<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>General Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply, Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Pocket Monsters: Ultra Sun &amp; Ultra Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Gladio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Moon (Pokemon), Gladio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Aged-Up Character(s), Fake Science, Woke Feminist Gladion, HBIC Wicke, Metric Fluff-Tons Of Fluff, Ridiculously Cute Good-Byes, Mina Lowkey High On Paint Thinner, Chatfic Crack, The Commencement Of The E-mail Subplot, Vine References For Absolutely No Reason, Deconstructing The Chosen One Trope, Nana Feels Out Of Left Field, Mallow's &quot;Aromatherapy&quot;, More Wild Z-Crystal Shenanigans, Ben Is The Star Of This Chapter, Recreational Drug Use, Gladimoon Communicating Maturely About Their Emotions, Author Is Sick Of Pikachu Getting Special Treatment TBH, Poké Pelago: Aether Paradise 2.0, Because Amnesia, Ugly Alolan-Print Shirts, Save Olivia 2K20, Moon Does Not Understand Flirting, Aloraichu Living Its Best Life With Crayons, Gladimoon Is Communication Goals, Author Fantasizes About Noodles, A Teenager Hiring Another Teenager To Run Social Media Accounts, yeah if you weren't already aware this fic is crack now you know Emotional Video-Calls, Near-Death Experiences In the Desert: The Reprise, Ravening Wolf Packs Don't Play By Battle Rules, Is It Blasphemy To Call A God A Dick If It's Accurate, Hau Exposing Moon In the Group Chat Once Again, Nanu Just Wants A Nap, and he would have had one too if it weren't for those meddling kids, Hau Is MAD Mad, We Finally Finished The Trials!!!, Gladimoon Being DISCOSTANG, no really gladimoon are frickin gross, The Time-Honored Question: Big Spoon Or Little Spoon?, The Penny Drops From Mount Lanakila, Tapu Bulushit, The Only Appropriate Tag For This Chapter Is OOF, Fluff galore, I Wrote Slow-Burn For Gladion's Smile And I'm Not Ashamed Of It, mostly because DIMPLES, Gratuitous References to Avatar: the Last Airbender, Crackfic Aesthetique, Marshadow Likes Horror Movies, Necrozma Deserves Better, &quot;Who Would Win In A Fight&quot;-Styled Questions, Gladimoon Wins Everything, Fluffy Fluffity Fluffing Fluff, Moon Is A Badass, that's it that's the chapter, Divine Sponsorship, The</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Winter Rose

by Scribe34

Summary

As the new year begins, Moon aims to complete her island challenge.

Do you know when I chose you, Moon?
“...when?”
I chose you when you first asked Lillie to be your friend. You brought her a light she had never had before. I knew you would do the same for Alola.
“...okay. Okay— I can't promise you all I'll succeed. But I promise you I'll try.”
It is all we ask of you.

Notes

Hi, welcome to the Conquer the Night universe! If you've been here before, you know where this is going; if not, what are you doing here. Go back to the beginning... or don't, I'm not your mother.

AU Rules of the CTN Universe:

1. THE CHARACTERS ARE AGED UP. Pokémon Trainers may begin a journey as soon as they graduate high school or turn eighteen. This is done because I'm not comfortable writing romance between preteens. Gladion is 19, Hau is 18, Moon is 18, and Lillie is 17. Most of the trial captains are in their twenties; exceptions are Acerola, who is nearly 13, and Sophocles, who is 16. Hapu is nearly 17, and became the kahuna of Poni Island as an exception to the rule because, well... Hapu.
2. THE GAME IS ULTRA MOON WITH ELEMENTS BORROWED FROM SUN, MOON, AND ULTRA SUN. This is spoilers if you haven't read the series but Lusamine became Evil Squid Mom from SuMo; everything else is USUM.
3. MOON AND HAU ARE SECOND COUSINS BY BLOOD. Moon's grandmother was Hala's older sister; Hau's dad and Moon's mom are first cousins. Hau is full Alolan. Moon's mom is Alolan, and her dad is half-Kantonian, half-Unovan.
4. RED AND BLUE ARE MOON'S FRIENDS and while they haven't appeared in person in this fic since the first chapter of QP1: Frangipani, they are still important influences on Moon's childhood and girlhood before she moved to Alola. She considers them her older brothers.
5. ALL TRIALS HAVE TWO TOTEM POKEMON. So far, they are: Gumshoos and Alo-Raticate, Verdant Cavern; Wishiwashi and Araquanid, Brooklet Hill; Alo-Marowak and
Salazzle, Wela Volcano Peak; Lurantis and Tsareena, Lush Jungle; Vikavolt and Togedemaru, Hokulani Observatory; Mimikyu and (shiny) Palossand, Thrifty Megamart; Kommo-o and Drampa, Dragon's Pass. All other Totems will be revealed in the course of this work.

6. TEAM SKULL AND PO TOWN HAVE A DARK HISTORY. Several of the Team Skull grunts, as well as Guzma and Plumeria, have become layered, nuanced characters. Their histories and futures will be covered more thoroughly in *Flowers Grown From Bones*.

7. On a related note **THE AUTHOR IS DOING HER BEST TO INCORPORATE LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS AND THEMES** because even though I'm Mostly Straight, I'm also demisexual (grey/ace spectrum) and there are many people I know and love who are on the LGBTQ+ spectrum who deserve to have representation in fiction so if that does not tickle your fancy then you don't have to read this and you especially don't have to comment. I'll be a thousand percent honest with you: I will straight up delete nasty/mean/homophobic comments, because I am a sensitive flower who will cry at the drop of a hat and I don't have room for that kind of negativity in my life. I haven't had any mean comments yet and I figure this is probably an unnecessary warning because AO3 tends to be a very supportive place for the community; but it never hurts to say something in advance.

This is not an AU Rule but more like an FYI kind of thing: **THE FUTURE OF THIS SERIES AND A GENERAL STATUS OF WHAT I AM CURRENTLY WRITING MAY BE FOUND ON THE “CONQUER THE NIGHT” SERIES PAGE.** Click on where it says Conquer The Night to see the following: endgame pairings, a couple of disclaimers, and the titles of all planned installments in the series. My goal is to finish by the time I hopefully begin graduate school next fall.

Also **WE HAVE A WHOLE ENTIRE DISCORD SERVER DEVOTED TO THIS SERIES!!!!!!!** Seriously, it's amazing. @user HeadlessChicken here on AO3 created and moderates; I think I'm an admin or something because I'm the author. We hang out and shoot the shit, and I post chapter update announcements and direct links to new chapters. I also occasionally include random inspirations pictures and worldbuilding stuff, like a universal Alolan Pokémon Center map. People have made the most AMAZING fanart; user lil-morgi/morgibelle even made the friendship bracelet that Hau gave to Moon on her birthday back in Hibiscus, and sent it to me in the mail!!!! If you would like to join us, please comment to request an invite link. Or I guess you can private-message me on my tumblr account, which is jooniepertree.tumblr.com.

I love all of you so much. Even though we have never met in person, even though you may be miles and states and countries and oceans away, I love you. I've been a college graduate for three years, and I don't have any kind of 9 to 5 job like an Actual Adult. Writing this series and hearing how much you all love it, and how much it's helped you, has given my life meaning despite the fact that I'm not technically being a productive member of society. If my writing can help you to be happy, or even just reduce your grief by a small amount—then it's enough to justify all the blood, sweat, and tears I've put into this. For me, it's enough.

Thank you for being the brightest stars in my sky.

—Sarah (Scribe34)
not from the stars do I my judgment pluck

Chapter Summary

Aether Paradise
***************
Moon, Hau, Lillie, and Gladion prepare to resume their journeys.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Title— Sonnet 14, William Shakespeare
Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: invitations issued by request!!! comment for an invite. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moon was not hungover, because there hadn't been alcohol at the Team Skull party. There probably would have been if they weren't on Aether Paradise, but there was no way that Wicke was about to let a bunch of teenagers drink. Moon thought that Guzma and Plumeria might have had alcohol— Guzma had a cold-thermos he kept drinking out of, and Plumeria stole sips and sat on his lap the whole evening— but they were legally allowed to drink.

So no, Moon was not hungover... but that really didn't explain why she was waking up with a lightly snoring Gladion clinging to her like a Komala.

“Rotom?” she whispered.

“Yeah?” answered her Dex, also in a whisper.

“What time is it?”

“Ten fifty-four a.m., bzzt. The date is January first.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Too early,” said Gladion, his voice only slightly muffled by Moon's shoulder. “Go back t'sleep.”

“I'm like, never asleep this late. The only reason I slept in was because we were up until like three in the morning playing parchesi with Molly, Rogelio, and Almas.”

“Three-thirty. That's seven 'n' a half hours. Average adult needs eight to function. Go back t'sleep.”

“I think you just want to keep snuggling,” teased Moon, reaching over to run her fingers through his hair. Gladion made an annoyed sound, but otherwise didn't try to stop her. “You're way clingier than I thought you'd be.”
After a few moments, she thought he'd actually fallen asleep again, but then he grunted, clearing his throat and turning his head up to stare at her sleepily.

“Lillie's a hugger,” he mumbled. “Or she was, when we were kids. So was Dad. Wicke— sorry, 'Melia— only hugs people when they're upset or when she's upset. Mother hugged us until Dad died, and then she stopped. So I'm used to touching. When nobody's around, I've always got my team out. Null took some time to warm up to me, but now she'll take up two-thirds of whatever bed I'm sleeping on. Imp and Rey like cuddles. Nox doesn't really care because he's a plastic robot duck or whatever, and you saw Ellie.”

“Aww, cute.”

“Couldn't cuddle with the Skulls. Not even Molly 'n' Rogelio. Made me homesick. So I avoided it. Think I'm—” His jaw clicked as he yawned widely, eyes crinkling shut. “—making up for lost time.”

“I will snuggle whenever you want to,” promised Moon.

“I know,” he said simply, turning his face back to her shoulder.

“Are we in your room at the mansion?”

“Mm-hmm. Bed's a damn sight comfier than the one in Medical.” He yawned again. “Don't much like being here, but it's pretty nice with you.”

“Anywhere's nice with you.”

He kept his eyes closed, but the natural pink sleep-flush deepened to scarlet. “Way too early to be cheesy. Go back to sleep.”

“I won't be able to,” said Moon regretfully. “Sometimes I can wake up and nap again, but despite your statistics I thrive on six and a half hours of sleep. I'm awake now.”

He let out a soft sigh before opening his eyes again. “Okay,” he mumbled. “Guess I'll wake up too. Bet 'Melia wants to talk to us anyway.”

“Why?”

“Prolly to help you out with Z-Crystals. Tellin' Lillie 'n' me what to pack for therapy. Hau's invited on principle.”

“Pack for what now?”

He let go of her arm and sat up; so did Moon, intrigued by the conversation. “Therapy.” Another yawn. “Like, the super intense kind. Dunno how she does it, but 'Melia got Lillie 'n' me to agree to it. 'S gonna be like, two months. I'll go to Kanto after that. Whenever the visa comes through.”

“Oh.” It hadn't occurred to Moon that Gladion wouldn't be travelling with them anymore— let alone Lillie, who had been travelling with them since Melemele Island. “Are you doing it here?”

He shook his head. “Mother's therapy is here,” he explained. “Whenever she actually gets around to it. Wicke's putting pressure onto her to get help and shit. I think she might be working something out with Nanu about house arrest. She'll move back over here once she's fully detoxed from Nihilego. Lillie and I are going to the hospital on Poni Island. We're staying with Hapu.”
"I guess I'll see you a few times. Hau and I have a Grand Trial to do with Hapu, after all. And I've got some stuff to ask her about Z-Crystals anyway."

"It'll be long-distance, kind of.” He turned to look at her, green eyes wary. “Are you okay with that? We should figure something out, if you're not.”

“I'm okay with literally everything. Rotom always has an Internet connection, and when you leave for Kanto we can talk with one of those free messaging apps that doesn't use cellular data. Preferably it'll do calls and video calls, too.”

“Yeah. That'll be nice.”

Gladion's voice was soft, and he looked down at his hands where they were twisted with worry over the dark-gray comforter; slowly, he pulled them apart as he lifted his shoulders, rolled them back, and let them drop. Moon interpreted this as a conscious effort to relax, and felt pride well up in her chest. He was doing so well.

“I guess we should get dressed and find some breakfast, then.” Moon pushed the comforter off her own legs and got to her feet, stretching out her arms. “I think I left my bag in Lillie's room... you think she's in there?”

Gladion didn't respond immediately. Moon glanced back and was very surprised to see his gaze focused on her pajama-shorts-clad thighs, drifting downwards. Trinh's words, from the previous day, came back to her: "He thinks he's being subtle as long as you don't see him staring, but the rest of the world exists. He ain't slick. He looks at your legs a lot.”

He blinked and looked up at her, expression suddenly guilty and very, very red. “Sorry.” he mumbled, staring back down at the blanket. His hands twisted back together. “Didn't mean to— yeah. Sorry.”

“It's fine,” Moon assured him. “I, um, kind of had the impression. It's okay.”

“It's rude.”

“It would be rude if you were treating me as just a pair of legs,” she corrected him. “But I'm pretty sure you like the person attached to them, too.”

He nodded.

“And—” This was approaching territory they had agreed not to touch, but she wanted him to be honest. “—um, as long as it's me, and you're the one looking, and you're not looking at anybody else like that, I... am sort of, um, very okay with that?”

He blinked a few times.

“Like, it's flattering,” Moon hastened to clarify. “Because I like you, and you like me, and I like that you like me. It's nice to see. It's nice to know.”

“Oh.” His brows furrowed. “It still seems a little disrespectful.”

“You're one of the least respectful people I know.”

As she thought it would, the jibe made him roll his eyes. “Okay, sure, I'm an asshole, but I'm not a total fuckin' tool. Women aren't commodities designed for my viewing pleasure, and all people are complex and nuanced regardless of gender.”
“I am so attracted to your brain,” Moon informed him, and was delighted to see him go from red to nearly maroon. “I'm going to go find some clothes, and probably use Lillie's bedroom shower unless it's occupied. Um, meet you back here in like twenty?”

“Mm-hmm,” he mumbled, staring at the ground.

Moon ruffled his sleep-mussed hair and left the room, warmth welling up in her heart.

* * * * *

chat: AW, GM, LM, HA, MH

AW : Brunch will be waiting for you in the eastern dining room. Team Skull has been taking their meals there. I would like everyone in this groupchat to meet me in my office— the mansion office, not the complex office— at noon. Gladion and Lillie know where it is.

HA : coolio thx 4 tellin us

MH changed the chat name to Gladion and Lillie Support Squad

MH changed AW 's name to omnipotent and omniscient

MH changed GM 's name to poképharmacist

MH changed LM 's name to pinky mcgee

MH changed HA 's name to bottomless pit

MH changed their name to bookworm

bookworm : MUCH better

poképharmacist : Who let you have admin privileges? That was a mistake.

bookworm : Wow RUDE

omnipotent and omniscient : If this doesn't hinder anyone's ability to identify other members of the chat, I find I don't object terribly.

bottomless pit : its moon u get used 2 it

omnipotent and omniscient : Also, everyone has admin privileges in this group. I expect you will not abuse it.

bottomless pit : no ma'am
poképharmacist changed bookworm 's name to the thorn in our sides
the thorn in our sides changed poképharmacist 's name to meanie >:(
meanie >:( changed the thorn in our sides 's name to rock hunter
rock hunter changed meanie >:( 's name to null's weird dad

null's weird dad : And here I was trying to be nice to you.
pinky mcgee : I could have seen that coming from miles away, honestly.
bottomless pit : yea same
bottomless pit : @gladimoon the 2 of u r GROSS but also v cute, do not change thx
rock hunter : Oh, like you and Lillie aren't also gross?
null's weird dad : ^

Moon filled her plate with some kind of scrambled-egg stir-fry, which had cubes of ham, bits of bacon, chopped mushrooms, shredded potatoes, and diced onions; it was a very greasy-looking breakfast but that just meant it would be tasty. Gladion followed, with a withering stare at her plate — unjustified, because he had a pile of what appeared to be breadsticks with a cup of maple syrup to dip them in— and they sat down at a table across from Molly and Rogelio. Jeremiah and Kimo- moon were a little further down the table with Almas, who was half-paying attention to the conversation and half fiddling with something in his lap.

“How'd y'all sleep?” said Molly, wiggling her eyebrows at Moon.

“Like an absolute log, thanks for asking.”

“And how did Gladion sleep?”

“I dunno, ask him.”

“She wanted juicy details,” laughed Rogelio, as Molly pouted. “You both left at the same time, after all.”

“There's nothing juicy about the details, you would find them boring,” Moon informed them. “We are superbly uninteresting.”

“I dunno, I think you're pretty interesting.”

Both Molly and Rogelio began cackling as Moon's face instantly heated. Gladion was sitting there nonchalantly eating, but as she glared at him he turned to look at her and winked , which was— gah . Moon allowed her brain a few seconds to reboot before turning back to frown at her delicious fried breakfast.
“That was smooth, man,” Hau greeted Gladion, sitting down on Molly's other side; Lillie was next to him, across from her brother. “Always nice to see Moon at a loss for words.”

“I didn't get the memo that it was pick on Moon day.”

Lillie blinked at her. “Why would you get a memo for something that happens every day?”

“Hey!”

Molly whooped, leaning behind Hau to high-five Lillie. “Oh, nice.”

Despite the teasing, Moon was happy to sit with all of her friends and eat. Soft winter sunlight streaked in through tall windows, and haphazard streaks of bubblegum pink, royal blue, and harvest gold paint warmed the otherwise bleak white walls. Gladion didn't quite seem to be awake, eating slowly and frowning down at his plate; Lillie was only a little more alert, as she and Hau had tapped out from the New Year's festivities at about one in the morning. Hau, Molly, and Ki-moon were all quite chipper, as was Moon; but Rogelio, Jeremiah, and Almas shared Gladion and Lillie's lethargy.

“Hey, Al, are you talking to So—”

Rogelio, without looking up from his breakfast, placed a hand over Molly's mouth. “Shh,” he said firmly. “You are loud, and Al is easily embarrassed.”

“Right,” said Molly ruefully. Moon might have easily dismissed the exchange if it were not for the fact that firstly, Molly only backed down from jokes when they were treading really, really sensitive topics; and secondly, Almas looked up at this, glanced around the table, and nodded timidly before looking back down at what was in his lap.

“He's a lot louder over text,” she said to Gladion, as they were making their way through the maze of hallways to Wicke's office. “Like, almost as loud as Molly.”

Gladion's fingers laced through hers. “It's the only place he feels safe being loud. I can relate.”

“You're not loud over text though.”

“Whereas you're always loud, regardless of the medium of communication.”

“You like it,” retorted Moon, lifting her chin so she could look down her nose at him.

“Clearly.” There was a short pause, and then Gladion said quietly, “Almas has been through absolute shit. I'd venture to say even worse than what Lillie or I went through. You can ask him about it yourself— it's not my place to say anything.”

“It must have been really bad, if it's worse than what you went through.”

“Don't get me wrong, my mother is awful. But there's a special place in hell for Almas's birth family. I hope Giratina and Darkrai make them suffer when they die.”

There was an undercurrent of viciousness in Gladion's voice that usually only manifested when he spoke about Faba. When the discussion touched upon Lusamine's abuse it was tempered by a weariness that went to the very soul, but Faba made Gladion angry, and clearly so did Almas's birth family. Moon resolved to ask Molly and Rogelio what would be the best way to ask Almas about it. He seemed like an awfully sweet kid— and his friendship with Jeremiah and Ki-moon reminded her a lot of her own friendship with Red and Blue. They were practically siblings, but
two of the three were dating each other and as such, the third might occasionally be left hanging to dry.

Hau and Lillie caught up with them at Wicke's office door; they were a couple of minutes early but Gladion knocked anyway, pausing only for the answered, “Come in, please” before opening the door and walking in. Wicke was speaking on her phone and tapping on her tablet at the same time. There were four chairs crammed into the room— clearly not a usual occurrence, judging by the unavailable real estate— and to Moon's surprise there were also several Pokémon in the room. A Clefable appeared to be sorting through paperwork on one side of Wicke's desk; an Alolan Ninetales curled up on a bookshelf behind Wicke, cleaning its fur; an Ampharos sat on a small stool next to Wicke's chair, holding a cord that was plugged into the tablet and looking bored; and a Bisharp lurked in the corner, staring at both Lillie and Gladion with malevolent eyes as they walked into the room.

“I don't think that Bisharp likes you,” said Moon under her breath.

“Joy doesn't like anyone, but she hates Mother most of all and she thinks we're evil because we look like her.”

“Is Clefable doing paperwork?”

“Yeah. 'Melia put together a color-coding system ages ago, so people's Pokémon can help as long they aren't color-blind. Red is very urgent, orange only slightly less so, and all the way through yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink, which is the lowest urgency. There's little sticky tabs on all the paperwork. Alouette sorts incoming files for her.”

“What about the other two?”

Lillie pointed at the Alolan Ninetales. “Justinian doesn't help. He thinks he's too pretty to work.”

“Tay tay nye,” said the Ninetales smugly.

Lillie rolled her eyes. “And Nikola charges Wi— sorry, Amelia's things.” The Ampharos nodded briefly and let out a soft sigh.

Wicke abruptly hung up the phone. “She also assists me with some physical therapy needs,” she said briskly, as though she'd been participating in the entire conversation. “With all the work I do, I am quite often prone to stress headaches and muscle tension. Nikola was trained here at the Paradise to perform transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation therapy. It's not painful. A very light electrical current is run through the tensed muscles. Usually it will get worse for a few moments, but then the heat from the current loosens everything. It's treating a symptom and not a cure, but until things calm down a bit I don't really have the time for anything else.”

“Which is literally what you've been saying for the last seven years,” pointed out Lillie with a frown. “You really should take better care of yourself.”

Wicke merely smiled. “I'll work on it,” she said, in a tone that sounded quite sincere to Moon but at which Gladion and Lillie both narrowed their eyes. “Anyway, I have penciled you in for a twenty-minute meeting, after which I must take a video call from the president of the our branch in Kalos. So, to begin with— your plans from this point.”

“Well, Moon and I are finishing the island challenge,” said Hau, glancing at Moon. “And Moon's got her Z-Crystal thing, for Necrozma.”

“Indeed.” Wicke's head tilted slightly— questioningly— at Gladion. “Shall I?”
He shook his head. “Lillie and I are doing therapy,” he said, a bit brusquely. “Arceus knows we fucking need it.”

Lillie nodded. Hau didn't seem surprised; Lillie had probably already told him, as Gladion had told Moon.

“I know you and Hau are both eager to set out,” said Wicke, looking at Moon. “Would you mind dropping Gladion and Lillie off at Kahuna Hapu's home... either tomorrow, or the day after? When are you planning on leaving?”

Moon hesitated. She wanted to start getting the rest of the Z-Crystals— there was a soft, aching need inside her to help, to make things right for Necrozma. At the same time, she wouldn't see Gladion or Lillie very often for the next few months, and it would be nice to have a little more time with them. “The day after tomorrow,” she decided. “If that's okay with you, Hau?”

“Fine by me.”

“Thank you. That gives everyone a little more time to get their things together.” Wicke nodded, lips pursing. “Now, will you need any assistance with the Z-Crystals from Aether? Is there anything we could provide that would help you?”

It was a generous offer, but Moon only had one thing in mind. “Yeah, actually. Um, so did Lillie ever tell you how I ran into Dr. Colress on Route Eight, and he had like this neat scanner thingy that could pick up Z-Crystals and unusual Pokémon auras and stuff like that?”

“She mentioned your meeting, and I already knew about the scanner. Dr. Colress splits his time between the Route Eight facility and the Route Sixteen facility; they are both isolated in nature, which is what he prefers. I believe he has a spare scanner, if that is what you are asking about?”

“Yeah. I've got a general idea where to look for the Z-Crystals and so on, but once I get to a place I need to be able to narrow it down.”

“I will get in touch with him directly. A courier should be able to bring it by the end of the day. Is there anything else you need?”

Moon found herself almost uncomfortable under the intensity of Wicke's gaze. There was still a slight smile on her face, as always; but it seemed as though she were waiting for an answer to a question that hadn't been asked.

“I don't think so,” she said finally. “If I need anything I'll let you know.” An idea popped into mind. “Is there anything you need from me?”

One of Wicke's eyebrows rose. “There might be. I understand you are acquainted with Kanto's Professor Samuel Oak.”

“I guess being the neighbor's annoying kid who tags along after your grandson and his soulmate everywhere is kind of an acquaintance, yeah.”

“I'm sure the Professor doesn't see it that way,” said Wicke, though the corners of her mouth curled in amusement. “I doubt that Gladion has any special requests regarding his planned journey to Kanto—”

“What?” said Lillie and Hau in unison.

“I'm doing the Gym challenge, catch up,” said Gladion, a lazy smirk drifting onto his face.
“—but I would like to ask you to make the introduction anyway,” continued Wicke, seamlessly speaking over Hau's and Lillie's indignation. “Having access to Professor Oak's experience and knowledge and more importantly, his resources, may greatly aid Gladion while he is there. It would make my mind easier to know that he is taken care of, in some small way.”

“I can't promise you anything,” Moon warned her. “Professor Oak has always been... not crotchety, exactly, but terse. He has a soft spot for Blue that's extended to Red. He kind of tolerates me, probably because he knew I wasn't going to bug him about getting a Pokémon. Because I couldn't afford one. Sorry, that's irrelevant. The point is that it would be smarter for me to ask Blue to ask his grandad. Better results.”

“I wouldn't complain about a connection with a widely respected gym leader, either.” Wicke's gaze was narrow. “Gladion would be the one making the connection, but he and I both know that socializing and maintaining professional relationships is more my area than his. I have some ties to Silph Co. through R&D, but I'd like to cultivate a trade of knowledge with Samuel Oak on behalf of the Aether Foundation.”

“Oh, so this is like business business. Yeah, I should definitely ask Blue first. He majored in Pokébio and he's technically a scientist as well as a Gym leader, but he's also way more a people person than his grandad. Red is socially hopeless.”

“You really don't have to,” muttered Gladion. “Like, sure, do it for Wicke or for Aether. But you don't have to mention me.”

“No, I kind of have to,” said Moon, turning to look at him. “Red and Blue are pretty much my older brothers, and if you're doing a gym challenge you're going to see both of them eventually. If I don't tell them my boyfriend is coming to Kanto to do a gym challenge, they're going to lose their collective shit at me. I've been on the receiving end of both of them being mad at me, but never at the same time.”

Gladion blushed violently as Hau, Lillie, and Wicke all stifled laughter. “Um— sure, whatever.”

“I'll shoot him a note, no biggie. I bet you anything they'll volunteer to meet you at the airport.”

He sighed. “Should I expect the shovel talk?”

“Probably, but Blue is a twig and Red looks scarier than he actually is. You have nothing to worry about, unless they invite you for dinner and Red is cooking. Then you know you've fucked up, because if Blue is actually allowing him to cook then they're legit trying to kill you.”

“As enlightening as this insight into perhaps two of the world's most famous Trainers is,” said Wicke dryly, “it is no longer entirely relevant to the discussion at hand. Feel free to pass out my contact information to any of them, and do ask if you may pass theirs on to me. I assure you I will be a terribly well-behaved and charming business associate.”

“Yeah, I can do that. I'll get back to you soon.”

“Thank you.” Wicke studied her for a few moments, then got to her feet and turned around, taking a ring of physical keys from the pocket of her skirt. The Alolan Ninetales shifted on the cabinet he was sitting on, moving his voluptuous tails to reveal a keyhole and a numeric dial—a combination safe with an additional lock.

“It does not come close to what the two of you are owed, for the physical assistance in Ultra Space and the escort on Poni Island—not to mention the friendship and love you have given to Gladion
and Lillie or even my own personal gratitude for services rendered,” she said, one hand covering the dial as she turned it; the Ninetales’ tails flicked back down to block Moon from seeing the combination, but she heard the lock click. “But you may consider it a down payment.”

The cabinet opened, and closed. Wicke turned around, with two closed fists; she leaned across the desk, held one hand each out to Moon and to Hau, and opened her hands.

“Holy shit that's a Master Ball,” blurted out Hau.

“Indeed. The Aether Paradise keeps about twenty on hand; we use them for any Pokémon that cause major destruction when injured. A beached Wailord, for instance, can and has flattened palm trees and small houses. The Geodude, Gible, and Trapinch families can all cause earthquakes, and we have long since relocated any Electric-types from anywhere near the vicinity of Po Town. The Magby and Magmar of Wela Volcano have periodically caused fires on Routes Five and Six. If we cannot quell a hurt Pokémon any other way and lives are in danger, we use a Master Ball to contain it, later releasing the Pokémon inside. Aether uses them as rescue tools, but I know that Master Balls are highly prized among Trainers for their failsafe ability.”

“Aren't they super expensive though?” Moon took the offered Master Ball anyway, carefully tucking it into her belt.

“They are,” said Wicke neutrally. “As long-standing customers, Silph Co. has offered us a considerable discount. However, I could give you each ten fully-priced Master Balls, and I would not consider it enough to repay the debt I owe you.”

Moon frowned, opening her mouth, but Hau beat her to it. “Look, you say we've done a lot for you and we have, but some of it's been for us, too. Nobody asked Moon to give away her Z-Crystals, and nobody asked either of us to be friends with Lillie or Gladion. We do that stuff because we want to. It's a privilege to be friends with Lillie and Gladion. It's a privilege to be with Lillie. You don't owe us anything for that.”

“Honestly we should be paying you,” joked Moon, squeezing Gladion's hand. “For some reason, your kids seem to like spending time with weirdos like us.”

There was a pause, as she registered what she'd said.

“Oh my god, I'm so sor—”

“If you apologize for that, I'm taking back the Master Ball.”

Wicke's voice was so soft that Moon wouldn't have heard it if the older woman didn't have such a powerful command of the room. Her eyes blazed with fire and something like joy—and even what seemed to be glittering, unshed tears.

“Anyway, this has been very productive,” she continued, a little louder. “But it's three minutes until my phone meeting, so I must ask you to leave now. Thank you for your help. I will likely see you off when you leave. Good afternoon.”

Gladion stood up and hastily ushered Moon out; Lillie was doing the same with Hau. The Bisharp was glaring at Moon now as well; she shrugged helplessly at it before the door closed.

“I feel so bad, I really didn't mean to—”

“Oh my god, would you shut up.”
His arms were around her, so tightly she almost couldn't breathe. Moon vaguely heard Lillie sniffling, and Hau mumbling something that sounded comforting.

“Literally that was the highest compliment you could have paid Wicke,” Gladion informed her. “She would never say it, but we all know she's been more of a mother than fucking Lusamine ever was.”

That was obvious, and it was why Moon had made the joke in the first place; but it hadn't occurred to her that it was such a delicate topic before she'd opened her mouth.

The rest of the day was spent doing laundry and packing. Gladion and Lillie had rather different preparations to make since they would be staying at Hapu's house rather than camping and hiking; Lillie, in particular, seemed to favor the more dressy, feminine clothes she hadn't bothered with while they'd been in the wilds. And Moon was really not prepared for how Gladion, with a scrunched-up and extremely annoyed expression, came into Lillie's room to ask if Moon still had the scarf he'd lent her in the caves of the Vast Poni Canyon.

“U-uh,” managed Moon. Her brain was trying to process the white sweater with rolled-up sleeves, as well as that's a lot of rings why does he have so many rings.

"Why are you talking about me in the third person?” said Gladion, staring at her, and Moon realized she'd spoken out loud. Whoops. “I'm literally right here. Also, I'm trying to decide which ones I like. I started buying them when I was rebelling against Lusamine because she hated them, but then I kind of grew to like them. I took and sold most of them when I ran away, but I guess I left a few of them here.”

There was something almost suspicious in his eyes, and Lillie had retreated to her bathroom to, Moon was sure, laugh in private. Hau, peering over Gladion's shoulder, was grinning widely, and held up one hand as he mouthed, “hands.”

“The scarf?” said Gladion, and Moon saw he was flushed again which meant she was embarrassing him and she needed to stop. She blinked rapidly, thinking back to the scarf.

“I-I think I still have it. Do you need it back?”

“No, Poni Island is very mild.” He coughed, uncomfortable. “I just wanted to be sure I knew where it was. Lillie made it for me when she was a lot younger.”

“You can have it back,” offered Moon, grateful for the opportunity to turn around as she unzipped her backpack. “I won't need a scarf until I get to Lanakila, and frankly I'm probably going to need an entire snowsuit anyway.”

He nodded. “I'd rather keep it safe,” he murmured. “I wouldn't mind you taking it with you, but it's rather old and you have a long, rough journey ahead. I'll make it up to you.”

“It's all good, don't worry about it.”

That earned a noncommittal hum, which Moon interpreted as “say what you like but I've already made up my mind.” It was something she'd heard Wicke do as well. Like mother, like son came to mind.

Of course, she didn't really comprehend how exactly Gladion had made up his mind until he walked into the bedroom that Rogelio and Almas were sharing, where Moon, Molly, Rogelio, Cassie, Jeremiah, Ki-moon, Almas, and the purple-haired girl named Raquel were hanging out and playing parchesi. Or rather, Moon, Molly, Jeremiah, and Raquel were playing parchesi. Rogelio,
with Ki-moon's assistance, was hanging up almost an entire new wardrobe's worth of clothes in the closet with a slightly dazed expression on his face. Almas was lying on his bed with a small video game system in his hands, clearly listening to all of the joking and screaming if the little smile on his face was anything to go by; and Cassie was on her phone, looking considerably less amused. Moon had already come to learn that this didn't mean she was annoyed. Cassie, much like Gladion, was prone to what Moon had often heard termed “resting bitch face.”

Gladion knocked, an apprehensive expression on his face; he was holding a shopping bag with the logo of one of the stores in the Paradise mall— the same mall to which they'd taken Rogelio earlier, to buy some nicer clothes in preparation for the not-seduction of Jack. Rogelio had been surprisingly amenable to the plan, even though it was (in Moon's opinion) a shitty plan. And he hadn't been the only one to go shopping, either; all of the Team Skull kids had some new things. They tended to stick to the monochrome palettes as Gladion had done originally, but now there were a few splashes of color. Molly's new high-top sneakers in electric lime; a terracotta-colored sweater that was too long in the sleeves for Ki-moon and made him look like a pouty Torracat; and slender lilac jeans that fit Cassie perfectly.

“Did I forget a bag?” said Rogelio apprehensively, eyeing Gladion's bag with a wary expression.

Gladion glanced down at the bag in question, as though he'd forgotten he was holding it; and promptly flushed. “No. Um— this is... for Moon.”

He mumbled her name almost inaudibly but her heart still skipped a beat. “Oh,” she managed.

“Is it lingerie?”

“Jeremiah!” chorused six exasperated voices, as Moon's face heated into a blush to match Gladion's.

“Because I'm very not into that. Moon's pretty and all, but I really donot swing that way.”

“Would you shut up,” hissed Ki-moon, grabbing Jeremiah's ear and pinching it so that Jeremiah let out a wounded yelp. “You don't just fucking ask questions like that, they only started dating all of a couple days ago!”

“The fuck?” said Raquel, frowning. “A couple of days ago?”

Molly rolled her eyes. “They only admitted it a couple of days ago, but they've basically been dating for like... well, I dunno, actually.”

“When Moon got lost in the desert,” said Rogelio placidly.

“We were barely talking at that point,” protested Moon, though it was hard for her to hear herself over the thudding of her heart in her ears.

“I'm sure none of this is relevant,” said Gladion, his tone more than a little cold; but he held the bag out to Moon. “Here.”

She took it and he turned to leave, but she reached out and wrapped her hand around his ankle. “Stay and hang out,” she said, smiling up at him when he turned to look at her. “I don't get to spend time with these guys very often, and we're both leaving the day after tomorrow.”

“I've spent enough time with them in fucking Po Town, thanks,” snarked Gladion, but the bite was taken out of the remark when he sat down against the wall next to the door. There was some distance between him and Moon, which was probably because he was still embarrassed over the
lingerie question.

“Open it,” said Molly. “If it is lingerie, I actually do want to see it.”

“Oh my god, it's not going to be lingerie.” Moon rolled her eyes, reaching into the bag.

“How do you know?”

She proved herself correct when her hands brushed something soft and woolly, and she immediately knew what it was, drawing out first a scarf and then a hat and mittens. The yarn used to make them was primarily an eye-searing shade of red, but there were streaks of other colors that complemented it: magenta, violet, orange, gold, and even a bit of warm, soft green.

“Oh my god, their faces,” said Jeremiah in a loud whisper. “That's like, the softest shit I've ever seen in my life.”

“You are the reason I'm going to end up in jail,” snapped Gladion, the flush darkening once more. “Because I'm going to murder you, and I will string your dead body up on the Aether flagpole.”

“I'll help you,” muttered Ki-moon.

“Hey!”

Moon rubbed the soft yarn between her fingertips for a few moments, marveling in the braid-like texture of knitted material and the nice colors.

“It's cute that it's mostly red,” remarked Molly nonchalantly.

“Why?”

“That's his favorite color.”

Moon had already known this, but the glare that Gladion shot Molly's way told her that it had probably actually been a factor in the purchase decision. She lifted the hat, pulling it on over her hair and ears; then she wrapped the scarf around her neck and pulled the mittens on, surprised and pleased to discover that they were combination mittens, with a large mitten pocket over the fingers that could be buttoned back to reveal fingerless gloves.

“They're really nice,” she said, feeling a lump rise to her throat as she looked at Gladion. “Thank you.”

He nodded once.

Moon hesitated— but she didn't want to ask him for anything else, didn't want to embarrass him any further in front of the others. She just smiled down at the tassels on the scarf, running them between her fingers.

“You look nice.”

It was barely audible, but the hush that fell over the room after was so tangible that she could not dismiss the compliment as merely hearing things. She peeked up at Gladion again, saw that he was watching her; and a frisson of warmth went from her spine to her toes.

“Thank you,” she said again, offering him a smile.

“I love love,” announced Molly, and Gladion looked as though he were about to start yelling but
Moon set the bag down and scooted across the floor without standing to where Gladion sat, winding her arms around his waist and pressing her forehead into his collarbone.

After a few moments she felt him return the favor, and then there was a brief, fleeting pressure on the crown of her head which caused the entire room to explode with noise. Molly and Jeremiah were both screaming with excitement, with Ki-moon and Rogelio trying to calm them down.

“Quit being assholes,” said Gladion flatly. “We're acting just like any other couple.”

“To be fair,” pointed out Cassie, “Molly does the same thing every time she sees Jeremiah and Ki-moon being affectionate.”

“Yeah, but Jeremiah feeds off that shit, whereas it just annoys me. Let me do stuff without making it into a big fucking deal.”

It was too warm inside to continue to wear the hat and scarf and mittens, so she let Gladion go and began peeling off the mittens.

“I still have your beanie,” he said to her quietly, ignoring the conversation around them— Rogelio and Ki-moon having taken over Gladion's half of the argument for him. “The one you lent me in the caves. Do you—”

“You can keep— oh my god, I interrupted you, I'm sorry.”

Gladion huffed out a soft laugh. “Better,” he murmured, meeting her eyes. “You're doing better at that. Do you want the beanie back?”

Moon shook her head as she unwound the scarf from her neck. “No, you can keep it.”

His eyes swam with some intense emotion, and Moon was unable to look away. Then he lifted one hand, reaching out, and brushed his fingertips along her cheek.

“Moon, are you still playing?” called Raquel.

“U-um, yeah,” stammered Moon. “Just a sec.” She lowered her voice again. “Will you stay?”

“If you want me to.”

She nodded, offering him a smile as she pulled the hat off. “I kind of like having you around.”

It was cheesy and he snorted, but a tiny smirk lifted the corner of his mouth as well. “Same here.”

Moon was going to die, but that was fine. It was all fine.

She managed to turn her attention back to the game, and Gladion went over to sit on Almas's bed and talk quietly; but from time to time she could still feel his eyes on her. She always turned to smile at him, when she felt it; and she always caught him just as he was looking away, a seemingly permanent pinkness to his cheeks even while he seemed to be relaxed and comfortable.

They had tomorrow, but the day after that they would be going their separate ways. It would be a lie to say she wasn't nervous about the distance; but at the same time there was an aspect of Gladion-over-text that she liked just as much as she did Gladion-in-person. He was a little more soft, a little more awkward in person— just like Moon, frankly. But Gladion-over-text was confident, sarcastic, dryly funny— and often unabashedly honest, in a way that made her heart flutter. She would miss the hugs and the soft pecks pressed to cheeks and forehead; but that didn't
mean her feelings would wane. Absence was said to make the heart grow fonder; and Moon was also quite sure that distance would make their bond grow stronger.

* * * * *

[Draft] To: garyo@pmail.co.kan, satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
RE: Stuff I have something to tell you Recent experiences Life and near-death updates

Hey, we haven't talked in a while

So recently I've been through some shit

I don't think I'm okay. Like I'm kind of okay, but also kind of not okay, and I'm not really sure which it is at any given moment

I went to fucking space and it was the worst kind of neat when we weren't trying not to die really weird

I don't know how to write this goddamn email, I used to be able to tell you guys anything

I have a favor I need to ask you

Low-key I have a boyfriend now and I need advice about boys, which I'm sure Blue has in spades

I miss feeling like your little sister. Like when I spent time with you I always felt safe and happy. I wouldn't change things, I wouldn't go back at all. But I miss feeling safe. I don't know when that stopped

I'm writing half about me and half about like a business propositiony thing for the professor from the Aether Founda
Writing sleepy cuddly Gladion is DEATH it is DEATH I am D Y I N G

“Think I'm— making up for lost time.” “I will snuggle whenever you want to.” “I know.” —nO

“Gladion's voice was soft, and he looked down at his hands where they were twisted with worry over the dark-gray comforter; slowly, he pulled them apart as he lifted his shoulders, rolled them back, and let them drop. Moon interpreted this as a conscious effort to relax, and felt pride well up in her chest. He was doing so well.” —boy has already made a Very Good Start on his mental health recovery

“'Okay, sure, I'm an asshole, but I'm not a total fuckin' tool. Women aren't commodities designed for my viewing pleasure, and all people are complex and nuanced regardless of gender.' 'I am so attracted to your brain,' Moon informed him, and was delighted to see him go from red to nearly maroon.” —I love writing Woke Feminist Gladion, god bless

Gladimoon flirting through changing their names in the OT4 + Wicke groupchat— I am so SICK OF THEM SDJSADJKDSJKDSAJK

“Gladion was sitting there nonchalantly eating, but as she glared at him he turned to look at her and winked, which was— gah.” —could you like, Not

“I didn't get the memo that it was pick on Moon day.” “Why would you get a memo for something that happens every day?” —khjadjasdjadkjfaejkjal LILLIE

“Almas has been through absolute shit. I'd venture to say even worse than what Lillie or I went through. You can ask him about it yourself— it's not my place to say anything.” —Gladion is a Good Bean who does not out people

I'm not totally sure who would be in charge of Poké-hell, which I would argue is totally a thing based on 1) the existence of Ghost-types and 2) extremely vague and nebulous canon parallels between Arceus the Universal Creator and Judeo-Christian mythology; but I would imagine that it's Giratina, as a part-Ghost (afterlife, yanno), would be part of it; and Darkrai, who does nightmares and therefore makes people suffer. Not necessarily maliciously; it's just what he does. There isn't really a Pokémon of death; that's kind of dark for a children's video game series.

Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation therapy (TENS) is totally a real thing but I definitely also made up the science because I'm too lazy to look up how it actually works. I think I maybe mostly had it right but I'm not sure.

Lillie: Wicke you should take care of yourself
Wicke: HAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH
Wicke: hey can you vaguely mention Gladion to your famous friends from Kanto Moon: yes of course I will write a peer-reviewed scholarly article on Why Gladion Is The Best. twenty pages? twelve-point font? single-spaced? mcfuckin DONE

“You have nothing to worry about, unless they invite you for dinner and Red is cooking. Then you know you’ve fucked up, because if Blue is actually allowing him to cook then they’re legit trying to kill you.” — BAHHAHAHAHAH

oh hey we get the Master Ball!!!! NICE

MOON JOKES ABOUT GLADION AND LILLIE BEING WICKE'S KIDS AND THEN IT TURNS OUT THAT WICKE IS SO GODDAMN FLATTERED SHE ALMOST STARTS CRYING WHAT THE FUCK WHY DO I WRITE THINGS THAT MAKE ME CRY

Hi so wearing a long-sleeved button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up is A Look and also Gladion wearing a lot of rings is A Look and basically I should start a Gladion fashion Pinterest board or something

Hau in the background, unnecessarily reminding Moon about the fact that she really likes Gladion's hands lmao

Gladion: hey so I need that scarf back, it has sentimental value to me and it was just a loaner
Moon: no problem here you go
Gladion: in exchange here is an entire hat, scarf, and mittens that match, and are mostly in red because I like seeing you in my favorite color
Moon: what
Gladion: what
I know some of you may be interested in the whole “How Rogelio gets Jack to switch sides” thing but uhhh... that's gonna be in Flowers Grown From Bones b/c it overlaps with Winter Rose, Weedkiller, and Highlights from the Cherry Blossom Front (and also continues after those three events)

JEREMIAH YOU CAN'T JUST SAY THINGS LIKE THAT AKHDSKLADKSLADS KI-MOON COLLECT YOUR MAN

“You are the reason I'm going to end up in jail. Because I'm going to murder you, and I will string your dead body up on the Aether flagpole.” “I'll help you.” — in lieu of collecting his man, Ki-moon has elected to throw him to the wolves because they have that kind of relationship lmao

Molly, Jeremiah and the author: HELL YEAH SOFT GLADIMOON INTERACTIONS
Gladion and Moon: please stop we're so tired

“Absence was said to make the heart grow fonder; and Moon was also quite sure that distance would make their bond grow stronger.” — would someone please make me stop, that was cheesy as hell
but thy eternal summer shall not fade

Chapter Summary

Ancient Poni Path, Seafolk Village
*********************************
Moon and Hau drop Lillie and Gladion off at Hapu's house before heading to Seafolk Village to finally take on Mina's trial.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title— Sonnet 18, William Shakespeare

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com if you'd like to pm me for any reason but haven't yet joined the...
...Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord!!! comment for an invite link and someone (usually me, but other nice people have done it as well) will send you one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whenever Moon rode with Gladion on Charizard-back, she either kept her eyes closed or firmly glued to Rotom. She had to see to navigate sometimes when she was alone, but he had taken that on for her as they had travelled together.

Wicke had gotten Ride Pagers for Gladion and Lillie at some point; and yet he was still behind her, arms wrapped firmly around her waist. Moon had her eyes closed, trying to focus on that feeling instead of the vaguely unpleasant sensation of a nervous stomach. Hau and Lillie had elected to do the same with Hau's Charizard.

The nerves had to do with the height of their travel. They were completely unrelated to being mildly upset over the separation. Completely, utterly unrelated.

Tap, tap; the light pressure on her leg told her they were coming down for the landing. It was a flight of about twenty minutes from the Aether Paradise to Hapu's home, and Moon had spent nineteen and a half of them with her eyes squeezed shut.

Charizard landed, with several soft thuds as it took a few steps forward. Moon opened her eyes and saw Hau helping Lillie off, and Hapu waiting at the door of her home.

“Here.”

Gladion, unconcerned about things like batophobia, had already disembarked the Charizard and now held his hand out, a friendly offer. Moon took his hand and swung her leg over the saddle, intending to slide off; but Gladion's free hand curved abruptly around her waist and did most of the work, pulling her into close proximity.

“Hi,” said Moon, blinking up at him.
“Hi.”

He let her go and they unloaded Gladion's backpack, as well as a suitcase, from the cargo straps; Moon's backpack remained where it was. Hau had swung Lillie's backpack onto his own back and was carrying her suitcase one-handed, despite her protestations; Hapu, amused, held the door open as they went inside.

Neither of them said much as they went about settling Gladion in. Because he and Lillie were going to be at Hapu's for rather longer-term than usual, Hapu had done them the courtesy of preparing two beds in opposite corners of the room, with curtains hanging from the ceiling and drawn for privacy. Gladion set his suitcase and backpack down and flopped backward onto the bed for a moment with a sigh. After a few moments, Moon followed sedately, sitting rather than lying down.

“Seems comfy,” she remarked. “You'll sleep well, eh?”

“Mmm.”

It wasn't a distinct answer but there was agreement in the tone of it, and Moon let out a sigh.

“Shouldn't leave the Charizard unattended,” she mumbled. “They get antsy when they have to wait.”

“True.”

Gladion got to his feet and followed Moon back outside. Hau and Lillie had the same idea, and were waiting for them along with Hapu, who stuck her hand out for Moon to shake.

“I would like to thank you once more for the service you have performed for Alola in your dealings with Necrozma,” she said seriously. “And I wish both you and Hau luck as you challenge Mina. You will, in all probability, find her trial quite easy; but it is fairly time-consuming as it involves travel.”

“Sounds fun.”

“You don't like flying though,” Hau reminded her.

“Oh... forgot about that.” Moon wrinkled her nose. “Damn.”

Hapu offered a small smile as the rest of them chuckled. “I shall leave you to make your farewells,” she said, walking back toward the house and lifting one hand in a wave as she went.

Moon glanced at Gladion, then turned to Lillie. “Hey, come here a second.”

Lillie raised an eyebrow, but followed Moon away from the boys.

“Are you talking shit about us?” called Hau, grinning.

“Only you!” retorted Moon, making him laugh. She turned to Lillie. “Okay, I only brought you over here because if I say this in front of either your boyfriend or mine, one or the other is going to try and hug me and I won't be able to get the rest of the words out because I will literally cry.” She'd thought this over quite a lot on Charizard-back, trying to distract herself from the height. “And also, this is going to be totally, stupidly sappy. Like, you're going to be so grossed out. But, um.”
Lillie waited, patient as always; and that was what Moon admired about her.

“You're kind of my hero,” she said finally. “Like— I just look at you and I think wow, I want to be her. Except for the dating Hau bit, because no offense but ew.”

“None taken.”

“But like, you're really brave, and you've been through such garbage and you've stayed sweet and gentle and positive, and yeah sometimes you make mistakes but so does literally everyone. You work so hard— harder than any of us know, I think. And we've been traveling together now for four islands. It's been really awesome to get to know you and be your friend, and to watch you grow into an even stronger person. And I'm r-really going to miss you.”

She managed to say everything without crying, but her voice cracked on the last sentence and in a flash, a teary-eyed Lillie had gathered her in for a full hug.

“Moon Hawkins, I can't believe you made me cry,” she said shakily. “I was already going to cry, but you've made it so much worse.”

She laughed through the tears. “Sorry.”

“I don't really mind. I'm going to miss you, too. If I'm your hero, then you have to accept that you're mine. You're the first person I ever met who made me want to be different from what I was. And you were so encouraging about everything with Hau, and sometimes we thought it was annoying but—” Lillie inhaled, sighing softly. “Mother wouldn't have been supportive at all. She never liked the idea of me dating or having a boyfriend. So it's been wonderful to feel that people want me to love and be loved.”

“Oh, goddamn it,” mumbled Moon, reaching up to fully wipe her eyes. Lillie laughed quietly. “We'll be each other's heroes, okay?”

“Okay,” agreed Lillie.

They stepped back, and would have walked back over to the boys; but the sight of Hau reaching out for a handshake, followed immediately by Gladion pulling him in for the briefest of hugs, made both Moon and Lillie stop short.

“Wow.”

“Wow is right.” Moon shook her head, amused. Gladion let go of Hau almost immediately, or tried to; but Hau's grin could have stretched from island to island and he yanked Gladion back in for a proper hug. “Okay, we'd better go rescue him.”

As they approached, Moon heard Gladion's voice say softly, “You take care of her.”

“Same to you, man.”

They split back off into “couple pairs” for more private good-byes. Moon, glancing over at Hau and Lillie, was mostly unsurprised to see that their farewell was largely nonverbal.

“Stop staring at them,” muttered Gladion, turning pink.

“I'll stare at you instead, how about that?” Moon batted her eyelashes, exaggeratedly flirtatious; she was quite surprised, therefore, when Gladion went from pink to Cherrim-red, clearing his throat and looking away. “Holy shit, I didn't think that worked outside of the movies.”
He sighed. “A lot of the things you do work on me,” he said, sounding pained.

Moon took a step closer to him, reaching for his hands. “Yeah, same.”

He blinked at her, confused. “When do I ever do anything?”

“Well, anytime you quote Shakespeare at me, for instance. And when you get all cuddly. I might seem cool but I'm like, dying inside. It's great.”

Several more blinks; but then his hands untangled from hers and slid around her waist, pulling her in close.

“Yeah,” said Moon, hating how her voice had gone all funny. “Kind of like that.”

His mouth twitched in the shape of a smile but it was only there for a second. “I'll keep it in mind,” he said gravely. “Um— how often should we talk?”

“Text me literally whenever,” said Moon. “If I'm busy I might not answer right away— you can always ask Rotom what I'm up to as well.”

“Happy to help, bzzt,” her waistline chimed in.

“Shut up, we're having a moment.” Moon patted the Rotom-occupied pocket on her Trainer belt affectionately. “Um, you could call me sometimes if you wanted, too. Even a video call. I prefer those actually, because it's easier to interpret tone when you have facial expressions to look at.”

He nodded. “That's fine,” he murmured. “I don't mind video calls; I'll get to see you.”

“I'll send you an ugly selfie every day, if you miss me that much,” Moon teased him— trying to ignore the way her heart pounded at his words.

“Like you could take an ugly selfie.” He rolled his eyes.

“Th-this is what I mean! About me dying inside, when you do things.”

“You really like compliments.” It wasn't a question.

“Yeah, I do. I always have.” She felt herself flushing. “Usually when I get compliments it's about my brain, or how smart I am or whatever. But you just make me feel nice about existing, or something like that.”

He blinked at her for a few moments; then one of the hands at the small of her back slid up to her neck, pulling her in closer. Moon sighed, letting her head rest on his shoulder.

“Gonna miss you,” she told him.

“Mm.” Nonverbal agreement, again; then the hand on her neck pulled her back a bit. “Stay still for a second, would you?”

“O-kay?”

Her eyes were just about naturally level with his mouth— she was five foot seven and he was only a few inches taller. Moon was slightly alarmed as his mouth drew closer to her face; but then his chin lifted and she felt soft, fleeting pressure on her forehead, breathing out gently and closing her eyes as it repeated once, twice, three times.
“I'm going to work on getting better,” he said. Another forehead kiss, number five. “In therapy. You know. So hopefully the next time you see me I won't be so pathetic.”

“Well, of course I want to see you happy, but I definitely don't think you're pathetic.”

“Gloomy?” he suggested. Forehead kiss number six. “Moody?”

“Yeah, those are both better words. Can I do that?”

Number seven. “Do what?”

“That.”

He leaned back slightly, looking down at her with a shadow of a smile on his face. “Sure, but can you even reach?”

“Okay, first of all, asshole, fuck you. Second of all, come here and bend your stupid head down a bit.”

Gladion snickered, but complied with her request. Moon pushed his bangs out of the way and kissed his forehead a few times. She might have continued, but one of the Charizard lifted its tail and slapped it impatiently down on the ground.

“Sorry,” Moon called, turning to look at it. “Just a little bit longer, sorry.”

“I would wish you good luck,” said Gladion, recalling her attention, “but with your skill, you won't need it.”

“Thank you. You know, I really do like compliments, so it's a good thing that you're aggressively talented at giving them.”

Another forehead kiss, and she began to pull out of his grasp to walk over to the Charizard; but she was abruptly yanked back close, hugged so tight she almost couldn't breathe.

Neither of them said anything, but Moon could feel desperation in his arms. He didn't seem to want her to go, but it went deeper than that.

“I'm only a phone call away,” she reminded him. “Any time, seriously. I'll have Rotom prioritize your calls. Even if you call at three in the morning, it will wake me up.”

Though at three in the morning, it was entirely possible that Moon would already be awake. Since she'd gotten back from Ultra Space, her dreams had been less than pleasant; she'd already told Rotom to shine at night in soft, dim pink. She was trying not to think about it too much, trying not to give it power over her.

He inhaled, shoulders rising; then let it out heavily, relaxing and almost slumping over on her. Then he let go, taking a step back and watching her with wary eyes.

Moon beamed at him— she still probably looked like a mess from crying with Lillie, but she didn't want the goodbyes to be all sad. “See you around.”

“See you.”

Hau was climbing on his Charizard, and Moon followed suit with her own, as they programmed Seafolk Village in for the next destination. Gladion had walked over to stand by Lillie. Moon looked at both of them and saw strength, determination, and outstanding courage; it was the image
that stayed with her when she closed her eyes and let the Charizard launch itself into the air.

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

missing lillie hours: open changed their name to hau do u do

hau do u do: i think its time we revived this chat

the cute one changed their name to rapunzel

rapunzel: I had forgotten this one existed, frankly.

August Green: I kind of wish it had remained forgotten.

hau do u do: >:(

crescent: Well if you're going to do a terrible pun for your chatname you have to take what you get

hau do u do: >>:(

crescent: Increasing the number of eyebrows on your emoticon doesn't actually make it look angrier, it just makes it look like it has four eyebrows instead of two

hau do u do: >>>:(

rapunzel: You could send that kaomoji I showed you instead.

hau do u do: OOOOOH ur so right gimme a second

crescent: Omg Lillie why would you teach him kaomojis

rapunzel: I like kaomojis! They're very cute. (^u^)

crescent: What did you show him though??!

hau do u do: (°.domain°) J ———

hau do u do: it's a dude flippin a table

hau do u do: cuz he mad
August Green: I don't know why I'm friends with you.

hau do u do: hang on I got 1 4 u my dude

hau do u do: ┏∩┐
            (o_o)
            ┗∩┛

August Green: ...

hau do u do: the ol 2-finger salute

August Green: (╯°□°)╯︵ ┻━┻

hau do u do: HECK YEAH

crescent: I don't even know what to say here

August Green: I'm already cringing at myself, there's no need to say anything.

* * * * *

The Charizard swooped down for a landing in front of the Pokémon Center in Seafolk Village, and as usual Moon and Hau went inside to the main service counter to rent out rooms.

“Hi!” chirped the desk clerk. “What can I do for ya today?” She had the Poni Island accent.

“Hi,” answered Moon. “I'd like to rent a single room, if you have one.”

“We've got a few of those. What are y'all in town for?”

Moon indicated Hau. “Oh, we're challenging Mina's trial.”

The desk clerk paused in her work. “Oh,” she said, her tone changing. “I'm not gonna to stop you from rentin' rooms, but I'd advise you to go talk to Mina, 'fore you do that. Her trial involves a lot of travellin', so you might wanna plan out where you're goin' and where you're stayin', and so on.”

Moon and Hau exchanged glances. “Huh, that's what Hapu said too,” said Hau finally. “That's really nice of you, thanks. We'll do that, then.”

“Sure thing. Y'all come back if you need to!”

Mina's house, they were informed by the first person Hau flagged down outside, was a boat resembling a Whiscash— which was easy enough to see. All of the houseboats were designed to look like Pokémon. And sure enough, as they approached the Whiscash-shaped boat, the door opened and Mina walked out of it.

She was speaking on a cell phone and frowning. “—and they're lettin' you do what with the place? Really? Wow, that's... kinda awesome, actually. From what you tell me about it, it could do with a bit of color.” She made eye contact with Moon and Hau, and her eyes brightened. “Oh, speakin' of which, Moon and Hau just got here. I bet they're challengin' my trial this time. What's that?” She paused, then pulled the phone from her ear. “Trinh says good luck, and some rude stuff, but I think she means it friendly.”
“Probably.” Moon shrugged. “That's the kind of relationship we have.”

“Tell her thanks from both of us,” added Hau.

“I figured. She's like that with me, too.” Mina held up one finger and put the phone back to her ear. “They both say thanks. Well, I gotta go, but I'll see if I can't swing by the Paradise tomorrow. I wanna see what y'all have been up to.” Moon was surprised to hear the Poni Island twang peeking through her words; she hadn't ever heard Mina or, for that matter, Trinh use it. “Want me to bring anythin'? I've got some unique stuff, if Ms. Wicke can't get hold of it. Glitter spray? Gold-leaf texture?” A pause. “You're good? All righty then. I'll see you tomorrow. I love you. Thanks. Bye.” She hung up, shoving the phone in her pocket, and grinned at Hau and Moon.

“Did you know you have an accent sometimes?” asked Moon, fascinated.

“Usually only when I talk to Trinh,” admitted Mina; the accent was gone. “We both used to use it because we grew up here, but I trained myself out of it when I went to art school— everyone thought I was a hick. I guess some of the Team Skull kids made fun of Trinh for it too, so she did the same thing.”

Hau frowned. “That's kind of dumb.”

“It is what it is.” Mina shrugged. “Anyway, am I right in guessing the two of you are here to start my trial?”

“Yes, we are.”

“Great. Come inside and I'll explain it to you.”

“You weren't going somewhere?”

Mina shook her head. “Just wanted some fresh air.”

The reason for this became immediately apparent as Moon and Hau walked inside; the strong smells of paint, turpentine, and paint thinner pervaded the entire house. They weren't quite strong enough to make her eyes water, but it was still a bit difficult to breathe.

“Give me a second— I'll open the windows. They're usually open, but it was raining this morning and I didn't want it to come in.”

Once a fresh breeze was rolling through open doors windows, Mina gestured for Moon and Hau to sit down on the sofa.

“So the reason my trial is so complicated is that it's traditionally the last trial with an actual captain,” she said, without preamble. “Some people, like Kahuna Hapu, completed my trial in tandem with the other trials— to save time as she traveled from place to place. Alola has eight trials, seven of which have a captain— you did the one in Dragon's Pass, right?”

“Yeah,” said Moon, nodding. “Why doesn't that one have a captain?”

“Because the Totems guard the Altar. In return, they don't have to answer to a trial captain.” Mina's eyes flickered with amusement. “Did you think the Totems like being told what to do? They're still wild Pokémon, after all.” Her gaze traveled to Moon's Z-Ring. “You would do well to remember that, as you search for the special Z-Crystals. The Tapus have a low tolerance for humankind, but the truly wild Pokémon have even less of one.”
“Truly wild? What does that mean?”

Mina tilted her head to one side. “It’s not that I don’t want to tell you; it’s that I’m bound as a trial captain to keep some of Alola’s secrets. I’ve made a promise not to tell people some things, and I don’t break promises.”

It was a point that Moon had never considered, in her constant gripe about not being told things; at any rate, she couldn’t argue with that.

“Anyway,” said Mina, taking Moon’s silence as the agreement it was, “I should explain my trial. Like I said, there’s eight trials, seven of which have a captain. This is a lot like the format of other regions— eight Gyms with badges you have to earn in order to challenge the Elite Four. Until recently, with the building of the Pokémon League close to completion, the island challenge paralleled a traditional gym challenge in every way, with two exceptions: first, the Grand Trial at the end of each island challenge; and secondly, the lack of a trial captain battle for each trial.”

“How does that relate to your trial?”

Mina smiled. “My trial consists of battles with me and all the trial captains you’ve already faced,” she said simply. “We each have a flower petal, in a different color. You must fight each captain and collect their petal, and return when you have all seven. After that you’ll face the Totem.”

Moon frowned, turning to Hau. “So, that’s Ilima, Lana—”

He nodded. “Kiawe, Mallow, Sophocles—”


“Right up your alley, too.” Hau nudged her. “You’re the battle whiz, and all.”

“So are you,” said Moon, firmly insistent on giving that due credit— she had seen Red insist on the same for Blue so often that it was nearly ingrained. “We’re both gonna do awesome.”

“Challengers can take on the gym leaders in any order,” added Mina placidly. “I’m right here and currently free, so if you want to battle me you can go ahead and do that. Or you can come back later. Up to you.”

“I’ll battle you now,” decided Moon. “Hau?”

“Same here. Fire-water-grass to see who goes first?”

“Sure.”

Moon won, with fire to Hau’s grass; and Mina led them out the back door to a floating, circular wooden dock. Tall, slender poles stood up at the sides of the dock; a quick count told Moon that there were thirteen poles. The seventh one, at the far end of the dock, was partially concealed by a pedestal that looked exactly like the ones in Ten Carat Hill and Dragon’s Pass.

“I’m guessing this is where we fight the Totem, eventually,” she said, gesturing.

“How did you know,” deadpanned Mina. “Usually it’s a bit more... ah, festive, than this. But you did come in the winter. Most people who do an island challenge don't make it here until spring is well underway, during which time it's much prettier. But this will also do as a place to battle. Are you prepared?”
Moon and her team had barely trained since coming back from Ultra Space; but having beaten the Dragon's Pass trial, as well as Necrozma— not once, but twice— she was fairly confident she would be okay. And she'd trained specifically with Kate a little bit, too.

“I'm ready,” she answered, picking out Kate's ball.

Mina smiled, and sent out a Mawile. Moon hastily tucked Kate's ball back into the appropriate slot and brought out Hero instead.

“Hero, use Bulldoze!”

“Hyacinth, Sucker Punch!”

The little Mawile was fast— and not only because of the nature of Sucker Punch, which always went first. Hero wasn't exactly slow, but she was big, and also weak to Dark-type moves. It didn't take her out, because she was tanky; but it did enough damage that Moon was very, very grateful when Hero's Bulldoze promptly one-shot the Mawile.

“Very nice,” said Mina appreciatively, sending out a Granbull. “Though it's to be expected, since you've already gone through the Vast Poni Canyon. Venus, use Earthquake!”

Hero definitely didn't have enough left in her to make it through an Earthquake. Moon recalled her fainted Metagross and weighed her options.

