did. The Luxray's visual prowess illuminated the features of the young man they'd dragged in. His skin was a paler shade, though more sunburnt than tan at the moment. Facial fuzz covered his mouth in a circle, and the features of the face, high cheekbones, narrow eyes, everything seemed unnervingly familiar.

Within the space of his mind, he aged the individual a few years, accounted for a lack of sun, and more than a bit of cleaning up. The passive expression shifted to a dark grimace, and despite being held, Alex's fists clenched on instinct. The opportunity to wipe out one's enemy did not often parade itself so obviously, but he knew he had to resist, if they wanted to return to the time they belonged. He resisted thinking about all the lives he might save with a command and an arm movement. Out of sync as they were, which was all that was keeping Giratina from crushing them, the inhabitants wouldn't even see where the move originated. Each of the Scales realized this, and though they
struggled against the power holding them, they stayed motionless as time replayed the events they had wanted to see.

Other white-haired individuals flooded into the room now, taking a viewing position where their captives had stood before. They watched eagerly, each bowing as Giratina's eyes moved over them. They shifted to the distorted group of humans as well, but the intruders had ceased struggling against his power. They weren't worth the effort to kill. Not at a time as critical as this. Displaced as they were by the Celebi, he could do little more than hold them. For now.

The man who'd thus far been the executioner of the hapless victims raised his Shadow-bladed hand over the neck of the young Pravus, who'd been laid atop the still very much blood-soaked altar. He looked down at the youth, and spoke in grave tones. "Will you give all you have for Humanity?"

The younger human suddenly ceased struggling as, to the eyes of the psychics watching, a small piece of the Shadow within Giratina's aura attached itself to his, and sent him into a state of what seemed to their senses to be a euphoric, primal mix of arousal, rage, loyalty, and unwavering devotion to a greater entity. He made a movement hidden to the eyes of those watching. "My heart and soul to the cause!"

The blade came down, and the body grew still. Arthur, who had watched and engraved every single lost life into his psychic memory, had also seen every blade movement the man had made. He'd turned wholesale slaughter into an art form with his technique, and one had to admire how little his victims suffered, though it was entirely possible he was simply in a hurry, and not taking his time. Those who had tried to fight at the end had been slower to pass on.

It was as the blade came down, presumably for the final time, that the Gallade noticed it was in a different manner from every other merciless cut the man had made. The blade stabbed into the back of the young man who would one day become Caleb Pravus, and as it did, the Shadow in the older man's aura moved from him, to the body on the altar.

Giratina roared, and the entire mountain shook. The skulls lining the walls of the pyramidal roof began glowing with what little essence yet lingered, and the waves of normal energy shifted to ghost in the Legendary Pokémon's presence. Each otherworldly light flowed into the Renegade Pokémon as it cried out, and the onlookers stared on in disbelief.

In the light, Giratina split into two forms. One, affected by the gravity, manifested on the prime material plane, while the other yet remained a Shadow, trapped in the Reverse World. The two entities seemed to pull apart, until the shadowy one used its tendrils to draw the other back to it. It encased the ghostly dragon completely, and after a few moments, the massively heavy form hit the bottom of the pyramid again, shaking the mountain.

A fully materialized Giratina looked around the chamber, and the eyes were alight with Shadow.

*Finally...with this, all my plans are suddenly within reach...*

With a howling shriek that made everyone present cover their ear-holes, Giratina began to writhe, or rather, the corporeal one did. It seemed to have two heads for a moment, one real one Shadow, but the Shadow did not take long to regain control. It looked down at the corpse upon the altar as the foul energy sank back into the struggling Legendary Pokémon.

*Finish what you have begun...*
The corpse in question had, upon being suffused with the power and aura of a Darkrai, turned pale skinned. The hair once black was now entirely white, and had lengthened even, to the shoulders. The eyes had shifted from the white, brown, and black of a human to the green of one possessed by a Darkrai of varied color. Slowly, it rose from where it had been struck down, and raised both of the boy's thin arms. A larger pair of darker purple claws enveloped them, and from his perspective, Alex saw the young Pravus grin. It was a look he'd started to notice, and be unsettled by, more and more often, especially in times of war. The gleaming eyes of a human who had acquired new and unfamiliar power, and was gaining a hunger for more.

Purple and black electricity came down from the topmost point of the room, and struck the altar, which began shining with the accumulated normal typed energy of all those given to it. What little Giratina had not taken in directly had saturated the stones, and had continued to do so until the ghostly dragon had told them to stop. Now, what was left of the energy also turned to ghost as Pravus placed both hands on the altar.

The air gained a sudden and inexplicable weight as the gravity increased tenfold. A sphere of total darkness engulfed the altar, and Pravus, hiding him from the view of all present. After a few moments, the gravitational force increased again. The Shadow encasing the Legendary Dragon began to be sucked in by a forming whirlwind of dark energy, the natural byproduct of shifting so much normal energy to ghost. The foul clouds encircled Pravus' sphere with an ever increasing pace, until the entire inner area of the pyramid was filled with swirling black clouds. Suddenly, the sphere of black dropped, and Pravus leapt down to the other spectators, landing in a three point stance that left a small impact crater.

With another roar, the Giratina shifted into its flight-friendly forme, and dove into the center of the forming vortex, while simultaneously returning to the world that acted as its prison. The resulting hole in both space and time led into the Reverse World, and within, the Shadow finally let go of its ancient host, releasing Giratina as it prepared to find a new host. It traveled deep into the Reverse World, hiding easily from the only occupant that had been set here as a prisoner, not a guardian. Unable to separate the Shadow from the natural force of gravity and antimatter that was Giratina, Arceus had locked them both away. Now, ghost typed energy would enter the prison each time the humans on the other side of the new Nexus sacrificed yet more humans, and the Shadow would grow stronger as a result.

Alex and company found themselves hurtling outside the blood-soaked pyramid with a rapidly flying Celebi, just in time to avoid the chaotic backlash of energy that ripped through those who remained in close proximity. Once they were clear, and things within settled, Alex and the others approached the entrance, and looked within. The humans fused with Darkrai had been struck in numerous areas across their bodies, but even now those had begun to heal. A few figures began to rise. Those among them that still possessed common decency began the lengthy, but ultimately not too costly task of returning their fellows to life. The majority of those who'd managed to regenerate lacked decency, and thus sat back and waited with cocky smirks as the others slowly returned from the brink.

"We need to leave." Pacha insisted, pushing them from the entrance, and towards the cliff they'd come in on. The Celebi glanced at the sky. "As I recall, it did not take Zigma long to respond to the energy emanations here...we don't want to be around when she arrives..."

The time traveler's insistence led to no complaint from the humans, and indeed, upon reappearing in the present from the rapidly fading Time Ripple, the humans could see where Zigma had struck the once flourishing fortress. Most of the ruins had eroded by their era, but a few scars of the ancient battle remained.
Once back in the grove, Pacha bid them a short farewell, and returned through her original Time Ripple, on to a timezone not embroiled in war. Alex turned to Arthur and the girls once she'd left. "Did you see what it did at the end?"

The Gallade nodded. "It went home, and linked the Nexus to the Renegade's prison. We cannot simply shove Light into it. That could end up opening a permanent hole to the Reverse World, and the effects on this land would only worsen."

By the time they’d returned, not very much time had passed, and the night continued on as normal as the present ever was. Alex fumbled through his bag for the herb-smoking instruments, and began unpacking them with practiced skill. "Obviously...we need a new plan. And when is the best time to plan, oh Gallade of mine?"

The psychic fighting type smirked at him. "At dawn, of course."

Jess plopped down on Alex again as he took the usual crossed leg position that was her chair. "It's settled. At dawn, we plan." Their partners joined in a circle around them, as they had earlier, always eager to partake of the smoke. Funnily enough, the effects had not translated across timezones, so while they had technically just finished a smoke session, soon enough for the bowl to still be warm to the touch, the effects had faded after the fear and adrenaline that came from watching history unfold.

Shruikan's leathery sky-darkening wings surrounded them, as they were more than large enough to encircle the Celebi's grove, and Alex gave the massive chin of the dragon a thorough scratch as he hit the piece one handed, and passed it onto the redhead using him as a chair.

---

Lab Ein - Fornia Region

A shadowy figure appeared in the large entryway of the hangar that supplied Lab Ein. It took the inhabitants a moment to notice, and it wasn't long before the entire room's soldiers had their energy stave weapons pointed at the intruder with varied lights of red, yellow, and light blue. "This area is for enlightened personnel only! In the name of Arceus, and his true Church, put your hands up, or we'll ruin your day!"

The command came from the evident leader of this bunch, a man whose armor was red rather than the standard white, for some reason. Wes looked him over again, and a dark smirk broke the otherwise impassive glare he'd been wearing for this. "Rosso...I had a feeling you might be here." Upon closer inspection, it seemed that the Crusader armor on the men under his command had indeed drawn inspiration from Cipher's aesthetic. The helmets were far superior though, as was the armor plating, and of course, the weapons.

The man in question held up his hand, and the glowing weapons, newly dubbed Power Staves by the Church, powered down slightly. "What!? Who the hell do you think you are? And how do you know my...oh Muk..."

Wes chuckled. "That's right. Round three...lets see if blind faith has made you less of a pathetic Trainer. Typho...Erupt!" The Pokémon appeared in a flash from where he'd crouched by the entrance, but the soldier's leader did not command an immediate volley. His gaze was locked on the Typhlosion that had once been his Cyndaquil. The same Cyndaquil that he'd infused with Shadow energy once it evolved, thinking it would be unbeatable.
Unfortunately, he had not understood then that Shadow energy essentially made training useless. He'd been effectively stomped by this very Trainer's Umbreon and Espeon, and by the end of the battle, his partner was gone, snagged by a machine that should've belonged to them in the first place.

The Typhlosion met his gaze, and there was anger, but not the kind that had sent him into the Shadow. This was fueled by the shared desire between himself and his Trainer to prevent that foul energy from ever infecting a Pokémon again. Yet every time they closed down an operation using such Pokémon, they'd just pop up again a few years later. This time, they had decided to be thorough. Fornia had advanced the production of Shadow Pokémon into the low billions with their sheer factory power once Doctor Ein 'converted' to their organization, and the numbers only increased when Ardos, bearing Lovrina's notes, had joined Fornia after Cipher's second attempt at world domination. His contributions, while disdained openly by Ein, had nonetheless earned him a promotion to Hand of the Prophet, and Ein had used the notes regardless. The result had been a third variation of Shadow Pokémon, one far more difficult to purify with friendship and good feels. It required an egg to be prepared, but having a powerful tool that also gained experience from battling with the Shadow's power was invaluable to the strength of Fornia's soldiers.

As Shadow Pokémon had pervaded Fornia, the Church had given those who questioned the sudden increase in power, and decrease in kind emotions of the Pokémon given to the Church's care. The running line was that this was caused by the 'blessing' the Arcean priests bestowed upon the Pokémon, turning them into righteous weapons of the Alpha Pokémon's vengeance. Naturally, anyone who'd been able to see such tainted auras, and thus the truth, had quickly disappeared, or fled the region, and the technology used to both identify and purify had been destroyed on sight once they'd taken over Orre.

The order to fire came several seconds too late, as the volcano Pokémon began prepping its signature move. The Eruption was quicker than the energy beams. Most went wild, as the move's fire typed power slammed into the human who'd subjected him to the Shadow so many years ago, and essentially blew that part of the hangar to rubble as it manifested an erupting mini volcano. Craters of magma formed down the volcano the Pokémon had drawn from the earth, as burning rocks filled the hangar with death, and the exploding transport aircraft took care of the rest. Wes and his partner strode through it unfazed, shielded by their Espeon's Barrier.

The move had seriously weakened the already vulnerable foundations embedding the lab in the mountain. Wes informed his partners of the imminent danger over their Holociever, and their time table moved up. They'd already confirmed what he'd expected. These servers had media news files, and little else. As per usual, the good stuff would be in the lab, no doubt buried deep under defenses and mountains, hidden from moral eyes. It was a theme with Ein's labs, since his first had been so easily discovered.

Wes continued moving through the base, alternating between his team of ten as their opponents varied their lineups. He was a ruthlessly strong battler, and he burned every human opponent to ash, after snagging their teammates. The ones who persisted, at least, by turning their weapons on him after losing a battle. The few who fled, he let go. Peons were redeemable.

Typho was as angry as his Trainer was, but these guards, evidently composed of a majority of inexperienced Power Stave wielders, were only the warm up to their desired target. Every other outward exit of the compound had, by way of his Noivern, been melted shut. The bat-like dragon now waited above, hiding in the darkness for their quick getaway.

Eventually, Wes discovered tunnels that went into the mountains themselves, leaving the shell of a heavily armed base to defend it from intruders. As per usual, the soldiers he came across supplied the
needed card IDs to advance, though not one gave it up willingly, even after losing.

Eventually, he came to the true Lab Ein, an impressive affair that was suspended over a dormant, but still very much hot volcano. Protected from heat and intruders by an enormous glass pyramid whose edges dug into the sides of the rocky cone of the mountain, there was only one entrance, and all along it Wes spied Crusaders, ready for battle.

At their head was someone he had only heard rumors of. He hadn't been around for Ardos' attempt to revive Cipher, and without Doctor Ein's smarts, the 'un-purifiable Shadow Pokémon' had indeed been saved, but he reasoned that if the two had ended up in the same amoral cult, they'd likely perfected their projects by now. Ein had had plenty of time, after all.

The bridge leading into the pyramid of what appeared to be special glass, as it wasn't melting, was covered at its head by an impressive archway that doubled as a sentry lookout. Wes came up to it, and met the gaze of the man above. "Fire at will!"

Any hesitation he'd received from Russo was due to their history, it seemed. Evidently, the order was to take his head. He wished them luck, as he sensed his Espeon's mind meld with his, and together, they used their shared sight to dodge through the field of elemental energy beams.

As he spun horizontally over the last straight line of elemental death, Wes hurled a purple Pokéball marked with an 'M' into the center of the soldiers. Those who saw what now appeared in their ranks either cowered, or switched their staves to ice, but the first strike belonged to the Tyranitar. "Dark Pulse...wide spread."

The Pokémon roared in acknowledgement of his Trainer's command, and the dark energy formed a sphere in his jaws. It swirled, condensed, grew in size, and then launched a series of small, rapid projectiles made of dark energy into the soldiers, blowing those hit by the move to pieces with the kind of power that had made Pokémon more valued in war than firearms. Those he initially missed retaliated, and found their beams useless against Protect. They were ended with a harsh Stone Edge.

For his part, Wes had charged with his Espeon, and leapt up to Ardos' perch. The powerful special attacker held the man with Psychic before he could so much as draw a Pokéball. Wes gave the cat a nod, and began walking towards his Tyranitar, past the carnage of his wake, and across the bridge. The Espeon held the man until they reached the bridge, at which point the psychic cat coldly stopped levitating him, over the lava pit below.

Wes held up a hand as he heard a familiar Psychic thrum, and spied the falling form of Ardos, levitated now by his Alakazam, saving himself from death once more. "Dark Pulse." The single, focused beam of energy struck the psychic type, and the two plummeted once more. Wes quickly threw a ball at the Alakazam, and the Snag Machine brought it into his care with a manifested claw of bright energy, focused around a Pokéball. His Espeon saved the other five balls, each of which was likely also infused with Shadow.

There had been much snagging on this mission already, and while he knew he'd probably missed some, he also knew trying to save them all alone was a lost cause, especially in a war. As always, he would grab as many as he could, open their hearts, and send them on their way. Those who wished to never again let another Pokémon be tainted, were the ones who stayed, and found true power.

Ardos mercifully did not last long in molten rock, and the three continued on past the bridge. As they came up to the door, Wes spied an irritatingly familiar card key slot, and glanced down again.
"Damn. He had it on him, didn't he."

His Tyranitar assuaged his worry by empowering his tail with steel energy, and reducing the barrier to crushed glass and metal with a few powerful strikes. He gave his Espeon the phallic Melmetal hacking spike he'd use on the terminals in the 'lab' above to gather data from. The psychic cat would download their databases, including their current work, while Wes and the Tyranitar took the lead in distracting the Doctor. Of all of the Shadow Pokémon made by Cipher's first wave, none had been so thoroughly experimented on as this very Tyranitar, a pet project of Doctor Ein's.

It had taken a strange green-haired man claiming to be an Aura Guardian, who could speak with Pokémon, to tell Wes the extent of what exactly Ein had put them all through. Thus, he'd hunted the man for years, whenever he dared to leave his base. The base's location itself had, until recently, remained a mystery.

Vengeance was finally at hand now though, it seemed. None of the Arcean scientists had the fortitude to go toe to toe with a Tyranitar that furious, and as he recognized a few faces, he understood. His reputation preceded him. They found Ein at the top of the building's interior, smashing through every door and Trainer that decided to try to slow them down when they'd reached a lab terminal. His Espeon had become rather good at hacking databases on psychic intuition alone, as his instinct always lead him to the juiciest information first, and if the enemy did somehow interrupt their download, all they would miss was extraneous data.

The Doctor turned, and sighed as he saw who had entered. Time had not been kind to him, nor had the Church, it seemed. His jawline bruises were relatively fresh, and his trademark hair flick had been shoddily chopped away, leaving an awkward raised clump as a remnant. He'd stopped combing as well, and the wild tangle of black hair, rapidly turning gray at the roots, suited him, as did the exhausted, sunken eyes. "Of course...it would be you...and with my Tyranitar, of all things. The nerve..."

Wes smirked, but his eyes had no pity left for this man. Not after so long, and so many Pokémon traumatized in his wake. "It's over, Doctor...from now on, you will never again make a Shadow Pokémon...Blizzard!"

The Tyranitar opened his maw once more, exhaling a furious flurry of icy death towards the human he had zero reservations about harming. He had seen all the others, fellow Pokémon of all genders and ages in those days, one by one, turned to the Shadow, and all the while the Doctor had continued 'perfecting' his masterpiece.

Despite his rage, the ice didn't reach the smirking, aging human, who had reached for and subtly pressed a large red button on his console moments before the strike. As he did, he finally noticed the Espeon that was hacking his database. The AI interface in his workstation gave the 'Download Complete' tonal signal, and the smirking psychic cat Teleported away with a data spike in its jaws.

The Doctor angrily slammed his workstation, now devoid of data, as the heat in the room suddenly grew more intense, and the ice attack, for all its power, was essentially melted into a harmless puddle. The Tyranitar and his Trainer narrowed their eyes in unison. Wes glared at the Doctor as he recognized the terrain effect now taking place all around the cone of the volcano. "Tell me you didn't..." Deep veins of red pulsed along the rock, and he had a strong idea of what was coming.

"The key to a perfect Shadow Pokémon..." The Doctor said, straightening as he turned with a hint of mania in his voice, "Is to make them as strong as they can possibly be, before infusing them...and then once infused, have the door to their heart almost opened, and then shut again, no less than ten
times! Until the Pokémon understands that it will never be free of this rage, and power. Not surprisingly… Primal Reversion makes Legendary Pokémon, usually so heroic, far more susceptible to the Shadow…” Ein grinned down at the Tyranitar. "You were only a prelude to this, even Cipher itself was little more than a setback...now, be burned away by the true power of my work!"

There was an all too familiar roar from below them, and Wes sighed. Only Ein would bury a Shadow Groudon underneath his lab. He eyed the Doctor again, and began to understand. This was his line in the sand...he would finally win here, or be burned away, likely by magma, which even then was rising.

The heat was intense, and the two humans were sweating profusely as the lab was turned into an oven by its proximity to a Legendary Pokémon that really should've been asleep. Ein leapt backwards, atop his workstation, and pointed at Wes. "This is the man! We had Realgam for a day thanks to him! Wipe him out, Precipice Blades!"

Wes swore, as he understood he needed to pull back. The mountain shook as the angered, primal Groudon's eyes focused on him, and summoned the power. Surprisingly, this Groudon was not red, but rather a deep black, and radiated an aura of rage and Shadow that even he could see traces of, such was its strength.

Wes had his Tyranitar charge through the glass, which had finally started to melt under the desolate heat, and he recalled his partner as they jumped out over the bridge below, and landed. He glanced back, and saw four massive earthen spikes rise through the bottom of the lab, breaking it easily. The bridge he was standing on began to groan as the structure descended into the lava, and Wes quickly moved to the rocky edge of the mountainous interior.

He thought perhaps the move might've caught Ein with it, but alas, the mad Doctor appeared atop the Groudon's head after a few moments, and with a manic cackle, the pair rose towards the rock-covered top of this long dormant force of nature.

Walker and Geralt had made a similar retreat after Wes' warning, and had been encircling on their flying types, alongside his Noivern. They'd been told that this would likely happen, and that if Wes did indeed go in solo, they would help him better by waiting for his vengeance to run its course.

They figured said vengeance had gone poorly, when the mountain erupted with all the fury of a Primal Groudon. They quickly ascended over the thousands of flaming, burning rocks, and past the rising cloud of ash as well. The two shared a look, as they spied a man in a lab coat, with white armored plates beneath it, atop the head of the Legendary Pokémon. Evidently this Doctor Ein didn't care that he'd just taken out the shell covering his lab, and everyone inside of it.

They saw him point, and the Groudon answered his command with an Eruption. Chunks of metal slag that was once a lab now filled the sky alongside yet more rocks, and the surrounding area, which had thus far been unaffected by the firestorm to the north, now joined it, and made the ash cloud as a whole that much larger.

His target had evidently been Wes, as the Noivern had, upon seeing the man responsible for infecting him with Shadow, raced down towards him, only changing course at the last few moments when he heard his Trainer call for him.

It wasn't long before Wes was on the back of his newest dragon type snag, one that had proven quite strong, once purified. Like most modern Shadow Pokémon not captured as an egg, he'd been trained
to a decent level of power, and then boosted with Shadow. The accumulated years of experience build-up had driven the relatively new party member to a level that almost matched the rest of their team. Evidently now was the time for him to pull his weight.

"Extremespeed..." The Noivern gave his Trainer a nod, as he inhaled deeply, and made the cones of his bat-like ears shift direction, and invert. With a boom, they shot towards the Groudon, namely the Doctor, as sound was expelled behind the dragon. His aim was just shy of the Doctor, but he hammered the Legendary Pokémon's skull with surprising strength, enough to shift even its colossal weight.

Reeling, the Primal Groudon focused on the now poorly positioned dragon type, and as it rose to fly away, the massive Pokémon raised a claw, and Shadow energy surged forth around the four of them, forming a barrier of darkness, and preventing their flight.

"Oh no you don't...Shadow Break!" Ein's voice had kept its manic tone, though now irritation had sunk in. He'd be set back quite a ways after this, all of Fornia would feel the loss of the lab. Moreover they would soon also learn that most of the quicker fleeing scientists, who'd hauled tail as soon as they'd watched the Snatcher stride through their workplace with a Tyranitar, had offered themselves to Geralt and Walker's mercy, in exchange for their expertise. Geralt had found a way to send the One Dragon a message via his own Espeon, and the Legendary had transported them into the arms of Unova.

The shadowy fist, which had now manifested even to Wes' eyes, came slamming down onto the Noivern, who'd dumped his Trainer from his back, rather than flee. Wes recalled him as he fell roughly ten feet, landed hard, and summoned his ace in the hole. That particular partner would no doubt draw Ein's interest. He hopped atop the back of the rock and dragon typed raptor that had been playing the role of ace in the hole in his squad for several months now, and had proven himself invaluable in keeping Orre in the fight. Whatever Ein had done to this Pokémon, it had made him as fast as a Lycanroc, with the capacity to hit twice as hard, and he hadn't even evolved yet.

The Doctor was quite obviously fuming, and sweating, as he was standing on a Groudon. He didn't seem to care at that moment though, as his near-perfect genetic masterpiece took the field, took the Snagger on his back, and then began leaping across the smaller, nearby mountains in preparation for an attack, likely another Earthquake.

They skirted just around the barrier's shadowy edge, and Ein called another command that they were too far away to hear. Shadowy flames came their way in a torrent of fury, but the Veloraptar once more proved just how agile he could be. They did not strike though, and continued dodging the flames, to Ein's evident and increasing frustration.

Soon enough, they ran out of room to run, as much of the massive area the Shadow Hold encompassed now burned with purple flames of Shadow that eagerly reached for them whenever they came close. With a final leap, the raptor met the Shadow barrier with his feet, and using it for rapid redirection, launched himself at the Legendary Pokémon.

His Trainer hurled a familiar purple ball, the very one that Ein had seen, from the safety of Realgam's stands, snag his masterpiece of a Tyranitar. A dark look came over his countenance as he realized the Snagger's plan. "You bastard...you and your damned STAB..." The truth was that his Groudon had taken far more damage than he cared to admit, and it seemed like Wes was looking to knock the Legendary out, and then snag it. Such tactics, like capturing fainted Pokémon, were usually frowned upon, but Wes had zero Muks to give. This was war, and victory meant survival.
The Tyranitar reappeared with a roar, appearing almost twenty feet in the air, understanding his role as he took in the battle, and made his move with the momentum his ball had shifted to him. He slammed into the ground just before the shattered mountain the giant Groudon was still standing in, and the ground responded to his power, shaking the entire chain of smaller mountains with its fury as the energy was guided into slamming the Groudon once more. The cone of his volcano, what little remained, shattered, and the steaming, wounded primal Legendary began stomping angrily towards the Tyranitar.

The barrier of Shadow keeping them low fell as the move had struck home, but not before Ein shouted a counter-command lost beneath the roar of pain from the Groudon. One of the Legendary Pokémon’s claws lit with fighting type energy, as it charged his Tyranitar, and sent the massive beast flying as the move connected.