She decided on Kate, in the end; the type advantage was just something she couldn't ignore. “Does Granbull learn Earthquake naturally, or do you need a TM for it?”

“I have the TM. Venus, another Earthquake!”

“Kate, use Toxic!”

It was dangerous to spend a turn setting up her real move; but Kate surprised her by simply hopping up to hover in the air, thereby negating the effects of Earthquake. Moon was thus able to deliver an overpowered Venoshock, defeating the Granbull.

“I have one more,” said Mina, withdrawing the ball in question from her pocket. “All seven of the gym leaders you face will use three Pokémon apiece.” She sent the Pokémon out; it was a Ribombee.

“Kate, use Toxic again!”

“Clover, use Psychic!”

That was super-effective, and Moon winced as the much faster Ribombee took Kate out before she could even try to attack. On the bright side, she had just the girl for Bug-types.

Mina's eyes narrowed slightly at the sight of Ariel; and she crossed her arms— the beginning of a Z-Move. Moon hastily began performing her own Z-Move, the steps to Supersonic Skystrike; but Mina was faster: arms out, forward, wrists crossed; hands drawn back and then pushed forward, forming the shape of a heart; then her arms rose and bent inward while one foot lifted as high as her knee.

“Clover, Twinkle Tackle!”

“Ariel, Supersonic Skystrike!”
The collision of the Z-Moves shook the entire floating dock, causing Hau to stumble and yell as he was splashed; but in the end, Ariel was victorious with her type advantage.

“Very nice,” said Mina warmly. She reached into one pocket and withdrew something small and pink. “Here's the Pink Petal. Keep it safe.”

“Thank you.”

Mina healed both of their Pokémon, and Hau stood up, damp and slightly breathless, to take Moon's place. She was unsurprised when he sent out Ollie first; the Flareon was a good counter for Mina's Mawile. The trial captain's Granbull, however, took Ollie down quickly. Hau didn't have any natural counters for Fairies, having picked up neither a Steel-type nor a Poison-type; he would have to power through the trial on sheer strength, as Moon had done for several of her trials. He sent out Poppy next, quickly overpowering the Granbull with Sparkling Aria; and when Mina's Ribombee appeared he, as Moon had done, gave the order for Poppy to use her Primarium Z-Move, Oceanic Operetta.

As a result, all three of them (as well as Poppy and the fainted Ribombee) were not just splashed but totally drenched at the end of the battle.

“Well done.” Mina recalled Ribombee and crossed the dock to shake his hand.

“You did better than me,” called Moon, standing up to wring the water out of her shirt. “You beat her with two Pokémon, and it took me three.”

Hau considered that for a few moments; then a slow, warm smile crossed his face. “Huh, I totally did. Thanks for pointing that out.”

“Anytime, dude.”

Mina smiled. “And here is a Pink Petal for you, as well.”

Hau's Pink Petal was identical to Moon's. “Are they real petals?” she asked Mina.

“This isn't my full team,” said Mina, indicating the three Pokéballs on her belt. “I also have an Alolan Ninetales, a Wigglytuff, and a Comfey, which is the answer to your question. Comfey makes the petals for me, and I hand them out to the other trial captains. I'm not sure if they're real or not.”

“If Comfey makes them, they're probably real,” said Hau sagely. “Comfey are literally made of flowers, after all. So that's one petal down, six to go.”

“The Gym leaders aren't always found at their trial sites. I'm one of the exceptions,” said Mina, indicating the dock. “Ilima lives in Hau'oli City, for instance. I think Kiawe's home is in Paniola Town, and both Lana and Mallow live in Konikoni City. Sophocles does live at the conservatory—he and Molayne share an apartment—but Acerola, obviously, lives at Aether House. So it's up to you to decide where to go, and who to look for.” She paused. “Though I believe Acerola might have, um, taken a vacation from being a trial captain? I'm not sure where you'll find her, but she'll have left someone at Aether House who can tell you where to go, and possibly who to challenge if she's left that duty to someone else as well.”

“Thanks for the advice,” said Moon. She turned to look at Hau. “Want to go back to the Pokémon Center and plan out where we're going next? We can just chill in the café until we decide.”

“Yeah, sounds good. Thanks again, Mina.”
“You’re very welcome.” Mina smiled at them again. She was dripping wet, and the paint and ink that was usually in her hair and on her clothes was running everywhere, including her face; but she didn’t seem to notice the mess. “Have a nice day, and good luck with the rest of the trial.”

Hau coughed. “Sorry about the, uh, getting everyone wet.”

“It happens at least once a trial, don’t worry about it,” said Mina, waving off the apology.

Fortunately, they didn’t have to rent rooms to use the Pokémon Center showers. Moon suggested going back to Hapu’s house, but Hau pointed out, rather sensibly, that they had just finished saying very emotional good-byes to Lillie and Gladion, and it would be counterproductive to go back and do the same thing all over again. She had to admit that he was right.

When they were clean and dry once more, they ordered lunch at the café and settled at one of the tables to discuss their options. Moon had Rotom’s notes app open, as well as the scrap of paper where she’d written down the Z-Crystal locations that the Professors had recommended to her.

“Do you mind coming with me to look for Z-Crystals as well?” she asked him, looking up. “It would save me a lot of time if I looked for them as I went. I have to ask some of the trial captains and kahunas where exactly to look anyway.”

“Nah, I don't mind. It sounds kind of fun. And if I can help you with that deadline, you'll be less stressed out about it.” He grinned.

“I give you shit sometimes, but honestly you’re like the best kind of friend I could be travelling with.”

“I am pretty great,” said Hau, with a laugh when Moon mockingly rolled her eyes, “but then again, so are you. Where do you want to go first?”

Moon considered. “I think I just kind of want to go back around all the islands,” she said finally. “So Melemele first, then Akala, then Ula’ula, and back to Poni.”

“I like that idea. If we go home first we should plan on staying a few days, right?”

“Well, when you phrase it like *that* it is. Arceus.” Hau snorted. “Maybe *I’ll* ask that question, and you can tell them about what we’re doing. Should we call Charizard and talk on the way over?”
“Yeah, sounds good.”

chat: the four musketeers

crescent: So Mina's trial is fun...

rapunzel: Okay, I'll bite. How is it fun?

August Green: They have to go around Alola and battle all of the trial captains.

crescent: WAIT HOW DID YOU KNOW

August Green: Guzma complains about literally everything to do with island challenges and trials, and keeping my mouth shut meant I was privileged enough to hear that rant at least seven times in the twenty months I spent in Team Skull.

hau do u do: (ಠ_ಠ) | —— |

August Green: It stops being as effective when you flip the table over every time you get angry.

rapunzel: ^

rapunzel: In related news, guess what we learned about in therapy today

crescent: Oh good I thought I was going to have to ask if you wanted to talk about that

crescent: Does it have to do with getting angry?

rapunzel: It's related. When you experience the same emotion over and over again, you eventually become desensitized to it.

August Green: Which would explain why Lillie and I both have trouble comprehending why people are so horrified by things that Lusamine did when we talk about them.

rapunzel: We knew it was because we'd just gone through it a lot, but we didn't know that it happens to literally everyone who goes through trauma.

August Green: We have to call it trauma now, by the way. The group therapist says we need to call things what they are and not say that “this is normal” or whatever.

rapunzel: So trauma is trauma, and what Lusamine did to us was abuse, and it still doesn't feel right to admit that but I know that's what it is.

hau do u do: that's amazing

hau do u do: not like, all the depressing crap w/ lusamine. i mean like learning stuff & doing therapy

crescent: Why do you have a group therapist? I thought you were getting separate therapists?
**August Green:** We have separate therapists and a group therapist. There are more people in the group therapy than just Lillie and me.

crescent: Ohhhhh gotcha

**hau do u do:** and ur staying @ hapus house right

**August Green:** Yeah. We're at the hospital right now, though. Our individual appointments are at the same time. We just got done with group therapy. That's going to be twice a week.

crescent: How long does therapy last?

**rapunzel:** Group is ninety minutes, and to begin with the individual appointments will be two hours but they'll decrease as time goes on

**rapunzel:** But that's boring. What are the two of you up to now?

**hau do u do:** we battled mina & got 2 lil pink petally things

**August Green:** “Petally” isn't a word.

crescent changed **August Green**'s name to **petally**

**hau do u do:** LMAOOOOOOO

petally: Really?

crescent changed petally's name to **pedantic**

**rapunzel:** Literally perfect.

**pedantic:** I suppose I can live with this, seeing how it's true.

crescent: Anyway we got lil pink petally things for battling Mina so now we're going to Melemele Island.

crescent: Probably gonna do laundry for a day but then we'll find Ilima and get another lil pink petally thing.

**hau do u do:** we dunno if it's pink tho

**crescent:** Okay that's fair

**pedantic:** So you're flying on Charizard right now?

crescent: Don't worry, I've got my eyes glued to Rotom's screen and I only moderately feel like throwing up
pedantic: I wasn't worried.

rapunzel: He was frowning at his phone with a very worried expression.

rapunzel: Still is, actually.

pedantic: Why did we decide this chat was a good idea again?

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

lunar sun: Really I'm okay, I have my hoodie on and I've pulled it up so I can't see the ocean out of my peripheral vision

brave heart: I wasn't worried.

lunar sun: ...

brave heart: Fine, I was mildly worried but you seem to be doing okay, so I will stop being worried.

lunar sun: It's okay if you worry about me, literally everyone worries about the people they love

lunar sun: I MEAN CARE ABOUT

lunar sun: HOLY SHIT I DIDN'T MEAN TO SAY THAT I'M SO SORRY

brave heart: Did you hear me complaining?

lunar sun: Eye—

brave heart: ???

lunar sun: It's a meme

brave heart: Why.

lunar sun: Shhh just let me have this

lunar sun: ANYWAY disregarding me being cheesy as fuck

lunar sun: I kind of miss you.

brave heart: Telling me you miss me is cheesy as fuck.

lunar sun: Shit u right

brave heart: Unfortunately, I have to go; our therapists are here, and mine wants me to turn off my
From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
To: garyo@pmail.co.kan
Re: pls put on your “professor's grandson” hat to read this email

Hey, I hate to invoke your status as a celebrity but I was wondering if you'd do me a favor.

To make a very, very, very, VERY long story short, I kind of now have a boyfriend and he's going to be doing Kanto's gym challenge. He's applying for the Trainer visa right now, which is up to the Kantonian government to take care of; but said boyfriend's non-biological mother has connections so I don't anticipate that going anything but smoothly.

I can already hear you screaming even though you're nineteen hours ahead of us by the clock. I promise I'll tell you the full story eventually, but the point is that boyfriend's non-bio-mom is a high-ranking executive (or something) in the Aether Foundation, and she's hoping to get in touch with your grandfather for networking stuff anyway. Probably boyfriend will bring some stuff from her when he goes to Kanto, so he'd be courier-ing it to the prof which means you'd probably meet him before like, he challenges either of you and all. He's very cool and he's a very good Trainer, has a solid team of five. (He hasn't beaten me yet, but he's beaten Hau so he's pretty good.) So if you don't mind letting me have your grandfather's contact information so that boyfriend's non-bio mom can talk to him about business and science and stuff, that would be great.

AND it might be cool if boyfriend could get a Kantonian starter to fill that last spot in his team... but I understand that your grandfather needs more information for that kind of thing. Boyfriend's not-bio-mom can probably supply like school transcripts and stuff— though I'm actually not totally sure if he has a GED????? (Very, VERY long story.) I'll check with him and ask.

We should definitely set up like a video call sometime. I'm going to be looking for an app that just uses Internet for long-distance stuff like calls and texts, since boyfriend will eventually be headed to Kanto. I know I should have done it ages ago to talk to you and Red, but I've been very focused
on my island challenge and so on. I really miss you guys... and there's some stuff I want to talk to you about that believe it or not, has nothing to do with boyfriend. Anyway, let me know if you can help out with the Prof’s contact info.

Love, Moon

P.S. I bet you're literally screaming about the fact that I didn't tell you boyfriend's name lmao00000000

Chapter End Notes

ok so MOON AND LILLIE OVER HERE MAKIN ME CRY ON A WEDNESDAY FRICKEN NIGHT I AM A MESS

specifically: “So it's been wonderful to feel that people want me to love and be loved.” AUGH LILLIE MY HEART

and also “We'll be each other's heroes, okay?” has sent me to an entirely new planet. it is an ocean of tears.

ok but Hau and Gladion doing the hugs too, we goin EMOTIONAL emotional today

“My, glancing over at Hau and Lillie, was mostly unsurprised to see that their farewell was largely nonverbal.” —*ahem* THEY'RE MAKING OUT, WHO IS SURPRISED, NO ONE THAT'S WHO

My favorite thing about writing Gladimoon is that both of them are Very Fricken Awkward BUT it totally works for them. Moon feels like she's an obnoxiously flirtatious mess but Gladion is Very Into It; and Gladion thinks he's a cold unfeeling prick but Moon knows he's actually soft as fuck and Loves That Shit. So they're both self-conscious and weird but they also know that the other person will like them anyway and I just GAH

*stammers*f-forehead kisses

Moon tries to be cute and Gladion makes a short-person joke at her??!?!? this ain't Fullmetal Alchemist, author

Charizard is So Done with all this disgusting PDA lmao

HELLO CHATFIC, HOW I HAVE MISSED YOU

I classed all of BroT4 as “neutral good” on a D&D alignment meme I posted on the discord (shoutout to the discord, comment for an invite), but honestly Lillie teaching Hau how to do kaomojis might just change her over to “chaotic good.” do you think Hau is going to type in anything else, ever again, for the rest of his life
I wrote *Gladion* using a kaomoji. This is full-blown crackfic and we're only on the second chapter.

Mina learning how to drop her natural Poni Island accent because of academic elitism and snobbery (“obviously you can't be smart if you sound like a hick, because the geographic locale and linguistic culture of where you grew up is *totally* what dictates your personal intelligence”) is A Tall Soapbox of mine. Team Skull (ok, like a couple of specific people from Team Skull) giving Trinh a hard time for her accent is more to be expected, because teenagers are dicks. (Source: was once a teenager. Still kind of feel like one some days; the only difference between being in your twenties and being a teenager is that you're more tired and sometimes people actually value your input on things.)

Mina lives alone in CTN because she's an adult; her mom and Trinh's dad are in a nearby houseboat. So duh it smells like paint and paint thinner lmao. The circular dock out back is made up, but I refuse to believe that a trial based around FLOWERS would be held inside.

**YAY MOON GETS TO BATTLE WITH KATE** also I promise we're going to have more Pokémon bonding time in this fic!!!!!!! There wasn't as much in Jacaranda because it was so very focused on BroT4 travelling together and figuring out one another's issues and shit, but now we're going to be focused on the island challenge again, which means focusing on Moon and her team and Hau and his team. It'll be more like Frangipani and Sakura, in that respect.

Turn-based combat isn't technically Realistic (though I've incorporated elements of it into the fic), so what happens when two Trainers use a Z-Move at the same time? ...chaos. That's what happens.

I kind of half-assed Hau's battle, but I couldn't resist the urge to write Oceanic Operetta again. I HECKIN LOVE PRIMARINA

Moon asking Hau to come with her and help— *I Love A “Chosen One” Who Doesn't Bullshit About Doing Things Alone*

yo so “not calling things what they actually are in order to lie to yourself that it was normal” is something I definitely, totally did when I was in college figuring out how to deal with anxiety. I was “shy” or “sensitive” or “a crybaby” or, when I was really feeling down, “a basket case” or “a complete fucking mess.” BUT THAT WAS BULLSHIT, it was my brain trying to say “no look there's nothing wrong I don't wanna change” and it turns out that my brain is a dumbass. (Helloooo, it thought briefly that wanting to die was a good idea.) But now that I have been to therapy and am on medicine and All That Good Stuff, it is much more agreeable about calling things what they actually are, which in my case is “depressed” and “anxious,” and both of those words have a neutral connotation for me so I can live with them without feeling like crap. As Dumbledore says, “Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

Gladion: I wasn't worried.
Lillie: He was totally worried, I'm sitting here watching him.
Gladion: WHY DO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO EXPOSE ME

**MOON DROPPED AN L-BOMB**
AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH
Moon's email to Blue I am LAFFIN
with sun and moon, with earth and sea's rich gems

Chapter Summary

Moon's house, Iki Town, Route Two, Berry Fields

Moon confides in her mother over a spot of laundry and goes for an evening stroll with her great-uncle Hala.

Chapter Notes

chapter title— Sonnet 21, William Shakespeare

yet another chapter that was an absolute fricken mess to write. like literally I spent so much time on the first half of it that I realized the thing would be twenty pages if I didn't scoot the second half over to the next chapter. BUT I finished it and it's done and I don't want to die so that's great

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (for private messages if you aren't on the discord. it's a BTS stan account though so if you're not into that then uh oh well I guess) Conquer the Night Fan Server Discord: comment for an invite!!!!!! also literally how is this story cool enough that I have actual live humans who like it enough to make a discord for it. literally how. I love you guys so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn't that Moon wasn't used to waking up in a bed; she spent plenty of time in Pokémon Centers as well as camping on the road. What she wasn't used to was waking up in her own bed. There was something about it that had let her sleep deeper and longer than usual— in fact, she only woke up from a nightmare once, and managed to go back to sleep in only twenty minutes. She tended to be a fairly early riser but it was half-past nine before she so much as stirred— and even that was solely due to the door banging open loudly.

“Wha—”

“I'm sorry, Marion!” called her mother. “I tried to stop her, I really did.”

“Poi poi poi!” Kate screamed happily, zooming toward her.

“It's good, I don't blame you.” Moon patted Kate, who squeaked and preened at the attention. “It's entirely on this little scamp. You're trouble, you know that?”

“Poly poly, poi poi,” sang Kate.

“Yeah, yeah. Quit sassing me.”

Puck's head appeared at the doorframe. “Hoo deci,” he said sternly.
Moon raised one eyebrow, watching; but Kate merely made an unintelligible high-pitched noise before bouncing over to the Decidueye.

“Is this going to be another Ben-and-Macbeth thing?” she inquired.

Puck rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Hoo-eye.”

There wasn’t much point in staying in bed now that she was awake, so Moon got to her feet, closed the door, and got dressed. She was a little surprised that Ariel had not peeped her awake at four in the morning, but then again her mother usually left one window open at night, for Meowth and more recently Albion. Kapua Hawkins had mentioned Albion in the occasional text or email, but had forgotten to indicate his species; and as a result Moon had been very surprised, the day previous, to land her Charizard outside of her house and get pounced on by an Absol.

“They're said to be bad luck, but I'm usually at home alone so your dad suggested a loyal, protective Pokémon,” her mother had explained, gently pulling the suspicious Pokémon off Moon. “Albion, this is my daughter Marion. She's a Trainer, and I know she smells like a lot of different Pokémon but that's because she has six of them...”

Albion was currently following Kapua around the house, twining around her ankles and generally getting in the way as he glared at Moon's teammates. He was apparently used to Meowth as well as Yoshiro and his Komala and Alolan Sandshrew; but a whole new person with six powerful teammates was a big adjustment for any Pokémon to make. Due to her size Hero had been confined to the garage, which was more of a glorified shed; but the door had been left open so she could watch them and keep company. The rest of the Pokémon had been made to spend the night together in the living room. Meowth, as the eldest, and Puck, as the leader of Moon's teammates, kept order. Nothing had been broken, but both Ben and Albion had some suspicious-looking scratches, and the normally placid Macbeth was glowering at Albion as she jammed chocolate-chip waffles into her mouth.

“Holy sh— crap, Macbeth, slow down,” snorted Moon, amused. “Did they fight?”

“I'm not as versed in understanding Pokémon as you, since Meowth hasn't ever been terribly verbal,” said Kapua. “But from what I gather, Macbeth tried to make a friendly overture, was rejected, and Ben promptly took offense on her behalf.”

“Yeah,” sighed Moon. “Sounds like them. Puck, did you already scold him?”

“Hoo ho.”

“Thanks.” Moon turned to stare at Ben. “Though I'll add my two Poké on the subject, as well. You know better than to scratch unless we're in a battle. We talked about this. Fighting is for battles and defending yourself, and nothing else. Another Pokémon being rude to Macbeth is not a good reason to start a fight.”

Ben rolled his eyes, but otherwise didn't argue.

“It's kind of a shame,” added Kapua. “From what you've told me about Ben, Albion reminds me a lot of him. I would think they could get along.”

“Sol, sol,” hissed Albion quietly.

“I don't think so,” said Moon, shaking her head. “The only reason Ben likes Macbeth is because she's cute and puts up with his bullsh- garbage much more than she should.” Ben barked a correction. “Oh, excuse me. She was cute when she was a Wimpod, but now she's majestic.”
Macbeth, sitting in the living room, sat up straight and beamed at Ben, then at Moon. “And they're both co-dependent as hell. I mean, heck.”

“You're an adult, Marion, you can swear,” said Kapua, amused. “Just censor yourself around Mel and Wiki, if you don't mind.”

“I tend to do it more when I'm stressed out, but I've gotten into the habit. I should really stop, though.”

Breakfast was chocolate-chip waffles, which Kapua freely admitted to having toasted from a pack of frozen ones, and fresh Rawst berries. Puck and Ariel had evidently gone hunting; the window that was left open at night was large enough for Albion to leap through with no difficulty, but Puck had apparently had a difficult time getting in and out. Albion himself was also a hunter, but had gone separately.

“So what are you up to now?” her mother asked her. “Collecting the Z-Crystals?”

“Yeah.” Moon held up her Z-Ring. “Professor Kukui got me replacements for the ones I gave to Necrozma, as well as Incinium Z. And I've got Primarium Z from Hau, and also the one Marshadow gave me. Marshadium Z, I guess. While I'm here, I'm going to ask Hala about where to find a couple of them. And I'm technically still doing Mina's trial, so I need to find Ilima and challenge him to a battle.”

“So what's on the docket for today?”

“If we see Hau's family, I'll ask Hala about Z-Crystals. Otherwise it's just relaxing. Hau and I are going to challenge Ilima tomorrow.”

Kapua raised a knowing eyebrow. “You want to do laundry, don't you.”

“God, yes. You know me so well.”

“I'd better, since I raised you. I think we'll go up to the Akiona's for dinner, but otherwise I don't have anything planned if you don't.” She paused, a grin sliding onto her face. “Which means you and I are going to talk about Gladion.”

Moon smiled— she couldn't quite help it. “Well, if you insist,” she mumbled.

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

lunar sun: Picture Attachment: [TastyBreakfastSelfie.jpeg]

lunar sun: Good morning. My mother is about to grill me about you. Any topics I should avoid?

brave heart: Frankly, I expected a good-morning text much earlier than this.

lunar sun: HEY (>n<)
brave heart: Not that I actually expected one. You're the type of person to send good-morning
texts, and you tend to be an early riser. It was a logical assumption.

lunar sun: Just say you're a hopeless romantic and go lmao

brave heart: ...no.

brave heart: Also, why are you using kaomojis.

lunar sun: Because I can?

brave heart: Fair enough.

brave heart: Anyway, I'd rather talk about Lusamine myself. I would prefer you didn't mention
anything that has the potential to embarrass me, but we're friends with Molly so there's really not
much left that can do that.

lunar sun: LMAO

lunar sun: If there's something I'm not sure about, I'll ask you

brave heart: I might not be able to reply to texts. I have a fairly long therapy session, and also
class.

lunar sun: Class???? What kind of class????

brave heart: It turns out that even if you are overqualified for a high school diploma, you're still
required to officially graduate in order to go on a Pokémon journey. I have a week of GED prep
and I'll take the test next Monday.

lunar sun: Omg I've been dating a High School Dropout

brave heart: I'll thank you not to repeat that to your mother.

brave heart: Unless you explain that it's a joke.

brave heart: Your mother seems like she would understand.

brave heart: I trust you.

* * * * *

“What's your favorite thing about him?”

Moon was folding her clean laundry, sitting on the floor; she had assigned Puck and Macbeth the
task of matching pairs of socks, while Ben did something to each piece of clothing that removed
static cling. Ariel couldn't really help with laundry and Albion had also rejected her attempts to
befriend him, so she was sulking in the garage with Hero. Kate, being the only one of her
teammates who actually had hands, was picking up the matched pairs and folding them inside one
another. Kapua was doing her own laundry, with Meowth sorting and mating socks for her as well.
“There's a lot of answers I could give to that question,” she said finally. “Favorite thing he's done for me, favorite personality trait, favorite thing he's ever said, favorite physical feature, and so on.”

“All of the above,” chuckled Kapua. “Yoshiro and I like him, but we haven't gotten the chance to talk to the two of you about it on your own.”

Moon snorted. “You make it sound like an interrogation.”

“It might be, but it will be a friendly one. To make sure you're being nice to him.”

“Shouldn't you be on my side?”

“Red and Blue will cover that. Speaking of which, there were three very long and capslocked emails in my inbox this morning, demanding to know whether I was aware that my daughter had a boyfriend.”

“Oh my god. I told Rotom I'm on do not disturb today— exceptions being Hau, Lillie, and Gladion.”

“Would now be a good time to mention that you have forty-seven emails from garyo@pmail.co.kan, bzzt?” inquired Rotom.

Moon sighed. “Why is he so extra?”

“It's Blue,” pointed out her mother. “He's the definition of extra.”

“Fair enough.” She pondered the original questions her mother had asked for a few moments; they fell into silence as they did so but despite their extraverted natures, Moon had never found the need to fill silences with her mother.

“Physical feature is easy,” she said finally. “I like his hands.”

“Oooh.”

“Mom. It's not like that. He just has— weirdly pretty hands? I don't know. He plays the piano, or he used to.” Moon shrugged. “Anyway, my favorite thing he's ever done for me— um, so you know how Christmas is different here than it is in Kanto?”

“More family-oriented than couple-oriented?”

“Yeah. I know Christmas was like, literally ten days ago or something but it feels like a lot longer. Anyway, he um, he went to the trouble of like, setting up an actual date. We went down in the basement of Kahuna Hapu's house and watched movies by ourselves. There was popcorn. And we held hands.” Moon could feel herself reddening. “And we might have fallen asleep cuddling.”

“It doesn't take much to make you happy, does it.”

“Well, no. But the important thing is that he did it because I didn't know that Christmas is a family thing here and the rest of them did, so I was like, slightly culture-shocked and had to explain it to them. And instead of just letting me be culture-shocked, he went out of his way to do something that means more in Kanto, just because it's what I'm used to.”

Kapua's grin softened into a real, pleased smile. “Oh, I see what you mean. That's wonderful, Marion. He must really want to impress you.”

“It's not like he has to work too hard to do that.” They both snickered. “Um— favorite personality
trait. It's sort of— mixed up in the Ultra Space stuff, and also the stuff with his mom who is absolutely awful, which he's asked me not to talk to you about because he wants to tell you himself—"

“I got a basic understanding of that from the meeting that Ms. Wicke had on Aether Paradise after you got back, but go on.”

“Oh, right. Anyway, I, um— he's really, really brave.” To Moon's surprise, she could feel tears beginning to sting at the edges of her vision. “I love that about him. I love that even though he's had a hard and frankly terrifying life, he just lives with his fear and makes things work. He keeps trying new things. He embraces change, even though it's hard.”

Kapua didn't say anything, simply studying her.

“And my favorite thing he's ever said... well, he's said a lot of nice things to me. He's really good at compliments, and I kind of eat that up with a spoon so it happens a lot. And we both do this thing where we'll say something that's not really complimentary, like I guess I like having you around or You're kind of okay sometimes. It's very silly, but we both know what we mean.”

She thought of that time he'd said You are the brightest star in my sky, dropping such high praise around like it was nothing; but that seemed kind of personal. It was too nice to share with anybody else; a secret, just for the two of them.

“I'm really glad your dad and I had you.”

Moon blinked, looking up at her mother; Kapua's eyes were a little glittery, as she suspected her own were. “Why's that?”

“Because it's incredibly rewarding to have a daughter in the first place, but then to raise and nurture her so that she grows up into a kind, strong, intelligent woman is a whole new joy entirely. And then, even more than that— to watch this woman, in whose creation you had a hand, share her kindness and strength and intelligence with other people. You're a great person, and we get to watch you fall in love— shut up Marion, it's definitely love even if you're not saying so. Watching you find happiness in all kinds of ways is a gift of infinite worth, but especially watching you find someone with whom you can have a relationship like mine and Yoshiro's.” The tears spilled. “You've become a wonderful person, and you're going to have an amazing experience with these new emotions.”

“It's a little scary sometimes,” admitted Moon, wiping away her own tears. “But you know me, I always dive into things head-first. Gladion wants to take things slower, and I like that about him, too.”

“Your personalities are very different, aren't they?” Kapua leaned over and kissed Moon on the forehead— very different from the way Gladion had done yesterday morning, but welcome all the same. “It means you'll have to communicate.”

“I don't think communication will be a problem on my end, and he's— well, long story short, he's in therapy right now. Um, don't tell anyone, except maybe Dad.”

“You can tell your dad yourself.”

“That's true.”
chat: the four musketeers

crescent: Picture Attachment: [TeamLaundry.jpeg]
crescent: It is laundry day, my dudes
crescent: *screams awkwardly at mirror*

hau do u do: LOL

rapunzel: ?
pedantic: I just don't ask anymore.
pedantic: Does your mother know you took that picture?
crescent: Are you kidding, she posed for it lmao

crescent: As did her Absol, who hates everything almost as much as Ben does and despite that is a totally different and extremely photogenic pokémon on film

hau do u do: o shit is that the grumpy 1 that mel says hides under ur mom's chair every time she comes over?
crescent: Mom says yes, Albion does that

rapunzel: Apparently, a lot of Absol are abused or abandoned. This in turn gives them the reputation of being difficult Pokémon to train. They're drawn to bad luck and tragedies, though they aren't inherently evil themselves—it's just how they function. However, if they decide to adopt someone, they adopt them for life. Absol make very loyal companions.

rapunzel: What I'm trying to say is, your mother is very lucky.
pedantic: I don't know that I would call her lucky. Her only daughter is dating a high school dropout and former gang member, and recently returned from an impromptu trip to space that resulted in three broken ribs and emotional trauma.
crescent: My mom, when I read her that text out loud: “Okay, but my daughter is happy with said boyfriend, and she didn't die in Ultra Space. I'll take it.”
crescent: She also said, “Stop trying to downplay yourself, if Marion likes you then I'll like you.” I 100% agree w/ this

hau do u do: AWWWWWWWWWW
lunar sun: She also wants your number so she can talk to you. Is it okay if I give it to her, or would you rather I didn't?

brave heart: Uh.

lunar sun: Don't worry, she knows you already have a mom so she's not going to try and adopt you lol

lunar sun: By which I mean Wicke, not the egomaniac in your basement

brave heart: Sure, I guess.

lunar sun: She said she doesn't want it if you're not 100% enthusiastic about the idea though

brave heart: I am 100% enthusiastic about virtually nothing.

brave heart: Except for my Pokémon.

brave heart: I'm 100% something about you, but I think a better word for that might be “overwhelmed.”

brave heart: In a good way, of course.

lunar sun: Omg my heart you can't just SAY things like that

lunar sun: Change of plans, here's my mom's number and you can text her when you're comfortable with the idea

lunar sun: (###) ###-####

brave heart: Thank you. I appreciate that.

lunar sun: Np np

* * * * *

“So,” said Moon to Hala, later that evening, “Professor Kukui says you're the person to ask about Snorlium Z?”

“Ah, yes.” Hala grinned. “I thought you might ask about that. How do you feel about an evening's walk?”

“Is it close by?” Moon pulled out the Colress scanner.

“Technically, no. It's on the other side of the island from here.”
“Can I come too?” asked Hau.

“I think you had better stay,” said Hala, with a solemn expression. “Knowing what I do of Snorlium Z, Moon will have better success if she approaches alone.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Your Z-Crystals will interfere with her scanning signal. In fact, Moon will have better success if she leaves her own Z-Ring behind.”

Moon frowned. “I don't like that, but I can see the logic in it.”

“I could take mine off and come, too.”

“We wanna play with your Pokémon,” protested Mel and Wiki.

Hau laughed. “Well, okay. I guess I don't have to go.”

Hala nodded and turned back to Moon. “If you would like to leave now, I can lock your Z-Ring in my office until we return.”

She glanced at Kapua, who looked amused. “Is that okay with you?”

“You're an adult, Marion.”

“I'm gonna go, then. I don't think it will take too long.” Moon took her Z-Ring off her wrist—it felt oddly naked to go without—and handed it to Hala.

“I will put it in my office, and then we will go. It is a quick flight by Charizard—not more than two minutes, I believe.”

He was back fairly quickly, and they went outside to wait for a pair of Charizard. Hala had a full belt with six Pokémon, Moon noticed; but he had shed his own Z-Ring.

The flight was quick—and relatively painless, because heights weren't quite as scary when Hau'oli City and its bright lights looked like little dolls in a dollhouse instead of actual people in buildings. To Moon's surprise, Hala directed his Charizard a little ways onto Route Two, near the path that diverged and went west to Big Wave Beach.

“I'm afraid I was a little less than honest with Hau,” said Hala, and to Moon's surprise he held out her Z-Ring. “I couldn't think of a better way to get him to stay behind. The Z-Crystals will register on the scanner, but they won't prevent you from finding new ones.” He took his own from his pocket, sliding it back onto his wrist.

“Why didn't you want him to come?”

“Tapu Koko advised against it,” said Hala simply.

“Why?”

Hala studied her for a few moments. “Who knows what may be on the mind of a Tapu,” he said at last. “He did not see fit to provide me with a reason. Generally speaking, my relationship with him is such that he chooses to explain himself most of the time. When he does not, I know it is not for me to question him.”

Moon considered this for a few moments. “You said he didn't give you a reason,” she said slowly.
“You didn't say you don't already know why.”

There was a pause, and then a slow smile spread onto Hala's face. “Very good, Moon,” he said quietly. “Nanu told the rest of us that Gladion had spoken of this to you— about some purpose the Tapus have for you.”

“Is this it? Collecting Z-Crystals?”

“That is certainly part of it.” Hala nodded. “I cannot tell you the rest— not because I do not want to, this time, but because I don't know it for certain. What I do know, because Tapu Koko has mentioned this much, is that while Hau may choose to assist you, he has his own journey to focus on as well. Many people will assist you with the secret Z-Crystals located around Alola; Snorlum Z is something with which I am uniquely qualified to assist you.”

“Why?”

“You will see— and no, I am not trying to frustrate you. I can tell when you get frustrated at non-answers. This is simply a secret of Melemele Island, and I don't wish for anyone else to hear it.”

There were a few people around, all of whom waved at Hala as they passed; everyone knew the island kahunas. It was understandable.

Hala began walking, and Moon fell into step beside him. “I have a different question, then.”

“Yes?”

Moon swallowed. “You knew,” she said, her voice dropping. “Since I got the Sparkling Stone from Tapu Koko, you knew they had something in mind for me.”

“Yes.”

“Did you— did you know it would be so difficult?”

He didn't answer immediately. Moon was used to Gladion and Lillie's tendency to ruminate before answering questions, so she didn't mind the wait; she just didn't expect it from Hala, who was as much of an extravert— perhaps even more so— than Hau.

“I cannot say I anticipated the things that happened to you,” he said finally. “Though I as much as the other kahunas would have spared you your suffering, if we could have. You are my great-niece, and I love you dearly. You are Hapu's friend, which is a rare thing because her maturity and youth have combined to isolate her from her peers— she loves you as well. Olivia mentioned once that she had met you at times when you were unhappy, and that the strength you showed in trying to move forward despite your sorrows was inspiring. It spoke to her big heart, and she has had a soft spot for you ever since. And even Ishmael— Nanu, I should say. You know he's a misanthrope, but he has admitted that he doesn't mind your company. He is quite fond of Gladion, in his own way; and you evidently make Gladion happy so that fondness is extended to you.”

Moon hadn't considered the possibility of the other kahunas being on her side, except perhaps Hapu; it was interesting to think about.

“Would you have noticed me if I hadn't been chosen?” she said finally. “Any of you.”

“Whether or not you are chosen, you are my great-niece and a skilled Trainer. We would have taken notice.”
That was rather comforting, but she had one more question and it was probably the hardest one. “Why did they choose me?”

Hala was quiet for even longer this time. They turned off the path, into what appeared to be a Berry orchard in the soft starlight. A farmhouse with several lit windows stood at the far end of the orchard.

“I believe that the gods qualify those whom they choose.”

Moon frowned. “So I was ordinary, and then they changed me?”

“No, not at all. You were extraordinary to begin with, Moon.” Hala's voice was soft. “Have you never wondered how Foxglove was able to get away with so much evil, for such a long time?”

“Only in passing.”

Hala nodded. “He was charismatic. He was born in Johto and moved here in his youth, but he maintained friends from home all his life— constantly visiting and writing letters. And he made still more friends here.”

They walked over to the farmhouse, but instead of knocking on the door Hala paused, sitting down on the porch steps and patting them to indicate that Moon should do the same.

“When he was chosen by Tapu Bulu, we thought it was an odd choice. A charming, friendly, social man as the servant of the most notoriously reclusive Tapu? After seeing Nanu as the kahuna, it didn't quite make sense. And then it did, because Foxglove proved himself to the Tapu and began many works to benefit Ula'ula Island and Alola. He was responsible for building Malie City's library, which holds many of Alola's oldest documents; he was responsible for raising funds for both the original Thrifty Megamart on Ula'ula Island and its replacement on Akala Island. He was responsible for the creation of Aether House, as a collaboration between the Tapu Village affairs council and the Aether Foundation. He had the Pokémon Center at the edge of Route Fifteen and Route Sixteen built; and he had been pushing for development at Haina Junction and at Blush Mountain— development that it has since taken ten years to bring to fruition. He did many good things.”

Hala sounded, perhaps for the first time since Moon had met him, like an old man. She looked up at him and saw that his eyes were a touch shinier than usual; it felt private to see so she looked back down at the ground, listening.

“But though the effect he had on Ula'ula Island was initially positive, the motivation behind it was void of emotion. He fooled us all for a very long time.” There was pain in his voice. “We thought he was truly as kind, as empathetic, as he professed to be. But as Olivia and Ikaika and I watched him, after the failure of the Thrifty Megamart, we began to notice things that had we had not previously found disturbing. Foxglove could smile and joke with any adult, but he did not like young children or baby Pokémon. It was in his nature to connect with people, and to network; but he only did so with those whom he believed could benefit him in some way. Children and baby Pokémon are weak. They could not serve his purposes, and therefore he ignored them. Only a few months before he died, I happened to observe him unseen as he spoke with some of his Foxes— the original volunteer brigade, not the criminals you know them to be. There was some disagreement among them, and instead of immediately working to resolve the issue he allowed them to fight about it for some time. He simply watched and listened, and it was only then that I actually saw a real emotion in him. He was pleased. It amused him to watch conflict unfold, and it amused him even more to create conflict or to quell it. He was not a mediator, but a manipulator.”
Moon was oddly reminded of Kohaku, saying that people were like puppets on strings; and then she thought of Lusamine, gleefully and unrepentantly trying to break Gladion's heart even more than she had already done. The whispers of Nihilego, louder in the dark of night, tried to creep up through her ears; she forced them back down to keep listening.

“Nanu explained it to me once.” Hala turned to look at her, eyes serious. “I tell you this in strict confidence; you are not to repeat it to anyone except for Gladion, who already knows the story. I went to see Nanu shortly after Foxglove's death, when everything had calmed down and Po Town had been settled as the place of imprisonment for the Foxes. I went in the evening, thinking I might find Nanu the kahuna, relaxing by the television; instead I found Ishmael the man, drinking alone in the dark and crying.”

“Oh my god.”

“He said that Tapu Bulu had told him that he had seen the emptiness in Foxglove's heart, that he had weighed it against the good he could provide for the island. Tapu Bulu told him that he knew Foxglove's emptiness would win out eventually; but that the good could not be ignored. The thing that made Ishmael weep was that he had thought that Tapu Bulu was finished with him— but he had not been, he had never been. He was simply a servant— a tool to be picked up and put down, an instrument which performs the will of the god. Tapu Bulu allowed Foxglove's evil to happen because he trusted that Ishmael would clean it up.”

Moon sat there, stunned and horrified. “I'm sorry,” she said finally, “but that's fucked up.”

“That is one of many phrases Ishmael himself used to express his pain.” Hala sighed. “Olivia and Ikaika and I all agreed it was not fair to Ishmael, to be made to bear this pain alone. So we took on many of his duties. Traditionally, it is the job of the Ula'ula kahuna to care for Mount Lanakila and the end of the island challenge. I have taken that responsibility upon myself. Ikaika watched over the Lake of the Sunne, as he watched over the Altar of the Moone; the Sun Flute was only taken after his death, when no one was watching it. And Olivia, who has long borne far more burdens than she should, has often accompanied island challengers from Akala to Ula'ula to introduce them to the island as she introduced them to her own— exceptions being when the island challenger decides to go elsewhere first, as you and Hau did. She supervises the protections put in place in the Haina Desert to protect the place where Foxglove found remnants of ancient Solgaleo and Lunala. And she has also helped to arrange Nanu's schedule for taking on Grand Trials— she usually schedules them and informs him when and where to go. It is above and beyond her duty. Even now, with the changes of the Pokémon League approaching, she is beginning to reach the limits of what she can do for all of Alola; and it is Ishmael— not Nanu— who bitterly refuses to pick up the slack.”

“He's given up?” guessed Moon.

“It is partly his age and weariness,” agreed Hala. “But spite and defiance come into it, too. Tapu Bulu cannot begrudge Nanu his contempt for the main duties of caring for the island and protecting its people from danger; not when he himself wishes to have as little to do with humanity as possible. Nanu does his duty; Ishmael does it half-heartedly, because he has not forgiven Tapu Bulu for using him so cruelly. There are other factors at play, too. Ishmael is undoubtedly in need of treatment for a variety of mental health issues.”

The separation of names was beginning to make sense. Moon had seen flashes of color in Hala's eyes, in Olivia's eyes, in Nanu's eyes, and Hapu's eyes— flashes of color that belonged to the Tapu, indicating their presence and bond with the kahunas. But despite that, the kahunas were still people. Moon knew the feeling of betrayal. No matter how unjustified she had been, it was how
she had felt when she found out that Gladion was a member of Team Skull. To have been betrayed by a god—it must have felt like Nanu's life was a sort of punishment for something that was beyond his control. Ishmael, the man, was betrayed by his friend; Nanu, the kahuna, understood but was still bitter about it.

“What does that have to do with me?” she said finally.

“Foxglove was chosen because at the time, he was the best person for his job. Similarly, you were chosen because you are the best person for your job. Your personality and characteristics, your experiences and memories, and your motivation and resolve— they are what Alola needs.”

“Alola needs a nosy, impatient, stubborn know-it-all?”

“Yes,” said Hala, raising one eyebrow. “It needs a curious, decisive, determined, and intelligent person to retrieve the Z-Crystals and heal Necrozma— among other things. You might be able to guess what else is needed of you, if you think about it for long enough; you are naturally on a path to it anyway. Now, more to the point: Snorlium Z. I just need to inform the farmer to stay in his house for a little while.”

They both stood up. “Why?” wondered Moon.

Hala laughed. “You'll see,” he said, knocking on the door.

It was answered almost immediately by an older man. “Took yez long enough ta knock,” he said grumpily. “My porch ain't no dance hall bench, ya know.”

“Sorry,” said Hala cheerfully. “We're going downhill.”

The man's eyebrows rose, as he turned to look at Moon. “Are ya now?”

“We are. Stay inside tonight— you know she's always a little careless afterward.”

“That I do. Thank ya kindly, kahuna.”

“You're welcome.”

The farmer closed the door, and a bewildered Moon followed Hala around to the side of the house and down a long hill that sloped in the general direction of both the Hau’oli graveyard and, further away, Iki Town. This part of the island was heavily wooded, and not hospitable to Trainers.

Despite this, Hala led her into the woods, along a very narrow path lined with prickly Berry bushes of all kinds. In Alola's tropical climes they bore fruit even in the winter, and the fruity smells made Moon salivate a little bit.

“What gives a Totem its aura, Moon?”

“The Z-Crystals, right?”

“Indeed.” Hala raised an eyebrow at her. "And what gives a Z-Crystal the power to do so?”

She blinked. "I... don't know.”

“It may seem like a paradox to you, but observations made by Professors Kukui and Burnet suggest that the Z-Crystals take their energy from the Totems— which means it is cyclical, that they share their energy. Consider this. We are going to find Snorlium Z out in the wild. Does it not occur to you that a Z-Crystal takes on a typing from the two Totems that serve it? Even if the
Totems have different primary or secondary types, it is their matched one that creates the singularly typed Z-Crystal experience. If, however, there were only one Totem with the Z-Crystal deposit...

They walked out into an open clearing, which was mostly dominated by a large, dark-blue-and-cream-colored mound lying prone in the center; beyond it was a large, glowing crystalline deposit, also tinted with dark blue and cream.

“... then the Z-Crystal would only have one Pokémon on which to focus, and would then adapt to become most suitable for that specific Pokémon.”

Moon stared at the mound. “That’s a Snorlax.”

“Not just any Snorlax.” Hala put his fingers to his mouth and let out a loud, ear-piercing whistle; the mound stirred, sitting up to reach the usual height of nearly seven— and then ten, twelve feet high. “Check your scanner if you don't believe me.”

She took out the scanner, eyes widening at the words on the display: Totem Aura Detected.

“What the fuck.”

“Hello, sister,” Hala called to Totem Snorlax, giving a slow, high wave before pointing at Moon. “This is Moon. She would like to battle you for a crystal.”

Totem Snorlax considered her for a few moments, then nodded.

“Oh god fuck what do I do?”

Hala raised an eyebrow. “You battle her like you would any other Totem. Be prepared for anything a Totem might do in battle.”

Moon reached blindly for her belt, still staring at Totem fucking Snorlax, and felt along for Macbeth, sending her out first.

“Snorrrr...”

It was more of a very loud, rumbling purr than a cry for help. But all the same a Pokémon came rushing forward to face Moon along with the Totem: a Munchlax, which she supposed was to be expected.

“Macbeth, First Impression on Munchlax!”

Despite Moon's initial nerves— mostly due to intimidation at the sheer size of Totem Snorlax— it was not, in the end, a difficult battle. The Munchlax was taken out with one hit, though it took several turns to conquer Snorlax's second ally, Crabrawler— also an obvious choice, given their tendency to hang out by Berry trees and bushes. Snorlax was known to be fond of food, and Moon imagined that both the orchard and the wildberries made a nice foraging grounds for both the Totem and her allies. Snorlax defeated both Macbeth and Ariel; so in the end it was Hero who took her out with Hammer Arm.

“Very good,” said Hala warmly. “You have earned the right to use Snorlium Z.”

The Totem rolled over from where she'd landed post-Hammer Arm and reached out to the blue-and-cream crystal, wrapping paws around a small spike on the crystal and breaking it off before reaching out to offer it to Moon. She took it.
“It's a bit big for my Z-Ring.”

Hala chuckled softly. “Snap it into pieces until you find one you like; they are all the same.”

Moon broke the crystal a few times until a small piece fell out and landed in the palm of her hand — still slightly jagged, but it would do the job. She put it into her Z-Ring and it clicked into place.

“We'll walk out of here before calling Charizard. She gets nervous around them, and I haven't visited often enough to explain to her that they don't mean any harm...”

Totem Snorlax rolled over and seemed to fall asleep again, and Moon followed Hala out of the clearing.

“So, there's a Totem for all of the other Z-Crystals?”

“Indeed there is.”

“So, somewhere out there is a Totem Decidueye—”

“You won't need to visit, as you already have Decidium.” Hala laughed softly once more. “But for reference, she lives in a small forest on the northern shore of Ula'ula Island, far enough from Po Town and Route Seventeen that she is not afflicted by the rain.”

“What about Incineroar and Primarina?”

“Totem Incineroar lives in a cave that opens about a hundred feet above Route Eight, on the north side of Wela Volcano. The only way for humans to access his cave is through the other end of it, which is found in Lush Jungle. And here on Melemele, Totem Primarina makes his home at the base of the waterfall leading down to Kala'e Bay — he has a sort of mer-Pokémon's lagoon, if you will.”

“Wow.” Moon wondered if Totem Decidueye ever took random visitors, and if so would she mind if Moon took Puck to visit sometime.

“I only know this because I have been keeping an eye on Maleko and Elizabeth's research ever since Lillie became friends with you and Hau. I don't know any of the others, sorry.”

“It's fine.” She waved him off. "You've given me a lot to think about already."

* * * * *

To: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
CC: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: garyo@pmail.co.kan
Re: Re: Re: Re: MOON LITERALLY WHAT THE FUCK

MOON YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO MEEEEE
LIKE FIRST OF ALL IF I'M GOING TO RECOMMEND YOUR BOYFIE FOR A STARTER I HAVE TO ACTUALLY KNOW SOME THINGS ABOUT HIM??!?!?!?!? DO YOU THINK GETTING A STARTER IS A FUCKING JOKE MOON??!?!? DO YOU??!?!?

AT LEAST ANSWER MY EMAILS YOU HORRIBLE CHILD, I RAISED YOU WITH MY OWN TWO BARE HANDS AND THIS IS THE THANKS I GET

I LOVE YOU BUT I AM VERY FRUSTRATED UGH

BLUE

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan, marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo

From: satoshired@pmail.co.kan

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: MOON LITERALLY WHAT THE FUCK

Moon— I gave you twenty-four hours to enjoy Blue having hysterics. At this point you've definitely seen the replies, and it's time to stop teasing him because I'm going to lose my mind if you don't.

Blue— I say this with all possible love and respect for you as my best friend, only rival, and life partner of both a platonic and romantic nature:

STOP SPAMMING MY GODDAMN INBOX WITH EMAILS OR I'M GOING TO HAVE PIKACHU FRY EVERY ELECTRONIC DEVICE YOU OWN I SWEAR TO ARCEUS.

Red

Chapter End Notes

Kate is a lot like how I wrote early Nebby; but listen now that Nebby's verbal and all, she's a chaotic preteen instead of a chaotic toddler. So we needed a replacement
Absol are Awesome and I often forget that they're like bad omens. BUT I've been playing the excellent Pokémon Reborn lately, which without spoiling anything has A Lot Of Dark Shit, and it reminded me that Absol show up right before tragedies. So I kind of combined it with the whole concept of how black cats are more likely than nearly any other kind to be abused or abandoned, b/c people are superstitious assholes. If I weren't allergic to kitties I would want a black one.

Ben and Macbeth ARE co-dependent as hell but 1) they're Pokémon and 2) writing them that way has mostly got to do with the comedic juxtaposition of tiny Jolteon and HUGE Golisopod

there's going to be so much chatfic in WR

yes I did include another Vine meme into the chatfic, to the tune of Lillie and Gladion having no idea what it's referencing.

Kapua: Marion, get your boyfriend to give me his phone number because I want to interrogate, I mean get to know him
Moon: MOM OMG STOP BEING WEIRD

Hala is great, okay? He is great and good and awesome and consistently underrated, god bless

Moon: why did Tapu Koko say that Hau couldn't come
Hala: who knows, such mysterious, very Tapu
Moon: that's some Tapu bullshit
Hala: MUCH RELEVANT, VERY PLOT, WOW
Moon: ...ugh fine if it's for the fucking PLOT

“You said he didn't give you a reason. You didn't say you don't already know why.” Hala's often funny and everything but I've also written him smart as frick and he's a strategist (Fighting-type specialist, come on) so he knows how to disseminate information. Moon, however, is ALSO smart and she's learning how to see through things that aren't stated outright, because Wicke is the queen of not saying things outright and Moon wants to be Wicke lmao

OOH WE'RE ON SOME CHOSEN ONE SHIT AGAIN

Awwwwww so all the current kahunas have a soft spot for Moon :( 

oh wow look at this Foxglove-related angst... a couple of things to note. Firstly, does this description of him... remind you of anyone? and secondly, the effects of this whole “being used as nothing but a tool by the gods” stuff on Nanu is Very Noticeable and it made me sad to write but it's okay because Nanu deserves better and his life, along with everyone else's life, is going to Improve <3

I won't say that I've written Tapu Bulu's treatment of Nanu as necessarily abusive, because I think the dynamic of a kahuna and a tapu is different than most relationships. At the heart of it all, they both want the same things. However, there's definitely a power dynamic being leveraged that is Very Unfair to Nanu, and Tapu Bulu doesn't... uh, give a shit? As long as Nanu is doing what he agreed to do in the kahuna ceremony, Tapu Bulu doesn't care how he feels about it. (Or maybe he does,
Okay, so Snorlium Z and Totem Snorlax!!!!!! Yes, there is going to be a Totem for every specialized Z-Crystal.

“Does it not occur to you that a Z-Crystal takes its energy and typing from the two Totems that serve it? Even if the Totems have other types, it is their matched one that creates the proper Z-Crystal experience. If, however, there were only one Totem with the Z-Crystal deposit... then the Z-Crystal would only have one Pokémon on which to focus, and would then adapt to become most suitable for that specific Pokémon.” — please tell me that my sciencing is making sense here. Two Totems per trial isn't canon anywhere but Conquer the Night, but like THE OTHER Z-CRYSTALS HAVE TO COME FROM SOMEWHERE >:(

All of the Extra Totems are going to live in places that will make sense. Snorlax lives by the Berry Fields, because they like eating. Decidueye is in a forest, Incineroar is in a volcanic cave, Primarina is by a lagoon of sorts. The canon Totems make sense, too. I've already covered locations for some of the other Z-Crystals, such as the fairly obvious Pikachu Valley for the TWO Pikachu Z-Crystals. (Ok Pikachu is cute and the series mascot and all but Game Freak why the fuck does it get TWO Z-Crystals, that is Tapu Bullshit and I don't like it.) However, some of the Z-Crystals don't have obvious clues as to what their location might be. I already know where they are as I'm writing the story but I'm looking forward to showing you. <3

“I raised you with my own two bare hands and this is the thanks I get” —omfg Blue shut UP

“Stop spamming my inbox with emails or I'm going to have Pikachu fry every electronic device you own I swear to Arceus” —Red is VERY separate from Ash but they have their Very Sassy Pikachu in common lmao
“Okay,” said Hau, staring up at Ilima's house. “I didn't realize he had the fancy digs, wow.”

“The architecture looks kind of Kalosian. It's a lot like Po Town— the houses that are still intact, that is.”

“Well, he does speak Kalosian. If he had the house custom-built it would make sense.”

Moon nodded, agreeing with the assessment. “Let's see if he's home then.”

It turned out that Ilima was, in fact home; he came down to meet them with a smile. He was still handsome, but Moon was relieved to find that there was absolutely no trace of the crush she'd nursed on him. Gladion had quite overtaken him, as well as every boy she'd ever liked, in that regard.

“It's always nice to see challengers who passed my test early on, when they return to collect a petal for Mina's trial,” he told them, eyes dancing with amusement as he led them around to the side of the house, past a swimming pool and stopping at a patch of earth that had been marked for Pokémon battles. “Shall we begin?”

Moon and Hau wordlessly turned to one another, playing a lightning-round of fire-water-grass; she won with water to Hau's fire and thus her cousin was up first. She watched with interest as Ilima sent out a Gumshoos, standing proudly against Uila.
chat: the four musketeers

crescent changed hau do u do's name to BOSS

pedantic: ?

crescent: Picture Attachment: [Mina's Trial Battle #2.jpeg]

pedantic: Ah.

rapunzel: It's a nice picture! Thank you for sending it. (^u^)

crescent: I feel like I get way too much credit for being an awesome trainer when a whole HAU AKIONA exists, right in front of my salad

pedantic: That is... not how that meme is used.

crescent: How would you know lmao

pedantic: I had no desire to learn this information, but I was forcibly educated by the Terror Triplets.

rapunzel: I have the feeling that this is a good story.

pedantic: ...

crescent: Please?

pedantic: I walked into my bedroom at Po Town, the one I shared with Rogelio, Jeremiah, and Ki-moon.

pedantic: At the time, I had not learned that a sock on the door means DO NOT GO IN.

crescent: omfg

pedantic: So I went in, which was a mistake because I saw more of Ki-moon's anatomy than I ever wanted to see in my life.

crescent: AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

pedantic: My eyes were scarred. Ki-moon couldn't look me in the eye for at least two weeks. Molly, Rogelio, and Almas thought it was hysterical and quoted the meme at me for a month.

rapunzel: I was correct. That was an excellent story.

pedantic: Sure, when you're hearing about it after the fact.
Ilima's Gumshoos went down to Uila, but his Smeargle took both Uila and Ollie out—clearly it had been prepared with elemental attacks to counter the starters. BB managed to defeat Smeargle, and almost got Ilima's Komala as well; but she didn't quite manage to win out. It was Poppy who emerged triumphant, crowing happily with Hau as a grinning Ilima handed him something small and orange.

“Oh, it's gonna be a rainbow flower,” said Hau, showing the petal to Moon. “Your turn.”

Moon nodded and tucked Rotom away as Ilima healed up his teammates. They faced off, and she sent Macbeth out against the Gumshoos.

“Espionne, use Super Fang!”

“Macbeth, First Impression!”

The sharpness and speed of Macbeth's attack took Gumshoos out in a single hit. Moon, pleased, patted Macbeth's elbow-joint as Ilima nodded thoughtfully.

“Guzma uses a Golisopod, does he not?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“I have had occasion to study all kinds of Pokémon, in my career as a trial captain and a part-time teacher.” His eyes were warm, and he sent out his Smeargle. “Wimpod and Golisopod do not trust easily. They must find a Trainer upon whom they are fully able to rely. But for those who are patient enough to train, a Golisopod is an invaluable asset. I find it intriguing that you have this in common with Guzma, who is... not exactly known for his patience. Peindre, Extreme Speed!”

Moon snorted. “You can say that again. Macbeth, use Rock Slide!”

Ilima winced as the rocks rained down on Smeargle, but it didn't faint. Both Macbeth and the Smeargle were hanging on by threads, however, so Moon recalled Macbeth and sent out Kate instead.

“Peindre, another Extreme Speed!”

“Kate, use Poison Jab!”

Kate chirped happily, taking the blow with only a slight wince before lashing back out with Poison Jab. The Smeargle went down and Ilima nodded resignedly, recalling it and sending out Komala. Moon studied it for a few moments—Yoshiro had one, but she had never had occasion to battle her father before.

Ilima raised an eyebrow. “Somnolente, Sucker Punch!”

Moon winced. “Kate, use Toxic!”

Kate took Sucker Punch surprisingly well, but Toxic didn't seem to do anything. Moon frowned at the Komala before consulting Rotom. “Hey, what's up with Komala? I tried poisoning it but nothing happened...”
“Komala have the ability Comatose, bzzt,” explained Rotom. “They are nearly always partially asleep—not enough that they can't take orders in a battle, but enough that they are not affected by most status conditions like poison, paralysis, burns, and so on.”

“Oh.” Moon frowned. “Annoying.”

“I'd like to think so,” said Ilima, with a soft laugh. “Komala, another Sucker Punch!”

“Kate, use Poison Ja—okay, never mind,” sighed Moon, as Kate geared up to attack but was taken out by the Komala instead. She selected Ariel instead, and a quick Brick Break easily defeated Komala in turn.

“Very good,” said Ilima, nodding respectfully. “Here is your Orange Petal.”

Moon accepted the petal, tucking it into the small plastic bag where she was keeping the pink one—it seemed like they should stay together, and they were small enough that she didn't want to risk losing them. “Thanks for the battle, that was fun.”

“Agreed. It is not often that I get to battle Trainers whose strength either matches or surpasses my own, and I am always delighted to take the opportunity.” Ilima smiled cheerfully. “Do you intend to continue addressing Mina's trial in the order you challenged the captains?”

Moon glanced at Hau; he shrugged. “Well, I'm looking for some special Z-Crystals, and I'm sort of hoping I'll find one at Ten Carat Hill.”

“Ten Carat Hill?” Ilima looked thoughtful. “That is more on Kahuna Hala's half of the island. If he does not know of a Z-Crystal located there, besides the pedestal for Flyinium Z, I highly doubt there is anything to be found. Still, it does not hurt to check.”

“I mean, I got Snorlium Z last night on what I'm guessing is your half of the island,” pointed out Moon.

“I am aware of Totem Snorlax's existence,” said Ilima, offering her an amused smile. “You could have as easily come to me for assistance, but obviously Kahuna Hala is more convenient to your home location.”

“Which one were you thinking was at Ten Carat Hill, Moon?” asked Hau.

“Professor Kukui said that Olivia thought Lycanium Z would be either at Ten Carat Hill or in the Haina Desert. I'm really hoping it's at Ten Carat Hill.”

“That would be fitting, as it is home to Rockruff and there are at least two packs of Lycanroc who make their homes there,” agreed Ilima. “Unfortunately, I do not think you will find Lycanium Z there. After all, Lycanroc can also be found on Poni Island. I think it is likely that you will discover what you seek in the desert.”

Moon sighed. “I was afraid you'd say that. Well, we can have a look around anyway, I guess.”

“Indeed.” Ilima smiled and lifted one hand in farewell. “I wish you luck in your endeavors. You have both come far as Trainers, in a very short amount of time. That is something to be proud of.”

“Very proud,” agreed Acerola.

“Aaaah!”
It was not just Moon and Hau who let out undignified shrieks, but also Ilima, who leaped backwards with flailing hands— entirely at odds with the calm, collected manner he tended to conduct himself with. Acerola beamed at all of them, with mischief in her eyes.

“Hi!” she said cheerily to all of them before turning to Moon. “You're looking for Mimikium Z, right?”

“Uh— yes?”

“Right, right! Great. Um, I have some bad news for you. There's no source crystal for Mimikium; it's just the one crystal.”

Moon stared at her. “Um.”

“But the good news is, I am pretty sure we can get ahold of it! The Totem who used to live at the Thrifty Megamart— well, she didn't really like sharing her job, to be honest. So it was a big relief when Nanu and Gladion got us all together to explain that we needed to get rid of Foxglove. And I'd already decided what I wanted to do next anyway. We're going to work on building a bit of an obstacle course— maybe add an underwater bit? Palossand still lives there and he wouldn't like that, but the Dhelmise and Jellicent would and they're important too. And we'll just plop Ghostium Z down at the end of it. I've commissioned one of those crystal container machine thingies, and we're going to put the source crystal inside and let it get going. So I can finally retire, no problemo.”

There were a lot of things in this sentence than Moon wanted to question but it was this that finally broke her desire to remain polite. “Retire?”

“Mmhmm.” Acerola's mischievous gray eyes went abruptly serious. “I've been a trial captain for a few years, you know. I was nine when I started. Nobody really thought I could do it, and Nanu was awfully concerned about me setting my trial up around Foxglove's ghost. But I sat down and had a chat with him— the ghost, I mean— at the very beginning. You know, the kind of chat where I had all of my Pokémon out to stare at him menacingly? So he agreed to leave me and the trial challengers alone, and he kept his promise except for a couple times when he sensed Tapu Bulu's influence or presence. Which is why we kind of used you as bait— we knew he wouldn't be able to resist. But anyway, that's not important. Um, I was only nine, and I'm going to be thirteen in a month, and I know that four years isn't very long to serve as a trial captain but the thing is that it's kind of... um, really stressful? Soffy has Mo to help him out, and even though Mo isn't the captain anymore he still lives with Soffy and he loves him a lot so he'll help with whatever Soffy needs. But I don't really have anybody like that. I'm only thirteen, and I'm kind of responsible for Aether House and Tapu Village, as well as Haina Junction and Blush Mountain, and a little bit of Mount Lanakila. I'm not as good at addressing like, the needs of the people. I love the trials and I love battling, but I'm not very good with people.”

It was a lot of words, delivered in Acerola's usual high-speed chirp. Moon's mind had been blown about four times during the monologue, and she was still struggling to recover; but Hau nodded abruptly.

“You're more like Kahuna Nanu than you let on,” he said shrewdly. “Except positive.”

“Yes, exactly!” Acerola beamed. “That's sort of the difference between Dark-types and Ghost-types. Ghost-types point to an afterlife, a sort of hope beyond death. Dark-types are about using the malevolent powers inherent in every being, Pokémon or human, to manipulate reality.” She paused. “Though arguably, Dark-types could also symbolize the void, a relief after a lifetime of suffering, and Ghost-types could indicate eternal suffering even after death. So it's really a toss-up,
depending on whether you tend to be optimistic or pessimistic. Nanu is a pessimist, and I'm an optimist. So it's like the first one, with us. But yes, I'm a Ghost-type specialist and even though I'm also an optimist it's still kind of difficult to deal with, um. Life. Death is way easier.”

That made more sense than Moon thought it would— especially after the last couple of months when she too had been struggling to deal with, well, life. She thought of Gladion abruptly, wondering if he ever felt the same way.

“So yes, I'm retiring. I do have a new job lined up, so it's not like I'll be suffering for money or anything.”

“You're literally thirteen,” pointed out Moon.

“You're also a ward of the state,” added Ilima; his tone was slightly strangled, as though he were still struggling to recover from the sudden shock of Acerola's appearance. “You're not required to have a job to take care of yourself.”

“I know, but I'm covering for some stuff for Nanu anyway, and Professor Kukui made me an offer that I really, really like.”

It clicked— Acerola liked battling, but not being a trial captain; and Professor Kukui had made her a job offer. “You're going to be one of the Elite Four!”

“What?” said Hau and Ilima in unison.

Acerola beamed at her. “Bravo! I knew you'd get there eventually. I'll have more time for the kids at Aether House, too. Which is a good thing— we're going to need it in the next couple of years. Lots of adjustments to make, lots of things falling into place. Lots of changes. Kids like us at the Aether House, we don't do so well with change.” Her eyes flickered with momentary sadness, but then she brightened up. “So, yes. I'm retiring. Technically, I'm retired already. The Ghost-type trial no longer exists— I've had Nanu just handing out the crystal for challengers, since I've been busy. He grumbles, but it's the least he can do for me and he knows it. Speaking of which, you're also going to have to go to him for Mina's petal.” Her eyes flickered over Ilima. “That's what you were doing here, right?”

“I— yeah.”

“Yes! I don't have the petal, Nanu does. He doesn't mind that so much either.” She turned back to Moon. “Now, Mimikyu and Palossand are no longer Totems— they're still big and they still have auras, but Palossand will eventually shrink and lose the aura as he adjusts to being a regular Pokémon again. Mimikyu, on the other hand— she's tricky. One of her ancestors apparently picked up a bit of Necrozma's crystal, and it's been passed down through her family ever since. Even I didn't know she had her own Z-Crystal until I went to find her and ask, and she didn't want to talk about it at all but I kind of made her. And then she got upset and ran away, and I've been tracking her down but I finally traced her location. Which is why I came to find you— she's being really stubborn about things, and I'm only one person against a powered-up Totem. I need some help cornering her.”

“Gotcha,” said Moon with a nod. “Where are we headed?”

Acerola's eyes gleamed. “We're going at night,” she explained. “Mimikyu is nocturnal, like lots of Ghost-types are; but she's expecting me to look for her during the day so she's keeping herself awake. After pulling an all-dayer, she's going to be tired and not as careful. So that's the best time to catch up with her. Can you meet me at the Hau'oli City East Pokémon Center at... oh, let's say
nine-thirty tonight?”

“Nine-thirty? Yeah, I can do that. That's right by my house, actually.”

Acerola blinked at her a few times. “The blue house?” she said, a touch of confusion in her tone. “On Route One?”

“Yeah, that's the one. Why?”

Acerola blinked at her several more times. “Nothing,” she said, but a slight smile curled onto the corners of her mouth. “Just a bit of a premonition. Don't worry, it's nothing bad; but I'd rather hang onto it, just in case.”

“Uh— okay?”

“Seriously, don't worry about it.” Acerola's gaze flicked over to Hau and Ilima. “You both are invited to come help, if you want.”

“Where is Mimikyu hiding out?”

“The Trainer's School,” said Acerola, with a sigh. “Another reason we have to wait until night— I don't want any kids or teachers involved with this. There's Zorua on the grounds, and I think she's probably recruiting them. They're illusionists and they enjoy mischief— it would be just like her to ask them to keep us occupied.”

Ilima frowned. “I'll definitely be accompanying you, then. The Trainer's School is mine— I don't like the thought of a Totem disrupting the balance we have there.”

“Me, too,” added Hau. “I'm helping Moon collect Z-Crystals, and this sounds like fun.”

Acerola regarded him for a few moments. “It might not be,” she said solemnly. “A scared Pokémon is the most dangerous kind of Pokémon. You know that first-hand.”

Necrozma was implied in the silence that followed; but so was Null, and strangely enough Moon's mind supplied her with a thought regarding Tapu Bulu. What the hermit god had to be scared of she had no idea, but there was probably something very human about it. Necrozma had taught her that much.

“The Hau'oli City East Pokémon Center, at nine-thirty?” she repeated.

Acerola smiled— fey and demure, as always. “Yep. I'll see you then.”

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

lunar sun: Picture Attachment: [IntrospectiveSelfie.jpeg]

lunar sun: Rotom wtf
brave heart: I understand that it editorializes your photographs, you've mentioned it before.

brave heart: Though you do seem pretty thoughtful, in the picture. Something on your mind?

lunar sun: You, obviously

* * * *

chat: girl power

marianne dashwood: Hey so I've been texting your brother and I might have dropped a super flirty line and he hasn't responded for like ten minutes, is he okay

elinor dashwood: Oh, so THAT'S why he's been giggling in the other corner of our room.

elinor dashwood: I asked him what was so funny and he brushed me off but he can't stop laughing.

marianne dashwood: Omfg thank you for that mental image

elinor dashwood: I can give you something better than a mental image, actually.

elinor dashwood: Video Attachment: [VID003.vid]

marianne dashwood: OMG

marianne dashwood: LILLIE

marianne dashwood: I'VE NEVER HEARD HIM LAUGHING LIKE THAT WHAT THE FUCK HE'S SO CUTE HOLY SHIT

elinor dashwood: He tries to stick to laughing in a way that makes him sound more manly, because Mother once told him that only little girls squeak when they laugh. But you know as well as I that you can't always control how it comes out when you're truly happy.

marianne dashwood: Yeah, your little snort-giggle thing is also super cute.

elinor dashwood: Thank you. But your reaction to this was hysterical; I will definitely be screenshotting all of this and forwarding it to Hau.

marianne dashwood: Wtf you're so mean lmao

elinor dashwood: I've been spending a lot of time with my brother lately, and he's spent a lot of time with Team Skull. Both of our senses of humor have taken a turn for the acerbic.

marianne dashwood: Ok fair

* * * *
chat: no longer hypothetically

brave heart: Why do I even like you? That was disgustingly cheesy.

lunar sun: Listen, I have objective proof that you enjoyed that

brave heart: ...

brave heart: I don't like the sound of this.

lunar sun: Well, when you drop a very cheesy line and your boyfriend doesn't answer for ten minutes, you start to worry

lunar sun: So I maybe texted Lillie to ask if you were okay

lunar sun: And I now have a thirty-second video of you being extremely fucking cute and I'm really not okay

brave heart: Oh my god, I'm going to murder her

lunar sun: Don't kill her!!!!!

lunar sun: Listen, your squeaky giggle is like low-key the highlight of my day. I adore it, please never hide it from me again

lunar sun: Literally you're the cutest human on this planet and I'm losing my mind because I want to squish your stupid face

brave heart: You sound upset about it.

lunar sun: I AM UPSET

brave heart: I'm sorry.

lunar sun: OMG NO NOT AT YOU

lunar sun: Just like, the universe

lunar sun: I have a lot of feelings about you and your squeaky giggle and they're coming out as anger for some reason lmao, but I'm not angry

brave heart: Would this be similar to when Molly says anything along the lines of “I can't even?”

lunar sun: That is literally the exact emotion I'm experiencing, yes

brave heart: I see.

brave heart: Picture Attachment: [IMG054.jpeg]

brave heart: I had to ask Lillie to take that picture. You owe me.
I am blessed, the world is amazing and wonderful, life is perfect

My crops are watered, my children are fed, my homework is finished, my face is clear

And my boyfriend sends me pictures of his Pokémon squishing his face because I'm not there to do it myself

Today is a good goddamn day

---

Acerola and Ilima were waiting outside of the Pokémon Center. Moon had her team and her Z-Ring, all healed and ready to go; Hau was similarly armed. And Ilima, noted Moon, had six Pokéballs rather than three. Acerola only had five, but she was as relaxed and confident as any of them were— which was to say, not a whole lot.

The Trainer's School was deserted at this time of night but Ilima, as a teacher, had a key to unlock the gate. At Acerola's request he locked them back in. It was almost never cold in Alola, but Moon felt a creeping, clammy chill slide slowly up her spine.

"Yes," said Acerola quietly. "Yes, she's here. Hau, you fought her when you took on my trial. Can you sense her?"

Hau blinked at her, bewildered. "Why would I be able to?"

Acerola smiled softly. "You're more sensitive to this kind of thing than you think," she informed him. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. Close your eyes and listen and breathe; you'll get what I mean."

Moon did the same thing, but all she picked up on was her own profound sense of unease. After a few moments she opened her eyes, glancing at Ilima; he shook his head softly.

"I'm very mundane," he murmured. "Acerola and I get along, but I have no sense for anything extraordinary. It's why I chose to specialize in Normal-types."

That made sense, Moon supposed. She looked at Hau, who was frowning slightly with his eyes closed; and then her gaze slipped to Acerola, who was watching Hau intently.

"I think I get what you mean," he said finally. "I don't know quite how to explain it, though. It's more like... I know where she's not? I don't have a Ghost-type on my team, so I'm not used to that sensation. But I guess you could say I'm more in touch with the school than I am with Mimikyu. I mean, I did attend school here for thirteen years. So I'm pretty sure she's inside the building, and I think she might be in the basement or the stairwell going down to it— but again, that's just kind of me getting a feeling where she isn't, instead of where she is."

Acerola smiled— but this was not the soft smile that Moon was used to. There was something hard and glittering about this— something that reminded her of Puck's arrows, of Nebby's stubbornness. "Very good," she said quietly. "We don't want her to escape physically or through the shadow paths, so we have to plan our attack. Moon, Hau— neither of you have any Dark-type Pokémon on your team, correct?"
“Nope.” Moon shook her head, and Hau opened his eyes to do the same.

“But you do.” Acerola turned to look at Ilima.

“I have a Raticate, yes.” Ilima's hand went to a Pokéball.

“It may be tricky, because Mimikyu is also a Fairy-type; but you're going to be keeping her from getting out through the gate. She might have brought a Klefki with her from the Thrifty Megamart— or what's left of it, anyway. So she would be able to open the gate if it were left unguarded. You'll stay here and keep watch with Raticate and the rest of your team, and you'll keep her from getting out physically.”

Ilima nodded, and Moon could see that he looked relieved by this.

“I'll be blocking off the shadow paths,” continued Acerola, her hand going to her Trainer belt; one at a time she sent out each of her five Pokémon: Banette, Drifblim, Dhelmise, Palossand, and a slender white figure that Moon didn't recognize offhand.

“Froslass, bzzt,” Rotom informed her. “An Ice- and Ghost- type. They can evolve from female Snorunt with the aid of a Dawn Stone.”

“That's a very specific kind of evolution.” Moon realized that Froslass looked like she was wearing a kimono with a red obi; it was a thought of childhood and summer, a touch of warmth in the darkness.

“You'll all guard the paths for me, won't you?” said Acerola.

Her teammates made agreeable noises and one by one, faded into the shadows. Moon noticed that Acerola was doing the same— but she hadn't completely disappeared. It was like she was shimmering around the edges, slightly transparent.

“I'll be halfway between here and the shadows,” she said— there was an extra layer in her voice, a deeper note that did not mix well with Acerola's fairly high-pitched voice. “Moon and Hau, you'll be going in and hunting Mimikyu yourselves. Moon has the advantage in that Mimikyu's never fought her before; and it's been a while since she's fought Hau so hopefully she doesn't remember a whole lot about you.” She paused. “Good luck.”

Her eyes had gone from gray to black— whites as well as irises. She looked vaguely demonic. Moon nodded, feeling slightly too intimidated to say thank you, and turned to Hau. He cast a disturbed look at Acerola, but fell into step with her as they walked to the school.

Moon unlocked the building with Ilima's keys; several lights turned on as they walked in, with the faintest of buzzing noises that told her they were simply motion-triggered, and had nothing to do with Mimikyu.

“Is she still in the basement?” she asked Hau.

He closed his eyes, frowning; then he shook his head. “She's gone upstairs, I think.”

“Is there more than one staircase?”

“Nah, just the one.”

Moon took a deep breath. “I guess that's where we're going.”
“I guess it is.”

Despite her bravado she still reached out and grabbed Hau's hand. He squeezed it once, letting her know that it was all right— he was very good at being comforting and not just for Lillie, either. They began walking up the stairs.

Cold air washed over Moon's neck as they reached the top; Hau's murmured grumble told her that he'd felt the same thing. The hallway was lit up but deserted, and the classroom doors were locked. He led her over a slightly walled-in reading area, with tables, chairs, and beanbags.

“Maybe it does know you, since it went for the library,” he snorted.

“This is the library?”

“Yeah. We don't really have a dedicated room for it— just this open space and the bookshelves.” Hau gestured to it. “Not a great place to study even at the best of times, but it gets the job do— holy shit ohmygod.”

Moon followed his shaking finger to see a book, sliding from the shelf and floating over to one of the tables, where it was left open. She didn't have the ghost-sensor on Rotom anymore— they'd been removed after finishing Acerola's trial— so she couldn't see whatever was looking at the book, but then the pages rifled rapidly over to fall flat on a specific entry.

After a few moments in which nothing happened, Moon took a cautious step toward the book.

“Moon!”

“I highly doubt that Mimikyu wants to hurt us,” she pointed out. “But maybe it wants to tell us something.”

Pale purple smears appeared on the page, highlighting words— as though to prove her point. Moon bridged the distance between herself and the book and looked at the words.

-ing to cause the Pokémon to flinch. Astonish does very little damage, but the trade-off for causing a flinch means that it is occasionally free damage, which is invaluable in early Training. If you choose to allow a Ghost-type to learn Astonish, there is the added benefit of same-type attack bonus. Other moves that are valuable in a Ghost-type's repertoire— especially those Ghost-types that work most efficiently by using status conditions to undermine their foes' attempts to defeat them— are Glare, Will-o-Wisp, and Mean Look. Glare paralyzes the opponent, Will-o-Wisp burns them, and Mean Look causes the opponent to become trapped in the battling arena.

“Okay, well that's creepy as hell.”

“What is it?” asked Hau, moving closer as the book offered no additional threat.

“The highlighted words read 'you are trapped.' Not exactly subtle, but somehow I don't think that's what Mimikyu is going for. Is she still here?”

Hau closed his eyes, then shook his head. “No, she's gone back downstairs.”

“How do you sense her? Or sense where she isn't?” Moon asked, curious. “Like, how does it
work?”

He shrugged. “I honestly couldn't tell you. I just know, somehow. And Acerola said I was right, so
I'm going to trust my gut on this one.”

“I trust you too, but like—”

“You want a scientific explanation,” Hau finished for her, grinning. “Yeah, don't you always?”

“Oh, shut up.”

They walked back to the stairs, pausing as an odd squelching noise reached their ears; a few
moments later, a greenish-grey slime slid from beneath a classroom door and reformulated itself
into a Grimer.

“Oh man, he scared the crap out of me,” laughed Hau.

The Grimer eyed them suspiciously. “Grime grime.”

Moon shook her head. “No, we're not vandalizing anything. We're looking for a Mimikyu.”

“Grime grime.” Grimer nodded toward the staircase before squelching off in the direction of the
next classroom.

“What's he doing?” Moon wondered.

“Janitor duty, probably.”

“Oh... yeah, that makes sense.”

They walked down the stairs, and the cold chill crept over Moon's neck again; she blinked as they
were met with the sight of the exact same classroom door that faced the stairwell, instead of the
main entrance. Peering around the corner revealed that the library was still present.

“Oh, what the fuck.”

They tried going down the stairs again, to be met with the same dilemma.

“Oh,” realized Moon. “You are trapped. Okay, yeah. We kind of are.”

Hau blanched. “Oh my god we're going to be stuck here forever.”

“No we're not.” Moon considered. “You go down the staircase, and I'll stay at the top.”

“I don't want to split up!”

“Worst-case scenario, you just appear at the top of the stairs and we really are in a never-ending
loop,” pointed out Moon. “Best-case scenario, we're just stuck in some kind of joint illusion. If we
force Mimikyu to try and separate us, at least one of us should be able to get free. Is she still
downstairs?”

Hau frowned. “No, she's not... I wonder if that's really her signal I'm picking up? Mimikyu don't
move all that quickly, or at least she didn't when I battled her in the trial.”

“Acerola did say something about Mimikyu joining up with Zorua,” remembered Moon.
Hau winced. “And Zorua are known for illusions. Ugh, I miss Lillie and Gladion.”

“Because they have Zoroarks and they could probably break the illusion?”

“No, because I want to hold Lillie's hand and kind of like, hide in her shoulder. I'm really not that fond of Ghosts.”

“Me neither— Puck and Rotom excepted, of course. And I guess Nebby, technically.”

She waited, peering down through the turn in the stairwell after Hau as he went.

“Okay,” he said finally. “It's kind of— flickering? Like, I can half see the second floor, but I can also see the main lobby on the first floor. I wonder if I'm up there?”

Moon glanced around and jumped violently when she saw a fading Hau, staring straight ahead and squinting; his mouth moved in unison with the real Hau's words.

“You are,” she informed him.

“Sick, dude.” He sounded impressed, which made Moon grin— even when he was scared, nothing could keep Hau down for long. “Since we know it's an illusion, it doesn't really work anymore, right?”

“Right.” Moon reached out and poked illusion-Hau's leg; she felt another chill go down her spine and the illusion shattered into sparkling stardust, revealing a blue-eyed fox that blinked innocently up at them.

“Hi there,” said Moon.

“Hi to who?”

“The illusionist. Come up and say hi yourself.”

“Zor, zor,” said the Zorua. Moon grinned and pulled off her backpack, opening the pocket where she kept her sack of beans; she wasn't averse to a bit of bribery.

“Oh, hey Zorua. Did you do the cold bit, too?” Hau asked, sitting down next to them.

A giggle from the ceiling made them both look up; a Gastly and a Drifloon were bobbing side by side, both of them laughing. Zorua let out a soft laugh as well, picking out a few beans to nibble.

“Ah, a group effort,” said Moon wisely, which made all of them crack up again. “I don't suppose you'd be willing to change sides and lead us to Mimikyu?” She offered a handful of beans up to them. Gastly sniffed once and declined, but Drifloon reached out with tiny yellow hands, grabbed a bean with each of them, and brought thread-arms up to press the beans against its yellow, X-shaped mouth. The food seemed to phase through it, and Moon couldn't see teeth or a tongue but she heard chewing noises all the same.

Zorua shook its head. “Rue.”

“Fair enough. But we broke your illusion, so you'll stay out of our way now.” Moon glanced up at Gastly and Drifloon. “You two as well, right?”

Three solemn nods, even if all their eyes sparkled with mischief; it reminded her of Kate, or Sonar and Ollie—and Imp, and of course Nebby. Hero sometimes, when it was feeling particularly whimsical.
The trio did, however, follow them as they made their way toward Mimikyu— or rather, away from where Mimikyu wasn't. She was definitely down in the basement again, since Hau could eliminate Gastly and Drifloon from what he was sensing. It was only belatedly that Moon smacked herself in the forehead and withdrew Colress's scanner, searching for a Totem Aura; and there it was, directly in the basement.

“I feel like an idiot,” she announced.

“So no change.”

Moon elbowed Hau; he elbowed her back.

Halfway down the basement stairwell, a chill washed over Moon—a full-bodied chill, this time. It was the difference between a regular Pokémon and a Totem. Zorua, Gastly, and Drifloon retreated to the top of the stairwell, watching with smiling eyes; Moon and Hau waved good-bye and ventured further into the basement.

It was legitimately far more creepy down here; a single lightbulb flickered restlessly and cast weird shadows over the entire hallway, which looked like the two hallways above it but was lined with spare and broken desks and chairs.

“It's like an obstacle course,” observed Moon.

“Be kind of hard to chase a little Ghost down in here.” Hau frowned. “One of us should stay at the stairwell, so it can't get past us.”

“Good call. I'm going to say that should be you.”

“You did this during Acerola's trial,” protested Hau. “And then Foxglove almost killed you.”

“He wouldn't have killed me. Acerola and the Totems knew what they were about.” Moon met his gaze. “I'm not like, babying you because you're a little more freaked out about the Ghosts than I am. It's because it's my job to collect the Z-Crystals, and because I have the scanner to pinpoint Mimikyu's location.”

He relaxed. “As long as it's practical...”

“Dude, if I weren't on this chosen one bullshit I would let you do it in a heartbeat.”

That earned her another laugh, and Moon left Hau guarding the stairwell as she cautiously made her way through the jungle of dusty schoolroom paraphernalia. The scanner led her further down down the hallway, leading her to a locked classroom door. Moon had to try a few of Ilima's keys before one turned in the lock and let her in.

Mimikyu had not bothered to hide; she was simply sitting in the center of the room, looking up at Moon with beady black eyes below the Pikachu-button ones on her coat.

“Did Acerola explain why I want your crystal?” she asked it directly.

A slight frown creased between Mimikyu's eyes; she scuttled backward, away from Moon. Moon sighed, got out the Pokébeans again, and sat on the floor.

“It doesn't really belong to you,” she said. “It belongs to Necrozma, and she needs it back. I might be able to ask her to give you another one; she used to give them out a long time ago.”
“Kyu,” muttered the Mimikyu darkly, scuttling even further back.

“Come on, that's childish. You're a Totem, you should know better.”

“Mi mi mi.”

It had not occurred to Moon— or, clearly, to Acerola— that Mimikyu might be feeling abandoned by Acerola's resignation as trial captain, and her clear intent to make Ghostium Z a prize crystal rather than a trial crystal. Logically, this meant that a new trial captain would be required; but that was a problem for someone else to worry about.

“Huh,” she said finally. “Well, if it weren't for the fact that I have six teammates that I love dearly, I would be happy to take you with me. But I do have six, and if I took you then it means either you or one of them would have to stay in the computer, and that's just boring. Even if you got to go to Poké Pelago, which is absolutely something I'd let you do, I don't think you'd like it. You just want to be loved, huh?”

Mimikyu made an annoyed sound that Moon interpreted as confirmation of her guess.

“Well, good golly, if you'd said as much in the first place instead of running away I'd have offered you my last spot!”

Moon squeaked, sending a handful of Pokébeans flying into the air; about a dozen dark hands snapped out from beneath Mimikyu's coat and caught all of them before slithering back in place. Acerola, still half-shadowed and black-eyed, was folding her arms and glaring at Mimikyu.

“Did you think I would just leave you to be silly and lonely all by yourself?” she demanded, in that strange double-voice. “Even if you weren't on my team, I would have visited. That's what I'll be doing with Totem Palossand; he likes his beach too much to leave, and I already have a Palossand anyway. My god, you're such a diva. Give Moon your silly rock and come with me— I'll train you with everybody else, and you can help me with my new job. Deal?”

In lieu of a response, Mimikyu darted forward to Acerola, dark arms wrapping around her legs and squeezing hard. The younger girl let out a soft laugh, reaching down to gently pet Mimikyu's head; this earned a half-sobbed cry from the Pokémon and Moon had to subtly wipe away her own tears.

“Ah, you're an idiot,” sighed Acerola, and withdrew a pale-pink Heal Ball from her pocket. She tossed it at Mimikyu, who promptly vanished inside; the quick flash denoted a critical capture, and Acerola scrolled along the Pokéball band until she found the option to remove Mimikyu's item.

Mimikium Z was a faded, pale brown color, with little splashes of darker brown dotted through it. Moon let it click into place, in one of the few remaining slots in her Z-Ring; she was beginning to run out and sooner or later she would have to start keeping them in a plastic bag like the petals for Mina's trial.

The shadows around Acerola faded, and her eyes lightened to their usual color as she spun the band back around. “What should I call you, hmm... well, you'd be happy with anything, honestly.” She murmured something Moon couldn't quite hear into the ball and it vibrated. “You can be Patches; then you match me, because my dress is all patches. Which is how I prefer it, so it's not an insult.”

They made their way back through the jungle of desks and chairs, and Hau raised an eyebrow on seeing Acerola but didn't ask how she'd gotten past him. Probably he knew better. “I'm guessing Mimikyu's not a problem anymore?”

“You tell me,” countered Acerola.
“Well, I can't sense her anymore.”

“Indeed.” Acerola tossed Mimikyu's ball up and down once, then slipped it into the slot where her other teammates were—they'd been called back to their balls at some point, noted Moon. “She's my last piece.”

Hau frowned. “Your last piece of what?”

“My last piece,” repeated Acerola. “Of me, of my life— whichever you like. She's all I had left to take care of as a trial captain; now I really am free from that responsibility.” She sighed softly. “Feels nice.”

“Who's your replacement?”

“Oh, we don't have one yet. Nanu told me not to worry about it; he said it would be someone else's problem and I should focus on helping Professor Kukui with the Pokémon League. I'm taking his advice.”

Hau frowned again, but before he could say anything Acerola had darted past him, taking the stairs three at a time with light, quick feet.

“I don't think she wants to talk about it,” said Moon.

“I can't believe you're actually being the emotionally sensitive one here,” snarked Hau; his frown faded slightly. “Still, I don't think a vacancy for trial captain should be left very long. The islands function by balancing each other out, and there's supposed to be eight trials. Right now there's only seven.”

“As though Ula'ula Island is balanced in the first place,” snorted Moon.

Hau opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. “Okay, that's absolutely fair. Someone should fix that.”

As far as Moon was aware, it was what Gladion was working on, or what he would be working on when he got back from Kanto; and Team Skull would be there to help. Gladion would probably want to keep Lillie out of it, but Moon suspected that despite her boyfriend's best efforts, Lillie and Hau would both end up getting involved as well.

* * * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan, satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
Re: Ok fresh email chain because I'm getting tired of the all the Re:'s in the title

Red— sorry, you know I like winding him up. But since he's probably frothing at the mouth at this point, I will show mercy and give you some more information. Not a whole lot, because knowing the two of you there will be a lot of internet stalking and poring over things. But I can direct you to some public videos where boyfriend is showing off what a brilliant Trainer he is. This should also
serve as proof for the professor that boyfriend deserves a Kantonian starter. (He is actually studying to take his GED this week so by the time you get the official application in he'll have one.)

Blue— you'll want to look up “August Green Battle Royal.” There should be plenty of videos, both fancams (still a weird concept, that boyfriend has fans) and official material from the Battle Royal Company.

To both of you: his name is not, in fact, August Green. That's a pseudonym. His name is Gladion Mohn, and he is awesome. I can't give you a lot of details of how we met without like, majorly invading his privacy; but I can tell you a couple of things. He's nineteen— he turns twenty in April, which makes him about a year and a half older than me. I've told you about my friend Lillie; he is her older brother and they look a lot alike— light blond hair, green eyes, tall and slim. He would be mortified if I said it to his face, but he's one of the prettiest people I've ever met in my life. I honestly wish I had a selfie with him to send to you guys, but I don't, and I don't want to send a picture of just him because that's like... weird, I dunno.

In terms of personality— well, he's a jerk. You're both probably thinking “MOON WTF WE TOLD YOU NOT TO DATE JERKS” but listen, he's not a total asshole. He's a jerk in the same way that both of you are jerks. Okay, specifically in the way that Red is a jerk. He's considerably more talkative than Red, but that's not exactly difficult lmao. He's smart, sarcastic, arrogant, and rude. And he is also very sensitive and quiet and gentle. I kind of high-key adore him and I accidentally implied an ILY at him once, which is very embarrassing but we've both sort of nonverbally agreed that it didn't happen so that we don't have to talk about it.

We are sort of long-distance at the moment, because he is currently doing some medical stuff and I am finishing up my island challenge. (Don't worry, he's not like sick or anything, it's just like... medical stuff. I don't really know how to explain it to you without explaining some private stuff but he's fine, I promise.) We text a lot, and I told him I would send him a selfie every day. I usually get one back, which is nice.

He memorizes random little bits of Shakespeare for me. He gets as annoyed as I do at Mukeo and Pukiet. He organized a movie date for us on Christmas. He's not a morning person but he can be aggressively cuddly. He squeaks when he's laughing really hard at something, which is the cutest thing in the goddamn universe.

Anyway I really like him and I'll talk to him about telling you guys more stuff and so on.

Love, Moon
Technically Moon is not misusing the “right in front of my salad” meme but it does have a Very different original context lmao

Also: Gladion being scarred for life after walking in on Jeremiah and Ki-moon boinking— a whole mood for anyone who's ever walked in and seen something they didn't want to

I love the contrast between the canon personality of a Wimpod and Guzma's canon lack of patience for weakness. I love the irony of him having a Golisopod as his ace. I love Guzma.

Comatose always trips me up when I'm battling a Komala lmao

I've written Acerola as a huge troll so her appearing out of nowhere and scaring the shit out of Ilima is just a continuation of the theme

Acerola constantly getting off-topic— did you mean me having irl conversations

Being a trial captain is a Big Job and I feel like Acerola would get overwhelmed by that. She may have mystical ghost powers and be a semi-omniscient meta-commentary-giving character, but she's also a thirteen-year-old girl who is basically running an orphanage for mentally ill and emotionally disturbed children. Somebody please help her.

I've been asked about incorporating the haunted Trainer's School event a few times in comments— it's apparently very popular! I thought it was cute, but I also thought that a few of the hauntings were very intriguing— specifically the never-ending staircase one and the book that led you to believe it was a diary but it was actually a horror novel written in diary format. So I kind of mixed several of the separate haunting events together, added a touch of Zorua because they live at the Trainer's School and they do illusions— a very perfect coincidence, mind you— and voila, we have a nice setup for Moon getting hold of Mimikium Z. Plus I was able to incorporate things I've sort of worried about in the process of removing Acerola as trial captain (because yes, I was always going to remove her; she becomes Elite Four and neither her nor Olivia deserves to pull double duty with that kind of job), such as “what happens to a Totem when it no longer has a Trial?” So formerly-Totem Mimikyu is now Patches, a member of Acerola's team.

Acerola is having a premonition about something related to Moon's house... interesting

I have absolutely nothing to say about the chatfic and the entire revelation about Gladion getting flustered and laughing until he starts squeaking. ABSOLUTELY NOTHING...

...mostly because my entire reaction to this headcanon was written into Moon's reaction to the video Lillie sent her.

Molly is absolutely the kind of person who voices the tumblr “I can't even” out loud. I was once this kind of person as well, but I stopped using tumblr for a few years because I had a mental breakdown. My old account doesn't exist anymore.
Gladion got all of his team out of their Pokéballs and had Rey and Ellie squish his face while he attempted to put on his grumpiest face. Then he had Lillie take a picture so he could send it to Moon. Hi my name is Scribe34 and I want to Die

Hau can't sense Mimikyu... but he can sense where she's not... because he is, somehow, attuned to his alma mater? Or is he... perhaps... attuned to Melemele Island itself?

Demonic half-shadow Acerola was fun to write lmao

The general stereotype of Ghost-types is that they're lil pranksters. I am 100% proud to have contributed to this stereotype

Moon forgetting about the Colress scanner is, uh, me forgetting about the Colress scanner and then deciding that Moon solving the problem by logic-ing her way out of it is better writing than just using the MacGuffin to do that for her

I live in my hometown, where I went to high school. At my alma mater, to which I frequently have occasion to go as a person who picks her younger brother up from marching band rehearsal (HE'S A SECTION LEADER AND HE HAD A SOLO IN THIS YEAR'S BAND SHOW AND HE PLAYED THE FIRST VERSE OF DREAM ON BY AEROSMITH I'M SO PROUD OF HIM), there's a wing at the back that has this little gated courtyard, with blacktop and a chain-link fence. Inside the courtyard are probably several hundred stacked-up old desks and chairs, as well as old filing cabinets and other random furniture and crap. It's one of the creepiest things I remember seeing. It's like a graveyard of the most stressful time in my life. (Not counting my mid-college mental breakdown, of course.)

AWW MIMIKYU FEELS LIKE ACEROLA LEFT HER :(((((( and one of Mimikyu's chief personality characteristics (in general, not specifically this Mimikyu) is that they just want someone to love them :((( honestly I didn't plan this guys, I have no idea how it worked out so well

“Nanu told me not to worry about it; he said it would be someone else's problem” — dude I get that you're old and cranky but Gladion hasn't officially replaced you yet. why are you like this
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Chapter Summary

Lush Jungle, Paniola Nursery, Route Five
******************************************************************************

Moon and Hau challenge Lana and Mallow for the blue and green petals, and find yet another wild Totem to challenge.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title: Sonnet 73, William Shakespeare

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (I rb Pokémon stuff sometimes but fair warning it's a BTS stan blog because MIN YOONGI I AM GOING TO SUE YOU!!!!)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: invites by request!!!!!! pls join we are a lovely bunch
******************************************************************************

AHEM. SO IT'S BEEN LIKE TWO MONTHS SINCE I'VE UPDATED
pls don't worry, the fic is not dead. I just had a really, really rough end-of-November to mid-January. I have been periodically sick throughout this time; my family are musicians and December is Busy As Fuck for musicians; my brother came home for two weeks during Christmas and I wanted to spend time with him; and I finished my application for grad school, fuckin FINALLY.

I just wanted to say thank you to everybody who reads this story, for your patience and kindness. I was worried that y'all would be like, mad or something and that I would log back in to a bunch of "WHY HAVEN'T YOU FUCKING UPDATED YET" type comments, but obviously that's anxiety talking because I've literally never had a mean comment on this fic. At least, not that I remember. In fact, I had a really nice comment from ForgottenFelix about how it was okay if I needed to take time and stuff like that. And some new readers leaving comments on the older fics, which is *chef's kiss* wonderful.

So while I may not immediately begin posting at the same mad rate I have been accustomed to, I will try to put up one chapter per week. You'll get chapters as I finish them (plus the twelve-to-thirteen chapter gap I leave between what I've written and what I've posted), which means it could be like two or three chapters a week or maybe I just miss an entire week here and there. My job is still the babysitting gig and it's not super demanding— literally I help the kids with homework, make them practice the piano, and drive them to Cub Scouts or karate or whatever. Three, maybe four hours a day. So I have plenty of time to write, but I do have other things to do occasionally. I try and read when I can, I play video games (Skyrim is truly an addiction folks), and I'm teaching myself Korean. Plus other things come up— my mom needs me to run an errand, I have laundry or other chores to do, etc etc. I'm not going to give myself stress about posting as frequently as I've done before, and I'm not going to give myself any long-term deadlines. The story will get done when it gets done. If it takes another year, even. I mean... I began this series in April 2018. So it's literally been almost two
years.

ANYWAY I hope this eases everyone's worries about me and about the lack of updates. I love you all, enjoy the new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most of the trial captains had not given Moon or Hau any kind of contact information, including all three of the Akala captains; and they also didn't have Olivia's contact information, which meant asking Hala to talk to Olivia and then asking Olivia, in turn, to talk to Lana, Kiawe, and Mallow. As a result, through a flurry of text exchanges, Moon and Hau had arranged to meet up with Mallow at Lush Jungle two days after finding Mimikium Z; and apparently Lana would also be there, which would kill two Pidgey with one stone. (Moon didn't really like that phrase, but it was how the saying went.)

The Ride Pager Charizards touched down outside of Lush Jungle, and Moon opened her eyes and reminded herself that she'd been securely buckled in place the entire time and there was no reason that her legs shouldn't work. This was not entirely convincing to her legs; she wobbled as she slid off the Charizard's back and removed her backpack from the side straps.

“I think we're a bit early,” commented Hau. “They said they'd meet us here at the gate, right?”

“Yeah, they did.” Moon checked Rotom, but she hadn't gotten any texts from either Lana or Mallow. “Do you think we should go in and look for them?”

“Maybe you should go, and I'll stay here at the gate. They might not be here yet.”

“Oh, that's true. If either of us find them, we'll text.”

“Sounds good.”

The dim green light of the winding path soon swallowed the gate behind her. Lush Jungle was quite loud, as jungles tended to be—she'd seen enough documentaries about the Safari Zones in Kanto-then-Johto and Hoenn to know that much. The trills of Trumbeak and Fomantis echoed along with bubbling water, and even though it was barely a week into January, Moon was still sweating.

Soft human laughter echoed from further up the path, so she began to follow it only to be stopped by a strong, slightly sweet scent that flooded her nostrils.

“Ugh, gross.” She coughed, waving her hand in front of her face; it didn't help. Though now that she thought about it, the smell was rather familiar; she'd had occasion to visit Pewter City during a class trip in high school; they were on their way to Mt. Moon but they'd stopped for a tour of Brock's Gym. She remembered the smell because it had stuck to her clothes, and because her parents had freaked out when she got home and demanded to know why, exactly, she smelled like marijuana.

(Red had confirmed that Brock did, in fact, smoke a lot of weed. Ostensibly it was for medical benefits, but he didn't have to smoke it to get those. Blue said it was because he wanted to look like a cool hippie and impress girls.)

Moon pressed onward despite the smell and rounded the bend to find Lana and Mallow, sitting on
the ground with their backs against a fallen log; between them were a pair of Comfey and, oddly, a Torkoal. The Comfey were shedding greenish-white petals, letting them fall onto the log; Mallow picked up a couple and fed them to Torkoal, who snorted and let out a puff of steam—the source of the smell.

“How does it smell like marijuana?” she asked, curious.

Lana merely blinked at her, slow and lazy; Mallow sat bolt upright, eyes wide. “Oh my god we have an appointment with you and Hau and I forgot.”

“We're early, so don't worry about it. He's at the gate— should I call him back here?”

“Um, no— hang on, just a second. And, uh, try not to breathe.”

“Already on it.”

Lana laughed again. “Relax, Mallow. I'm sure Moon doesn't care that you borrowed Torkoal from your brother just so we could get high.”

“Lana!”

“No, she's right, I don't care,” agreed Moon. “Well, I care in the sense that it smells like weed somehow, which is like... very weird. Comfey is magical flowers and shit, there's no cannabis involved?”

“No,” agreed Lana, “but some of Comfey's petals, the greenish-white ones, contain THC. It smells like weed because Mallow's brother sometimes feeds his Torkoal weed, and it combines really nicely with the Comfey petals. We only smoke when Mal is stressed out about something.”

“What are you stressed out about?”

“I'm doing some stuff for Olivia, because she's busy helping Professor Kukui with the Pokémon League.” Mallow sighed and pulled a Pokéball from her pocket, recalling Torkoal; it vanished. The Comfey chirped soft good-byes and floated off into the jungle, and both trial captains got to their feet. “She really does way too much— she does like half of Nanu's job for him on top of her own, and she's going to be part of the Elite Four for at least a little while because the Professor can't find anybody else to do it.”

“So that's Acerola, Olivia, and I think Molayne?” Moon frowned. “Who's the last one?”

“Kahili,” said Lana. Her tone was dry. “Her family owns the Grand Hano. She specializes in Flying-types.”

A memory sparked in Moon's mind. “Does she have like, kind of minty green hair?”

“Yeah, that's her.”

“Okay, yeah, I've totally met her before. She showed me how to do the dance for Supersonic Skystrike.”

Mallow's nose wrinkled. “So I have her to thank for how badly you wasted me during your trial, huh? Your Toucannon is a menace.” But she didn't sound annoyed; Moon supposed that being okay with defeat was part of being a trial captain or a kahuna—or, for that matter, an Elite Four member. Since she was aiming to be the champion, hopefully she wasn't going to have that problem for a good long while.
They hiked back out through the jungle to the gate, where Hau was waiting. His nose wrinkled slightly as they approached. “Dude, are you guys high?”

“Not enough to mess up a Pokémon battle.” Lana grinned. “I'll take you on first, and then switch off with Mallow. Sound okay?”

“Sure,” said Hau, looking pleased to be chosen. He and Lana moved further away onto Route Eight, leaving Moon and Mallow at the gates.

Moon sent out Macbeth first because she was a Bug-type with a guaranteed priority move. Mallow offered her a slightly irritated stare, but gamely threw a Pokéball to reveal a Lurantis— much smaller than the Totem that she'd battled back in September.

“Lavender, use Solar Blade!”

“Macbeth, First Impression!”

First Impression was super-effective, and it knocked Lurantis out in one hit. Mallow sighed, but threw out another ball to reveal a tall and rather intimidating tree that wore a ghoulish grin.

“Hey Rotom, what kind of Pokémon is this?”

“Trevenant are Ghost- and Grass-types, bzzt,” answered Rotom promptly. “They will attack anyone who dares to cut down trees in the forests where they live.”

“I wonder if you can find them in Totem Decidueye's forest,” murmured Moon. “Since they share typings and all... and I bet the Totem Decidueye doesn't take kindly to lumberjacks, either.”

“I caught Willowbark in the cemetery near Konikoni, but you're probably right. It's been ages since I went to Arrow Woods, but there's quite a few Pokémon who don't like humans that make their homes there.”

“Arrow Woods?” Moon smiled, immediately charmed by the name. “I should bring Puck— though if the Pokémon don't like humans, maybe I shouldn't bother.”

“You'd probably be all right; it's clear you treat your teammates well. Willowbark, hit her with Shadow Claw!”

“Macbeth, use X-Scissor!”

Macbeth was faster, but X-Scissor wasn't quite as powerful as First Impression so she didn't knock the Trevenant out. Shadow Claw hit hard, triggering Emergency Exit; Macbeth fled back to the Pokéball with a squeak and Moon considered her options for a few moments before sending out Kate.

“Oh, is this the alien Pokémon?” Mallow eyed Kate with curiosity in her eyes. “Olivia mentioned that you'd gotten one from the scientists.”

“Yeah. Her species is called Poipole— I should say their, because Poipole don't really have a gender but I kind of think of Kate as a girl. They evolve into Naganadel. I have no idea when or how that will happen or what she'll look like.”

“And I'm guessing that a super bright color, like on most Pokémon, screams Poison-type?”

“Bingo. Kate, use Toxic!”
“Willowbark, another Shadow Claw!”

Despite not being fully evolved, Kate was quite a bit tankier than Macbeth. Moon suspected this was partially because almost nothing actually bothered Kate. She tended to giggle when she was hit by opponent attacks, which most Pokémon—not to mention their Trainers—found unnerving. This time around was no exception; Shadow Claw hit and Kate took damage, but laughed it off anyway before thoroughly dousing Trevenant in venom.

“Willowbark, use Shadow Claw one more time!”

“Kate, hit it with Venoshock!”

“Aw, cripes,” complained Mallow, but the damage was done and Trevenant, already weakened by Macbeth, fainted dead away. That was two down, which meant that the trial captain had only one teammate left.

Mallow sent out Tsareena—again, not the Totem who had visited for a bowl of soup after Moon's trial; but it seemed to recognize Moon, narrowing its eyes in suspicion.

“You're the Steenee that got mad about me picking Haban berries, aren't you?”

Tsareena sniffed disdainfully, but Mallow laughed. “Good eye, Moon. Huckleberry here kept harassing Trainers during their trials, so I decided to keep her out of trouble by offering her a spot on my team; and now she's a Tsareena like her mama. I guess she's got a long memory.”

“So it would seem. Kate, use Toxic again!”

“Tsareena, Trop Kick!”

Tsareena was very fast, and she was all too happy to slam her leg into Kate as hard as she could—so hard that Kate was knocked out, despite her type resistance. Moon promptly sent out Ariel. She was quite surprised when Tsareena got another Trop Kick in first; but Ariel's Beak Blast saved the day and won Moon the battle.

“Very nice,” said Mallow, handing Moon a green petal.

“Is this one of the ones with THC in it?”

“No, it comes from Mina's Comfey.” The trial captain eyed her. “Are you asking to buy some? My brother won't sell to anyone under twenty-one.”

“No worries— I don't smoke,” Moon assured her with a grin. “I was just curious.”

Mallow laughed, but then she let out a sigh. “It helps sometimes,” she said, turning to watch Lana and Hau finishing up their battle. “But it doesn't really change the fact that we're stretched really thin trying to build the League. Professor Kukui knew it would be too much for the kahunas to take on by themselves, and Nanu's never pulled his weight anyway.” There was no judgment in her tone; it was simply a statement of fact. “And Olivia's getting the shaft for it. Kahili doesn't have to do much except show up at the League when she's called, and technically neither does Melaye but he's been helping Acerola and Nanu with some of the stuff that's messed up over on Ula'ula. That entire island is a mess, honestly. They need a new kahuna like, yesterday.”

Moon nodded. “And Acerola's almost thirteen. Trial captain is a big job for someone that young, and she's been doing it for a few years now— no wonder she's retired.”
“Yeah, she got in when she was like nine.” Mallow opened a small satchel and took out some healing items, bringing her team back up to full health; Moon followed suit. “We were made captains around the same time, actually. Lana got in the year before I did, and Kiawe two years before that. Ilima's been doing it since he was sixteen, because he's a prodigy and a genius or whatever. Same goes for Sophocles, but he only started a few months ago. From what I can guess, you and Hau were among his first ten trials.”

“Yeah,” said Moon, remembering Sophocles sobbing into Molayne's chest. “Yeah, I kind of figured.”

“And Mina... well, she got in sometime between Kiawe and Lana but she's been very hands-off about trial duties, until more recently. Kahuna Ikaika didn't mind, but I think Hapu asked her to step up a bit until she could be made kahuna.”

“Mina's trial is pretty hands-off anyway. You guys are technically doing a lot of the work, aren't you?”

Mallow grinned. “Yeah, but we all like battling Trainers who are closer to our skill level than the trialgoers usually are, so none of us mind it. And it means she's free up to cover a lot of things that Hapu can't manage while she in turn is filling in for Nanu.” She sighed again, the smile fading slightly. “Fact of the matter is, we need a new kahuna for Ula'ula Island so that Nanu can retire and Olivia can stop doing his job; and since Acerola's resigning we need a new trial captain as well. There's just a lot of stuff to do, and not enough people to do it.”

“That really sucks,” said Moon sympathetically.

Hau and Lana finished, both of them laughing; she handed him something small and blue before reaching into her bag to revive her teammates. Hau pocketed what was presumably a blue petal and healed his team as well.

“It was a good battle,” said Moon, shaking Mallow's hand. “And if you need to vent, you can text me or whatever. I don't know if I can answer you right away, but I'll listen.”

Mallow's smile was soft. “I tend to confide in Lana, mostly. But thank you for the offer.”

“Sure, anytime. I still remember that you didn't bullshit me about ‘finding out on my own,’ when I asked what kinds of trials were on this island. I appreciate that.”

“Heh, no problem. Have fun with Lana.”

“Thanks.”

Moon walked over to where Lana stood, high-fiving Hau as they crossed paths. Lana waited for her with the same wry, yet amused expression that Moon was accustomed to seeing on her.

“Ready?”

“When you are,” confirmed Moon.

“Then let's begin.”

Lana began the battle with a colorful, sharp-toothed fish that Moon recognized as a Bruxish; in return, she sent out Ben. Lana laughed softly.

“Snap, use Psychic Fangs!”
“Ben, go for Rain Dance!”

It was something of a risky play, because Rain Dance would help Lana's Water-type moves; but Moon couldn't resist the increase in accuracy that rain would provide for Thunder. The clouds rumbled slightly as the day became overcast; Hau and Ollie turned to offer her twin expressions of betrayal and she had to try not to laugh.

Psychic Fangs was no joke, however; it took out a fairly large chunk of Ben's health and she was slightly nervous that she wouldn't get the chance to take Bruxish out with Thunder. She needn't have worried, however; despite the hard hit Ben was still much faster than Bruxish, and knocked it out easily before it could get a move in.

Lana nodded, expression thoughtful, and sent out a Wishiwashi. It was just the little fish by itself at first, but then the air around it shimmered and it seemed like hundreds, maybe even thousands had joined it in School form.

“Ben, another Thunder!”

“Scholar, use Aqua Tail!”

School form Wishiwashi was quite slow, so Thunder arced into it before it could so much as turn to aim its tail; a one-hit knockout.

“Ah,” chuckled Lana. “You're definitely not going to make this easy on me, are you?” She sent out an Araquanid, which made Moon's stomach clench slightly but didn't quite inspire the same fear that the Totem at Brooklet Hill had done. Working with Macbeth for so long had almost cured her fear of Bug-types.

“Nope. Ben, one more Thunder!”

“Ariadne, use Liquidation!”

The Araquanid took Thunder surprisingly well— not immediately fainting as Bruxish and Wishiwashi had done. Moon suspected a high special-defense stat as the underlying reason for this. Liquidation unfortunately took out Ben, already damaged because of Bruxish. This left Moon at something of an impasse. Puck would be effective against Araquanid's Water-type, but the secondary Bug-typing might cause problems. By contrast, Ariel's Flying-type would be effective, but she remembered that the Totem Araquanid had had an Ice-type move and the chances were high that Lana had taught her Araquanid an Ice-type move. She decided on Ariel. Neither Araquanid nor Ariel was particularly fast but Araquanid hit first with Crunch, an interesting choice; her Toucannon shook it off and delivered Beak Blast to once again end the battle.

“Very nice,” said Lana, shaking her hand. “I thought you'd bring out Decidueye, which is why I had Ariadne go for Crunch, but you made a much better choice.”

“Thanks,” said Moon, pleased. “I thought about it too, but I remembered Araquanid is also a Bug-type, so.”

“Good decision. I can tell you battle smart, not hard.”

Moon cocked her head, intrigued. “What do you mean by that?”

“Take Hau.” Lana indicated Hau, who had gotten over his annoyance with Moon's Rain Dance trick by removing Ollie from battle and fighting with Rumble instead. “Hau battles hard. He goes all-out, every time. Unless he's up against someone like Mallow or Sophocles, who are specialists
in types that are super-effective against his starter, he's going to use Z-Moves whenever he can. A lot of the time he goes for raw power over a type advantage, and that usually works fairly well. You tend to battle more strategically as a rule—setting up with Rain Dance or Toxic, for instance, before you used Thunder or Venoshock. It's risky to expose yourself to your opponent for a turn, but it pays off drastically.”

“Oh, I see.” Moon nodded slowly, taking out Revives to heal her Pokémon. “I should tell him that. We've gotten to a point where he doesn't mind losing to me anymore, but I think he low-key still kind of wants to beat me even if it's just once.”

“You'd give up your edge to help a friend?”

Moon grinned. “I never said I'd let him win, did I?”

Lana laughed. “Indeed you did not. Well, here is your blue petal.”

Moon stowed the petal with the others of its kind and walked with Lana back to where Hau and Mallow had just finished their battle. Hau triumphantly pocketed a green petal and turned to grin at Moon.

“That's that,” he remarked. “What's next on your list, Moon?”

She had to consult the checklist she'd made with Rotom. “Um... I wanted to look for that Pikachu Valley place. And is the Paniola area the only place in Alola you can find Eevee?”

“Yeah. At least I'm pretty sure it is.”

“What is it you're looking for?” asked Lana.

“Z-Crystals. It's a long story, but basically Necrozma—you've heard of Necrozma, right? She's missing a whole bunch of Z-Crystals and she needs one of every kind. There's a Pikanium Z and a Pikashunium Z, and also Eevium Z. I need one of each of those.”

“Eevium Z, huh?” said Mallow thoughtfully. “I think I know where it is, but I bet Tane and Rachel would know more about it.”

“They're the nursery workers, right? I haven't seen them in ages.”

“Yep, that's them!”

“And Pikachu Valley is easy enough to get to,” said Lana placidly. “From Paniola Town you go back along Route Four—the path curves a lot, but it's somewhere along the westernmost edge. As the Murkrow flies it's surprisingly close to Brooklet Hill, but I have a fence up to protect the Pokémon that live there. Electric doesn't play nicely with Water, as I'm sure you understand.”

“I can think of a couple exceptions.” Moon patted Ben's ball and then Macbeth's.

“Yes, well you're something of a special case, aren't you?” Mallow chuckled. “An exception to a lot of rules. Well, why don't we take you down to the Nursery? You can walk to Paniola from there and go to Pikachu Valley tomorrow.”

“Sure. Should we page Charizard?”

Mallow shook her head. “I brought the jeep—it's parked just inside the gates. I don't like flying all that much.”
“Same,” said Moon fervently.

Hau frowned at Mallow. “Aren't you still high?”

“She'd pass a breathalyzer test,” said Lana.

“That's not exactly comforting!”

“She's calm high, not loopy high. Be glad it's Mallow driving and not me.”

“Why?”

Lana's eyes gleamed. “Would you like to find out?”

“No,” said Mallow flatly. “Trust me, neither of you want to know, and also I don't let Lana anywhere near my baby's keys on principle.”

One surprisingly short jeep ride later, they rolled to a halt outside of the Paniola Nursery. Moon brought Ben out of his ball, letting him ride on her shoulder.

“This is where I got your egg,” she informed him. “I wonder what happened to your brothers and sisters? I think your mama was sick or hurt, which was why they were handing out eggs to begin with.”

“Vee jol.”

“Fair enough.” Moon grinned. “I'm glad you consider us family even if you're a brat most of the time, hey?” In a rare show of affection, he leaned over to bump his snout against her forehead—a Pokémon kiss.

“Hello!” sang Mallow, walking into the Nursery. Moon and Hau followed, with an amused Lana bringing up the rear. “We have come to interrogate the two of you about cool stuff!”

Rachel looked up from the desk where she was sitting, holding a startled-awake baby Fomantis, which began to cry. There was murder in her eyes. “I just fucking got him to sleep, Mallow,” she hissed.

“My bad. Hand him over, I'll try and soothe him while you help Moon.”

Rachel's gaze slid over to Moon, and her eyebrows rose in surprise. “Oh, hey,” she said wearily, passing the Fomantis to Mallow as it worked its way up from crying to a full-blown shriek. “It's been a damn minute, huh. Is that the Eevee we gave you?”

“One and the same,” said Moon, reaching up to pat Ben.

“Jol! Jol vee on!”

The sharp cry startled the baby Fomantis into silence, its eyes widening as it stared at Ben; but then it hiccuped once and turned to burrow its face into Mallow's overalls, weeping much more quietly.

“Did you seriously just say 'hey, go the fuck to sleep' to a baby?” demanded Moon.

Ben sniffed haughtily. “Tee jol.”

“Oh my god, you're the worst.”
“Thank you,” said Rachel, wide-eyed. “I mean, if the baby learns to swear then Tane's gonna fucking kill me, but thank you. Uh, what was it you needed?”

Hau, Lana, and Mallow were all laughing quietly in the background, the latter patting and bouncing Fomantis soothingly; but Moon ignored them and cleared her throat. “I'm looking for Eevium Z.”

“Jolteon wouldn't be able to use it, as far as I recall. What do you need it for?”

“It's for a friend.” Moon coughed. “Well, to be exact it's for the legendary and immortal Pokémon Necrozma, but I think at this point she might possibly maybe consider me enough of a friend, that saying I need the Z-Crystal for a friend wouldn't technically be lying.”

Rachel blinked at her for a few seconds. “Disregarding the headache it's going to take me to parse that entire sentence—”

“Totally fair.”

“— I don't know exactly where Eevium Z is. Tane might—he's in surgery, but he should be done pretty soon. Are you in a hurry?”

“I'm not.” Moon glanced at Lana and Mallow. “You guys don't have to stay if you're busy.”

“I don't have any trials scheduled today,” said Mallow, shaking her head. “And I completely spaced out about your appointment earlier.”

“I'd like to see what happens,” offered Lana. “I don't have any trials, either.”

“Have a seat then,” said Rachel, waving them over to a waiting area. “People might be coming in while you wait.”

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

**BOSS**: so storytime

**BOSS**: moon's jolteon jus told a bb fomantis “hey, go the fuck 2 sleep”

**BOSS**: like out loud

**crescent**: I'm sure that isn't an exact interpretation, but it's basically what happened

**rapunzel**: It would be your Jolteon to swear at a baby, wouldn't it?

**crescent**: I mean, Puck might if he was really grumpy or something

**crescent**: But yeah, it's pretty in character for Ben lmao

**pedantic**: Since the two of you left, Null has taught Ellie to swear.
**pedantic**: I'm trying to get her to stop, but it's been an uphill battle.

**BOSS**: omg that's hilarious

**pedantic**: I need them both to stop. I don't want to be that scary Trainer whose Pokémon swear at their opponents every battle.

**crescent**: But I can already picture it so clearly

**crescent**: You, in black, with dark circles under your eyes

**crescent**: Your Pokémon come out screaming obscenities

**crescent**: And your opponents pee their pants in fright

**pedantic**: I'm fairly certain the eyebags alone could accomplish that.

**BOSS**: BAHAHAHAHAHAH

**crescent**: That's an impressive self-roast lmao

**rapunzel**: He really does get the worst bags when he doesn't sleep well.

**pedantic**: Thank you for sharing that entirely vital information with the entire group chat. I really do appreciate it.

**rapunzel**: I wasn't thinking, sorry.

**pedantic**: It's fine, don't worry about it. Probably Moon and Hau have seen it all anyway.

**BOSS**: yea u do get super dark shadows n stuff

**crescent**: I haven't seen anything like that?

**pedantic**: Well, no. I sleep better when you're around.

**BOSS**: ooooooooooooooooooooh

**rapunzel**: ooooooooooooooooooooh

**pedantic**: I'm sorry, that sounded better in my head.

**crescent**: ooooooooooooooooooooh

**pedantic**: I hate you all.

* * * * *

It was twenty minutes before Tane emerged from the back room. A few customers had come and gone— there was a small pharmacy in the clinic and Rachel handed out prescriptions. Mallow managed to get the baby Fomantis back to sleep, after which Rachel carefully took it to the back of
the building where its bed was presumably located.

“We're running low on gloves,” Tane said absently to Rachel, rubbing his hands together; the smell of a strong sanitizer flooded Moon's nose, sharp and bitter. “Can you put an order in for about twenty boxes? That should last us for six months at least.”

“Will do,” said Rachel, tapping something out rapid-fire on the computer. “You have guests, besides the trial captains here.”

Tane looked up, blinking for a few moments; then recognition lit his eyes. “Ah— Moon, is it? You took on a temperamental Eevee egg, didn't you?”


“Then you made a fine choice in his evolution,” said Tane, nodding. “The Eevee of a surlier disposition tend to choose Umbreon or Jolteon— or very occasionally Leafeon as well.”

“Surly is putting it mildly. He's almost antisocial.”

“He swore at one of the babies,” added Mallow, in a very unhelpful-helpful tone.

“Did he now? I hope it was a pre-verbal one. But we are getting off-topic. What did you need from me today, Moon?”

“I need a piece of Eevium Z. Long story short— all Z-Crystals come from the same place, which is Necrozma's forehead, and she's got crystals missing and needs one of every Z-Crystal so she stops trying to eat stars and stuff. She's got like half of them already, but I'm collecting the rest.”

“Hmm.” Tane nodded slowly. “I should be able to help you. I have never actually seen the Eevium deposit in person, but I know where it should be. Along Route Five, a little further north of here, there's a very narrow path leading east, off the road and into the woods. There's a cave with a lot of Morelull and a few wild Eevee nests along the way— the wild ones are quite territorial, which is why I haven't gone far enough down the path to actually see Eevium Z. I would be allowed to pass through for medical reasons, but not for just a casual glimpse at the deposit. I'm not sure what you'll find at the end of the path, but I am quite certain it is Eevium Z.”

“That's a solid lead. Thanks for your help!”

“I advise you to travel with at least one Pokémon out of your ball at all times; you don't want to be caught off guard by an angry pack of Eevee.”

It was good advice, and Moon opted to keep Ben on her shoulder as they began wading through the thick, overgrown path off Route Five. Hau had Ollie— both as a protection and a warning, as a Fire-type in a forest was prone to be. Lana didn't bother with a Pokémon, though she kept one hand on her belt; and Mallow brought out Tsareena, who glared at Moon again.

And there were Eevee, all around them— cute but angry, growling with frowns and sharp teeth until Ben let out a loud barking noise that made them all go silent— including Ollie, who had been chattering quietly in Hau's ear.

“Oh damn,” said Lana. “He's got a strong presence, doesn't he?”

“You don't know the fucking half of it,” said Moon wearily.

The path eventually opened, and despite Ben's posturing the Eevee surged forward again, growling
as they approached.

“Hey,” said Moon, raising her hands. “We come in peace, okay? Who's in charge?”

There were probably a hundred Eevee around them in the clearing— some of them tiny and tripping over awkward baby-feet, some of them with sedate wrinkles at the corners of their eyes. Around the edge of the clearing, Moon spotted some flashes of color that seemed to fade into the background.

“Who's in charge?” she repeated.

Eventually there was a noise rather like a throat being cleared, and a slightly deeper bark than she was used to hearing in Eevee. A bush rustled, and out walked an Eevee that stood about as high as Moon's waist— taller than any of the others in the clearing, with intelligence and warmth in its dark eyes. It seemed to be wearing something around its neck, but underneath all the fluffy, cream-colored fur she couldn't figure out what it was.

“Eee.”

“Okay,” said Moon, swallowing. “Okay, yeah. Hi. Um— so you probably know where Eevium Z is, right?”

The Eevee's eyes narrowed.

“I'm not like— going to take any without earning it. But, um, you see. Originally it like, belonged to someone else? Necrozma, if you've heard of her? She just needs a little piece back. You can keep the rest, no biggie.”

A very soft, rolling growl left the Eevee's mouth, which in turn began a buzz of growls around them.

“Well, that's intimidating as hell,” said Mallow quietly. “Maybe we should call it quits, Moon— I don't think they're willing to let you have anything.”

“Please,” Moon begged. “I promised her one of every kind. I know it's not fair to make a promise like that without asking you first, but she doesn't need much and it was hers first. Please.”

“Jol vee.”

Ben hopped down from Moon's shoulder onto the ground, taking a few languid steps forward to look up at the big Eevee. It regarded him with disdain.


The Eevee's expression shifted.

“Yes!” agreed Moon fervently. “No capturing, never, all of you are safe from me! I got Ben from an egg, his mother had been killed or something so he needed someone to raise him. I love him a lot and I treat him well and all I want is a stone for Necrozma to use, not me, and she doesn't need any of you to use it properly, it won't affect you at all—”

“Jol jol,” said Ben, turning and frowning at her.

“Okay, right. Yeah. Shutting up now.”

The Eevee regarded her for a few more moments, but then it dipped its head in a nod, turned
around, and began walking.

“Do we— follow you?”

“Vee jol,” said Ben, shaking his head.

“You seem to know an awful lot about this.”

“Flare vee!” called Ollie helpfully from Hau's arms.

“What do you mean, *pack instinct*?”

“I think all the Eevee in Alola must come from here,” said Lana softly. “Biologically speaking, Eevee fit into several categories— canine, feline, and vulpine. In groups, canines tend to defer to a dominant individual; this includes Trainers, if applicable. Ben obeys you, and Ollie obeys Hau. And all of these Eevee obey the Totem.”

“I didn't even think to scan it,” said Moon resignedly, taking out the Colress scanner. “Maybe when it comes ba...”

Her voice died as not one, but nine Pokémon emerged from the bushes. Eevee was first, and still the largest by far; but she was followed by a Flareon, who sniffed interestingly in Ollie's direction; a haughty Vaporeon, who refused to make eye contact; a Jolteon whose eyes widened at the sight of Ben; an elegant Espeon; a bored Umbreon; a mildly annoyed Leafeon, a giggly Glaceon, and a soft-eyed, gentle Sylveon.

The nine of them spread out in a semi-circle, facing Moon; the other Eevee had all pushed back to crowd the edges of the clearing, leaving empty space.

Eevee gazed at Ben, then barked softly. Ben blinked several times, but walked forward.

“What is he—”

“Vee,” said eight Eeveelutions in unison. Moon shut up.

The big Eevee lifted its head, and Ben reached up, standing on hind legs to pull on whatever was on Eevee's neck. It came loose at once, a worn cord snapping; a small pouch dropped to the earth. The Eevee pawed the pouch open with care, revealing a translucent, brownish-cream stone about twice the size of a regular Z-Crystal.

The Flareon stepped forward first; he opened his mouth and a soft ring of flame swept over the stone. It left a faint orange glitter in the center. Vaporeon went next, spraying water to leave a bright blue shimmer. The other Jolteon, still staring wide-eyed at Ben, sent sparks rolling over the stone with a yellow gleam. Moon wasn't entirely sure what Espeon and Umbreon did, but they left magenta and black fire in the stone. Leafeon grew small vines that briefly wrapped around the stone, with a green glow; Glaceon coated it in ice that melted away at once to leave a pale-blue sheen; and Sylveon's ribbons caressed it with pink sparkles.

Eevee went last, simply leaning down to touch its forehead to the stone; there was a bright flash of white light, and all of the rainbowy colors were muted by brown and cream once more— though Moon was fairly certain she could still see them if she looked closely and squinted.

The stone was pushed forward a few inches, and then Eevee retreated. Ben turned to look up at Moon, raising an eyebrow in what she considered an unfairly judgemental expression.
“Do I, do I just—”

A nod. Moon swallowed, took a few steps forward, and bent down to look at Eevium Z.

They were all waiting, all watching her. The rainbow fires were still waiting, in the stone; a fizzing energy that she now recognized as the Totem Aura crackled silently through the clearing.

“I don’t need the whole thing?” she said hesitantly. “It’s a lot of rock, and it wouldn’t fit into my Z-Ring anyway... not that I’d use it, it’s just got lots of storage slots for crystals. Um... should I try to break it?”

She glanced at all of them, and then at Ben; but they were staring at her with careful, neutral expressions.

“That’s what I’m going to do,” she decided. “Because I don’t need all of it. Um, let me see... what do I have that could break rock? Hmm.”

“Hero knows Hammer Arm, doesn’t she?” suggested Hau.

“Yeah, but Hero is huge and intimidating.” She had a better idea anyway, reaching for her Pokéball with slow, obviously telegraphed movements and sending out Puck.

“Can you slice up this rock into something, um— Z-Crystal-sized?”

Puck offered her a look of supreme disgust, at the idea that his skills could be used for something so menial; but then he sighed softly and got to work with Leaf Blade, which made the Leafeon cock its head with interest though it did not attempt to approach. Puck cut cleanly and carefully, preserving as large pieces of the original stone as he possibly could. It took some time, but the Eevium Z was eventually shaped to Moon's liking and she took it, recalling Puck with a quick, quiet thank-you.

Ironically, there were nine pieces remaining; but she was beginning to get a grasp on the ceremony of things because each of the Eeveelutions stalked forward, picked up a piece with its mouth, and turned to wander back into the bushes. Flareon and Vaporeon left without any sort of fanfare but Jolteon took a few steps forward, getting into Ben's space; it gently nosed his forehead in a Pokémon kiss before picking up its stone and leaving. Ben endured the touch with a patient expression. The others took their pieces and left as well, until only Eevee with the largest chunk remained.

“Do I battle you?” Moon asked it.

It shook its head, taking a few steps forward with eyes fixed on Moon's wrist and the Z-Crystals there. Moon placed Eevium Z in one of the few remaining free slots— there were thirty or so, and she didn't have many left.