Wes had taken to the sky once more, this time on his Skarmory, and recalled his fainted partner before he crashed into a mountain from the force behind the quadruple effective move. It seemed Ein could play to type advantage as well. The transferred inertia nearly ripped the ball from his hand, but thankfully, Master Balls could handle such stress. Wes looked the Groudon over again, only to notice that the human on his head was administering a familiar potion.

He swore, as he recognized a Full Restore, and he contacted his support. He was two powerhouses down against a revitalized legend. He might as well use the aid he’d been given. Geralt and Walker swiftly joined the fray, as did Ein’s other Pokémon soon after. A Gyarados and Rhyperior joined the Legendary, each undoubtedly sporting the same Shadowy curse, and battle was joined.

Anything resembling the rules of combat quickly fell apart into utter chaos, as wide-area Shadow moves whittled down their strength, and kept them from fleeing. It seemed that Ein had mastered using Shadow moves, and had even come up with a few new ones that Michael had never reported seeing. The battle raged for almost two hours, before the Doctor and his opponents had exhausted their store of potions, and their final partners were on their last legs.

Surprising no one, Wes' Umbreon and Espeon were the last standing on his team, though the revivified raptor was still acting as his method of avoiding Legendary scale attacks, and Geralt was down to just Ghost, who he was riding to avoid flaming rocks and lava. Only Walker still had all three of his partners, though he stayed on his Pidgeot, keeping it from battle as his monstrously strong Tauros and Sandslash abused the advantage of the Primal Groudon's single weakness with yet another series of Earthquakes and same type attack bonuses.

The area around the lab, for at least thirty miles in a circle around the now volcanic crater, had been turned into an inferno of ash, fire, and shattered ground. Other Arceans had appeared over the course of the fighting, drawn by the eruption, but the three assigned to this mission could handle peons. Like an increasing number of Pokémon the world over, this Groudon had not been limited to four moves either, and its rampage seemed unstoppable. Out of Revives and potions, the three men gathered for a final stand against the beast, alongside their partners.

Over the course of the battle, Ein's boots had slowly started fusing to the heated Groudon's black scales, effectively sealing his fate to the enraged Legendary. Everyone was exhausted after the ferocity of the fight. Even damaged as he was, the Groudon had not relented. It was uniquely colored, Legendary, and infused with the most advanced methods of Shadow Infusion to date. Ein had crafted the perfect beast for defending his lab, but the three men the One Dragon had launched at him, not unlike an arrow, had stymied his plans in less than a day, again, and now his strongest weapon was on its last legs.
The Doctor reached for a Max Potion, finding only one, but as he tried spraying it, the bottle fell to pieces, and the coagulated boiled contents of the potion covered the front of his robe with an appropriate yellowish smear, amidst the black caused by the rain of ash. The Doctor looked across, from what remained of his mountain, to the only slightly scorched tops of the peaks nearby, where his enemies had retreated to in the massive wake of the lava and shadow attacks.

Wes and Geralt were speaking, and then, a grin came over the Snatcher's face. Ein didn't fancy himself a lip reader, but 'Do it' wasn't exactly hard to make out. Ein slowly raised an eyebrow as the two other men with him, reported as members of the Ranger-Interpol hybrid organization that had taken to being irritatingly effective all across the globe, raised their arms, and began tracing a pattern in the air, or rather, practicing it. Then, he saw their fingers begin to glow, as they traced the same pattern again, in perfect sync, and left the glowing emblem hovering in the air between them.

Ein had focused mostly on Shadow Pokémon throughout his career, but even he had heard the rumors of the Rangers supposed 'secret power', which put them on par with the Aura Guardians of old. A familiar cry, one which had often echoed in his dreams immediately after leaving Cipher, rang through the air. From the first embers of the rising sun in the east, just under the cloud of ash covering the sky, marking an end to the tumultuous night, came a comet of sacred flame. A similar ball of fire had ruined his boss' and thus Ein's own, chances of continuing with their plans. Instead of slamming into a helicopter, this time, it took the form of a massive multicolored bird, and landed behind his three foes, leaning down towards them.

"Shadow Fire!" Ein shouted, before they could get comfortable and start talking, sharing power, or handing out magical game-ending items. The mystical bird turned its eyes to the fire typed attack, and as the flames purified, they seemed to think better of striking Ho-Oh, the source of what many called the 'Sacred Flame' by avoiding it entirely, and fading into nothing. It was an old story in the western regions, but one that claimed the Trainer who could tame Ho-Oh would gain the secret of its powerful fire, along with immortality. Naturally, the greed of anyone seeking such a thing kept the bird from being so much as sighted for many years, until word of it had turned to legend in the face of limited human lifespans.

While not as active as its counterparts on some continents, the northwestern hemisphere's guardian, who'd had one of its favored trio stolen by this very man, now decided to get involved. They had tainted the Guardian of the Sea in these lands, which very much needed the presence of a Lugia. Though the guardian had indeed been saved from the Shadow, the manmade rot had persisted, and the sacred bird had done as it always had, since the One Dragon tamed the continent. It minded its own business, and out of that lack of attention, the Shadow had flourished. No longer.

The Legendary bird eyed the three humans, and the red eye centered on Wes. A feminine, but no less thunderous voice echoed in his skull with, at his best guess, a volume that matched Tao. "Long have you been fighting the Shadow…" Memories came rising to the surface, but none of it was worth remembering before a certain event which occurred not long after he decided to leave Team Snag'em.

His mind was once more drawn back into the same cycle that had been fueling his state of fury. As before, he determined Ein was irrevocably, unequivocally, responsible. For all of it. He glanced down at his left arm, as it began tingling, though not from any natural stimuli. His machine was shining. Cracks appeared, golden light shining from beneath them, and in an instant, the device that had been on his arm for years now, shattered to pieces. He knew where the power had come from, and he glared up at the Ho-Oh.
"How am I supposed to save that Groudon now? You just doomed us!" Wes swore colorfully, and turned towards Ein, and his partner. The Groudon was still panting, but he knew better than to give an enemy a chance to catch their breath.

"All I did was release the restraints on your power." Wes turned back to the bird, as the angry look deepened at her words.

"I don't have magic powers. I can't burn the Shadow from Pokémon with a wave of my hand." Wes swore again, and then whistled to his last two Pokémon. They joined him, and he began to walk towards the 'path' down their chosen peak.

"Would you like to?" The Snatcher stopped in his tracks, and again met the bird's gaze. Patient as stone, she had not moved. "You have snatched thousands of Pokémon by this point. Have you not wondered at the energy that fuels their snagging and purification?"

Wes turned completely. "Celebi does it. It's Time Vortex energy, used to revert the Shadow infused cells back to normal, once the Pokémon's mind lets it body achieve a measure of homeostasis, of course."

The Legendary bird's rainbow feathers ruffled as she made her version of a chuckling sound. "Almost...but not quite. You humans have come far in the fields of scientific understanding, but you yet lack the ability to understand just how many types of energy exist."

"Nineteen." Wes muttered, unamused.

"That you know of." There was mirth in the voice, but it seemed the bird was finally going to stop irritating him, as it leaned forward, and gained a serious look in its eye once more. "Listen well, little humans." Geralt and Walker leapt a foot in surprise as the voice, which had apparently not been for them before now, pulled them into the mental web of conversation at the speed of thought. "The dimensions of Time and Space, and those who maintain and make use of their awesome power, can always be traced back to the Light, and the being who resides at the center of it. For He is the one who created, and ordered them, such as they are." A look of surprise came over Wes' face as he processed the bird's words. He could've sworn the rainbow phoenix was smirking at him, but then, birds didn't have lips. "You have been using the Light the entire time...all your machines did was tap into what was residing in the Vortex's energy, and draw out the powerful purifying qualities within. If you do not believe humanity has come far enough to manipulate Vortex energy, you need only ask your flame-haired friend why his backpack is bigger on the inside, for proof."

With that, the Legendary Pokémon once more ascended into the air, and leveled a gaze at the Groudon. "Go...I grant you the means to save as many of those fallen to Shadow as you can. All three of you. Do not abuse your gift, it will not be given again." As the calming feminine tones ended, the three men looked up at the majestic sight of a Ho-Oh in flight, and even through the ash-covered sky, a pillar of Light forced its way through the cover in a very bright, very obvious beam from above. The three gasped in unison as they felt it, a brief surge that caused their hands to shine gold, and their bodies to be filled with a genuine sense of peace.

Geralt looked nauseous, Walker had a calm smile, but Wes was smirking. He let the power fade, then summoned it again. It appeared as a sort of claw around his hand, one that seemed very familiar. The smirk widened. Walker had managed a similar test of his power, though for some reason his beard had initially shone with the Light, rather than his hands. It moved to his limbs as he realized he could control it, and being a martial artist, shifting the energy became rather easy for him. All four limbs began shining gold as the Ranger prepared for yet more combat.
Ein had a good view from his all but welded position to the Groudon's head. He'd stopped feeling the painful heat a while ago. Unable to stop Ho-Oh's benevolence, he was not surprised when his three foes, now glowing with the force that was apparently the polar opposite of the Shadow, began charging towards him. One atop his own creation, no less. He watched the Ho-Oh depart, and grinned. It was not the first time a Legendary Pokémon had underestimated his ability to come through unfavorable situations intact.

As the Doctor looked beyond his charging opponents, up at the Ho-Oh in the sky, and then down again in defeat, something caught his eye on the horizon. The look of grim acceptance of fate changed, and the Doctor began laughing like a madman. The Groudon's exhausted, furious eyes shifted to the human, and the Doctor composed himself as he drew a Dark Ball from his stained lab coat. "Return, Groudon."

The three light wielders charging the madman stared in genuine surprise as Ein recalled the massive Pokémon, easily over a hundred feet tall, into his ball. The man who'd been perched atop him began to plummet. He hit the ground long before they got close to him, and it was Wes, atop the revivified raptor, who found the man's broken body, still clinging to life.

The Doctor had blood leaking from his mouth, as was common with internal organs crushed by the power of gravity. He grinned weakly up at Wes. "You're too...late...they're here, you fool..." Wes looked behind him immediately, and gave Geralt and Walker a signal to halt. Still some distance behind, they did. It didn't take long to understand why.

A single, rather massive sphere of technological death, colored entirely black, descended over the peak they had just occupied. With it, came old Earth style fighter aircraft. Their numbers had been diminished by clashing with Nate unbroken string of victories, and sabotage, but there were still enough to handle three men. Wes and the other two regrouped by the fallen Doctor, recalled their partners, and took up defensive positions, desperately hoping their newfound power would defend them. It did, forming a shield over their kneeling forms as the aircraft came screaming towards them.

Their pilot's aim was about as good as the rest of the Crusaders they'd fought here, but thankfully, Dark Balls appeared to become useless when hit with enough Light. After several useless strafing passes, the pilots realized what was happening, and moments later, they ceased their run, and the black orb began moving towards them.

A viewscreen of sorts slid upwards as it came within five feet of them, revealing Caleb Pravus himself. Geralt groaned. "If I have to listen to another speech, I'll save you the trouble and end myself now."

There was a new hardness to the Prophet's eyes, or perhaps that kind of glare was only for the battles that weren't public. "You couldn't have possibly expected me to ignore such an obvious incursion in my own back yard. I assumed Ein could handle it..." He glanced at the broken pile of coughing, mad Doctor in the nearby Groudon footprint he'd landed in. "But it seems not, and now, you all have awakened the power as well. It's about time things started kicking off..."

Darkrai-esque claws sprung out from either side of the sphere as it zipped forward in less than an eyeblink. The grinning Prophet made a motion with his arm from within the sphere, and with the Shadow, pulled a single ball from Wes' belt as he passed by. The other hand made short work of Geralt and Walker as it smacked them with a wide, open palm. The two endured the hit with the Light, but were tossed a fair distance away, where they hit the ground hard.
The Prophet glanced around with an almost paranoid movement of his head, and then summoned the revivified raptor from the snagged ball. His floating death sphere was radiating an aura of visible Shadow, and now that it was closer, Wes spied a familiar pair of hateful eyes staring down at him. Only one Pokémon had eyes like those, though they seemed half real, compared to what they were hovering above. Still new to seeing such things, he didn't recognize that the Darkrai was suffusing the shell, not the man.

The raptor snarled, and lunged at the ceraglass protecting the sphere. It was a credit to his claws that he managed to scratch it, but the thickness and durability of Imperium blending techniques was second to none. Expensive, for foreign entities, but not for a cult that profited from over ninety percent of their peon's paychecks. The raptor's eyes went blank as a sphere of dark energy immobilized him in a waking nightmare.

"Remember…" The dark haired man said with a grin. His goatee helped make the obvious evil theme he had going that much more intimidating. "Remember what you were...understand what you are…"

After several minutes, the raptor's eyes blinked back into focus, and regarded the man. By that point, Wes had been joined by the rest of his squad, but the barrier of Shadow from Pravus' machine kept them from interfering in the closing of the raptor's heart. He had grown strong as a part of Wes' team. The Shadow would make him terrifying.

Once the raptor was fully snared, the ceraglass shield rose, and Pravus himself reached out to his lab's creation, holding a Dragonium Plate. It had taken a while to arrive, but they had found more than enough dragon shards to make several such creations whole again, though even their knowledge proved futile in replicating or otherwise shifting the form of the Plate. The divine object soared from his hand, and attached to the raptor's chest area by itself. Then, it started to glow.

The raptor's vertical irises went wide as the power of his blood was awakened by the power inherent in the ancient human's devices wrought from shards of fallen Alpha Pokémon clones. The rock-like protrusions, as well as the typing, vanished and left the Pokémon part dragon, part something else entirely. Where the rocks had fallen, his skin had turned from mottled brown, to a darker shade of black, and now seemed to be covered with a subtle layer of what looked like feathers. The fangs grew sharper, the claws lengthened, and the Pokémon's body as a whole gained several feet of height.

The barrier of Shadow fell, once the deed was done. The Prophet lifted his hand from the raptor's head, and then turned him on the three men who were now being surrounded by Crusaders in armor that, in comparison to what they'd faced thus far, seemed to be some kind of improved version of the standard battle armor.

Being somewhat experienced with finding themselves in situations where they were surrounded and outnumbered, the three men chosen by the Dragon of Unova had a fallback plan for this exact scenario. Geralt pulled his last pair of regular Revives from a bag pocket, and tossed one to Wes. Upon learning they both had Espeon, they had instructed their psychic cats, who seemed to get along, to work together if necessary to ready a last ditch Teleport. Geralt had no intention of being a prisoner again, and neither Walker nor Wes had a desire to go through what Geralt had told them of in as little detail as possible.

The raptor charged them as the two revived, and still very much hurt Espeon focused their mental powers. Together, they could recall to a location their Trainers had both visited at some point, which in this case was Rosa's southern command center, a Pokémon center that had been caught in the
fighting early on, and turned into a bunker of sorts as the war progressed.

Being one of the only Pokémon yet ready for battle, Walker's Sandslash protected their little group with a Rock Tomb, as beams of fire, ice, and electric energy shot towards them. They hammered the defensive boulders hard, but as the Veloraptar came close, they could see the rage in his eyes. Wes knew he'd have no problem leaping their boulders and tearing them to shreds.

As he looked up, ready to try a last-ditch snag on his newest partner, he instead saw Ho-Oh. She winked at him, and a cylindrical barrier of rainbow light repelled the leaping raptor. He slashed at the barrier twice more, before settling to slowly stalking around it, waiting for a chance to smash it and destroy those within, as he'd been commanded. It did not take long for his chance to come.

It all seemed to happen at once. A Dark Ball, launched from the once-more enclosed black sphere protecting Pravus, hit the Ho-Oh in the sky, and pulled the rainbow Pokémon into its dark depths. There was an ominous tone, like a bell, as the ball dinged shut, and infused its occupant with Shadow energy. The rainbow barrier disappeared, and the raptor leaped, finding himself face-to-face with an Ultra Snag Ball empowered by the Light.

None of the Arceans saw whether the ball captured their newest acquisition or not, but by the time they got close enough to look, the three men were gone, as was the raptor.

The obsidian sphere 'touched' down, hovering inches from the ash-covered terrain. The Dark Ball thrown from the sphere zipped into the Prophet's hand, and he pocketed it with a grim look. He'd been so close to retaining the raptor, but with a Ho-Oh as a prize instead, it was an equal trade-off. Without Ein, he couldn't make full use of it anyway, properly typed or not.

Two of his soldiers accompanied him as he made his way to the broken, wheezing form of Doctor Ein. He stared down at the broken man with a look of contempt. "There he is...the fallen Doctor Ein, yet clinging to life...fetch a medi-pod."

"Yes, my Prophet." The two soldiers moved quickly to do as commanded, and Pravus knelt down to Ein, who weakly raised a hand holding a Dark Ball.

"The Groudon...is still ours...but the lab is...gone." The Prophet nodded, and took the ball from his hand, pocketing it as well, as the soldiers returned with the pod in question. Like most modern vehicles, it was equipped to float just above the ground, and made harsh terrain one less problem to deal with.

The Arceans then returned to Sacreus, and continued to wait for the continent-spanning cloud of ash to make its way east. They had been tracking the progress of the cloud for months, and with this latest generous addition, the early reports said it would be more than enough to cover everything, as the Prophet had wanted, thanks in no small part to the mid-winter winds driving the war, and the current stalemate. All across the front lines, those in combat, and those sick of freezing their genitalia off, had slowly become accumulated to the ashen snow, until they stopped caring about it entirely.

With Tao distracted by everything else he needed to coordinate in order to give the new Empire a fighting chance, he'd overlooked the ash as an unnecessary weather effect, added for flare and intimidation more than anything else. To one who could clear the skies with a single roar, or several if he felt compelled to clear the entire continent, such things were better left to be dealt with until they became an issue. Occupied as he was, he did not have the energy to spend on cleansing the skies of ash, and thus the Prophet's plans came ever closer to a head.
Dawn had arrived early, as it was summer in this part of the world, and as intended, the three Scales of Balance planned. What they concluded, was that breakfast was needed, though even after they'd eaten, they were still faced with an unavoidable fact that had come up early in the planning session, from Arthur himself.

Giratina had utterly immobilised them, easily, and the only one of them that had been able to move, had only managed clenched fists. They had ultimately concluded that, in order to separate the Nexus from the Reverse World, they'd need to enter that strange dimension, sever the connection from there, and then hopefully find a way back out.

Alex and Jess had argued that, by all accounts, Giratina was often miscast as a villain, not unlike Darkrai, and that its actions in the present era at least, had seemed akin to those of a Guardian, not a Renegade. The gathered Pokémon, even Terra, had still been skeptical. Evidently, their Gallade's shared sight had been frozen on the Legendary Pokémon, and Arthur had been unable to move even his eyes. His team insisted that the Legendary evil they'd had more than enough time to bear witness to would crush them if they entered the Reverse World.

The unanimous agreement then had been, regardless of the plan, they needed an edge. This time, it was Svelka who chimed in. "I have watched you in battle these past days, Redwood. I am cureeess. Why do you not use thee Plates your partners hold?" She tapped her own breastplate, the one that had thus far been keeping the native of an icy land moderately comfortable in the intense, humid heat of the world's largest rainforest, in the middle of their summer months. "Eet would give you thee...boost... you say you need, no?"

She looked between Alex and Jess, which wasn't hard as they'd taken their usually positions as chair and leetle spoon. They shared a look, and then glanced at the Gallade, who was at that very moment, partaking of the Leaf on his own piece. After learning how to Teleport, his Gallade had become rather independent and used much of his time, and his Trainer's winnings that he correctly saw as partially his, to go shopping for things that drew his attention.

One such had been his psychic-blue shaded bong, but Alex hadn't minded. Arthur knew, better than any other of their partners, that they were at their strongest together. True to his word, his 'freedom' had not impeded how often he battled, as a mental nudge tended to be all he needed as notice to return.

The Gallade exhaled with a sigh, and nodded. "Aye...that could be one method...the only problem is that...it's a lot of power, and not all of us are as...experienced as we need to be to handle such things."

Alex raised a brow, and the Gallade sent him a thought through their connection. The human's eyes narrowed slightly, and the Gallade nonchalantly hit his piece once more. Alex spoke, and the two women flinched as they heard a bit of irritation in his voice, a rare thing, as he was more patient than most humans under the same level of stress. "Regardless...as you said, we only need those who can wield the Light for this. It's our best chance of coming through this alive." Alex looked back to Svelka. "You seem to know a bit about them already. Care to show us how exactly they work?"
The Norstad native nodded, and stood, moving to the pair of Articuno who were, by proximity, keeping the gathered group at a comfortable temperature. Svelka reached for her own breastplate, and her hand was illuminated by ice energy as she removed the Plate, and offered it to the bird that was her main partner. She and her sisters had each, before entering war, only had their Articuno on their teams. As time passed, they'd slowly taken to building their teams, though some had refused, and remained relying on just their birds. Svelka had only taken a few other partners, who had proven to be both cute, and rather useful. For glorious combat though, there was only one choice.

The Articuno rose to full standing height, and the Icium Plate rose into the air to match it, attaching to her chest as Jess' own had to her Articuno. The difference, came when Svelka raised her hand to the Plate, and once more made it flare with the energy that resided within. Eric had, on his last call, confirmed that they were indeed giving off serious Infinity Energy, and that these Plates were likely behind the technological boom Japan had been enjoying for the past decade. The signatures matched the tech from the Devon Corp. to the last wavelength. He'd likely demand a demonstration, once he heard about this.

Light blue armor plates flared across the bird from the original Plate, covering her weak spots with rather beautiful icy blue armor. Not surprisingly, it matched the aesthetic her tribe's riders had for their own garments. Apparently, this was not a new trick for the inhabitants of Valaskjalf, as the armor had an ideal perch for a rider as well.

Alex smirked, as Jess stood and ran to her own Articuno with an eager look. He caught his Gallade's eye, and Arthur was smirking as well. The two nodded in unison. Alex glanced over at the girls, and saw Svelka was once more favoring his better half over him. He'd expected as much, and turned to face his Gallade. He didn't need help anyways, one demonstration was enough for his new way of seeing the world, and this particular formula felt...promising.

Though the Articuno riders had been nothing but polite to him, and the other men in the army that held rank, they'd been as cold as their mount's typing, only speaking more than three words with those of the female gender. That too, he'd expected. With time, and battle, they would likely warm up as their Chief had, but he knew humans. True change, and the idea of a world in which humans considered each other equal by default rather than superior thanks to genetics, ideology, or gender, would come with new generations. As it always had.

He raised a hand over Arthur's heart piece, where the Psychium Plate had fused with his partner, and the familiar deep blue aura surrounded the pair. "Ready?" Arthur nodded, and used their bond to ascend to the next level of evolution. He took his Mega Form, and once the change was finished, Alex's hand flared.

The psychic energy that was by this point a part of him did its job, as the heart piece glowed bright, but no plates appeared. Alex raised a brow, and heard Arthur in his head, sounding somewhat pained, or at least uncomfortable. "It's my fighting typing...the Plate is overpowering it, and the lack of bodily balance is keeping it from activating."

Alex nodded. "You've honed your fighting techniques to the point of divinity, my friend. Focus on summoning and refining that power, and I'll handle the psychic end of things." The Gallade frowned for a moment, then mentally acquiesced. He made his usual 'Gaaaaah!' cry as he powered up, and his aura shifted from blue to gold. His arm blades did the same, radiating Light energy in waves of power. Rather suddenly, metallic plates of armor, similar to those that had covered the Articuno, formed around his Gallade.
His helmet became more reminiscent of a full helm, and covered his mouth, leaving only his eyes visible. His torso and legs were shielded, though the most interesting change came to his arms. Gauntlets had formed on his hands, and curved along the edge of his arms, namely the blade, and the formerly wild Light energy focused, and began to hum. Arthur tested them with several swings, and gave his Trainer a wide grin. As they swung through the air, they sounded uncannily like his plasma sword when it did the same thing. "This...this will be enough. Even a Pokémon as powerful as Giratina will have a hard time suppressing this kind of strength, especially in this form."

He fell into a standard series of dragon style practice strikes then, circular movements that had been adapted by Tao himself for use by the Gallade. His arms hummed with every strike, and his Trainer had to admit, he looked insanely cool. He glanced over at the birds then, and spied the two women already atop them, smirking down at him and his overeager Gallade. The only thing not encased in the Psychium Plate's armor was his cape. The metal itself seemed to have a mix of gold and traditional psychic pinkish coloring, and even the Gallade's natural green 'helmet' had gained an extra layer of protection.

The two Articuno flapped over to them, and the boys mounted up. Upon closer inspection, the two bird's regalia differed, though the differences were subtle, and seemed to reflect personality more than anything else. Svelka donned her helmet, and the two Unovans activated their belts, and their armor. They were going to be rather hot, but that was preferable to being dead. With a shared nod, the two birds ascended into the air. They recalled the rest of their partners from above, mentally promising each that yes, they would get to try this 'armor thing' too, but for the moment, duty came first.

The two birds ascended from the grove, and over the ruins of what had once been a fortress that housed evil. The closer they came to the entrance they'd entered in the past, the colder the air became. For a long time on their slow approach, the only sound in the entire area was the soft flapping of the Legendary Pokémon.

As they touched down at the main entrance to the topmost chamber the ancient pyramidal structure played home to, two new sounds filled the air. One, a low ominous hum, intermixed with indistinct whispers. The other, was a growl, followed by an impending sense of death.

Two words floated through the air, underlined by the growl. It took them a minute to realize they were being projected, though by what they could not sense. "Go...back…"

"Som! Bra! Dor!" The Shout echoed through the area as Alex and his very shiny Gallade leapt from the birds, towards the very edge of the top stairs, and the entrance to the chamber he'd seen in the past. The air was much colder, and frost was forming on his armor. He didn't worry about the cold impairing it though. The bones that were his armor had survived the coldest hel of Norstad for millennia. It would take more than this to break them.