“I won't use it, not at all,” she promised. “I carry them here, but I don't use all of them. This is just for Necrozma. A gift. I use some of the others because they were gifts to me, but this isn't for me. I know that.”

The Eevee nodded once— there was something like remote, polite approval in its eyes. Then it turned around, picked up its crystal, and walked back into the underbrush— leaving Moon, Hau, Lana, and Mallow in stunned silence, surrounded by a hundred very quiet Eevee.

Ben turned to look up at Moon; there was something oddly soft in his eyes as he stood on his hind legs, pawing at her jeans— a request to be lifted. She bent to pick him up automatically, turning
around and walking back to the slender path.

It was not until they re-emerged on Route Five that she let out a shaky breath, pressing her hand to her heart.

“Why was that so nerve-wracking?” she asked, turning to look at Lana and Mallow. “Literally, what the hell?”

“Had anyone ever mentioned to you that most of the wild Totems don't like people, especially Trainers?” said Lana dryly.

“Well— I mean, it's come up,” admitted Moon, feeling a little stupid. “Mina said something about it... and I guess Acerola did too, though she was only talking about Mimikyu.”

“Wild Eevee tend to be particularly distrustful of Trainers,” said Mallow. She sounded a little sad. “Because they're so cute, they're often hunted and caught by breeders for profit. This is the first time I've ever seen the Eevee lands— Olivia tells us that the only humans they trust on this island are her and Tane.”

It clicked. “You wouldn't really call Tane a trial captain, but could you say he's a guardian? Kind of like how the guy on Melemele who owns the orchard is a sort of guardian for Totem Snorlax?”

Lana smiled. “Exactly. Now you're getting somewhere. Not every wild Totem has a guardian, of course; but usually there's going to be someone looking out for them. And we as the trial captains, and also the kahunas, keep the status of the Totem guardians a secret— to protect the Totems, of course. Imagine what someone with ill intentions, like the Foxes, might do with control over a Totem Pokémon.”

“Or somePoké. Is that a word? It should be.”

“Anyway,” said Lana, rolling her eyes at Mallow, “the point is that most of the wild Totems really, really don't like humans. Especially Trainers. And you should keep in mind that the cuter the baby form of the wild Totem is, the more aggressive the wild Totem will be.”

She had to think about it for a few moments, but then remembered Pikachu and Rockruff, who were both pretty cute. And Jangmo-o was kind of adorable, too. “Great. I'm going to die at the paws of an angry Lycanroc, aren't I?”

“Of course not!” said Mallow at once.

Moon blinked at her wearily. “Why not?”

“Well— Tapu Bulu definitely wouldn't allow it, for one thing.”

“Mal,” said Lana, in a slightly warning tone.

“Okay, okay...”

“Lycanium is definitely in the desert, then?”

“Yeah. Olivia said she'd tell you about that when you meet up with her.” Lana sighed, but then she smiled and offered her hand for both of them to shake. “It was very nice battling both of you. Congratulations on your progression toward finishing the island challenge, and I wish you luck.”

“You've come a long way, and we know you'll work hard!” agreed Mallow, also shaking hands.
“If you have trouble finding Pikachu Valley, you be sure and call one of us or the Professors, okay?”

“Will do. Thanks for your help today, I really appreciate it.”

“No problem! It was a lot of fun. See you around!”

They walked off toward Mallow’s jeep, leaving Moon and Hau to just stare at each other for a few moments before relaxing into laughter.

“It was so tense,” chuckled Hau. “Like, super formal, ceremonial stuff. What was all of that about?”

“I wonder if they keep the deposit away from most of the Eevee, and they kind of just take bits off as they need them?” wondered Moon. “So it wouldn't be powered up most of the time, and they all have something to contribute. It’s weird that the evolutions weren't really in charge, though.”

“Is it?” They fell into step along the road back to Paniola Town, Ollie and Ben listening to the conversation. “Which one would be in charge, do you think?”

Moon opened her mouth to say Jolteon, because of course Ben was so stubborn and bossy; but then she remembered the wide-eyed, sweet Jolteon from the clearing who had kissed Ben's head before scampering away— definitely not a leader type.

“Okay,” she said finally. “That’s fair.”

“And the only thing that all eight of them have in common is Eevee. So it makes sense to me that Eevee is in charge. It's probably older than them— and it probably has an Everstone somewhere, so it doesn't evolve.”

“It was wearing the Eevium though, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, but that was a lot of fur. It could totally be hiding an Everstone in there.”

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

lunar sun changed their name to eevee are terrifying

eevee are terrifying: Picture Attachment: [ChatNameChange.jpeg]

eevee are terrifying: I don't want to talk about it

eevee are terrifying: Picture Attachment: [EeviumZ.jpeg]

brave heart: At least you got it, right?
eevee are terrifying: Yeah, and I'm mostly joking lmao

eevee are terrifying: There were like a hundred angry little fox dogs staring holes through like my entire fucking soul, but I'm okay

brave heart: I think you mean kitten fox dogs, don't you?

eevee are terrifying: Do I need to change your name here to 'pedantic' as well

brave heart: Hau's Flareon tends to take a more puppyish approach to life, but if your Jolteon isn't the cattiest of cats then I'll eat six of those Haban berry malasadas in a row without drinking any water in between.

eevee are terrifying: I—

eevee are terrifying: Ok that's totally fair

eevee are terrifying: The Haban berry ones aren't half bad tho

brave heart: You are used to Kantonian cuisine, which as a rule is much, much spicier than Alolan food.

brave heart: I, on the other hand, am a wimp who can barely handle more than a dash of black pepper on my food before I decide it's too much.

eevee are terrifying: I have a pressing need to see this with my own two eyes

brave heart: ...future date idea?

eevee are terrifying: DSAKHJDSAHJKASFH

brave heart: I'll pencil that in as a yes.

eevee are terrifying changed their name to shook

shook: Picture Attachment: [Already.jpeg]

shook: OI ROTOM QUIT EDITORIALIZING

brave heart: Picture Attachment: [IMG061.jpeg

* * * [Picture Attachment: IMG.061.jpeg] * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically
To: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
From: garyo@pmail.co.kan
CC: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
Re: MY BABY GIRL IS ALL GROWN UP

HIGHKEY THAT IS THE CUTEST SHIT IN THE ENTIRE WORLD AAAAAAAAAHHH

I NEED MORE INFORMATION??!!??!!? Like I know he is coming here, you said as much, but I NEED more information like IMMEDIATELY, like YESTERDAY. (Obviously if you can't tell us stuff for reasons then that's valid and we won't bother you about it.)

Red is sitting next to me watching some of the videos you suggested we look up. Battle Royal is an interesting format— it never really caught on here, though I'm told it's getting popular in Unova. Unova has a lot of interesting battle formats anyway— besides the usual Double Battles they also have Triple and Rotation. So we're not unfamiliar with it.

More importantly, the man is good-looking. You have taste. Obviously, this is because we raised you. Red says he has a very interesting battle technique, which I will take his word for because he's the one who gives a shit about defending his title. I have to hand out badges anyway, so losing has stopped mattering quite so much... I mean, I still don't like it, but it helps that I'm paid by the League and all.

Anyway, we are both curious as to the identity of his ace. The commentators are saying that it's an Absol that has to wear a helmet for health reasons, but those aren't Absol feet or an Absol tail. Red says it looks like Houndoom, but the feathers are throwing him off. I think the tail fin looks like a fish or some other Water-type— what has that sort of webbed look to it? Magikarp and Gyarados, but the coloring is off. And two of the feet are talons, so the jig is up... what's going on?

“Health stuff” sounds crappy; sorry he can't spend time with you. Glad you have a way to talk to each other— and you really should find an international texting app! We could talk to you more often, it would be so fun. We love you and we miss you.
Love, Blue

P.S. the fuck is up with his hair, looks like a Pokémon cut it— Red

P.P.S. RED OMG THAT IS SO RUDE Moon sweetie I am so sorry— Blue

P.P.P.S. also I really do not like the helmety thing, it looks wrong. why does it need a helmety thing— Red

P.P.P.P.S. Same— Blue

Chapter End Notes

“Brock being a stoner” happened because it made me giggle

I want you to know that my entire notes regarding Mallow and Lana's cutscene in Lush Jungle were “Mallow smokes the dank weed tho” so that's why that happened lmao

Mallow and Olivia just need A Fucking Break (TM)

I know shit-all about the competitive Pokémon battling scene but I know that setups are a lot more common there than they are playing through the story. Moon, as a contender for the championship, is logically going to have something a little extra— whereas Hau is literally my playing style because I just like the fricken Z-Move animations

“You'd give up your edge to help a friend?” Moon grinned. “I never said I'd let him win, did I?” —savage lmao

Rachel and Tane were two of the very first OCs I intentionally created for this series

Ben saying “go the fuck to sleep” to baby Fomantis is inspired by Samuel L. Jackson reading the not-exactly-a-children's book, Go the Fuck to Sleep. You can search it on YouTube. It is one of my favorite videos in existence.

“I'm fairly certain the eyebags alone could accomplish that.” —GLADION ASKGSAGK

Moon, Hau, and Lillie jokingly giving Gladion a hard time because they're finally comfortable enough to tease him is a Feeling and I am Having It

ok but picture a hundred tiny Eevee growling at you???? cute???? possibly death but cute????

Ben going “listen she's an idiot, but she's a well-meaning idiot and she's my idiot so
could you just give her the rock” and Totem Eevee is like “wtf are you doing talking, child”

We're not bothering with the mysterious cashier who gives you Eevium Z for battling different Eeveelution Trainers. Where'd he get the rock from, huh??? Instead we get Totem Eevee, though fortunately we don't have to fight it. We do, however, get to see that Eevium Z is, in fact, influenced by the Eeveelutions. I won't be explaining how or what the Eevium Z-Move is because it isn't relevant to the story, but this is my nod to it because honestly I think the concept is cool as hell. (Though Pokémon Insurgence might have done Mega Eevee/Eevite first and I think it was sort of the same concept??? Game Freak do you have moles looking at the fanmade games???)

and as per usual, chatfic fluff and an email to end things. :)

My most full flame should afterwards burn clearer.

Chapter Summary

Paniola Town, Pikachu Valley, Wela Volcano Park, Poké Pelago
**********************************************************
Moon faces not one but two Totems before facing Kiawe to challenge him for the Red Petal; a visit to Poké Pelago proves very eye-opening.

Chapter Notes

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (I reblog Pokémon stuff when I remember to get on but mostly it's a BTS stan blog because they're on vacation and I miss them)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM I used to be like "I'm only issuing individual invitations because security" but then it occurred to me that like... sometimes people don't want to ask for things because Anxiety Is A Lil Bitch and that's relatable as fuck so here's a permanent invite. I'm going to link it every chapter of Winter Rose probably, but I might put them at the beginning and end of future fics and just individually link people in comments if they ask uwu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

chat: no longer hypothetically

shook: So I've been talking to Red and Blue recently...

brave heart: ...?

shook: I might've mentioned I have a boyfriend and told them to look up your Battle Royal videos

brave heart: I see.

brave heart: That's fine, obviously. They're pretty much your brothers, aren't they? They deserve to know.

shook: They're asking me about Null though

shook: Like, they're seasoned battlers. They know she's not an Absol in a helmet

shook: *an Absol that used to be in a helmet

brave heart: ...shit.

shook: Yeah I don't know what to tell them
brave heart: I'll talk to Wicke and get back to you about what they're allowed to know science-wise, but you can tell them the very basics.

brave heart: This is stuff you can't tell them but Type: Null and Silvally are actually in the National Pokédex. They're what's known as “hidden” entries. Wicke explained this to me once—entries in the Pokédex are sort of need-to-know. If you haven't personally discovered something, it won't appear in your Pokédex. Just about everything that exists is technically in the Pokédex—if someone in this world has discovered it, it's in the Pokédex. That includes legendaries and mythical Pokémon.

shook: Holy shit really?!?!?!

brave heart: Yeah. I've been very careful to keep Null away from people with Pokédexes—you and Hau excepted, but at this point I trust you.

brave heart: Correct me if I'm wrong, but your friend Red was kind of involved with the Mewtwo Project, right?

shook: It's kind of a sensitive topic for him, but yeah

shook: He's sad that Mewtwo hates humans as much as it does

shook: He doesn't think it's thinking anything wrong by hating humans, though. We kind of did really shitty by Mewtwo as a society, tbh... letting Team Rocket get away with the shit they did for as long as they did was definitely the Kantonian government's fault

brave heart: So he'd understand the sensitive nature of Null's creation and the secrecy surrounding her.

shook: Yeah. And Blue studied Pokébio, because he low-key wants to be Kanto's next Pokémon Professor. He knows a lot about the technical sciencey shit with Mewtwo, more than Red does.

brave heart: That's the stuff that is currently classified, but if that changes I'll let you know. If he's a scientist he might find it interesting.

brave heart: If he doesn't vomit, that is. Null's creation story is not for the faint of heart.

shook: I hope you'll tell me about it someday.

brave heart: I hope I'll be able to.

brave heart: Emotionally, I mean.

brave heart: Anyway, you can tell them that Null was the result of unethical experimentation and that she's one of three of her kind. To the public she is a Normal-type. You can also say that the helmet was a temporary measure, and that she has since evolved and no longer needs it.

brave heart: Will they be satisfied with that?

shook: I mean, probably not. I don't get my insatiable thirst for answers from either of my parents; it's a learned behavior, and I learned it from Blue. But they'll understand if I say that there's stuff I can't or won't tell them, and they're okay with respecting those boundaries.

brave heart: Thank you.
Pikachu Valley, in comparison to the Eevee colony, was rather underwhelming. There were Pikachu everywhere, to be sure; but they didn't seem to mind humans. This was likely due to the RV sitting smack-dab in the middle of the valley and the couple sitting in chairs outside of it. The woman was heavily pregnant.

“Hi there!” she called out, waving to them. Her husband rose to his feet; she did not. “Welcome to Pikachu Valley! Are you here to adopt, or just to look around?”

“Neither,” said Moon. “We're looking for Z-Crystals.”

“You'll be wanting the trial captains, for those.” The woman's voice was pleasant, but there was something wary in her eyes that told Moon she'd found the guardian—or guardians, if the woman's husband counted—of Totem Pikachu.

“Normally, you'd be correct, but this is a special exception. Um, I can call Kahuna Olivia, if you want to check?”

“It'd be appreciated.” The woman held out a phone. “Use this, please.”

“Why?”

“How do I know you aren't going to call some friend who will pretend to be the kahuna for you?” Moon nodded, impressed. “Makes sense.” She took the phone, found Olivia's number, and dialed. “Persis?” Olivia sounded confused. “Is everything okay?”

“It's Moon, actually.”

“Moon? Goodness, what are you calling from Persis's phone for? You've got Rotom, haven't you?”

“I'm trying to get hold of Pikanium and Pikashunium for Necrozma, and she wants me to confirm that it's like a real thing and not me trying to take advantage of anyone.”

“Oh. Hand her the phone, please.”

Moon passed the phone back to Persis. The woman listened for a few moments, nodded a couple of times.

“Thank you for indulging my paranoia, Kahuna Olivia,” she said finally. “All my best to you and your team.”

She ended the call and looked up at Moon, simply staring for a while. Moon looked back steadily, waiting for judgment.

“Imran,” said Persis finally.
“Hm?” said her husband.

“Help me up, please.”

He moved to her side at once, assisting her as she slowly rose from her chair.

“Follow us,” she said to Moon. “I would just send you with Imran, but the Totems are not as fond of him as they are of me.”

“Why not?”

“That's a bit rude,” pointed out Imran, amusement flickering over his face.

“I didn't mean it like there was anything wrong with you, sorry,” said Moon hastily. “I meant, is there some other reason the Totems act that way?”

“Pokémon often display greater trust toward pregnant women.” Their pace was slow, and it looked like Persis was struggling; but her voice was free from strain. “It's a biological signal— it says 'people carrying young are more likely to be nurturing.' Wild Pikachu have every reason not to trust humans— as one of the most popular species in the world, they're hunted as pets and mascots as well as battling companions. Imran and I have worked and lived here for a while, long before we were expecting; but it took us a long time before they trusted either of us even so. And they have always preferred me over Imran.”

“It isn't a guarantee, though,” pointed out Moon. “Sometimes people's moms are terrible. Like, my boyfriend's mom sucks major ass.”

“So you would like a Pikanium and a Pikashunium,” she said, studying Moon with the same wary eyes.

“Not for me,” Moon was quick to clarify. “I don't have a Pikachu, and I don't know anyone that has a Pikachu. Well, actually, I do know someone with a Pikachu, but he's famous and he lives in Kanto and I have no intentions of giving him any Z-Crystals.”

“And they are for— Necrozma, you said?”

“Yeah.” She explained the situation as briefly as she could, and Persis and Imran listened in silence the entire time.

“I think you may be trusted with the Z-Crystals,” said Persis finally. Her gaze was still hard and wary. “Your heart is in the right place, and it is clear that like me, you do not trust just anyone. You will keep them safe until they have served their purpose.”

“Absolutely.”
Persis's gaze slid past her. “Did you both hear that?”

Moon turned to see two large Pikachu watching them from between the two statues. Each of them bobbed their heads in a nod.

“Pika, pika.”

“They want to test you, as is proper,” murmured Imran; both of the Pikachu bristled slightly at the sound of his voice.

She swallowed. “Both at once?”

“They serve as each other’s allies.”

Moon took a few steps toward the Pikachu. It was at moments like these that she really wished she had a Ground-type; it would come in very handy just about now.

“And I just get to use one teammate, right?”

“Correct.”

Moon nodded and sent out Hero. “Use Bulldoze!”

“Piiiiii... ka!”

It was a familiar cry she'd heard anytime Red ever battled; she still wasn't quite sure what it meant but it had something to do with outputting more power. Both of the Totems screeched it in unison, calling down a double Thunderbolt on Hero. It did quite a bit—the attack had STAB to begin with, but it was also hard-hitting. Hero rumbled eagerly and responded with a powerful Bulldoze. It also did plenty of damage to both Totems, but they were Totems for a reason.

The Pikachu on the left held up one balled fist; Moon could see a hint of a sparkle in it, which could only mean that it was actually holding one of the Z-Crystals. Uh-oh. “Piiii... kaaaaa..... chuuuuu!”

Another familiar cry, one that she usually associated with Blue losing the battle with a pout; but the raw power that rained down on Hero was absolutely zero fucking joke, far more than any that even Red's expertly-Trained companion had ever managed to call upon. Her Metagross fainted dead away.

“What the fuck,” breathed Moon, recalling Hero.

She considered her options as the Totems waited. Ariel was the tankiest after Hero, but she was weak to Electric-type moves so it was a last-ditch option. Kate was also fairly tanky but she still hadn't quite caught up to the rest of Moon's teammates in terms of power. Macbeth and Ben were both quite fragile, and Macbeth was additionally weak to Electric-type moves as well, so she had her hand on Puck's ball to send him out when she remembered that Ben had Volt Absorb.

The other Pikachu went for a move that was only slightly less flashy. Moon thought she recognized Volt Tackle in the gist of it, but it was definitely Volt Tackle on steroids. However, Ben's Volt Absorb caused the attack to fizz uselessly away and a sharp Swift was, to her surprise, able to stun both of the Totems into the end of a battle.

They lay on the ground panting for a few moments, while Moon recalled Ben to his ball; then Imran held up what appeared to be a water gun and sprayed a bright pink liquid that Moon
recognized as Hyper Potion at the Totems.

“It's good for the more hostile Totems,” explained Persis, resting her hands comfortably over her stomach as the Pikachu stirred. “These two are more docile after a defeat, but they still prefer me to Imran and I'm too awkward to bend down and heal them right now. You can approach them now.”

Moon took a few hesitant steps toward the Pikachu, but one of them trotted forward, opening its paw to offer her a yellow crystal that had a jagged edge—one that resembled its tail in the sharp lines of a male Pikachu. The other Pikachu stared at her with suspicion in its dark eyes for a few moments longer, but then it opened its own paw and dropped a second yellow crystal in her hand. This one had dark tips and red spots, like the ears and cheeks of a Pikachu.

“Which is which?”

“You know, I'm honestly not sure,” admitted Persis. Imran helped her stand up, and the Pikachu scampered off into the bushes as Moon followed the couple back toward the trailer. “But it doesn't matter, if you aren't going to be using them.”

“That's true.” Moon set them in place on her Z-Ring.

She left them where they had been, with Imran picking up a large metal water bottle, the kind that kept your drink cool even in the hottest weather, and held it up for Persis so she could drink. It was very heart-warming, and the way that he quietly assisted his wife who was so obviously in charge reminded her a lot of her parents.

Hau was waiting back at Paniola Town—she had offered to let him come with her over breakfast, but had been quite surprised when he turned to look at her thoughtfully for a few moments before turning her down.

(“I think I'd like to go there,” he had explained, “but I sort of... want to go like, as a date with Lillie. Kind of like how she and I went to the Lake of the Sunne.”)

Moon had cooed at him, but there was a part of her that was thinking about Hala, and the reason that he had still not given for not inviting Hau to come watch her battle Totem Snorlax. She still couldn't determine the reason, and worse yet she didn't know if it was because of Hau or because of her.)

“Did you have fun?” he asked, looking up from his Dex as she sat down across from him at the café table. His teammates were gathered around him, playing quietly or napping—Uila, Ollie, and BB curled into Rumble's side, with Sonar perched on the back of Hau's chair and Poppy on the chair next to Hau, her head in his lap as she watched the progress of whatever he was doing on screen.

“Lots of fun,” agreed Moon, holding up her Z-Ring to show off the two new crystals. Hau blinked for a few moments, then grinned and turned his Dex around, holding it up. Lillie's face appeared, eyebrows rising with a quizzical expression until she too spotted the Z-Crystals.

“Well done!” she said cheerfully, voice only slightly distorted by the video. “It's nice to see you, Moon. Where are the two of you headed next?”

“We thought we'd fly up to Wela and look for Kiawe, get the next petal out of the way before talking to Olivia about more Z-Crystals.”

“Check in Paniola Town first,” said Gladion, off-screen.
“Why?”

Half his face appeared as Lillie tilted the angle of her own Dex; he was wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants and his hair was soft and messy and Moon just really, really wanted to squish his face with her hands. He was doing something with Nox, hands running over smooth plastic with a slight frown; a little tool-kit sat in his lap. He didn't seem to notice either of them.

“He lives there,” he said absently, lifting the Porygon-Z up in the air and squinting beneath it; Nox giggled quietly, chirping a soft hello in Moon's direction. Lillie, also on-screen, grinned. Moon moved around behind Hau so they could both see the screen. “The only other major business besides the ranch in that town is the farm that his family owns. He doesn't work with them, but Molly went there for fresh produce for the Skulls before Rogelio put together the greenhouse. The Thrifty Megamart says they do fresh, but they really, really don't. Anyway, you might be able to find him there first, so it could save you a journey.”

“Thanks,” said Moon. “What's up with Nox?”

“Maintenance check. He keeps getting hiccups and I'm not sure why so I want to see if something's come loose in his casing.” Gladion blinked, then turned to look at Lillie before his eyes flicked to the camera in realization. “I didn't know this was a video call.”

“I always video-call when I can,” Lillie informed him.

“Oh.” A flush rapidly rose over his face. “Um, sorry, I probably look like a walking disaster but honestly I just woke up, I don't have therapy until after lunch so I slept in—”

“It's fine,” insisted Moon, smiling at him. “Don't worry about it.”

He nodded, but he still seemed self-conscious; and she realized that saying “don't worry about it” to someone like Gladion, or for that matter Lillie, was like saying “don't drip” to a leaky faucet. It was a nice sentiment, but it meant absolutely shit-all to the faucet.

“Well, let's head out and find Kiawe,” suggested Hau, looking up at Moon, “and these two can take care of whatever they need and we can call again later?”

It was a very tactful solution to the scrape that Moon had gotten herself into, and she offered Lillie and Gladion a thumbs-up. Gladion nodded again—he had unconsciously pulled Nox close, arms wrapping around his teammate as a comfort to his insecurity. Moon resisted the urge to coo and waved before stepping out of frame. Hau and Lillie said a few more good-byes before ending the call.

“I messed up,” sighed Moon, plopping down across from Hau.

“Yeah, but only a little,” Hau reassured her. “And I doubt he's like actually offended or anything. I'll bet you like, a hundred Poké he's not offended.”

“Cheap ass.”

“Hey, I've gotta do something to earn money from you, since I can't win it by battle.” Hau laughed. “Wanna walk over to Kiawe's family farm, or get lunch first?”

“Let's get lunch to go and eat while we're walking. If he's not there we can eat while we're flying.” Moon considered. “Well, you can eat while we're flying, and I will remain massively uncomfortable in the air and try not to puke.”
“Fun for the whole family.”

Kiawe was not, in fact, at the farm; but it had been a good lead because a tall, broad-shouldered young woman who introduced herself as Kiawe's older sister had informed them that if they managed to miss him at the volcano, they would be able to find him at the farm around a quarter to six in the evening. Moon wasn't totally sure if it was her smartest move, but she finished her sandwich before they left, instead burrowing her head and body inside her hoodie and getting out Rotom to pretend that they weren't flying high over Alola.

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

brave heart: Sorry I looked terrible.

shook: You should be aware that I find it literally impossible to believe that you can ever look terrible.


shook: But not terrible.

brave heart: Why are you like this.

shook: I ask myself this question frequently.

shook: For instance, when I say things like “don't worry about it” to someone with anxiety. That is the kind of thing that merits an apology, not “looking terrible,” which is a) subjective and b) patently false anyway.

shook: Ergo: I'm sorry I said “don't worry about it” to you, because that was a dumbass thing to say and I'm going to try and not ever say it again.

brave heart: I mean, I took it as you actually meant it, which was clearly “you don't have to worry about it.” It was a suggestion, not a demand.

brave heart: You don't really demand things from me very often.

brave heart: It's nice.

shook: It's really much more satisfying for me when you to agree to something I ask of you without coercion being involved. Is that how it is for you?

brave heart: Yes.

brave heart: Actions speak louder than words, right?

shook: Right.
Kiawe was in fact at the volcano peak, so Moon and Hau did the obligatory fire-water-grass exchange to see who would go first. Hau won, which meant that Moon would go first this time. She faced off against the trial captain, waiting to see which three companions he would send out.

His first companion was a Talonflame—a good choice, given Moon's team's general lack of counters for Fire-types. Macbeth had First Impression and she could leave some damage on her opponent, but she was also a Bug-type and therefore vulnerable to Brave Bird. It was a one-hit knockout.

“Oooh,” said Hau from the sidelines; Moon could hear the smile in his voice.

“Silence in the peanut gallery,” she ordered, grinning in return before bringing out Ben. He was quite fragile and spending a turn to set up Rain Dance was risky, but it would be helpful for the rest of her fight and he was also quite good at dodging. And Lana had said only yesterday that one of Moon's strengths was in her willingness to take risks for a battle setup, to change the field and the game to suit the skills of her team. Ben wasn't able to dodge Talonflame's Flame Charge, but the attack was weakened by Rain Dance and the hit didn't do nearly as much as Kiawe was clearly hoping it would.

“Ben, use Thunder!”

And that was that for the Talonflame. Kiawe nodded, eyes rueful and amused, and sent out a Salazzle. Moon had Ben use Thunder again, but the Salazzle took the hit and was able to knock Ben out with Dragon Pulse—a surprising choice but a sensible one, given that Rain Dance wouldn't do much for Fire-type moves.

Moon had just the thing for Poison-types—Hero had immunity with Steel and an advantage with Psychic—but she was surprised when Kiawe's mouth curved into a smirk.

“Maggie, use Toxic.”

“That's not gonna—”

Hero hiccuped, blinking and confused as she took Poison damage.

“How the fuck did you poison a Steel-type?”

“Salandit and Salazzle have the ability Corrosion,” said Kiawe, still smirking. “It allows them to poison any type of Pokémon—any type at all. That includes Steel-types and Poison-types.”

That meant that Kate probably wouldn't be a great option until the Salazzle was defeated. Moon chewed on her options for a few moments, then shrugged and went with Zen Headbutt. It was slower than Salazzle, but Hero was still plenty powerful and the still-in-effect Rain Dance prevented Flamethrower from doing super-effective damage. Two Zen Headbutts took out Salazzle, and the rain faded along with it.

Kiawe's final teammate was, perhaps rather predictably, an Alolan Marowak. That meant that Hero definitely couldn't stay in—poison aside, she was weak to both Fire- and Ghost-type moves. Moon's remaining options were Puck, Ariel, and Kate. Kate would do all right now that Salazzle
was gone; Ariel would be immune to Ghost-type moves but Puck could be super-effective against Marowak.

...Though if she switched him in, he would be at a speed disadvantage and might get one-shot by Flamethrower. Moon decided to send in Kate.

“Kate, use Toxic!”

Kiawe's smirk returned. “Winslow, Bonemerang!”

Moon groaned as the super-effective Ground-type move knocked Kate out in one hit, without even letting her get her own attack in first. “Ah, damn it. I didn't think you'd have access to the Kantonian moves as well as the Alolan ones.”

“Normally I wouldn't,” agreed Kiawe, “but I waited for Winslow to learn Bonemerang before I evolved him.”

She could send in Ariel— but bringing in a new teammate after one had fainted didn't come with the same speed disadvantage as switching a healthy teammate out mid-battle. She wasn't a hundred percent sure that Puck would be faster than Marowak; but it wouldn't hurt to try and she still had Ariel for backup.

Kiawe's eyebrows rose when he saw Puck. “Winston, use Flame Wheel!”

But Moon was taking no chances. She rapidly crouched, spun, and lunged in the moves of the Z-Dance. “Puck, Sinister Arrow Raid!”

Flame Wheel landed neatly where Puck had been before he leaped high and powerful into the air, chirping for joy as he drew his bow, spun, and fired. Moon was reminded of Ultra Space, when she had thought that she might never again dance with Puck as she was used to doing. It was really, really nice to try it again.

The Marowak went down, and Moon had defeated Kiawe.

“Thank you,” she told him earnestly. “I need to work on strengthening my team against Fire-types, so that was eye-opening.”

Kiawe raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Balance. Obviously, I'm always going to have a couple of major weaknesses to Fire, but if I can compensate with other teammates then it will be okay.”

“Always striving for improvement is an honorable goal.” Kiawe's smile lit with a touch of mischief. “I will do the same, and perhaps next time I can defeat you.”

“You can sure as hell try,” teased Moon in return.

Kiawe handed her an unsurprisingly red flower petal. “For your trial,” he said graciously, placing it in her palm. “Take care of it; we're not supposed to hand out more than one to each challenger.”

“Will do, thanks.”

She settled back to watch as Hau faced off against Kiawe for his own petal— letting her teammates out, despite the heat of the volcano, and offering them all beans. Hero seemed to be uncomfortable in the heat so after a short time Moon let her return, but the rest of them seemed to enjoy it now
that they weren't in battle. Puck closed his eyes, leaning on Moon and humming to himself; Ariel and Kate were chasing each other in circles, giggling and squawking at each other. And as usual Ben and Macbeth were cuddled next to each other— though Moon made an effort to keep Macbeth involved in what was going on around them, which in turn kept Ben engaged.

Hau began with Poppy, predictably. She had a strong advantage against Talonflame and defeated it easily, but her Fairy-typing was weak to Salazzle's poison and Moon was interested to see if Hau would choose a different teammate, or if he'd tried to give Poppy an advantage over Poison-types. She thought he might go for the latter, based on what Lana had said about his battle style— he preferred to work with raw power instead of setting up the way Moon usually did. Lana, and by extension Moon, were correct: instead of switching out for Uila, who had a Psychic-type advantage over Salazzle, Hau had simply taught Psychic to Poppy. As far as Moon could remember, Poppy had Sparkling Aria as the base for her Z-Move as well as either Moonblast or Dazzling Gleam; but she also had Ice Beam and now Psychic, both good counters for her weaknesses. They were also power moves, so even without STAB they hit hard and played to Poppy's strength in special attack. The Salazzle went down easily, and Hau was able to take Marowak out with Oceanic Operetta, which made steam go everywhere as the excess water that swirled over the sides of the battle platform evaporated in the heat of the volcano.

“Friendly reminder that it took me four teammates to beat him, and you did it with just one!” called out Moon.

Hau turned to grin at her. “I mean, I do have a good type advantage...”

“Yeah, but putting Psychic on Poppy was a great idea. Give yourself some credit, dude.”

“You battled very well,” agreed Kiawe, giving Hau his red petal. “Congratulations, you earned this. Where are the two of you headed after this?”

“I think Konikoni City?” Hau glanced at Moon, thumbs pausing over his Ride Pager.

Moon considered this for a few moments. “Actually,” she said, “if it's okay with you, Hau— I want to make a trip out to the Pelago. I haven't actually visited in ages, since Arby figured out how to send me beans through Rotom. I should make sure everything is going okay and that he's not totally overwhelmed. He sends me a weekly update and makes sure all the expenses balance out, but I'd be kind of a terrible business owner if I let my manager do all the work for me. You don't have to come with, Hau— it'll probably just be me talking numbers with Arby.”

“You can do that, and I can relax on the beach with my team and a sack of beans,” suggested Hau, eyebrows wagging.

“Or we could do that.” Moon summoned her own Charizard with her Ride Pager; the ETA was ten seconds and she could already see a pair of them in the sky.

“Have fun,” said Kiawe mildly. “It's winter, so the Pelago should have very good weather right now. I imagine some of the more tropical Berries are in season— Oran, Nomel, and Sitrus, possibly even Pomeg.”

“Oh, I could go for a fresh Pomeg Berry. They're a pain in the ass to open, but they're super tasty.” Moon grinned as the Charizard swooped down to land next to them. “See you around, Kiawe. Thanks again for the battle.”

“You're welcome. Good luck with the trial.”
“Thanks!”

The flight to Poké Pelago was a little over an hour from the volcano’s peak; Moon kept herself occupied by hiding in her jacket with Rotom again.

* * * * *

chat: **the four musketeers**

**crescent** changed their name to **Lunarbean CEO**

**Lunarbean CEO**: Guess where we're going.

**BOSS**: guess how moons sittin on her charizard

**rapunzel**: Poké Pelago, based on your chatname change; and I have no idea.

**pedantic**: Probably with something covering her face so she can't see how high she's flying.

**Lunarbean CEO**: I get no respect around here lmao

**Lunarbean CEO**: But you're both right, so good job

**Lunarbean CEO**: I can send you both fresh fruit through the PC if you ever get the chance to go down to the village.

**rapunzel**: Both Hapu and the hospital have PCs connected to the Pokémon Center systems.

**BOSS**: w8 rlly??!!?

**rapunzel**: Apparently all of the kahunas have Pokémon Center PCs.

**BOSS**: gramps never said anythin???!?!

**pedantic**: What would change if you knew he had a PC?

**BOSS**: well i never wouldve gone 2 the pkmn ctr 4 healin if id known THAT

**pedantic**: And that would be special treatment, which I assume he wants to avoid.

**BOSS**: ok thats fair

**BOSS**: thx 4 supplyin me w logic when i dont have any lmao

**pedantic**: You're very logical. You're also very emotional, and you have a healthier balance than probably any of the rest of us.
Lunarbean CEO: HEY

rapunzel: I think Gladion is right

Lunarbean CEO: Oh I know he's right, I'm just protesting on principle

Lunarbean CEO: For instance I'm also pretty logical but a lot of the time I let my feelings take over first so I become a whiny baby

rapunzel: I have the opposite problem; I'm afraid to let my emotions overpower me so I try to push them down with logic.

rapunzel: My therapist says I've repressed a lot of things and as I get used to expressing my emotions in a healthy way, I'm probably going to have some mood swings and weird responses.

rapunzel: Which I interpret to mean I'll be crying a lot.

pedantic: I have both Moon's problem and Lillie's problem. Sometimes I'm brutally logical and turn off my feelings, and sometimes I'm overemotional and forget to think. It's hard to find a balance between the two.

Lunarbean CEO: But Hau actually does a thing where he responds with both logic and feelings to any given situation, so he comes out with both the smartest solution and the kindest one.

rapunzel: Agreed.

pedantic: ^

BOSS: so uh

BOSS: obvi lillie & gladion cant c me as they arent here

BOSS: & moon is 2 freaked out abt the flight to look

BOSS: but legit yall made me cry a little bit just now

BOSS: sometimes i dont rlly feel like im as strong-willed as the rest of u guys

BOSS: like im easygoing ill go along w/ whatevs

BOSS: so i wonder if im like a doormat or smth

BOSS: it's nice 2 kno u guys don't c it that way

Lunarbean CEO: AWWW DON'T CRY HAU WE LOVE YOU!!!!!!!!!!!

rapunzel: (^-^)

pedantic: ^

pedantic: WAIT FUCK THAT WAS FOR MOON'S MESSAGE NOT LILLIE'S

BOSS: dw gladion i'll give u all the kissies u want
Lunarbean CEO: Omfg I'm screenshoting this

rapunzel: I would literally pay to see this in real life.

Lunarbean CEO: What, your boyfriend kissing your brother? O____O

rapunzel: I was referring more to Hau making kissy faces at Gladion, and Gladion running away screaming.

Lunarbean CEO: ...

Lunarbean CEO: Yeah ok I'd pay to see that too

pedantic: I never ask to suffer, but I always do.

* * * * *

Poké Pelago was much the same as Moon remembered it— warm and a bit humid, with a lush breeze that kept the air fresh rather than claggy. She’d sent a quick message to Arby letting him know they would be coming down, and was surprised to find that the Charizard headed straight for a concrete platform that had been built off the side of the largest island— clearly a place designed for Charizard takeoffs. Several wooden docks had also been built for boats, and both humans and Pokémon were working to move crates and sort sacks as they walked between warehouses and shops that had popped up beyond the docks.


“Yeah,” agreed Moon, still taken aback. “It's really nice— he's done a lot with the place.”

“Oh, Moon! Hello!”

Moon and Hau both turned to see Arby jogging toward them beaming. He wore a lime-green shirt with an atrocious tropical print— aqua and gold Bounsweet along with pink and orange Alolan Exeggutor. It was an absolute eyesore, and she was going to have to figure out a way to show Lillie and Gladion without hurting Arby's feelings.

“Hey, Arby! It's nice to see you again.” Moon shook his hand, grinning. “So this is what you've been doing with the place, huh?”

He nodded vigorously. “I've had some assistance from Trial Captain Mallow, actually; her family runs a luxury restaurant in Konikoni City and she sent us a message about a regular bulk-order of our highest-quality beans. So far they're the biggest investor, but we've also had some deals with Paniola Ranch and the Hokulani Senior Center. I've given them both discounts— I thought you would prefer that?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Thank you,” said Moon, pleased. “I'd like to tour everything, if you're not too busy?”

“No, of course not! There are a lot of people and Pokémon doing the work for harvesting and sorting beans and Berries, and also some people doing advertising and so on. So mostly what I've been doing is figuring out the computer systems. I've sort of given myself the IT department.” He
chuckled, a bit self-depreciatingly. “Carnation says I need to get out more.”

“Carnation?”

“My Stoutland.” Arby patted at his belt, which Moon was surprised to see was a Trainer's belt; there were four Pokéballs tucked in place. “Um, would your friend like to join the tour as well?”

Hau had been staring at Arby, with a slight frown on his face; but as Moon turned to look at him his expression cleared and he grinned. “Nah, I'll just stick around here. Can I play on the beach with my Pokémon?”

“Of course! But I recommend you do so on Isle Evelup—the sandy one, over there. That's where we're working on building the guest houses and the little beach resort.”

“Neat. Thank you!” Hau waved and began running toward a bridge that led in the Isle Evelup—in fact, all of the islands had been bridged together in a continuous looping path. There were lanterns with colorful glass hanging from the railings, and Moon could see that small mesh-fences had been built at the places where the main ocean met the shallow rivulets of salt-water between each island. Several Machamp and some Dugtrio, oddly enough, appeared to be building rocky circles in the water.

“They're making tide-pools,” explained Arby, seeing her preoccupation. “For Pokémon like Corsola and Staryu and Pyukumuku... you know, the ones that get preyed on by predators like Mareanie and Toxapex.”

It rang a bell in Moon's mind. “Oh, like the conservatory at the Aether Foundation?”

“I suppose so. That's what everybody says, when I tell them about it. I just think that Corsola are a really nice species, and it would be a shame for them to die out. There's a sort of... um, fence trap? I rigged it up with the help of a couple of Trainers who are overseeing construction and architecture. A Corsola can get in through the main wire fence because there's a gap that's big enough for them to fit without getting caught. Unfortunately, Mareanie and Toxapex are also small enough to get through, and so are Bruxish and Carvanha. So as a Pokémon comes in, two finer mesh fences will slide up before and after it to close everything off while still letting the water run through it. If a fence comes up it sends a signal to the response team, and they go take care of the Pokémon. If it's an endangered species, we let it stay in the tide pools. If it's a predator, we let it back out in the ocean.”

Moon whistled. “That's amazing, Arby. And you don't even have to remove them from their natural types of habitats.”

“That's the best part.” Arby's smile was soft, and rather fond. “They're still free to come and go, if they want. If they're happier out in the ocean, they can go. But if they want to stay here where it's safe, they can do that too.”

The tour began at Isle Abeens, where Pokémon and humans alike were harvesting a section of tangled bean-vines that grew all over the island.

“They have about a one-week growth period,” Arby informed her. “So we split the field into sections— pink, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. We harvest and sort one section every day and give it the rest of the week to grow before harvesting that section again. It looks like today we're on the green section.” He pointed at a green flag marking where everyone was working.
“Does the green section only produce green beans?”

“Oh goodness, no. All of the colors grow just about everywhere. It might be more organized if they did, but I don't really mind and it doesn't affect vine-to-shipment speed or worker productivity at all.”

Moon studied him. “You know a lot about business, don't you?”

“I didn't at first,” admitted Arby, without an ounce of shame on his face. “Because of the amnesia, you know. But once I read a few books about economics and trade, it's come quite naturally to me. I can't explain it, but I think I must have done something like this before I lost my memories. Some things are instinctual— like building the tide pools and the fence guards for endangered Pokémon. It just seemed right.”

“Well, you keep following your instincts,” said Moon warmly. “It's doing you good here.”

He smiled, tanned face going slightly pink. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

The next stop on the tour was Isle Aplenny, home to a huge Berry orchard and garden.

“So beans make up the vast bulk of product sales, but the Berries are the real moneymaker,” explained Arby, turning to look at her. “I've followed your ideas about pricing, and I really liked one idea we were throwing around, about medical discounts for Pokémon who can't have beans for whatever reason. We've had some contact with the hospital on Poni Island about that. They get discounts, and so do individual Trainers who can provide proof of medical need; but everybody else pays full price. And with the constant good weather as well as people and Pokémon to work on the orchard, we've got nearly half of all known Berry species growing here. All of the most common Berries, as well as a few rarer ones. I've put in some orders with an orchard in Kalos to see about getting hold of more seeds, but they're a little more dependent on seasonal timing and they've already planted for the year, so I'll have to wait until Kalosian harvest season for new seeds.”

“Fair enough.”

“I wish we could do vegetables, too— but I don't think there's enough room. I've wondered about floating gardens, but I'm slightly concerned about salt content. We do have a fresh water well and we've gotten both Isle Aplenny and Isle Abeens irrigated, but I'm not sure we could rig something like that up for a floating garden without a risk of getting salt water in it and destroying the crop.”

“Hmm.” Moon considered this. “I could maybe ask a couple of people about this. I have a friend who's a gardener, and my boyfriend is kind of interested in botany and medicinal plants.”

Arby's eyes lit up. “Oh, medicinal plants would be a good idea! I built a PC that has a connection with the Pokémon Centers, but we don't have a medical facility.”

“I could ask Kahuna Olivia about building a Pokémon Center here, if you wanted?”

He shook his head. “I don't think we need a whole Pokémon Center, but I'd like to build a clinic. Probably on the corner of Isle Aphun, here— where we've got the Charizard pad and the docks. Let's go take a look.”

Moon was surprised to find a small mine that had been opened, a cave dug into the ground with both Pokémon and Trainers traipsing in and out periodically with sacks that clinked.

“We sell a lot of the stones to Kahuna Olivia, and it brings in decent money. We've also found fossils, and a few of the braver Pokémon went deep enough to find an oil deposit.” A slight frown
creased Arby's face. “I really don't want an oil rig built here, but I'm having a hard time coming up with an alternate solution. Most of Alola runs on solar or wind power, so the demand for oil isn't that high here. But the demand is high in other regions, and the Alolan government would be keen to profit on exports.”

“Don't you own the land?” said Moon. “Or me, or whoever is on the deed?”

“I own the land,” admitted Arby, “but the oil deposit is under the ocean floor. So I would have to let the government have it. I really, really don't want an oil rig.”

“I'll think about that and get back to you,” promised Moon. “I don't want an oil rig, either. It might mean money, but people get touchy about oil. Unova and Kanto would definitely both want a piece of that.”

The tour brought them next to Isle Evelup, where Moon spotted Hau lying on a beach chaise under an umbrella while his teammates played and splashed in the water. Simultaneous construction on about five beach houses at the center of the island was taking place; ten were already built, lining the path that stretched from bridge to bridge. These too were strung with colorful lanterns, and several Trainers with Sudowoodo and a Bellossom— Moon blinked, surprised; none of the Oddish family were native to Alola— were working on landscaping between houses.

“They're from Johto,” said Arby, waving at the group; they all waved back. “One of them was on vacation and was recommended to visit here, and they offered me a landscaping deal with a hefty discount in exchange for being willing to host some kind of... um, landscapers' conference thing? I accepted, but we also need to build a conference hall and I'm really not sure where to put it. I'm considering another concrete platform, but honestly the Charizard pad is in the best location to build it and I don't want to move that service away from the docks.”

Moon glanced around, surveying all of the islands. “What about Isle Aphun?” she suggested. “The dock warehouses are already right there, and so is the Charizard pad.”

“There's no room to build anything.”

“There is if you build down.” Moon pointed out at the ocean. “It would take some work to manage it, but if you had an entrance that comes through the mine and takes you down to a room that sticks out into the ocean, with glass walls...”

“We could light it up at night,” said Arby, eyes brightening. “And during the day it would have a great view of the reefs on the north side of the Pelago. That's perfect, Moon; I don't know why I didn't think of building underwater.”

“Because it's time-consuming and expensive,” laughed Moon. “And you'll have to be able to flood it or vacuum-seal it at will. It might take a while, but if we rent out the conference hall for businesses who want to do a vacation-style conference then we can make back what we spent on it easily. And it would probably also be a good place to put things like your IT setup, and any delicate machinery that shouldn't be out in the open.”

“Oh, I like it! It would be like headquarters, I suppose. Thank you, Moon. That's a great idea. I'll look into it.”

The last island was Isle Avue. It looked almost exactly the same as it had the last time she visited.

“We haven't worked much on the hot springs,” explained Arby. “There's the path that connects the two bridges, and there's one spring that's currently usable for spa purposes; but we just haven't
gotten around to working on the rest of it.”

“That's okay,” Moon reassured him. “That will be more important once you've gotten the conference hall built, right? It's an attraction. And you could also put some buildings here as well.”

“Not too many. It's the smallest island. But it would be nice to have something here besides hot springs, I think.”

“What other buildings do we need besides a conference hall?”

“A kitchen,” said Arby immediately. “We have kind of a tent setup over on Isle Aplenny and a team that does breakfast, lunch, and dinner; but it would be better to have a kitchen that's actually indoors. Er— we actually had a visit from one of the Lush Jungle Totems, once... I didn't know Lurantis could fly. I guess it smelled our food?”

“Sounds about right,” murmured Moon, grinning as she remembered Lurantis and Tsareena and how much they had liked Mallow's spicy soup. “So, actual kitchen building. Just a kitchen, or with like an attached dining hall?”

“A dining hall would probably be good.”

“Do we want to rent out spaces to restaurants, or just cater everything here?”

“I think we should cater everything here. If people want restaurant food, they can go back to the main islands.”

All in all, Arby had made spectacular progress. For a man who had amnesia and no recollection of his life before washing up on Route Seven's beach, he was remarkably charismatic, drawing people in to help him transform the Pelago into something amazing.

“I still can't believe I have a share in this,” Moon said, shaking her head. “Seriously, I make plenty of money battling. You should put whatever you've been paying me back into the Pelago. If we're going to hire someone to help us build an underground conference hall, we're going to need lots of cash.”

He frowned. “Are you sure? It would certainly help, but you were the first person who actually took me seriously enough to visit and help me make this possible. I feel that it's owed to you.”

“You've already paid me a bajillion times over, dude. I love everything you've done with the place, and I love all the plans you have for it. It's the coolest. As long as you keep providing me with free beans, I will be a very happy Trainer.”

“That I can do.” Arby beamed, and Moon was reminded that she wanted to show Lillie and Gladion his eye-searingly ugly shirt.

“Hey, you should take a selfie with me and Hau,” she suggested.

He blinked, surprised. “Er— certainly, if you like.”

They retrieved Hau and his teammates from Isle Evelup; Hau looked more relaxed than Moon had seen him in ages. “Seriously, we have to bring Lillie and Gladion here,” he said to Moon. “This is the coolest thing.”

“Agreed. Come take a picture with us, I want to send it to them. Rotom?”
“On it, bzzt.”

The selfie would have been a good one, all of them grinning and making peace signs or giving Rotom a thumbs-up; but at the last second a pair of Sandygast and a Staryu decided that they, too wanted to be in the picture. Moon, damper and sandier than she had been only a few moments ago, looked at the picture.

“Top ten pictures taken moments before disaster,” she snickered, passing it to Hau. “It's perfect, honestly.”

“More like top ten pictures taken mid-disaster,” laughed Hau. “This is great. I love that angle on your nostril.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Moon snickered.

“You don't need to retake it?” said Arby anxiously, attempting to wring out his colorful shirt as the Staryu chirped, spinning away to the tide pools as the Sandygast crept back off to a shadowy patch of sand beneath one of the bridges.

“Nah, this is hilarious.” In the picture, Moon had stumbled forward, back arching in surprise as the Staryu had blasted cold water at them; there was a Sandygast under one of her feet. She was captured mid-flail; one arm smacking into Hau's chest as he too dodged from the water. The second Sandygast had tripped Mohn so that he stumbled forward, face out of frame while his ugly shirt was still fully visible. It was honestly a great picture.

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

Lunarbean CEO: Picture Attachment: [PhotoBomb.jpeg]

rapunzel: That's... interesting.

pedantic: That's not the word I'd use.

Lunarbean CEO: You can't see his face but that's my Poké Pelago guy

Lunarbean CEO: We're seriously going to have to take you here. He's done so much with the place, it's amazing

Lunarbean CEO: But mostly I sent this picture because his shirt is the ugliest thing I've ever seen but I low-key love it and I need to buy four of them

BOSS: BAHAHAAHAHAHAH

BOSS: why do u need 4 tho

Lunarbean CEO: One for me, one for Gladion, one for my dad, and one for Red.
BOSS: o thank god i thought u were gonna give me 1

BOSS: tryin 2 figure out how 2 say no thx

pedantic: You say it like this: “No thanks, Moon.”

pedantic: Speaking of which: no thanks, Moon.

Lunarbean CEO: I just want to see you wearing it, honestly

Lunarbean CEO: It's neon. It's ridiculous. It's amazing.

rapunzel: You can take pictures with matching couple outfits.

BOSS: omfg that would b so funny tho

Lunarbean CEO: I mean you don't have to wear it ever if you don't want to, but I'm buying one for you anyway because I already know you're going to make the funniest face when you see it in person.

pedantic: I repeat: I never ask to suffer, but I always do.

* * * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan, satoshired@pmail.co.kan

From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo

Re: Gladion

Okay so I can tell you some things, but not everything, so please be patient.

Firstly: so Gladion's been through some shit and so has his ace, which is the Pokémon you're asking about. I'm not telling you her species name but he calls her Null.

She was made in a laboratory by an extremely unethical scientist from the Aether Foundation. Gladion has referred to her as a “chimera” before. She is one of three of her kind in the world.

She was also tortured and experimented on, which made her hostile toward humans. That's what the helmet was about; it was made to keep some of her powers from hurting people. But Gladion stole her from the Foundation and ran away, and slowly trained her to trust him and eventually she broke the helmet. She looks a lot cooler now but I can't send you a picture; you'll have to wait and see her in person.

And she is actually responsible for Gladion's haircut, at the time of the Battle Royal videos. It's still asymmetrical but he has since gotten it trimmed at an actual salon. So like you weren't wrong... but you were still rude lmao.

Love you guys.
Persis and Imran are delightful to write and we will be getting more of them later; a really, really observant reader might be able to guess in what context they will be appearing. ;)

Hi so fun fact I really really HATE that Game Freak gave Pikachu not one but TWO specialized Z-Crystals. Yeah, Pikachu is the game mascot. Yeah, Pikachu has been the hero of the anime for a long time and continues to serve in that function by being occasionally extremely OP. But for fuck's sake could you have not given Z-Crystals to other Pokémon??? You know who deserves their own Z-Move? Here's a entire list for you: Golisopod, Salazzle, Bewear, and fucking SILVALLY: aka the aces of Guzma, Plumeria, and Gladion as well as one of Lusamine's teammates. (I maintain that Lusamine's ace is Clefable.) Thank you for listening to my TEDtalk.

Sleepy, messy-haired Gladion doing robot maintenance for his Porygon-Z because it has a chronic case of the hiccups? UGH CUTE

It's reflex for people to say “don't worry about it” when they're trying to be reassuring. And I know it is almost always meant as a suggestion, not an order. However, as a person with All The Anxiety it is high-key very difficult to actually “not worry about it.” I'm not really sure what I would actually want to hear in those situations though. I'm probably just being pedantic honestly

more silly chatfic fluff because reasons

Arby is low-key turning the Pelago into a nature preserve as well as a vacation resort... does this remind you of anything?

you thought we were going to have Lillie and Gladion see their dad and go HOLY SHIT THAT'S DAD but haha SIKE
It is the star to every wand'ring bark

Chapter Summary

Konikoni City

*************

Moon and Hau learn about some of the challenges ahead of them, and Moon challenges another Totem.

Chapter Notes

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (fair warning, it's a BTS stan account. my babies performed at the Grammys and they were just on the Late Late Show with James Corden I am A PROUD MOTHER even though I am younger than exactly two of them) Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM JOIN US JOIN US

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh my god, are you okay?”

“Moon,” said Hau conversationally. “Shut up.”

Olivia smiled up at them from their reserved table. “I'm all right,” she said, and though her voice was as sweet and cheerful as always, her eyes told a different story.

“Sorry,” mumbled Moon. “I just know you've been busy, that's all.”

“It's all right.” The kahuna let out a soft sigh. “I'm not feeling my best, I know that much. But I can handle it.”

It did not look to Moon as though Olivia was handling it. They sat down across from her, picking up the menus that a green-haired young man placed down for them— though if the bright smile and faint scent of marijuana were anything to go by, he was surely related to Mallow.

“Any appetizers I can get for you?”

“A large plate of onion rings with house honey mustard and a pickle platter,” said Olivia immediately. “To share. Anything to add, either of you?”

“Do you have those garlic knot thingies?” inquired Hau.

“Sure do!”

“I'm good,” said Moon, shrugging. “I've never been here before, so it's all the same to me.”

Olivia smiled. “Oh, you're in for a treat. The Tualoni Teahouse has been running for sixty-eight
years, and it won't be going out of business anytime soon.” The server finished scribbling out their orders, winked at Moon, and trotted off to the kitchen. “So, how are you getting along with the Z-Crystals?”

“Pretty well,” said Moon, sliding her Z-Ring off her arm to show everything off. “Marshadow gave me a crystal back in Ultra Space, and I have Primarium and Incinium from Hau and Professor Kukui. Since then I've gotten hold of Snorlium, Mimikium, Eevium, Pikanium and Pikashunium.”

Olivia nodded. “Sounds like you’re finding them just fine, then. What did you want to ask me about?”

Moon consulted Rotom. “Um— Aloraichium and Lycanium?”

“Ah.” Olivia sighed again, leaning back in her chair. There were fine lines creasing her forehead and the corners of her eyes— lines that Moon suspected were usually smoothed away with makeup. Her only hypothesis for this was based on the dark shadows under Olivia's eyes, which would also have been covered. Most worryingly: while the kahuna was by no means overweight, she had clearly lost a few pounds, and it didn't really suit her. She looked ill and tired and stressed out. “Well, I hope it's not too forward of me to say that I'm glad you're asking about those two. Aloraichium is right here in the city; we can walk over after we're done eating, if you like. And Lycanium is very much not my problem, because it's in the Haina Desert. I can give you some advice and tell you where to go, but I won't be helping you find it in person. I simply don't have the time.”

“You really don't,” agreed Moon.

Almost as though on cue, Olivia's phone rang. She glanced at the display and sighed a third time. “Excuse me, I have to take this.” She got to her feet, walking over toward the bathrooms.

“Oh my god,” said Moon under her breath, staring after Olivia. “She’s really going through it. I just want to make her sit down.”

“Is it wrong of me to wish she was like, married or dating someone?” wondered Hau. “Not because she needs anyone, but so she could have them give her a shoulder rub or something.”

“She could use one. And like, a nap. For a whole month.”

Olivia returned fairly quickly. “Just smoothing over some troubles with my chamber design for the League,” she said, offering them a wan smile. “It could have waited, but most people don't think about things like that. Anyway— Lycanium Z, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have a map of the Haina Desert, by chance?”

“Rotom?”

“On it, bzzt.” Rotom obligingly pulled up a map, and Olivia leaned over the table to examine it.

“So do you notice that the desert is more or less contained by Mount Lanakila on the west, Blush Mountain on the east, and the tail end of the Hokulani Range on the north?” Olivia tapped the map as she spoke. “It's difficult to navigate the Haina Desert because the sands shift, which means that the paths do as well; but there are several things that never move. The most inaccessible part of the desert is the Ruins of Abundance. I don't know how far you got into the desert on your... ah, previous excursion—”
“That’s one way of putting it,” said Hau under his breath. Moon elbowed him.

Olivia chuckled. “At any rate, the Ruins are located on the northern end of the desert. They’re also further west than most people believe them to be. The Ula'ula kahunas have kept their maps intentionally incorrect for ages, as a courtesy to Tapu Bulu. In the last few years, satellite imaging has become advanced enough that it’s no longer possible to purposely obfuscate the location without creating a permanent sandstorm over the entire desert. And some highly accurate maps have been uploaded as well... all in the last ten years, if you take my meaning.”

“Nanu being petty?”

“Ishmael,” corrected Olivia, a twinkle in her eye. “Hala and Ikaika got me into the habit of separating the kahuna and the man, and I advise you to consider doing the same. Nanu, as a kahuna, is not petty. He would do anything for the people and for the Pokémon. Ishmael, as a man, functions as the very definition of pettiness. At any rate, you should know to avoid the Ruins of Abundance, because Tapu Bulu will not take kindly to your presence. If you do happen to run into him, be very apologetic, very respectful, and stay as still as you possibly can while he decides what to do with you.”

“That's... comforting.”

“There are only two other fixed locations within the Haina. The Z-Crystal pedestal that contains Psychium Z is located southeast of the Ruins— almost a straight shot, north-northeast from the main entrance. And the final location is the Boneyard.”

“The... Boneyard?” Moon grimaced. “That doesn't sound pleasant.”

“It's not.” Olivia regarded her somberly. “You've heard of it before. It is the place from where Foxglove took the star-spiked skull of a Solgaleo and the curving wing-bone of a Lunala, before he attempted to revive them as I frequently revive Fossils. It is where Solgaleo and Lunala go to die, at the end of their lifespans— and it is where the Tapus undergo their own reincarnation processes.”

“T... their whatnow?”

“The Tapus are not immortal, as Arceus and Mew and Necrozma. Every few hundred years, they convene in the boneyard and grow themselves new bodies from unwanted parts of their old ones— shed feathers and scales, broken claws and horns, and the shields they wear that form the appearance of a mask. A new Tapu is born from the old and they take up the shields, which are never damaged and never decay. Then the old body dies, and the young one inherits the spirit and soul of the elder. So each new Tapu has lifetimes and lifetimes of wisdom and experience with which to newly meet the world. All four of them do this in the Boneyard, and anything that does not become part of their new body is left behind with the bones of the gods.”

A chill went down Moon's spine. “I thought people weren't allowed to go there,” she said warily.

“They aren't,” said Olivia simply. “However, there isn't a punishment for going. It is assumed that if you go, you have some kind of punishment in mind for yourself anyway.”

She regarded them with kind, knowing eyes.

Moon sighed. “Lycanium Z is in the Boneyard, isn't it?”

“It is.”
“Cool.” Moon turned to look at Hau. “Want to come face imminent death to look for a shiny rock?”

“The story of your life,” said Hau solemnly. “I guess someone has to be there to report the details of your demise to the rest of the world.” He met Moon's high-five as his somber expression cracked into a grin.

“Hi!” chirped their green-haired server, chuckling at the high-five as he deposited several large plates onto their table. “Onion rings with house honey mustard, a pickle platter, and garlic knots. Can I get you guys anything to drink?”

“I’ll take a large Komala Coffee with soy milk and marshmallow syrup.”

“Root beer for me.”

“And I'll take a Nomel berry soda.”

He beamed. “All righty! I'll be right back with those.”

Olivia waited until the server was gone until she cleared her throat and resumed her explanation. “Lycanium Z is, of course, guarded by a Totem.” She picked up three onion rings at once, dunked them into the honey mustard, and crammed them into her mouth.

“Let me guess—a Lycanroc,” said Moon, electing to ignore Olivia's eating style and kicking Hau under the table when he stared for too long.

Olivia's mouth quirked into a smile and she wiped her face with a napkin. “Indeed. Do you remember learning about Dusk Lycanroc?”

“Uh—that's the sunset one, right? There's a Midday Lycanroc and a Midnight Lycanroc, and then a Dusk Lycanroc which is really difficult to evolve or something like that? Is that the Totem, then?” Moon selected a toothpick and speared two pickles with it, enjoying the crunch.

“Correct.” Olivia's face tightened slightly. “Obviously I am quite fond of Lycanroc, as a species. They are very intelligent, and they can be quite affectionate and loving. However, wild Lycanroc form packs and band together, showing hostility to any and all outsiders—Pokémon and human alike. Totem Lycanroc will not play by regular Totem rules. There will be no allies; there will be no turns, no unspoken battle etiquette. It will be you versus the pack—and when I say you, I mean you. Not your teammates. You.”

The jagged pair of scars on Moon's leg, a pair of cracked parentheses, pulsed with phantom pain. She winced.

“Hau, you will be at a disadvantage,” continued Olivia, indicating him. “You don't have any Pokémon that can help you gain high ground. Moon, on the other hand, has a Metagross, I believe?”

“We should ride Hero and not Ride Pager Mudsdales?” guessed Hau.

“Not unless you have a great desire to watch your Mudsdales die, after which you will be forced to pay a fine to Hapu's family—assuming you make it out alive yourselves.”

Moon winced in unison with Hau. “And they can't rip Hero up the same way, since she's a Steel-type.”
“Exactly. You should both ride on Metagross, and be prepared to send out your fighters to ward off large numbers of Lycanroc. You both have advantages with your chosen starter Pokémon, and I’m sure you’ve found other ways to counter Rock-types since your Grand Trial with me. As long as you stay alert and focused, you should be able to get to the Boneyards, find the Lycanium deposit, and get out. The Lycanroc will stop chasing you when you get back to Gible territory — the only time you should ever be glad to see a Gible in the Haina, honestly.”

“Don’t I know it,” muttered Moon, leg burning with more phantom pain. “And it's just smack in the middle of the Haina?”

“No. From the entrance turn east, and keep walking east. You'll find it soon enough.”

Almost on cue, the server reappeared with their drinks, setting them down. Olivia immediately reached for her coffee, taking several long sips and sighing as she set it down.

“And are you guys ready to order?”

Moon glanced at Hau and Olivia. Hau nodded, and Olivia squinted at her menu for a few moments before sighing a third time. “I really should not be eating this, but right now I need it. I'll take the build-your-own-imi-burger, with Unovan yellow cheese, sliced Tamato, lettuce, pickles, onions, mayo, ketchup, mustard, and extra bacon.”

“Awesome. And for your two sides?”

“Extra-cheesy chili-mac and Kalosian fries.”

“That sounds really good,” said Hau. “I'll do the Unovan imi-cheese-steak sandwich with extra onions, and double Kalosian fries for my two sides.”

“Fantastic. And for you?”

The server's smile was very wide and bright, and Moon was slightly taken aback by the force of it. She faked a cough and looked down at her menu as though to stall for time, even though she knew what she wanted. “Um — I'm going to go with the imi-seafood linguine with creamy pesto sauce. And I'll do Kalosian fries and fried curds for the sides.”

“Sweet! I'll be right back with those.” The server’s grin grew even wider, which she had not thought possible, and he winked at her before turning and trotting back to the kitchen.

Moon blinked, surprised.

“Oh,” said Hau, snickering quietly as he picked up a garlic knot. “Moon, I think he likes you.”

“What.”

“It certainly looks that way,” agreed Olivia, her eyes twinkling with amusement as she stuffed more onion rings into her mouth.

“What,” repeated Moon.

“He's related to Mallow, right?” said Hau, looking at Olivia for confirmation. “This is their family restaurant.”

“Ulu is Mallow's older brother, yes. I believe he is... twenty-six? Mallow is twenty-five.”

“What.”
“Relax, Moon. If he says anything, you just tell him you have a boyfriend and it's all good.”

“I know that,” grumbled Moon, also reaching for the garlic knots. “Oh, these are yummy... I guess I'm just weirded out because I'm only eighteen. And also because I've lived in Kanto for seventeen and a half years of my life and in Kanto I'm not like, pretty, so people didn't really ever hit on me or anything.”

“What do you mean by that?” said Olivia, frowning.

“Alola has a lot of different kinds of people,” explained Moon. “All skin colors, all sizes, and so on... so everybody has different ideas of what beauty is. But in Kanto, it's mostly like, Kantonians. So the ideal of beauty is very, um, Kantonian. And I'm half-Alolan, so I'm darker, and more fuller-figured, than most Kantonians; and because of that, most of them didn't think I was pretty. Nobody ever said anything to my face because that's rude, but like... I wasn't stupid.”

Hau regarded her with a flat expression. “Wow, that's the dumbest thing I think I've ever heard you say.”

“I never said I bought into it, dumbass.” Moon poked him in the shoulder. “I like how I look. I'm just explaining that people in Kanto were not interested in me in that way, so I'm literally very not used to it.”

“Well, you should get used to it,” said Olivia, crossing her arms as she studied Moon, still amused. “You're very pretty, and you're also confident— which is a far more attractive trait than simple beauty.”

“Well, duh.” Moon waved a hand at Olivia. “I mean, look at you.”

“Thanks,” laughed the kahuna. “I appreciate the compliment.”

“What about me, Moon, tell me I'm pretty.” Hau batted his eyes.

“You have Lillie for that.”

The laughter was only interrupted by— Ulu, Olivia had said his name was— as he set down their plates. He grinned at Moon again, who felt self-conscious under the attention and did her best to keep a blank expression even though she could feel her face getting hot. It was a very small mercy that she had a darker complexion, because it helped to conceal blushes; but Hau and Olivia, both of whom also had dark complexions, both looked at her knowingly and hid their smiles so Moon knew they weren't fooled.

The food was very good, as Olivia had said it would be; and for a few minutes the four of them just ate in silence. If Moon hadn't already been aware that Olivia was tired and stressed and hungry, she might have been alarmed at the speed with which the kahuna consumed all of the food she had ordered, as well as several cups of coffee.

“It's been like this for a while,” she said finally, not looking at either of them.

“How long?” Moon didn't bother asking like what, when she already knew what Olivia was talking about.

“Probably since Necrozma opened a bunch of Ultra Wormholes, back when she was throwing her original temper tantrum.”

“Oh yeah!” Moon leaned forward, wide-eyed. “I totally forgot she did that. What all happened?”
“There were probably... oh, two or three on each island?” Olivia shrugged. “The kahunas and trial captains dealt with them. Even Nanu stepped in, but that's because Tapu Bulu would have had his head on a plate if he didn't. A couple of them can make their own Ultra Wormholes, but for the ones that couldn't we had to keep them sedated until Solgaleo could come and open one for them. That took a while.”

“There's other kinds of Ultra Beasts, right?” asked Hau. “And Interpol calls them different names than the Ultra Megalopolans do.”

Olivia nodded. “Nihilego, or Ultra Beast ought-one: Symbiont, is the first one that Interpol ever got data on. We had a pair of those show up here on Akala; Lana dealt with them, since she has a type advantage. There's UB ought-two, which I believe Interpol calls Absorption... I think your grandfather fought one of those. I faced a UB ought-three, or Beauty as it's known to Interpol. UB ought-four is Lightning, and little Hapu took one of those down. Then there's UB ought-five, Blaster; and UB ought-six, Blade. Kiawe fought a Blaster. UB ought-seven is Glutton, and they are in my opinion the most terrifying Ultra Beasts.”

“Did anyone fight one of those?”

“Nanu.” Olivia smiled at the surprise that Moon could not quite help. “He may be crotchety and uncooperative, but he's a very skilled battler. Molayne and Sophocles were taking care of a pack of Blades that showed up in Malie Garden, and the Glutton was on its way over to join them. Glutton has to be kept away from people at all costs. As its name implies, it will eat anything and everything in its path.”

“Yikes.”

“That about sums it up.” Olivia grinned at her. “UB ought-eight and ought-nine should be very familiar to you. You have an ought-eight in your possession.”

“You mean Kate?”

“Indeed. I had the opportunity to ask Dulse about Poipole and Naganadel. They act more like regular Pokémon than the other Ultra Beasts do, but they are still Ultra Beasts by the very nature of the aura that surrounds them when they battle. In Ultra Beast classification, Poipole is known as Sticky, and Naganadel as Stinger. Which makes sense, from what I know of them.”

“I never knew that.”

“Well, you learn something new every day.” Hau poked her in the shoulder; Moon stuck out her tongue in response.

Olivia smiled at them. “UB ought-ten, or Assembly, is a fairly recent discovery. I believe that Hala and Ilima faced one as a team— it was a joint effort to take it down. And on the heels of ought-ten, Interpol discovered UB ought-eleven, aka Burst. That was only a couple of years ago.”

“How do you know all this?”

Her smile went suddenly dry. “Nanu still gets information packets from Interpol headquarters,” she informed them. “They are... relevant, to him. Like you, Moon, he is one of the few survivors of a Nihilego poisoning; and he has also been to Ultra Space in the course of his work with Interpol. For his own safety, he has kept himself up-to-date on knowledge of the Ultra Beasts.”

“Why wouldn't he be safe without them?”
Olivia went suddenly still. “Was this not explained to you?”

“What?”

The kahuna closed her eyes and sighed, reaching up to rub at her temples. “Nobody,” she murmured under her breath, “does their job around here. Not a single person.”

Moon glanced nervously at Hau, but he simply shrugged.

Olivia sighed again. “You are what's known as a Faller,” she said simply. “Ultra Space may seem quite simple to you, but that is because you accessed it with the aid of Legendary Pokémon, who may... bend some of the laws of the universe to fit their whims. Most people who access Ultra Space must do without, and are often left worse for wear when they return. It's one of the primary reasons why Nanu is the way he is. Something happened in Ultra Space a long time ago, something he refuses to discuss with any of us. I only know that much because I approached Interpol to request information on his behalf... but my point is this. Any person who enters Ultra Space is left with a permanent aura. It is similar to the Ultra Beast aura, but obviously it doesn't affect humans in the same way as it does Pokémon. Ultra Beasts are drawn to that aura. They can smell it on you. So a Glutton arrived in Alola, and it didn't just happen to appear on Ula'ula Island. It smelled Nanu, who was the only Faller in Alola at the time. It targeted him. If more Ultra Wormholes were to be opened in the same way, you and everyone else who has been to Ultra Space would be targeted as well.”

“So— me, Lillie, Gladion, Guzma, and Lusamine?”

“Correct. The Ultra Megalopolans should have told you about this. It's vital that you are aware of your status as a Faller, in the event that Ultra Beasts visit Terra again.”

For a few long moments they were silent. Ulu took the opportunity to glide over to the table.

“Are you enjoying everything?” he inquired.

“It's all delicious, thank you.” Olivia

“Can I get you any desserts or refills on your drinks?”

Moon glanced at Hau, shaking her head; he shook his head as well.

“No,” said Olivia. “If you could bring me the check, however, I would appreciate that.”

“We can split—”

“I will absolutely not hear of it, and I'm too tired to argue with you.” Olivia laughed. “I am paying, no matter what you say. The check comes to me, Ulu.”

“Yes, Kahuna Olivia.” Ulu grinned, shrugging semi-apologetically at Moon. “Sorry, I know what side my bread is buttered on.”

It was the opening for a conversation, but Moon didn't want to take it so she merely nodded. He seemed a bit disappointed by this. Hau, mercifully, waited until he was out of earshot to begin laughing.

“Shut up, it's not funny!” hissed Moon, smacking him on the shoulder.

“Are you kidding me? It's hysterical. You're so awkward. I'm totally texting Gladion about this.”
“Could you maybe let me do that first?”

“What for?”

“I’d rather he heard that someone was trying to flirt with me from me, not you. I’m not embarrassed about telling him; we’re just busy and it’s rude to text when you’re having dinner with someone.”

“Okay, that's fair.”

Ulu brought the check, and Olivia paid with a generous tip added on; it was not until they were outside, a few yards away from the restaurant door, that things got really awkward.

“Um, hey! Kahuna Olivia? Can I talk to your friend real quick?”

Olivia turned around, as did Moon and Hau. It was Ulu, still wearing his apron and a rather shifty grin.

“Hey,” he said to Moon, bringing one hand up to the back of his head. “Listen, I know it's kind of weird, but, uh... you're really cute, and Mallow said you're good people. I was wondering if, uh, you maybe wanted to go out for coffee sometime?”

He was a little pink in the face by the time he finished, and there were people watching the exchange with curiosity in their eyes. Moon was dying on the inside.

“Um,” she stuttered, feeling her face grow hot. “It's not that there's anything wrong. With, um—with you. I'm sure you're very nice. But I'm not, um. Interested. And also I have a boyfriend, so. Yeah.”

There was a long pause. She couldn't meet Ulu's gaze, but she didn't really need to. The disappointment radiating from him was almost tangible.

“Oh,” he said finally. “Uh. Sorry 'bout that. I'll just, uh. Go back inside now.”

Moon nodded once, still unable to look him in the eye. She watched his feet disappear as he left her field of vision, and heard the squeak and jingle of the restaurant door as it closed.

“Hey, Moon,” said Hau. “Quick question: was that as painfully awkward to experience as it was to watch?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely. Let's go find Aloraichium Z, please.”

It turned out that Aloraichium Z was in Konikoni City's famous lighthouse. It was kept at the top of the lighthouse, and the Totem Alolan Raichu that lived up there, Olivia informed them, used Electric-type moves boosted by its Totem aura to light up the parent crystal and provide the lighthouse with light. The lighthouse keeper was a cheerful, roly-poly old man who laughed every time he spoke and let them pass without argument.

The Totem was simply sitting on the floor of the light-room— and it was drawing. Moon was surprised to see sheets of paper tacked everywhere on what walls there were— clumsy stick-figure drawings and colorful scribbles framed everything in the room. It was all done in thick, chunky crayon.

“Hello, little one,” said Olivia warmly to Totem A ori Raichu. “Could we have one of your crystals? It's a favor for a friend— we won't be using them.”
The Totem sat up, looking at each of them with curious, serene eyes. Then it blinked, and a foreign image abruptly rushed to Moon's eyes.

She had seen Uila's memories before, as well as Hero's. Hero's vision tended to be in infrared, with a reddish tint to everything; Uila's was on a brownscale, coloring everything in different shades of brown, tan, and white. This was more like Uila's memory, but there were more colors in it.

It was the three of them— Moon, Hau, and Olivia— standing tall and looking down at the Raichu. Olivia was suffused in a blindingly pink aura, which was probably the power of Tapu Lele that aided her in kahunaship. Hau's colors were a little odd; he had subtle sparks of orange and gold, with several cloudy messes at his head and his heart. Moon didn't have any explanation for it, but it seemed right.

Her own colors were what confused her. She could see gold, pink, red, and violet; and that meant influence from all four Tapus, didn't it? They had chosen her for something, so that made sense. But there were other colors, too. A soft electric blue that played about her wrists and ears; white at her head and heart; speckles of green and orange near her fingertips and the toes of her shoes; and deep, dark navy that settled over and around her shoulders like a cape.

“W-what the hell,” she managed, blinking; the image faded into nothingness. “Why did I look like that?”

“Like what?”

“Raichu sent me some kind of, I dunno, image? It was the three of us, but we looked really weird and colorful.”

“I'll bet it was,” murmured Olivia dryly. “I would guess that your status as a Faller and your interactions with various legendary Pokémon lend some strangeness to the arrangement, wouldn't you think?”

“I guess so.” The explanation made sense, so she turned to face Totem Raichu once more. “Do I have to battle you for the crystal, or can I just take it?”

Totem Raichu studied her for a few moments in silence; then it shrugged, waved a paw at the large chunk of crystal sitting at the center of the lighthouse. Moon took this as a “whatever” and went over to the rock, looking for a little shard she could break off and fit into the Z-Ring. It was a deep gold color, with a glare that reflected magenta in some lights.

“Thanks.” Moon reached out and broke a chunk off the crystal. It took a bit of doing, but she wedged it into her Z-Ring with a satisfying click. “I guess that's that, then?”

“Um.” Hau stepped forward, a nervous expression on his face— which was unusual, for him. “So, you probably didn't mind Moon taking one for Necrozma, right? Because she isn't using it.”

The Raichu nodded once.

“But, um— I actually do train a Raichu.” Hau slowly pulled out Uila's Pokéball, clearly telegraphing his movements; he let Uila out and the two Raichu stared at each other. “So if you don't mind, I would like to have one of your crystals as well. But since it's for me and Uila, you probably want us to battle you, right?”

Raichu nodded and stood, hopping onto its tail-board and hovering in mid-air as Alolan Raichu did. Moon and Olivia quickly got out of the way, retreating to the opening of the lighthouse stairwell as Hau and Uila faced off against Totem Raichu.
Naturally, as the Pokémon were identical, they had some shared moves. Both seemed to know better than to use any Electric-type moves; it wouldn't do much. They both had Psychic, and began with that; but it too had less of an effect than Hau liked, judging by the little frown creasing his eyebrows.

The Totem reared up and attacked with Focus Blast, which wasn't terribly effective but still spelled bad news for Uila in terms of sheer power. Uila tumbled backwards, landing on his backside with a surprised expression.

The two Raichu gazed at each other for a moment.

“Uila,” said Hau softly. “Use Dig.”

“Oh, brilliant,” whispered Moon appreciatively. Olivia nodded next to her, eyes fixed on the battle.

Uila vanished, as all Pokémon did with Dig; and that was fine because Focus Blast required a cooldown time. It made sense for the Totem to have Focus Blast in the first place, decided Moon; it was a good counter for Dark-types, which were one of Alo-Raichu's main threats.

The Totem was just barely faster than Uila, but in this instance that was to its detriment. It looked around, sniffing the air. Dig (as well as similar moves Dive and Fly) technically didn't work for indoor battles, or battles that for whatever reason didn't take place on the ground; but it did produce a sort of pocket-dimension, into which a Pokémon could vanish and not take a hit while they prepared the attack. The Totem seemed to be trying to find Uila's pocket-dimension, and eventually it launched a Psychic into mid-air which fizzled out when it found no target.

“Now, Uila!”

Dig, of course, was super-effective; the Totem fell as Uila appeared from nowhere, slamming into it with all the strength he could muster. It was a defeat, judging by the way the Totem merely sat up and nodded once at Hau. It rolled back across the floor to where it had left its crayons and paper and in the process struck both Moon and Hau with a fit of the giggles.

“I think Aloraichium is yours for the taking,” remarked Olivia. “That was a fine battle, Hau. You've come a long way since you challenged me. It's been a privilege to watch you grow as a Trainer; and I know that Hala is very proud of you.”

Hau simply stared at her, wide-eyed; but his lower lip twitched before he swallowed heavily and nodded. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “That means a lot, Kahuna Olivia.”

“You're welcome. Now, I have to get going, but you can show yourselves out, can't you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Fantastic. I'll let Sergei know that the Totem needs some healing on my way out.”

She was gone before they could bid her a proper farewell. It occurred to Moon that Olivia had probably put off a number of important things to have late-lunch-slash-early-dinner with them, and was now probably even more stressed.

“She is seriously the best.”

“Yeah,” agreed Hau, breaking a small chunk of Aloraichium Z off the large crystal deposit. He got out a Hyper Potion to heal Uila and switched Electrium Z for Aloraichium Z, checking his Pokédex.
“Huh,” he said, after a few moments. “That's weird. It doesn't show up as being compatible with any of Uila's moves.”

“Rai,” called the Totem, looking up.

“What's that?”

Alo-Raichu sighed, rather aggressively; then it rolled over again and hopped up onto its tail to glide across the room, jabbing its paw at one of the drawings tacked up onto the wall.

The drawing consisted of a golden blob standing on a smaller golden blob, which Moon assumed was the Raichu itself. Bright scribbles of light blue radiated outward from it, as well as pink and gold dots.

“What does this mean?” Moon asked.

Raichu sighed again and turned around, gliding back over to the crystal deposit. It sat on top and pointed its paw out the window.

Its hair stood on end, and the thrum of the Totem-aura was almost deafening in Moon's ears.

“Rai... chu!”

Blue lightning snapped violently out from Raichu's paw, fractaling out into the open air. Moon heard a few shrieks from below, in the park below Konikoni City.

“Oh,” said Hau faintly. “So— Thunder?”

Raichu shook its head.

“Thunderbolt?”

A nod, this time.

“Maybe it's just not recorded into the Pokédex yet,” offered Moon. “I bet once you use it, it will show up.”

“That's a thought.” Hau brightened up, turning to grin at Moon. “Shall we get going, then?”

“Absolutely. After seeing how tired Olivia is, I would like to just lie down and sleep for a week.”

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

**BOSS**: hey moon would u tell them the thing

**rapunzel**: What thing?

**Lunarbean CEO**: Hey Lillie, just letting you know that your boyfriend is the WORST
BOSS: :/

rapunzel: Without further evidence, I'm going to have to disagree with you on principle.

BOSS: :)

rapunzel: <3

BOSS: <3

pedantic: Must you really?

BOSS: until moon tells u guys the thing i will b gross n annoying. sorry not sorry

Lunarbean CEO: *SIGHS VERY LOUDLY*

BOSS: thas a lil bit passive-aggressive

pedantic: There was nothing passive about that.

Lunarbean CEO: What Hau wants me to tell you is that we had lunch-slash-dinner with Olivia today and the waiter tried to flirt with me and I turned him down and it was extremely awkward.

BOSS: BOO

BOSS: u somehow managed 2 take all the fun out of the story

Lunarbean CEO: THERE WAS NOTHING FUN ABOUT IT, I HATED EVERY SECOND OF THAT INTERACTION AND LOW-KEY WANTED TO LIGHT MYSELF ON FIRE

rapunzel: ^Me about most social interactions, honestly.

pedantic: ^^

BOSS: luckily 4 all of u, i predicted this exact scenario

BOSS: so i caught this amazing interaction on film

Lunarbean CEO: OMG YOU DID NOT

BOSS: i totally did lmao

Lunarbean CEO: DELETE IT

Lunarbean CEO: PLEASE I AM BEGGING YOU WITH MY OWN TEN FINGERS, TWO HANDS, AND MORTIFIED BRAIN

BOSS: either i post it here, or i send it to lillie n gladion in our private chats

BOSS: or if ur like rlly rlly RLLY uncomfortable with it obvs i wont share it but like it's funny. & u were v v cute. gladion u will appreciate it.

Lunarbean CEO: ...
rapunzel: I have to admit that I am rather intrigued by this description.

Lunarbean CEO: BETRAYAL

Lunarbean CEO: Gladion please tell me you're on my side.

pedantic: Unfortunately for you, Hau has spoken the magic words— albeit with questionable spelling.

pedantic: I quote: “& u were v v cute. gladion u will appreciate it.”

pedantic: I mean, I'm sold.

Lunarbean CEO: Ugh all three of you are figuratively the WORST

BOSS: update: we r in lil singleton rooms at the Pokémon Center so i went 2 check on Moon. she isnt actually mad @ any of us, shes just like a lil bit embarrassed

BOSS: and she said i could post it, so here u go

BOSS: obvs this does not leave this chat

BOSS: Video Attachment: [VID003.mov]

rapunzel: ...Oh my god that WAS actually really cute??!!?!!?!

Lunarbean CEO: Nooooooo it was awful

rapunzel: You were so polite though! You did absolutely nothing wrong, you were just a little flustered.

pedantic: Exactly how fucking old is this guy?

Lunarbean CEO: Olivia said he's twenty-six, and I am low-key squicked out by that

pedantic: Do you want me to punch him or something?

pedantic: I could also break his kneecaps.

Lunarbean CEO: No lmao

Lunarbean CEO: I already shot him down, let the poor guy live

pedantic: I have no pity for him, but I suppose I don't actually need to pay attention to the sudden homicidal instinct that manifested when I saw the stupid-ass grin on his stupid-ass face.

BOSS: omg

rapunzel: ...No comment.

Lunarbean CEO: I appreciate that you're protective, but you're coming on kinda strong there.

pedantic: ...
pedantic: You are correct. I apologize.

Lunarbean CEO: Like it's a very sweet instinct!!! Protectiveness and chivalry and wanting to be of service and all that.

Lunarbean CEO: But maybe like, not an appropriate response. Yeah.

pedantic: Clearly, I've found some new things to discuss with my therapists.

pedantic: I used my own words, but the possessiveness and jealousy are definitely something I've inherited from my egg donor, and I'm going to have to work on that.

pedantic: It was also massively sexist of me to act threateningly toward someone I saw as competition. That isn't fair to you.

pedantic: I'm sorry.

Lunarbean CEO: First of all, there is ZERO competition

Lunarbean CEO: Secondly you are really good at apologizing and you should know that, because it's a skill that very few people have

Lunarbean CEO: Like you actually admit to everything you've done wrong and you make sure that both your regret and your intent to change are communicated??!?!?!

Lunarbean CEO: So like, one hundred and fifty percent forgiven.

Lunarbean CEO: And lastly, the fact that you're referring to Lusamine as your “egg donor” has just absolutely made my day, that is HYSTERICAL thank you

BOSS: & here, folks, we have 1 of the finest exhibits of #relationshipgoals in the entirety of alola. possibly the whole world.

rapunzel: I don't know if I've ever seen such healthy communication in my entire life.

pedantic: You can both shove it where the sun doesn't shine.

rapunzel: And it's back to your regularly scheduled programming.

BOSS: LMAO

Lunarbean CEO: We're going to go have great communication skills in our private chat, BYE

BOSS: ooh, sounds kinky

Lunarbean CEO: NO

pedantic: NO

rapunzel: Hau...

BOSS: yes babe? light of my life, apple of my eye?

rapunzel: ... no.
Okay not to be nosy but I actually have more questions that are related to your actual relationship.

1. How did you meet? Full story, leave nothing out, I want all the cute, gross shit.

2. What is the cutest thing he's ever done?

3. Describe his Pokémon team. Like you told us about the chimera one and that is very interesting, but you also said he currently has five teammates so we want to know about the other four too.

4. What does he want to do with his life? What job and/or college degree does he want to pursue?

5. Why is he going to do a gym challenge in Kanto instead of an island challenge like you? (if this falls under “secret” or “none of my business” you can say so, it's cool)

6. What are his hobbies? What does he do for fun?

7. What TV shows and movies does he like and what books does he read? (He has to read books if he's dating you, obviously.)

8. Does he do sports or any kind of athletic exercise-y pursuit besides the usual physical exertion of being a traveling Pokémon Trainer?

9. If he's a quiet introvert and you're... uh, you, what do you talk about?

10. What foods does he like, and does he have any allergies? (This is important for planning when we will obviously be inviting him to dinner and interrogating him, as good older brothers do.)

11. Have you guys talked about Important Things like where you are in the relationship and whether/when you're going to be intimate and so on? Communication is important.

12. Have you guys talked about deep philosophical shit and morality? That is also important because if you don't communicate about where your values differ you're going to fight a LOT.

13. When is exactly his birthday? You said April, and if that's when he's in Kanto then we'll have to get him some things and possibly throw a party.
14. Does he have any outstanding criminal warrants or an arrest record?

15. Is he a good boyfriend? Does he treat you well? Do you feel safe with him?

16. Have you told him about us and that we're together? Does he support people who are LGBTQ+? (I don't think you would date someone who didn't support that, but you can never be sure.)

17. And finally, most importantly: do you see this lasting for a long time? Or is it just like, the excitement of being with someone for the first time? Think about that carefully, Moon; you don't want to give away too much of your heart if you don't think it will be forever.

Love, Blue

P.S. Some of these are ridiculously invasive. You don't have to answer them. —Red

P.P.S. >:( —Blue

P.P.P.S. Ignore him, he's being a nosy brat. Love you. —Red

Chapter End Notes

Olivia is going THRU it right now tbh

PLEASE NOTE that Mallow's brother in this story has literally nothing in common with Mallow's brother in the anime! thx for reading

The Boneyard is also the name of where the hyenas from The Lion King live. This is definitely on purpose.

Only a few legendaries are immortal and/or one of a kind. However, there's some that are like... you can really only have one at once, but I would hesitate to say they're immortal.

Olivia making poor food choices because she's stressed out— literally me

Moon Doesn't Know How To Deal With People Finding Her Attractive And it's Totally Not Based On My Own Lack Of Experience On This Subject Or Anything Why Would You Think That

Disclaimer: I'm probably not super qualified to comment on this, because I have not personally experienced it in real life. However, from what I understand, people of color (like Moon) often experience racism from fairer-skinned Asians (Kantonians, for story purposes). Colorism is definitely a thing and it's important to recognize as a more complex form of racism.

Not gonna lie, I usually forget the stuff about Fallers and Ultra Space travel because this fic is primarily based on USUM and not SuMo lao

ohhh oh my god poor Ulu lao... mostly I just like to watch Moon suffer :)
Totem Alo-Raichu spending all its days in the lighthouse coloring with crayons is a Mood

Dig has no logical explanations for indoor/not on the ground battles. Dive has no logical explanations for dry-ground battles. Fly has no logical explanation inside caves or in a sandstorm. I have decided that they are essentially the same move (with different typing) and if Dig can't use the earth or Dive can't use water or Fly can't use the open air without some kind of barrier, then the move automatically creates a sort of pocket dimension for the Pokémon to hide in. It's kind of like when you have your Sneak stat maxed out in Skyrim and you crouch and suddenly NOBODY can see you (so obviously you pickpocket everyone in town and then take to the shadows and stealth-archer your way through all dungeons because Bethesda made any build other than stealth-archer extremely unfucking rewarding).

Writing passive-aggressive Totem Alo-Raichu showing Hau how to use Aloraichium Z made me giggle

HELLO CHATFIC MY OLD FRIEND

“Unfortunately for you, Hau has spoken the magic words— albeit with questionable spelling. I quote: ‘& u were v v cute. gladion u will appreciate it.’ I mean, I'm sold.” — sjksjksa Gladion why are you like this

I think that men feeling protective of women comes from an admirable place, on the whole. Like as a concept, protecting people you love is a Very Good Thing!!!! But any behavior that has its roots in placing women on a pedestal is, well, inherently sexist. It's just as sexist as reducing a woman to a sex object. I've had Gladion rescue Moon in a lot of ways in this series— mostly because Moon is an idiot who gets herself into trouble lmao but I've taken GREAT pains to make sure that Gladion doesn't treat her differently because of it. I prefer to write healthy and equal relationship dynamics, thank you very much. This instance is an anomaly, produced by what I like to call “the lizard brain.” It's an instinctive reaction to feel a bit uncomfortable when someone is interested in your significant other. Some people aren't uncomfortable with this, and that is fine and awesome. But most people don't like it and since Gladion's never HAD a significant other before he's not sure how to react and, as I think most people would, he sort of defaults to feeling insecure and jealous. There's also an element of Moon appearing to be uncomfortable as well, which Gladion Does Not Like. So he's reacting to that too. And Moon very gently calls him out on it, and he immediately realizes what he is doing and makes a thorough apology and a promise to change!!!! Which is how you should always respond if someone tells you that you've said or done something sexist/racist/otherwise problematic thank you for listening to my TEDtalk!!!!!

“Egg donor” as a term to distance Lusamine from her role as “mother” is something I've only seen on r/raisedbynarcissists but I'm sure it exists in other places. and we all know that Gladion and Lillie's real mom is Wicke anyway *cough* I mean what, who said that

It might look like I'm writing Blue in a very “Confident Gay Best Friend” fashion in terms of personality, but I promise I'm not reducing him to a stereotype and he is actually much more nuanced!!! we just haven't had very much interaction with him that's all

Blue: I just want to make sure you're using protection—
Red: literally shut the fuck up you are so NOSY
A closet never pierced with crystal eyes

Chapter Summary

Mount Hokulani
***************

Moon hires a publicist, eats noodles, and spends some time talking with her boyfriend.

Chapter Notes

Tumblr: joonieperntree.tumblr.com (mostly a BTS stan account because I purple them)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: invitations sent by request, comment to get one!!!

Chapter Title: Sonnet 46, William Shakespeare

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We've got an invitation to get dinner with Molayne and Sophocles, ,” said Moon, waving her phone at Hau. “I want to pick their brains about the desert, and some other things as well maybe. Do you want to come with?”

To her surprise, he shook his head. “My family's flying up to visit Gram, and I want to go with them,” he explained. “You can let me know how it went later.”

They parted ways at the Hokulani Pokémon Center. Moon headed over to the noodle shop that she had frequented with her mother and Lillie the last time she'd been here— it had only been a couple of months ago but it felt like longer. And it was a winter evening— already dark out, which made everything different. It was actually cold, presumably because they were on the top of a mountain; she was wearing leggings under jeans and two pairs of socks to compensate for the fact that she had left all of her cold-weather gear in storage back at her home on Melemele. Part of her wished she could just stay at the Pokémon Center and not go out into the cold; but the noodle shop was where they had agreed to go.

And she didn't want to stay at the Hokulani Pokémon Center, not when it reminded her— softly, achingly— of little Horatio; but she didn't really have any other options.

Moon got to the noodle shop first. It was mostly empty, but she went to find a corner booth with the thought that Sophocles, like Gladion, was an introvert and would probably prefer it. The teenagers working behind the counter glanced at her, then at each other.

“I'm waiting for friends,” she called cheerfully, to reassure them. “Totally not squatting.”

“That's fine,” said one of them— a tall girl with mousy hair and wide eyes. “Um— this might be kind of a rude question, but, uh— you're Moon Hawkins, right?”

Moon blinked at her a couple of times. “Yeah, I am. Why do you ask?”
“I knew it!” said the girl triumphantly, turning to smack at the arm of the boy next to her; he scowled and rubbed his arm. “You were in the kahuna ceremony video for Kahuna Hapu, and in that article that the Alola Announcer posted on their website!”

“The what now?”

“The— Alola Announcer?” The boy raised one eyebrow at her. “Like, Alola's celebrity news and pop culture e-magazine?”

“I spend like, zero time on the Internet,” Moon informed them. “I lived in Kanto before I moved here and I didn't use social media, so I still don't use it. And I'm not subscribed to any newspapers or magazines, electronic or otherwise.”

“Oh my god, that explains so much actually,” said the girl. She sounded sympathetic. “A lot of people have been wondering why you never respond to news about yourself— most people do, if they get featured. Sometimes it's negative press and they have to refute it, but the Announcer tries pretty hard to feature positive and negative news equally so sometimes they'll write about someone and the someone gives them a shout-out or whatever.”

“I'm guessing you're a fan.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Well, not exactly. But like, the official news channel doesn't cover anything that isn't super high-profile or official. Like, they covered Kahuna Hapu's ceremony video, and they'll interview kahunas and trial captains. And they're doing consistent coverage on the Pokémon League— they've got a deal with Professor Kukui about doing some kind of League Challenge livestream feed, like what other regions have.”

“Nice.”

“But they don't really discuss up-and-coming Trainers or people of interest who aren't kahunas or trial captains, so it's the only source of news we've got for people like you, or Miss Kahili. Sometimes the journalists can be really obnoxious, but I don't think they've ever done anything illegal.”

Moon folded her fingers together on the table. “I am,” she said carefully, “a person of interest to a celebrity gossip magazine?”

“Celebrity news,” corrected the girl. “The Alola Announcer does not publish anything that has not been strictly fact-checked, with credible sources. Since you haven't gotten in touch with them to discuss anything, all they publish is videos or basic information. All we know is that you were in the kahuna ceremony video and that you were sighted at the Aether Paradise a couple of weeks ago with an unknown medical condition; and then there's your super-impressive battle record as well. The speculation happens in the comments, and it's because you're a mystery to begin with.” She hesitated. "I mean, the speculation is kind of encouraged by the journalists. Which is kind of unethical. But it never happens in the actual articles."

“Huh.”

Moon had moved away from Kanto, where her two best friends were consistently the subjects of celebrity gossip articles as well as official news reports. She had actually been an extremely minor celebrity because of it. It was interesting that here in Alola, she was now a minor celebrity for her own merits. Blue would have said it was ironic, which was factually incorrect because he didn't understand the concept of irony; but at the very least the coincidence was amusing.
“I probably should talk to them, then,” she sighed.

“Are you going to challenge the League?” asked the boy.

“Yep.”

“You should let us tell them!” The girl practically vibrated with excitement. “You can be a mysterious figure until you challenge the League. It's a good story.”

“Do you want to be a reporter?” Moon inquired, amused.

“Yeah,” admitted the girl, flushing. “Obviously, you can do what you want, you know. But, um— I just like stories and news, and stuff like that.”

She wasn't all that much younger than Moon, but then again Moon had been feeling a lot older since she'd gotten back from Ultra Space. And she'd also always been quite mature for her age.

“Tell you what,” she said finally. “Come here and take a selfie with me— both of you, if you want. You can send that to the magazine and tell them that you met me in a noodle shop and I was very nice or very mysterious or whatever it is you want to tell them. I will back you up on it, no matter what you say.”

“What if we just straight-up lied and said you were a heinous bitch?” inquired the boy, but he was already walking out from behind the counter.

“Vanya! We are not doing that.”

Moon shrugged. “I'd still back you up. I have a couple of friends who are pretty famous, and the press have been dicks to them sometimes. So low-key, I'm okay with fucking with the press at any given time.”

“We're not doing that,” repeated the girl. She looked a little upset. “We're not saying that you were anything but nice to us, because that's the truth.”

“As long as the press here is nice and respectful, I will do my best to keep my general fuckery very low-key. Like wearing the same outfit every time I'm in public so that people can't get pictures of me in different clothes. Or just, I dunno, putting on one of those inflatable Tyrantrum costumes when I'm going to the Pokémon Center to get groceries. Okay, selfie time.”

They both smiled for the picture, and Moon put up two fingers in a peace sign. The girl snapped the picture, though her hands were just a little bit shaky.

Moon studied her. “Listen,” she said, crossing her arms. “You want to be a reporter, right?”

“Yeah, I just said that.”

“Do you want to work for this magazine specifically, or would you be happy anywhere?”

“I dunno.”

“Are you totally set on the idea of being a reporter specifically, or would you be okay with a different job related to gathering, organizing, and distributing news?”

The girl blinked at her a couple of times. “I— think that would be okay?”

“Are you planning on attending college?”
“I thought I'd do an island challenge first,” said the girl. She looked a little flustered; Moon didn't blame her. “But yeah, I want to go to school for journalism. That's not for a couple of years, though.”

“Awesome. And what's your name?”

“C-Caroline.” Her eyes were huge in her face.

“Caroline what?”

“Palmer.”

Moon nodded. “Well, Caroline Palmer, I tell you what. I have plans, I have super big huge plans. I'm aiming to become Alola's Champion. It will be a lot of work, but if there's anything I can do it's work. Once I'm the Champion, I'm going to have to deal with a whole lot of crap. I think there will be people employed by the Pokémon League who will do most of that for me, but they won't be responsible for things like media appearances, press interviews, and all that kind of thing which is definitely, one hundred percent your area and not mine. Since you like that kind of thing and I really don't, I'll pay you to deal with it for me.”

Both Caroline's mouth and Vanya's fell open, the latter turning to look at Caroline with an impressed expression.

“U-um,” managed Caroline, after a few moments. Her voice sounded rather strangled. “Um. Oh my god. Why me?”

“Because you're nice,” said Moon patiently. “And if you've got exclusive access to me, then the media people have to go through you if they want to talk to me. That gets your name in the door, with like connections and stuff. You benefit by getting references and networking, and I benefit by letting you take care of scheduling all my publicity crap and just showing up when I have to.”

“I— I'm literally sixteen, I don't know if I can—”

“I'm literally eighteen.” Moon paused. “I interrupted you. That was rude, sorry. But you're on social media more often than I am anyway, so you've got a much better grasp on the job already than I ever will.”

Caroline reached for her arm and grasped the skin about halfway between elbow and wrist, pinching hard. “Ow,” she said. “Ow, oh my god this is real I'm not dreaming.”

“Seriously,” said Moon, pulling Rotom out of her pocket and tossing it into the air. “Give Rotom your contact information. I will literally ask you for help with everything, I am an idiot about publicity.” Rotom zoomed over to Caroline, and Moon laughed softly at the bug-eyed expressions that both Caroline and Vanya made when they realized it was a Rotom-Dex.

The door opened, with a soft ring of the bell; Molayne strode in confidently, followed by Sophocles who slouched with his hands in his pockets.

“Hi, over here.” Moon waved at them.

“Hey there, Trainer Hawkins,” drawled Molayne, letting Sophocles slide into the corner seat across from Moon before settling down next to him. “And how are you on this fine evening?”

“I'm doing great. I just hired a publicist, for when I become the Champion.”
“That's a bold statement to make. Who'd you hire?”

“Caroline,” said Moon, indicating the girl who was whispering into Rotom's screen with a terrified expression on her face.

“She's only my age,” murmured Sophocles, a slight frown on his face.

“Literally who better than a teenage girl to manage my social media accounts and appearances, though?” Moon shrugged. “I figure I have to have like, a Spindagram or something if I become the Champion. Maybe Probobook. I might actually have one of those, though... I just never use it.”

Molayne regarded her for a few moments in silence. “All right,” he said finally. “Clearly, you're going to need a publicist, if you can't remember whether or not you have a social media account in this glorious day and age of technology.”

Moon eyed him flatly. “Thanks. Let's order our food.”

Rotom, having gained Caroline's contact information, zipped back over to Moon and tucked itself into her pocket as they approached the counter.

“Hi, Mr. Parker. Hi, Captain Sophocles,” said Vanya. “Hi, Trainer Hawkins. What can we get for you?”

“I would like lo mein in the largest serving size you have available,” said Molayne grandly. “And a small soft drink. I will be paying the whole tab.”

“You don't have to,” protested Moon. “Everybody's been paying for my food lately, but I can definitely afford it.”

“Consider it our thanks for not letting our moon get eaten by a known destroyer of worlds,” said Molayne, without even blinking. “Soffy, you want the usual?”

Sophocles nodded.

“Medium soft drink, medium bowl of ramen, medium bowl of pho, and small bowl of japchae.” Molayne glanced at Moon. “And you?”

She tried to stare him down, but Molayne was unnervingly good at staring people down and she ended up looking away, oddly embarrassed. “Medium soft drink and a large bowl of jjajangmyeon.”

Molayne paid, and they went back to Moon's chosen corner table. Sophocles jammed himself into the corner again, hunching over and staring at the table. Molayne, on the other hand, seemed relaxed.

“Can I challenge you for Mina's trial after we eat?” Moon asked Sophocles.

“Wha-? Oh, sure.” His ears went red. “Molayne said you wanted to, so that's fine. And Hau, too?”

“He might do it tomorrow. His family came up and they're visiting his grandmother.”

“It really is a pity,” mused Molayne. “Sammy Akiona was once my favorite teacher at the Trainers' School on Melemele Island. But everyone gets old eventually, and some people are unlucky enough to get sick as well. Now, you also mentioned looking for Z-Crystals?”

His gaze was sharp and knowing. Moon swallowed. “Yeah. I guess you've heard about Necrozma
“Only after the fact, as her little hissy fit sent half a dozen UB-ought-sixes out to play in Malie Garden.”

“Those were... Blades, right?”

“Yes.” Molayne regarded her with somber eyes. “It was all we could do to keep the little buggers from getting out into the city. Can't imagine how hard it would have been if we'd had to deal with Necrozma as well.”

“Which is why Mo insisted on paying for dinner,” said Sophocles, in a surprising contribution to the conversation; when Moon glanced at him in surprise he went beet-red and hunched back into the corner.

“Liv gave me a heads-up about what you'd be asking about. Lycanium Z is a scary one to try and get to, but if anyone can do it I think you can. Anyone going with you?”

“Just Hau and our teams. Olivia said we should ride my Metagross.”

His eyebrow rose. “Oh, it's your Metagross now? I'd heard you caught it at some point but I didn't know you'd already evolved it.”

“Yeah. It saved my life when I got lost in the desert, so I decided to call it Hero.”

“In proper keeping with your literary theme, yes.” Molayne grinned. “But you've already talked about Lycanium with Liv. What else did you want to know about?”

“Giant bowl of lo mein and a small soft drink,” said Vanya, setting a dish that looked nothing quite so much like a soup tureen full of noodles down in front of Molayne. “Medium ramen, medium pho, small japchae, and medium soft drink. And large jjajangmyeon and medium soft drink. Anything else I can get for you?”

“I think we're good.” Vanya left, and Molayne turned to Sophocles. “I'll grab your soda if you want me to. What kind do you want?”

“Is it too late for Lanakila Dew?” said Sophocles meekly.

“Well, no— not if you want to be awake until two in the morning. I'll get caffeine-free if they have it but what do you want otherwise?”

The trial captain's face fell. “Oran berry is fine, I guess,” he murmured.

“Caffeine-free Dew if they have it, Oran berry if they don't. Will do.”

Moon followed Molayne over to the soft drink machine. “Is he okay?” she said quietly. “He seems really quiet today.”

“Believe it or not,” said Molayne, not bothering to lower his voice, “he's actually quite pleased with himself at the moment. He's always quiet.”

“Stop talking about me, Mo!” called Sophocles, but he didn't sound annoyed.

“I talk about whatever I find interesting, thank you very much!” retorted Molayne.

Moon filled her own cup with Nomel berry soda and followed Molayne back to the table. For a few
minutes they dug into their food, and then Moon cleared her throat.

“I've got a theory and I want to pick your brains about it.”

“It wouldn't be a visit with you if there were not any brain-picking,” said Molayne solemnly. “How can we help?”

“Do the Tapus have Z-Crystals?”

“Not as far as I know,” offered Sophocles, but he glanced at Molayne.

There was a pause, and then Molayne said absently, “You went to Tapu Fini's den.”

“You would know, since you edited it like one of those Red/Blue ship videos in the deep dark corners of the Internet.”

He laughed. “Guilty as charged, but Alola needed to be aware of the raging UST you had with Gladion. Are the two of you dating yet?”

Moon nodded, feeling a flush rise to her cheeks.

“I'll grill you about that later. Anyway, the point is that you've been to visit Tapu Fini already. Did you see anything like a Z-Crystal in the den itself?”

His voice was just a little too light, just a little too innocent; and Moon frowned at him, knowing he was pitching it that way on purpose to make her rethink the question.

“I technically saw a lot of things that could be a Z-Crystal,” she retorted. “You can find a lot of glowy rocks in an underwater cave, you know.”

He merely blinked at her.

“Wait.”

Another blink.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now.”

“Language,” said Molayne, mouth twitching with suppressed laughter. “Hapu is exactly the sort of person who would hide something in plain sight, isn't she? And it doesn't matter how many people grab Z-Crystals; there's only one Tapu Fini. So most of them have neither the knowledge nor the ability to use them.”

“There's only one Tapu Fini,” said Moon shrewdly. “But there are four Tapus, so... are there four Tapu Z-Crystals?”

“Now you're thinking,” said Molayne approvingly. “The Tapunium Z-Crystals are weird, though.”

“Why didn't I know about them?” said Sophocles, frowning.

“You're still in training. It's on the six-month agenda of Necessary Trial Captain Information,” said Molayne. “We're currently on about... oh, what is it, month three? Month four? So I would have told you in a couple of months anyway.”

“Oh.”
“Anyway, the Tapunium Z-Crystals are weird. Olivia and I are doing a little bit of research on it—haven't had much time to work on it lately with League prep and all, but we're studying data taken from stones in the Tapu's dens. We didn't actually take any stones so I can't offer them to you, but I can tell you what we've learned in pretty much one sentence.” He paused, raising one eyebrow and smirking at her. “All four of the Tapunium Z-Crystals are simultaneously the same crystal, and a completely different crystal.”

“Oh my god,” said Moon, resting her head on the table. “At this point you're trying to make my brain explode. Please stop.”

“But it's so fun.”

“How can they be the same crystal and also different crystals?” asked Sophocles.

“They're visually quite different from one another. Tapu-finium, for lack of a better word, is bright purple with light blue streaks, and it glows in the dark at night. Tapu-bulium is red and sandy brown. Liv says Tapu-lelium is a whole spectrum of pink. We haven't come across Tapu-konium; presumably it's got some yellow in it.” He took a sip of soda. “However, the stones are functionally identical. Four very different-looking rocks, but they have the same aura and presumably would all access the same Z-Move for a Tapu, should you be privileged enough to battle with one.”

Moon considered this. If the Tapunium Z-Crystals were functionally the same stone, would she still need all four of them to heal Necrozma? Or could she get away with just taking one? It was probably better to be safe and obtain all of them in advance, so she wouldn't have to go back and ask later.

“How do I approach Tapu Bulu and ask him for a Z-Crystal?”

“You don't,” said Sophocles immediately. “Not unless you wanna die.”

Molayne beamed at him, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “I have taught you well.” Sophocles scowled and batted his hand away, smoothing out his curls with a soft blush as Molayne turned back to Moon. “You ask Nanu. He'll have a word with the Tapu on your behalf.”

Moon hesitated. “Don't they have a... complicated history?”

“Yep,” said Molayne cheerfully. “But Tapu Bulu will understand it's going to a good cause, so he won't mind. At least, I don't think he will. Anything else you wanted to ask, Moon?”

“Would Solgaleo and Lunala have their own Z-Crystals, too?”

“That's a question better addressed to Solgaleo and Lunala themselves. You're acquainted with Lunala, given recent events.”

“Yeah, but she's going to be away for a while. Lillie said something about helping Ultra Megalopolis get their moons back.”

“I'm sure that in an emergency you could ask her to come back. And our Solgaleo might be able to help you too. He's pretty reclusive, but not nearly as crusty as Tapu Bulu.”

It was all the answers she was likely to get at this point. Moon took a deep breath and tried to let go of her questions and frustrations. Later, she told herself; and it mostly worked. There would always be things simmering at the back of her head, but they weren't urgent.

After dinner, Moon faced off against Sophocles for Mina's trial. Since he specialized in Electric-
types, she didn't start the battle off with Macbeth. It was Hero who took the lead this time, because
it had Bulldoze; and despite its slow speed and bulk Moon promptly swept all three of Sophocles' Pókémon— his ace Togedemaru, a Magnezone, and a Golem that was clearly Alolan due to the
dark-rock protrusions that formed a large magnet above its face as well as a moustache and
eyebrows.

Molayne nodded, an impressed expression on his face as he walked forward. “Nice one, Moon,” he
said. “Can I check out your Metagross? It's looking fantastic.”

“Knock yourself out,” said Moon, waving one hand at him. Hero submitted to the inspection,
eyeing Molayne with amusement.

“Um— here you go.” Sophocles, face beet-red, held out something small and yellow. “For Mina's
trial. I, um— you battled really well. I didn't even get one KO on you.”

Moon took the petal and resisted the urge to pat the trial captain on the head; that was
condescending, and it seemed like the privilege of a close relationship such as the one Sophocles
had with Molayne. “Thank you. I've worked hard to be able to do things like that, so please don't
feel bad or anything.”

That produced a smile— possibly the first she'd seen on Sophocles, as he always seemed to be
uncomfortable. “I don't feel bad,” he said, shaking his head. “I used to, when Mo was first training
me to become the trial captain. But when you're— um, when you're basically a teacher, you have to
get used to letting the hard work of others pay off. I wouldn't be a good trial captain if the Totems
were too difficult to defeat, or if I never let anybody win a battle.”

“So, you throw them?”

Sophocles shook his head fervently. “No, not at all. I've just, um... I learned to watch my
opponents, and decide at what point they've proved themselves. All the trial captains and kahunas
have to learn that. You pass a trial when the trial captain decides you're ready.”

Moon frowned. “Not by defeating the Totem?”

“Totems are a lot more powerful than you think they are,” called Molayne, from where he was
running a hand up and down Hero's chrome dome. “Totem Togedemaru, for instance, could short
out the entire town with ease— and they're known for nor being able to contain very much
electricity. Totem Vikavolt might be able to short out here and Malie City, which is the closest
electrical connection we have with anybody. The trial captain communicates with the Totem—
even if you don't see them at your Totem battle, they're still in contact with the Totem. The trial is
always designed to teach you a lesson, even if it's not the one you expect.”

Moon thought back to Kiawe and Alo-Marowak, and her first defeat. It seemed like long ago, but
she remembered that there had been a knowing look in his eyes when she had lost— almost as
though he had expected it. At first she was annoyed, but then she remembered: if she had not been
made to repeat the trial, she might never have spent that day training in the volcano park with
Gladion, and might never have gotten his phone number. Things might have worked out very
differently. The irritation was replaced with gratitude.

“That makes sense,” she said finally.

“And speaking of Totems being more powerful, you'd better make sure you're really, really well
prepared to go to the desert. The Lycanroc pack is scary stuff.” Sophocles had subsided into his
usual shyness, but at this he nodded in agreement with Molayne. “Anyway, that's enough about
training and trials. Thanks in large part to my superior video-editing skills, I believe you have a boyfriend.”

“Oh my god,” groaned Moon, but she couldn't quite prevent herself from smiling. “You are terrible.”

“He's liked you forever, you know.”

It occurred to Moon that Gladion had a separate relationship with Molayne and Sophocles than she did; and that they could probably provide her with more perspective about him. “What's he like to you?” she asked them, recalling Hero and healing her up.

“Oh, he's grumpy guts with us like he is with everyone else.”

“No, he's not,” corrected Sophocles, turning red once again when Moon looked at him. “He's just shy. Like me.”

“He's still meaner than you.”

Sophocles shook his head again. “He's only mean to you because you like to tease people.”

“That I do, kid. That I do.” Molayne ruffled Sophocles' hair again despite the scowl it earned him. “He is nice to you, though. I'll give him that. And to Ace.”

“Acenola?” Moon asked, because she'd heard the name a few times before.

“Molayne nicknames everyone,” said Sophocles, his voice monotone. “Nobody is safe.”

“Haven't nicknamed Moon yet, now have I?”

“You don't have to,” pointed out Moon, amused. “Moon is a nickname. My given name is Marion.”

Both of them blinked at her for a few seconds. “You really don't look like a Marion,” said Molayne finally.

“Duh. Why do you think I go by Moon?” Curiosity overtook her once more. “Does Gladion have a nickname?”

“I call him C4,” said Molayne, his face just a little too straight. “Bet you can't guess why.”

“I think I get the idea.”

“He hates it,” added Sophocles helpfully.

“Wow, you're sassy today,” snickered Molayne, reaching around to wrap an arm around Sophocles' shoulder. “Keep it up. I approve. Maybe your little Team Skull friend is rubbing off on you.”

“Mo!” Sophocles went a virulent shade of nearly-purple red, wrenching himself away from Molayne. “You said you wouldn't tease me about that!”

Moon hadn't been entirely sure that Molayne was capable of remorse, so she was surprised at the instant change of his expression into something rueful, a bit self-depreciating. “Ah, I forgot,” he murmured. “Sorry, Soffy— that was out of line.”

“Is it rude of me to ask who?” inquired Moon. “I know quite a few people from Team Skull.”
“Better not,” said Molayne apologetically, eyes fixed on Sophocles who was still blushing furiously, lower lip trembling. “I’ve already messed up, let’s not make it worse. We can go back to teasing you about Gladion.”

Moon lifted her chin. “There's not much to tease about,” she said loftily. “We are dating, and we like each other. That's pretty much it.”

“Oh, Moon.” Molayne shook his head, the rueful look transforming slowly into mischief. “When we got together with Nanu to help get rid of Foxglove’s shade, we learned pretty quick that he had a thing for you. You were part of the plan— as bait, since you still had remnants of Tapu Bulu's healing in you. And every time your name came up he would curl up a little bit, as though he were upset about it; but then sometimes he would smile when he heard it.”

Moon stared at him.

“We gave him a hard time about it—”

“You gave him a hard time about it,” muttered Sophocles venomously.

“I gave him a hard time about it,” agreed Molayne, nodding at Sophocles. “And after he said some things that were clearly designed to hurt my feelings, he sort of gave up on being angry or intimidating and just talked about you instead.”

“He said you were mad at him.” Sophocles's blush was still fading. “That he'd made a really big mistake, and he'd said some mean things to you.”

“And he said he missed you.” Molayne shook his head. “I don't know if I've ever seen someone quite that lovesick, before or since. So we took matters into our own hands—”

“You took matters into your own hands.”

“I took matters into my own hands, and I talked him into borrowing Nanu's old duster— the red one he wears when he has to go into the desert, which is literally almost never because Nanu avoids the Haina like the plague. And I helped him out with a couple of other things— styled his hair, made him all pretty for you.”

“Oh my god,” said Moon faintly.

“He said afterward that it was a waste because you thought you were hallucinating him or something anyway.”

“Oh my god.” She buried her face in her hands. “He's so— what the fuck, why is he so cute.”

“Wow,” said Sophocles quietly.

“Language,” said Molayne, a grin in his voice. “Funnily enough, he said the same thing about you.”

* * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically
**shook:** Picture Attachment: [Jjajangmyeon.jpeg]  

**brave heart:** I don't know who you're with, but a sweater pattern that ugly can only belong to Molayne.  

**shook:** Omg good guess!!! I had dinner with him and Sophocles and then I battled him for the petal thingy for Mina's trial  

**brave heart:** I've never had jjajangmyeon, what is it?  

**shook:** Noodles with a sauce made from black beans. VERY tasty  

**brave heart:** I'll have to try it sometime. Is that the noodle place on Hokulani?  

**shook:** Yep  

**brave heart:** We can go together.  

**brave heart:** If you want to?  

**brave heart:** I don't want to assume anything.  

**shook:** You are literally my boyfriend, you can assume lots of things.  

**shook:** Though speaking of you being my boyfriend, Molayne did have a very interesting story about an occasion where he styled your hair.  

**brave heart:** I'm actually going to fucking kill him, what the fuck.  

**shook:** Please don't kill him, it was entertaining and it made my heart hurt a little bit in a very nice way  

**brave heart:** ...  

**shook** changed **brave heart's** name to **painfully cute**  

**shook** Picture Attachment: [ChatnameChange.jpeg]  

**shook:** uwu  

**painfully cute:** I still don't know what that means, but okay.  

**painfully cute** Picture Attachment: [IMG072.jpeg]  

* * * Picture Attachment: IMG072.jpeg * * *
cactus changed adorkable's name to lemonade

* * * * *

shook: I do not object to this on principle, as I like lemonade

shook: But why

painfully cute: Lemonade is sweet and refreshing, but it makes you thirstier.

painfully cute: You always want more.

shook: I feel the need to inform you that I just shrieked and accidentally threw Rotom across the room

shook: He can levitate ofc so it was fine but like, DUDE

shook: I am devastated, you are so sweet and cute

shook: And I wish I didn't have to tell you this, but the word “thirsty” has a couple of different meanings and more than one of them apply here

painfully cute: Who said I didn't already know that?

painfully cute: From slangwords.com: “Thirsty: 1) too eager to get something or 2) desperate.”

shook: UM

shook: It also means like...

shook: ...you want to get laid.

painfully cute: “too eager to get something”

shook: I AM FEELING VERY ATTACKED RIGHT NOW

painfully cute: Picture Attachment: [IMG073.jpeg]

shook: WHY ARE YOU SENDING ME CUTE SELFIES

painfully cute: Obviously we're not physically at that point in our relationship. Is it possible to be emotionally thirsty?

shook: AKJLDSALKJLKA

painfully cute: I think so.

painfully cute: I miss you, sunshine.
“This is unexpected.”

“You're not like, busy or anything, right?”

“No, I'm done with therapy for the day. I was studying for the GED exam that I'm taking in two days, but I could use a break.”

“I would encourage you to study if I actually thought you needed to study, but we both know that you're definitely smart enough to pass it.”

“That's fair.”

“...”

“...”

“... so, um—I miss you, too. I was just having too many emotions to try and type them out.”

“It's a problem I experience frequently, when it comes to you.”

“Oh my god this is exactly what I'm talking about.”

“Sunshine—”

“Like somebody send help, I am dying here, you are making me feel so many things at once and it's just ugh.”

“Just ugh?”

“Just ugh. And like... it's all good things. Except for how I miss you, because I miss you a lot. But you're really good at compliments and you just—you're so you. And I lo-like that. I like it.”

“...”

“...”

“Sometimes, I wonder...”

“...”

“...”

“... wonder what?”

“I wonder what it is about— feelings. About how strongly they come. I think part of it is because I've been repressing a lot of things and therapy is good for letting those things out. I don't know how much I was pushing back my ability to feel things. But every time I talk to you, whether it's texting or calling or talking in person—it feels like I expand. I already have so many feelings, but somehow there's room for even more of them.”

“Oh my god, you put it into words. Literally same. I look at you and I think my heart is full, like it's going to explode. But there's always more room.”
“Perhaps healthy relationships make your heart grow, and unhealthy ones make it shrink. Not in a way that makes people in unhealthy relationships less capable of feeling things, but their feelings are distorted by the unhealthiness. It gets twisted.”

“That's about Lusamine, right?”

“Isn't it always?”

“No, not always.”

“...”

“...”

“My ability to feel has been severely impacted by the emotional and occasionally physical abuse I suffered at the hands of my egg donor. In a way, my feelings are always about her.”

“Maybe it feels like that right now, but it won't always. And I hope your feelings about me have nothing to do with her.”

“Oh, god, no.”

“Yeah, saying that out loud gave me the heebie-jeebies too. But like— sure, you've been hurt, but you're not irreparable. You're healing yourself, and you're shutting her out of it.”

“I don't want her anywhere near the things I feel now. I get so annoyed when it feels like she's impacted me in a wholly new way. Like... I just want her to leave me the fuck alone, and she's not even doing anything to me right now.”

“That must be frustrating.”

“It really is, god. Ugh... well, anyway. You're just at the Pokémon Center for the night, right?”

“... yeah.”

“...”

“...”

“... you okay, sunshine?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I almost never want to talk about this, but, um— I feel like I can trust you with it, if that makes sense?”

“You can tell me anything.”

“...”

“...”

“Thank you, Gladion.”

“Mm-hmm.”
“Um— give me a second. It's hard to talk about.”

“Take your time.”

“... so, um. Did Lillie ever tell you about how she got Esper?”

“No, actually. She mentioned in a text that she got a Cleffa, but I've never known the details.”

“Right. Um, so this was when Hero was stalking me, right? I was just like, training on Mount Hokulani, down in the tall grass and rocky parts. And Hero comes zooming up— it's still a Beldum at this point, by the way— and pulls on my leg. It's super distressed, making all kinds of noises. And then Hero does that Psychic-type mental projection thingy, and sent me this image of a bunch of Fearow attacking something.”

“They're vicious.”

“Damn right they are. So I followed Hero and it took me to where the Fearow were. There were only a couple of them left, so I yelled and scared them off. It was a Clefairy nest— they'd torn it apart.”

“Oh, Moon...”

“Y-yeah. The mama Clefairy was dead, and she was really young— like, underweight and probably only barely evolved from a Cleffa. And there were— I think three b-babies, plus some... you know, stuff, that made me think that there were probably a few more before the F-Fearow g-got to them—”

“Arceus fuck. Sunshine...”

“Y-yeah. At first I thought they were all, you know. Dead. But then one of them made a noise. He had a big gash down the middle, and he'd lost a lot of, of blood. I freaked out and called Lillie and Hau. Lillie told me to capture the baby, to stabilize him. So I did that. But, um. There was another Cleffa underneath. A female, and she was really tiny. Probably the runt of the litter. She wasn't hurt, because her brother had been protecting her. So, um— Hau and Lillie came down, and Lillie caught the female and we ran back up to the Pokémon Center. Hau stayed and buried the mama Clefairy and the other kits. And the nurse at the Pokémon Center did her best, she really— she tried so hard, and she was so nice about it. But, um. Horatio, he didn't. He didn't m-make it.”

“You named him?”

“Yeah. Horatio is the name of Hamlet's tutor. One of the only characters in Hamlet who isn't a complete idiot, to be honest. A-and— one of the only ones that survives to the end of the play. I was hoping he would— yeah. There was only a twenty percent chance. He lost a lot of blood. So it was, it wasn't likely that he would have.”

“Moon.”

“And he— I just— it was really hard at first. Because Esper did live, and she was tiny and needed a lot of care, and Lillie worked so hard to get her up to the right growth percentile. And she was just so happy and sweet and giggly, and every time I looked at her I just kept seeing Horatio and, and how he looked so tiny and, b-broken. It was ugly and awful and just bullshit and I, I, I—”

“Shh, Moon. Shh. Take a deep breath. For me, sunshine. Take a deep breath for me.”

“...”
“...”

“S-sorry.”

“It's okay, sunshine. It hurts when you lose someone.”

“Lillie said that too, back then. But, um— well, long story long, but I don't like this Pokémon Center. I know they're all the same, but this is the one where Horatio died. So I don't like it here. I don't know if I'll be able to sleep. I haven't slept very well since Ultra Space to begin with. Nightmares, you know.”

“I do know. I get them too. I'll read you a story and stay on the line until you fall asleep.”

“... literally why are you the perfect boyfriend.”

“Because I know you would do the same thing for me, if I asked you to.”

“But you wouldn't ask me, because you're fiercely independent which is a good thing, and very anxious which is not as good a thing, and you don't like feeling like a burden which is understandable but also bullshit.”

“...”

“You know I'm right.”

“Yeah.”

“...”

“...”

“... will you read to me from *Much Ado About Nuzleaf*?”

“I don't know if I have that one.”

“I'll gift it to you on the e-reader app— Rotom?”

“Sent, bzzt.”

“Ah— okay. Um, hang on, let me just— I have two phones, so I'm going to pull it up on the other phone so I can keep talking to you.”

“You have two phones?”

“I got my personal phone with money that Wicke gave me when I first left Aether, but then I needed another one for... um, some stuff I did with Team Skull.”

“Like... a burner phone?”

“Yeah.”

“...”

“... I swear I'll tell you about it someday but I don't want to talk about it right now.”

“Totally understandable. Um, *Much Ado About Nuzleaf*?”
“Yeah. Should I just start from the beginning?”

“Mmhm.”

“Okay... yeah, okay. Do you want stage directions as well?”

“Yes, please.”

“Right. Uh— Act one, scene one: before Leonato’s house. Enter Leonato, Hero, and Beatrice, with a messenger. Leonato: I learn in this letter that Don Peter of Arragon comes this night to Messina...”

* * * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan, satoshired@pmail.co.kan

From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo

Re: what is this, a marketing survey

For the record, Blue, I don't know why I'm friends with you.

1. We met in a Trainer battle. We did not like each other. He was mean to Hau and I was promptly mean back.

2. Took me on a movie date on Christmas, because in Alola Christmas is more of a family tradition and I mentioned that I'm used to it being a couples kind of thing. We watched The Scarlet Pimpernel and The Princess Bride and we definitely both fell asleep cuddling.

3. Like I said, Null is the chimera. Still can't disclose details about her, sorry. His other teammates: male Crobat (Imp), male Zoroark (Reynard, nn Rey), Porygon-Z (Nox), and Riolu (Eleanor, nn Ellie).

4. I honestly don't know but he's expressed an interest in pharmaceutical botany.

5. This falls under “secret” at the moment but you can *probably* persuade him to tell you about it when he comes to visit. But like, be nice about it. Our main relationship conflict has been me being a nosy jerk so I'm trying to be more conscious about that kind of thing... shocking, I know.

6. Reading, playing the piano (when he has access to one which is like never), playing with/training his Pokémon

7. I have no idea lmao

8. ^

9. We talk about the stuff that falls under “secret” which we're both privy to. We talk about books, we talk about our Pokémon and training. He's much chattier over text than he is in person.
Okay we flirt a lot, shut up

He likes Leppa-berry flavored sweets/baked goods. I don't think he's allergic to anything.

Yes, we are GREAT at communicating

Yes and no. I think we share a lot of the same opinions on moral issues, but we've only really discussed some very, very specific ones. File under “secret.”

April 13

Definitely file under “secret” lmao

Hell yes, hell yes, and HELL YES

Yes. And he is supportive, no worries there.

I have made him a promise that even if things don't work out for us as a couple, we will be friends. He was my friend first, before we ever dated. I was attracted from the very beginning, and I've learned recently that he was too. But we were friends first. I know I'm only eighteen, and he's only nineteen, and we have our whole lives ahead of us. But sometimes... well, the two of you know better than anyone that sometimes you just know.

Love, Moon

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is two chapters in a row where Moon gets dinner with someone who is info-dumping for the plot's convenience. No, I don't care.

Omg Moon getting recognized in public???

Moon is that person on the periphery of your life that is like “I don't HAVE a Facebook and I don't WANT a Facebook.”

Honestly though, more boomers/gen x'ers should be hiring millennials/zoomers to do their social media for them or at least to teach them how. I have at least three older Facebook friends who consistently post the “on this date, Facebook will effectively own all your information! Copy and paste this status saying that you do NOT give Facebook permission to use your information!” status, which is like... Karen, honey, you've posted that like at least twelve times since you've made a Facebook account and guess what, Facebook STILL doesn't own your information. They might use your cookies for targeted advertising, but literally everywhere does that.

Anyway, Moon's a zoomer (if we assume she turned eighteen in '18 or '19 then she was born in '00 or '01 and the cutoff line for millennial/zoomer is around '97) but she's still a technology noob so she needs someone else to help her lmao

And look at Moon planning for the career she wants, not the one she has!!! Such a good ambitious bean, I love my child
Molayne is, as always, A Massive Fucking Troll

Molayne is also The Mom Friend??!!? as indicated by him ordering for anxious kidney bean Sophocles

“It wouldn't be a visit with you if there were not any brain-picking.” —OKAY LISTEN

I'd always planned on separate Z-Crystals for the Tapus, because I honestly think it's bullshit that they share a Z-Crystal. Functionally, they can have the same Z-Move and I don't care; but they all LOOK different and they should have different-looking Z-Crystals!!!