The two Articuno landed behind them moments later, as nothing jumped out. The words, the presence, the feeling of death, it had all vanished the moment they'd landed on the steps. "Did you just break up his name into three parts solely so you could Shout it?"

Alex smirked, as he responded to the redhead. "Hush. He's here." His eyes were closed, but his third had stayed open. Normally, he couldn't sense dark types too well, if at all, but in this case it was easy to track the Legendary presence by the lack of definition he created in the wide range of his mental sight.

Arthur went from chuckling to his battle stance as the indistinct orb being tracked by his Trainer...
arced towards them. It did not move to strike however, adjusting at the last moment to land in front of them. Alex opened his eyes, as they were better suited to the show that was Sombrador’s entrance. Dark energy streamed in from seemingly nowhere, and before them manifested the Dragon of Darkness, the strongest of the Dark Continent's trio of Guardians.

He resembled both Luxray and Liepard in various aspects, and the eyes were almost identical to a Pyroar's, though the irises were red. His fangs were the only part of him that wasn't black, being instead stark white, and curved uncannily similar to a scythe. They likely flashed as the last thing his prey ever saw, if they were lucky enough to catch a glimpse. Even manifested right before them, the Legendary Pokémon gave off little to no presence they could sense.

Though his features were akin to the many feline Pokémon species, he too was part dragon, and bore dark scales instead of fur. His tail was akin to a Noivern's, though it split into dual barbed tips that were likely venomous in nature. He had wings not unlike Tao's, and unlike Kyurem, his appeared to still be able to work, and carry his bulk. The panther-like dragon type came low, lips raised slightly as it took in the individuals before it. "So...the time has come, has it? I can smell my counterparts upon you...Champion of Unova."

Alex raised a brow, and the Legendary continued to speak. He had no intention of interrupting, as they typically refrained from talking to humans. "Your deeds have not gone unnoticed, even here, where only death and ghosts reside. When I sensed that Unova once more had a Light wielder, I asked the One for assistance...or tried to. I did not know if he heard me."

The humans pressed their fists to their palms, and bowed as one. Arthur spoke for them, eyes blazing. "You were heard, Guardian. Now let us pass...it is time this blight was ended."

The lips of the Pokémon, that seemed to have a few bat-like characteristics as well now that he was so close and corporeal, pulled into a smirk. "You will need one who can control dark energy in there, if you wish to succeed. You cannot win with the Light alone."

"Then join us." The red eyes moved to the human, clad in dragonbone from his head to his boots. A leathery black cape hung from the flared shoulderpads, covering almost everything else. The smirking human spoke again. "We have enough Light between us to match the amount of dark energy you can call upon. Probably. If it's going to take both, I have an idea of what we'll need to do. But first, we'll need to enter the Reverse World. Can you help with that?"

Sombrador gave a sigh of what sounded like relief. Usually, all he got this far out were bandits, looking for a hideout, and Trainers, usually young ones, disproportionately strong for their size, and lacking the mental maturity for the power in their hands. "Competence...finally...there is a portal to that dimension nearby. But only one, and we do not want to end up within the entity that feasts upon it. I could make another entrance...but it would require a lot of power."

The two Unovans shared a look, and then different aspects of their dragonbone began radiating dark energy. Jess spoke this time, smirking as well now. "Will two Plate's worth be enough?"

The cat-like eyes widened, slightly. "You have access to Plates of a fallen Alpha? Multiple, no less? Humanity must have come far indeed to have remembered how to re-forged them, let alone meld them into the bones of a dragon type. Very well. We will put an end to this curse. Together."

Sombrador's mind touched theirs, and while Alex and Jess had dark type friendly partners, an overwhelming mental presence radiating the energy they were inherently weak to almost threw their
focus. Almost. The One Dragon's training kicked in, and they forced themselves to raise their arms, and guide the dark energy at their command into the legend before them. As they did, Sombrador's form began to radiate with the power of his inherent typing.

When the dark dragon gave the command, they halted the flow, and pulled away from the mental contact. The dragon bathed the closest flat rock surface in obsidian flames, polishing it to a bright shine within moments.

Then, the Legendary Pokémon channeled the donated energy into the rock, and moments later, a portal was made of the ancient stone face, a hole in the fabric of space and time that led to only one place. The humans and Pokémon flew through quickly, followed by their newest legendary ally.

They emerged into a world of utter nonsense and non-euclidean angles. The rocky platform they were on was, thankfully, oriented 'normally', though the ones surrounding it, and everything else, all arced at strange angles. Thankfully, they could still fly, more or less. It didn't take long for them to spot the Nexus roughly two hundred feet in front of them. A swirling vortex of ghost energy was being infused, slowly, with the dark energy that permeated the Reverse World's 'bars'. Essentially, the prison was being weakened, albeit at an impossibly slow pace.

Above the swirling Nexus was what at first appeared to be an indistinct shadowy circular blob. They all flinched as, quite suddenly, a red and black eye formed in the center of the entity.

"What is that?" Jess whispered, as she and Svelka recoiled, much like their mounts. The birds did not seem to like the Reverse World, or the utterly foul, deathly cold aura the thing was giving off.

I...am the Weakness of All that Lives...

An unnerving smile from a mouth full of razor teeth curved around the bottom of the entity as the eye opened fully, and its unnerving voice echoed both in their heads, and all around them. Only Sombrador seemed unaffected. It seemed to swell, awakening, as the newest victims spared it the trouble of pulling their life essence through small tears between the dimensions. It had been eons since it had tasted anything this fresh, and potent. Being shoved into this realm had genuinely weakened it, more than expected. Until now.

Tentacles of Shadow formed from behind the massive indistinct blob, and came towards them. Or rather, they tried, only to be smashed by flames of pure black, and burnt away to nothing. Sombrador shot a glare at his newest 'allies', but they were already in motion.

Two beams of Light, encased in, refracted, and empowered by the ice energy that guided them struck the shortened entity, whose size had diminished, slightly, under Sombrador's flames. The eye winced at the brightness of the beams, but only seemed to grow angrier as two attacks from Legendary birds struck it, and blasted away parts of its form into nothingness. The entire mass shrank, as the blob repaired the holes with what Shadow remained.

Arthur and Alex followed them up, striking the entity from the spot in its vision that, presumably, was still blinded. Both of their aura shields had turned gold, and both had managed respectable attacks, in the form of whirling light blades, and a sphere of Light energy that was shaped not unlike an Energy Ball. It had been surprisingly easy to form and wasn't heavy at all, but as the boy's attacks came close to the Shadow entity, it opened a circular hole within its form, and they passed through, only to be caught by Shadow tentacles immediately on the other side.

The birds moved to free their partners, only to be caught themselves as their riders charged up their
Ice Beams. Sombrador, for his part, had vanished. The slimy, semi corporeal limbs tightened around their newest victims, holding all four above its maw.

The jaws opened, and within, they spied what they'd been waiting to see. After comparing notes with the speed and efficiency of telepathy, Alex and Sombrador had discerned that the Nexus was connected to whatever entity they had seen subdue Giratina in the past. That same intelligence had been what ultimately sundered Zigma. They had endeavored to find the entity, and now, they had.

Four thwipping sounds filled the air, as the ghostly Shadow tentacles were bisected by pure channeled darkness from the forked tail. The Scales once more empowered themselves, all at once, forming a familiar half of a familiar shape out of pure Light energy in the space above the entity.

The massive eye narrowed, wincing in the Light, as it was joined by a similar counter-shape of darkness. One golden aura separated from the others, flying high with the speed of a Mega Gallade as the energy below began to spin and condense, guided by the other mortals, and the dark dragon type. With another boom in the opposite direction, the Gallade's psychic power sent him shooting down on the gathered taijitu swirl of Light and Dark energy.

The Gallade's mental voice, not all that different from his Trainer's, echoed as he utilized his own Voice, alongside his Sacred Sword. "Vulkunyolmah!" As Alex had predicted, the center was where the zenith of all that power was. Arthur hammered into it with his Sacred Sword and Night Slash simultaneously.

The massive, and rather dense spinning swirl of energy shifted from the others, to the one among them who could, and was, used to wielding both types. As it shot downwards, the greedy swirl below them absorbed the entire attack, and then the teeth came together once more in a swirling grin.

I do not know why...but I expected more…

The Gallade chuckled in response, as his Trainer floated up beside him with a smirk. "Hi los nalkun dilon." Alex snapped his fingers, and gave the energy its catalyst. There was a flash from within the entity. Then another. The entity's tentacles, once more reformed, paused in their bid to bind them all once more, and a look of what could only be described as indigestion came over the cyclopic blob.

The explosions continued, picking up in pace as the two oldest types of energy slammed together over and over, neither gaining total domination. The resulting clash, perfectly balanced, caused continued damage to the entity from the inside, and pieces of it shot into the darkness of the void with each concussive burst.

Svelka glanced at the male and the Gallade. "That vill...stop, yes? It vill not continually eat realitee with ever larger bursts?"

The two psychic types glanced at each other, then the still exploding entity. It was obviously shooting parts of itself away into the void to be reformed later, but at the rate it had been growing, they had earned time to deal with it more effectively, at least. Pravus would be weakened regardless, and that, was what mattered. Arthur, for his part, was still smoking, and stunned, from launching that much power all at once. "Probably not..." They said, at the same time.

The girls shared a look, then looked at their birds, who seemed more amused than worried. With a final boom, the energy finally ran out of steam, and the last explosive burst sent anything left of the entity scattering into particles.
Sombrador reappeared then, and gave them all a respectful nod. "Well done...that was...rather impressive, for a Gallade and a bunch of humans. Combining Shouting and moves. Hrrrrrm. It has been some time since I've seen such a combat style." He glanced down then, at what remained of the Nexus, namely the tear that had allowed normaltypred human essence to seep in, and be corrupted into ghost energy.

Being a creature of darkness, the entity within this prison, whatever it was, had infused the corrupted life energy with enough darkness to create a larger amount of Shadow. Now that it had been blasted to pieces, all that remained was a tear into the prime material plane, through which, was the chamber they'd visited in the past. Similar shadowy figures, human one might call them, despite the indistinct white hair and missing eyes, floated aimlessly about the pyramid, their source of food and unlife now extinguished.

Sombrador licked his lips, revealing a tongue that was more serpent than catlike. "This, I can repair. Then...we leave...I will devour those foul entities once and for all, and this damned place will never draw in an innocent again. Heal yourselves, while I work."

The humans did as they were bid, and Arthur returned to his ball with the birds, leaving the humans to chat amongst themselves for the better part of an hour.

"And that is, essentially, what the Graceland Theory taught modern Professors about the Reverse World, and its apparent function. Giratina is not inherently evil, just destructive. A darker force bent it to its' will in an age long past, but somewhere during its imprisonment, Giratina freed itself, more or less. Now that we've scattered it, that...thing...may try to retake control. Something to keep an eye on..." Alex said, as he finished explaining 'what ze Muk' was up with this dimension, to Svelka.

A familiar, and fear inducing shriek, far too close for comfort, sounded in the fascinating void around them. They all glanced at Sombrador, who had paused in his mending of the ancient cage. The ghosts on the other side had tried to stop him, but the dark type had devoured them easily, and grown stronger by doing so. "The Renegade comes...it senses damage to its home, and it too will not be pleased...we must hurry..."

Jess walked over to the giant catlike dragon type, and fished around in her bag for a moment while the entity watched, and simultaneously kept mending. "I don't usually like using things like this in normal battle...but wow are they useful in certain situations." She pulled out five X Speed potions, items designed specifically for boosting stats in combat. She held one, and the other four mimicked her motions as they floated in the air. With one fingerpress, she sprayed five of them on the Legendary Pokémon.

Sombrador typically did not use such things either, having never needed berries in his current form, and having never had a Tamer either, but he welcomed the boost all the same, and in under a minute, the repairs were finished, and the hole where the Nexus of Darkness once manifested now left no trace behind. There was no dithering, as he leapt back to the others, and left through the portal by which they'd come. Once back home, Sombrador closed it with another gout of obsidian flame.

Then, they waited, eyeing the stone-face turned polished. After several minutes of nothing, the group moved to turn away from the rock, but Alex stayed. His instinct told him to wait, and so he did, beside the black scaled Legendary dragon type, who likely sensed the same thing. Giratina was close, and in modern times, it was able to break free of its prison, for short amounts of time. Apparently.
A familiar red eye appeared on the polished stone, glaring at them from the opposing dimension. An imposing and super effective mental presence intruded on Alex's all but breaking his mental defenses, in what quickly became the only time they'd been tested outside of the Sage's training. They held, but the words, the evident focus of the forced contact through time, space, and barriers, came through.

This dimension...must not merge... What is within...must stay within… Do not...forget.

A ghostly shriek, distorted by the barriers between worlds, filled the air, and the serpentine form of the Renegade Pokémon moved on past them, to do whatever it was that Giratina did within its cage. Alex began to wonder if it might not be incredibly important, and if their actions had, inadvertently, caused the God of Antimatter more trouble than it needed. Sombrador ran a five clawed paw along the surface, marring it and making it useless for portals. Then, he turned to the humans. "I will remain here and...take care of the lingering spirits of the humans who fused with Darkrai. Then, finally, I can rest."

Alex bowed, as did the other four humanoids, in the Unovan style. "Rio awaits you, Dragon of Darkness. Mamboa and Yacuma desire to be whole again. Already they seek a Champion. Are you sure you don't need our help in there?" He eyed the entrance to the top of the pyramidal structure and cracked his knuckles with a look as eager as his Gallade's. "Unovans have a long, glorious history of busting ghosts."

The dragon gave a sly smirk, "If I need help, I know who to call. Go, Unovans. Make good on your promise with my people. I shall return later this evening. At dusk, look to the west." The three Scales nodded, and Teleported back to Rio, specifically, the yacht they'd rode in on. It was just around noon as they looked around the deck. Evidently their venture had taken the entire morning.

They bamfed in to find Captain Fergus in the midst of a Leaf session with three of the other Scales in Alex's original squad that had come with them. That meant that Haley and the other four were out, then. Alex gave them a nod, and then once more found his gaze drawn to the ship anchored immediately next to them. Fergus joined him. "Welcome back, lad. Ye've sterted quite a parrrty y'know. All o' Rio is celebratin' the return o' their Guardians. S'fine work, lad. Fine work."

Alex chuckled as he saw Arthur and the two ladies join the other Scales in their session, and nodded at the captain's words. "I didn't do all that much. Arthur was the one who ultimately freed this land...as he did in Norstad. It's becoming a habit with him. Tell me, Captain. Did we ever find out which of these massive ships is the flagship?"

The Captain seemed to chuckle. "Aye, laddy. As fate would 'ave it, that beastie parked on our port is wot Rio uses as their bellwether. Accordin' tae me sources, the last time they seen action was a'fore even my time. Almost t'ree hundred yars past."

Alex glanced over the side of the yacht, ignoring the potent smell of smoldering Leaf behind him, for once, as a purposeful cloud blew in his general direction. His smirk widened into a grin as he read the words on the side of the ship. "Captain...that lettering there...that is their ship's monicker if I'm not mistaken?"

Fergus glanced over, and then nodded, arching a salty black and gray eyebrow at the young man who'd been named Dragon Emperor. "Aye lad, that be her name. Though I admit, it be an odd one for a ship."
"It seems more like a 'him' with a name like that." Alex chuckled, and Jess joined them as she sensed his thoughts.

"Och! A ship be a fine thing lad, hence the feminine terms. But ye 'ave a point. Sailors I've known refer tae their ships after what they named'em. Praps it is a lad, in this instance. Would explain the, erm, giant cannons." The smirking Captain took a long drag then on his own smoking implement, a lengthy but simple wooden pipe full of crushed, if a bit stale, Green Monster.

Jess took a look for herself, and then smirked up at Alex. "Is this another nerd thing?"

He grinned back down at her. "Kind of, though I'm not even entirely surprised at this point. Seems appropriate, given our plans. We should go find Iara, the others, and then head for home."

It took roughly an hour for the Scales to regroup into their original squad of ten plus Haley. The city was a far cry from what they'd seen previously. Evidently, with the return of two thirds of their Guardian, the people had hope. Unova had reunited theirs, after all. It was time good fortune came Rio's way.

The buildings were alight with every color of fluorescent wiring the people had found, fixed, or just plugged in again after a few hundred years of disuse. The lights spread to the ruins around the harbor, but those were more normal flames. They gained an appreciation for just how many poor citizens lived in them, as the candle flames easily illuminated the continent's curve, and then some.

They found the Queen by the city's stadium, a place for sports of every kind, and of course, Pokémon battles. The most recent tournament had been presided over by the two gargantuan snake-like Legendary Pokémon, and tonight, it was nearing its finale. They found the Queen in the viewing box that, by no coincidence, was eye level and in between the two massive serpent's draconic heads.

Yacuma looked as lovely as ever with her shifting blues, but Mamboa seemed much different. Happy, even, going by the curve of his mouth. The leaves had dried completely in his time watching the battles, and the leafy crest that adorned his head and neck was magnificent. Pokémon had taken to perching on the massive, strong fronds, for many wild ones also appeared to be watching, and enjoying, the contests of skill below.

"If what you say is true Dragon Emperor, then I will favorably consider your request once my people hear it. But only once Zigma returns as well will our aid manifest." Queen Iara resumed sipping her drink then, and Alex nodded. He was seated between her and Jess, and the others had taken to indulging in the food, and chatting up the Queen's lovely entourage. "Should she do so, we will send aid to the regions you suggested, and quickly. I expect my sailors will be glad just to do something other than war games, though I do not know about these...'battle yachts' you mentioned. They seem silly."

Alex shrugged. "They've essentially blockaded Hoenn and Johto's ports. Nobodys heard from Alola, and while we have the northwest, they control those coasts as well. Getting aid to Japan has been rather difficult."

Iara nodded. "I see. Well, in any case...we have methods for dealing with Sharpedo swarms." She turned the ocean blue eyes from the battle below to him, then. "You have done much for us, Dragon Emperor. But recovery will not occur overnight."

"We will, of course, be willing to compensate you for any aid you provide. Be it in materials or food." Alex said, smirking as he met her gaze evenly. "My only agenda is to see both our continents
thriving, and united, as they should be."

That drew a genuine smile from the Queen. "Then let it be a lasting alliance. Come, help me tell those below the news."

He was about to suggest they wait for the battle below, a genuinely interesting contest of skill and power that kept drawing his eyes, to wrap up when quite suddenly, it did. The contestants were a Primeape sporting an additional grass typing, and a Corsola with blue spikes, and impressive size. The Primeape had cupped its hands by its waist, and then brought them forward as it launched a Solar Beam, and having just used Protect earlier, the Corsola Trainer hesitated and called an Ice Beam counter a second too late.

The Primeape, which seemed to have retained its coloring, but grown an additional layer of green moss upon its fur, hopped around happily, beating its chest, and urging on the crowd, who loved it.

Yacuma offered her wide blue head as a platform, and Alex stepped up next to Iara. The crowds went silent as the massive snake's movement brought them to a dull murmur. Alex casually stuffed his hands in his pocket, and murmured as well. "Tell me when you want the theatrics."

Iara chuckled. "You'll know your cue."

The beautiful blue-haired Queen raised her arms then, and the Unovan beside her arched a genuinely impressed brow as her voice reached all of those below, though how exactly, he did not quite know. "My people! Many have been the rumors surrounding our returned Guardians. A stranger from a foreign land has convinced the elusive Mamboa to rejoin us, and has informed me that Sombrador shall also be returning, this very evening!"

She had to pause, as the cheers were deafening. Once they quieted a bit, she continued. "Some wonder if it might not be an ill omen, but fear not, for I can assure you only good things will come from this, the turning point of our time! For Rio, and all who call this continent home!" The cheers drowned out any other noise, and lasted for a full minute, before the Queen continued. "Now, many of you have asked, both yourselves, others, and even mine own guardsmen who is responsible for this sudden change, who is the foreigner who so generously offered to aid us in our time of suffering?"

The crowd enthusiastically began chanting 'who', but the Queen shrugged. "If that's all you can muster, you must not be very curious!" The cries of who increased in volume, and speed, and Iara gave a subtle nod. Alex ran past her, right off Yacuma's nose, who gave him a snout assisted jump into the air as the disguise melted away. Those below only saw a hint of white and black before it was obscured.

A flash of black light limned in white brought forth the leviathan that was Shruikan, who had seen precious little of Rio, or the sun, for quite some time. Alex climbed to his usual perch atop his head, plasma saber ignited and raised as the chanting of 'who' became an incoherent drone of cries, some of joy, awe, disbelief, and even a few insults.

"The most common thing I'm hearing..." Alex said as he made a show of casually strolling across Shruikan's lengthy back idly spinning the black and white blade, his Words reaching all of them just as easily, "is 'why?' Why Unova's newest Emperor? Why accept the aid of the leader of a nation embroiled in war, when doing so might well drag your own into the conflict as well?" The massive black dragon soared just above the crowd, and an eager member held up a hand for a high five as he passed. Shruikan lowered his tail slightly, giving the portly man a decent slap, and soon, others
Shruikan arced around the stadium in slow circles as he made enough passes to hit all those who'd raised their hands for a tap, though none in the crowd with a desire to pelt the foreigner with food and drink had the stones to do so when the massive dragon was that close, and quite good at picking out potential threats in a crowd. Usually, a glare dissuaded them. "If I may enlighten you all as to our plight, perhaps after, you will be amenable, as your Queen is, to giving your northern neighbors some aid, in this time of war."

That brought more than a few 'boos' but Alex nodded, as if expecting them. Shruikan arced back up just below Yacuma and her icy fangs, but the two dragons pointedly ignored them. "Three thousand years ago, the people of Rio banished a cadre of cultists to your home's western mountains. It took them the better part of those three millennia, but eventually, they struck back, and brought you low three centuries past with dark powers best forgotten, sundering your Guardian, even as ours was being torn apart by war. These cultists and the Shadow they infuse in their being, are the reason your mighty Zigma is no longer whole!"

As he strolled along Shruikan's length, Alex kept his eyes on the people. Most were still paying attention, and most, had nodded at his last statement. "Now those of you who know how that particular tale ended will ask what a bunch of now long dead sorcerers have to do with you, the present day people of Rio. That is, essentially, why I have come to your lovely region. The creature that calls itself Caleb Pravus, also known as the Prophet of Arceus, is one of these sorcerers, one that escaped Zigma's vengeance three centuries ago, and ever since, has been effectively brainwashing our west coast regions, moving ever eastward. The same threat that brought Rio low has regrown, and mark me, they'll be turning south when and if they manage to take us, and Japan, who they have also declared 'holy war' on."

The chanting soon returned, though what he eventually made out was 'not our war', steadily rising in volume. Glancing up, Iara looked more disappointed than anything at her people's response, but Alex Redwood had expected this too. Nobody ever wanted to go to a war they were not directly involved in. Not unless victory was easy.

"You are correct. This is not your war, nor would Unova expect the people of the southern continent to fight it for us." The chants died, and confused, slightly angry, murmurs bubbled throughout the crowd, but the once more encircling dragon kept them from boiling over, as did his Words. "I am the one who Tamed the One Dragon." He twirled the blazing plasma sword for emphasis, and felt Lux give it full power as he did, making the visual display shiny, and impressive. "Caleb Pravus is mine, but the people of Japan are casualties not even our Tao foresaw. We knew the Arceans had ambition for Sinnoh but...well, see for yourself people of Rio. See what has become of Sinnoh, favored region of the Alpha Pokémon."

He extinguished the plasma sword, flipped it over, and pointed the bottomost end at the stadium's far screen opposite the Queen and the two snakes. The unmistakable outline of the Sunyshore City lighthouse, ruined and scorched by fire, was the first sight the people saw. The rest of the port city fared no better. Not even the Pokémon center was free of flame marks. Alex and Lux continued flipping through the images that Haley had been saving as part of a larger project Tao had her working on, but for this, they were useful as well.

The images shifted again. Pastoria. Oreburgh. Jubilife. Canalave. One after the other, the flame-scarred cities covered the monitor, and the crowd had grown quiet. Then came Hearthome, and the murmurs of anger swelled. The 'cultural building' as it had once been called had shifted from a place
of tolerance and compassion, to little more than a recruiting center, with the Arcean's symbol plastered atop it. Not even that city, however, had escaped the flames entirely.

Alex continued, just as quiet, and yet, not one person in Rio missed what he said. "Sinnoh has been taken, largely by ambush. It started in Hearthome, a center of peace between humans and Pokémon. The Arceans used their 'foreign culture' to ingratiate themselves with its people, and then set up their command headquarters in Veilstone. Surprising no one, the remnants of Team Galactic apparently aided them, and from Sinnoh, the Arcean Crusaders have descended upon Japan, taking one region after another, until Kanto's own Red halted them just north of the Indigo Plateau."

Shruikan roared, and the crowd jumped out of their silence. Alex put Lux's container back, and gestured to the people. "Unova can, has, and will, handle our recalcitrant neighbors to the west. To you, the people of Rio, I ask aid for Japan. The Arcean Church has outfitted a fleet of 'battle yachts' with impressive weaponry and Sharpedo swarms. They've blockaded Japan's ports, and likely Alola's as well. I ask this of the people of Rio: I have brought your Guardians home, and shall help the one chosen to tame Zigma learn how to reunite a Regional Guardian, all the north needs of you in return for this knowledge, is your navy. Your Queen is confident that your ships can free Japan, and force the Arceans back to Fornia. Having seen your ships, I cannot say I disagree with her assessment, but as always, the choice belongs to the people of this free city. What say you?"

Shruikan had arced back up to Iara as Alex finished, and he recalled the giant dragon, thanking him as he landed once more atop Yacuma's head. The crowd of the stadium below milled and murmured, and murmuring grew louder as heated arguments erupted. The two regional leaders waited, patiently, and slowly, the people of Rio gave their answer.

"War...war...war...war...War! War! War! War!" Slowly, and then quicker once the people chanting realized they were the majority, the chanting grew louder as they drowned out the calls for peace or other more idealistic solutions, and the two leaders nodded.

Iara spoke then. "This shall be the start of a new partnership with our northern neighbors, who have promised recompensation by way of materials, and food, for whatever aid we give in this conflict born of ideology." The Queen grinned, and the stadium's own camera drones, which had been giving the people as good a view as they received from Pokémon battles, focused on her face as she spoke. "Let us teach these...Arceans...what true followers of the Alpha can do! But first, let our semifinal match commence!"

It was rare for Alex Redwood to watch a Pokémon battle whose contestants he knew little of, but that is what the final match of Rio's tournament demonstrated. Two Pokémon he'd never seen, going head to head with abilities he did not know by heart. Yet. Even the announcer had only named one, though what exactly it was had been drowned out by the ever swelling crowd's cheers. The other, though unnamed, Alex knew as Zeraora. Though that was about all he knew. Name and typing, though as he'd guessed, it was a fast physical attacker.

The Trainers themselves did not speak, save to order moves, and going by their glowing eyes and normal/ghost typing, he guessed the benefits of the Sight were not all that different from what his own eyes showed him. That would make teaching the victor easier at least, though he had no idea what the Trainers were like in terms of personality.

The one he liked, namely because of his surface thoughts on war in general, ended up losing, and the victorious Trainer who'd started with the Zeraora ascended, recalling her final partner, bowing both to her Queen, and the visiting foreign ruler. Alex projected his thoughts to the snakes, and Iara as he looked the woman over with a cursory glance. "A moment, if you'll allow it...I was given very strict
instruction not to teach those who are unworthy of power. I would test your Champion." The snakes nodded subtly, and the Queen did as well, taking a step back as the foreigner walked forward, and shook the woman's hand.

Her skin tone was as bronze brown as most of the people of Rio, her body was in peak condition, and her belt had ten matching spheres holding Pokémon. Her clothes were an appealing mix of green, black, and blue that were suited to Rio's weather, and her mind had impressive mental defenses. Someone had trained her already. This too would make things simpler.

"So, Unova's Champion. I have to admit, when I heard the term 'Dragon Emperor', I expected...more." The Challenger had the same about-to-be-broken cockiness that all such Trainers had, after climbing to the top, and facing down the last obstacle. Such attitudes were what made, or broke, Champions.

Alex smirked, and poked his belt with a psychic infused finger. The dragonbone manifested in all its impressive glory, and the woman blinked, several times, eyes darting about as she noticed just how detailed it really was. The Graybeards were masters of their craft. "Better?" She nodded. "Bring out your psychic type again, if you would."

The Xatu appeared with a squawk, and its gaze fell upon the tall bone-clad human before it. The eyes widened slightly, as it looked him over, and then its gaze shifted up, and up, and up. The strange bird leaned back, oblivious to the words or mental touches Alex had attempted to get its attention with. Whatever it was seeing was distracting it from the present.

A bright flash appeared beside Alex, and his Gallade manifested. Arthur knelt to the bird's level, and poked its chest as he brushed the Pokémon's mind, and projected his words. "Oi. Anyone in there?"

The Xatu blinked one eye, then the other, and its head slowly lowered to meet the Gallade's gaze. "Ah. The Prince...yes, that makes more sense." The bird turned towards her Trainer, and spoke to her directly. "Do not make an enemy of this one. Friendship is more beneficial."

The psychic flying type glanced up as it was tapped on the shoulder by a once more de-armored Dragon Emperor. "Hello there. See anything interesting?"

The bird blinked, once. "Xatu."

Alex's eyes narrowed slightly, and switched to mental tones. "Fine. Is this better?"

"Yes." The bird's mental tone was feminine, but simple, not like her Trainer's own regional accent with Common words. "You wish to open her eye?"

Alex nodded. "She will need it, for what comes next. Do you think she can handle the power?"

The Xatu made a chirping sound, and said, "Yes, yes. Otherwise the Rain Sage would not have trained her." Alex nodded again, and then gestured to the woman with a hand wave that said 'go ahead'.

The Xatu turned its gaze back towards its Trainer once more, and a flash of deep purple aura surged between the pair. Alex smirked, as he sensed the burgeoning mind, quite different from a psychic type's upon closer inspection, forming connections by instinct with her team of ten.

Her eyes burned with ghost energy, and she grinned at the Unovan. "This is...amazing."
He smirked. "It gets better." He nodded at the stadium's own Nurse Joy, who'd been patiently standing by to heal the Challenger's team. As was the custom in Rio, all battles were fought by participants at their best, and any status effects were encouraged to be cured immediately after battling.

With the number of Pecha berries, amongst others, that cured all number of ailments growing in abundance within the city and the jungles it wasn't a hard thing to do. Many considered leaving a Pokémon injured with painful status effects post battle a punishable offense, even if the laws of the city did not, but thankfully those too callous to spare a berry were rare in this region.

"It is time, Challenger. You will face my own team, and we will determine who Rio's strongest is."
Iara spoke as Yacuma brought her to her side of the battle field. The Challenger chuckled as she retrieved her healed team, and then followed, convincing Mambo to give her a lift with just a glance.

As she took the Challenger's spot once more, she raised the ball that had, if memory served, held the Zeraora. "I'm going to bring you down, my Queen. This ability is…"

"Something I mastered three centuries ago." Iara's eyes flared a deep blue, the same color as Yacuma. "Something that allowed me to become a Legendary Tamer, on top of being a world leader." She smirked, as the tone was very much good natured. "But by all means, you who have just opened your eyes, come at me with all you have."

In short, she did. Iara's team, true to form, had predominantly water types, who did not fare well, or long, against the Challenger's Zeraora. Her own Aurorus, a female much older and much, much larger than Gelauros, managed to bring it down by shattering the field in a display that Alex's Earthquake users found most impressive.

The Queen handled the woman's Victreebell rather quickly with an Ice Beam, but her Yanmega brought the Aurorus down with a Solar Beam it charged as it dodged the long-necked Pokémon's attacks, and grew faster by the second.

The same Yanmega took down the rest of the water types as well, and even the Queen's Lilligant, making the Challenger victorious. Once more, the old guard changed for the new, and Rio had her Champion.

Iara led the woman back up to her viewing box, which then ascended on its own power high above the stadium, into the fluffy, and yet very damp clouds, to a floating hidden landmass that seemed to be home to an entire ecosystem, including several rare Pokémon. Alex sensed the other's Trainer eyes watching them, but wisely, none made a move to throw a Pokéball.

The large white-blue form of what could only be a Latios whipped past them, and descended towards the old stone building on the floating island. It was the only such structure up here, and shared architectural similarities with Rio's own building's below.

The new Champion floated from the box on her own power as she saw who awaited them beside the Latios they had seen previously. Alex smirked, and threw Arthur's ball into the air as well, for when there was a parent, the child would likely also be nearby. It took about five seconds of aimless floating before the Gallade was tackled by an invisible ball of feathers and red, and once more, the two were off in a game of tag.
The viewing box came in for a landing as the Professor gave the newest Champion of Rio a pat on the head. "I can't believe how far you've come. You're not that little girl that left town with her Torchic anymore. Go on then, lets see how she grew up."

The Champion obliged, and her Blaziken appeared, fully healed, as she hadn't been used in the final match. The Professor, a thin, balding man that looked as local as the Champion, gave the Blaziken a chin/neck scratch as he looked the Pokémon over. "Yes...yes, I see. She's become rather strong. Good. Come with me, Nelinha. We shall enter your team into Rio's Hall of Champions."

As the pair walked off, Iara sat back in her own chair, which was more of a throne. "This will take some time, my friends. So enjoy, and get some dinner."

Alex, for his part, was staring at the orange-tinted sky that was growing ever darker, hands in the pockets of the white robe-jacket that served as his usual casual attire. It took almost an hour, by which point the sun was setting, but once the two returned, it was with an armful of eggs.

Thoroughly curious, Alex watched Professor Cashapona, as he was evidently known to the region, place the ten eggs in the care of the Latios he'd arrived on, and the Latios then disappeared into the island's cluster of trees, presumably to find the eggs a solid home. As the Professor and Champion made their way back, he caught Alex's eye, and the Unovan gave him a nod of respect, that was returned in kind.

He offered a hand as they came closer. "Apologies, Dragon Emperor, for not introducing myself earlier. Our customs are important, and are best done quickly. I am Professor Cashapona of the free city of Rio. Thank you, for bringing our Guardians back to us."

Alex returned the handshake. "It wasn't too terribly difficult, your Guardians wish to be whole." His eyes shifted to the Champion yet, and she smirked. "It's about time you learned how exactly you'll be re-uniting them, and then, we must return home." She nodded, and the lesson began.

Thankfully, and as was the case with most Trainers at her level, Nelinha had a full set of Plates, if not crystals. Alex showed her how to manipulate the energy, particularly ghost, dark, grass, and water, and once she had figured how to, more or less, activate and guide each of the types a roar filled the air. One that was familiar to the three who'd ventured into the Rainforest.

The bat-like wings of what could only be Sombrador shot above the cloud layer, and soon after, the heads of Mamboa and Yacuma joined them, though even with their massive size they just barely broke the cloud layer, and appeared only as heads. Below, the people had again begun cheering, and the party was in full swing from the sound of things.

As Sombrador landed, Alex snapped his fingers, and brought Rio's Champion back to focus on him. "This is the most important part. Legendary Pokémon take quite a bit of power to Mega Evolve, and handling three at once will be a challenge to maintain. But maintain it you must, if you wish to be Zigma's Tamer. Do you feel ready?"

Nelinha nodded. "Aye, dragon blood. Your knowledge is...helpful. I too am glad you came to our region, even if by doing so you've pulled us into war."

Alex chuckled awkwardly. "Well...I will endeavor to aid your forces, should they need it. We are allies now, after all. They'll be counting on you, as well. Once you are a Tamer, you'll understand how the power you've acquired can be used to protect many at once. Have Zigma show you how, if you find it beyond your skill level."
Rio's newest Champion thanked him again, and then turned to go and converse with the three gathered Guardians. The other Scales gathered around behind Alex and Jess as they watched history be made.

Nelinha proved as exceptional in her handling of energy flow as she was in handling Pokémon, and first, Yacuma ascended to the next level. The crowd below made noises of confusion as their water guardian began to shine impossibly bright white, and then flew upon a new pair of wings, not unlike Sombrador's, into the clouds above the stadium. She began circling the island in slow circles, brimming with the energy of Mega Evolution. Her form had gained four wings, but no limbs, and any other changes were obscured by distance as the Legendary Pokémon circled the sky.

Next to join her was Mamboa, who also gained wings, though only a single pair, which ended in fearsome claws, not unlike a Noivern's. The crest around his head had, like a Serperior, become the basis for his leafy wings, and he too joined Yacuma in the sky, twirling and dancing alongside her for a final time.

Last, was Sombrador, who remained standing on the floating island as his counterparts circled above. Alex felt a pull from him, and he, Jess, and Svelka all approached, and bowed low.

"My new friends…" He began, as his purring tones echoed in their skulls, "My people and my selves shall not forget your aid, nor fail to reward it. Long have your Dragon and I not seen eye to eye, though I like to think there was no malice in our disagreements. He wished to rule his people as he saw fit, and I shall do the same."

Alex responded mentally, keeping the conversation between the four who had entered the Reverse World, and ended the Nexus. "My wish, is to rule both of our peoples, in time. I tell you this, because I do not want to rule by force. I will help humanity prosper, as much as I am able. When the time comes for unification, I will hope you decide to join us."

The dark dragon eyed him for a long moment, and as he did, his eager Tamer-to-be channeled the infinite dark energy of a Plate of Arceus into his form. Of the three, and much like Kyurem, Sombrador changed the most. His scales became yellow, and black spots covered them all over. The wingspan grew large enough to rival Tao's, and the tail, ever the most impressive aspect of the Dragon of Darkness, gained a pair of much sharper stingers.

The Mega Form of Sombrador met Alex's gaze, and he sensed amusement from his mind, as the dragon sensed his thoughts. He did not hide them. He needed the Guardians, at least, to understand his intentions, and the logic behind them. Finally, the now yellow and black cat-like dragon nodded. "When the time comes...I will aid your case. Though it will be for my humans to ultimately decide. It is their society, after all."

Alex bowed, and the Scales followed his lead. He got a good look at the much sharper, much longer claws as he lowered his gaze, and spoke with the same respectful tone he used in every Legendary conversation. "You have my thanks. Now go, become whole once more."

Alex stood, and placed a hand on the shoulder of Rio's Champion, who was sweating heavily under the strain of mega evolving three Legendary Pokémon, though as he'd explained to her, it was really only one. That understanding helped her maintain the energy, but she was rapidly losing focus when it came to combining them. "For this, you must let them take over the merging, and focus on supplying as much of the three types they share as you can. They will do the rest. Recover your balanced center, before you start."
She nodded, and did as instructed, letting the calm fill her mind. Finally, after several moments of focus, she opened her blazing eyes, and nodded at Sombrador. The dark dragon roared, and its two counterparts descended towards its tail, at which point, the appendage split further, and pierced its counterparts, not unlike Kyurem had done with its wings.

The tail ends pierced the snakes in their chests, which they bared willingly, and with a sharp inhale, the three began to glow. Their Champion focused on the Plates before her, and each once more shot energy into their respective Legendary. The light became brighter as the three massive Pokémon began to come together, and with a final flash, three once more became one.

To Alex's eyes, Zigma was quite similar to Tao. Though she was feminine where he was masculine, and radiated a presence of unsettling darkness, whereas his own partner radiated a sense of calming light. She was as large as the Original Dragon, and had retained the catlike body of Sombrador, as well as the spotted coloring, not unlike one of the spotted cats that once roamed Old Earth.

The wings were large, and seemingly fluffy. Yellow at the base, though they shifted to green at the top, a familiar color that could only have come from Mamboa, and upon closer inspection, the fluffiness of the wings became identified as being frond-like leaves that were quite similar to how the grass snake's crest had appeared when dry. The tail had again changed, though it remained split in two, it had gained two snakelike heads, black in color. One had eyes like emeralds, and the other's were more akin to sapphires. They joined the cat-like head by moving forward towards it.

Zigma's countenance was more fur than scale, as was the rest of her body, though many draconic aspects remained. Her long fangs were obsidian, but her eyes were kind, motherly almost. She was lying on the ground, in a manner much like a feline, for she still had four legs, and each of those appeared feline-esque as well. She regarded the Unovans for what felt like a final time, standing slowly to her full height as her Tamer climbed upon her back. "Travel quickly back to your home, Dragon Emperor. Much has changed, and the One Dragon requires his Tamer. Go. I will see that Rio flourishes from this point forward. You may expect our fleet within a matter of days. When next we meet, let it be in Sacreus."

With her newest Tamer now upon her spotted neck, the Guardian of the Dark Continent descended below the cloud layer, and the cheers once more became deafening. Every citizen knew, or had at least heard, what their Guardian of old looked like. True to the Unovan Leader's words she had, finally, returned to them. Up above, the northerners bid farewell to the Queen and the Professor, then linked arms and Teleported home after telling the Captain that he could begin making the voyage north. Evidently he was ferrying some curious southerners for a bit of profit as well.

---

New Tork City Science Lab - Unova Region

When the Scales reappeared it was, for once, a place Alex had not seen. Mid Teleport, they had been redirected, and guided to this spot, whatever it was. The eleven humans glanced around, and then, they saw Tao.

He was hooked up to a number of machines that were, at a glance, gathering numerous types of data. He nodded at the Scales, and they moved towards the being that was a leader to them. Both he and Alex had varying levels of respect, but when it came to military matters, they shared a rank, as well as strategy. Orders from one were considered on the same authority level as the other, though naturally, the humans tended to backtalk their Emperor, and not their draconic Guardian.
"Welcome home. I take it things went well down south. Pravus has missed the last two of his public addresses, ever since you caused that surge of energy. We felt it even here, and indeed, the entire planet may have taken notice. Pravus will now likely begin trying to restore the Nexus, by making a new one. His methods have advanced in three hundred years. He understands the Shadow quite well, and, he still has Doctor Ein." The dragon's calming baritone rumbled in their heads as his own head rested comfortably in his paws. Evidently, he did not mind the scientific data that was being collected. Anything, to further their goals.

"I thought Ein was supposed to be taken out, along with Fornia's science base. It's rare that one of your plans doesn't go the way you wish it. What happened?" It was Alex that spoke, though the rest of the mental peanut gallery heard him.

Tao rumbled out a rare growl as he spoke again. "The base was thoroughly ruined and its data is now ours, but the team I sent to Fornia was...waylaid by a Groudon the Doctor turned Primal. Ein delayed them long enough for reinforcement to arrive, and even with a Ho-Oh aided boost to their power, Pravus brought the team low, nearly snagged the Veloraptar, and caught the aforementioned Ho-Oh in a Dark Ball. We must strike quickly. Hence the...science." He nodded towards the numerous machines the Brain Trust, among other lab coated scientists, were recording. Alex's eyes caught sight of Professor Juniper, and her daughter, as well as several other famous minds from across the States.

Alex glanced around, and then noticed that Tao had, at some point, dropped his Mega Form. He'd held it for weeks, a testament to just how much energy Alex had been channeling after finishing the Trials, but now it seemed, he was at rest once more. "Finally ran out of energy, hmm? What of our forces, then? How will we speak to them all?"

"We won't. [I]You[/I] will. It is time the Unovans had their Emperor lead them." The Original Dragon made a sweeping claw gesture towards the walls of the room they were in, and Alex glanced down, realizing exactly where they'd been redirected. Castelia's streets were teeming with uniformed Trainers under the Dragon Empire's newest banner, the One Dragon's own symbol.

"We have moved everyone back here with coordinated Teleports for armoring and resupply. The next phase of this conflict will be bloody, but we must make it short. The more time we give Pravus to abuse his newest prize, the worse an abomination we will find when we reach Sacreus. For this next drive, we will meet the Crusaders in the field with our newly armored Legions. The Swamp Sage has given us additional Scales, enough for each of the Generals to have five thousand under their command." Alex's eyes went wide at the dragon's words, and the scientists around him began disconnecting the various equipment and sensors from his scales as he idly cleaned his claws.

"Five thousand? I don't recall there being that many of us...that's thirty thousand total! From where did we find such promising Scales?" He muttered, stroking his beard as he pondered what exactly had been happening in the Swamp while he'd been busy.

Tao filled him in. "Many Trainers who were fleeing from the west ended up being called to the Swamp, and guided to the Sage. Most of these were, before his training, just normal Trainers but now, the Sage boasts, they can match a Champion in battle...for a while, anyways. True Champions usually have an abundance of fighting spirit. That does not occur in every human. They are all here, ready to move out for the next offensive of this conflict."

A smirk slowly appeared across the Dragon Emperor's face as he moved towards the dragon. "Tell those under myself and Jess to meet in Entral Park...and I want as many Scales that have already seen combat as possible. See who the others are willing to spare." The dragon nodded, and then rose,
with his Tamer upon his icy crest, standing beside the fiery redhead that usually accompanied him. "For now, let us inspect the troops...and send them back into war."

It took almost two hours for the hundreds of thousands of eastern soldiers, most of whom were either refugees turned soldier, or veterans of many, many conflicts where Crusaders simply mowed their units down. As usual, Tao had managed a near perfect balance of both kinds of warriors across each battle company.

The Original Dragon flew across the length of Unova's most populous island, and all along it his riders could see army tents pitched and waiting. Many began to crowd the streets as the dragon roared, and woke the armies under his command. They had come to rely on his timely aid in battle, and many understood with certainty that they only still lived because Tao had aided them, though the form of said aid tended to vary by what was available.

This time, his gift to them had been armor, not unlike that which the Scales wore, and indeed, Alex spied many of the dragon-inspired sets of black and white appearing below as the soldiers readied themselves. They were the veterans, than. They knew by now that the dragon did nothing without purpose, and if he was flying the length of Unova, it meant the time to roll out was upon them. The armor itself was not unlike the dragonbone sets with which they shared an aesthetic. The scientists responsible for creating it had managed a decent enough substitute that, while a bit heavy, was both light and apparently abundant enough for mass production. All field tests, apparently, deemed that it could take two to three hits from a Power Stave before giving to the absurd amount of elemental energy those weapons produced.

When it came to weaponry, Alex noticed that the troops below were not necessarily uniform in their choices for close combat. Swords were, by far, the most common but they were not plasma, instead sharing their composition with their wearer's armor. Other such weapons, of a large variety, had also been crafted and distributed across the ranks with whatever each soldier felt most comfortable relying on to survive. For ranged attacks, they had full belts of ten to match their opponents, as ranged attacks like Rock Slide had proven rather effective at stopping energy beams, or at least reducing the devastation they left.

Alex felt a mental nudge from the dragon, and his Voice reached each of the Unovans below, quite a bit more difficult feat, as they were scattered and within buildings sometimes, rather than all inside a stadium, or said stadium’s parking lot. It took a moment to make sure he reached who he wanted, but eventually, he spoke.

"Hail to you, Unovans, easterners, and more than a few westerners as well. You who find yourself under our banner...welcome. The time to put an end to the Cult of Arceus has arrived. Some of you may have mixed feelings about that, but what is important right this moment is to focus on taking down the people making the cult a problem in the first place. Namely, Caleb Pravus, and his Hands."

Tao arced up above the Entree, and the majority of Unova had a line of sight on the dragon as the tiny figure atop his head Shouted, and reached, those below with the strength of his Voice. "Make no mistake, the rumors are true. They have embraced the Shadow, and shield themselves from scrutiny by hiding that fact under their worship of the Light. But we of the east know better. We know the Alpha, we know his Guardian, and most importantly, we know freedom, something the men of the west have long forgotten, in their zeal to please the Alpha Pokémon."

Tao had, during the time it took to gather the army, shared with Alex the plan he had for the east's counterassault, and also illuminated him as to the abilities of his cousin, Wes, and a martial artist.
Ranger from Texico. They made quite a trio, and many had taken to calling them the 'Light Triad'. It was fitting, for the old Shadows under Ghetsis had been confirmed to be on side with the enemy. Now, Tao could answer them with humans just as unnaturally strong as they, and perhaps finally put an end to them.

As the dragon wheeled north, towards Nimbasa, his Tamer reached out to and sensed those stationed there who had made their barracks in the dual-stadiums. They mostly comprised of Kalosian reinforcements, and Thor's own host, who had, much like their leader, recovered, and were ready for a second chance at Monachus.

To them, the Dragon Emperor said, "Allies from Kalos, friends of Thor, your task shall be to take Urbe Monachus, Fargo, and then march to the ruins of Colville through the Northstone Pass. Once there, you will receive more guidance, but make no mistake, taking two cities will be rather challenging."

A familiar bellow came from out of the dark clouds just above them. "Two cities, two hammers!" Thor came blazing forth in his fiery Gogoat chariot, and parked unnaturally in the air beside the hovering One Dragon. "Mark me lad, this time, we shall not be denied our prize."

Alex nodded, speaking normally. "I should hope so, though I imagine it will be easier without Pravus there. I hear the Hand he's left in charge...Nonagon...is quite a handful. Maybe go in with your Pokémon as backup, this time. Just in case. Even Pravus used one, you know. The Darkrai did all the work." Thor looked offended for a moment, and then paused as Alex simply arched an eyebrow, as if daring him to find a fault in that logic after being so soundly taken down. After a moment, he nodded with acceptance. He'd underestimated the Shadow aberrations before, he would not do so again.

Alex turned back to the waiting soldiers in the stadiums, who had all activated their armor with his Words echoing in their ears. "Opeleucid's own General shall lead you, alongside Thor, and his new company of five thousand Scales shall make the Arceans tremble at the arrival of the Northern Legion. Go now! To victory! Krif Fah Kun!" As the Shout washed over those below, and the Scales who were even at that moment swarming in front of the two stadiums in preparation for a Mass Teleport, their armor lit up with ancient Common runes, which essentially had little difference between them, and the Unown upon which they were based.

Energy surged through the soldiers, and those under Thor started the war cry, even as Merlin coordinated his psychic types for the intricacy of Teleporting so many thousands of minds all at once. Then, they vanished, and Nimbasa was left with crowds of old, young, and mothers all looking up at the dragon god of their people with a mixed range of looks one might expect from family members risking loved ones in a war.

Tao flapped, once, and a wave of golden aura passed over the gathered people. Alex felt their minds ease, though not completely. It was not false hope his dragon shared with them on an instinctual level, but it was one that remained skeptical, and optimistic.

Tao flew then over the Entral Park, which was still gathering Scales of Balance new and old. Apparently, even the new arrival's blades had not diminished the Chargestone crystal supply in a permanent way. The Professors had found that by sharing the power of a Lightning Plate, the Chargestones could recover and regrow in hours, making the disturbance in the magnetic field temporary. Trainers had eventually been advised to not catch the remaining Joltik though, as their population had dwindled significantly. With an abundance of food; however, they would recover
Jess floated down from the dragon's head towards her own forces, again mostly female, which had no small number of noticeable Articuno Riders. Almost half of what they'd given to this conflict, though it was rumored more would come, if the fighting dragged on in an unfavorable stalemate too much longer. To the east, by the Imperial Palace, Alex found Hilbert and Hilda, alongside their forces, the other half of Kalos' soldiers, and two army groups four hundred thousand strong of regular troops that were in tents that stretched along the entirety of the coastline, and had evidently even filled the palatial quarters to the brim.