“How do I approach Tapu Bulu and ask him for a Z-Crystal?” “You don't,” said Sophocles immediately. “Not unless you wanna die.” Molayne beamed at him, reaching out to ruffle his hair. “I have taught you well.” —literally I adore the pair of them

“Moon took a deep breath and tried to let go of her questions and frustrations.” —we stan character growth

Sophocles has “a little Team Skull friend??!!?!” WHO COULD IT BE??!!?!? Also: Sophocles aggressively correcting Molayne so as not to implicate himself in Molayne's shenanigans, just because he is embarrassed and annoyed, is my FAVORITE thing lmao

“I don't know who you're with, but a sweater pattern that ugly can only belong to Molayne.” —GLADION DSAKJFASJKDASJKH

Jjajangmyeon is a Korean dish and I REALLY want to try it b/c it looks tasty as frick

Gladimoon flirting and Moon trying to figure out how to tell a seemingly-oblivious-but-actually-trolling Gladion that “thirsty” colloquially means that you are experiencing sexual desire??!!??!! yes, hello, it is I, your crackfic author

I stylized the video call by using only dialogue— as though we’re hearing it but not seeing it, or reading a transcript. I might not use that format for future video calls but I felt like it worked here.

Moon talking to Gladion about Horatio is important, because it's a reciprocation of the many times that Gladion has shared his burdens with Moon and sought comfort. Moon ISN'T his therapist. They're equals, and they share each other's burdens.

Gladion reading Shakespeare to Moon to help her sleep. I am DEVASTATED
The earth can have but earth, which is his due;

Chapter Summary

Haina Desert
***************
Moon and Hau test the limits of their strength in trying to obtain Lycanium Z.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Sonnet 74 by William Shakespeare.

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (it's a BTS stan account (stream MOTS:7) but if you want to pm me there I do... occasionally... remember to check it lmao)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: invitations sent by comment request!!! we love you pls join us

I would like to apologize for the length of time between updates. I was writing the entire next installment in the series (I post where I'm writing versus where I'm posting on the series page by the way) and it literally took me two fucking months to write. It's supposed to be a one-shot, and yet it's 65 pages and 32k words long. what the fuck, scribe.

ANYWAY I hope you are all doing well and being healthy and safe despite the plague!!!! please enjoy the chapter!!!! I love you <3 <3 <3 <3

Content Warnings: depictions of wild animal attacks, depictions of violence against animals (in self-defense, not because anyone is happy about it)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know, with the appropriate weather gear, this isn't nearly as bad as it was last time!”

Hau, wearing a pair of heavy-duty goggles that Moon had originally bought for him when they had first made their way through Wela Volcano, turned to look at her with a disbelieving expression. A sudden breeze lifted a wave of sand into the air, falling over them; Moon accidently inhaled and choked on the grit.

“Are you sure you want to tempt fate like that?”

“...shut up.”

He snickered, and they continued their trudge through the Haina Desert.

Moon had prepared both herself and Hau extremely thoroughly for this excursion. All of their Pokémon were in perfect shape; there were Hyper Potions, Elixirs, and Revives on hand to help them when they began the battle; Rotom was wearing a heavy sandproof case and had a Bluetooth
connection to an earpiece that Moon wore, so that it didn't have to leave the safety of her belt pouch; and both Moon and Hau wore the thick, heavy fireproof clothes that had originally been intended for Wela Volcano. The clothes had made Wela Volcano a much more comfortable experience, and even though they were a bit heavy they were quickly turning out to be essential for the desert as well. The material did not allow sand through, and the cuffs and ties at their wrists, ankles, and necklines ensured that nothing slipped in through the regular openings of their clothes.

A chorus of soft giggles filled the air, rising even over the howling wind; Moon caught a glimpse of glitter-black eyes, peeking up from the wavering shadows of the windy dunes.

“Go away,” she said firmly to the Sandile— or possibly Krokorok.

“Think we should start riding on Hero yet?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Moon summoned her Metagross and they both climbed on.

The Sandile, maybe Krokorok, continued to trail them; but Hero's intimidating bulk and warning stare kept them at a distance. A few faint, yippy snarls were heard in the distance; she peered out into the hazy sunlight and saw a quartet of Gible, gazing at her with something akin to longing in their beady eyes.

“Vern!”

Hau had let out Sonar, pointing him in the direction of the Gible. “Sonar, Dragon Pulse on the little assholes.”

Moon stared at him, confused; but Sonar yipped appreciatively and took off, soaring lazily over to the Gible before opening his mouth and letting out a shrill blast of power. The Gible squealed in dismay before scattering, diving into the sand until only their fins were visible as they raced away.

Hau nonchalantly returned Sonar to his ball. “I think they recognized you,” he said, his voice deceptively casual, “and, well... I still haven't forgotten how fucked up your leg was when Gladion and Tapu Bulu brought you back last time.”

“Ah, so you were playing the long con.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” He grinned, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. “And we don't need them trying to complicate an already dangerous situation, right?”

“Right.”

The revenge shot at the Gible also served to warn off the Sandile and Krokorok, which left Moon, Hau, and Hero quite alone as they traveled steadily eastward through the Haina. They didn't have an exact GPS location for the Boneyard, but Rotom had a compass, and was more than willing to let them know when they veered off-track.

Rotom was also running a constant surveillance scan, which Moon discovered when it announced in her ear, “Picking up signals for three Lycanroc, approximately a quarter-mile east-northeast of our location. One Midnight form, two Midday forms. They are moving directly toward us, bzzt. The wind is also travelling northeast, so they have probably detected our presence already.”

“Great.”

“What is it?” said Hau.
“Ah, right, you don't have Rotom's Bluetooth... there's three Lycanroc headed our way. Rotom thinks they caught our scent on the wind.”

“Makes sense. Rockruff and Lycanroc both have really keen senses of smell.”

“Yeah...” Moon considered her options, reaching for her belt. “I think I want Ariel out for now. She's mobile, and she's still got Brick Break— honestly, one of the best decisions I ever made with her.”

“Five million percent agreed.” Hau brought out BB, which made sense as she would have STAB on Fighting-type moves. Ariel cawed a soft greeting at BB, who chittered back before they both fell into watchful, focused silence with Moon and Hau.

Hero plodded along, smooth and steady and solid; they would also be an asset, though Moon was hoping that her Metagross wouldn't be needed in the battles ahead.

“I think I see them,” said Hau.

The wind picked up a bit, blowing sand at them— directly at them, and Ariel squawked in discomfort.

“That's Sandstorm,” said Rotom, perhaps unnecessarily. “Not, you know, a sandstorm, bzzt.”

“Yeah, I think I got that.”

“Sandstorm?” guessed Hau.

“Yep. None of your teammates have Sunny Day by chance, do they?”

“Ah, damn, I knew I'd forgotten something. I was totally going to teach Ollie before we left.”

“It's okay. I'm not even sure if a weather condition would work here anyway... though Ben has Rain Dance. We could try that.”

She brought Ben out, settling him on the other side of her lap. It felt strange to have three Pokémon out, but the approaching Lycanroc showed no signs of stopping so she was going to have to get over her battle etiquette hangups pretty quickly.

“Rain Dance,” she ordered Ben.

He chirped approvingly and let out a fierce snarl, one that was quickly and loudly echoed by the trio of Lycanroc. Hero did not stop moving, even as the wolves approached; they parted silently, moving to either side of their bulky party.

“Will you watch our backs?” Moon asked Hau.

He was moving before she'd even finished the question. “On it.”

The Midnight Lycanroc went fully behind them; the two Middays lurked on either side. Hero rumbled warningly whenever one of them trotted too close, and none of the trio made any move to attack.

The rain began to fall. It didn't quite remove the effects of Sandstorm; they were in an arid, windy desert and there was always going to be some level of abrasion. But it did soften them, changing the weather to a musty, claggy rain that left tiny mudstains on their jumpsuits.
“Hey, that works,” said Hau, with a shrug. “I bet Poppy and Macbeth will both do well in this.”

“Probably, but unfortunately I don't think it's going to stop the Lycanroc at all.”

As if on cue, one of the Middays snapped at Hero's leg. Hero, predictably, ignored this—they were made of hardened metal, and a bite wasn't going to do much. There was a nasty crunching noise, and the biter snarled angrily; something like copper rose in the wind, and Moon saw a dark line trickling from the Lycanroc's mouth as it spat out something white and shiny.

“Holy shit, I think it broke a tooth.”

Hau patted Hero's chrome dome. “Attagirl. Wait, atta...robot?”

“It's okay,” said Moon, shrugging. “I gave Hero a feminine name, and I don't think they mind what pronouns you use.”

“Unlike Null?”

“Unlike Null.”

Something heavy crashed into Moon's side, wrenching her arm outward; it was the same Midday Lycanroc, angrily trying to drag her off Hero with hatred filling its blue eyes. Before the sharp teeth could fully close around her arm, Ariel shrieked and slammed into the wolf, knocking it away.

“Oh, god,” said Moon, scrambling back from the edge where it had pulled her. “Oh, god. Thanks, Ari.”

Ariel's eyes did not leave the Lycanroc as she trilled a quiet you're-welcome.

“Hey, fuck off!” shouted Hau, and BB let out an angry squeak as her fists pummelled into the other Midday, trying the same tactics.

“We've got to take them out now,” realized Moon. “Hero, stop for a second.”

Hero immediately ground to a halt. In unspoken agreement Hau took the Lycanroc on his side and Moon took the one on hers; the Midnight in the back was watching both battles. It tried to creep closer before its packmates could be quite taken out; but just as Ariel's Brick Break defeated Moon's opponent, Hero rumbled in annoyance, lifted one leg, and slammed it into the Midnight's face. Moon heard the crack and crumble of bones, and the Lycanroc was lifted bodily into the air as it flew back about fifteen feet. It hit the sand with a puff and did not move.

“Oh god did you kill it?”

“Honestly,” said Hau pointedly, “I don't think you need to worry about whether or not you killed it. Given that they're, you know, trying to kill us.”

“Obviously, if I have to kill them to keep myself alive, I totally will. But like... I still don't like the thought of killing a Pokémon, even in self-defense.”

“Fair enough.”

“It isn't dead, bzzt,” Rotom informed her through the earpiece.

“How not dead is it?”

“My medical scanners aren't very good at this distance, but I can detect multiple broken bones and
facial contusions, bruising and bleeding under the skull, definite concussion, and probable permanent brain damage.”

“...yikes.”

“What happened?” queried Hau.

“Broken bones, concussion, probable brain damage.”

“Hot diggety damn, remind me to stay on your good side.” Hau patted Hero's dome again.

“A-fucking-greed.” Moon brushed her own hand along one of the Metagross's X-shaped ridges.

“Thank you for looking out for us.”

“Meta.”

They came across another trio of Lycanroc about a mile further east; this trio, rather than attacking, began to howl instead. The howls were answered with a ringing chorus— much of it distant, but still too close for comfort. This trio also kept their distance, which confused Moon until she saw a sand-encrusted patch on the leg that Hero had used to kick the Midnight Lycanroc: it had left blood, and the new wolves could smell it.

“Incoming,” said Rotom, and Moon stiffened at the alarm in its tone. “Fourteen more Lycanroc signals, bzzt— eight Midnight, six Midday. In addition to the three trailing us now, that brings the total up to seventeen Lycanroc— nine Midnight, eight Midday.”

“We have fourteen more coming,” Moon told Hau, and his groan about summed up what she was feeling. “Does BB have anything that can hit multiple targets?”

“No, which kind of sucks. Her movepool is honestly not great until she evolves, from what I remember.” BB chirped apologetically, and he scratched affectionately at a chink in her plating before recalling her and bringing Sonar back out. “I guess I'll have to rely on this fellow, for now.”

In greater numbers the Lycanroc were more confident, and the pack was loping forward toward them with snarling speed; but Hau and Moon both shouted at the same time— signalling Sonar's Dragon Pulse and Ariel's Echoed Voice, respectively. The attacks rocked into the Lycanroc; a few of them stumbled away, which was enough to make the rest of them pause; but eventually all seventeen of them loped around Hero's steady pace, keeping their distance from her legs, and stared with hunger and mistrust at Moon and Hau and their teammates.

“I'm thinking,” said Moon quietly, “that we should probably rely on special attacks. Physical contact with any of them seems... risky.”

“Yeah, good call. Sonar's okay for now, though if any of them start using Rock-type moves instead of just biting and scratching he might struggle. But Poppy can take care things if he can't fight anymore.”

“Right.” Moon frowned. “Puck and Macbeth are both physical attackers, though... my special Attackers are Ben and Kate, and sometimes Hero.” She fumbled for Ben's Pokéball, letting him out into her lap.

“I mean, if Hero's already out...”

It was a very good point. “Hero, use Psychic.”
The powerful blast of power knocked most of the Lycanroc over, making them stagger or even roll. Unfortunately, it only seemed to infuriate them further, and three of them crouched and sprang.

“Pick them off!” shouted Hau, and quick shots of Boomburst and Air Slash ripped through the air to smack two of the attackers back down into the pack. The last one, claws extended, was about to land on Moon; but a harsh crackle of electricity jolted through him and he fell to the sand, twitching. Ben snarled at the Lycanroc, fearlessly angry as per usual.

“You're amazing,” she told him quietly. His head bobbed once in a nod, which was just like him—not a thank-you but an I-know.

Another Lycanroc leaped, but Hero's leg smacked into it again. This one flew even further, with dark spots of red spraying into the murky rain as it skidded across the sand. There was a sudden, ominous silence.


“Got it.”

“Hero, run.”

Ariel and Sonar took off, soaring high above them; Hero began running, their heavy legs pounding through the sand. They were not quite as fast here as they had been on Ultra Megalopolis, but that was mostly due to the sliding sand.

The silence was shattered by a chorus of howls, shrieks, and roars that echoed from all around them. The skies had gone grey thanks to Rain Dance, and the blend of Rain Dance and Sandstorm made it difficult to see around them in the late afternoon; but as they streaked through the desert Moon could vaguely make out shapes that emerged closer.

“There are between thirty and forty-five Lycanroc converging on your location in addition to the seventeen currently following—”

“Great, got it, thank you!”

The howling rose to a deafening crescendo, and several larger, static shapes loomed on the horizon: bones, Moon realized. Not just bones that were about the size of Nebby or Solgaleo, as might be expected; but bones that were much larger, bones that didn't even look like they belonged to legendaries that she knew. Hero darted between two giant ribs, zig-zagged between tailbones, slid into a gap beneath a massive skull and darted out into the mucky rain once more.

“Where's the Totem?” screamed Hau, clinging onto Hero for dear life.

“Rotom!”

“I'm scanning, bzzt...”

More Lycanroc charged, but Ariel and Sonar let out twin shrieks of Echoed Voice and the resulting blast knocked all fifty-odd wolves off their feet. Hero stumbled as well but recovered quickly, increasing the distance between them and the pack.

“Nice one!” called Moon, waving at Ariel and Sonar.

The loudest howl yet, off to her right, made her whip her head around. Through the dirty rain, a flash of catlike green glowed briefly below the ribs of the largest skeleton yet.
“That lone Lycanroc has a Totem Aura and appears to be larger than the others, bzzt.”

“Good enough for me.” Moon guided Hero in the direction of the green flash.

“Did we find it?”

“Yeah, I think so. I thought I saw its—”

_Wham._

The earth shook, and Moon’s hands were torn from Hero’s X-ridge as she flew into the air. The surprise of it left her limp and motionless for a few moments, and by then she was slamming back into soft sand anyway, the air whooshing from her lungs.

Silence fell once more, unnerving and raw. Moon coughed, trying to breathe, and sat up. Hero was picking themself up, trotting over to stand above a terrifyingly motionless Hau.

“What’s wrong?” she tried to call, but her voice came out thin and gaspy. “R-rotom—”

“His head hit one of Hero’s limbs when the Totem attacked. He has a shallow cut and a probable concussion.”

“F-fucking great,” muttered Moon, but relief filled her lungs before air did. A cut and a concussion weren’t tragic injuries; and Hau was healthy as a horse to begin with.


The thumping of many paws against sand alerted Moon to their predicament. Ariel and Sonar both flew down to land on either side of Moon, squawking and squeaking in warning.

She still couldn’t breathe, but she struggled to her feet anyway. A sharp, aching pain lanced at her ribcage area—a reminder that she’d generally been told to take things easy after her post-Ultra Space healing. Whoops.

“Rrrrrroc.”

The deep bass snarl made her look up. The pack of Lycanroc, now eerily quiet, surrounded them with the ancient ribs rising among them every so often. The feeling of being caged pressed in, but Moon was rather focused on the Totem Lycanroc that stood before her.

Dusk-form Lycanroc was a beautiful, orangey gold color; even the murky mud-rain could not hide that. Instead of blue eyes like Midday or red eyes like Midnight, Dusk had the green eyes that had caught her attention as they raced through the ruins of the gods. Its fur was messy but not long—another medium, between the rigid bristle of Midday and the tangled swoosh of Midnight. The most intimidating thing about Dusk was that it was a Totem, and as such was much larger than the other Lycanroc. Lycanroc weren’t terribly large to begin with—Midnights were larger than Middays, both in height and length, and even they were only about three and a half feet tall; but Totem Dusk Lycanroc had to be at least six feet tall, with bared, snarling fangs and pure hostility in its eyes.

Another green gleam caught her attention; in the dullness of the mud-rain she almost hadn’t spotted it, but a large, orangey-green crystal rose from the sands behind the Totem. That was almost certainly the source rock for Lycanium Z.

“Moon,” called Hau.
“Yeah?” she managed, her voice weak and raspy.

“I think I hit my head.”

“Rotom says you probably have a concussion.” She had to think fast; it was unlikely that the Totem would allow them to remain in stalemate forever, and if Hau had a concussion he was going to have difficulty battling. “Just, um— stay still. Hero, you protect him.”

Hero folded her hind legs, plopping her back end down on the ground behind Hau. It was what she had done for Moon in the Ultra Sea, forming a sort of tent to prevent foes from sneaking up from behind.

“Sonar,” said Moon softly. “You go to Hau. I've got this.”

“Noi?” said Sonar uncertainly.

“Really.” She put her hand slowly to her belt; the Totem's eyes followed the movement, narrowing. The volume of the growl increased, but she selected Ben's ball anyway, bringing him out first— he was small and probably not terribly intimidating. Kate followed, giggling for a few moments until she caught on to the tension; then Puck, and finally Macbeth.

Sonar hopped over to Hau, crouching in front of him. The Totem's legs bent as it prepared to attack.

“Macbeth and Ben, watch my back! Kate, use Toxic! Ariel, Brick Break! Puck, Leaf Blade!”

All five of them sprang into action. She could hear more Lycanroc attacking, but the clang of metal as well as Sonar's cries of Boomburst and Echoed Voice told her that Hau was fine. She could hear Macbeth and Ben as well— they worked well together, Rain Dance boosting Macbeth's Liquidation as well as increasing the accuracy for Ben's Thunder. The renewal of Rain Dance left Moon drenched, but it was fine— she was fine. Kate was quick and focused, spiraling in floating circles around the Totem and dodging its swipes as she sprinkled toxic venom over and around it. Ariel charged with more force than grace, as per usual; and Puck followed it up with the sharp, fierce slashes of Leaf Blade.

The Totem, surprised by the threefold attack, staggered backwards; but then the hackles rose, the growl rising into a full roar. About ten Lycanroc charged Moon at once; but a shriek from Ben and a bellow from Macbeth slammed them back: soak and shock, soak and shock.

“Note to self— try Soak on Macbeth to use with Ben for Double Battles, hot damn.”

Hau was not sitting idly by, despite Moon's instruction; he was rather sensibly taking advantage of Rain Dance to call out Poppy. Sparkling Aria slapped back any and all Lycanroc that tried to charge him, which in turn allowed Sonar to perch on Hero's head to pick off singular attackers.

The Totem's roars ripped through the air, and the ground around them began to shake. Moon, already unsteady from having the wind knocked out of her, stumbled and was caught by Puck. Chunks of rock— and to her surprise, bone— rose into the air as the Totem leaped toward them.

She had to duck and dodge, screaming for her teammates to move, move, move; a spray of gravel sliced across her cheek, hot followed by cold which meant she was probably bleeding.

“Kate, Venoshock! Ari, Brick Break! Puck—”

Moon inhaled muddy sand and couldn't complete the order due to a coughing fit, but she began the
steps for Sinister Arrow Raid anyway, and Puck's eyes lit up in joyful acknowledgment.

The combined power of all three moves knocked the Totem out. That was all very well and good; but the problem now was getting the crystal. Moon stumbled forward to claim it, and that was when the pack attacked, with a deafening chorus of howls.

It was a madhouse. She could faintly make out Hau shouting as well, but she couldn't hear what he was saying and she didn't think her teammates could hear her.

“Liquidation! Thunder! Brick Break! Leaf Blade! Venoshock!”

The attacks spiraled out and around, combated by fifty Accelerocks and Sandstorm. The wolves pressed in, pushing them back— away from the orange-and-green crystal.

Moon, sheltered by her teammates and trying to direct them, stared at the crystal. Exhaustion, followed by annoyance, welled up in her chest and throat and eyes.

“Meta!”

“Taur!”

The ground jolted violently, sending Moon and her teammates stumbling as well as their attackers. A combined Bulldoze, from Hero and Rumble, was just what was needed.

“Go get it!” bellowed Hau. His hands were clutching his head, and he looked rather pale. “Go, now!”

The jolting and jerking of the earth continued. Moon staggered to her feet, pressing forward to the crystal and reaching for a smaller spike. It broke off easily in her hand and she quickly pocketed it.

The problem now would be getting out. They couldn't access Ride Pokémon here— not even Charizard. Her teammates followed her over to Hau, still warding off the Lycanroc; Rumble and Hero were stomping their feet rhythmically, producing a constant Bulldoze. A few of the Lycanroc were unconscious, but not enough that Moon could justify letting either her Metagross or Hau's Tauros exhaust themselves by using the same move over and over again.

“We gotta get out,” she told him. “We gotta go.”

“You're bleeding,” he informed her.

“So are you. Come on— up you get. We have to climb on Hero, we have to get moving.”

For a few moments, it seemed like everything was going to work. Moon recalled all of her teammates except Hero and Hau recalled all of his except Rumble; they climbed onto Hero while Rumble continued Bulldoze; Hau recalled Rumble; and they were set to start running.

And then most of the Lycanroc pack latched onto Hero's legs with fangs and claws, trying to dig into the metal and mostly failing, but very much succeeding at being extremely annoying. Their weight slowed Hero, and she tried to shake them off but was not succeeding.

“Oh god,” said Hau, pointing at a contingent of twenty or so Lycanroc that seemed to be preparing to leap on them. “I already used Oceanic Operetta and I don't think Poppy's ready for that again, oh god.”

The pack crouched and jumped, arcing through the air toward them. Moon fumbled for Puck's ball,
about to scream for Leaf Blade.

“TAPU BU.”

A crackling wave of energy swept over them— lurid scarlet, emerald green, fiery black. Moon didn't remember seeing Tapu Bulu when she had last been here in the desert, and it was with some trepidation that she stared at him now. Hau let out a very quiet, very squeaky whimper.

The energy slammed into the Lycanroc, and they fell limply to the earth and left a deafening silence behind. The god turned, slowly, to look at them.

“Thank you for saving us, we would really like to leave now,” said Moon, before she could stop herself. “You have a lovely desert, and I hope I never have to visit again because I've heard you don't like visitors.”

There was a long pause, and then Tapu Bulu glided up close, bending down to gaze at Moon with dark, hostile eyes.

You always seem to be causing trouble in my desert.

“The last time was Nebby's fault. I mean, Lunala's. Well, she was a Cosmog then. And this time was totally Lycanroc's fault.”

An arched eyebrow rose.

“Oh god I'm shutting up now.”

Hau whimpered again.

What else is it you want? His voice was laced with impatience. I can see the question in your mind, human. Spit it out.

“I need a Z-Crystal from you for Necrozma so she'll stop trying to eat Solgaleo and Lunala.”

If I give it to you, will you leave me alone?

“As alone as I possibly can,” promised Moon.

That earned her a snort. I can already tell I will have to deal with you again, but I doubt you will return for any idle reason.

“No, sir. I mean— uh, no.”

Tapu Bulu's hooves clacked together, and a stone appeared between them. Moon cautiously held out one hand, and it fell into them— mostly red, but with faint hints of pink and green and black sparkling in the midst.

I will help you leave now.

A bright flash of light momentarily blinded Moon, but when she blinked they were definitely not at the Boneyard.

The trial guide who had been a dick when they'd lost Nebby stared at them, pale and horrified. “Y- y-you— y-you just— T-t-tapu B-b-b—”

Oh, shut up. Moon detected impatience in the Tapu's tone before he turned to look at Moon. Tell
"Gladion to hurry. I am tired of dealing with the other one."

"With his tasks or whatever?"

A long, slow blink. *With his trial.*

"He's not doing an island challenge, though?"

*I need not explain myself to you.* Tapu Bulu turned, regarding a pale, silent Hau. *As for you— stop whinging. You will see enough of me in the future as well. I dislike blubbering, and so does my brother.*

"What does that m—"

Tapu Bulu stared at Moon.

"Never mind," decided Moon.

Another long, slow blink. *As I thought.*

And with that, he zipped back into the desert, leaving behind only a trail of dust and, oddly, wildflowers that bloomed in the scarlet, gritty earth.

For a few moments they were all silent, but then finally Moon let out a breath.

"Wow," she said finally. "I can't believe we're alive. Let's go get fixed up." She glanced at the mute, terrified trial guide. "Hey, did they finish building the Pokémon Center here?"

"Y-yeah."

"Thanks." She resisted the urge to tack *asshole* on to the end of the formality. "Come on, Hau."

Hau remained quiet through their trudge to the newly constructed Pokémon Center and through the fussing of the nurses on duty. With Audino and Blissey, their cuts and his concussion were soon cleared up. Moon, sensing something fragile in his aura, went to the café counter and ordered them both sandwiches and let him eat.

"I don't want to see him again," said Hau plaintively, after he'd eaten about two-thirds of the sandwich. "Why do I have to see him again? And what was that about Tapu Koko?"

"I would have asked, but I don't think he likes me."

"He doesn't like anyone."

"Okay, fair."

* * * *

chat: *the four musketeers*
BOSS changed Lunarbean CEO's name to tapu sasser

BOSS: discuss

pedantic: Why am I going to hate this?

tapu sasser: I did not SASS him I was just asking questions, sheesh

rapunzel: I don't know why any of you are surprised. The first time Moon ever met a Tapu, she word-vomited at it.

pedantic: Ah yes, the very first near-death experience I recall hearing about.

tapu sasser: Why is every day “pick on Moon” day tho

BOSS: b/c u make it easy

rapunzel: Because you make it easy.

BOSS: OH

BOSS: OMG BABE WE TWINNED

tapu sasser: ew

pedantic: Gross.

tapu sasser: ...

BOSS: BAHAAHAHAHA WHAT WERE YOU SAYING ABOUT *US* BEING GROSS

tapu sasser: Okay ANYWAY we went to get Lycanium Z, it was very dangerous and we nearly died a few times, yadda yadda, and Tapu Bulu got us out of the desert and was his usual grumpy self

tapu sasser: On the bright side, he also gave me Tapubunium Z so I never have to go back, so that's nice

pedantic: I'm going to need you to back up to “we nearly died a few times”

rapunzel: ^ There's nothing “yadda yadda” about that!!!

tapu sasser: We already knew it was going to be dangerous, but basically ummm we were being chased by a pack of Lycanroc the whole time and they don't play by battle rules

BOSS: we both got cut up a bit & i had a concussion, but the pkmn center fixed us up so we good now

BOSS: still VERY scary. our teammates were so cool and awesome, def saved our lives a few times

tapu sasser: ^ Yeah, we're definitely treating them to malasadas or something
rapunzel: I'm glad you're both okay.

rapunzel: Hau, can I call you?

BOSS: hell yeah

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetical

shook: Okay so while they're off being gross, I really am okay and stuff. I'm sorry if I'm worrying you.

painfully cute: I'm always going to worry about you a little. I just wish you'd called and asked me to come with you.

shook: That's fair, but if you're studying for your test that's kind of important.

painfully cute: I think your health and safety are more important.

painfully cute: But it's fine, and I'm going to try not to be bitter or petty about it even though it's tempting. You don't deserve that.

shook: Honestly I don't deserve you.

painfully cute: Other way around.

shook: I feel like we're not going to ever agree on this lmao so let's just decide we deserve each other and be done with it.

painfully cute: I suppose that's doable.

shook: Oh btw Tapu Bulu gave me a message for you?

shook: It was something like “tell Gladion to hurry up because I'm tired of dealing with the other one.”

shook: Not really sure what he meant by that but I'm guessing you do and that's the important thing?

painfully cute: I don't care if it's blasphemy— he's a fucking dick.

shook: LMAO

shook: I don't think it's blasphemy though— pretty sure he cultivates that impression on purpose?

painfully cute: Correct. Still a fucking dick.

shook: Seriously I'm cracking up, you have no idea how much I needed that
painfully cute: Good.

painfully cute: I like making you laugh.

shook: ASKSHJDSA

painfully cute: I also like that, whatever that is.

shook: That is me being flustered

painfully cute: Yeah. I definitely like that.

* * * * *

To: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
From: garyo@pmail.co.kan
CC: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
Re: well played

Okay FINE, BE like that with your MINIMALIST TROLL answers. This is the THANKS I get for raising you with my own two bare hands. SHEESH.

* * * * *

To: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
From: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
CC: garyo@pmail.co.kan
Re: My boyfriend is being a brat.

^ 

Sorry. Let us know when your boyfriend's GED results come in. We can talk to Samuel and see if he qualifies for a Kantonian starter. Would he mind carrying a Pokédex? If he's anything like you he'd probably be great at the data collection aspect. Have a nice evening.
To: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: garyo@pmail.co.kan
CC: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
Re: TRAITOR

WHY ARE YOU SO MEAN TO ME, WE HAVE BEEN DATING FOR LIKE FOUR YEARS.

>:(( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:( >:(

* * * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan
From: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
CC: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
Re: Re: TRAITOR

We are literally sitting in the same room. Why would you email me when we are sitting in the same room.

Moon, please housetrain your boyfriend before you cohabitate. I clearly failed in housetraining mine; learn from my mistakes.

—Red

Chapter End Notes
“You know, with the appropriate weather gear, this isn't nearly as bad as it was last time!” —Moon you dumbass do NOT INVOKE MURPHY’S LAW

Moon's overpreparedness for the Actual Fucking Volcano they had to traverse comes in handy once again— the jumpsuits prevent them from getting sand in all their stuff lol

Hau ordering Sonar to warn off the Gible is definitely, one hundred percent not me as the author making sure that totally unnecessary justice is fulfilled lmao

“That's Sandstorm. Not, you know, a sandstorm, bzzt.” — there's totally a difference, fight me

I've always wished you could combine weather conditions. Like, Hail and Rain Dance should make some kind of freezing rain, and Sandstorm and Hail should make a fuckin tornado or something idk. I was therefore VERY pleased when I ran into Pokémon Reborn, a fanmade game that has like thirty weather/terrain effects. GOOD SHIT. anyway Sandstorm plus Rain Dance would be nasty sludgy muddy rain (adds power to Water- and Ground-type moves, any Pokémon that uses Muddy Water or Mud Shot gets STAB even if they aren't Water- or Ground-type) and that's been my TEDtalk.

“Attagirl. Wait, atta...robot?” “It's okay,” said Moon, shrugging. “I gave Hero a feminine name, and I don't think they mind what pronouns you use.” —fun fact: I occasionally forget that Hero is gender-neutral and write them with feminine pronouns so if you ever see those in the story feel free to call me out because I always INTEND to write them gender-neutral. I do the same thing with Rotom and masculine pronouns. Null and Kate are always feminine, and Nox is always masculine.

“Oh god did you kill it?” “Honestly,” said Hau pointedly, “I don't think you need to worry about whether or not you killed it. Given that they're, you know, trying to kill us.” — the Hau equivalent of “She needs to sort out her priorities.”

“His head bobbed once in a nod, which was just like him— not a thank-you but an I-know.” —so Ben is literally Han Solo, right down to Harrison Ford being a grumpy old man who no longer wants to have anything to do with the Star Wars franchise which is why they killed off his character

What could the bones in the Boneyard be from? insert thinking face emoji

Hau's never been injured in this series before and I'M SORRY FOR HURTING MY BABY :((((

Hi so this has been your PSA: I'M BAD AT WRITING FIGHT SCENES so I hope the pacing is okay and stuff

Tapu Bulu was so much fun to write omg

“Tell Gladion to hurry. I am tired of dealing with the other one.” —and Nanu is tired of you, but he doesn't complain unless he's at the end of his rope so SHUSH

Honestly Hau lives for exposing Moon in the group chat, it's one of my favorite things to write
GLADIMOON, COMMUNICATING AND COMPROMISING AND BEING EMOTIONALLY HONEST AND VULNERABLE WITH EACH OTHER

“I don't care if it's blasphemy— he's a fucking dick.” —lmao

And as per usual, we conclude this chapter with a continuance of the email chain—this one considerably crack-i-er than previous installments

“Moon, please housetrain your boyfriend before you cohabitate. I clearly failed in housetraining mine; learn from my mistakes.” —ice fucking cold, Red
Of different flowers in odor and in hue

Chapter Summary

Route Seventeen, Seafolk Village
******************************
Moon and Hau collect the Purple Petal from Nanu before returning to Seafolk Village
to complete Mina's trial.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Sonnet 98 by William Shakespeare.

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com ...it's a BTS stan blog, you were warned. Stream
MOTS:7 :)  
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: invitations issued by request!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Charizards thumped against the ground, and Moon gratefully slid off hers before unbuckling
her backpack. Hau followed suit, and the Charizard quickly departed— not wishing, Moon
supposed, to stay in the rain for any longer than it had to.

The decrepit police station of Route Seventeen stood before them. Hau hadn't been here before, so
Moon strode up to the door— ignoring the sign reading Do Not Disturb— and knocked sharply.

Nobody answered, but there was a quiet scratch at the door so she turned the handle. It was still
gloomy inside the police station.

“This is a lot of cats,” said Hau, looking around.

“That's not really surprising. Nanu's definitely a cat person.”

“Who the fuck is in my house!” bellowed a voice from the back. “I've got motion-sensor cameras,
you think you can just walk in and take shit?”

“It's Moon and Hau.”

There was a long quiet, and then the door to the back hallway opened. It was not Nanu, but his
Sableye that stood there; it chittered quietly and beckoned with long, pointed fingers before turning
to scuttle back down the hall.

“We're coming in,” called Moon.

An annoyed grunt was the only response to that, but she was fairly certain it was resigned
agreement so she followed the Sableye to the room with the kitchen.

Nanu was sprawled on his sofa, staring at a television with bleary eyes despite the fact that it
wasn't on. There was a metal can on the coffee table in front of him but it appeared to be the only one.

“The fuck do you want?” he grunted. “Olivia didn't say she was sending anyone today. Or did Hala send you?” His eyes flicked to Hau. “You can tell him I'm alive, and sticking to the stupid promise.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” said Hau pleasantly, though Moon could tell he was annoyed.

“We're here to challenge you for the petal that completes Mina's trial—Acerola mentioned that she'd asked you to do that, since she's going to the Elite Four.”

It didn't seem possible, but he slumped even further into the sofa. “Olivia schedules that for me. Talk to her about it.”

“I think Olivia has enough to be dealing with right now, don't you?”

Moon kept her tone as light and polite as she possibly could; but Nanu turned to stare at her with cold, slightly bloodshot eyes anyway.

“I wouldn't know,” he said, after a few moments. “Nobody else fucking tells me anything. They all think I need help with the goddamn job.”

He spat the last word as though it were a curse. Moon folded her arms. “If it's not the job you need help with, what is?”

He mumbled something under his breath.

“I didn't catch that, sorry.”

“I need,” said Nanu, with crisp enunciation, “a therapist, and some goddamn medication. I need to move out of this shithole and get somewhere with enough room for the cats. I need a sandwich and most of all, I need a fucking drink, but I can only have one beer a day because your fucking grandfather made me swear I wouldn't get drunk during the work week.”

There was a long pause. Moon didn't really know what to say to that; she glanced at Hau and saw, with some consternation, that he was really angry now.

“If Gramps made you promise that, he did it for a good reason,” he said stubbornly.

“I know that, kid. Can't deliver on a proper island challenge experience if I show up to battle drunk off my ass or hungover.” He snorted. “I'm just whinging. You caught me on a bad day. Which is why you should have scheduled with—”

“Olivia,” said Hau, his tone just as crisp as Nanu's had been a few moments ago, “is pulling double duty as an island kahuna and a future member of the Elite Four. She's also doing a lot of your job. She's tired and stressed out. I get that you're struggling, but making other people suffer because of your struggles isn't the right way to solve things.”

Nanu stared at him humorlessly, then turned and rolled over to face the couch. “Go away.”

“No.”

“Hau, let's just—” tried Moon.
“No, Moon. Let's fix this. Therapist, medication, new house with room for cats, sandwich, and drink? You've got a drink, enjoy it. I'll check your fridge and see if you've got anything for a sandwich.”

“Grocery delivery comes on Mondays, it's a Saturday,” said Nanu in a monotone. “Fridge just has beer and some cheese that's gone off. I hate cheese. I don't know why they put it in my grocery order.”

“Probably because protein is good for you,” said Hau. “What about delivery? Does the Pokémon Center on Route Sixteen deliver?”

“Pokémon Centers don't deliver. The other restaurants don't deliver here because it's too close to Po Town and too fuckin' rainy.”

“Fair enough. Are your cats kid-friendly?”

“You mean will they bite? Only if you're an idiot and hurt it.”

“Do they all have Pokéballs or carriers?”

Nanu rolled back over, turning to look at him. “What's it to you?” he said suspiciously.

“We can't solve the sandwich problem right now,” explained Hau. “Therapy and medication are really something you're going to have to set up on your own; you're an adult, even if you don't act like one—”

“**Hau!**” said Moon, shocked.

“— and I don't have access to stuff like your health insurance or bank account or whatever. The only other thing on the list is a new house. I can't find you a new house, but I can think of a house that's pretty close by, has plenty of room for your cats and a lot of people to play with them, and needs a supervising adult anyway.”

Nanu blinked several times.

“Aether House,” clarified Hau. “I'm talking about Aether House.”

“I **know** that. I'm not an idiot. I can't leave here.”

“Why not?”

“Po Town.” He gestured vaguely northward. “I'm set up in the old police station for a reason—surveillance. Someone's got to keep an eye on the Foxes.”

“Well,” said Hau lightly, “it sure is lucky we know Amelia Wicke, and that there's an Aether outpost on Route Fifteen. She can send people to keep an eye on the Foxes, and you can take a break.”

“It's my—”

“Job, yes. You don't seem to have a problem letting people do other parts of your job. What's different about this?”

Nanu sat up on the couch, and made as though to stand up. Moon automatically moved to offer her assistance, but the glare she got made her retract her hand. It took him a few tries, but Nanu stood up, recalled the grinning Sableye to her ball, and turned to walk out into the hallway.
“Don't need to waste any Aether employees on me,” he tossed behind him, as they followed him out to the main room with the glowing-eyed Meowth and then outside, into the rain. “Which of you is fighting me first?”

“I will,” said Moon quickly, with a glare at Hau. He rolled his eyes, but nodded once.

The battle was quick. She suspected that Nanu's heart wasn't really in it. Macbeth defeated his Sableye, but lost out against Absol; Ariel, however, cleaned up by defeating both Absol and Persian.

Nanu silently walked back over to the police station, rummaging in a cupboard; he withdrew three dusty-looking Revives, three Hyper Potions, and three Elixirs. “This is the shittiest part of the job,” he said finally.

“What, battling?”

“Nah. That's not so bad.” He seemed more relaxed, Moon noticed—not quite as angry as he'd been before. “The surveillance. I gotta watch shit that makes your heart sick to think about. It's a little better now the kids are all gone, and at the same time worse.” His tone went flat, and a little distant. “Watched them get out—tried to help, from the background; I was on a line with Plumeria, helping her get around the perimeter guard. Saw that little shit Kohaku and the town dunce Emmett go after Rogelio's greenhouse. Smashed all the glass, destroyed the plants—chased after Rogelio. They caught him, too. Pinned him against a tree. They were going to slit his throat with glass from his own greenhouse. I thought they did, for a minute. But it was just a scratch, and Molly and Cassie caught up to them quick and ran them off.”

Moon remembered the scar on Rogelio's throat, and swallowed down bile. The gloominess of the day and the soft patter of rain began to remind her of Nihilego, whispering softly of brilliance and oblivion in her dreams.

“Watched the kid, a couple times.” Nanu's eyes had gone hazy. “Bout a year ago, maybe a year and a half—some scumbag Fox decided he didn't like him. Gave him a hard time whenever he had to go out on a job. Stalked him through Po Town. I don't get audio on the cameras so I dunno what he was saying but I know it was bad. Kid looked desperate.”

Nanu, Moon remembered, only ever referred to one person as “the kid.”

“And then one day. The scumbag said something, and the kid stopped walking. Went totally still. He had his friend out with him—the Type: Null. Smart move. Scumbag kept talking. He was grinning. Laughing. Knew he'd got under the kid's skin.

“So he turned around, and the scumbag pulled a gun. But she didn't even wait for an order; she knew. She jumped on the scumbag. Pulled her head up—helmet, I guess. And she smashed the scumbag's head in. Just slammed it, right down into his skull. It was a nasty fucking mess. Brains and bone and blood everywhere. And the kid just...stood there.” His voice was raw with grief. “Shouldn't have had to stand there. None of them. None of those kids deserved this. None of the people on this island deserve this. I couldn't fix it. I left him in charge, and then he broke my fucking island and I can't put it back together.”

There was a long silence. Moon took a breath, wiping the tears from her face.

“So you see,” said Nanu, healing his Pokémon and not looking at either of them. “This is the shittiest part of the job. I have to watch shit like that, every goddamned fucking day, and I can't do anything because that stupid-ass deal that the stupid-ass government made with the stupid-ass
Foxes. So yeah, I'm letting other people do the rest of my job. I'm letting them help with the stuff that's easy. The stuff that's pretty and nice and full of joy. And I keep this nasty shit to myself, so nobody ever has to see it."

Hau took a few steps forward, and gently rested one hand on Nanu's shaking shoulder. “For ten years?” he said softly. “Just you, all by yourself?”

Nanu shrugged his hand away. “Yeah, what of it?” Some of the usual gruffness returned.

“That's really brave, Kahuna Nanu.” Hau put his hand back. “That's really brave of you. But Gladion and Guzma and Plumeria are going to get rid of the Foxes. They're planning something.”

“I know. It's my island.”

“So you'll want to help them, right? You'll finally get to do something.”

“Damn right I will.”

“But if you break down before then, you might not be able to help.”

Nanu went still, but he didn't shake off Hau's hand this time.

“So,” continued Hau, “you should let us help. Please just rest for a little while. None of this was your fault. Foxglove— he wasn't your fault. He's an adult, he made his own choices. And if Tapu Bulu made you feel like he was, then he's probably wrong. I bet he's just as bitter and angry about things as you, and he's lashing out like you do because he's hurting.”

Nanu turned to look at Hau. His eyes were oddly blank.

“Trust me,” said Hau softly, “I've got some experience with friends lashing out at each other because they're hurting. If you don't take time to let it heal, then it's just going to get worse.”

Moon's heart ached hard— he was talking about her and Gladion, of course; but he could also be talking about Molly, or any of the kids from Team Skull.

There was a long silence. Hau removed his hand from Nanu's shoulder and walked over to where Moon had been standing in her battle. After a few moments, Nanu followed.

The battle was conducted in near silence— both parties only speaking to command their teams. Hau won in a clean sweep thanks to Poppy's Fairy-type advantage, and Nanu automatically moved to retrieve more Revives, Hyper Potions, and Elixirs from his cupboard. The rain had soaked him through, but he didn't seem to notice; and it wasn't terribly cold in this part of Alola despite the fact that it was close to the end of January.

They went inside, following Nanu back to the room with the kitchen and the couch and the television. He sat down on the sofa, staring at nothing— still damp.

“Where are your towels?” Moon asked him.

He blinked, turning to look at her for a few moments. “Bathroom,” he said finally. “Turn left, first right.”

“Do you want to change clothes or anything?”

He shook his head. “Everything's wet here anyway, it doesn't matter.”
He had a point; even the towels were slightly damp, stacked in the dark linen closet. Several tiny Spinarak peered down at her from the closet ceiling.

“Be good,” Moon warned them, taking out four towels and closing the door.

Hau had found a broom, and was sweeping the kitchen floor. Moon held up a towel for him to see, placing it on the kitchen table, before crossing over to Nanu and draping one of the towels over his shoulders.

“I'm not a child,” said Nanu petulantly.

“Nah,” said Moon, her tone easy—though her heartbeat pounded rapidly in her throat. “You're old as shit. Dry off.”

She toweled her own hair dry, setting the fourth towel down next to Nanu. She and Hau had been wearing raincoats in anticipation of the Route Seventeen weather, but Nanu didn't seem to care about rain.

He snorted. “You're both disrespectful little shits,” he said, but his hands went to the extra towel and he began drying his hair from where the rain had plastered it to his scalp.

“Do you have a vacuum cleaner?” said Hau. “Your carpet is gross.”

“Might've taken it apart for something, but you can check the hall closet. Turn right towards the front room, last left.”

Hau left and returned with an ancient-looking vacuum cleaner. Moon sat down on the couch next to Nanu, lifting the coffee table when Hau vacuumed beneath it. The cleaning made a drastic difference; instead of being gritty and rather gray looking, the carpet turned out to be a warm shade of reddish brown.

“Here's your petals,” said Nanu abruptly. “You can go now.”

Moon and Hau each accepted a purple petal, putting them away with the others.

“You can call Wicke, or we can do it,” said Moon, with a glance at Hau; he nodded approvingly. “Either way, we're not letting you go back to being miserable all by yourself.”

Nanu stared at them. Hau folded his arms, and Moon relaxed further into the couch.

“Arceus save me from meddling, disrespectful little shits,” he muttered, but dug in his pocket and pulled out an ancient-looking cell phone. “I don't like phone calls. You can do it.”

“That explains so much, honestly,” said Hau pointedly.

“I can call her with Rotom, actually.” Moon took Rotom out from its case; it was already calling Wicke. “Hey, Wicke— we're at Nanu's police station, and we've got kind of a situation... how much time do you have right now?”

* * * * *

It was with much lighter, easier hearts that Moon and Hau flew back to Seafolk Village. It was
nearly midnight by the time they got there, so they quickly rented out rooms and fell into their beds with exhaustion; but when Moon woke up the next morning she had several messages and voicemails from a variety of people: Wicke, confirming that Nanu had been packed up and moved to Aether House; Wicke also confirming that not one but three teams from Aether's Security department had been set up in the police station and the Aether outpost on Route Fifteen, with a patrol route that oversaw Routes Fifteen, Sixteen, and part of Seventeen; a doctor from the Aether Foundation, letting Moon know that for some reason she'd been listed as Nanu's emergency contact in the forms he'd filled out for a therapist; and four texts from Olivia that contained various capslocked keyboard smashes, crying emojis, and heartfelt gratitude that Nanu was being taken care of properly.

“I think,” she said out loud to her teammates, “we did good.”

After breakfast, she and Hau walked over to Mina's house, rapping on the door even though it was open; odors of turpentine and paint wafted out, though they were mitigated somewhat by the cross-breeze created by open doors and windows.

“Hi,” said Mina, looking up from where she was sitting on the floor. There was a large plastic tarp on the floor, and a canvas frame sat in the center of it. There were plastic cups filled with colorful paint, as well as a large measuring cup of plain white and an identical empty one next to it. “Are you here to do the last part of the trial?”

“Yeah.”

“I need about ten minutes to finish this, do you mind waiting?”

“Not at all.”

“Great.”

Moon watched, intrigued, as Mina poured the white paint all over the canvas, spreading it out thickly with a flat metal scraper. A hairdryer, plugged into the wall, popped any bubbles in the paint. Quite a lot of the paint dripped off the sides of the canvas, pooling on the tarp; but that didn't seem to matter.

Several drops from a plastic bottle with clear liquid were added to each cup of colorful paint— teal, lime green, bright lavender, and a soft, pale fuschia-rose. Mina began pouring dribbles of paint into the empty cup, occasionally adding white paint as well.

“What are you doing?”

“Acrylic pour,” said Mina absently. “It makes very abstract art— depending on the paints you use, it can end up looking like a galaxy, or like a geode cracked open. I've never done it before, but I've watched a lot of videos and I thought I would try it.”

She pushed a stray lock of hair out of her face, heedless of the fact that there was teal paint on her fingertips; it streaked through her hair with other colors that seemed to have been placed there by accident.

Moon was fascinated by the process of adding little bits of paint to the big measuring cup, creating what looked like a rather stripey effect inside of it. When the cup was nearly full, Mina squinted at it, nodded, and dumped it onto the canvas without any further preamble.

The colors oozed and rolled across the canvas— some of it blending with the white, and some of it forming bubbles of singular color.
“Oh, I like the silicone,” murmured Mina—she seemed to have forgotten they were there. She picked up the frame, heedless of the paint dripping from the sides of it, and tilted it to slide all of the colorful paint around. The bubbles and swirls stretched, elongating and distorting into ovals and stripes that varied between crisp and smeary. It did rather look like a geode.

Mina set the canvas down on a plastic rack that was slightly higher than the surface of the tarp, allowing the excess paint to drip off the sides. “I have to leave that for a while, so this is a good opportunity,” she said, standing up. “Let me just wash my hands real quick, and we can start the trials. Who’s going first?”

Hau promptly turned to Moon, holding up one hand; the winner of fire-water-grass was Moon, which meant that Hau would go first.

“All right,” said Mina, ushering them both out to the back dock. It was still rather barren of flowers, but some thin strands of ivy had begun to work their way up the poles on the sides. “Hau, lay your petals out in a flower shape on the dock.”

For a few moments, nothing happened; but then the wind changed: softer, warmer, less salty and more perfumed. There was an oddly musty note to the smell, and Mina turned to Moon and pulled her gently to one side as a large mushroom waddled past them and out to face Hau.


“It would be a very pretty battle if you'd come in the evening,” said Mina, with a soft smile. “Morelull and Shiinotic are both bioluminescent.”

“All right,” said Hau, addressing the Shiinotic. “So you're the Totem, right?”

“Shii,” confirmed Shiinotic.

“Neat. Let's go.”

He sent out Ollie—exactly what Moon would have done in his shoes, given the type advantage. Shiinotic let out a loud, warbling call; a pale-violet streak flashed, and a bird landed on the dock next to Shiinotic, flicking feathers out in a familiar gesture.

“This is another form of Oricorio, bzzt,” said Rotom. “Sensu Oricorio is Ghost- and Flying-type, and specializes in the imitation of fan dances found in Kanto and Johto.”

“A lot of Kantonians and Johtonians who chose to move to Alola gathered in the Battle Tree area,” explained Mina, before Moon could ask. “The culture there is a more even mix of Alolan and Kantonian. Over time, the Oricorio on Poni Island adapted to learn the fan dances.” Her eyes twinkled. “Pom-pom Oricorio picked up on cheerleaders at high school rugby games, as well as the international rugby championship that is held in Hau'oli City every other year. Pa'u Oricorio learned from hula dancers at both the Tide Song Hotel and the Grand Hano resort. And Bailé Oricorio learned from flamenco dancers—there used to be quite a few dance studios in Po Town, before it became what it is now. Most of them have moved to Malie City, but the Oricorio remained in Ula'ula Meadow.”

Hau defeated Oricorio first, and it was replaced by a second ally—a Komala; but Moon's mind was filled with memories of fan dancers from the Obon festival—a carnival, with games and food; wearing lighter yukata rather than full kimonos; and lighting candles, to honor the spirits of her ancestors. Moon wasn't entirely sure she believed in an afterlife—though Acerola casually mentioning speaking to her dead father several months previously had been something of a
philosophical shock—but she didn't mind paying respect to her ancestors. She wouldn't be here without them, after all. It was odd to think of Obon now, in the middle of winter; her family had left before this last year's Obon and it would have been celebrated in July, while she was exploring Melemele Island with Hau and Lillie. The year before that, she'd gone out with Red and Blue, playing stupid carnival games and eating imi-lamb skewers and churros and other greasy fried foods—and dodging the paparazzi that Red and Blue had to deal with every time they went anywhere.

Moon shook herself out of the sudden bout of homesickness in time to watch Hau shout triumphantly as Totem Shiinotic fainted. She was here now, and she loved it more than she'd ever loved Kanto.

“Very good,” said Mina warmly. “Here is Fairium Z.” She dropped a pale-pink crystal into Hau's waiting palm before turning to look at Moon. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Mina's smile widened. “Then you may begin.”

Moon laid her own petals out in a flower shape at the center of the deck, then took a few steps back. For a few moments all was silent; but then the flowery perfume returned in full force—a tropical bouquet, frangipani and orchids and hibiscus and then sap-sweet sugar, overwhelming, so thick she could nearly taste it.

“Ribee.”

“Ah,” said Moon, watching as the slender strands of ivy burst into vibrant bloom. “I was wondering if it might be Florges for a second, but this makes sense too.”

Totem Ribombee laughed softly, floating forward. Lillie's Ribombee, Charmant, was not terribly large; but the Totem was probably as big as Moon's torso. It was a stark contrast.

To begin her challenge Moon sent out Kate, with a clear type advantage; she was therefore terribly surprised when Totem Ribombee let out a lovely trill and summoned—of all things—a Pelipper.

“Kate, use Toxic.”

The Pelipper used Rain Dance, and within a few moments Moon and Kate were both soaking wet.

“Oh, come on,” complained Moon. “We literally just got back from Po Town, Arceus... fine. You want to play it that way, we can play it that way.” She promptly recalled Kate and sent out Ben instead.

“Oh, Moon, that's overkill,” laughed Hau. He and Mina had retreated to the doorway of her houseboat, peering out at the battle through the rain.

“No such thing. Ben, Thunder on Pelipper!”

The Pelipper's eyes went briefly wide before Ben squealed gleefully, a deafening crack of lightning arced down from the sky, and sent the poor bird tumbling to the deck.

“There might be such a thing as overkill,” said Mina delicately. “I assume you'll be helping me sand down that burn mark when you're finished.”

“Yeah, I owe you that much,” sighed Moon, regarding the scorched deck dismally. Pelipper fled,
and Ribombee called on another ally with narrowed eyes.

This time the summons revealed a Blissey, and memories struck hard again; she was fifteen, hanging out at the Viridian City Gym after school and doing her homework. It was a year or two into Red and Blue's decision to pursue a romantic relationship. Blue was taking challengers—something he didn't do very often, because statistically speaking most Trainers never actually finished their Gym challenge and Blue's gym was difficult because he refused to type-specialize. On the particular afternoon that was brought to Moon's mind, Blue's challenger was a tiny girl, who was either eighteen or had some kind of early-graduation pass; she had only three Pokémon at her side. Blue had always been easy to read; clearly, he didn't think this girl could defeat him. Moon had been a little doubtful, herself.

And boy, they had never been so wrong. The girl's three teammates were two Blissey and a Magnemete. Blue had hastened to take out his Machamp, but the first Blissey had Psychic and a godly special-defense stat; it took a Focus Blast like a champion and promptly proceeded to wreck its way through his teammates; it was eventually taken out but the other Blissey was just as tanky. Blue's entire team of six was laid out flat before he could think to readjust his strategy.

It had been Moon's first lesson in healing tanks—she understood the concept, but she hadn't seen it put into action quite so effectively until this very moment. The girl had worn a very satisfied smile on her way out, shiny new badge tucked into her case. Blue's expression had been resigned.

"Should know better than to underestimate a girl because she's a tiny little thing," he said, shaking his head. "She was shorter than you, and she just whooped my ass as soundly as Red might have done it."

"I'm kind of tall."

"Really not the point here, kid."

Moon was brought back to the present when the Blissey took a deep breath before attacking with Dazzling Gleam—a logical choice, given that it was a Fairy-type trial. Ben took the hit, blinking away the bright spots; Moon withdrew him and sent Kate back out. The Totem had steadily been taking damage from Toxic, but seemed hale enough. She made an attempt to poison the Blissey as well, but it knew Refresh, an exercise in futility waiting to happen.

"Brute force it is. Kate, use Venoshock!"

It wasn't as effective without pre-poisoning but Kate had a very good special-attack stat and the advantage of speed. After a few turns, the Blissey was knocked out and the Ribombee was beginning to look a bit ragged from the poison. Another Venoshock did it in entirely.

"Nicely done," said Mina approvingly.

The rain had long since stopped, but Moon was still dripping as she strode back over to the houseboat. Hau snickered at her until she flicked water at him from her hand, making him yelp. Mina hastily moved her art project out of the main path to the front door.

"Here's Fairium Z for you as well," she said, holding out two more pink crystals. "And one for Necrozma, right?"

"Thanks," said Moon, pleased. "I appreciate it."

"It's a noble cause. I'm happy to do what I can for you. And here is the Z-Dance for Twinkle Tackle."
This dance was not nearly so complicated as either Savage Spin-Out or Acid Downpour; and it was
cute, which was a bonus. Moon copied the steps for Mina quickly, so that she could watch six-
foot-two, one-hundred-eighty-ish-pounds Hau bring one foot up and pose like a flower princess.

“You wanna do that again so I can film it?”

Hau cheerfully repeated the dance. Moon filmed it with Rotom and promptly sent it to the group
chat; mild revenge for Hau sending that awkward video of her interaction with Mallow's brother.

“And with that,” said Mina, watching this in amusement, “you've completed all the trials of Poni
Island. Usually I would tell you to make your way through the Vast Poni Canyon to pay your
respects to Lunala at the Altar of the Moone... but I think you're a bit past just paying respects to
her. So now I'll just direct you to Hapu's home; I believe she has yet to receive a challenger for her
Grand Trial since being made kahuna.”

“Really?” said Moon, surprised.

Mina's eyes twinkled; she held out a piece of sandpaper, and Moon took it back out to the deck.
Fortunately, the burn mark came off quite easily. “Well, most people don't have quite your motive
for getting through the Vast Poni Canyon in a record-breaking sixteen days, or through my trial in
about two weeks. I started a few early birds on my trial yesterday and the day before, but I don't
expect them back for another month at least; and they have yet to go through the Vast Poni
Canyon, since they don't have special circumstances.”

“Oh. What's the record for the shortest amount of time to complete an island challenge?”

“As the island challenge currently stands? Oh, I have no idea. Kahuna Ikaika used to keep track of
statistics and things like that; it might still be in his records, if Hapu is using his old office. And
obviously, the League isn't quite ready to receive challengers, but it's going to open in a couple of
weeks— I think the Professor said February first, in the email chain.”

“Oh, brilliant. I probably won't even be done with looking for Z-Crystals by then, but I have a
deadline of Leap Year's Day for handing them in to Necrozma so that's a whole month.”

“Plus climbing the mountain,” pointed out Hau. “Gramps says an experienced hiker can get up
Mount Lanakila in three weeks, but most Trainers aren't experienced hikers.”

“How does he think we've been getting around the islands? Do you have a hidden Segway scooter I
don't know about? Hand over the goods, I don't want to walk anymore.”

“Hiking itself is fine, but hiking in the snow is a whole 'nother story.” Hau shook his head,
suddenly sober. “There have been avalanches and blizzards before. Sometimes people have died
trying to get to the top. Not very many, but definitely a few. There's going to be some bits where
we have to like, rappel and stuff.”

For a few moments, Moon seriously reconsidered completing her island challenge at all; the word
rappel was that horrifying. “Oh, fuck no.”

“You'll be fine,” Hau reassured her. “We've got that good Ariados rope, and we both have Flying-
types on our team. Worst comes to worst, I wrap you up with the tent poles and haul you up on my
back.”

“That's even worse. Smelling you all the time?”

“Hey!”
“As charming as this is,” interrupted Mina, “I do have things to be doing, so I'm sending you on your way. Thanks for the interesting challenge.” Her eyes were fond. “And if you happen to go back to Aether Paradise at any point, tell Trinh she should come visit me. She doesn't have to see either of our parents, but I'd be happy to hang out with her.”

Her eyes were wistful. Moon nodded, thinking she could relay that to Gladion or to Wicke—they probably wouldn't mind passing along the message.

“Thanks for the trial, it was very long and complicated but a lot of fun,” said Hau cheerfully.

“That's kind of rude,” pointed out Moon.

“I'm not offended,” Mina assured them, “because that's the point of the trial. Did you go back and remember your other trials fondly?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you've learned what you were meant to learn.”

“Which is?”

She shrugged, an impish smile crossing her face. “I've got no idea. It's your island challenge.”

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

tapu sasser changed BOSS's name to flying soon to a kahuna near you

tapu sasser changed rapunzel's name to HEY I MISS YOU

tapu sasser changed pedantic's name to hi

tapu sasser changed their name to moooooooooooooon

moooooooooooooon: Hey

flying soon to a kahuna near you: ur so xtra

moooooooooooooon: :D

HEY I MISS YOU changed moooooooooooooon's name to marvelous moon

HEY I MISS YOU changed flying soon to a kahuna near you's name to heroic hau

HEY I MISS YOU changed hi's name to great gladion
HEY I MISS YOU changed their name to silly lillie

heroic hau: ur not alliterative like the rest of us though
silly lillie: I couldn't think of a good one.
heroic hau: >:(

marvelous moon changed silly lillie's name to lovely lillie

marvelous moon: You're welcome
lovely lillie: ...you know what, I'll take it.
heroic hau: HELL YEAH

great gladion: Firstly, I hate this.
great gladion: Secondly, can we infer that you'll be here soon?
marvelous moon: Literally come outside and look up lmao, ETA ninety seconds

* * * * *

Lillie was running when their Charizard touched down outside of Hapu's house. Gladion closed the door behind her and walked, hands in his pockets; expression neutral like usual. And yet there was something different about him— about both of them.

Moon watched Lillie first. It was the middle of the afternoon, and half of her hair was in a neat braid while the other was rapidly unraveling as she ran. Hau slid off his Charizard, quickly loosened the straps that held his bag onto the Ride saddle, and opened his arms to hug Lillie, tightly enough that her feet left the ground and she squeaked with laughter.

“Gross,” said Gladion, joining her; and Moon turned to look at him and was left without words.

Both siblings had very fair complexions, though Moon had traveled with Lillie in the summer and learned that she was capable of putting on a light tan. Now she knew that Gladion could also tan, judging by the faint gold of his nose and cheekbones. The uneven hair had been clipped back on one side with bobby-pins, no longer hanging in his eyes; and instead of his ratty black jacket he wore a long-sleeved shirt— navy blue, because Wicke hadn't been able to talk him into wearing lighter colors.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “Take a picture, it will last longer.”

“Oh, shut up.”
She wasn't sure if he was okay with hugging her in front of Hau and Lillie so she contented herself with nudging his arm with hers. He nudged back, but one hand slipped out of his pocket and carefully, reverently twined with her own.

“Moon!” shouted Lillie, and Moon let out a shriek as her friend knocked into her—resulting in them both falling over, her hand ripping out of Gladion's. “Oh my god, sorry! I'm just happy to see you.”

“You can knock me over literally every time you see me if it means you're this happy about it,” laughed Moon, hugging Lillie back. They both stood up. Hau had one arm over Gladion's shoulder, and while the latter's expression was nothing short of disdainful he made no move to remove the former, which told Moon that he actually didn't mind the affection.

“We didn't ask Hapu, do you think she'll mind if we stay here tonight?”

“She's got that whole room of beds, she's not going to say no.”

Akela and Hapu's aunt Maia waved as they walked through the house, though Hapu herself didn't seem to be at home. Neither were the twin cousins, though that was apparently because they were still working, and because they lived in a recently-constructed outbuilding on the property rather than the main house. Ride Pager training had them up early and in bed early, so separate sleeping areas were something of a necessity.

The whole room of beds in question showed signs of two long-term residents. Besides the simple cloth curtains, which Hapu had put up before Lillie and Gladion had arrived, some tables and chairs had been moved in and around the room. Lillie had unpacked the contents of her hiking backpack into a shabby dresser, and Gladion's clothes sat in folded piles on top of a bench wedged in the corner behind his bed.

“Just pick a bed,” said Lillie, waving her hand around. “I guess Moon should sleep over by me, and Hau by Gladion?”

“Whatever you want,” said Hau with a shrug, dumping his backpack on a bed diagonal to Gladion's. Moon set hers on the floor and promptly flopped on the bed adjacent to Lillie, pressing her face into the quilt and breathing in the scents of cotton and lavender fabric softener. “Now if you don't mind, and if she has the time and the desire to do so, I'm going to take my girlfriend on a long walk around the property because Gladimoon are too wimpy to be affectionate in public.”

“Oh fuck off,” said Moon good-naturedly. “I am being respectful of my boyfriend's personal space.”

“Wimps,” repeated Hau. She could hear the grin in his voice that indicated that he too was joking. “See you guys later. Don't get too hot and heavy, we all have to sleep in h—”

“Oh, that's a little much,” said Lillie gently. “Come on, sweetie.”

“Sure thing, babe.”

“Gross!” Moon yelled, muffled into the pillow.

The door closed after them, and Moon rolled her head to one side to look up at Gladion.

“You look good,” she told him sincerely, because he did. “Have you been outside a lot?”

“The roof is flat,” said Gladion, which didn't quite answer the question until he continued. “There's
a couple of beach chairs and a lot of potted plants. I'm trying to figure out what they are without looking them up on my phone. I have that herblore book you got me for Christmas— there's some plant Pokémon, but there's regular flora as well.”