Soldiers flooded out of the pyramidal palace as Tao landed atop the mountainous edge of the coast that once looked over Undella, and had remained somewhat intact as the massive, ancient building upended the surrounding terrain. The palatial complex had grown its own golden grass and flora rather quickly, but those had also been covered in the snow that had been forestalling the conflict until only a few days past, when the winter winds finally let up. That was when both sides had begun regrouping for the next, and likely final clash.

Alex addressed those below with the same booming Voice, "Long have many of you here held the north-middle line of this conflict, and while many give credit to Nate's unbroken string of victories, the two Generals here only fell into trouble when they were unwisely split apart. This time, the twins shall take you all into the heart of the Arcean's satellites, Arciana City. Take it, do not senselessly sack it, free those citizens who would be free of their cult, and recover the prisoners the Arceans have no doubt accrued there as well. Our sources say the numbers are large, and the conditions poor, but we've had no eyes within that city. Taking it will not be easy. Should you do so, you are to move west, and take down the prison camps our Articuno riders have marked on your maps. Free the people there, arm those who will fight, and then head south, to reinforce General Rosa. Fight smart, and win!"

This time, Tao roared, and an aura of calm settled over the gathered army groups, as they closed ranks around the Palace, and linked arms. When all had done so, after roughly five minutes of adjusting, they too Teleported to the closest eastern base they had to Arciana City, the city of Menefer, a city on the Sippi River typically known for its classic and true revivals of thousands of old earth musicians, and indeed entire lost genres of music. From there, it was almost a straight shot to their target just to the west.

The Original Dragon once more returned to New Tork, which by that point, had also poured and linked up their units in preparation of Teleportation. The four hundred thousand or so regular troops had the slightly larger number of veterans amongst the legions, and they had already surrounded the rookies in the middle, knowing exactly where their entry point would be.

Tao arced up in front of the Empire building, and hovered. "This one will take a moment. Take your dragon. They need to see you. It has been a while."

Alex was on Shruikan's head in short order, and the two arced over the city streets, all maze-like, in a grid, and teeming with black and white. Finally, he relied on his third eye to find her. She burned with a silver aura that seemed awfully close to manifesting a Light ability, of some description. She just needed a push, and Tao had informed him that the Arcean's southern general, Lucien, would give her a decent one. Or break her.

They found Rosa atop a skyscraper full of troops whose arms were also linked. There were several such buildings repurposed for just this, in order to fit so many bodies into the cramped quarters of the city. Those on the Texican border had seen the worst fighting, and none from Rosa's Scales had
opted to join the Dragon Emperor. He did not mind, as they would need that solidarity if they were to invade the 'city' known only as The Rocky Pass.

"You all know your objectives. You all know what it's going to take to seize them. Once the Pass is yours, retake Orre, rally the locals, and then prepare for a siege of Texico City. Hopefully, when your reinforcements arrive, they will surrender in the face of superior numbers." Alex saw many soldiers roll their eyes, and their prejudices clouded their minds. He shifted his gaze to Rosa in particular, and she raised a brow as he shared mental words with her. "Make sure they do not dehumanize the Texicans of the west. Their hatred will consume them, if you let it."

Rosa looked down for a moment, thinking, and then nodded, as she created an idea of what would be needed to remind the people of two regions long at odds that their enemy was, in fact, human and worth saving.

Alex closed his eyes then, as he felt Tao achieve the threshold of power on his end. The plasma sword ignited, and he held it horizontally over the dragon's icy crest. He focused on summoning the energy of the universe, and soon, he was burning rather bright under the darkened sky. Lux channeled the Light into the Original Dragon, and with a booming Shout that tore the sky, the clouds that had been moving ever eastward over Unova were blown away by the sheer power of the being that had once more ascended.

Sweating rather hard under the moonless sky, but still rather glad he'd managed to Mega Evolve a Legend a second time, Alex extinguished the blade, and sat cross legged atop the dragon's head. "You handle the sky, and their boons. I need a minute. It's a lot harder to do that without divine assistance…"

The smirking and once more mega evolved One Dragon flapped all four wings at once, and the aura of every soldier and Scale of Balance within Castelia began to glow with golden light. Moments later, the empowered soldiers returned to Aweston, to begin their latest assault on the Rocky Pass.

With the majority of the armed forces under them dispersed, the remaining Scales of Balance, the 'elite forces' under the Dragon Emperor, and she who would be Empress, were all that was left to deploy. Tao returned to Unova's center, namely the Entree, and landed upon the strange, ancient plant.

The double helix of black and white branches began glowing with white intensity, as did the pool of water that gave it life below 's tendril extended to the circles under his wings, and the dragon's tail went 'turbo' as their greatest scientific minds called it, as he summoned the power for his next move in the game of war. His much larger, coiled form was whited out by the sheer brightness of the Entree. A pair of golden eyes broke the blinding white, and with a thundering crack that split the sky, the First Dragon's own Hyper Voice rolled across the northern continent, eliminating the foul ash clouds as it went ever westward, and expanded from the north to the south.

The Legendary Pokémon's power revealed many a hidden flying Crusader company, not yet in the right formation for an ambush, over numerous eastern outposts that had been lightly manned, but prepared for exactly this scenario, clear skies. The skies over the east filled with Pokémon attacks in the newly cleared theater of war, and the final battles of the latest conflict between east and west finally began anew.

Alex leapt from Tao's crest, as this time the dragon required a moment, and landed on a lower black branch of the Entree. "Alright boys and girls...the rest of them are moving. We must as well."
"Where are we headed, Dovahkiin?" One of them said from below.

Alex smirked. "We head for Pravia, in the northwest, and then move east towards the Northstone Pass. When Nate and Thor arrive, we'll all move south along the coast, and trap Sacreus between Mewsia, and a retaken Orre. Before we move out though, there's a new trick we've picked up...every other battle group has a blessing, but we do not require one, apparently, now that we have unlocked this. You were told to bring your out Plate sets to this gathering, those of you who forgot your Plates, run and retrieve them. Now. We shall begin when all here have their full sets. We're going to need them."

Hours passed into the night as the Scales of Balance, under the Emperor and the Entree, rediscovered an ancient method of armored warfare once lost to time. The dragon, who watched them all from atop the spiraling tree, smirked to himself. Their potential was starting to manifest, but their ability to close the jaws would make it appear, or kill them in the process.
The East Burns Red

(The following is a short story giving us an informative light on events transpiring elsewhere right as Chapter 39 starts. While that will focus mainly on Unova, Fornia, etc. this will center on Japan. Skipping isn't advised for this one.)

Oceana Pacifica, East of Evergrand Plateau - Hoenn Region

"Give me a regular report."

The Vice Admiral saluted, "Sir. All scans are normal. Another lovely day in Hoenn, sir."

Admiral Nauta sighed, and it turned into a groan at the end. His own naval attire, a dark blue suit that did little to hide the man's impressive bulk, was very much Sharpedo themed, for reasons that became obvious rather quickly to anyone who irritated the man Caleb Pravus had put in charge of the Arcean Fleet. "Another lovely damn day. Looks like another long day of thinning the prisoners…"

The gathered crew members aboard the ship that had long since stopped being a luxury yacht, grew grim faced. Only one person aboard the ship actually enjoyed watching the hunger of Pokémon like Sharpedo driven to the point of eating humans, and eventually craving them. Some in the pack were reluctant, and would try to eat anything else. The largest, were not. Those were the ones selected to be moved out of the pens that acted as engines, and had done so ever since the Arceans had been forced to adapt to a life at sea, aboard these very ships, so very long ago.

Before the regularly scheduled slaughter of rebellious 'japs' could again start, the radar pinged. All eyes turned to the main viewer. A single, massive ship was coming from their southeast. The device pinged again. The first dot had friends. Many friends.

The Admiral's tones rang throughout every ship in Japan. "Contact, south east Pacifica. Friendlies sound off."

None did. The others were either blockading the besieged dual regions of Kanto and Johto, or up north parked in Sinnoh. These ships then, were not friendly. The Admiral grinned, revealing a mouth full of manually sharpened teeth. He'd taken the Sharpedo look to the extreme, as he genuinely loved his partners, and only one had been infused with Shadow. It was the one exception the Prophet allowed when it came to infusion, given the Admiral's effectiveness.

Another ping, and yet more ships appeared behind the first groups in obvious formations. "Who the Hel has the 'nards to test my ship?" The Admiral growled, expecting an answer.

His well trained crew, who while harshly treated, were also genuinely loyal, to a degree, gave him the answer he expected with the haste he deserved. The man was a genuine Mudbray, but he'd kept them alive when their families abandoned them to the Prophet's mercy for their rebellious skepticism, and he'd given them food, rather than turned them into it.

"Sir! We have eyes on the Flagship. Putting it on screen now."

Once more, all eyes were drawn to the screen, and every crewmate on the deck flinched as they saw
the imposing but unmistakable outline of the Dark Fleet. They had not truly sailed in millennia, not since they had lost their Guardian, and the imposing dark aura that had made ships flee in terror of their wake had vanished. The very large and very numerous cannons had made up for their lack of aura, and had proven as effective as firearms ever had against humans. Once more, it seemed, the Dark Fleet sailed with Zigma's boon.

The Admiral spoke again, undeterred. "I want the name of the ship I'm about to devour...I never got the chance to have a proper facedown with Japan's."

Fingers hammered buttons, as the crew raced to be the first to answer their Admiral's demand. One man shouted in the tense silence. "HMS Chekhov, sir! That's their name for it. Flagship of Rio's Dark Fleet. Evidently, both it and the fleet can, and have, deployed Trainers on flying types for battles like this before in mass quantities."

The Admiral chuckled. "They'll find a sky full of ice a harsh teacher. Ready the Dewgong." He held out a hand, and through the power of technology and electromagnetism, summoned to his gloved fist a Power Stave that had been converted into an upgraded trident. At the top of the hilt was a blue gem, and it began to glow as the Admiral's voice rang throughout his own ship, and the others in his battle fleet. "Now, release the Sharpedo!"

Heavy thumps echoed from every ship, as the pens holding the Sharpedo meant for battle opened, and released the beasts into the sea. The Admiral's voice came again as he touched a pair of fingers to the blue crystal. "All pods! Mega Evolve!"

The rather obvious glow prompted the Dark Fleet to open fire, though their guns were not firing projectile bullets, nor were they aimed at the ships. Balls of still bloody chum encased in a sap that was waterproof, and yet still gave off a bloody scent in the water, hurled by the mega evolved Pokémon, and as one they turned on instinct, and sped after the meals that, when reached, would entrap them in tar-like sap miles from their Trainer. It would dissipate with enough salt water, but by then the battle would be over.

Suddenly defenseless, the Arcean ships began listing as the Sharpedo and Carvanha acting as engines also moved for the food balls and dragged their ships as far as their anchors would allow. The Admiral glowered at the main viewer. "Fine. If that's how they want it, Carcharo shall be their opponent. I'm going up top." His final words were answered by a rising platform under his chair, that would bring him to the ship's topmost deck, an area reserved for the Admiral alone. It was also where he tended to launch from.

A Dark Ball brought forth his favored Sharpedo, and the ever-angry beast glared at him. The Admiral pressed the trident again. "Mega Evolve! Carcharo, devour them all!" The man pointed, and the now mega evolved Pokémon obeyed, charging through the waves in bloody curving line towards the Chekhov.

Sap balls flew past him without the Shadow infused shark so much as glancing at them, and the Rio fleet's reluctance to harm a Pokémon left them wide open. He tore into their right flank, arcing towards the flagship through five relatively speedy boats used for reconnaissance.

The flagship changed ammunition rather quickly, and soon, multicolored balls of blue, magenta, and orange hit the speeding shark, and forced it to veer away, as the water around it became filled with 'Pester Gas' for use in the aptly named Pester Balls, that helped the people of Rio without ghost powers traverse the jungles, and drive off wild Pokémon without injuring them.
"Carcharo!" The Admiral shouted, and his voice traveled across the water, gaining the Shadow shark's attention. The Pokémon's eyes went wide, as it saw the Stone the Admiral had evidently raised to the top of the ship as well. It glowed with seven colors, and radiated the power of infinity.

The Mega Sharpedo circled back to his Trainer, and leapt out of the water, matching the height of their own ship with ease. The Admiral hand one hand on the Stone, and the other outstretched, as an offering. Carcharo bit down on his Trainer's limb with zero hesitation, and the man growled through the pain. "Dark...Burst!"

Shadow traveled from the Sharpedo to his Trainer, and then into the Stone as well. With time, the Shadow would devour it, and force the Stone to be found once more once it reconstituted itself, but if it meant wiping out the Dark Fleet, it would be worth it. Admiral Nauta fused with his Mega Sharpedo, and the two became one as the Shadow energy pushed their evolution to a new level.

The resemblance to a Garchomp was a little unsettling, though the Admiral and his partner lacked scythe hands. Aspects of the shark had fused with aspects of the man, and the result was a deep bluish purple skinned monstrosity with hate-filled eyes, and a very much Sharpedo-like jaw, with three rows of deadly teeth. The shark man eyed the oncoming ships again, as flying dots that must have been Trainers filled the sky.

The Admiral's new gravely tones rang over the battle fleet's intercoms. "All Dewgong...Ice Beam! Feed any that miss to the engines!" With that, the fused beast leapt into the dark blue waters, and began swimming towards his prey as their Trainers fell by the hundreds. The Dewgong that yet lived on these horrible ships had long since learned what inaccuracy led to. It didn't matter if they didn't want to hurt fellow Pokémon, they had to hit successfully, or become chum.

All the Chekhov got in the way of warning was an easy to miss nose, rising from the point of the shark man's elongated snout. Thankfully, the aid coming to the flagship was under the water, and saw the threat outlined in the intense sunlight long before he came close.

An explosion of glowing blue beams of water typed energy hammered the Admiral as he leapt for the flagship, jaws wide, and was sent skipping across the water as an Origin Pulse blindsided the Arcean's strongest water Trainer. The Trainers who'd acted as aerial support thus far cheered, as the massive blue form of Kyogre broke the surface. Atop the super ancient Pokémon's head was a woman, who gave the trio of figures atop the Chekhov a cocky salute. "Any enemy of these zealots is a friend of Hoenn! Name yourselves, strangers!"

The three figures atop the flagship, the Queen, their new green-clad Champion, and a man clad in blue with suspiciously Latios-like hair conversed briefly, before the green one leapt over the side of the ship, and mounted a being that melted from the shadows. The massive form of Zigma coalesced from under the Dark Fleet, and the now floating Kyogre eyed the massive feline-esque chimera warily as she took the sky, and hovered before the Guardian of the western seas, and her Tamer.

A strong, and unquestionably feminine voice thundered in Haruka Birch's skull as she received her answer. "The Dragon of Unova sends his regards, alongside the Dark Fleet of Rio. We are to free your ports, be reinforced, and take back the northern half of this island. Guide us to your leaders."

The woman atop the Kyogre ordered the super ancient Pokémon to rise, and she stared the leopard-spotted chimera down, even when the rear snakeheads loomed, watching always, above what mortal's considered Zigma's 'face' to be. "First, we need to take those ships, and not with firearms,
there are innocents aboard." The Tamer of Kyogre gave the Dark Guardian and her Tamer another look over as she spoke, "I will be honest...it is a little unnerving to receive aid in the form of the Dark Fleet from a nation that claims to stand in the Light...one might wonder if the Arceans aren't completely off base...though their actions thus far are still dishonorable. It's for better heads than mine to deal with. I'll guide you to the Champions once we handle those ships."

Zigma's feline head nodded once. "Lead on, Tamer of the Sea. This is your home, you know it best. But first..."

Just as the hovering chimera paused, her fangs lit with pure darkness, and clamped down upon the near-invisible form of Admiral Nauta, who had sped back towards his quarry in a frenzy, and tried to strike down one of the Tamers with stealth. He snarled in pain as the fangs embedded themselves deep into vital organs, and even with his Shadowy healing factor, the wounds seemed to resist closing, or even attempting to heal. "How...did you see me...I am...a Shadow...darkness incarnate!"

Zigma stared down the shark man, and clenched her jaw tighter as the sea below them filled with black blood. "You...are little more than a tainted imitation of the real thing...and it is time you stopped pretending to serve the Alpha."

Nauta's eyes went wide as the Guardian's voice thundered painfully in his head, impossible to ignore, or deny, for the truth of her words was infallible. Darkness radiated off the hovering entity, as she spoke a final time. "In fact...perhaps it is best if you are simply...forgotten."

Zigma clenched again, and with shattering sound, the crystalline energy binding the Sharpedo and the man together broke before it could fully make itself permanent, and the fusion split apart. The shark fell towards the water, only to be stopped by a purple aura, that kept it hovering in place for the moment.

For the wounded Admiral, his end was, to all appearances, quick and merciful as he completely vanished into the gaping jaws of the Dark Continent's Guardian, and was never heard from, or remembered, again. Zigma turned to the man's unfortunate partner, and with a flash of her dark aura surrounding his body, Carcharo was freed of the Shadow, and his painful memories of a genuinely good, if a bit deranged Trainer all at once.

His Mega Form had faded, but the latent experience from the many battles he'd participated in as a weapon of naval warfare all suddenly came back at once, and the already massive Sharpedo doubled in size. The eyes turned towards Zigma, blinked once in a respectful acknowledgement of the Mother of the Home Rivers, and then turned towards Hoenn, and the scent of Sealeo, and Walrein.

Zigma's Tamer let the hungry shark go to sate his burning hunger, and then turned her eyes on the ships in the distance, soaring above as Kyogre moved below the ocean's surface. She spied the Hoenn girl trying to subtly send a message via Holociever to what appeared to be a very worn, very haggard Steven Stone. The call was brief, but she could guess what it was about.

The giant, seven colored rock was obvious, atop the highest deck of the Arcean's flagship. None had realized the Admiral's fate quite yet, and none had possessed the right attitude to risk their necks and take a peek up top. Admiral Nauta had killed people for less.

Thus, the Dark Guardian swooped by, gripped the stone with her massive paws, and lifted it easily into the possession of the Dark Fleet. She warped it into a pocket space only those with true mastery of the dark typing could create, or safely enter. Moments after the theft, the massive form of Kyogre Aqua Jetted through the Arcean's main ship, and by no coincidence left the still-afloat other half
alone. That one, had contained prisoners, but the decks that had been barracks, and 'rec rooms' for Arcean higher ups had been completely torn through. The momentum of the fifty foot Pokémon's massive form went rather high with the move it had perfected with the aid of a human.

That same human now guided the Legendary Pokémon back down, and they hovered slightly above the remaining battle group as Zigma began portaling prisoners away. "Incoming!" Was the only warning she gave as Kyogre gave off a deep rumble, and the surrounding water rippled from the sheer force of it. It had rested well, for once, and today was finally the day to strike back. The Water Spout went high into the air, high enough to crystallize in the upper atmosphere, before falling back to the earth.

The self-titled Contest Queen then marked the ships below her with her eyes, and told the massive Pokémon where to aim specifically. The goal was to keep the casualties low, but with the power of an Origin Pulse, someone was bound to be unluckily caught in the crossfire. The streams of blue water energy shot into the massive Water Spout spread, and arced off the many pieces of ice, breaking them, and focusing the beams all at once.

The beams bounced around, and then downward, towards the parts of ships marked by the Tamer of the Sea, splitting the ships in half with pure water energy. Kyogre's aim was rather good, and always only the Arcean quarters and the main decks were the casualties. A few ships had managed to fire off cannons of their own, alongside Ice Beams from several Dewgong, though many had resisted firing at the Guardian of the Sea. To a water type, the idea of attacking Kyogre, outside of Battle of course, was simply absurd. None aboard the ships had the heart to take down the Guardian as ordered, and moments later, more than a few directed their Ice Beams at the humans.

Chaos erupted as meteoric ice chunks fell into the ocean, and on parts of what was still floating. Thankfully, Zigma's methods of saving people were as quick and efficient as spatial portals always tended to be. The majority were evacuated with haste, though there had likely been casualties. Such was the nature of Legendary scale attacks.

In the distance, atop the Ever Grande Plateau, a plume of fire and smoke filled the sky, and from the newly leveled Victory Road, which had been emptied during Arcean occupation, now sported a massive volcano. A red scaled Groudon roared up from the flaming mountain, and met Kyogre's gaze in the distance, and a tiny figure atop its head waved in their direction.

The Groudon was recalled into a Pokéball, and before they'd gone halfway towards the plateau, they were met by a Champion, atop arguably the strongest Salamence in Hoenn. Once the three Tamers had conferred for a time, the Dark Fleet split in two. The southern half moved for Slateport, and would be led by Rikuya, the Tamer of the Land, in retaking the city from the Arceans. The northern group, and the larger, had split again. Some went for Mossdeep, and the many strong Trainers who'd hidden themselves well, while the rest moved for Lilycove.

For her part, Zigma had again moved the prisoners to the safety of the Hoenn Tamer's last holdout, Sootopolis City, and then had continued on her way. The fleet had orders to regroup and head for Johto once Hoenn was free, for that was where the Dark Continent's Guardian headed from Hoenn, specifically to Mt. Silver, the place where the Champions of Japan had hidden themselves, and their allies, from the encroaching zealots.

Mt. Silver - Johto Region
"You know, only fools climb up here more than once."

The ever-snarky tones of Professor Gary Oak caused the man known as Red to smirk, humorlessly, down at what he was looking at. It was a clear day, gorgeous really. Perfect for war. The view below was filled by the armored forms of the zealots from Fornia, covering the northern slope of the mountain. Only the lakes north of Mt. Silver broke up their lines, not that it would matter.

"So far, my Mewtwo and the…other one Team Rocket made...have been holding them back, but…" Red was interrupted as one of the Mewtwo, the Y strand, raised a hand from under its brown cape, and formed a familiar ball of psychic death. The Psystrike rained down on the Crusaders, catching only the slowest of those below, who had been foraging outside of their corp's shields. General Marius knew armies marched on food, and the Crusaders had effectively stripped the land from Sinnoh to their current position of much of the berry related fruits, not even bothering to plant the extra. All were needed, for Arceus' war machine.

---

The retaliation was swift as it arced up towards them with all the combined fury of flame, ice, and electricity, but Red was already there, floating in the air behind his Mewtwo. "Mirror Coat!"

His partner, currently still mega evolved into its physical attacking form nodded once, seeing the logic. His spoon formed from thin air, and the genetic Pokémon twirled it as it shone with rainbow light, and sent the combined Tri-Attack beams back down as well, where they smashed uselessly into the combined energy barrier formed by the Power Staves when in close proximity.

The Crusaders had been marching under such defensive cover ever since their newest General, Marius, had arrived to reinforce them, and drive them south. The General had taken most of the north, and the Arcean's Admiral had taken the southern islands, and even Hoenn last they'd heard. Still, nowhere was as bad as Sinnoh.

The Champion of the region, Lucas, along with his team of would-be heroes, had managed to escape the Arceans when it became clear that Sinnoh was helping the invaders, or rather, a larger majority than expected had suddenly revealed their membership all at once, and had simultaneously crawled out of the woodwork to enact their 'righteous conquest'.

Gary sighed at Red. "This isn't working. Where is Cynthia? We could use that Rayquaza of hers…"

"She went north, to Sinnoh, to train. Last I heard." Red's tone was emotionless, and his eyes were locked on the north. "That dragon is probably already under their sway…"

Gary came up beside Red now, and stood beside him atop Mt. Silver. He'd dressed as he usually did these days, with his classic (and warm) purple shirt, covered by his gramp's lab coat. "I certainly hope not...a Shadow Rayquaza is a bit...out of our league."

Red smirked again. "Mewtwo, both of them, can handle it if necessary...but you have a point. With that kind of firepower, we won't last long. They can't fight everyone. Not at once."

"Red! Red, you need to see this!" The feminine tones of Leaf, as well as the familiar rumble of a Hydro Pump entered their ears as the cannon turtle brought his Trainer to the summit of Japan's most iconic mountain. The two boys turned as she landed. "Seems like your Unovan friends finally sent us some help! The others are on their way up. We're counterattacking. Now."

The smirking, red clad Trainer floated into the air on his own power once more, and joined the Mewtwo in the sky above Mt. Silver's conical snow-covered top. Gary summoned his Charizard,
and was joined in the air moments later, by the other Champions, and their own flying partners. When Red had called, those with a Pokédex had answered. Kanto, Johto, Sinnoh, and even friends from Kalos had come, though Hoenn's remained absent.

It was Kalos' so-named Prince, Calem, who floated over to Red then, on his Noivern. The tall Kalosian handed him something crystalline, and Red's eyes flared with crimson aura as he saw it, and then looked at his Mewtwo. The two psychic types, for Red had awakened his own typing in the Swamp, seemed to converse for a moment, and then the Y strand Mewtwo floated over as well. After a few minutes of further psychic discussion, they nodded in unison, and flew further above the gathered Trainers. That, was when they saw the form their aid had taken.

Rising quickly over the mountain's conical top, Zigma's emerald colored feathery wings darkened the sun, and her Tamer stood atop her head, arms crossed. She shouted down to them. "Champions of Japan! It's a real honor to meet you all, face to face. Your legends are heard even in Rio. By request of Unova's Dragon Emperor, we have come to aid you."

Red nodded, rising beside the pair of Mewtwo, as he addressed everyone. Seeing the sky above the mountain filled with Pokémon, the Arceans below began the long march up the mountain's relatively easy slope. "The time is now. We either win here, or let Kanto and Johto fall. Are you with me!?" He raised a fist, and the others cheered, but Red could see they were worn out. They'd been trapped in the very much inhospitable caves for weeks now. Most of Johto and Kanto had already been invaded, but the counterattack came now. Red pointed at the shield covering the forces below as he met Zigma's fierce feline eyes. "Can you take care of that shield? We can take them if we can hit them…"

The leonine chimera gave her best attempt at a shrug, and opened her jaws. Atop her head, her Tamer raised a dark crystal, that glowed with a similarly dark energy. The Dark Pulse grew in size, and then inexplicably condensed into a much, much smaller sphere. With a roar, Zigma sent the evidently heavy orb hurtling towards the Arcean' largest corp of soldiers, and when it hit the shield, it appeared to vanish.

"Is...is that it?" The question came from one of the gathered Trainer's Togekiss, namely the girl riding atop it, alongside Hibiki, the man who'd gone toe to toe with Red on this very mountain, in his day. They were both much older, and the former Indigo Champion had gone on to become, and greatly expand, the use of Rangers, and Ranger battle tactics, across Japan.

Kotone got her answer when, quite suddenly, an orb of dark energy flared up under the enemies' shield, devouring them to a man with unsettling waves of pure black. When it faded, all that remained were Power Staves, still connected to the overall shield of their corp formations, but lacking the men who'd held them.

Zigma turned to the gathered Trainers, Champions, Breeders, and Pokédex fillers. "Well...you have weapons, now. Make use of them."

Red floated forward, speaking for the uncomfortable Trainers gathered at his request. "That's not how we do things, in this land."

Zigma, who had begun to descend, paused unnaturally in the air, and then reappeared in an eyeblink before the floating Red. The feline eyes narrowed at the tiny human, and her Tamer had a look that very much suggested Zigma was doing her own thing, and would not easily be deterred if she decided to have a psychic snack.
His aura shield tightened around his body, for all the good it would do against a legend, but he wisely let her speak uninterrupted. "You do survive here, yes? Fight with honor? A code of Battle?" Red looked quietly to one side. "I do not care if you dislike such weapons. You may not need them, but they might." One spotted paw gestured to the regions behind them, and on such a clear day, it was easy to see smoke rising from Olivine City, and Cinnabar Island as well. "Will you not give your people the chance to fight for their freedoms?"

Red's eyes, burning with an appropriately crimson aura, narrowed. "That is how villains do things. Team Rocket. Magma. Aqua. Galactic. Flare. They use such devices, as well as Pokémon, to achieve their aims. Such things should be smashed, and never again made, as the ancestors willed." He gestured as well. "I've battled almost all of our region's Trainers by this point. I have faith in them. Next time, crush the weapons too."

While the Guardian and former Champion were arguing, the two Mewtwo had, seeing an opportunity, dove into the fray on either side of the now fractured Arcean line. The X strand, Red's partner, shared his views on this particular issue, and in short order, his spoon proved itself superior, again, to any Power Stave, smashing them all to pieces.

Irritated, but evidently unwilling to argue, Zigma turned towards the easternmost army group of Crusaders, and prepared another strike, only to find that the corps had mobilized en mass, and were now ascending atop Pokémon capable of flight. In short order, the sky was a frenzy of deadly energy beams, Pokémon moves, and naturally, death. Typically battles were several hundred feet up, and Mt. Silver's summit was not merciful to those who fell. Neither were its inhabitants.

As the battle grew, it soon became apparent that the local Pokémon were helping as well, as best wild Pokémon could. While typically weaker to those who'd been trained, in large numbers, they were rather strong. Several of the original Pokédex fillers had also embraced Ranger tactics, and made full use of their wild allies, and even summoned in others as well.

Soon, the slopes were covered in battling Pokémon and humans, and Mt. Silver's northern face became pure chaos.

Several Miles North of Mt. Silver - Holon Region

"At last...back to war." The scarlet and gold armored form of a giant strode to the front of his mode of transportation, and glimpsed the flash of energy beams and Pokémon moves in the distance. His armor was considered to be the 'Mark III' of the Crusader pattern, even though 'Mark II' hadn't even been widely distributed to all forces. In Formia and Japan, the soldiers had received what suits had been made, and their old ones were used on newer recruits, primarily for reinforcing Texico City.

The Crusaders under General Marius smirked at his enthusiasm. The aged man lived for conflict, and had just finished destroying an old student of his who'd taken up living in a backwater nation like this. He'd mastered electricity fairly well, but he'd ignored the other elements entirely, and had fallen to his old teacher's power, as all the others had before him.

General Marius had been the mind behind the original idea of using the One Dragon's legendary power of subjugation, namely his devastating breath attacks, and condensing them into a powerful, portable weapon. Even while asleep, they had done it, and the Prophet's dream had come to fruition much quicker than anticipated.

Arceans had, according to their history, never actually warred with anyone. Any conflicts they did
have, were usually in States they had held sway over, and had usually been against the rebellious 'counterculture' of whatever region they'd been taking over at the time. Thus, General Marius had a track record of victory, though even he had been stalled by winter. Like a true 'Spartan', he had refused to campaign in a blizzard, so Pravus had sent him somewhere else.

As the General's airship, the crimson painted Thunder Eagle, sped ever southwards on the standard Arcean combination of tandem rotor blades and powerful engines, Marius sighed. The land below was mountainous, snowy, and likely cold. But at least it wasn't thousands of miles of flat land and nothing but white in every direction. One had to be mad to be able to fight in such conditions, which certainly explained the Prophet's choice in switching around leadership.

The airship landed on the remains of what had once been an entire corp of their forces, and Marius' personal guard followed him from the ship's hold. He had his own personal army with him, and additional ships carrying the bulk of the hundred thousand strong force landed soon after. Like their general, their armor was scarlet, though it had been greyed by months of functioning under perpetual ash clouds. Now, they would turn it scarlet once more.

"Ahh...Mewtwo...interesting. Two, no less, and with the strongest, ideal natures...Giovanni did not skimp. Let us see how they handle...a Titan. He drew a Pokéball from the scarlet cloak that adorned his back, and bore the Church's symbol.

Despite being a normal ball, the occupant was very much still infused with Shadow, as was obvious to any present who could see such things. The General summoned his Regigigas to the field, and pointed at the two battle geneticPokémon.

The soldiers immediately around them suddenly focused their fire, and forced the pair to retreat under their Barriers. Three Pokémon moves, also of fire, ice, and electric typing, forced the combined attacks into a stalemate, and canceled the energy out with the usual explosion. From the dust, came a former World Champion, and the Legendary Beasts he only summoned on special occasions.

Silver glanced up at the Mewtwo, who both blink in recognition of the boy they had both once seen, clinging to Giovanni. It was one of their earlier memories. "I have this...go, find Red. You'll need him to take that thing down!"

As he finished speaking, he turned back to see the aforementioned titan charging at his beasts with building speed. "Shadow Impact!" Came the command from the red armored General commanding the titan, and at his words, it picked up its pace, and sent Entei, Suicune, and Raikou flying into the mountainside behind the floating form of their Trainer. Psychic was being used liberally, and many of the Trainers atop the mountain had been levitated into the air, though it took them a moment to realize who was orchestrating it.

Serena's Delphox had a reputation for her masterful manipulation, and Leaf's Alakazam was outclassed only by legends when it came to psychic power. Together, they kept those who needed to fly, and battle, out of harm.

As the pair of Mewtwo ascended to the top of the mountain once more, they found themselves no less embroiled in conflict. The sky was a shifting array of colors, often based upon type of move, but though the invaders each had belts of ten, those gathered here had trained more than enough partners to fill out four spaces.

The brown-shrouded Y Mewtwo looked around. "I do not...see him. Or sense him."
Red's voice came from above and behind them. "Where are you looking? I'm here. Right up here."
The crimson aura-shrouded human was smirking, and holding up a strange crystal that was glowing
with seven different colors of light, and radiating power to rival Mega Evolution. "Which of you has
the power to answer a titan?"

The two Mewtwo shared a look, and both started forward, only to pause, and again lock eyes. Their
auras, both deep blue and radiating raw power began sparking as the edges collided. Red's Mewtwo
took advantage of the closeness, and struck impossibly fast with his psychically manifested spoon.
The Psycho Cut was smashed through with a Psystrike, and the Y strand Mewtwo raised both arms,
calling down a hail of follow up strikes as it pummeled the other into the mountain.

It turned towards Red then, and in an eyeblink, it was before him, three fingered hand raised towards
his. Their auras blended, and the crystal flared in Red's palm as he started the chant that, apparently,
Kalos' top scientists had insisted was necessary for activation. Calem had helped him memorize it.
"Full length…"

"Genetic Series…" The Mewtwo answered.

The two spoke again in unison. "Heavenly Burst!" The red coloring of Red's aura swelled as the two
became one, and the genetic Pokémon reached a new stage of its evolutionary path. Because it had
been mega evolved on its own power, the new fusion retained many aspects of the Y stand's
characteristics.

It was a lucky thing, for just as they finished, they raised a four-fingered hand, and halted the
Shadow Beam Regigigas had launched towards the impossibly bright red light. The beam had also
cleared the smoke around the pair's vicinity, and all of the combatants around and above the
mountain paused, as they bore witness to a power only dreamed of.

The sky was bright red, and the reason for that coloration floated above all of them. The lengthy
head tail had split into two, and the semi-halo that surrounded the Y strand's Mega Form had become
a full, blazing one, burning red above their head as the waves of power emanating from the new
fusion of man and Pokémon. Their head sported a pair of uncannily catlike ears, and Red's seemed to
have been lost somewhere in the mix.

The fused pair clenched their fingers as they glowed bright with the power of Mirror Coat, and the
beam of darkness went streaking back into the Regigigas, who was too slow to counter its' increased
speed.

The elemental titan fell with a heavy crash next to the creature that controlled its actions, the human
who was a general of his people. The man's third generation suit, one with no Melmetal essence,
only ceracrete metal blends 'borrowed' from the Imperium of Man, revealed a hidden feature of the
Arcean's latest armored suits.

His back-embedded jetpack brought the General high above his titan, and he spoke a single word.
"Automatize!"

Regigigas rose, but as it did, it was missing parts of its metallic body, and the foliage that had grown
upon it with time. Shadow poured from the missing pieces, and the General spoke again.
"Now...smother the red one. Shadow Grip!"

The enraged, and heavily damaged titan charged towards the fusion of human and Mewtwo, each of
the six long fingers blazing with pure darkness.

As they saw their opponent approaching, the fused pair agreed, they needed to use an attack that would remove their enemies in one blow. Then, they could use this new Light energy coursing through them to heal their land, and retake Sinnoh. A shadow from the late noon sky covered the fighters, and all looked directly up, as Zigma appeared above them all, and fired a sticky, sludge like substance, that certainly looked poisonous, at the feet of the Regigigas. The elemental golem's momentum faded, and Zigma roared. Their opening was before them.

The fused pair's crimson halo moved as they did, to behind their back. Their arms outlined a circular pattern, forming a familiar symbol made of pure light and psychic type energy.

The halo burned brightly as they raised the dual typed Taijitu move over their head, and let their mental baritone thunder across the mountain range. "Erupting...Heaven Sphere!"

The fusion of man and Pokémon let their arms drop to either side of them, and the burning orb exploded into thousands of red meteors, each of which sought out, and struck down, an Arcean soldier. Many fell to their ends, though just as many were saved by their armor's ability to take heavy landings rather well.

The largest sphere met Regigigas' Shadowy hands, and burned the foul energy away. The orbs exploded on impact, filling the battlefield with bursts of smoke, and Regigigas' was no different as it took another direct hit, and finally fainted.

General Marius, who had deflected the orb meant for him with a single punch, began moving through the smoke towards his airship's LZ, suddenly found himself face to face with the ultimate fusion of Pokémon and human. The General sneered at the abomination, but a sneer was all he got.

"It would be best for all if you simply...forgot...all that you have been lied to about by your vaunted cult." The four-fingered hand with typically bulbous fingertips radiated crimson psychic power, and the General visibly reacted with disgust.

"Foul creature! I will never submit to your mind trickery!" The General stood strong in the face of the fused abomination's psychic power, but in the end, a single poke to the wrinkled forehead removed almost all of his memories involving loyalty to the Church of Arceus had faded. What the psychic and normal type left behind, was a shell of the former man, a husk, not fit for command.

For good measure, the crimson fusion of human and Pokémon destroyed the man's Pokéballs, releasing his partners all at once. It was at that point that Zigma again flew over. Throughout the course of the fighting, she had been inhaling, and purifying, the Shadow energy forcibly infused into many of these Pokémon. Some, were more infected than others, and would need a Light wielder to remove their affliction. It was the kind of Shadow corruption that changed one's very being, on a genetic level, and seeing it used so commonly from the Pokémon she attempted to free of the foul substance made the dark Guardian's heart ache for them, and their suffering.

Knowing that such things required tampering with Eggs, the closest thing Pokémon had to a taboo, ignited her fury as well. The humans were learning once more, and if their rapid knowledge was not curbed, there would be another Judgement War in the end. Thankfully, the General's Pokémon had been second generation, infused in the early days of Fornia's tampering. Each of them grew large and healthy as years of battle experience under the west's strongest General came back to them all at once.
The others hit by the fused pair had been similarly affected by the fusion of Light and psychic. The indoctrination that had been working its effects on each of their minds since before they could walk seemed to vanish, along with the psychological compulsions to praise and obey their Prophet. The Trainers gathered were all bruised and covered with the grime of war. Several had been wounded rather seriously, but said wounds had been healed when the fusion of human and Mewtwo had guided its attack into the wounded as well, proving beyond doubt that the Light could both heal and hurt, when necessary.

With the last of their energy, the fused entity curled itself up into a fetal position, and a wave of cleansing Light exploded from its body, passing over every single human, and Pokémon, on Mt. Silver. The Shadow infusions that had resisted Zigma's efforts were burned away, and the damage done repaired, in moments, by the power and inherent understanding of genetic code in the center of the Light.

Red and the once more brown cloaked Mewtwo fell towards the mountain as their fusion ended, and the two were caught by the X strand's telekinesis, still in his Mega Form. Having healed from the earlier Psystrikes with a Max Potion he'd applied himself, the melee combat form glanced between his Trainer, and his newest ally, whose own Mega Form had dropped.

"Well done...that move of yours even struck those still in their balls. You have both effectively cleansed this entire army group...without Shadow Pokémon giving them the advantage, our Trainers will have no trouble rising to meet these invaders."

The gathered Trainers floating or hovering in the sky around the three cheered, and below, the armored forms of confused Arceans began moving northeast, to their nearest friendly port. Many had simply left their Pokémon, but quite a few had produced another ball, and recaptured their partners.

At that moment, horns of many ships began sounding from their south, namely behind where the battle around Mt. Silver had been fought. Rising higher for a clear view of Kanto and Johto below, the gathered Trainers saw that the fleets had arrived from Hoenn, and with a pair of super ancient Pokémon in tow, no less.

The anchored Arcean ships tried to resist, at first, but the Dark Fleet's Trainers, strengthened by their conflicts in Hoenn on this long, war-torn day, made short work of rebellious ideas. Over half of the Crusaders the Arcean's had thrown at Japan were either captured, or had been killed in the fighting upon Mt. Silver. The army group formerly under General Marius, men who had seen, and not forgotten, the numerous subduing campaigns they'd enacted under his orders soon rejoined their fellows, and the rumors began spreading as the typical ingrained fear of speaking out against Caleb Pravus was gone.

---

"All of them? Even Marius?"

"Yes sir!" The Arcean Lieutenant responded, saluting as he did. The new and growing bruise on his left cheek was inspiring more loyalty than ever. "Whatever Red did, dissenters are now the majority in Japan. Many are calling for your head, others have hijacked ships and joined the Dark Fleet. Expected projections assume they'll retake Sinnoh within a day, and then move on to Alola."

"Hrm...we can't have that...Alola needs to stay out of this." Caleb Pravus sighed, and looked down upon the chamber they were setting things up in. "Doctor, how long until we are ready?"
The stiff form of Doctor Ein, who'd become more machine than man once they'd found most of has ribs, and a few spinal segments, had been shattered by his fall. His feet had been melted, and that term was generous for what had been left after standing for hours upon the back of a Primal Groudon in battle. "We are ready now, my Prophet."

A grin spread across the not unappealing visage of the Arcean's Prophet. "Excellent...let us begin. Get the deer."

The cyborg shuffled off to do as commanded, and returned soon after with a very small, very young white and teal colored Xerneas. The first that had, to their knowledge, ever been successfully cloned. The man keeping it in line, the Arcean Church's own Head Bishop, and resident Light user, followed behind it, holding in his cupped hands a Dark Ball that had since turned gold, thanks to its occupant.

Pravus summoned the last of the legendary influences they would need. The sleeping form of Azelf, curled tight, floated by instinct to the exact center of the room. It had resisted Shadow infusion thus far, but now, it would give them what they desired.

With a dark flash, Ho-Oh was released into the chamber as well, and the furious phoenix squawked only once before the Azelf, prodded by its owner, bound it with a sinister series of red crystalline chains. From talons to beak, the bird was muzzled. Ein shuffled forward, dragging the white-furred hind behind him. Ho-Oh paused in its rage, saw the creature, and then her eyes went wide. The Shadow overwhelmed the emotions of anger and fear, forcing the noble bird to do as it was commanded.

Within the center of the circular testing area stood a simple pedestal, upon which was a mostly white crystal that had multicolored pieces of red, yellow, blue, green, and purple floating around within it aimlessly. Ein gave the hind a nudge, and the tiny Xerneas began emanating, and focusing, its Fairy Aura through its barely grown antlers into the crystal upon the altar. It was, essentially, the only move the Doctor had taught it. Azelf levitated Ho-Oh directly over the object absorbing the seven colors of energy Xerneas' horns were giving off. The crystal turned entirely black as it absorbed the seven colored light. The bird struggled against the bonds, but a similar human creation had been used once to summon, and temporarily bind, the aspects of Time and Space themselves. In this underground realm of Shadow worshipers, Ho-Oh was quite far from the Light, and any chance of divine intervention.

As the bird struggled, she felt her wings gain ground against the restraints, and hope returned, but only for a few moments, as she realized she was still bound. For whatever reason, the Azelf had given her minor wing space. The reason became evident, as she saw the particles of rainbow light fall from her wings towards the strange creation below. It absorbed the particles, and even the single feather that had fallen in her struggling against the chains. Even infected with Shadow and bound, Ho-Oh was a creature of the Light, and maintained some semblance of sanity. For the moment.

The energy from Ho-Oh turned the pure black crystal into a pure white one, and Caleb Pravus, as well as his gathered underlings and the robotic Doctor Ein, all shared a grinning expression. When the Prophet spoke, it was in an excited whisper. "Next comes yellow..." He held up the Z-Crystal that had been 'acquired' along with the one that was serving as the base for their newest creation. It was a standard Z-crystal shape, though it sported additional diamond shaped protrusions at the top and bottom edges. A black eight-pointed star sat in the middle of it, and it began radiating a dark energy as Pravus drew upon it, and guided it into their creation with a burst of Z-energy that Ein had determined would be necessary for their plans. The crystal bursted with a flash of yellow light, and retained that coloring, as it hummed with the gathered powers of four Legendary Pokémon.
"And finally..." Doctor Ein intoned in his much deeper and changed voice, "The reddening..." He gestured to the Prophet, who manifested the same dark blade that had pierced and brought low Thor himself. An aura of Shadow surrounded him, though it flinched as he neared their creation. In this stage especially, it was strong enough to weaken beings like him. In the next, that would no longer be a problem.

Pravus raised his dark sword to one of Ho-Oh's bound talons, and slashed, cutting just between the top of the claw, and bottom of the leg, where the two met, and quite a bit of blood flowed. The sparkling crimson droplets fell onto the yellowed crystal, and a sinister aura formed as Pravus began speaking. Two Darkrai-like hands extended from the aura by his shoulders, and hung on either side of the strange crystal. The Dark Plate he'd affixed to his armor flared with energy as he bent reality to his whim, and summoned those who evidently needed to have a hand in this, the final process of forming the ultimate weapon. It was harder without the Nexus to draw upon, but after this, he would not need a Nexus ever again. After this, immortality would be his.

Hundreds of Unown poured between the tear in the barriers of reality, and the dark hands bent them to the Prophet's will. The confused and then controlled Pokémon floated in a pattern, forming it naturally as their simple bodies reacted to the stone the humans were trying to create. The Unown's power activated the phoenix's blood, and the crystal absorbed it, too taking on the crimson coloring slowly until it pervaded the entirety of the crystal. As the process finished, the Unown, torn from their own dimension, were released, and Teleported back on instinctual fear. Pravus did not care though, for he had his prize.

The still smoldering ruby-colored crystal seared his hand's flesh as he picked it up from the altar. He grinned, as he felt the rage of the consciousness that evidently was still within, even after the work had been finished. "Yes...scream and thrash as much as you like, little dragon. Your power is now mine."

The aura surrounding the Prophet darkened his form, the red crystal disappeared in the forming maelstrom of dark energy, and appeared again as a pair of menacing ruby colored eyes. Two words came from him now, as he finally put the last stage of his plans into motion."Dark Reversion!" He felt the Darkrai that was a part of him reawaken, and become the embodiment of the element it represented better than almost any other Pokémon. The Prophet cackled, sounding very much mad as the power of their great work remade his form, and his partner's.

Japan was merely a setback, a costly one, but one that had distracted the dragon from focusing his forces on where they should have been, in order to stop this very process. Pravus was under no illusion that the One Dragon had an idea of what he was up to, but there was no way the divine lizard could've known how far along they were. Only Doctor Ein and his personal Lieutenant knew enough to be dangerous, and neither of them had loose lips. "We go to Alola..." The Prophet said, as he once more resumed his fused form of human and Darkrai. They were stronger than they had ever been, and the Reversion was not yet complete. "We will stop this...Dark Fleet...before they ever become a threat."

The Doctor and Lieutenant saluted the swirling maelstrom of sentient darkness before them in standard Arcean fashion, and answered their master. "Yes, my Prophet!"

The maelstrom of energy ascended then, through miles and miles of rock and stone, up to the surface, where they would have space to take their final form.
Chapter 39: Jaws of the Dragon, Part 1

(HBefore reading, please take into account that each time we change scenes, we're jumping back in
time as well, to the start of the same day, in multiple places.)

Arciana City Limits - Arciana Region

Hilbert and Hilda had, upon arriving in the city of Menefer, split their forces evenly. That meant each
Champion turned General had five thousand Scales, most untested in true combat, as well as two
hundred thousand regular troops in each army group. Menefer was a good example of what most
cities east of the 'new border' had become. Covered in ash, filled with refugees, and of course,
rumors of the dark things going on to their west. Nothing but foul rumors came from Arciana City,
one of the largest satellites the Arceans had pulled into their fold. At the source of all these foul
rumors was, as per usual, a Hand of the Prophet.

Doctor Manchineel, a world-renowned scientist in his own right, had been placed in charge of using
the 'undesirable converts' shipped en mass by train to his walled city to perfect something. Nobody
knew quite what, only that it involved the Light, and a disturbing amount of people turning
essentially brain dead, tossed aside to aimlessly wander the cold city streets. The sane locals of
Arciana City had abandoned their homes once the Hand had built a massive steel retaining wall,
hundreds of feet high and several feet thick, to keep the inhabitants from simply wandering away.

Though the shambling, dead-eyed humans were considered failures, those touched by the Light
sometimes clawed their way back to sanity, and the strange new abilities that came with it. The
Arcean Church had made full use of the largely abandoned homes, which were their property
anyway, to house their soldiers. The few civilians who remained were usually in positions of
importance. The good doctor had been given eight hundred thousand Crusaders to hold the eastern
border line that had once marked the State of Arciana.

In truth, he had plenty of men, but nowhere near enough machines for them to fly in, after constantly
having them blown apart by Hyper Beams from the dragon types that General Nate favored using in
massive numbers. Even flying types were somewhat rare in this region, as much of it was little more
than large swathes of flat, farmed land. Hilbert and Hilda's newly reinforced troops had no such
problems, as by this point only those serious enough to train ten Pokémon remained. The early
battles of the war had not been kind to amateurs.

With the mobilization came additional aid from the Imperial capital, in the form of Gym Leaders,
from both Unova and Kalos. The majority of Kalos' military was now en route to aid Japan, but their
elite Trainers, essentially the nobility, had been sent to Unova alongside two armies that had been
trained for battling in winter conditions in the Mediterra Mountains, against Thunder Warriors. The
twins had the aid of Burgh, Elesa, and Roxie for this particular endeavor, and their respective forces
had become specialized during their training for combat.

It was standard practice of late in Unova for those intending to fight for their homes and their Empire
to train rigorously under those the One Dragon had elevated with his teachings. Not one of them
lacked psychic powers, and were Scales in rank, but their duty was to remain home to defend and train, and that is what they had done. The results spoke for themselves.

True to form, Roxie's crowd did not lack for motorcycles, and more than a few had taken to specializing in poison, but a common second favorite was pairing the poison with an electric type. This was largely where Elesa came in, and together under Hilda's leadership, they formed one half of the forces besieging Arciana City, which left Hilbert and Burgh to handle the rest. The boys had found that bug types and dragon types paired surprisingly well, when working together, and their own training had been just as intense.

There was little ceremony once everyone was in place. They knew their task, and the boon from the One Dragon kept their heads clear, and focused. The 'Dragon Legions' as the soldiery had taken to calling the entirety of the budding government's military power, had been given explicit orders by both their Emperor, and Tao.

Unlike most armed conflicts throughout history, it had been ordered that soldiers bearing the Dragon's mark, typically on their shoulder-armor, would remember what that meant, and in the heat of battle would refrain from the usual tactics of pillaging the civilians' valuable possessions, or worse. There was only one punishment for those who callously broke this rule, and as with the majority of the punishable offenses crafted by the Five Generals, the sentence was a permanent guarantee that such atrocities would not happen again.

They did not deal out death for relatively minor things, like looting a store or home that was obviously abandoned for army resources, but the more serious repeat offenders would be sent to Unova for another lesson on what was and was not allowed in 'honorable combat', as Tao had called it.