“You've got freckles.”

“Do I?” The corner of his mouth turned up again. “Good. Lusamine hated it when we got freckles.”

“I really like them,” Moon confided in him.

“I figured. You're not the type to make personal remarks unless it leads up to a compliment.”

She rolled completely over and sat up before patting the bed, indicating that he should sit. After a few moments, he shook his head and offered her his hand.

“My bed is comfier,” he confided. “After the two of you left, Lillie and I tested all the mattresses in the room, and switched the best ones to where we wanted them. Also, I've gained about ten pillows.”

“Why?”

They sat down on Gladion's bed, and he kicked off his shoes so that he was just in sockfeet; Moon promptly did the same. “The hospital ordered a bunch of new ones, so they were going to throw out or donate the oldest ones. They have pretty high standards for what they consider donateable, so I got some of the ones they would have just thrown away. I soaked them overnight in bleach water and re-stuffed a couple of them, and they're good as new.” As he spoke, he laid down, sprawling out over the pillows and glancing up at her through his eyelashes. “I'm done pretending I don't want to cuddle the shit out of you. Please come here.”

“I am also totally done with that.”

For a few minutes they were both silent. Moon pressed her face against his collarbone and snuggled in; his hand curved down over her shoulder, gliding to the small of her back and just resting. He was warm, the house was warm, and the room was quiet.

“I missed you.”

“Me, too. I mean, I've been happy, but I missed you.”

“Yeah, same here.”

* * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan
CC: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo
Fwd: Re: Kanto Gym Challenge Application— Gladion's Records
Hey guys— here's the stuff that you and the professor would probably want about Gladion. I know Amelia's probably been talking to him already. You can just forward this straight to him if you want, but I know you've been helping out with some of it. Also, you're a nosy ass. I highlighted something she said about that.

And, um— here's my own letter of recommendation. Not that it counts for a whole lot but like, I just thought I'd put my two cents in or whatever.

- Attachment: [reasons why you should accept Gladion into the gym challenge.pdf]

Love, Moon

////////

To: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo

From: aewicke@aether.org

Re: Kanto Gym Challenge Application— Gladion's Records

Moon,

The following records were requested by the Kantonian League and by the Trainer Research team, headed by Professor Samuel Oak.

- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Kantonian_Gym_Challenge_Application.pdf]
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Personal/Medical_History.pdf] (Has been partially redacted for privacy)
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Trainer_Records.pdf]
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_August_Green_Trainer_Records.pdf] (This is also a statement of transferral— August Green is a legally recognized pseudonym and public entity, but is also Gladion. All paperwork and electronic records have been backdated to reflect this change.)
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_GED_Results.pdf]
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Secondary_Education_Transcript.pdf]
- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Form_3A-42C.pdf] (Alolan Court Statement— Removal of Juvenile
Criminal Records)

- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Form_3A-43B.pdf] (Alolan Court Statement— Removal of Adult Criminal Records) (Most of my time in the last month has been occupied with removing all criminal records for penitent adult members of [REDACTED]; Gladion is among them. INTERPOL and the Alolan justice system are willing to grant them amnesty in exchange for eventual testimony against [REDACTED]. This information is currently classified, and has been appropriately censored in order to satisfy Kantonian requests without revealing incriminating information.)

- Attachment: [g.a.mohn_Statement_of_Personal_Intent.pdf] (This satisfies the essay portion of the application, but was not included in the application itself, which contains a censored version for public intake. This statement is intended to be read by Samuel Oak, Blue Oak, and Satoshi Red. The file will corrupt seventy-two hours after it is opened by the appropriate recipients.)

I hope that if there are any further relevant inquiries regarding Gladion's application, you would be willing to relay them. **Inquiries of a frivolous nature will be ignored; if they are continued, the Aether Foundation will back Gladion in a suit of harassment.** Personal questions may be directed to Gladion upon his arrival in Kanto. Please convey my professional courtesy to your friends and to Professor Oak for the vital and valuable work they do; and please convey my personal thanks for their influence on you, which in turn has influenced both Gladion and Lillie for the better.

************

Amelia Wicke
Aether Foundation, COO
Head of HR, IT, Hospitality/Public Relations, Media Relations, Sales/Marketing, Security, Custodial Services
Acting President and CEO
Acting Head of Medical, Conservation, and Accounting

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Chapter End Notes

This is the first chapter I wrote after redoing the plot; as a result, it may seem a little faster-paced than the previous chapters.

Making Nanu a crazy cat man was an excellent decision, I do not regret it for a second

Oh... oh dear... Nanu is SUPER not functioning right now... honestly same

Welp I made myself cry over literally the grumpiest character in this game, author pls
Rogelio :((((((

GLADION :((((((

Hau is literally the best person to exist, I don't make the rules

“I'm not a child.” “Nah. You're old as shit. Dry off.” — the following is connected to: “ for some reason [Moon had] been listed as Nanu's emergency contact” because I LIKE SUFFERING FROM FOUND-FAMILY EMOTIONS

“Arceus save me from meddling, disrespectful little shits... I don't like phone calls. You can do it.” —A Whole-Ass Mood

literally Wicke is God I don't make the fuckin rules here folks

Mina is doing an acrylic pour because I've been spending some time recently [by which I mean writers' block slash insomnia slash quarantine slash whatever you call it when life is an absolute drag but you're not necessarily unhappy about it] watching paint videos. They are pretty and soothing. And if you put silicone in the paint it forms little bubble cells and it looks very cool.

I strongly considered Ribombee's partner Totem being Alo-Ninetales; but Alo-Ninetales is an Ice-type and I can't justify it living on literally the most summery island in Alola. I also considered Comfey— it would have made sense with the flowers and Ribombee and it's a pure Fairy-type. But Comfey has a shit attacking moveset so most of the Work would be done by its summons, and I wanted to give my squishy mushroom boi some love anyway. We had Komala because it's a Normal-type like Blissey, and Sensu Oricorio because... uh... weirdly enough I'm just going to say Plot and be done with it BYE

“I've got no idea. It's your island challenge.” —this sounds wise and everything but fyi it's me going “I just want to be done with this scene and get to the sweet sweet Gladimoon”

Ten username changes in like five seconds, this chat is WILD

Hau: “We're going on a walk so you guys can be cute in private”
Lillie: “Actually we're going on a walk so we can make out without Gladion making judging faces at us”
Hau: “That too but also the first thing”

Gladion!!! With freckles!!! Sitting on the roof!!! Looking at plants and his lil book!!! I am!!! DEVASTATED!!!

“I'm done pretending I don't want to cuddle the shit out of you. Please come here.” “I am also totally done with that.” —Speech: 100. I love Skyrim and I love Gladimoon.

I have nothing to say about the forwarded email from Wicke. NOTHING AT ALL

Wicke: “Listen, I have fifty thousand emails to answer at any given time already, so if Blue tries to @ me with nosy questions I will literally sue the shit out of him I am not kidding you, I don't have TIME for this NONSENSE”
Also Wicke: “Tell Red and Blue I said thanks for being your friends because I'm pretty much your future mother-in-law so I'm allowed to be grateful for that kind of thing”
And, constant stars, in them I read such art

Chapter Summary

Ancient Poni Path, Vast Poni Canyon
**********************************
Moon and Hau challenge Hapu in order to complete the Grand Trial of Poni Island.

Chapter Notes

Title credit is from Sonnet 14 by William Shakespeare.
Tumblr: jooniepertree@gmail.com (it's a BTS stan account lmao but if you find tumblr private messages easier to use than the comment system here on ao3, feel free to hit me up)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: I still can't believe people actually enjoy this series enough to make a Discord about it?!?!?! Invites by request :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Moon hadn't seen Hapu at all the previous afternoon and evening, but when she went into the dining room for breakfast the kahuna was there, looking fresh as a daisy and tucking into eggs and bacon with the appetite of a starving Lycanroc.

“Ah, hello!” she said cheerfully. “Grandmother informed me that you and Hau had arrived yesterday. I was busy with an urgent matter in the canyon— some vandals were being threatened by Totem Kommo-o, as is proper. I removed the vandals, both to their gratitude and the Totem's; and I took the opportunity to inquire after Kommonium Z.”

She offered her hand, opening it; a blue-and-red crystal sparkled in the light from the open windows.

“Thanks,” said Moon, relieved. “You saved me a trip out there myself. I'm going to go visit the Altar of the Moone anyway, but if I don't need to bother the Totem I won't.” She reached for the crystal.

“Actually, you will need to visit Totem Kommo-o anyway. I promised him when I took this crystal that you would visit; I did not think you would mind agreeing to that.”

“That's fine, I guess. Will I have to battle him again?”

“I do not think so, but of course it never hurts to be prepared.”

Moon pocketed the crystal and sat down. “Words to live by.”

She was about halfway through her breakfast when someone hugged her from behind, leaning over to slump on her shoulder. Lillie and Hau, walking around to the other side of the table hand in
hand, were both grinning at her; which meant it was Gladion enveloping her.

“Good morning,” she said. Her voice sounded remarkably steady, in contrast with how hot her face suddenly felt.

“Mmmph,” said Gladion in lieu of actual words.

“You should actually sit down. That can't be good for your back.”

“Eurghh.” But he let go, pulling out the chair next to her and plopping down into it, resting folded arms on the table and blinking moodily at the platter of pancakes in front of him.

“Hapu, can Moon and I challenge you today?” asked Hau, relocating about half of the pancake platter to his own plate.

“Barring any further emergencies, it is what I had planned on. The two of you will be the first Trainers to take on my Grand Trial, and I think I have found the location where I wish to battle with challengers.”

“We're not going to just, I dunno, go outside?”

Hapu shook her head. “Kahuna Hala happens to live close to the Ruins of Conflict anyway,” she explained. “Kahuna Olivia always stages her Grand Trials outside the Ruins of Life. And if you had not been in a very understandable hurry when you challenged Kahuna Nanu, you would have faced him at Haina Junction— which is further away from the Ruins of Abundance, but still fairly close. I have chosen a venue that is much further away from the Ruins of Hope; but I thought it was fitting, given how the Ruins of Hope cannot be currently accessed by land.” Her eyes, usually silver-stormcloud gray, suddenly brightened into eerie violet; the hair on Moon's arms stood on end. “It is nearly time for my friend to rest. She has done much, for so long.”

Hapu's eyes faded back to gray, and she went back to eating eggs and bacon as though nothing had happened. Moon glanced around, wondering if she had been the only person who had seen this. Hau and Lillie didn't seem to have noticed anything amiss; and Gladion's eyes had slipped closed, his head falling further into his arms.

“Eat,” she told him, poking his arm. “If you want to, that is. Don't sleep at the table.”

He stirred and sat up, yawning and immediately turning away to try and hide it. “But I'm tired.”

Moon fought back laughter. “Again, I recommend eating.”

He made a noise that could only be interpreted as a growl, which sent both Hau and Lillie into a fit of giggles. Moon tried to give him an unimpressed look, but that really only worked if she hadn't also been trying not to laugh. She had gotten dressed in the bathroom before coming down for breakfast, but Gladion clearly hadn't bothered— he was in pajamas and his hair was a fluffy, wavy mess and he was trying to growl. It was too cute.

But he picked up his plate, slid a couple of pancakes on, and added to it what appeared to Moon as a ridiculous amount of maple syrup. She took pity on him and poured him a glass of Leppa berry juice, as well as a glass for herself.

“Remember when Mo— Lusamine used to ration out the maple syrup?” said Lillie, in the tone of someone who has just remembered something they really did not wish to think about.

“Why do you think I'm drowning my breakfast in it.”
“To be fair,” continued Lillie quietly, “maple syrup is one of the least healthy foods to ever exist, and it's a smart parental choice to limit sugar intake until their child is old enough to regulate it on their own.”

Gladion snorted. “But then when we do get to choose things like that, well after the fact, we overindulge.” He indicated his plate, which had more maple syrup than pancake on it. “Exhibit A.”

“Exhibit B, your entire wardrobe once you ran away from home.”

“You're going to have to blame Null for that one. I tried to salvage the rips and tears by making some of them look like they were done on purpose and sewing up the rest, but I can assure you that almost none of my clothes had holes in them when I bought them.”

They were talking about these memories—memories that were about abuse, emotional pain, and the pragmatics of survival—almost as though they were normal; but watching two pairs of green eyes grow slightly damp, Moon realized that both Lillie and Gladion probably wouldn't have been able to talk about this in the same way only a few weeks ago. It was amazing—they were both so strong, and they were working so hard to be able to understand their pasts, that they might face their futures with courage.

After breakfast, Hapu directed the four of them outside, where she paged a Charizard. Lillie and Gladion also took out their own Ride Pagers, which Moon didn't recall them ever using; she was used to sharing a saddle with Gladion, leaning into him more for warmth in the cold sky than anything else. The flight itself was not long—perhaps a minute and a half north—and then Hapu, in the lead, steered her Charizard down into the Vast Poni Canyon.

Moon recognized the dead tree that stood before the very first cave entrance, and considered it for a few moments. “Are you going to fix it up at all?” she asked Hapu, looking around. “Draw a battle circle, build a platform—something like that?”

Hapu shook her head. “I may try to cultivate some more plant growth, but it is likely to be a long process. And besides, this place represents the Ground-type well. It is rocky and ever so slightly sandy, and a dead tree is the fauna equivalent of a skeleton; bones have long been a symbol for Ground-types as well as Ghost-types. It is also isolated, and Charizard know where to find it.”

“It needs a name, though,” pointed out Hau. “Like, Gramps takes challengers in Iki Town, and Kahuna Nanu takes them at Haina Junction, and Kahuna Olivia takes challengers in the Akala Outskirts.”

“I had not considered that.” Hapu's eyebrows creased. “This is part of the Vast Poni Canyon, but you are right—it needs its own name. Perhaps you would be willing to come up with one?”

“Who, me?” said Hau, taken aback.

“The four of you.” She smiled. “I can think of no one better suited to name my proving grounds than those who witnessed my ascension to kahuna.”

“Oh, Hapu,” said Lillie softly. “It's an honor for us, thank you.”

“I will let you think about it and discuss it; I do not expect any challengers too soon after the two of you. Speaking of which—are you ready?”

Moon glanced at Hau, who grinned and nodded. “Yeah.”

“I await your challenge,” said Hapu simply, and turned to walk past the tree.
“Fire-water-grass?” said Hau, holding up his fist.

“I mean, I kind of want to go first, actually. If I win I can say I was the first challenger to defeat her.”

“You're welcome to it.” Hau shook his head. “I still remember watching her battle Tapu Fini—whew. We should both be okay, but she's going to be tough. Good luck.”

“Moon won't need luck, not with the skill she has,” said Lillie loyally.

“Thanks,” laughed Moon, “I'll take both.” She turned to walk toward Hapu but Gladion's hand closed around her wrist. “What is it?”

He was looking at her. They had long since defined what they were to one another, but it still often went unspoken between them—partly because Moon didn't want to stress Gladion out, and partly because it just didn't come up in conversation.

He leaned forward; his face was inches away. Moon blinked hard.

“I,” he began. “Um— they both said. What I wanted to say.”

“Aw, that's okay. I know you were, um, wishing the same good things for me. Luck and skill, and stuff.”

“And you.”

“And... me?”

“You,” repeated Gladion, and both of his hands curved over her shoulders. “You, Moon Hawkins. You.”

Moon stared at him, still rather confused. He sighed, frustrated, and pulled her in close for a hug.

“You,” he said. “You're— you're going to win, because you're... you. And Hau will win because he's Hau, but you will win because you're you.”

Moon still wasn't sure she understood, but whatever Gladion was talking about, it was flattering.

“Thanks.”

His arms tightened—they were so close that Moon almost couldn't breathe, but it was Gladion so she wasn't exactly upset about it.

“I like you,” he muttered, almost inaudibly. She was aware of this, but her heart still skipped a beat. “I just—I just like you.”

He sounded almost desperate, and suddenly it clicked.

“Oh,” she said, and it came out embarrassingly breathy; he went still around her. “I— I like you too. I like you so much.”

She said it quietly—for his ears alone, despite the fact that Hau and Lillie were watching them with matching grins.

“Really?”

She almost didn't hear it, about to let him go; but at this she rose onto her toes and kissed his cheek.
“Really.”

His exhaled sigh of relief was all she needed, and he let go, taking a step back and smoothing his face back into neutrality with impressive speed.

Moon smiled at her cousin, friend, and boyfriend; and then she turned and walked over to face Hapu.

Hapu's eyes were steady. “Moon Hawkins. You approach the kahuna of Poni Island. Having completed all the trials set upon this island, are you prepared to face me in battle for my Grand Trial?”

“I am.”

“Then we shall begin.”

The sensible thing, given typings and moves, was for Moon to begin with Macbeth; and that was what she did. Neither Ben nor Kate would be terribly helpful during this battle. Hapu sent out her Golurk, which loomed high over all of them.

“Phantasm, use Earthquake!”

“Macbeth, First Impression!”

As always, First Impression made just that on their opponent. It wasn't a terribly effective move in terms of type, but Macbeth's speed and power more than made up for the deficiency. Hapu studied Macbeth for a few moments, seemingly untroubled; but it was time to keep going.

“Phantasm, use Stealth Rock!”

Oh, that was going to be annoying. “Macbeth, hit it with Liquidation!”

The Golurk managed to get the pointed rocks floating in place, but Liquidation knocked it out. Macbeth let out a triumphantly buzzy trill, and Moon patted her on the back.

Hapu nodded, still calm; her next choice was Flygon. Moon didn't want to switch Macbeth out—Stealth Rock would damage her replacement.

“Momentum, use Earth Power!”

“Macbeth, another Liquidation!”

Liquidation hit, but Earth Power was nasty and it triggered Macbeth's Emergency Exit—which on the bright side was a free switch-out; but there was still Stealth Rock to contend with, because none of Moon's team knew Rapid Spin or any other field-clearing move. That was something she probably ought to fix. Hero was the best equipped of Moon's teammates to deal with Stealth Rock, even though she was also weak to Ground-types; and only that morning she had reviewed a few Z-Dances in preparation for this moment.

“Momentum, another Earth Power!”

Moon was already moving, dancing to direct that aura in closer to Hero. “Hero— Shattered Psyche!”

The Flygon, unfortunately for Hapu, did not stand a chance: Shattered Psyche was devastatingly powerful, bringing the full weight of Hero's psychic ability—and then some—down to bear on
her opponent. It was rather early in the battle to use a Z-Move; but Moon had some memory of what Hapu's team looked like, from the battle with Tapu Fini. Flygon was one of the only Pokémon on Hapu's team for which Moon did not have a direct counter; therefore, it was best taken out with a heavy-duty Z-Move.

But then Hapu brought out Krookodile and everything promptly went to shit because Moon had somehow forgotten about it. She knew Golurk and Flygon; she remembered Gastrodon and of course, Hapu's Mudsdale; but she had not thought of Krookodile. Hau wouldn't have this problem — Poppy could handle a Krookodile with ease.

“Hero, use Brick Break!”

“Tenebrus, Crunch!”

It was super-effective, and Hero was out in a single hit— the Flygon hadn't managed to damage her and Stealth Rock was negligible, so this was not looking good. Moon swallowed and sent out Ariel. “Ariel, Brick Break!”

Ariel screeched and slammed into the Krookodile, which responded with another Crunch. Neither of them knocked the other out, but it was a fairly near thing— the Krookodile had STAB and Ariel's move was super-effective.

It was unfortunate but Ariel fainted first, to a well-placed Rock Slide. That left Moon with only Puck, against not one but three of Hapu's teammates— assuming that she still only had five of them and not six. Ben would be a liability, and Kate wasn't likely to be much help. She could maybe Toxic-stall if it came down to it, but Moon would largely be relying on Puck— Puck, who as part Ghost-type was vulnerable to Krookodile's Dark-type.

“Puck, use Leaf Blade!”

“Tenebrus, Crunch—”

Puck had moved almost before Hapu finished speaking; the Krookodile was already damaged so it was out for the count. Moon's Decidueye looked back at her with a vaguely irritated, condescending expression.

“I will never doubt you again,” Moon assured him.

Puck merely rolled his eyes.

Hapu's eyebrows, smooth until now, creased slightly; as far as Moon could tell, that was a good sign. She sent out Gastrodon, which hissed menacingly at Puck but promptly fainted to a quadruply-effective Leaf Blade; and this was followed with a deeper eyebrow-crease and Epicentre, who snorted in recognition.

“Puck, another Leaf Blade!”

Hapu's mouth twitched. “Epicentre, use Payback!”

Moon's stomach lurched. That's supereffective oh god oh shit oh god oh shit—

The Mudsdale slammed hard into Puck, who had as of yet been undamaged; but he groaned, staggering away from the hit to launch a third Leaf Blade.

“Come on,” muttered Moon, staring at Puck and willing him to gather himself. “All you have to do
is hit first and you've got this, we've got this.”

Puck, breathing hard, glanced back at her again; his eyes were soft and proud.

“Leaf Blade,” she said— perhaps unnecessarily, for he had moved before she had finished speaking.

“Epicentre, one more Pa—”

Leaf Blade hit, and Epicentre staggered back several steps before beginning to tip over. Hapu recalled her before the Mudsdale could hit the ground.

“And that's that,” she said.

Moon blinked a few times. “Oh,” she realized. “Oh, okay.”

Hapu smiled. “You won. And as such, you have formally completed the Grand Trial of Poni Island. Allow me to demonstrate the dance for Groundium Z— Tectonic Rage!”

Moon often forgot that the kahuna was younger than her, younger than all of them, because she spoke so eloquently and formally. It was therefore interesting to watch the dance for Tectonic Rage, because it was a heavy, harder hitting dance— it required power. And yet, despite her small stature, Hapu delivered the power required. The muscles of her arms showed clearly when she slammed one fist down onto the ground.

“And here are two Groundium Z-Crystals,” added Hapu, getting up as though she had not just shown them an intense dance move. “One for you, and one for Necrozma.”

“Thanks.”

She recalled Puck and turned back toward her friends but was promptly engulfed in a hug from Hau.

“That was an awesome battle!” he yelled— a bit loudly for close quarters.

“Oof— thanks.” She patted him on the back. “Your turn.”

“Just a minute, we're celebrating you and stuff.”

“Oh my god we can celebrate both of us when we're done. Twice the celebrations.”

“Oh, good point.”

He let her go, turning to face Hapu; Moon could hear her speaking but her attention was drawn to Lillie and Gladion, who had spread out a quilt and were sitting on it. Gladion patted the spot next to him, behind Lillie; so she sat down and leaned on him.

“That was beautiful, Moon,” said Lillie, half-turning. “I could see how hard you've worked and how well you've trained your team.”

“Thanks,” said Moon, pleased.

“You had a minute where you thought you were going to lose, didn't you?” asked Gladion.

“Yeah, when Epicentre used Payback. Super-effective on my ghosty boi, thought we were done for.”
Puck's Pokéball vibrated madly, telling her what he thought of the appellation “ghosty boi”—which reminded her that she needed to heal her teammates. She dug through her bag for healing items and turned her primary attention to Hau and Hapu.

“Hau Akiona. You approach the kahuna of Poni Island. Having completed all the trials set upon this island, are you prepared to face me in battle for my Grand Trial?”

“Yes,” said Hau firmly.

“Then let us begin.”

Moon quickly healed her Pokémon as Hau and Hapu sent out their first battlers. Hapu had gone with Gastrodon this time, and Moon was surprised to see that Hau had sent out BB. The little Crabrawler was by far the least developed member of any of their teams, but she had still always been able to hold her own in battle. And Hau was clearly trying something new—at least, Moon hadn't seen him practicing the technique of using Iron Defense rather than going for a straight attack. It made sense, in practical terms; BB wasn't weak to anything in Gastrodon's movepool, but also didn't have access to much of anything super-effective. Hapu used Muddy Water for a few turns, but BB stubbornly held on, as Hau built up her reserves with Iron Defense and the move had less and less of an effect; finally, when she was as powered up as she could be, Hau had her use Reversal, of all things.

It was devastatingly effective—the use of Muddy Water had worn BB’s HP down even if her Defense was high, and Reversal was stronger when the attacker's HP was low. Gastrodon fainted in one hit.

“Go, Hau!” screamed Lillie.

“That was like, a textbook-perfect use of Reversal,” said Moon, awed. “Somebody's been studying. I don't know when he'd have had time to do that...”

“Well,” said Gladion, his voice delicate. “It's quite possible that he does, occasionally, talk to me instead of either of the two of you.”

Moon turned to grin up at him. “Oh, so you're giving him ideas now?”

“It's a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

“That's wonderful,” said Lillie happily. “I'm glad the two of you are finding things to talk about.”

Gladion's mouth twitched and he nodded once, but otherwise didn't respond. Moon leaned her head on his shoulder again, nudging him with her elbow; he shifted, and one hand slipped around her waist, resting firmly on her hip.

“All right?” he said in her ear.

“Very much so.”

Hapu's next battler was her Golurk—a sensible choice, as Reversal wouldn't affect a Ghost-type Pokémon. Hau grinned and had BB use Bubblebeam instead—which Moon had known, technically, was part of a Crabrawler's repetoire but hadn't registered exactly how useful that would be against a Ground-type specialist—when really only one of Hau's teammates had a naturally super-effective typing against said specialist. Moon had Puck and Macbeth, plus Ariel's immunity; Hau also had an immunity in Sonar, but Uila and Ollie were both weak to Ground-types while Rumble and BB took neutral damage. Moon had faith in her cousin—if she could beat Hapu with
three teammates who were weak to Ground-types, then Hau could certainly do it with two.

BB tried her best, but she didn't have STAB on Bubblebeam so it wasn't quite as strong as Golurk's Earthquake; and plus her HP was already down severely. She managed to hold out for one turn before she fainted, and in her stead Hau sent out Rumble. It was also a very sensible choice, given Rumble's immunity to Ghost-types. Rumble had Bulldoze, which wouldn't have done all that much against a Ground-type; but Moon had forgotten that Hau did use other moves in Rumble's set besides Bulldoze— specifically Pursuit, which he used to devastating super-effectiveness against the Golurk after taking Earthquake like a champion.

“What's the rest of Rumble's moveset? I didn't know about Pursuit— I mostly see Hau using him for Bulldoze.”

“I think Giga Impact for STAB, and then he rotates the last move around depending on what's needed,” answered Lillie. “He's used Protect, Toxic, and Return... I think he tried Solar Beam once, so he could have a Grass-type move; but Rumble is a physical attacker so that never worked out very well.”

“If I'm not mistaken he currently has Smart Strike,” said Gladion. “Yeah, see— there he goes.”

Hapu had sent out Flygon in lieu of Golurk's defeat, and Hau had gone for the aforementioned Smart Strike. It did a reasonable amount of damage, but then Flygon used Earth Power and Rumble was done for.

“Oh, but now he's got options,” murmured Gladion, intent on the battle. “Noivern or Primarina— both would work well here.”

Hau sent out Poppy, but Moon was intrigued by the analysis. “Which would you pick, if you were the one fighting?”

“Primarina, for sure. Dragon-typing is useful for sheer power, but Flygon also has access to that and they're really damn fast. Primarina is immune to Dragon and takes negligible damage from Ground—”

His voice trailed off as Hau shouted, “Poppy, use Ice Beam!”

“Oooh,” said Moon, Lillie, and Gladion in unison.

The Flygon was out in one hit, flattened by a quadruply-effective move; and Hapu nodded thoughtfully.

“I forgot about Ice Beam, damn,” said Gladion, in a tone that suggested he was at least somewhat impressed. “And that's good against her entire team, too... he'd be great at Battle Royals.”

“And Lillie and I are doomed to obscurity?” teased Moon.

“I'm not super interested in any kind of competitive battling,” said Lillie hastily. “I'm really happy just to be able to defend myself, and to work on healing techniques. I never wanted an Audino or a Blissey, but most of my team have access to healing moves and magic.”

“And you're meant for something bigger than the Battle Royal scene, Moon,” said Gladion absently. He wasn't looking at her, but the hand on her waist tightened.

“What's that supposed to mean?”
“You're going to be the Champion, obviously.”

That definitely merited some kind of response but Hau had just flattened Krookodile with Poppy's Moonblast. Epicentre was Hapu's only remaining teammate, and she too was taken out quickly as Hau performed the dance for Oceanic Operetta, summoning a chaotic, beautiful swirl of water in the bleak canyon as Poppy's voice rose high, sweet, and clear above the rush.

“Congratulations,” said Hapu, shaking his hand with a nod. “A truly impressive battle, Hau. You've been working on your technique.”

“I've had some advice,” admitted Hau, gesturing at Gladion. “He's good at battles.”

“Is that so?” Hapu offered Gladion a soft smile. “Then you are well-prepared to face what the future will bring you, and you have had a good teacher besides. It will be to your benefit.”

Gladion went scarlet, but Hau laughed. “Thanks, Kahuna Hapu.”

“It is my pleasure. Here is Groundium Z; and I will demonstrate Tectonic Rage for you once more.”

And with that, they were both done with the Grand Trial of Poni Island. Moon let Lillie hug Hau first but followed suit, patting him on the back. She stepped back— and Gladion, much to her surprise, stepped forward and actually initiated a hug.

Hau's eyes went round, and slightly damp; but he hugged Gladion back. “Thanks, man,” he said quietly.

“I'm trying to be more physically expressive with my emotions,” said Gladion, his voice still painfully neutral. “You're— you're my friend. It means a lot that you're giving me some credit for helping you with this battle even if I did ass-all in reality to help you.”

It seemed as though every time she thought she could not get any happier, Moon reflected, she was proven wrong.

* * * *

“This one is a Tamato berry plant.” Gladion ruffled the leaves of said plant.

“Goli!” said Macbeth, squinting to stare at it.

“Yes, like the ones in Mallow's soup. I didn't know they could grow in the winter,” said Moon, fascinated.

“Normally they can't. They're summer plants in Kanto and Unova, but Alolan winter is much milder than Alolan summer so they grow best in the winter.”

“Wow. And is this one Haban berries?”

“Goli goli!”

“I wonder how you could tell,” said Gladion dryly. “It's not quite ripe, Macbeth— so don't pick it.”
“Green Habans are nice, too.”

“Dark green Habans are nice,” he corrected her. “That's too light to be a ripe green, and I believe this Haban plant is a red one anyway— Alolan cuisine favors red Habans.”

“So does Kantonian, but we like the super-spicy kind.”

“I remember. We need to do that noodle shop date sometime.”

“I don't know if we'll have time for it anytime soon,” said Moon, turning to look at him. “I've got Z-Crystals, and you're getting ready to go to Kanto.”

“My gym challenge will be quick,” Gladion reassured her. “I plan on utilizing public transportation where possible, so I don't have to spend weeks camping to get from place to place. I made a request for it in the gym challenge application.”

“You'll still have to train.”

“Of course, but training doesn't have to include traveling. I can train in and around cities in Kanto, and stay in Pokémon Centers or hotels... though if I'm going on Wicke's dime, which I think I am, she will probably budget for the latter. She's generous like that.”

His voice was soft and fond, and Moon glanced at him to see if she could catch a smile but his back was turned to her, looking up at a sunflower that beamed up toward the sky as Nox and, surprisingly, Ben curled up in his lap. They were on Hapu's roof, with a few of their Pokémon, surrounded by plants both familiar and foreign. Moon could pick out cactuses, some flowers, and vegetables and Berries; but most of what was grown ended up at the neighboring hospital for medical purposes— Haban berries ground in a poultice could add warmth and relax tensed muscles, while Tamato berries apparently made good fertilizer for the rest of the plants. The sunflowers were there, apparently, because they were Hapu's favorite flower; and Moon had noticed bouquets and vases with sunflowers prominently featured inside the house.

Hau and Lillie had commandeered Hapu's basement, for a movie date similar to what Moon and Gladion had done on Christmas. Moon and Hau had battled Hapu in the morning, and it was now afternoon; the sun was beginning to sink in the sky, earlier than usual because it was winter. Hapu's roof was still quite warm, holding heat from the sun. It would be colder once the sun set, Gladion told her; but then they could come back outside after dinner and look at the stars. There weren't many lights out this way, and Moon remembered that what she could see of the constellations in the Vast Poni Canyon had been gorgeous. From here the view was undoubtedly superior, and she was looking forward to it.

“This is a funny-looking cactus,” she said, poking said cactus. “It's not prickly.”

“That's an aloe vera plant,” said Gladion, glancing back cursorily to identify said plant. “Makes good burn cream, and feels great after you've been sunburned. Most of that gets sent over to the hospital.”

“What about this one?”

“I haven't been able to identify that yet.” Gladion squinted across the roof at the plant in question; it had soft, velvety leaves. “I think it might be Mareep's lettuce, but I'm not totally sure.”

“That's a funny name.”

“Yeah. I think Mareep really like eating it or something— that, or someone touched it and thought,
"this feels like a sheep. I hope it's the first one, because this feels more like a cat or a bat than anything else. Imp has fur a lot like this, though it's so short you can't really tell unless you touch him."

“So Imp is soft?”

“When I can get him to sit the fuck still, yeah.”

Moon snickered, and Imp—perched on Macbeth’s shoulder, despite all of Ben's protestations—also laughed. Ben hissed very quietly from Gladion's lap. Moon might have gone over to sit next to Gladion, but her own lap was occupied by Kate and Eleanor, who were getting along like a house on fire (Kate's emotional state was so bright and constantly happy that Ellie could not quite help being drawn to it, Gladion explained) and giggling quietly. Ariel and Null, old friends, were also dozing off in the summer sun; Hero was a bit heavy for the roof so Puck and Rey had elected to stay in their Pokéballs so that all three of them could sit on the ground and vibrate at each other to keep company. It was very soft and quiet and relaxing, and as Moon watched Gladion petting Ben, somehow without getting bitten, a particularly intense affection rose within her. Ben had gravitated to Gladion's lap in order to sulk about Imp taking his usual place—or rather, to sulk about the fact that Macbeth didn't seem to mind the usurper as much as he did. And Gladion had taken this in stride, asking Moon if there was anywhere that Ben really liked or disliked being petted; he was scratching Ben's chest, hitting the sweet spot that produced purrs and avoiding his nose, which was sensitive. Ben had been suspicious at first, staring at Macbeth and Moon; but after being reassured several times, had allowed himself to be petted into tranquility. Not even Hau, who had been with Moon since the beginning, had managed to win Ben's affections over; he was very much a one-woman Pokémon but it seemed that Gladion was to be an exception to the rule.

“Ah, see,” said Gladion softly, almost absently, to Ben. “You're okay. I'm glad you're letting me be your friend. I'm good friends with your mama—”

Ben trilled a lazy correction.

“Well, no, we're not—like that. It's different for humans than for Pokémon.” Gladion went a little pink. “But yes, we're together. So it means a lot that you'll let me do this. I feel honored.”

Moon wasn't going to cry. She wasn't.

“Lu lu,” said Eleanor, reaching up to press a paw to Moon's face.

“Thanks,” said Moon, with a slightly watery chuckle. “I'm happy, don't you worry.”

“Rio.”

“I know you know.”

The hatch that led up to the roof knocked twice, and Hapu's face peered from within as it rose.

“Grandmother has just made a batch of brownies, if you or any of your Pokémon would like some. Dinner should be ready in an hour or so.”

“Thank you,” said Moon.

Hapu nodded, and the hatch closed.

“I'm not feeling brownies, but you can go get some if you want.” Gladion carefully turned himself without disturbing either Nox or Ben in his lap, and laid down on the quilt that was spread out on the roof. “I just want some sunshine.”
Moon opened her mouth to declare her intent of retrieving some brownies for herself and whichever of their Pokémon wanted it; but Gladion's head turned slightly to look at her, one eye half-opening in the sinking sunlight, and she fully registered what he'd said as heat rose to her cheeks.

“Lu rio,” said Eleanor helpfully, climbing out of her lap and pulling Kate with her.

“Y-yeah, I got that,” mumbled Moon.

She scooted over to the quilt and laid down next to Gladion, closing her eyes and letting a more natural warmth soak into her nose and eyelids. Kate and Eleanor were laughing again, and when Ben made a noise of protest Moon opened her eyes to see what was going on. Gladion was up on his elbows slightly, frowning at the four Pokémon; Ben was reluctant to leave Gladion's lap but Kate, Ellie, and Nox were all tugging on him.

“No biting or scratching,” Moon reminded him.

Ben glared at her sulkily, mumbling something she couldn't hear.

“Rio rio,” said Eleanor knowingly.

Ben's ears flattened as he stared at her, then at Moon, then at Gladion.

“Ellie!” said Gladion, turning scarlet. “That's— not what we're doing!”

“Your friends want to play with you,” said Moon, though she could feel her face burning with more than just sunlight. “So if it horrifies you that much to think about us, um, doing stuff, then don't think about it that way. Especially because we aren't doing stuff. Like that.”

Ben leaped from Gladion's lap, skittering off to the far corner of the roof; Macbeth plodded after him with Imp hopping off her shoulder to latch onto the bottom of a hanging plant, upside-down; Kate, Nox, and Ellie followed them over to the corner, leaving Moon and Gladion more or less by themselves.

“That was definitely not subtle,” laughed Moon, lying down flat again.

Gladion, still perched on his elbows, turned to look at her. “Sorry,” he murmured. “Ellie's just— much more forward than I am.”

“If you want to be forward,” said Moon, making extremely deliberate eye contact, “then go ahead and be forward. I can guarantee you I'll enjoy it.”

Gladion blinked at her, and the flush produced by Ellie's remark deepened. “I-I,” he began, and seemed to be lost for words.

It was so often that she found herself flustered by Gladion that it was extremely gratifying to know that she could have the same effect on him.

“Oh my god,” he said finally. “Um. I— okay. I'm still going to have to, um. Work up the nerve. But, um. Okay, yeah.”

“Did I break your brain?”

“Completely shattered it. Gonna have to start from scratch.”

Moon laughed. “Anything I can help with?”
“I'll get over it,” he said easily. “Just need some adjustment time, that's all.”

He sat up properly, rolling over onto his stomach, and reached for one of the pillows that so far neither of them had been using; he grabbed two, setting one down on Moon's face.

“That's my face,” she informed him, muffled by the pillow.

“Yes. I'm being forward, give it a minute.”

Moon laughed, waiting and not bothering to move the pillow. Soon he took it away from her face, and she glanced at him to see that his expression was resolute.

“Um, lift your head?”

Moon obligingly lifted her head, and the pillow was tucked underneath it. “Very forward, making sure I'm comfortable.”

“I said give it a minute. Do you want—” Gladion's voice failed him, and he cleared his throat.

“Little spoon or big spoon?”

“Little spoon,” said Moon, though her voice cracked in the middle of the word spoon. “Yeah.”

He nodded, making a gesture with his hands that was something like turn on your side. Moon stared at him for a few seconds, committing the sight to memory; then she rolled onto her side, away from him. A few moments later, she felt one of his arms slip beneath her neck, the other one draped over her middle; and then warmth and softness enveloping her because Gladion, like Hau, was one of those people who ran like furnaces.

“I could literally fall asleep like this.”

“Yeah, especially with the sun.” Moon closed her eyes again, snuggling back into him. “Hey, you're great. This isn't what I thought you were going for, but I'm very okay with it.”

“What did you think I was going for?”

“I was wondering if maybe you were reconsidering your stance on kissing,” admitted Moon. The pause was so long that she feared she had offended him; but when he answered, his voice was low and rough, making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. “I'm sorely tempted, sunshine; but I do want to wait a little longer.”

“That's fine,” managed Moon. “Totally fine. I have absolutely no problem with wai—”

The arm that was under her neck bent, his hand curving up to cover her mouth. “Don't think about it too hard,” he advised her. “It's worse when we're talking about it and thinking about it. When I know you're thinking about it.”

Moon smiled into his hand, and he let it fall. “Okay,” she said softly. “Do you want to just take a nap, then?”

“Sounds amazing, but we can talk if you want to.”

“We can also talk when either of us is travelling. I don't get to take a nap with you very often.”

“And Arceus knows both of us could probably use one.” His head moved behind her, and she felt his nose and forehead pressing into her hair; his voice was already slurring. “Could stay here
forever, honestly.”

“So could I,” said Moon, closing her eyes. “Good night.”

“Night, sunshine.”

* * * * *

To: samueloak@pmail.co.kan
CC: satoshired@pmail.co.kan
From: garyo@pmail.co.kan
Re: unusual Trainer/Gym challenge applicant

Application# 2843 <----- links to this specific application in the online daabase

This one looks like it comes with a lot of extra baggage, but I thought the extenuating circumstances were important. This is the one that's connected to the Aether Foundation. It's not just that they've made special requests about him; he's also connected to Marion Hawkins— you know, Red's and my unofficial baby sister. She's currently doing an island challenge in Alola (equivalent to a Gym challenge here) and by all reports is doing very well.

I'm not asking you to consider favoring this kid over the bajillion Kantonian applicants we get every year; I'm asking for you to consider giving the kid Dex-entry field assignments. By all accounts he's far more experienced than most brand new Trainers just getting started on their journey; and if you read the classified material that came with his application you know he's seen some shit. He can handle anything you throw at him.

I think Moon's hoping you'll give him an elemental starter, too. He'd be suited for one, according to his high school transcripts— they're a little messy because he was homeschooled, but the grades speak for themselves and he got a GED, no trouble at all. With the real-life field experience, the kid probably qualifies for at least an associate's degree in Pokébotany/Pokébio. I'd be willing to handle his end of things if you'd rather focus on the research partnerships that Ms. Wicke from the Aether Foundation is proposing.

If nothing else, I think you should read Moon's letter of recommendation, because she wrote one as well. It wasn't submitted with the official paperwork because she's not really qualified to recommend anyone just yet, but I was really impressed with it.

Look it over and tell me what you think. If you forget to do it, I will be unbearably annoying about it until you remember. :)

- Attachment: [reasons why you should accept Gladion into the gym challenge.pdf]

—Blue

* * * * *
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN (so basically Professor Oak):

Gladion Mohn should be accepted into Kanto's gym challenge for the following reasons:

1. He's probably like, overqualified in terms of academics. I saw his GPA and academic record when Ms. Wicke forwarded everything to me (with permission, I'm not THAT nosy). I didn't finish valedictorian or anything, but I consider myself pretty smart and I know I would have qualified for an elemental starter had I done the gym challenge. Gladion's records are even better than mine.

2. He's legitimately a good person. Sometimes he's angry, or sad, or afraid. But so is literally everyone. And given the stuff he's been through, some of which you've probably already noted in the application, he's got every right to be angry, sad, or afraid all the time. And yet he isn't. He tries to be calm and happy and brave, even when he doesn't really feel that way.

3. He loves Pokémon. Like, possibly Red-levels of loving Pokémon. He never yells at his teammates or says anything unkind to them.

4. He didn't get the chance to do an island challenge due to struggles in his family. At this point he's too experienced to get anything out of the island challenge as it stands. He would benefit from going to a different region instead.

5. He's connected to Aether and you can do business stuff with them.

6. He's got some personal stuff to discuss with Red and Blue. It's related to both the Aether stuff and the family stuff.

7. He WANTS this. He's ambitious and he works hard. He will put a hundred and ten percent into the gym challenge.

8. He has some personal stuff to work out on his own and a Pokémon journey would be really good for that.

9. He's been through a lot of shit to be perfectly honest, and he deserves this.

10. His Pokémon (specifically one of his Pokémon) have also been through a lot of shit, and deserve this just as much as he does.

And here's some reasons that probably don't matter to you, but I'm going to say them anyway.

11. He's my friend. (okay my boyfriend actually, whatever)

12. Kanto is gorgeous in the spring and summer and I'd like him to see that.

13. I want him to meet Red and Blue.

14. I'm definitely not ready to say this out loud or to his face, but I love him. And I want him to be happy.

Okay I guess that's it. This is kind of stupid but I'm going to send it anyway. And then I will probably immediately regret it, but like... what can you do.

Sincerely yours,
Chapter End Notes

If you think that Hapu just happening to ask about Kommonium Z is a bit of a cop-out — well, um, it is. This is the chapter I wrote concurrent with publishing the last chapter of A Bouquet in Four Parts, and it's really from here on out that I've managed to reduce Winter Rose to something I can write without getting totally exhausted. Because this part shouldn't take as long as an entire island!!! It's just that I wanted to include a lot of fluffy character development, and Mina's trial is longer than most, and there's a ton of Z-Crystals to collect... yeah. If the pace of the rest of WR feels rushed, it's because I've reworked the remaining plot to avoid burnout.

Gladion doing a grumpy glomp onto Moon is just The Best Thing and you can't change my mind

There's a lot of “rest after mental health struggle” themes going on in this story... totally not related to my personal mental health struggles or anything... totally...

HEY SO THIS DEAD TREE PLACE HAS BEEN NAMED BY THE GREAT PEOPLE ON THE DISCORD SERVER AND YOU WILL FIND OUT WHAT IT IS NEXT CHAPTER!!! If you would like to have occasional future input on story ideas please request an invite in the comments and I will send you one!!!

“I like you... I just— I just like you.” —lowkey this is definitely Gladion trying to say I love you without saying I love you. It takes Moon a minute but she gets there. I hate both of them they're such awkward dorks dsfkdsfsalkdas

Everyone is in a room with a double door. The door bursts open; in walk Wicke and Hapu, side by side. They are both wearing sunglasses. Epicentre the Mudsdale is right behind them, also wearing sunglasses. The music plays: “I'M A BOSS ASS BITCH I'M A BOSS ASS BITCH” but just that part of the song, because I hate the rest of it. Everyone applauds. You're welcome.

Moon: *refers to Puck as “ghosty boi”*
Puck: u wot m8? u havin a giggl there m8? ill bash ur fken ead in i sware on me mum
Moon: I pretty much am your mu—
Puck: U WOT M8

“You're going to be the Champion, obviously.” —literally everyone knows this and Moon is like “I mean yeah I'm gonna try, but—” and the rest of them are like “no, shut the fk up you're going to be the Champion just you watch”

Hapu tells Gladion that he's a good teacher— which is literally a compliment from a kahuna to a *future* kahuna so like goddamn that's gotta be validating as fuck

MOON AND GLADION BONDING WITH EACH OTHERS POKEMON TEAMS ESPECIALLY BEN??!!??!! I AM HIGHKEY EMOTIONAL RN

So the stuff that makes peppers hot (capsaicin? capsiacan? Caspian sea? Capsicle?)is, in fact, used in some homeopathic/natural remedies to facilitate warmth and muscle
In Pokémon Refresh, Jolteon’s sweet spot is actually his chest/tummy while he gets mad if you boop his snoot. This makes sense for Ben because he has been known to be a Bitey Fellow.

Moon: “No biting or scratching.”
Ellie: “Seriously dude come hang out with us so they can mate or whatever it is humans do when they like each other”
Gladion: “ELLIE WHAT THE FUCK NO”

Gladion is such a precious bab—his idea of being forward is literally asking Moon if she wants to spoon. I DIE.

I know I write Blue as kind of immature and arrogant, but see the thing is that he and Red are both Whole-Ass Adults so sometimes he can actually talk about things like a Whole-Ass Adult... though he has the ability to be annoyingly persistent, as he reminds us in the last line of the email.

oh you thought I'd missed Samson Oak, did you? you thought WRONG
The cause of this fair gift in me is wanting,

Chapter Summary

Dragon's Pass, Altar of the Moone, Ancient Poni Path, Poni Beach

Moon finally learns why things have happened the way that they did.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Sonnet 87 by William Shakespeare.

Tumblr: jooniеперетree.tumblr.com (I'm tired of pretending it's not just a BTS stan account lmao but if you aren't on the Discord and you wanna message me privately/not in a comment then that's the best place to go)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: comment for an invite link!!!! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

chat: the four musketeers

heroic hau: ok but consider this

heroic hau: hapu's trial place

heroic hau: shud totally b called

heroic hau: dead tree road

great gladion: No.

lovely lillie: All right, we shouldn't reject his suggestion out of hand. Hau, do you have reasons why you like that name?

heroic hau: thank u 4 not bein RUDE, lillie

heroic hau: but the point is that the tree is dead

heroic hau: & it's in the road

heroic hau: so, dead tree road

marvelous moon: We can consider it if we don't come up with anything better.

great gladion: I'm now actually invested in finding a better name, because I don't like that one.
heroic hau: i try 2 contribute 2 this group friendship & this is the thx i get

lovely lillie: Thank you for the suggestion, Hau.

heroic hau: do U like it tho

lovely lillie: ...not really, sweetie.

heroic hau: :/

lovely lillie: <3

heroic hau: <3

marvelous moon: Go be gross in your own chat lmao

* * * *

“I'm thinking we stop in to see Totem Kommo-o first,” suggested Moon, as their Charizards landed at the base of the stairway that led up to the Altar of the Moone. “He's closer, and I'm supposed to go see him as soon as I can anyway.”

“Your call,” said Hau, with a shrug. “Is Dead Tree Road really such a terrible name?” He looked a little mopey, and Moon felt kind of bad for making fun of him in the chat.

“It's very, um, literal,” she said, patting his shoulder. “And it's not the only place in the road with a dead tree. There are a whole bunch of them closer to Dragon's Pass.”

Hau nodded ruefully. “I see your point.”

“I've been thinking about that, though.”

“Uh-oh.”

Moon flapped her hand impatiently at him when he snickered. “Oh, shut up. Like I said, it's not the only dead tree, and it isn't actually dead, either. That tree is part of the big root-system that runs through all of Poni Island. It's part of the Battle Tree. I think there are some trees that aren't somehow connected to it, but The Traveller's Guide to Alola—”

“—which you complain about like every twenty minutes—”

“—says that nearly all of them are,” continued Moon, pointedly ignoring the interruption. “So I think we ought to incorporate something about that.”

“Oh, that's a neat idea. I'll throw it to Lillie and Gladion and see what they think.”

“I could do that.”

“Don't you have a Totem to talk to?”

Moon squinted at him. “Why do I feel like you're trying to not come with me?”
“Because I'm trying not to come with you.” Hau shifted in place. “Look, I— when we were on Melemele and Gramps took you to find Snorlium Z, I knew he didn't want me to come. His excuses were kind of a load of BS. But that was one of the only ones I was really curious about. It felt like... I dunno, like I should know about that one.”

“But not this one?”

He shook his head. “It's got to do with Hapu,” he explained. “This is her island, you know? I don't feel like I have to know too much about it. I can come here respectfully, but it doesn't seem like home to me.”

Moon considered that for a few moments. “Okay,” she said finally. “Yeah, I respect that. Everywhere in Alola has felt like home to me, so I don't really get it. But I won't make you come with me.”

“Much appreciated.” He grinned at her, pulling out his Dex. Moon grinned back and walked back towards Dragon's Pass.

Evidently her arrival was expected, for the moment she reached the pedestal where Dragonium Z was kept, a swish and a thump sounded, as Totem Kommo-o leaped down from one of the large holes in the ceiling. A blue-and-white blur followed, peering at Moon from behind Kommo-o with curious, round eyes— Totem Drampa, who had not been her opponent. They were both large—much larger than Moon


Totem Kommo-o's head dipped once in a regal nod.

“Are you— do you want another battle?”

A shake, this time. Totem Drampa walked forward. It was about eye level with Moon, walking on four legs. The large head dipped, sniffing at Moon's waist area.

“What are you— oh, my Pokémon? Um, do you want to meet them?”

Two nods. Moon shrugged and selected Puck's ball from her belt, letting him out. He tensed, ready to battle; but she reached out.

“They're just curious, we're not fighting,” she assured him.

Puck eyed the Totems as Moon let out first Ariel, then Ben. The Totems gazed serenely at Moon's teammates. Macbeth, Hero, and Kate followed.

“Did you want to, I dunno, talk to them?” said Moon, uncertain.

Totem Kommo-o nodded, and Totem Drampa lifted one paw and made a shooing motion.

“You... want me to go away?”

“Hoo deci,” said Puck, still side-eyeing the Totems.

“Just out of earshot?”

Two more nods from the Totems. Moon shrugged and walked away, giving them about thirty feet. A soft rumble told her that Totem Kommo-o was speaking to her teammates, but she couldn't make
out exactly what he was saying—firstly, it was too quiet; and secondly, each Pokémon had its own way of communicating and it took time to adjust to the communication style of a Pokémon you weren't familiar with. It varied from species to species, but could differ wildly between individuals of the same species—one had only to look at Red's Pikachu to see how different it was from others. Most Pikachu were quite friendly, and a little prone to mischief; they tended to be chatty and informal. But Red's Pikachu, while definitely prone to mischief, had over time taken on more of the characteristics of his Trainer. Most people didn't know that the most famous Pikachu in the world was actually stubborn and somewhat grumpy.

An even quieter noise indicated that Totem Drampa was speaking. Moon watched her friends; they too had their own personalities. She hadn't battled with many Trainers who used a Decidueye—most of them were professional Trainers, and therefore spent most of their time at the Battle Tree or travelling to other regions—but she knew Puck was a fairly typical representation of the Decidueye personality. Like Red's Pikachu, Puck was on the grumpier and more reserved end of the spectrum. However, Moon had fought many Trainers who used a Toucannon. Ariel was chattier and friendlier than most of them; but she too was quite normal. Ben... well, Ben was a special case, having been raised from an egg; but usually Eevee of his personality type evolved into Umbreon, and he was unusually temperamental for any type of Eeveelution. Macbeth was far shyer than most Golisopod; one had only to look at Guzma's Goliath to see that much. Moon chalked it up to the abuse and fear that Macbeth had experienced before she had joined the team. Hero was logical and practical, blunt in a way that only robotic types could achieve but with a very dry, almost morbid sense of humor. They reminded her of Gladion. Both of them had come to rescue her in the desert, so there was a soft, protective side to Hero as well. And Kate was far bouncier than Soliera's Poipole—Moon hadn't seen any others, so she didn't have much of a basis for comparison.

Totem Kommo-o spoke once more, and all of her teammates sat or stood up straight. They appeared to be having some sort of interrogation session. The only one of her teammates who seemed comfortable with the situation was Kate—and whether that was because she was oblivious or because she didn't care, Moon wasn't sure. Ben and Macbeth both sat still and rigid, clearly uneasy. Hero's expression didn't change much in general because they weren't very emotional in general; but the blank face they currently sported told Moon another story. Ariel shifted in place, one foot to another; and Puck's eyes darted from Kommo-o to Drampa to Kate, who was doing lazy front-flips while hovering in place and giggling quietly.

Finally, Totem Drampa said a few words, and Totem Kommo-o said a few more; and then they both nodded. Ben shot across the thirty feet to Moon, leaping up so that she had an armful of Jolteon to deal with. Macbeth was second only because she was much larger and slower. Moon recalled both of them, amused. Hero stomped over with Ariel sitting on its back.

"Was it bad? Ben and Macbeth came back like Zubats out of hell."


"Formal? I mean, that's... good, I guess? Was it like a test?"

Kate seemed to be talking to the Totems about something—probably chattering their ears off, judging by the expressions on their faces. Puck was waiting for her, anxiety beginning to creep into his face. Totem Drampa didn't seem to mind the conversation but Totem Kommo-o looked as though he wished he were elsewhere.

"Should we rescue them?"

Hero let out a rumbly laugh. "Gro bel meta."
“Which ones are we rescuing, indeed.” Moon stuck her hands in her pockets, walking in the general direction of the Totems; Hero followed, Ariel still sitting on its back.

“—poi polo, polopolo poi polopopo poiiii,” Kate was saying excitedly. The gist of her conversation, from what Moon could tell, seemed to be about auras—which made sense, when one considered the Ultra Beast aura that surrounded Kate in battle.

“Polo poi?” Kate concluded, looking at Totem Kommo-o inquiringly.

The dragon blinked at her for a few moments, then shrugged, turned around, and began walking away.

“Dram dra,” said Totem Drampa gently, leaning forward to sniff at her. His nose wrinkled for a few moments, and then he made a noise that was quite clearly a sneeze.

“What do you mean, blood of the dragons?” said Moon, bewildered.

Totem Drampa also shrugged before leaping into the air and sailing out of one of the ceiling holes.

“Po poi!” Kate called happily after them.

“What were you talking about, Katie?” Moon opened her arms, and Kate zoomed into them for a hug. “Sounds kind of ominous.”

Kate blinked at her for a few moments, then screwed up her little face into a frown. “Poi po,” she murmured, reaching out to press a tiny paw against Moon's cheek.


“What the fuck,” gasped Moon. The foreign memories faded—now hers and not hers. Kate blinked at her. “Did you just. Did we just.”

Kate put her paw back on Moon's face. Nest-mother talks memories like Sirens talk strengths. Don't like Sirens.

She remembered a conversation she'd had with Phyco about Poipole and Naganadel, not too far from where she now stood in Dragon's Pass. Naganadel had some limited psychic powers, and could access memories and motives—it was possible that Kate was preparing to evolve, if she was able to do the same thing.


**Nest-mother. Naga-thingy no.**
“Well, it's what they're called here. And... Caretaker, that's Dulse. Firehair's got to be Zossie, I don't know anyone else with that color... and that makes Phyco the Scientist, and Soliera the Soldier?”

Kate nodded, beaming.

“Redsun is obviously Solgaleo. Newmoon must be Nebby. Blossom is... Lillie? And I'm Mama?”

Another nod.

“Trixie hoo,” interjected Puck, gesturing to the Dragonium Z pedestal with an outstretched wing.

“Oh!” Moon felt like an idiot. “Duh, blood of the dragons... so Naganadel are Dragons, too?”

*Nest-mother Naga-thingy blood of the Dragons.*

“Oh.” She was fairly certain that Dulse had not covered this in any of the questions she'd asked him about Poipole and Naganadel. “That's pretty neat, actually. I don't have a whole lot to fight with Dragons, and the Poison-type means that you've got something to counter Fairies.”

Kate nodded a third time, nuzzled her face against Moon's, and reached down to tap on the blue-and-gold ball that she had referred to as a “little home.”

“I get you.” Moon grinned, recalling Kate, Ariel, and Hero to their balls. Puck rolled his wing-joint bones, which Moon was used to thinking of as shoulders; she let him stretch for a few moments before recalling him as well.

Hau looked up as she approached. “We have some ideas that we all kind of like about the name,” he said. “Check your Rotom.”

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

**heroic hau**: k so moon's busy talkin 2 the totem like hapu told her 2 but she said the dead tree is part of the battle tree & most trees on the island r part of the battle tree so like we should name the dead tree smth related 2 that

**lovely lillie**: Oh, that makes sense.

**great gladion**: I'm going to do some quick research and get back to you on this.

**lovely lillie**: The roots are spread out along the canyon, aren't they?

**heroic hau**: yea

**heroic hau**: remember like that 1 time that gladion touched a root & it went all green & funky

**lovely lillie**: I do remember this, yes.

**great gladion**: File under “weird tasks from Tapu Bulu thing.”
great gladion: He is, after all, half Grass-type.

heroic hau: w8 omg rly?

great gladion: ...did you not know this?

heroic hau: no!!!

heroic hau: i wouldn't have guessed grass tho b/c he's red and grass-types usually rnt red

heroic hau: tapu koko makes sense b/c he's electric and yellow

heroic hau: & so does tapu lele b/c she's psychic and pink

heroic hau: so lowkey i kinda thought tapu bulu would be fire or fighting or smth idk

lovely lillie: But Tapu Fini is a Water-type and violet, which is generally associated more with Poison-types or Ghost-types.

heroic hau: yea but water can look purple 2

heroic hau: idk

heroic hau: what kind of tree is the tree

great gladion: Preliminary research suggests that the Battle Tree and accompanying root-system is a baobab.

heroic hau: a whatnow

great gladion: Did you forget how to read in the thirty seconds since my last text?

lovely lillie: That wasn't an “I don't comprehend what you're saying” what, that was a “wow, how weird and/or interesting” what.

great gladion: Why can't people just say what they mean?

great gladion: That remark was not directed specifically at Hau or anyone else. It's a general complaint I have about the entire world.

great gladion: At any rate, the Battle Tree and all of the trees connected it do have an actual name, though most people don't use it. They're called Pando.

lovely lillie: What about Pando Path?

heroic hau: alliterative, i like it

great gladion: The issue I have with that descriptor is that technically the entirety of the Vast Poni Canyon is, in fact, a “Pando path.” Pando's roots are found throughout the canyon. So that doesn't really differentiate between the clearing with the dead tree and the rest of the canyon.

lovely lillie: Oh, you're right.

heroic hau: ok wait
heroic hau: so do either of u kno like, old alolan

great gladion: The language? No, Lillie and I were both made to learn Kalosian growing up.

great gladion: I've forgotten most of it.

lovely lillie: I text both Ilima and my private therapist in Kalosian to stay in practice.

lovely lillie: Also, because most people don't know Kalosian so they can't see what I'm talking about with my therapist.

heroic hau: that's pretty neat

heroic hau: well i actually kno like, a lil bit of old alolan

heroic hau: most people do actually. the world standard is like a weird hybrid mix of kantonian and unovan, but alolan gets mixed in a lot here as well. most names of places here are in old alolan, b/c it stands out more

heroic hau: well anyway i found this

heroic hau: “Aina: earth or land. However, in Alola, Aina means more than just the ground beneath our feet. Aina is a connection to everything around us, an expression of years long since past when Alolans lived in greater connection with the earth and nature.”

heroic hau: it's from a pikipedia page but i ran the word thru a translation app & it checks out

great gladion: Okay, I actually really like that

great gladion: It's symbolic on multiple levels, and it seems especially potent here on Poni Island — where the people are more in touch with the earth and nature than they are in the rest of Alola.

great gladion: But I still want to incorporate Pando. If the Battle Tree has a proper name, we should probably be using it more often. By putting it in the name of the path, Trainers will learn about the tree and what it means before they ever travel there.

heroic hau: @marvelous moon r u done reading yet

marvelous moon: I love all of you with my whole heart and soul.

heroic hau: @great gladion *o*

great gladion: @heroic hau Stop being ridiculous.

marvelous moon: ANYWAY I kind of like Aina Pando, just by itself. It's a tree that's connected to the entire world around us.

lovely lillie: Aina Pando...

lovely lillie: It sounds nice when you say it out loud. Aina Pando.

heroic hau: i like it 2! it's very like traditional and simple

heroic hau: which i think will appeal 2 hapu
“Aina Pando,” said Hau out loud, as they reached the top of the staircase. “That's really neat. I kind of love it so much.”

“I appreciate the compliment,” chuckled Moon. She tucked Rotom back into her belt pouch and looked around at the Altar of the Moone. The stone was still pitted and damaged in places where Necrozma and Nebby had fought, only a few weeks ago; crumbling debris was scattered around the platform in piles. “So, do we just like... call Nebby?”

“How would we do that? We already took the Moon Flute back to Exeggutor Island.”

“What about the Sun Flute?”

“I think Wicke had someone return it to the Lake of the Sunne.” Hau cupped his hands around his mouth to shout. “Hey, Nebby! Are you home right now?”

“Hau, that's not going to work.”

Oh, it's the bookworm and the prince!!! It's so nice to see you!!!

Nebby soared out from behind the Altar, bright-eyed and cheerful; a few moments after, the red Solgaleo followed, a rather sulky expression on his face.

“You were saying?” said Hau smugly.

Moon elected to ignore him. “Sorry, were you busy?”

Yes, said the Solgaleo grumpily.

We were, but it is our job to serve humans and Pokémon who need our assistance. Nebby turned to look at Hau, squinting. Your aura has gotten much clearer recently.

“My whatnow?”

Your aura. It was only a little bit sparkly the last time I saw you. Now it's almost all gold. Nebby's head cocked thoughtfully. Perhaps Tapu Koko will be speaking with you soon.

“Well, I need to go visit him anyway, so I'll take Hau with me,” suggested Moon.

“No thanks, I'd like to stay alive.”

The Tapus do not kill really important people, said Nebby, with twinkling eyes. Otherwise the bookworm and the brother and I would all be bleached bones in the desert of the red island.

“Thanks for that charming mental image,” said Moon dryly. “I do actually have a reason for coming here, though. Do you have your own Z-Crystal?”
Something heavy slammed into her, knocking her down flat on her back. The red Solgaleo stood snarling over her, teeth bared.

*How did you know about that?* he demanded. *Who has been telling you our secrets?*

*Stop that, cousin!* scolded Nebby, batting at the red Solgaleo with her wings. *She is collecting crystals for Grandmother, remember?*

“So there is a crystal,” confirmed Moon, feeling satisfaction rising in her chest despite the intimidating jaws so close to her face.

*Yes, there is. I will get you a piece. There is not very much, because there is only ever one Lunala living on Terra at a time. But you are lucky, for Terra is the only place where a Lunala has kept one of Grandmother Starlight’s crystals. Cousin, let her up.*

The red Solgaleo reluctantly stepped off of Moon, backing away; Nebby rose and flew back around behind the altar.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” said Moon apologetically to the red Solgaleo. “I don’t have any nefarious purposes, I promise. I just need a piece to give to Necrozma.”

The red Solgaleo was quiet for a few moments. *I thought only of Ne— of Luna,* he said, tilting his head in the direction that Nebby had flown. *She is yet young, and there are those who would seek to take advantage of her kindness. And it is Grandmother Starlight I fear far more than I do you. We have only had Sol after Sol in the Spireland, after she ate our twin Lunas. And my light, even dimmed as it is by my color, would be too harsh for the Spireland without a moon to balance it. It would become a fiery, arid desert.*

“I’m sorry,” said Moon, not really sure what else to say.

*Do not be sorry for things that are not your fault. I overreacted.*

*I found it!*

Nebby flew back around the corner, carrying something awkwardly heavy with psychic power—it floated after her, with a hazy violet mist shimmering beneath to keep it airborne. She set it down on the Altar.

“That is,” said Moon, after studying it for a few moments, “a very large rock.”