There would be those, as there always were, who would try to steal and rape and kill anyways, and those were the intended focus of this particular order. Officers and soldiers alike were expected to follow it, with the guarantee that even one of the Generals, should they violate the rules, would receive the same sentence from the Dragon himself if needed. Tao did not look kindly on such things, but luckily, his chosen Generals all possessed hearts that were, at their core, kind. His halves had chosen each of them and battled together at one point or another. They would not fail.

Hilbert and Burgh demonstrated the results of their preparation first, as the bug Trainers combined the power of hundreds, if not thousands, of Pokémon using Bug Buzz. Most of the soldiers, formerly under Nate's command, had possessed dragon types, and Hilbert had one of his own, as did most serious Trainers on his level. Among the rising Scales, dragon types had, surprising no one, become the favored type to train.

His Hydreigon led the others in empowering the Bug Buzz with the undisputed force of Hyper Voice, and the resulting sound wave was enough to reduce the western side of the city's steel retaining wall to scrap, by causing it to buckle inward, and fall upon the barracks behind it. Though nobody had intel from the ground, aerial spies had confirmed where the Arceans had placed their valuable buildings, and both of the twins had intended to take out those targets with their entrance. The eastern forces rushed through the shattered opening, and battle was soon joined as Crusaders streamed in from across the city to plug the breach, and drive the enemy out.

Hilda's approach was subtle, where her brother's was brazen. She had Elesa lead the very loud, very distracting bikers in a serpentine biking formation as they exchanged shots with Crusaders on the wall, hiding behind their combined Stave shields. Hilda took Roxie and her strongest poison users straight to the wall, and after a few Acid Sprays, entered the back of Arciana City's own house of
worship. Strangely enough, it was empty, as quiet as a tomb, for the Light branded did not wander into it by instinct. That was good, for Tao had been very clear on what they were to do to these false temples of Arceus worship.

"Alright Draga, Sludge Waaaave!" Roxie gave the command from the statue of Caleb Pravus, just outside the temple as she struck her ever-present electric guitar, and the purple and green colored Dragalge responded with his usual volume as the vibrations got him pumped up for battle. Hilda and the others had gone up to deal with the soldiers atop the walls by that point, and the poison dragon was able to drown the entire building in his attacks. He was soon joined by the rest of Roxie's squad, and as her Scolipede brought down the statue, crushing it to dust, they knew they had announced their presence to the city. Power Staves hummed to life around them, and the battle began on both sides of the city.

The soldiers atop the wall were removed in short order, and the rest of the girl's forces soon enlarged the hole, and streamed into the city over the still sizzling remains of what had once been an impressive stone cathedral dedicated to Arceus. As the armies moved through the city from two sides, they did their best to avoid catching the almost zombie-like people who had been 'purified' by 'Arceus' Light' in the radius of their attacks. These victims had been ordered north, to the Black Hills, provided they survived the battle in the city.

It soon became obvious that the city itself was evidently not holding the armies that had kept the east from pushing west throughout the conflict. Only a few thousand Crusaders had met them, and they had in no way been the best of the best. The twins regrouped alongside the Gym Leaders once the city was taken.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Hilda said, as her brother and Burgh approached their appointed rendezvous. "This was too easy, and I feel like I'm standing in the middle of a trap." She looked up at her mega evolved Metagross, who was scanning below them with its powerful brains for signs of human life they were as yet unaware of. "Anything, MetaGee?"

The Pokémon gave a sound that sounded like a no, and then, a voice was projected to each of them, one that sounded much like Hilda's, but wasn't. "There is dark energy shielding something below. Above, only the branded. If they are hiding, it is under the city."

"Of course they're under. You read the intel." Hilbert said, glaring downwards. "They build into mountains and rock as the norm. Diggers! You're up!" Hilbert finished as he summoned a truly imposing Krookodile to join them. "Don't dig straight down. Guide them on the proper way to make a descending tunnel, strip mine variant. I don't care about ores, just find out if anyone is down there, and watch out for ice attacks."

The dark and ground gator gave his Trainer a thumb pointed upwards, and moments later, the gathered diggers, namely from the belts of Scales, began heading downwards in tight spirals. Hilda's Metagross shared the Krookodile's eyes with them, and it did not take the ground gator long to find what he was after. He descended from the tunnel he came upon with all the force of Dig, and chomped down on one of the patrolling Crusaders as the other diggers joined him. Some went deeper, some went sideways, but in short order they had mapped out a somewhat detailed sketch of the underground complex in what had once been an urban garden center.

The two Generals and their accompanying Gym Leaders had sketched out what their Pokémon found, and once more, they found few soldiers. Even the underground, which bore signs of recent habitation, had been emptied somehow.
"I don't like this..." Hilbert said as his digger returned to the surface, and was recalled. "There are supposed to be eight hundred thousand of them. We've barely taken out four... Where could they..." He paused, glancing back at the way they'd come. The wall had buckled with surprising ease, despite the power of their attack. They had been told it matched the Kanadian's in thickness if not length, but that had not been the case. It had fallen in like crumpled tin foil, and that was when he realized why.

At that same moment, a soldier ran up to him, an officer judging by the small set of horns, styled after Tao's, sweeping back from his black and white helmet. He saluted. "General! We've discovered more dead Crusaders in the remnants of the wall we brought down! It's my opinion sir that if they were hiding in that portion, they'll be in the others as well."

Sounds of battle erupted again, this time to the north of the city's centermost building, but soon, the fighting engulfed the entire perimeter. The officer had been correct, and the Arceans had begun countering.

"Oh ho ho ho!" A voice rang out from above them, and the gathered leaders of the Dragon's Legion got their first look at the enemy General, floating above them in a machine that looked like half of a Pokéball, and somehow kept the heft of its occupant aloft. Doctor Manchineel was a bald portly man, appeared to have no neck, and sported a bushy, grayed moustache under his far too large nose. His eyes were protected by what appeared to be a horizontal band of black glass, not dissimilar from what was used in the Crusader's T-shaped visors. "This is what the Unovan Dragon sends me? A pair of twins, and a few Gym Leaders way past their prime? I have to admit, I'm disappointed! I thought my success in holding a hard border against hordes of dragon types would merit sending your Emperor. No matter...perhaps he will come to reclaim your corpses!" The Doctor snapped his fingers. "Open fire!"

At his command, the light around them seemed to shift, and atop the walls they saw far, far more Crusaders than they'd seen from the air. Even at that moment, more were streaming up from, presumably, where they'd been waiting within the hollow walls of the city. The easterners suddenly found themselves within a very large barrel, and the losses mounted as the Crusaders did as they were ordered.

Hilda reacted first. "Elesa, Roxie, Burgh, defensive formations! Shield as many of them as you can." She turned to her brother, who was already on his Braviary. "We'll handle the floating fool." She summoned her own Pidgeot, and together, the two twins ascended towards the Doctor amidst a hail of mostly electric beams of energy. Being hit by just one would likely bring down their flying types, but the two Trainers had long since mastered aerial dodging with their partners.

"Focus fire on the twins!" Manchineel shouted, sounding somewhat frantic as he guided the machine keeping him aloft away from the angry, charging twins, "Electric beams! Now! Now!"

The two flying types had to break off, if they wanted to stay aloft, their entire focus became dodging, but it became rapidly apparent that evasion alone would not be enough for long. Both understood that, eventually, one of the stave wielders would fire at the right time to hit them.

"Storm them! Get atop the walls!" The order came from Elesa, and Burgh took the lead, as did Roxie, bringing their respective squads up the southern and eastern sides of the wall. The focused fire on the twins gave the three Gym Leaders an opening, and the last the twins saw of them was the three Gym Leaders vanishing into the depths of the walls at different points. They would take care of the soldiers within, while the regular forces secured the top.
The two tiring flying types were recalled once the volume of electric death beams lessened. Hilbert summoned his Hydreigon, and Hilda jumped atop her Metagross. The two Generals once more charged the Doctor, whose comparatively slow machine had been chugging towards the tallest building in the city, the city's center. A window opened to admit him, and it would have, if a very angry three headed dragon had not barred his way. Behind him, the Metagross closed in as well.

"Psychic." Hilda gave the order, and her partner obeyed, freezing the mad Doctor's flying machine where it was. "It's over, Doctor. Give the order to surrender."

The Doctor met her hard eyes, and kept his expression unreadable. "You're right, you've clearly outsmarted me. I am defeated." He held out his hands, wrists together, as if he expected to be cuffed. Hilda moved forward to do exactly that, which was when the man shifted, and hammered one of the buttons on his floating machine's dashboard. "No!"

The twins didn't have to guess at what he'd done, the results were obvious and immediate. The walls of the city blew up from within, leaving a ring of charred slag and human remains around the entirety of the city. He had sacrificed his remaining forces, once they'd drawn in the Gym Leaders, and a good portion of the east's Scales, into the walls. Most of the regular army, and their own squads, had avoided the initial explosion, but as the wreckage tilted inward, it threatened to crush them. Some reacted swiftly. Others, did not.

"No..." Hilbert stared at the wreckage, knowing the odds of surviving such an immediate and devastating explosion were small at best, even with their new armored uniforms. But while the brother was sorrowful, his sister displayed another emotion.

A low hum filled the air and the blue light of Hilda's plasma sword underlit her severe expression. She raised it horizontally, holding it in the air. Even the portly Doctor recoiled at the ferocity in her gaze. "N-now now, I'm an important prisoner of war! You can't kill me! Think of all the secrets I could tell you-"

Hilda raised her free hand as the man began begging, and her Metagross shifted its Psychic to him, instead, immobilizing the man rather than the machine. That was a mistake she would not repeat, but learning it had been costly. "Doctor Manchineel, for your abominable experiments on the people of Arciana City, as well as the murder of three Gym Leaders, and most of your own forces, I sentence you to swift and immediate death in the name of the One Dragon. Speak your final words."

The Doctor looked at her for a long moment, and then grinned. "I'm sorry my dear, but you don't have the eyes of a killer. It wouldn't matter if you did! You have no idea what is coming for you...for all of you. Caleb Pravus will bring us all back." He gave her a smug smirk, and Hilda's hand tightened around her blade.

"No...he won't. There won't be anything left to revive." She made a gesture, and before her brother, still shocked by the apparent death of three Gym Leaders and old friends could stop her, her Metagross tossed the man from his cockpit into the air, and by no coincidence, the small sliver of throat between his chin and clavicle met the tip of Hilda's blade as his obese form went sailing past. She didn't turn to watch, she spoke only a single command, knowing MetaGee's aim to be true. "Hyper Beam."

The Metagross again acquiesced, and the Doctor's portly frame, skeleton and all, was atomized before the unbridled fury of one of the most powerful moves known to humankind. The twins descended then, and quickly the battle resolved itself. The east had more remaining soldiers, but any attempts at excavating the walls only revealed body parts, and crushed human. Elesa and Burgh had
been blindsided, along with their ace Pokémon, but Roxie's Scolipede came rolling out about an hour into the search for survivors. The bug type deposited his cargo, a very burned, but still living Roxie, and then proceeded to Arceus' realm with a final sigh.

The Scale's armor had kept a few of them alive, but their forces had each taken serious casualties. Once Tao's symbol flapped above the sea of wreckage and carnage below, the twins took their armies further west, to the camps they had gained the exact locations of from Manchineel's lab.

There, they made short work of the Crusaders defending the camps, and more than once the 'prisoner' population jumped in to aid them. The people were emaciated, grimy, and covered in ashfall. The areas directly east of the Stoney Mountains had received the heaviest, and almost constant, cloud cover from Fornia's burning forests. What the twins discovered within the camps only cemented Manchineel's fate. Even Hilbert eventually agreed he was better off dead.

They found numerous logs of experiments, from meddling with human and Pokémon genomes, to forcibly attempting to psychically link twins and awaken their latent potential, the experiments were detailed, brutal, and had accompanying video footage.

It wasn't until they found evidence of the Church of Arceus' support that they decided to report back to the Imperial Capital. They sent the data, logs, and evidence of heavy Church support to the homeland, where the media hounds would prepare it for the first blow to the Arcean's support of their Church. From lauding Doctor Manchineel as a 'paragon of morality' to directly funding the macabre experiments he enacted, the proof was hard, and undeniable. Each camp liberated only provided more evidence, and before the day was out, Tao had reports of the mad Doctor's experiments finding their way to the ears of the relatively sequestered Arcean populace.

**Several miles South of Fargo - Dakota Region**

The second foray in Urbe Monachus proved to be easier than the east's last attempt, but no less dramatic. Thor had strongly insisted to General Nate that he and his warriors would be the ones to claim victory here, as they should have the last time. To that end, the being straight from prehistorical legends had charged the city, army of Asgardian warriors in tow, and in short order had claimed it for the Dragon Empire.

To the God of Thunder's disappointment, the city had only contained those branded by the light, who had taken to aimlessly wandering the streets, and roughly two thousand Crusaders, most of which surrendered when they lay eyes upon the sparking form of Thor, and his iconic hammer. From them, Nate learned that the Arcceans, under their newest General, had strategically withdrawn to their northernmost city of Fargo, the largest city they had outside of the Kanadian Wall, and the one that had been the source of almost every failed Arcean attempt to surmount said wall. With Shruikan gone, the attempts had gotten bolder, but the new defender, a Rayquaza known to the Fornian people, made less than short work of their forces. All had been recalled to Fargo, after that, and as far as anyone knew, the former capital of the Dakota region had played host to the Crusader's entire northern army group for months as the harsh winter stalemate had dragged on.

Nate ordered the Light branded rounded up, as peacefully as possible, and then guided to a holding facility where, presumably, Tao had someone who could help these poor, wandering husks. The dragon had not elaborated on how they were being taken care of, only that Nate was to send any branded who'd been left to wander to that specific location.
Evidently, Hilbert and Hilda were going to be sending anyone else they found branded within Arciana City to the same place. The location in question was one of the last eastern holdouts this far west of Fornia's new border, in a place known historically as the Black Hills. Evidently, several former Champions from the surrounding regions had refused to give up the mountain they'd entrenched themselves in, and at this stage in the war, had offered their relatively empty mountain base as a holding facility for refugees, and those branded by the Arceans.

As the armies of men primarily from Kalos and further east trudged onwards, Nate and his complement of Scales lead the way, and thus, they were the first to lay eyes upon what General Nonagon had set up for them. To its south, Fargo was surrounded by a small community of mostly farmers known as Briar Wood. The Hand of the Prophet had taken the name literally, and Nate didn't have to guess what Pokémon was responsible. A Trevenant's handiwork was obvious, and one on a Hand's level, no doubt infused with Shadow, was a force indeed if it had done this alone.

The once farmable land now played host to an impossibly massive thorny bramble that, after some aerial surveillance, proved to be too large to jump across. The regular Norstad and Kalosian troops would have to go by foot, and Nate found his advance paused as the sons of Asgard, who had taken to leading the men of Norstad, caught up to the mounted Scales.

Nate looked over the troops, frowning. The Kalosians were all, supposedly, decent Trainers, and could likely fly over, as they all had belts of ten Pokémon, and any decent Trainer had one that could carry them. The Norstadders were another case entirely. Most only had one Pokémon, if they had any, and even then, they were wild, and would run off if injured. Some had Pokéballs for them to hide in, but few used them. They would be going on foot, if they went at all.

Alex had privately confided in the former Gym Leader before leaving, telling him that it was imperative that their allied forces stayed as intact as possible. Despite that, Nate had a feeling leaving the eager, bloodthirsty horde behind newly armed and armored as they were would cause his new Emperor more of a headache. Denying them a fight and a 'glorious death' as they called it would make them unwilling allies. He missed his legion of dragon types, and hoped the twins had managed to keep them alive. But he knew war, by now.

At that moment, a hefty, golden skinned hand placed itself upon one of his dragonbone encased shoulders. "Worry not, laddie. Your dragon gave us the perfect tools to cut through this pathetic attempt at defense."

The Asgardian turned to the now formed up ranks of Asgardians behind him. Their blue maned Rapidash gave off a similar aura in the cold night, and like the rest of their equipment, a tinge of gold covered their burning blue manes. Thor rose into the air on his own crimson Gogoat driven chariot, and raised the hammer. "Let us remind these curs of what happens when they dare to attack our Yggdrasil!" Once more, the Asgardians led the charge, and their Voiceforged weapons, burning with the dragon's Light, did indeed make short work of the bramble, which receded harshly before the Light. Mjolnir was no exception to the weapons and armor that had been empowered, and the hammer burned brighter than any other weapon as it lead the wedge of mounted warriors straight through the defenses and minor traps the Hand had left for them.

Nate turned as the apparently otherworldly warriors once more leapt into battle. He'd been given three Gym Leaders to aid him with this assault, two of which were Kalosian nobility. "Skyla, take half of the Kalosians, and strike from above. Take down any surprises that are waiting in the cloud cover. Grant, take the other half, and follow Thor. Keep your weapons up. This is too easy. This bramble isn't done with us yet." He turned then to the only noble that the men of Norstad had agreed
to follow, not because she was rather beautiful, but because she had the fighting spirit of a true warrior, and there was nothing that was more valued in the northerner's culture. "Korrina, take these warriors around the city, see if this bramble extends all the way around, and if not...hammer them from the north."

The Gym Leaders saluted, and moved to their tasks as the battle began. "As for us..." Nate said, smirking as he turned, and mounted the dragon in his arsenal that best handled fire and electric based attacks. "We follow Skyla...and reinforce Thor when he steps in whatever this Hand set up for us."

His Garchomp roared, and the Scales under Nate, formerly Hilbert's, took to the air as well. From above, he saw Korrina's Lucario, already tearing a path through the bramble. The Aura Pokémon was burning with Light like all the others, and seemed to be enjoying itself. He briefly worried that, if he could see literally every eastern soldier, so could this Nonagon person.

Halfway over the labyrinthine bramble, the pace of the men below shifted, as the forest's roots came alive. The forward progress slowed, but did not stop. The men of Norstad knew how to kill angry plants. Nate raised a hand, and a pair of Hydreigon riders, the few Hilbert had bothered to promote, torched the sides of the forest, and reinforced the border Thor and his host had carved with fire and fury.

"Incoming!"

The cry came from Skyla's unit just above them, as from the newest of the ashen clouds coming from Fornia's still burning wilderness came no less than nine floating airships, each similar in design but fundamentally improved from the Plasma Frigate upon which they were based descended in a line in the skies before Fargo. From them, streamed Pokémon riders streaming Shadow energy behind them as they sped towards Skyla's unit, and the Scales. Below, the trees had literally come alive, as Trevenant and Crusaders acting as their Trainers met the Norstadders in combat. Thor and his warriors charged on, seemingly oblivious, or just simply not caring as Nonagon made his move. The God of Thunder was charging straight for the gate that guarded the southern entrance of Fargo. It was impressive, tall and made of steel. Nate had a feeling Mjolnir would prove stronger. If it could reach it.

"Send your fire types to join the men below! The rest of you, with me! Keep Skyla's people alive!"

His orders given, Nate's Garchomp rocketed towards the horde of shadowy, aerial fighters, more specifically, for the blob of shadow leading them. His fellow Scales could handle the others. The Hand of the Prophet was wreathed in Shadow that flared off of him like a cape. A wall of energy beams sporting the ice, fire, and electric typings aimed for the Scales specifically, as they ascended. That was when Nonagon's men began to understand the difference between the regular soldiers, and those clad in dragonbone.

Plasma swords bisected numerous energy beams, and Nate was impressed as more than a few of the fiery ones were redirected at the enemies below. It was hard to miss, as the Arceans had been using the bramble's shadowy cover to great effect. Judging by how everything shifted below, it was where the majority of their own ground troops had been placed. Psychic aura shields surrounded Skyla's fliers, and as the Scales shielded and healed them, the sky became a whirl of golden lights dancing seemingly in vain among the Shadow surrounding them. But they did not break, and they did not yield. Nor would they. The One Dragon was counting on all of them.

For his part, Nate approached the ships amidst similar, if much larger, beams of energy. Trying to hit a Garchomp and its rider with something so massive was a wasted effort though, and soon, with naught but a pointed finger, the airships began bombarding Korrina's group as well. Nate didn't see
how they fared, as he landed before Nonagon, and recalled his Garchomp.

"So. You're the famous 'General' Nate, hmm?" The man's tone was light for a male, and his frame was thin underneath the black armor in the typical pattern for an Arcean officer. Armored as he was, Nate had the impression he could break him, like a toothpick if it came down to it, but appearances were deceptive. There was only one surefire way to be certain that this Hand would go down.

He drew an Ultra Ball, and leveled it at the Hand of the Prophet. "General Nonagon, I challenge you to Battle, ten on ten, no substitutions. The loser surrenders immediately, once the battle concludes."

The man chuckled, and raised his arms. The shadows on the deck of his airship parted, revealing a force of bodyguards surrounding them. Nate seemed unfazed, mostly because better villains had tried similar tactics when he was still a rookie Trainer, and he'd smashed every single one of them with the kind of winning streak most Champions had. "I think...I will accept your honorable battle. There has been far too little...structure...in the conflicts thus far. People calling moves out of turn, firing energy lasers every direction, Pokémon attacking humans, humans attacking Pokémon, it's...Chaos." The man's thin, beardless face sneered at his opponent. "I shall draw first, as I have the field advantage. Come forth, Felidion!"

A Dark Ball sent forth a Pokémon Nate hadn't seen much of, but could counter easily enough, with his team. The Pyroar in question radiated Shadow as one might expect, but beyond that, appeared to be normal. Nate rolled his neck, and called forth his newest heavy hitter, all the way from Alola. "Komodo. You're up."

The Kommo-o appeared from an Ultra Ball that shared his color pattern in a flash, eyed the Pyroar, and shuddered in anticipation. The scales began jangling, and Nonagon smiled, tilting his head as he listened. "Such a lovely tune...a smart choice. Heavy defense, fire resistant, and multiple moves that have an advantage over me and my kitty." The sneer widened. "Flamethrower."

Komodo lifted a single paw, and took the fire attack. The Pyroar blinked, a shiver running through its fur as the torrent of ten thousand degree heat did almost nothing to the dragon, whose scales began jangling a different more ominous tune as he shifted into an attack pose. Nonagon didn't wait, and shouted again, "Shadow Fire!"

Komodo was already moving though, and the black flames missed. Nate smirked. "You shouldn't have wasted the first move advantage. Komodo, Rising Fist!" Before the Pyroar could blink, the dragon was low under his guard, and his heavily scaled fist was shining gold and striking upwards into his jaw. The lion Pokémon flipped onto his back, and did not rise again. Nonagon recalled him, sighing.

"Fine, if you want to Play Rough...so be it." He tossed another dark ball, revealing a Mawhile, which shuddered in obvious pain as her master immediately forced her to the next level of evolution. Strands of shadowy energy from him sank into the Pokémon, and the pair of mouths on its head began salivating as the power of Shadow and Mega Evolution merged. Quick on the uptake, the steel and fairy type began hammering at the dragon, and was brought down in short order by the powerful fairy typed blows.

The next several rounds went back in forth in a similar manner. Nate's Arcanine removed the Mawile as a threat with a series of rapid Flame Charges, and fell to a harsh Earthquake from the Krookodile the Hand summoned next.
After that, Nate stopped playing around. He drew a Luxury Ball, and spoke a single word. "Therion." The Lucario he summoned rose slowly as it appeared, and yawned. Nonagon paused, and glanced at his Krookodile. They were trading type advantage with each round, but this Lucario was obviously stronger than the others the supposed dragon expert had used thus far. He still had one very effective dragon remover, but this Lucario needed to fall before he brought it out, and claimed victory.

"Aura Sphere." In the space of an eye blink, the seemingly mild Lucario summoned a sphere of pure fighting spirit imbued it with aura, and launched it in the center of the Krookodile's stomach. The dark and ground type went soaring, and Nonagon didn't even try to recall it as it went over the edge. If the Lucario was bothered by this turn of events, he didn't show it, but his eyes did get quite a bit harder as they took in the latest human they were facing properly. The appendages humans mistook for hair rose as the Aura Pokémon closed his eyes and summoned his power against one who fought with Shadow. Light flared around his palms, and then condensed, covering them in golden aura. "Leave this, to me." He said, dropping into a pose common to the dragon style of martial arts.

Nonagon answered the Lucario with the only thing left on his belt that might hit it critically. The rest would have to chip away at it before it inevitably brought them down. A Toxicroak appeared on the field, as Shadow infused as the rest of his party members. His poison points lit with dark energy as his Trainer called the move. "Shadow Sting!"

"Amateurs!" Therion's response thundered through the air as he moved his body, and struck the empty air with his palm as he projected his harsh psychic baritone over the field. It was followed by a wave of pure psychic typed power, burning a deep blue and gold, that slammed into the poison type, and sent it flying as well. The fainted Pokémon arced in the air then, as the Lucario landed it, somewhat harshly, but still on the deck of the airship.

Nonagon had taken the brief opportunity to summon his next Pokémon, who was already charging forward and striking as the Lucario's focus turned back to the battle. "Shadow Slash!"

The Kabutops in question was a sickly green color and was also encased in an aura of darkness and purple. It raised its scythe arm, and the bladed appendage glowed with Shadow energy as the fast physical attacker brought it down on the Lucario. An aura bone slashed through the air in response, and forced the prehistoric hunter to leap backwards, as Therion fell to one knee. He looked back at his Trainer, opened his eyes again, and nodded.

Nate raised a dragonbone encased fist, and it glowed with the fighting typed energy of a Plate of Arceus himself. The energy shot into Therion, who used it to ascend to the next level. His aura swirled low around his feet, and then flared, turning a harsh golden color as the Mega Lucario retaliated faster than any modern Kabutops could hope to match.

Nate called the move that his partner had already been charging, just so Nonagon would understand he was about to lose another round. "Leaf Blade!" The aura bone shifted to a deep green color, and took the Kabutops down, again with only one hit. It seemed there was a reason Nate had become a Champion. Time had only made him better.

Therion similarly dispatched many of Nonagon's remaining belt members. Another Psychic for the Dustox, an Aura Sphere ended the Emolga, but it was the Hand's latest pick that had the shining golden Lucario stumped.

The Goodra in question was, undoubtedly, the strongest Pokémon Nonagon had. Not surprising, as
it was a dragon, but Nate had yet to see his Trevenant, and the as yet unknown member of the Hand's final three. Each Dragon Pulse had been redirected by the hefty defensive fighter, and getting in close would only slow Therion. Without his speed, a Goodra like this would make short work of him. Nate knew he was far from losing, but there was only one other member of his team on Therion's level, and he was saving that one for the Trevenant.

"Shadow Storm!" The Goodra raised its mouth to the sky, and summoned the clouds of ash above them. Sooty raindrops fell, healing the dragon slightly where the Mega Form's power had left an impact. Dark lightning bolts fell from the clouds, and struck the Lucario full force.

"Return!" Nate said, as he raised the Luxury Ball, and recalled the seemingly fainted Lucario. He wasn't completely down yet, but he had been making little headway here anyways. It was time to fight a dragon with a dragon. "Chomper! Dragon Claw!"

Nonagon swore. His power hitter was down, but a Garchomp beat a Goodra any day. It had been the right choice against a special attacking Lucario, but now, once more, Nate made him pay for it by countering as hard as he had throughout the battle. The Garchomp's wings lit with draconic energy, and hit the Goodra, finishing what the Lucario had started, and leaving him fresh and ready for the next enemy.

Having no other choice than to begin dragon slaying, for he needed to start if he was going to turn this battle around, Nonagon summoned his chosen tool for the job. A Sandslash adapted for the cold of the Stoney Mountain range. Knowing he didn't have time to waste in this battle, Nate ordered the move as soon as the Pokémon materialized. "Fire Fang!"

Chomper's flame-covered form hit before the ice and steel type had a chance to lift a claw in defense, and Nonagon stared, watching as his icy tank weathered the hit. Chomper smirked, and leapt away, his rough tail brushing the icy digger as he did, and the resulting damage was enough for its eyes to roll back. The Sandslash fell over, fainted, and the Garchomp crouched low as it prepared for the next round.

Nonagon chuckled. "I didn't think I'd have to pull him out for this...I will give you this, former Unovan Champion...the rumors of your power are not based on nothing. But...alas, your fight ends here. Shadow Curse!" The Trevenant appeared, and as expected, was impressive as a specimen of the species. It seemed Nonagon had purified and then again corrupted this Pokémon several times. Its eyes were dead, and after a closer look, Nate understood that what stood before him was, at this point, more a vessel than a Pokémon. Not unlike the humans turned into shambling husks by overexposure to Light energy.

As the curse hit Chomper, Nate's eyes confirmed what he'd expected the shadow version of Trevenant's signature move to cause. His dragon was now purely grass typed, and had become entrenched by rampant grass energy, fueled by the power of Shadow. The dragon struggled to move as the slow, massive tree approached. Nonagon spoke again. "Shadow Fire."

A ball of flame, not unlike a Will-O-Wisp attack, floated down to the trapped dragon, and then detonated, finishing the dragon in a single move. Nonagon grinned. "The power of the Curse transfers to every member of your team, and only grows more powerful as they faint. Bring forth the next victim."

Nate sighed. With this particular curse, he was sure only one of his remaining party could resist it. He hadn't wanted to wake her up quite yet, as he expected she'd be needed for Pravus, but the Hand had
him cornered. "Laurea. You're up."

A scarlet light opened from a red-orange and tan Pokéball, and the Victini stretched, before she opened her eyes, and took in the sight of her next conquest. She glanced back at Nate, and his belt, as well as those who had fainted already, and with her third eye, she took in the war.

In short, Thor was doing, or rather had already done, the hard work. The southern gate of Fargo was down, bearing several deep dents from a square-headed object. It was impressive that it stayed in one piece despite the lightning adding to the pure force, but the host of Rapidash mounted warriors trampled over it all the same, their forward progress unaffected. Within the city, the battalions under Grant converged with their Norstad support, who had made it largely intact through the bramble alongside Korrina. Together, they met the Crusaders within, and with their ability to wipe out entire squads postponed for a few hits, it was enough for the warriors to get in close, and overwhelm the ranks. The Asgardian warriors had equipment that could take far more hits, but hadn't shared how to craft it, claiming the Unovan's current level would be enough for a conflict bound to a single planet. As expected, the God of Thunder had delivered a bloodbath, if the cries inside the city were anything to go by.

Nonagon had stayed silent as he watched the mythical Victory Pokémon awaken before his eyes. That was it, then. They had the dragon, and he had the essence of victory. The pair had conquered the entire continent, mostly by themselves, in days of old. If the legends were to be believed. Naturally, most Fornians were only concerned with their own mythology, no matter how absurd it became. Old 'eastern myths' were considered markers on the path to exile from the Church of Arceus, and His Light. Nonagon had studied them all the same, and as usual, found the legend to be based on quite a bit of truth.

"Searing Shot." As neutral toned as ever, Nate gave the order, and the burning psychic type sent a wave of scarlet flames towards the Trevenant. It had an effect, but surprisingly, the Pokémon stayed standing. Moreover, it seemed unbothered by the scarlet flame remnants still sticking to it.

"This old tree is special, you know." Nonagon said, sneering at the Trainer who, he was now convinced, had hyped up his reputation by using the Victory Pokémon. "Of course it is..." Nate muttered. Nonagon continued anyway. "I found it in Alola. Its' fire had long gone out when I came upon it, but with a little Shadow...the old Totem Pokémon lived again. More or less." The sneer widened. "Shadow Force!"

The ghostly tree exuded a mixed aura of ghost and Shadow energy, then disappeared from view, and reappeared instantly before the Victini, hammering it hard with the super effective Shadow move. The tiny Pokémon went sailing straight into Nate, who caught it with the softer parts of his armor, but still slid back several feet from the inertia.

Something new happened then, as the Victini became surrounded by scarlet aura, tinged with golden Light, and hovered forward out of her Trainer's grasp. Her eyes burned with the power, and she reached for victory. Nate urged her forward, and the psychic and fire type boomed towards the Trevenant as she countered, hard. "Flare Blitz!"

The impossibly fast scarlet meteor hammered into the old tree, knocking it over, and proving just how strong her opening move had been. It struggled to rise, but the Victini hovered over it before it could counter. Nonagon was shouting moves, but Nate just shook his head. The Pokémon couldn't hear them, now. Victini was blocking the surrounding sound as she delivered a merciful end. Nate's eyes shifted to Nonagon's as he spoke the command anyway. He knew what move she would use. "Inferno."
The psychic barrier surrounding the two Pokémon became visible as it filled with intense scarlet flames, which then proceeded to die down. Laurea let the barrier fall, and stared for a long time at the pile of ashes that had once been a true defender of nature. The eyes hardened, and then shifted to the human responsible for desecrating a Totem Trevenant's final rest.

The Searing Shot formed above her head without a command, as the battle was over, the war was again on, for them, and the enemy leader was right before her. The attack split into several shots of undiminished power, and she took down Nonagon's guards as well in the space of a moment. Then, she whirled on her human. "Next time, just kill him. We do not have time to delay." She looked around then, and sighed as only two of the nine airships had been felled by the Scales so far.

She hovered high above all of them, and Nate gave the psychic command to clear the air around the ships, and force the airborne Crusaders back towards them. The Scales and Skyla's forces did as ordered despite being outnumbered, and by the time the seven pillars of burning scarlet death tore through the rotors of each massive ship, most of the Arcean's flying forces were caught in the exploding vessel's radius. The ground below became a scarlet tinged inferno of molten slag and armored human.

Nate joined Laurea above, as she watched the carnage she had wrought. "This is why I told you not to use me to battle. All I cause is death."

Nate shook his head at her psychically projected words. "You put an end to what that lunatic had created from an already long departed Pokémon. And the ships needed to come down anyway. Let's go rejoin Thor and -"

He was interrupted, as the Victini gave his Garchomp a boost that would last the rest of this battle, and then returned to her ball. Nate sighed, and rocketed towards the city. Fargo fell not long after the ships had been burned out of the sky by the embodiment of victory. Those who surrendered were Teleported somewhere back in Unova, where they would be freed of their brainwashing, or tossed in with the zealots who would die before 'betraying the Prophet'. Most, abandoned loyalty to him once they finally looked at and read about the things he had done with their hard earned wealth, all in the name of their Church. But there were always a few who would need years to accept that they had been used, and had about as much worth to Pravus as the rest of his tools.

From Fargo, Nate and Thor liberated the Northstone Pass, and were the first eastern regular forces to lay eyes upon what had, for them, started this entire conflict. By this point, all understood what had been done to Colville. Seeing it, however, was something else entirely. The march was steady, but quiet as the soldiers had to either fly, or cover their mouths as their west moving columns kicked up fallen ash. Much of Fornia was still on fire, but these first flames had long since gone out.

Their target was a city known as Pravia, and one that their Dragon Emperor and his Legion of ten thousand Scales were supposed to handle. They had been filled by the strongest Trainers to come out of the Swamp, and by no coincidence had Alex put Champions, current and old, from each former loyal State in charge of the battalions they divided into.

They finally came upon the city six hours of hard flying later, and found it in the midst of a siege. Nate recognized what tactic they were using, though he also wondered why the Scales hadn't already conquered the city. They'd had time, with the march. The plan had been to refuel, and then charge Port: Land before the Fornians defending the homeland got wind of their movements.
Thor wasted no time, as usual, and his burning chariot charged towards the city, as his host of blue flaming Rapidash riders followed him once more into the fray. Not one of their number had been felled by the Crusaders thus far. Injured perhaps, and sometimes rather seriously, but they always recovered, and always refused to share how they managed that exactly.

Tao had explained to Nate that he was essentially supposed to deliver Thor's forces to Alex once they'd redeemed their earlier forced retreat, and once combined, the armies would charge south down the western coast of the continent, all the way to Mewsia, and then head east to hit Sacreus. They would be behind Rosa and the twins now, unless they made serious time catching up. To that end, Pravia needed to fall quickly. Nate gave the order to join the fray, and charged in alongside his troops once they began moving.

---

**The Rocky Pass - Border of Orre, Texico East and Texico West**

The Southern Dragon Legion bamfed into the middle of the newly taken city of Aweston, and had promptly begun marching westward, towards the Rocky Pass, and Orre beyond it. The soldiers following Rosa had been fighting consistently down here, for snow rarely bothered anyone this far south. Their months had been filled with sand, blood, and ash as the Texicans under Rosa had brought their foes to a halt time and again, for months on end. Now, empowered and literally burning with the Light energy infused into their very auras by the Original Dragon himself, they felt they had a chance to finally break this stalemate.

Supporting her, Rosa had Clay, Marlon, and Lenora, three level-headed and experienced Gym Leaders who knew how to keep the men under them in check. After a bit of shifting around when they'd been resupplying in Castelia, Clay had taken charge of the majority of the Texican's regular troops, Lenora had most of the Kalosians, and Marlon took whoever he wanted, as long as they had a good vibe. His force was smaller, but then, his role would be smaller too. But no less important.

Rosa's Scales, all five thousand of them, lead the charge west. Most in her group were brand new graduates from the Great Swamp, and the Sage who lived there. She personally had trained with Tao, and kept that fact hidden from everyone, including Nate. She did not yet know what psychic ability she would manifest, for many Scales either had common psychic abilities, or discovered something else entirely, but Tao had promised that this next battle would see hers awakened. She'd found that training with he who had once been Zekrom was far more useful than some giant Oranguru on a swamp island. Some people could live in that haze, with that smell. She was not one of them.

Their first target was The Rocky Pass, the sight of an ancient Old Earth city that had marked an important border between countries that no longer existed in any capacity. Despite the apparent tensions on said border, it had all been crushed to dust when Arceus had graced their world with his presence, and raised the Stoney Mountain range several thousand miles higher. Now, all that remained of the ancient city was a graveyard, where the people of the southwest and the people of the 'wild west' had clashed numerous times. Nobody remembered why the two peoples disliked each other, they only knew that things had always been this way, and were unlikely to change.

The people of western Texico, historically far more calm and rational compared to their quick drawing eastern Texican adversaries, had gone through a complete ideological shift with the introduction of Caleb Pravus' cult. Within a few generations, he had converted the people of western Texico, and used their senseless prejudices as a focus for their war effort. It had paid off, as most of the Arcean's victories had been on southern lines, and Texico City was rumored to be as well...
guarded as Sacreus.

As the Legion came upon The Pass, they found themselves funneled into a single tunnel that, historically, had been open to people on both sides of Texico, provided their business was legitimate, and nobody caused trouble. Trouble had occurred when humans avoided The Pass entirely, and bumped into nests of wild, and very territorial Pokémon.

In war time, things were very different, and the two halves of the same region had also had more than a few wars, with the Pass always playing a pivotal role in who claimed victory. Since most of their forces had to walk, and they were still small enough at the moment to be vastly outnumbered by splitting their group, the southern Imperial Legion had taken The Pass, and thusly found their entire army group ambushed.

Strangely enough, the attacks that came from the Crusaders of western Texico were not beams of energy and death, but webs, not dissimilar in shape from an Electro Web move. They captured, rather than killed, and then dragged Scales and soldiers away before retaliation could come. Rosa had been beset by no less than twenty of them at once, and her Scales also found themselves similarly outnumbered five to one.

Their foes appeared from hidden tunnels that disappeared as quickly as they'd shown up, and the Arceans carrying their friends would simply vanish into solid stone. Attempts to follow only met more rock, and even diggers couldn't track where they'd gone. The very rock walls of The Pass seemed to obey the Arcean's will, and it did not take long for the Gym Leaders to sound a retreat. They were losing too many people to capture, and at this stage of the war, that could mean an end to their newest offensive.

With Rosa and many Scales cut off from timely aid, Clay was the one who ultimately decided to sound the order to leave them. The Pass was too small for many of their force's Pokémon, and most hadn't even had a chance to call them out before they'd been bound in energy webs. Those Pokémon who had appeared anyway, sensing the danger, had been similarly subdued by type effective energy webs that kept them pinned.

Rosa's partners, naturally, sliced through the webs, and kept each other covered as Crusaders popped in and out of the stone to attack them. Finally, they stopped, and Rosa realized that she and her ten chosen partners were now alone. Then, like a bad nightmare, from out of the shadows came three old acquaintances that still creeped her out. Their Bisharp now radiated Shadow auras that her burgeoning psychic abilities barely made visible to her eyes. They surrounded her and her circle of powerful Pokémon, and then, one spoke. "You...we remember you...come…"

The three advanced, and Rosa's Pokémon snarled. From the walls came more Crusaders, bearing Power Staves that seemed different from the usual kit such soldiers had. Rosa looked at her partners, and then to the psychic partner of her mind. "Gothi...get them out of here." The Gothitelle shook her head, readying for more battle, but Rosa knew a hopeless situation when she saw one. "Now, Gothi...I'll be fine...but they'll infuse you all with Shadow...get out while you can."

The Gothitelle looked at her Trainer, and then her partners. She'd been on Rosa's team almost as long as her former Snivy, now a Serperior, who at that moment, gave her a nod as well. They needed to retreat, to fight another day, but one of their psychic-powered people had to stay behind. She looked again at her Trainer. Her time had not yet come, nor would it, according to her eyes, for quite some time. She trusted that, if nothing else, and with a flash of deep purple aura, Teleported away. The balls on Rosa's cloak went with her, leaving the Shadow Triad to find only her plasma sword, which
they took. They bound her with a web of dark energy, and then vanished in the way they usually did.

She was, after so many years, more than acquainted with how the Shadow Triad moved about, and when her vision reoriented itself, she found herself staring down what she assumed was the General of the Arcean's southern army, and the man who would, apparently, draw forth her psychic power. Lucien.

He seemed to have styled his appearance after Caleb Pravus, though where the 'Prophet of Arceus' had a goatee that belonged on a villain from a children's movie, he had a full, well-kept chinstrap, and a thin half circle around his mouth, connecting to his equally thin mustache. His hair was even combed over like his Prophet's, and as the Shadow Triad approached him, they handed over her blade.

"Ahh yes...the weapon of a Scale of Balance...but where are her Pokémon? I was interested to see what was on her team…” Lucien's voice had an even timbre, though it was filled with amusement. And why wouldn't it be? As far as he knew, his trap had worked. The apparent leader of the Shadow Triad gestured to his right, and the shadow on the right stepped forward, brushing their hair from their eyes. It was then that Rosa noticed, this was not one of the original three Ghetsis had at his beck and call. The other two were, she was rather sure, but this one had evidently replaced the third. What had happened to him, she knew not.

The newest member revealed herself to be female as she spoke. "We...knew you would be curious, General. She possessed a Serperior, a Gothitelle, a Wigglytuff, a Milotic, a Rapidash, an Excadrill, a Heliolisk, an Ariados, a Pangoro, and an Altaria. We expect that the Serperior and Altaria were capable of Mega Evolution."

Lucien nodded, eyebrows rising and falling, sometimes in disappointment, as he heard the list. "Not a bad line up...most of the types covered...and enough of a movepool to be ready for just about anything. Another exceptional setup for a Champion of the Eastern States." He chuckled, though it was full of malice rather than humor. "I can see why you stuck to making movies, General Rosa...compared to the other Generals your holy lizard has placed in charge, your team is...lacking. As are you, if our information is accurate?"

The lead shadow spoke again. "She...did not use any...interesting powers against us. We surmise she cannot yet even Teleport."

Lucien tutted. "A shame. Such potential. Such beauty. Wasted." He walked over to stand before Rosa, his arms crossed over his medium build. He was clad in black Crusader pattern armor, with an appropriate coating of sand and ash.

"Why do you care what gets wasted or not? Just kill me and be done with it…I'm not going to talk." Rosa spat on his boots, but the man seemed not to give a single Muk.

"I wouldn't say I care...I simply despise wasted potential...especially in those of our race who have awakened their latent psychic abilities...there are so very few in Fornia, and yet, Unova seems to have been sleeping upon thousands of them. You and I are going to...get acquainted, young Rosa, and then perhaps, you can tell me where exactly the Dragon is getting all these...awakened humans...and how exactly he's waking them up." Lucien leaned in low as he spoke, and sneered at the woman.

Rosa responded by spitting in his face. "Pravus hasn't figured that out yet? That's...depressing, really.
You've all had months. We were sure you'd attack the facilities producing Scales soon, not that you could take them, but if you don't even know where they are...we're going to win this faster than I originally thought.

That response, it seemed, warranted the usual show of brutality that those in power over others chose to dispense, and often with perverse pleasure. Lucien was no exception, but Rosa had faith. The Dragon had told her to believe in him, and the strength he gave her. She had no reason to doubt it, and as the Hand's attack, whatever it was, fizzled against her, the aura of burning golden Light returned, as if it had never left. He struck several more times, each harder than the last, but the Light did not yield.

"Irritating...but there are plenty of others we have captured who will talk in your stead...perhaps once you see what becomes of them, you'll have a change of heart." He looked to the leader of the Shadow Triad. "Bring me the one that was closest to her position at the time of capture...we'll start with the officers, and work our way down.

Rosa started, but her bonds held her in place. Heavy metal shackles kept her limbs pinned with both weight and restricted movement. The shadow in question disappeared, before he returned with one of her officers. Her name was Sarah, formerly an aspiring guitarist, and one of Rosa's oldest fans, she'd joined her idol in training under the One Dragon when the war began, and had excelled as most of Tao's student's did.

"Rosa!" She cried out as she saw the state of her friend and favorite actor, "Don't tell them anything! No matter what they-" She was silenced, but only momentarily, by a swift backhand from Lucien. "No matter what they do to me, Stay Quiet!"

Lucien turned to the two shadows not occupied by a prisoner. "One of you, move her to a seat with a view...the other...get the next prisoner. Make sure she's out of their sight...but not the range of their cries." He dragged Sarah through to a different room than himself, and Rosa did not have to wait long before she found herself behind a viewing glass. Her friend, and her first real fan of her non-Pokémon related work, was bound to a simple chair, beside a simple rolling table upon which lay many instruments designed for only one purpose.

She had heard of the Arcean's skill with torture from Geralt Redwood, who was also under her command in the southern Legion, and had even seen his scars. Lucien, it seemed, had been the man who had taught poor Geralt's torturer everything he knew, and when he was finished with her friend, she tried to look away, but the shadow behind her forced her head to turn towards the gruesome sight. She kept her eyes closed, but opened them at new sounds, another of her officers, and several of his Pokémon who had not been able to get away.

Thus, the process repeated. Over and over, hour by hour, Rosa eventually became stone faced, and watched as many of her allies, friends and strangers alike, fell to the lunatic's knives. Lucien had presented quite a respectable face, but his madness was soon apparent. The Crusaders around them all watched as well, though thankfully, most of them had either neutral faces, or were hiding obvious disgust.

Most of the Scales met their end with a similar fortitude, though even the stoutest could not help crying out, eventually. Others, were not so strong willed, and even offered to talk, but Lucien continued anyway. He was after bigger fish, and he needed her to understand the lengths he would go to. Human and Pokémon alike fell to him, and it was as he was once more proceeding towards yet another ended Pokémon life, on a Wigglytuff not at all that dissimilar from her own, she finally
felt something deep within, stir.

Having nothing better to do, she pushed her burgeoning senses towards this new...gap, she sensed in her mind, to deeper parts of it. Parts that had always been there, but buried under the trappings of life. In the face of the horror she had borne witness to, she had instinctively opened the pools of energy within herself. Little of what she had once considered important still mattered in the face of such casual disregard for her friend's lives, and while she had not quite opened herself to the universe, for once in an instance of one of many horrors this conflict had created, the universe was very much trying to help. All it needed, was a vessel for the power.

Light surged within Rosa, and through the hand of the shadow-human still mercilessly holding her head towards the carnage below. The second oldest of the Triad vanished in a cloud of ash and dust, and Rosa noticed none of it, as her mind made contact with a God.

**These actions nauseate and enrage you.**

She tried to give the mental equivalent of a nod. The deity understood, even though for the moment, her senses were still new.

**They have the same effect upon me...**

The girl's third eye widened in surprise. She'd heard the rumors from those who'd been partying by Undella when the Imperial Palace rose again from the depths. Having been there herself as a teenager, she was convinced she and Nate had found all there was to find. They had been wrong, but more importantly, the onlookers had reported seeing a familiar shape in the golden Light that had radiated from the palatial lighthouse. She hadn't believed Arceus had actually been present, but here he was, burning before her third eye in all his glory.

**Use my power...end these atrocities...** The deity's red eye widened, and then shrank for emphasis. **Quickly!**

Her chains melted away much like her captor had, and several things happened at once. The more eagerly viewing Crusaders noticed her, burning with an aura of silver, tinged on the edge with gold. The other half of the mandatory viewership, near the back of their underground base around The Pass, felt the tremors of Pokémon using Dig, or a similar move.

A whip-like tendril of white silver smashed through the upper viewing panel of Lucien's dungeon, and wrapped around his neck. The Light shone brighter, but did not burn. It healed the Wigglytuff below, leaving no physical trace of imperfection. The Light brought back all the Pokémon it shone upon, for their remains had been carelessly piled as the slaughter continued, and many of those returned had looks that suggested their reconstituted minds were still struggling to understand they were no longer suffering, or dead, for that matter.

Rosa hovered into the wider chamber, and then looked upwards. A pillar of silver light erupted through miles of rock and dirt, and Rosa rose through roughly half of it before she sensed the height she needed. Lucien came with her, gagging, but not dying, as her whip all but choked him. She liked to think it burned, as well.

She raised both hands, and like a Gothitelle using Psychic, sent her new power out in a wave that eroded the topmost layer of rock over the Arcean base, exposing it to the sky, and effectively creating a new series of tunnels and holes within the Stoney Mountains. Thousands of armored faces
looked up, and stared open mouthed as one of the Imperial Generals hovered above all of them.

While that was indeed unusual, they did not raise their weapons to fire, for floating above the lady General was the unmistakable form of Arceus, pure white, and furious.

You who claim to follow me, and my Light, put down your weapons and acknowledge the madness you have been willingly helping. That, and its implications, brought a few of the Zealots to actually attack their own deity. Their reasoning, as it was shouted, was that the ‘real Arceus’ was gold, not white. Those who raised their Power Staves vanished, in columns of golden flame, and not even ashes remained of them as their Pokéballs fell to the stone ground, unharmed.

The outline of Arceus raised his head then, and a sphere of pure golden Light formed above Rosa's head, in her raised palm. Those below kneeled, and prayed, begging for the mercy of the god they were only half convinced wouldn't just outright burn them all anyway. Those who genuinely repented, and understood why they needed to, did not suffer from the streaks of silvery gold that rained down on the humans below. Those Judged to be unworthy of forgiveness were not so lucky.

The rest of the southern Legion poured into the newly opened base, capturing and ending those who still resisted. The Light in the sky around Rosa began to fade, but not before she heard a final pair of words, just for her.

Well done.

She reunited with her Pokémon then, and while the surge of power was gone, she felt she could manage levitating herself, at least. She knew her power was strong, and unrefined. At least now, there was something to refine. The Legion Teleported their prisoners back home to wherever they were being kept, and then marched on Orre. It took roughly six hours for them to reach it, but the locals were all too happy to rise up from under their occupiers once the army arrived.

From there, the Legion took an earned rest, armed the Orreans, and began the long march south to Texico City.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!