“Definitely a Z-Crystal though,” added Hau. “And definitely Lunalium Z. You don't need that big of a piece, do you?”

“Nah. I can chip a piece off— if that's okay with you?” Moon asked Nebby.

*I do not mind. I have not used it much, and I think it will grow back.*

It took some precisely-applied Leaf Blades from Puck, but Moon managed to get a piece that would fit into the Z-Ring where she was keeping them. She only had two slots left, besides the one she was holding in reserve for her own Icium Z. She was going to have to start keeping them somewhere safe. There was an extra pouch on her belt that would probably do the trick.

“Thanks,” she said to Nebby. “I really appreciate it.”

*I am glad to help.* Nebby’s gaze was fixed on the Z-Crystals. *Which ones do you have left to find?*
“Well, let me see. I already gave all the elemental ones away except for Fairium and Groundium, so I'll need to give her one each of those. I don't have Icium yet, either. And here's the one from Marshadow... then Incinium and Primarium. Then there's Snorlium, Mimikium, Eevium, Pikanium and Pikashunium except I don't know which is which, Aloraichium, Lycanium, Tapubulium, Kommonium, and now Lunarium.”

Moon held out her wrist for Nebby to look at.

So, you are missing stones from three of the Tapus, she concluded, and also from my brother Sol on the red island?

She had to think about it. “I guess so, yeah. I didn't realize how fast we'd been collecting them, but we're still in a hurry. I don't know where on Mount Lanakila I'll find Icium Z or, for that matter, Necrozma. And it can take ages to climb Mount Lanakila.”

Well, if you are in a hurry to visit the gods, I can help you with that. You will still have to visit Sol — he has not and will not leave the red island until all of the wickedness and conflict has been resolved. But I will call the Tapus here to help you.

“The Tapus—”

“Lunaaa!”

There was a flash of blinding white light, at which Moon had to screw her eyes closed to protect them. Once the scarlet behind her eyelids began to fade, she risked opening them.

All four of the Tapus hovered over the altar. The red Solgaleo had faded quietly into the background, lying down on his stomach to watch the proceedings with interest; Nebby floated in the center, with Tapu Lele and Tapu Bulu on her left and Tapu Koko and Tapu Fini on her right.

What is it now, young Luna? Tapu Bulu smacked his hooves together. I have seen these mortals too recently, and I already gave them my stone. If I could have left you home, uncle, I would have. But I don't know how to call only three Tapus at a time. And the four of you belong together anyway. So just sit for a minute and deal with it. My island is too broken to be left alone.

Sol can watch it for a few minutes, said Nebby firmly, turning to stare at him with beady red eyes. For a few moments there was silence, and then Tapu Bulu inclined his head once.

It seemed to be acquiescence, for Nebby turned to look at the other Tapus. This is Moon, she said, which was surprising— Moon hadn't really been sure that Nebby knew her name. She is helping Grandmother Starlight to put the pieces of herself back together, but she is in a great hurry. Tapu Bulu has already given her a stone, which is why he is grumpy to be here. Could the rest of you give her a stone, too?

Ah, said Tapu Fini, floating forward to look directly down at Moon. Hello. How are you finding your destiny?

“Was this my purpose, then?” said Moon gesturing at her Z-Ring. “Collecting these to heal Necrozma?”

In part. Tapu Fini's eyes gleamed. I was listening to you say a new name today. I consider it a gift, for myself and for Hapu. And you have done some work for Bulu that he has not and will not thank
you for, because he is not prone to manners—

—SISTER—

—but that work has been of help to me as well.

“I can't know about it?”

Tapu Fini’s head shook slowly. It is... sensitive information. We have tried to play as minimal a role as possible in shaping your futures. You must be allowed to choose your path, or else we are no better than those who seek to enslave our power.

“Like Foxg—”

If you speak the traitor’s name out loud in my presence I will gore you where you stand, said Tapu Bulu calmly.

He will not, but I advise you to avoid saying it anyway. Tapu Fini withdrew one hand, pulling it into her shell; then it emerged, and she held out a blue crystal with pink sparkles. There are many of these around my cave. If you should need another one, you are welcome to help yourself. I will not miss any of them.

She glided backwards. Nebby turned to look at Tapu Lele, who nodded once and approached Moon.

It has been some time, little rainbow.

Moon blinked. “Little rainbow?”

White light consists of every color at once, does it not? Tapu Lele waved one hand at Nebby. She had to gather each color before she could become pure enough to withstand the brightness of the Blinding One.

“Shouldn't she be the little rainbow, then?”

I'm a moon, not a rainbow, said Nebby teasingly.

Your aura is rainbowed.

Moon frowned at the unfamiliar phrase, but it sparked a memory. “I saw a picture of myself, kind of— the Raichu that lives in the lighthouse showed me. Is it kind of like that?”

Yes, that is exactly what I am talking about. Tapu Lele turned to look deliberately at Tapu Koko. Though my brother will have more to say to you, and to Hau, about that.

She held out her own fist, dropping a bright-pink crystal into Moon's hand. Moon took the crystal, but then Tapu Lele’s other hand reached out, pressing softly into the center of Moon's forehead.

Do not mark her, said Tapu Fini, warning in her tone. If it were any of our right to mark her, it would be mine. You claimed yours first.

It was not a proper claim, just a blessing. So too is this. The ancient eyes grew oddly kind. Moon Hawkins, the last time I met you I was much more worried about Lillie Mohn. She had suffered much for one so young. I offered her healing and comfort, a reminder that when she looks in the mirror she can see more than her mother. My mark will not fade or wash away.
Moon hadn’t fully understood that, about the hair. Lillie did look a lot like Lusamine, and she’d struggled with finding herself worthy or lovable or even just pretty. In that context, the pink streak made much more sense.

But since that day, I have worried far more about you.

“About me?” said Moon, bewildered.

Since I met you, you have suffered things no one so young as you ought to have suffered. Tapu Lele’s tone was solemn. Your mind was violated by Nihilego. You took on the burden of love for one who passed so briefly in and out of your life, as wind passes through a candle’s flame; and you bore the grief of losing that love. You defied law and nature in order to rescue a friend, and were seriously injured because of it. You were preyed upon by a shade who had broken people older and stronger than you. You bore guilt not your own and chose to rescue beasts you did not know. You watched your friends and loved ones suffer, betrayed by someone who should have loved them more. You faced your fear of the fall countless times as you walked through my sister’s path to this very altar. You prevented Grandmother Starlight from wreaking havoc in Alola. You challenged Nihilego again, to rescue your friend and your enemy. And you fought Grandmother Starlight, saved Alola’s young moon, and generously gave everything you had and more to help both of them.

Moon stared at Tapu Lele, surprised. “Well,” she said finally, looking away, “when you put it that way it sounds really impressive and sad and whatnot, but mostly it was all luck and madness in the moment. It's just, you know. Life.”

Moon. Tapu Lele's hand, soft and hot, curled down to Moon's chin and raised it again. My sister told you once that we chose you, she said plainly. That is true. We hoped for you to restore Necrozma, which you are doing. And we hope that you will yet assist those who are working to repair what is broken in Alola. But we never intended for you to take on such heavy burdens, most of which are the fault of human greed and hurt. All this you have suffered, and yet you insist that it is not so much, that it is not so bad.

“Well, it isn't! Just look at Lillie and Gladion—”

I should think you know better than to argue with a god, said Tapu Lele, amused.

“She really doesn't,” pointed out Hau, though there was nervousness in his voice. Tapu Koko made a noise that Moon suspected was laughter.

The suffering of others does not negate your own by comparison. And you have been particularly affected by the Nihilego, because your strength is not simply your intelligence. It is your desire to use your intelligence to help others. Why do you think they made you slow and weak in speech? You always want to help, but they made it so that you couldn't. It was designed to induce despair in you, and it worked. They have hurt you in a way that affects you uniquely. It is all right to admit that they have hurt you.

Moon stared at her, throat suddenly thick; her eyes were warming, dampening. “I,” she began, but she was suddenly at a loss for words.

It had been something she hadn't quite understood about the Nihilego— why the dizzying speed of ideas had been accompanied by slowness. It had been devastating— was still devastating. But this made sense, locking into her heart; a missing piece of the puzzle.

You begin to understand. Tapu Lele’s voice was gentle. And because it was through no fault of your own that your strength of character was used against you, I offer you healing such that my
Something warm filled Moon's chest—something so big and bright and soft that she had to breathe in sharply, sucking in air before it cocooned her. The inhale caused her tears to break, to fall wetly down her cheeks. The air came out ragged, and back in more ragged; and then she was sobbing, shoulders shaking with the force of it.

*It's all right. You've been so brave, for so long. Thank you for bearing this. Please rest now.*

It was as though a glass wall slid down in her memories. She was on one side of the glass, and the Nihilego both at Aether Paradise and in the void were on the other. There was no hint of creeping voices, no pain; and the relief of their absence was sharp and arid and made her cry harder. She could look at the memories, and understand them; but they did not make her flinch away or spiral into darkness. The fear that had quietly plagued her was gone.

*I think you broke her,* remarked Tapu Koko. *You might wish to rethink your healing strategy, sister.*

His was the only mind-voice that Moon had not yet heard; and it was surprisingly young. Tapu Lele sounded like an older woman—rather like Moon's mother. Tapu Bulu was oddly young as well but much rougher, and Tapu Fini's mind voice was around the same age as Plumeria and Guzma. But Tapu Koko's voice was that of a boy, not much younger than her; Jeremiah, Ki-moon, and Almas came to mind.

*I know what I am about, brother.* Tapu Lele released Moon, gliding backwards to her place next to Tapu Bulu. *It is your turn.*

Tapu Koko floated forward, arms crossed. His gaze flicked from Moon, to Hau, to Moon again.

*Here is my stone for Grandmother Starlight,* he said finally, holding it out; golden yellow with flecks of pink fire. Moon put it in her belt pouch. *Keep it safe. The only reason I gave you the Sparkling Stone was because you were on my island. It really ought to have been Fini, because I had another person to whom I should have properly given a stone. Hala understood when I talked to him about it, and promised he would keep quiet about my little game.*

Moon stared at him, sniffling; she wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I might just be loopy from crying, but I don't really know what you're talking about."

*He is very good at not explaining things,* said Tapu Fini dryly.

*You had your turn.* Tapu Koko's eyes went bright and limpid. *Little rainbow, you are important. You know it, because we have told you so; and we know it, because we have watched you and trusted you. You are important, and you will do important things. What will you do after your journey?*

"Um, well I'm hoping to be the Champion."

*But what will you do if you become the Champion?*

Moon floundered. "Um, I never really thought about it before."

"Alola hasn't ever really had a champion," offered Hau, glancing nervously at Tapu Koko. "There's the island challenge champion, but that isn't a person you can challenge over and over again. It's mostly a title—you finished the island challenge, so you're an island challenge champion."
But now you will have a champion—you, or somebody else.

“Because of the League, right,” said Moon, nodding.

Alola belongs to the people, and that is correct. This League is a good thing, but there is no need to change the way things are run by the kahunas. When the system has every position filled, it will function perfectly. But does it not strike you that much of the work is done by those who do not have a proper duty to it, and how little of the work is done by those who ought to be doing it?

This was said with a pointed stare at Tapu Bulu, who remained still and impassive.

“Like,” said Moon hesitantly, “how Tapu Bulu has asked Gladion to do stuff, even though Gladion really isn't much more than a kid himself?”

That is different, said Tapu Bulu. You presume much, to question my motive for choosing him.

“What was your mo—”

“Moon,” begged Hau. “Please think of my sanity, and do not, for the love of Arceus, finish that question.”

Hau speaks wisdom, said Tapu Koko, with a lazy wink that made Hau start in surprise. Age has no bearing upon responsibility, as long as you are healthy and whole. We expect the same diligence and loyalty from Fini's Hapu as we do from my Hala. Think on it again, and you may find a better example—one that still does involve my brother.

“Nanu,” said Moon at once. “He's not really doing his job. Because he's got some, um, issues.”

And my Olivia has taken up far more duties than she ought, in response, said Tapu Lele softly. We know who will serve as kahunas in the island challenge, but the final challengers of your human organization can and should be chosen by humans. And they should not be kahunas or trial captains.

“You mean the Elite Four.” Moon's mind was whirling. “Right now that's Molayne, Olivia, Acerola, and, um—Kahili, I think? But you don't want Olivia to be part of it.”

And if Acerola had not chosen to give up her seat as trial captain, we should not want her to be part of it, either. Tapu Bulu's nose wrinkled. Good riddance. She came and found me first and pestered me until I said she could be a captain. It was proper for her to be one, and she came and asked because she had the premonition she ought to; but she was annoying, and I am glad to be rid of her.

“Oh my god, that is beyond rude,” said Moon, appalled.

“Moon now is really not the time to lecture a literal god on manners!” hissed Hau, the blood draining from his face.

I advise you to ignore him, said Tapu Koko airily. The rest of us do. So there is or ought to be a vacancy in the—Elite Four, you called it; and there is a vacancy for a trial captain. If you become the champion, as you wish to do, it would be your responsibility to find someone for your Elite Four. The island kahuna would need to find a new trial captain.

“Something else Nanu has to do, great,” sighed Moon. “Okay, I guess that's fine. I don't think he minds me so much. He listed me as his emergency contact on all his medical forms, so at the very least I think he tolerates my company. I think he'd listen if I asked him to start looking.”
“But what if you don't become the Champion?” pointed out Hau. “I mean, look at your friend Blue. He was the Champion of Kanto for what— forty-five minutes?”

“Forty-six. He's very insistent about that extra minute.” Moon looked up at Tapu Koko. “The role of Champion isn't really that predestined, is it? I could lose the battle, or I could be defeated after I've won.”

*It is more predestined than you think it is,* murmured Tapu Fini.

Moon swallowed, and a deathly quiet fell over the altar.

“I— really?” she said, looking down. “You want *me* for this?”

*It isn't the Tapus who pick the Champion,* said Nebby, speaking up for the first time in a while. *Who is higher than the Tapus, in Alola?*

“Y-you are. And Solgaleo.”

*Which is why you must visit Sol on your own, to get his crystal; he wants to meet you, and decide for himself if you will be our Champion.* Nebby's gaze fell away from Moon. *I thought I might ask Lillie to do it, that first time she stood up for me to the scientist and her mother. She was very brave, and a Champion must be brave. But it wouldn't suit her the way it will suit you.*

A funny feeling was rising in Moon's chest. It wasn't quite the same as how she had cried earlier, but it was close. “Does Necrozma have a say in it too?”

*It is odd that you ask.* Nebby's eyes gleamed. *We don't write down our histories the same way humans do, but we have them all the same. It is said that before Grandmother Starlight was shattered across the skies, she visited many worlds, and helped light-bringers like Sol and I to choose humans who would also bring light to those around them. She hasn't done that since her crystals were stolen. It's fitting, that you will restore both her crystals and this office of choice to her.*

“What about Marshadow?”

*Oh, you're thinking of the poem. Yes, he has a say; but he agrees with whatever Grandmother Starlight says anyway so we don't often think of him as having one.* Nebby made a soft trilling sound, which Moon knew to be laughter. *Do you know when I chose you, Moon?*

“...when?”

*I chose you when you first asked Lillie to be your friend. You and Hau both brought her a light she had never had before. I knew you would do the same for Alola.*

There was another long pause.

“Okay,” whispered Moon finally. The tears slipped out, rolling down her face and leaving cold trails behind. “Okay— I can't promise you all I'll succeed. But I promise you I'll try.”

*It is all we ask of you.*

*But we are not finished here,* said Tapu Koko abruptly. *Hau Akiona, do you know I could have easily given you your Sparkling Stone as I gave Moon Hawkins hers?*

Hau's mouth fell open.
I didn't, continued Tapu, eyes fixed on him. I didn't, because you already had a shadow on you. You wanted to be a good Trainer and to live up to your grandfather's name. That is honorable, but I thought that if I told you that you would be my next kahuna before you began your journey, that you would let that shadow sit on your chest and crush your expectations for yourself.

Moon stared at Hau, then back at Tapu Koko.

So I said as much to Hala, and he agreed that it was something you should not have to worry about. The island challenge is important for youths to grow into adults and to learn to care for Pokémon, but it is also a time of learning and having fun. You have learned a lot, and you have had a lot of fun, haven't you?

“I— y-yeah,” whispered Hau brokenly. He reached up, wiping at his eyes. “It's been so fun. Except for the parts that were scary, but coming out the other side alive was— that was pretty great.”

Every future kahuna is asked to complete some tasks for the Tapu before they are allowed to ascend. One of those tasks is always to complete a Pokémon journey; Fini's Hapu had to do that, too, and so has every future kahuna of Alola. You have almost finished. His voice was approving. You have done a fine job, winning battles with strength and strategy alike, learning from those around you, and honoring my siblings and I as well as Sol and Luna with enthusiasm in battle.

“T-thank you.”

Another task is something that you must accomplish with the kahuna before you. I will speak with you and Hala about this at another time. And the third task... Tapu Koko's beady eye flicked to Moon, and then to Tapu Bulu, and then back to Hau. When Grandmother Starlight opened doors here a few weeks ago in her attempt to devour the little moon here, there were other doors opened all over Alola. The Ultra Beasts within them were contained and returned to Ultra Space by the kahunas and the trial captains— all but four. They have stayed in remote, wild places; they are waiting for those with their own resonance of space to find them— Fallers, as you call them here. As such, it would be inadvisable to ask Moon, Lillie, Gladion, or Nanu to seek them out; the other two humans, even less so. Will you search for them?

“I—I—” Hau swallowed. “Yeah. Um, yeah, that's, that's fine. I can do that. Um, what do I do when I find one?”

Battle to weaken it, then summon me by saying my name. I will come if you call me, and I can open a door to send them back where they belong.

“Okay. That's— not so bad. Is that a thing that needs to be done right away, or is it a thing that can wait?”

Finish your island challenge first. One of them is in a place beyond where you are permitted to go before you complete it. Tapu Koko eyed him, amused. Anything else?

“I have a question,” said Moon. “If Hau doesn't, that is.”

Tapu Bulu snorted loudly. Don't you always.

“I'm still processing,” said Hau faintly. “You go ahead.”

“Thanks. I'm not stupid,” she said, turning to look at Tapu Bulu. “You've chosen Gladion, haven't you? For your next kahuna?”

There was a long silence.
For the amount of time it took you to realize that Gladion and Lillie were brother and sister, I did not expect you to deduce that so quickly.


“Good, because Nanu needs out,” said Hau softly.

I need him out. Tapu Bulu's nostrils flared. And that is all I have to say about this. If you want further answers on the subject, you must speak with either Nanu or Gladion.

And with a flash of light, he vanished.

Temperamental like always, remarked Tapu Koko. I too must be off. Hau, call your grandfather. He should hear that I have spoken with you from you, not me. It is the duty of the future kahuna to approach the present one. Another flash of light, and he was gone as well.

Allow Gladion some grace, said Tapu Fini, looking at Moon. I know you, and I know you do not like secrets being kept from you. Consider the dangers that lie in announcing Gladion as Nanu's successor, and consider Gladion's own state of mind upon being asked.

“I'm not mad at him,” said Moon, shaking her head. “Not about this. That's huge, that's a big deal. He's probably freaking out. I need to go cuddle the shit out of him.”

You have learned well. Tapu Fini's voice was warm. You will be an excellent Champion, and both of your friends will be excellent kahunas.

Lillie will not be left behind, added Tapu Lele. She is not Olivia's successor, but she will have her own role to play in the future, so you may expect great things from her as well.

Two more flashes of light, and all of the Tapus were gone.

“Oh my god,” whispered Hau. “Oh— oh my god. I thought, sometimes. I wondered. And now I know. I was— I was right.”

“You knew?”

“I had a feeling, sometimes. I don't know when Tapu Koko would have told Gramps, but I knew that Gramps was watching me pretty carefully in high school. That's already why I was nervous about not like, dishonoring him by being a bad student or a bad Trainer or whatever. I wondered, but usually I was just like 'nah probably not, it's not like you can inherit this from your family' or whatever...”

“Except you kind of did.”

“Shush, stop making sense.” Hau waved one hand at her. “And then there's you.”

“Me?”

Yes, you, said Nebby; Moon had almost forgotten she was there. Champion Moon.

She could get used to the sound of that. “I don't have any tasks or anything, do I?”

Other than earning your title, you may do what you want. Sol or I will tell you if you're wrong.

“That's a lot of faith you're putting in me.”
It isn't faith if we know you'll succeed.

“I—” Moon was rather lost for words. “Um. Wow. I— thank you.”

*Tell Lillie I said hello, will you?*

“Yeah, we'll do that. Um— see you.”

* * * * *

Moon took Gladion on a walk, in case he didn't want anyone else overhearing; though she suspected that Hapu as well as all of the kahunas and trial captains knew about Gladion. And she didn't know if Lillie knew, either— or if Gladion wanted her to know.

And besides, she didn't need an excuse to spend some alone time with her boyfriend.

“Why here?” said Gladion suspiciously, as Moon set down the old quilt on the black-sand beach of Poni Island.

“We're going to talk about something, if you want to talk about it,” answered Moon, which was true. “If not, we can just like, cuddle or something. So, Hau and I went to the Altar of the Moone this morning.” She sat down, pulling off her backpack.

Gladion stared at her for a few moments, then sat down as well. “I'm aware of this. Hapu likes Aina Pando, by the way. She's sending it in to the government as a registered Ride Pager location.”

“Nice. So, it turns out there is definitely such a thing as Lunalitym Z, like I thought there was. And I now have one. And Nebby was asking me about what I have left, and I mentioned I was in a bit of a rush and she was just like 'okay let's call the Tapus,' and wham suddenly all the Tapus were there at the Altar of the Moone.”

She watched him, registering his reaction. He was frowning down at the blanket.

“Due to some... um, stuff that Hau should really be the one to tell you about instead of me,” continued Moon, her voice careful, “I was able to made an educated guess about the nature of your, um, relationship with Tapu Bulu. Which turned out to be a correct guess.”

His eyes darted up to hers, then back down.

“As in, I know you're the next kahuna of Ula'ula Island,” she said finally.

His mouth tightened.

“We totally don't have to talk about it. I was thinking about it and I was like holy shit he needs cuddles.”

His eyes met hers again, but this time they were not wary or defensive but soft— scared, Moon realized. Without speaking, he scooted closer, hands reaching for her waist.

“What're you— oh, okay.”

He had pressed his face into the crook of her neck and shoulder, holding her so tightly she almost
couldn't breathe; and he was shaking.

“What is it? Gladion, what's wrong?”

“I'm—” He took a deep breath, but his voice cracked, growing higher in panic. “I, I. I'm.”

“It's okay, you don't have to tell me. Just breathe, love— just breathe.”

He went still, and Moon belatedly registered that she hadn't ever called him that outside the privacy of her own head. She cradled the back of his head, hand slipping through soft hair, and swept her other hand gently up and down his back.

“It's okay, love,” she repeated— committing to the endearment because, well. It was accurate.

“Is it awful to be really relieved that I didn't have to be the one to tell you?” His voice was shaky.

“Not at all,” said Moon. “I mean, do I wish you would have? Kind of, yeah. But you weren't comfortable with it so you didn't, and that's fine.”

He pulled his head back a little, surveying her for a few moments; they were rather close but he didn't seem to notice the proximity over anything else. “Thank you for being honest,” he said finally, before tucking his head back onto her shoulder.

They fell into silence, Moon still rubbing his back. “Do you want to talk about it?” she asked him finally.

“No, but I should.” He sighed. “It— fuck, sunshine. Remember when you went into the desert and I had to rescue you?”

“Yeah?”

“That's when he asked me. The absolute asshole.”

Moon was shocked into giggling, but considering that Tapu Bulu had threatened to kill her already that day she decided she was justified.

“I mean, you're lying there half-awake and delirious with Hero protecting you, and you're covered in blood, and I'm freaking out because I have a shit-ton of complicated feelings about you already but I was too much of a coward at that point in time to deal with them directly. And then Nebby waltzes over and I yell at her, but then Tapu Bulu shows up and I'm trying to apologize for showing up in his desert. But he opens his hand and just drops the Sparkling Stone in my lap. And I fucking — I know what it is, I'm not a dumbass and I've seen yours and Hau's a million times at this point. So I tell him, 'no, you're mistaken, it can't be me,' because really I didn't think it could be. And then he told me he needs me because he needs someone who understands what it's like to feel broken, so
that I can put the island back together. Gee, thanks. And I tried to tell him, I tried to tell him I wasn't in a good place and I needed to hide from my mother for Lillie's safety as well as my own, and he told me it would restore honor to my family which is essentially his way of saying 'I don't give a shit if you're not in a good place, you're doing this.' And he got us out of the desert and I just didn't talk about it to anyone for a week, but then I had to do the exorcism with Nanu and everybody anyway so they all knew. And Nanu said all the kahunas knew and most if not all of the trial captains, which is just like— great, I get no fucking privacy.”

She let him talk until he ran out of steam, listening in silence and rubbing his back; finally he sighed again, and his shoulders slumped forward, pressing against her arms.

“I'm more okay with it now than I was then,” he said finally. “And really, Nanu needs out more than Ula'ula Island needs to be like, not fucked up any worse than it already is.”

“To be fair,” pointed out Moon, “Ula'ula Island is just about as fucked up as it can possibly get. I don't think you can make it any worse.”

That earned her a laugh that was suspiciously damp, so she pulled him in tighter and turned to press a kiss into his hair, just above his ear.

“You'll be a really good kahuna, though.”

“I'm mean and bitter and I hate people.”

“You are blunt, pessimistic, and introverted,” corrected Moon. “My point is that you really care about making people's lives better. You'll be able to fix things. And I'll be the Champion so I'll be able to help you.”

“Well, obviously you'll be the Champion,” said Gladion, as though it were a foregone conclusion.

God, she liked him so much. “How does that help me?”

Moon coughed nervously. “Well, it seems that with the League and all, the Champion is a position that's sort of going to be... chosen similarly?”

He drew his head back to look at her, a slight frown creasing his eyebrows. “Were you chosen, then?”

“Nebby said she picked me. I don't fucking know.” Moon sighed. “It's mostly the Necrozma thing, I think; but there's some other stuff. I'm supposed to find an Elite Four person who isn't Olivia, because they really don't like that she's pulling double duty. And it was like... they're all-powerful gods and everything, but they bicker as much as the four of us do on the group chat.”

Gladion's head tilted to one side. “That's... unnerving.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I suppose you're probably meant to keep me from being too pathetic. If you're the Champion you'll be working on my— on Ula'ula Island, too.”

“First of all, you're not pathetic.” Moon frowned at him. “You're one of my favorite people, and I do not like hearing one of my favorite people insulted like that. And secondly... well, actually, you should text Hau so that we don't actually have to move or go back but he should be the person to tell you and not me.”

He squinted at her again, confused; but took one hand from her waist to fish his phone out of his
pocket before bringing it around behind Moon, resting his chin on her shoulder to stare at the screen. She leaned her head on his for a few moments; still gently rubbing his back.

“Okay, what the fuck,” he said, after about three minutes.

“Yes?” said Moon, amused.

“Look at this and tell me I read it correctly.”

chat: **you are what you eat**

**salt:** Given that you were present at the Altar of the Moone with my girlfriend, I presume you also heard her guess my future job. She said I should text you because you need to be the one to tell me something?

**malasadas:** o ya

**malasadas:** well about that

**malasadas:** so moon def guessed about u because she was listening to tapu koko give me MY 3 tasks

**malasadas:** u kno 4 the kahuna thing

**malasadas:** which incidentally i am also doing

**malasadas:** yea

**salt:** What

**malasadas:** omg u forgot ur punctuation r u ok??!!??

**malasadas:** QUICK GIVE ME THE PASSWORD SO I KNO ITS U & NOT A POD PERSON

**salt:** Holy fuck I'm not a fucking pod person

**salt:** Are you being serious right now. I swear if you're feeding me some line of Tapu Bulushit

**salt:** You can't fucking joke about this

**malasadas:** ok u win, pod ppl probs dont swear as much as u do

**malasadas:** also “tapu bulushit” R O T F L M A O

**malasadas:** but no, im not joking

**malasadas:** honest 2 arc i wish i were

**malasadas:** this is scary
“Yeah, no, he typed that correctly.”

**malasadas:** my hat goes off 2 u man, idk how u dealt w/ that alone w/o moon to give u kissies or anything

“...uh.”
“... Hang on for just a second.”

**salt:** I'm going to fucking kill you

**salt:** alasdashAFSAK .,2!314@$12@#$

**malasadas:** omg r u havin a stroke

**salt:** Hey this is Moon he's not going to kill you

**malasadas:** omg did u literally wrestle him 4 the phone

**malasadas:** WAS THERE AGGRESSIVE PHYSICAL CONTACT

**malasadas:** UST!!! UST!!! UST!!!

**salt:** This is Gladion. Moon has changed her mind and your death is being planned by both of us.

**malasadas:** lmao have fun “planning”

**malasadas:** or w/e the kids say these days

**malasadas:** wink wonk

“I know we're not actually going to kill him but I sort of want to right now,” sighed Gladion, dropping his phone on the quilt.

Moon, having flung herself to the other end of said quilt when Hau had started in with the capslock, made a noise of agreement that was muffled by her hands covering her face.

A gentle hand pried hers away, and she peeked up to see he'd scooted himself a little closer, now sitting with criss-crossed legs.

“If we don't get embarrassed, it's not embarrassing,” he said, sounding slightly uncertain. “Right?”

“Right.”

“Are—are you embarrassed?”

“Not of you,” Moon was quick to assure him. “Of me.”
“Sounds fake, but okay.”

She watched him for a few moments, studying his still-flushed face; his hands were restless, picking at the thread in his jeans or the hem of his sweater. His eyes flicked up to hers briefly, then back down at his lap.

“Hey, Gladion?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I—” Her nerve failed her. “You know what, never mind. I'm good.”

He raised one eyebrow. “Well now I'm curious.”

Moon studied him again. “Fortune favors the bold,” she said out loud, sitting up.

“What do you mean by— oh.”

He seemed to have forgotten how to move, and Moon felt even more self-conscious about climbing back into his lap and plopping back down like she owned it; so she tucked her head beneath his chin and pretended that nothing had happened.

For a few moments they were silent and Gladion was still; but then he relaxed, arms wrapping around her waist to pull her even closer.

“You're sweet,” he said quietly.

Moon's heart paused to reconsider its life choices before moving forward and trying to pretend nothing had happened. It was mostly unsuccessful.

“I don't say it out loud very often, because, um. I'm not— it's hard. To say out loud. But... you make me feel like it's okay, if. If I need to, to cry or to break down.”

“Always,” whispered Moon, and she was not going to cry, damn it. “You can always, with me. You can do whatever you need to.”

One of his hands rose, ghosting along her chin and jaw to tuck one of the longer strands of hair behind her ears; the same hand went back to her chin, fingers splaying out to lift it.

She met his eyes. Gladion looked as nervous as she felt, but there was a pinprick of fire in his eyes that sent a dizzy shiver down her spine. Moon mapped out his face: focused eyes, creased eyebrows, lips pinched thin together; but then his eyes dropped down to her mouth and she couldn't quite help the thin inhale.

He bent, the tip of his nose just brushing against the side of hers; she forgot how to think, how to breathe—

“Moon, you're receiving a call,” said Rotom, from her waist.

“Oh my fucking god can I not catch a goddamn break. Who the fuck wants to talk to me.”

“It's Ms. Wicke, bzzt.”

Moon sighed heavily. Gladion had let go of her face, leaning back; he had resumed his usual neutral expression so she reached for her belt and dug Rotom out, accepting the call. “Hey, Ms. Wicke.”
“Good afternoon, Moon,” said Wicke politely. “I understand that you and Hau went to the Altar of the Moone this morning?”

“Do you have cameras there?” wondered Moon.

“Hardly.” There was a smile in Wicke's voice. “I just had a call from Hapu, suggesting I call you and Hau.”

“They both know, Amelia,” said Gladion. “About me.”

There was a long pause. “Ah.”

“Hau should tell you about it,” suggested Moon. “He has, um— well, you should really let him explain it.”

“I will call him directly. Have I interrupted something?”

“Yes,” said Gladion flatly.

“A little bit, yeah.”

“My apologies. I hope you will have a pleasant rest of your day.”

“Thanks, you too.”

The line went dead, and Moon sighed with a huff of laughter.

“Sorry,” mumbled Gladion. “It was going to just happen, but now the moment’s kind of, you know.”

“Yeah, it kind of passed.” Moon grinned at him. “Maybe some other time, right?”

“Right. Can we go back to Hapu's house and take a nap?”

“Hell yeah.”

* * * *

To: garyo@pmail.co.kan

CC: samsonoak@pmail.co.alo, satoshired@pmail.co.kan

From: samueloak@pmail.co.kan

Re: Re: unusual Trainer/Gym challenge applicant

Tentatively approved for the choice of an elemental starter due to early application submission and impressive personal records. If he maintains a good ranking in the database until the submission deadline, he'll get one. The letter from Marion was... interesting. Attached for your perusal.

Samson, I know you'd rather just stay holed up in your shack— excuse me, research outpost— but
I'd like you to get in touch with the Aether Foundation. Red and Blue both have enough to be doing.

Attachment: [reasons why you should accept Gladion into the gym challenge.pdf]

Samuel Oak, Pokémon Professor
Pallet Town, Kanto Region

Chapter End Notes

OT4 giving each other a hard time for various reasons just gr8 content

“IT felt like... I dunno, like I should know about that one.” —k so I should explain that I've planned for Hau to be Melemele's future kahuna for like... longer than I've planned for Gladion to be Ula'ula's future kahuna, and I dropped that bomb on y'all back in like, fricken Hibiscus. However, because of the way I have written *Tapus* as a concept—as in, immensely powerful and with a general lack of sympathy for humankind—means that Gladion was always going to know first.

The explanation about Hau needing to do an island challenge without the weight of TK's expectations as well as Hau's own expectations is low-key lifted from the best fanfiction series of all time: New Hope by Bracketyjack. The canon source material is my favorite book series of all time, the Protector of the Small series by Tamora Pierce. Seriously it is a GREAT fic. Well-researched, well-written, discusses complex themes of predestination/destiny (which have somehow made their way over here to CTN, I wonder why), feminism, liberal politics in a fantasy monarchy, capitalism vs. socialism, and religion influencing life versus life influencing religion. The romance is super slow burn (oh hey), the world-building is superb, and the architecture is GLORIOUS. Five billion out of ten would recommend.

^All that to say that I always intended for Hau to be the next kahuna, but that Tapu Koko wasn't going to say squat diddly about it because he's a troll. thank u next

low-key this “trial” for Kommonium which Moon has already gotten is more of an interrogation by Kommo-o to Moon's teammates to ask them if they think she's cool or if she's just going to be a stinky greedy annoying human like everyone else. Drampa is tagging along because he was bored lmao

“Most people didn't know that the most famous Pikachu in the world was actually stubborn and somewhat grumpy.” Definitely totally not based on that popular webtoon/comic where a middle-aged Red and Pikachu are visiting Alola and getting very “get off my lawn” at all the new concepts since their days as trainers. Pikachu has whiskers and a beer gut and the bitchiest of bitchfaces. You've probably seen something from it at least once in your life. If anyone knows what I'm talking about u should copypasta the link in a comment. (I think that Red and Blue might also be super married but that could be a) projection or b) a different webtoon/comic)

I am unreasonably proud of “Pikipedia”
Red Solgaleo is low-key SUPER protective of Nebby. They have to spend time together to *cough* make babs BUT it's not really that kind of relationship. You should think of it more like... a ten-year-old kid and her crotchety old grandfather making a batch of cookies so that the kid can hand them out at school on her birthday.

Tapu Bulu: hates humans, is scary, will kill anything that gets too close to his house
All the other Tapus: go ahead and piss him off, he won't do SHIT

“It's all right. You've been so brave, for so long. Thank you for bearing this. Please rest now.” —I don't remember much between August and December of 2014; everything was an anxiety-fueled hellscape because of Zoloft. What I do remember is when I broke down on a Skype call with my parents and asked them to come get me because I just couldn't do college anymore. My mom was like “okay, let me just pack. I'll be there tomorrow.” to be clear: they were in Pennsylvania, and I was in Utah. It was December. So I just did what I had to do to survive, which was next to nothing because fuck classes at this point. When she got there, I just fucking broke. I cried on her for like an hour. She told me that she would take care of everything, that I didn't have to worry about it anymore. And she did, and then she took me home and I just laid in bed for like two weeks. I was so goddamn tired. It was such a relief to not have to think anymore that it hit me in the fucking chest like a sack of bricks. That's what I wrote here.

“I'm not mad at him. Not about this. That's huge, that's a big deal. He's probably freaking out. I need to go cuddle the shit out of him.” —this is truly Character Development, I'm so proud

“Her words died as he hooked one hand behind her knee and hauled her onto his lap.” — this has major “And I OOP—” energy

Gladion is Bert and Hau is Ernie, change my mind

TAPU BULUSHIT OMG GLADION THIS IS WHY TB HATES HUMANS

Here it is, folks— the very first almost-kiss in the series!!! Wicke is sitting in her office and regretting her life choices because she knows she cockblocked her OTP lmao
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;

Chapter Summary

Route Sixteen, Lake of the Sunne
****************************
Moon runs into trouble and forms an unlikely partnership to get herself out of it.

Chapter Notes

Tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (it's a BTS stan account because I LOVE THEM but if you would like to speak to me privately without joining the Discord, feel free to shoot me a message!!!)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord:

Content Warning: OC death of moderate importance, minor OC deaths, degrading reference to oral sex, extremely graphic depiction of violence, flawed character stating a massive untruth about mental illness (explanations in endnotes). IF YOU THINK YOU MAY BE DISTURBED BY THIS CONTENT PLEASE MESSAGE ME PRIVATELY ON TUMBLR OR THE DISCORD AND I WILL GIVE YOU MORE DETAILS.

I'll be honest with you: I debated about making this particular writing choice (the Very Specific OC death, which you will understand by the end of the chapter) for a long damn time. I finished a later chapter like, ten days ago, and since then I've been hemming and hawing and trying to decide if I wanted to work this in here and now, or if I wanted to move it to one of the future installments. The choice wasn't whether it would happen; because it was ALWAYS going to happen. It was a matter of when. Ultimately, I decided I wanted to write it now. If it feels sudden— it's meant to be. If you feel like there's a lack of closure— that's also meant to be.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the first time since she had gotten back from Ultra Space— though she had tried very hard not to think about it, because thinking about it just made things worse— Moon had completely slept through the night. She didn't remember dreaming, and she woke up feeling happy.

Perhaps for the first time since the early days of Akala Island, Moon was currently alone. Hau had flown over to Melemele for the day to talk to Hala about “future kahuna stuff,” while Lillie and Gladion both had therapy. Moon didn't mind being alone. She had an errand to run today anyway.

The Pokémon Center at the junction of Routes Fifteen and Sixteen wasn't terribly busy during the morning since it lacked a surrounding town, but there were quite a few white-suited Aether employees sitting in the café or browsing the PokéMart. Moon took herself and her teammates over to the café to order breakfast.
chat: no longer hypothetically

shook changed painfully cute's name to kaBOOMna

shook changed their name to crystal collector

---

crystal collector: Picture Attachment: [TerriblePun.jpeg]

---

crystal collector: Picture Attachment: [BreakfastSelfie.jpeg]

---

crystal collector: Good morning.

kaBOOMna: It really is.

kaBOOMna: Lillie just peeked over my shoulder and saw “kaBOOMna” and choked on her tea. That's what she gets for looking at my phone.

---

crystal collector: Savage lmao

kaBOOMna: Surprisingly, it's not one of the worst nicknames you've given me.

kaBOOMna: I only just opened the second picture. What, exactly, are you doing with your face?

---

kaBOOMna: I don't know, that's why I asked.

kaBOOMna: Whatever it is, it's cute.

---

crystal collector: ajkdajh

kaBOOMna: <3

---

crystal collector: <3

---

Moon packed up her teammates and began heading south through Route Sixteen. It was a bit of a trek to Ula'ula Meadow— by the time she began to see the scarlet hibiscus bushes it was nearly noon and she was hungry again; but she had things to do so she pressed onward.
(She did, however, stop to take a selfie against the hibiscus flowers. Gladion's favorite color was red.)

The path that led to the Lake of the Sunne was overgrown with grass taller than she was, droopy trees that littered leaves and twigs everywhere, and small pebbles that seemed to have been sanded down to roundness by what was surely at one point a river.

“Ori.”

Moon paused, looking around; a flash of crimson caught her eye and she looked up to see a red Oricorio.

“Hi,” she answered. “Can I help you with something?”

The Oricorio glanced from side to side before hopping off the branch, gliding down to the ground at Moon's feet. “Rico ri.”

“A warning?”

It nodded. “Cori co ori.”

She couldn't understand the Oricorio very well, not having trained one; but bad humans waiting ahead was a fairly simple concept. “Oh, good god. Thanks for the warning.”

“Riori.” It jumped up into the air, flying back toward Ula'ula Meadow.

The issue now was that bad humans waiting ahead was also subject to interpretation. It could be the Foxes, in which case they would be breaking the government order that forced them to remain within Po Town; or it could be Emmett and Kohaku, vandalizing monuments or perhaps stealing the Sun Flute— maybe even looking, like she was, for Solgalium Z. And where were the Aether Foundation employees? There were supposed to be patrols en route to the Lake, weren't there?

She crept forward, moving quietly and staying within the tall grass— keeping her ears open for trouble.

And still there was nothing— at least, not until the path opened up to reveal the Lake and a variety of people who looked as though they shouldn't be there.

Four Aether employees were sitting on the ground, gagged and bound; a taller man in dark grey, with a machine gun and an oddly familiar beret, watched them. Several other people also in grey and berets were walking around, looking at the stone columns that stood around the smaller central altar above the lake.

And there were a few others, as well; Moon's blood boiled slightly when she saw lilac, black, and scarlet heads standing in a trio. Jack, at least, looked uncertain; Emmett was smug, and Kokahu merely bored.

“How much longer is this going to take?” he called out to one of the berets.

“It'll take however long it takes, Nishimura.”

Well, regardless of what they were up to— though Moon knew she could probably figure it out if she waited and eavesdropped for long enough— the Aether employees were in danger. She took out Rotom.
“Mute,” she said quietly, and Rotom vibrated softly to tell her that it had turned off the volume. “Text Amelia Wicke. Kohaku, Emmett, and Jack are with a bunch of shady-looking dudes at the Lake of the Sunne and they're poking around. Copy message to Ishmael Nanu.”

Another vibration to confirm obedience. Moon tucked Rotom back into her belt pouch.

“What do we even need it for again?” sighed Emmett.

“The bitch and her friends had them a month ago,” answered Kohaku, his tone careless. “They'll summon a legendary. We're just keeping it safe.”

It was just the Flute, then. Moon felt Rotom vibrate and checked her messages; Wicke had promised immediate backup from the teams at the nearby Pokémon Center and the police station outpost. Nanu hadn't responded, but Moon heard a rustling in the bushes nearby, followed by a familiar mind-voice.

Why does trouble follow you about like a lost Litten? Tapu Bulu’s head poked out from the rustling bush. It's always you, and I always seem to have to rescue you.

Moon resisted the urge to tell the god off for being mean; now simply wasn't the time. “What do we do about this?” she asked, gesturing out at the intruders.

Tapu Bulu studied them for a few moments. This part of the island belongs more to Sol than to me, he said finally. I cannot destroy them without his let, and he is always reluctant to allow me to kill. You have no such obligation.

“I don't want to kill them either!”

It was, perhaps, said a bit more loudly than she should have. Emmett and Kohaku both looked up, frowning; it was only the speed of Tapu Bulu that sent her hurtling back into the tall grass in time.

“That's odd, I thought I heard something,” she heard Emmett say.

“Better go check it out, just in case.”

“Shit,” muttered Moon, hearing leaf-crunching footsteps making their way back to the path. “I can't go— what if they find the Flute, or Solgalium?”

I should not hurt them, repeated Tapu Bulu. I will keep you safe, but that is all I can promise. They will not be able to see me, but you may walk among them openly without fear of harm or pain.

“Even from bullets?” Moon eyed the machine guns dubiously.

I said what I said.

She sighed. “Well, I guess I'm getting myself captured, then. Arceus fuck, I'd better make it out of this alive.”

“It came from over here,” said Jack, peering over the tops of the tall grass. “Wait, there's a flatter pa—” He froze, staring down at Moon with sudden horror in his eyes.

“What is it?” The grass moved, and Emmett's face split into a nasty, smug grin. “Oh, it's you.”

“Can't really say I'm pleased to see you,” said Moon lightly. Tapu Bulu watched the discussion with passive disinterest. “Given how you're intruding on holy land, and all. There is backup from the Aether Foundation on its way here right now, so you and the Foxes are free to go before they
“Don't be stupid. The Foxes don't leave Po Town.”

“They're literally right there?” Moon watched him take off the safety.

“They aren't Foxes.” He pulled the trigger.

The bullet fired with a deafening echo, but it stopped at her chest and fell limply to the ground. Moon maintained eye contact with Emmett, even as he frowned and looked down at his gun.

“Are these blanks?” he said suspiciously.

“They shouldn't be, you shot down a Trumbeak about forty-five minutes ago,” said Jack, his mouth a thin line.

Emmett growled in irritation and shot again, to a similar effect. Moon picked up the spent bullet-casing, examining it.

“Cute,” she remarked.

“What the fuck is going on up there!” shouted one of the berets.

“Jack, grab her,” ordered Emmett. “Get the Rotom out of her belt— I'm going to smash it, so she can't call for help.”

Rotom zoomed out of the belt pouch, vanishing into the woods. Emmett yelped and fired after it, but missed.

“Boy,” said Moon conversationally, “I sure am glad my Pokédex is sentient enough to hear its life being threatened and smart enough to run away.”

“Sh-shut up!”

Jack, expression resigned, grabbed Moon's wrist and yanked her to her feet. Tapu Bulu watched, silently floating at her side as she was dragged down the hill and shoved down by the captive Aether employees.

“I called Wicke already,” she informed them, and was glad to see relief in their eyes. “She's sending backup, don't worry.”

“Well, hello.”

Moon looked up at Kohaku, meeting his cold, empty eyes; she did her best not to flinch but she wasn't sure she was successful. “Hey, asshole. How's it going?”

“Jokes for days,” he said, shaking his head condescendingly as he crouched in front of her and drew a knife from its holster at her waist. “I'm sure you'll change your tune soon enough.”

“You're welcome to try, but given that Dumbass McGee over here's already tried to shoot me twice at point-blank range and failed, I don't think you're going to do much better.”

Kohaku elected to test that theory almost before she finished speaking, thrusting the knife in her face; the blade stopped about an inch from her eye, refusing to go further.

She grinned at him. “That's not going to work. What are you looking for?”
“None of your business.” Kohaku studied her for a few moments, then turned and grabbed the Aether captive closest to Moon—a man who was probably not much older than they were. His eyes widened, and he thrashed to get away but the bereted man with the machine gun pressed the muzzle warningly against his forehead and he froze in place. “Besides, there are other ways of making you suffer. You wouldn't want anyone to get hurt because of you, right?”

Moon said a quick, silent prayer to Tapu Bulu that the protection would extend to other innocents as well as herself. “I’d rather that didn't happen, yeah. But I don’t know, it seems like a fairly common human emotion to me; a lot of people would say the same thing, in my shoes. Not that you would know much about human emotions.”

Kohaku's eyes went flat and annoyed. “Fucking hell, do you ever shut up.”

The knife swung, and the Aether employee let out a shriek—which quickly tapered out into harsh breathing as the knife simply bounced off the man's arm.

“Oh, dear,” said Moon mockingly. “It sure does look like your skills in torture and butchery are totally not going to work here.”

Kohaku went quiet, simply watching her. “Where is the Sun Flute?” he said finally. “None of this lot knew anything about it.”

“I wouldn't know, I didn't put it back.”

“You were using it. Where did you get it from?”

“The Aether Foundation,” said Moon, because being honest here wouldn't provide Kohaku with new information. “Back when they were making some rather questionable decisions, they took the Sun Flute from here to study it. I got it at Aether Paradise.”

His mouth thinned, and he got to his feet. “She doesn't have anything new,” he called to the five bereted people who were poking around the small altar. “But she's a person of interest to Van. And she's called for the Aether Foundation to send reinforcements. Should we take her back to HQ?”

At the mention of Van—a name that Moon had heard only once or twice—Tapu Bulu went very, very still. Moon tried not to look at him, not wanting Kohaku or the maybe-Foxes to figure out what she was looking at. She accidentally made eye contact with Jack, who was watching her. She was not terribly inclined to pity him, but Molly had texted occasionally to mention that Rogelio had established a very casual line of communication and that things seemed to be going okay so far.

Jack's mouth thinned even further, and he looked away from her. Indifference, or guilt? She could only guess.

“She's talking,” said one of the berets, walking back over—a woman, clearly Kantonian or Johtonian. “If she's happy to talk, then let her talk. If not... weigh her down and push her into the lake.”

It was probably a fifty-foot drop. Moon felt the blood drain from her face, and fought to keep it neutral even as Kohaku watched her with a sickly grin.

“Could dangle her over it,” he mused, eyes fixed on hers. “That'd be fun, eh? See if I can get her to piss herself. Take a picture, send it to her boyfriend... maybe we'd get two for the price of one.”

The woman snorted. “The blond one, right? He's a pain in Van's ass, too.”
“Hey, I think we found something!”

Moon glanced over at the group of berets by the altar. One of them pried a flat tile from the ground, tossing it carelessly off to the side; it cracked into four or five pieces. “Yeah, this sure looks like a flute to me. And I bet we can get a lot of money for this.”

He stood up, holding a large chunk of rock that she was horrified to realize was likely Solgalium Z — white, with gold and blue speckles in it.

“Wait, it's important,” said Kohaku. Moon glanced at him; he was still watching her, with the same nasty smile. “She looks like she just got punched in the gut.”

“Bring her over,” ordered the woman.

Kohaku reached for Moon's wrists, but was beaten to it by Jack, who hauled her up roughly—gripping her tightly enough to bruise, even though she couldn't feel much in the way of pain thanks to whatever Tapu Bulu was doing. “Ow,” she said pointedly, on principle.

“Shut the fuck up,” said Jack, but his heart didn't seem to be in it.

She was shoved back down onto the ground in front of the space where the tile had been. There were several things in the hollow beneath it— the Sun Flute, a few smaller chunks of Solgalium, a horn that had been carved from what looked like a giant claw, and several black-and-white rocks that Moon was surprised to recognize as Sparkling Stones.

“Ooh,” said Kohaku mockingly, picking one up. “I've got a Sparkling Stone, so now I'm special and I get to go on a special journey.”

“What is this?” the woman asked, ignoring Kohaku and pointing at the large base-crystal of Solgalium Z.

“I dunno,” lied Moon.

“Perhaps I should drop it in the lake, then.”

On the one hand, that would keep it away from the maybe-Foxes; on the other hand, she really needed to make sure she had a piece first. “It's all the same to me, though I'm guessing you'll catch it if Solgaleo finds out you've been getting into his stuff.”

“He's occupied,” said the woman, with an ugly grin. “Do you keep track of the lunar calendar?”

“Not usually, no.”

“There's going to be a solar eclipse today,” the woman informed her. “In about... oh, I'd say thirteen minutes? He's staying away, as he should if he doesn't want to get shot.”

Moon thought as loudly as she could at Tapu Bulu—OKAY THIS KIND OF SEEMS LIKE AN EMERGENCY—but she wasn't sure if he could hear her or not. He simply watched the proceedings, face impassive and calm.

“Let's break it down,” the woman ordered, pointing at Solgalium. “We'll need some dust to do a data analysis, so we can guess what a good market price would be. And then if we have smaller pieces, that will increase our profit margin.”

“Should we?” The question, surprisingly, came from Emmett; he had been fairly quiet up until
then, but now he spoke up, a serious expression on his face. “What if it's like, one of those really big diamond-type stones? Isn't that more valuable as a bigger gem, then?”

“That's actually a surprisingly good point, ma'am,” said one of the other berets, staring down his nose at Emmett. “Especially from the idiot.”

Emmett's mouth opened, but then Moon saw it, since she was down on the ground: Jack's foot, stepping on Emmett’s. She didn't dare look up at either of their faces, but no argument was forthcoming.

“Very well,” sighed the woman. “Congratulations, Felton— you just said something intelligent for once in your miserable life. Hope you don't want a cookie, because you're not getting one after all the dumbassery that leaks out of your face on a daily basis.”

Emmett didn't respond to that, either. Moon was oddly, horribly grateful for Jack— even if she didn't like him that much.

“And her?” said Kohaku, reaching out and yanking at her hair; it didn't hurt because of whatever Tapu Bulu was doing. Her head rose so she was looking at the maybe-Foxes, and his hand curled possessively in her hair— which felt wrong, so wrong, so wrong on so many levels. “Fish food or live bait?”

“You'd better bring her back,” decided the woman. “If Van wants to talk to her, he won't appreciate it if she's killed first. Let's pack it up, boys; we can just dump the Aether schlubs into the lake.”

“LEOOOOO.”

Moon's blood froze in her veins; a blur of gold and white shot through her line of sight and was gone in the next moment.

_Do not worry_, said Tapu Bulu, and he sounded oddly gentle. _He will be fine. And if he is not, there are a few Cosmoem in the caves at the edges of the Lake._

“Shoot to kill!” shouted the woman, and a barrage of bulletfire opened. In the confusion, Moon took the opportunity to punch Kohaku as hard as she could in the back of the knee. He yanked but ultimately released her hair as he staggered, falling over and turning to glare at her with a murderous expression.

“Stupid bitch,” he snarled. “You just don't give up, do you?”

“The only stupid bitch here is the one who purposefully desecrates a god's home.”

“You dumb motherfucker— they aren't gods. They don't care about us.” He reached out, crawling past Moon to grab the Sun Flute. She snatched the end of it, pulling as hard as she could; but he yanked it away with an oddly wiry strength. “They're just animals. They couldn't give less of a shit. You all think getting one of those stones means you're special, but it doesn't mean anything. All it means is that they want you to be obedient little sheep. They say jump, you say how high. They say suck my dick, you drop to your knees.” He shook his head, grasping the Sun Flute with one hand at each end of it. “Pathetic.”

He raised the Flute above his head and brought it down hard on his knee. It snapped into two pieces.

“So leo.”
There was a shriek, as one of the bereted people went flying off the island into the lake. The spray of blood that followed him suggested that he was already dead. Moon stared up at Solgaleo—at the white lion with rage, fire, and pain in his eyes and scarlet on his muzzle. He was bleeding in places where he'd been hit by bullets, but he didn't seem to notice.

“Die, motherfucker! They said you would die!” screamed the woman, squeezing off shots.

Your information is outdated.

For the first time, Moon heard the mind-voice of Terra's Solgaleo. It wasn't at all like the gruff, grandfatherly red one from Ultra Megalopolis; this one sounded like a younger man of twenty-five, perhaps thirty.

Solgaleo leaped forward, crashing into the woman and pinning her to the ground with sharp, heavy claws. For a few moments he simply gazed at her; then, with a gusty exhale that sounded almost like a sigh, he lifted one paw and sharply, suddenly decapitated her.

“Oh god fuck no,” choked Moon, turning away; but she'd still seen more than she wanted and her stomach heaved once, then again when she felt a spatter of something wet on the arm and leg closer to Solgaleo. She didn't actually throw up, but it was a near thing.

Through all this, Tapu Bulu remained silent and still, merely watching the goings-on. There was something like terrible, primal satisfaction in his eyes.

One by one, the maybe-Foxes were torn to pieces—Moon kept her eyes shut but winced every time she heard flesh tear or bones break. Solgaleo made the occasional rumbling growl, but otherwise remained silent. Finally, only Moon, Kohaku, Emmett, and Jack remained; the Aether employees that had been tied up were freeing themselves, glancing nervously over at the altar and up at the sky.

Hmm. The Solgaleo sat down on his haunches. It has been some time since I had to kill humans. They are generally much more respectful than this.

Moon wasn't sure what to say to that.

Emmett, with hands that shook, twitched toward his gun; Jack reached out and grabbed his arm, shaking his head in the tiniest motion.

“Cowards,” sneered Kohaku, watching them.

It is wise to fear death when you are young. It should only be for the old, though many young people end up dying sooner than they ought. Solgaleo turned to regard Kohaku with an oddly neutral curiosity. Do you fear me, little one?

“I’m not fucking little, fuck you.”

I am nearly thirty years full grown, and I was a little speckle of starlight for fifteen years before that. The Solgaleo's voice was dry. And I am a good head or two taller than you, even if you were standing upright. In every definition, you are littler than I.

You are more patient than I am, remarked Tapu Bulu. Kohaku, Emmett, and Jack all jumped, which meant that they could now see and hear him as well. If I were you, I should have killed him with the rest. His soul is stained nearly as dark as theirs, and he broke your flute besides. I do not think he deserves the opportunity to cause anyone else to suffer.
“Fuck you, too,” snarled Kohaku, but his voice was shaking. “Fuck you, especially.”

*I do not think it is wholly his fault,* observed the Solgaleo. *You see his fear, and his anger? They are the only things left within him. Something happened to steal everything else away.*

Kohaku went oddly still. Moon stared at him, surprised.

*And yet, cousin Bulu,* continued the Solgaleo, voice still gentle, *you are also correct. He is young, but he is still an adult. He has made his choices. He chooses to cause hurt and harm. Much like his uncle, whom you slew ten years ago. It brings him pleasure to see the pain in another's eyes. If he is left unchecked, he will ruin as many lives, perhaps more, than Foxglove ever did.*

*His... uncle?*

Tapu Bulu's voice was flat and quiet.

*Indeed. There is much blood in the air, which is my own fault. But I smelled Foxglove on him as soon as I looked at him. And he bears you much rage— he knows at whose horns lie the death of his kin.*

“You killed him!” It was an awfully wild scream; Kohaku was weeping uncontrollably, stumbling to his feet. “You fucking killed him, you killed him and you left me alone— watashi o aishita yuiitsu no hito—”

Living in Alola, Moon's formal Kantonian was extremely rusty, and Kohaku had a strange accent that she vaguely identified as Johtonian; but her heart broke for him anyway. *The only person who ever loved me,* indeed.

*I am sorry, little one,* said Solgaleo, still impossibly gentle. *But he loved no one and nothing. You know this. You do.*

“No! Fuck you, fuck you fuck you I hate you I hope you die!”

*All things die in due time,* said Tapu Bulu bluntly. *Your... uncle... might have lived longer, had he not chosen to destroy our island.*

Kohaku screamed wordlessly, turning away from both legendaries; his eyes fell on Moon and his face twisted into something awful as he dove for the gun that the bereted woman had dropped when she was killed.

“This is all your fault, you meddling bitch!”

He raised the gun, hands shaking; but there was a roar and a flash of scarlet, and Kohaku was simply *not there.* At first Moon had no idea what had happened; but then she heard a distant splash, and saw the scarlet on Tapu Bulu's horns.

Kohaku was— he was dead. He was gone.

*Cousin,* said the Solgaleo disapprovingly.

*You know as well as I that he was never going to see reason.* Tapu Bulu paused. *And... if he wishes to be with his uncle, I suppose that is the best place for him to be. At any rate, his uncle will likely be very annoyed to see him in the next life, and that brings me a great deal of satisfaction.*

“How are you literally such a jerk?” Moon asked Tapu Bulu. Her voice was shaking, and she
wasn't sure why; Kohaku hadn't meant all that much to her, in the grand scheme of things. “You
didn't— we could have sent him to a psychiatrist, or to prison. If he's dead, he's not going to
understand how he went wrong.”

He would not have understood. There was something... wrong. In his head. I thought once that a
person like that could be changed, or fixed. It was the greatest mistake I have ever made, and I do
not intend to make it again.

Tapu Bulu vanished, which meant she couldn't yell at him anymore.

Now, as for the two of you...

Emmett whimpered quietly as Solgaleo turned to regard him and Jack.

“They're okay,” said Moon. “You can let them go.”

You would defend them when they acted to harm both you and I?

“They're jerks, but I'm pretty sure they were just following orders,” said Moon, looking Jack
straight in the eye. “And I know that lots of people do bad shit and justify it by saying they were
only following orders, but sometimes it's actually safer to follow orders than it is to do the right
thing.”

An astute observation. Solgaleo took a few steps closer to Jack and Emmett; the latter's knees gave
out, and he sat down on the altar with a heavy thud. Solgaleo bent his forelegs slightly, looking
down at him. Little one, you should learn to think before you speak. You are not so far gone as the
other boy was; there is a better life for you, waiting if you want it.

Emmett's mouth dropped open, but he seemed to be lost for words.

“You're not— arresting us?” said Jack finally, looking from Solgaleo to Moon with wide eyes.

“We're not in trouble?”

Moon spread her arms. “I'm literally like, the same age as the two of you. And I don't think he does
arrests. His sense of justice is... you know. This.” She indicated the various bloody messes around
the altar that had once been human beings.

That is correct. Solgaleo took a few steps closer, until he was eye to eye with Jack; Emmett, next to
him, had scrambled backward behind his cousin's legs. You have blood on your face. Listen to your
friends, and the people who love you. You too have the opportunity to make amends for the hurts
you have caused to others.

He licked Jack's face before backing away. Go now, and think about what I have told you.

For a moment Jack remained motionless; but then he leaned down, grabbing Emmett's wrist and
hauling him upright. “Come on,” he said tightly. “We're gonna— we gotta go. Yeah. T-thanks.”

He nodded jerkily at Moon, pulling Emmett with him; they stumbled down the stairs to where the
freed Aether employees were staring at them in suspicion, and vanished into the woods and tall
grass.

It was strange to think of Kohaku being dead. He had been a point of worry in Moon's mind for
quite some time— making threatening, almost predatory remarks about Lillie; going out of his way
to say hateful things to and about Moon and her friends; and of course, endangering Rogelio's life
for what basically amounted to laughs. He was neither a Fox— nor really a Skull, since their
relocation after Guzma had gone to Ultra Space.
And now none of that mattered, because he was gone.

A rough tongue scraped damply over her face. *Your thoughts are turbulent.*

“Yes.” Moon sighed, reaching out to scratch behind one of Solgaleo's ears. “I don't suppose you would mind, um, sticking around until all the Aether people get here?”

His eyes closed. *It is my home.*

“Okay, fair. I just mean that like— you and Nebby and the Tapus have this way of like, cutting through the bureaucracy by literally leaving and making humans deal with it themselves.”

Solgaleo let out a snort. *It is true that we have little patience for nonsense, but I will stay if you need me. Now, little one— turn away from my altar. It must be cleansed, and I sense my method for cleansing will not appeal.*

“What's the method?”

*I will eat what I have spilled,* said Solgaleo, and yeah, okay, that was gross. *It is rare that I seek physical sustenance to begin with, for I am generally— like Luna— sustained by the energy of the universe. But I do hunt, sometimes. This prey has so kindly wandered into my den, and has done so on a day when I am weaker than usual. A considerately delivered meal.*

As he spoke, the shadows took on an interesting cast, and Moon glanced up to see the beginning of the solar eclipse.

*From our location, it will not be a true eclipse. But I recommend you do not look directly up at the sun. The light is known to damage human eyes and you are going to need yours... Champion.*

Moon, surprised, turned to look at Solgaleo; her timing was unfortunate because he had just pulled a rather large chunk of flesh from one of the corpses with his teeth. But his eyes were knowing and somewhat amused, even if his muzzle was still stained with blood. Moon's stomach rolled, but it wasn't all due to nausea.

“So you're, um, okay? With Nebby's choice?”

*Our choice,* said Solgaleo. *I only wished to meet you in person to confirm it. Luna knew you from the beginning, back when she was just a speckle; and her attention to you drew the attention of myself and her predecessor. We did not manifest or interfere in your journey, but we have kept an eye on you. Luna— the elder Luna, I should say— passed only the day before you arrived at her altar. I escorted her to the Boneyard and eased her passing, and she said that she approved of you.*

“I guess I didn't realize that the old Lunala had been alive at the same time as Nebby.”

*There are always a few Cosmog and Cosmoem in waiting, but there can only be one Solgaleo and one Lunala for this world at a time. She was very old and did not often leave her altar, but that makes no difference on the state of the moon itself. It is only when a Luna or a Sol is in danger that the sun and moon themselves may wink out of sight; for instance when a crotchety old beast attempts to eat one.*

Moon had known from the very beginning that Nebby had a sense of humor, long before she had known that Nebby was destined to be a Lunala. It was therefore something of a relief to discover that Solgaleo had one as well. She remembered thinking, in her hazy, panic-fuelled memories of Ultra Space, that their chances of survival increased exponentially if Necrozma had a sense of humor as well. So far, all the legendary Pokémon she had met seemed to have one— except for
Tapu Bulu, unless he found humor in his own cruelty.

“So, um— can I have some of that?” she asked, pointing at the large Solgalium Z crystal.

*I suppose I should tell you it isn't the real crystal,* said Solgaleo. *Once all of the false island's workers have come and gone, I will show you where to find it. You will be the only human to know exactly where it is.*

The sky was fully grey by now, and Moon quickly risked a peek up at the sun; the eclipse was in full swing.

*And that knowledge symbolizes the change you will represent to Alola. As the kahunas work with the Tapus, to care for both humans and beasts; you must work with me and with Luna, to care for all Alola. There has never been a great need for one unified battle-leader here. It has always been enough for a Sol and a Luna to care for their altars, and for the Tapus to aid the kahunas when needed. More recently, there are doors being opened to new places. Luna and I may both open doors, and so may the Tapus if they call upon our assistance; but we cannot control when others open doors— both beasts and humans, as you have recently learned. And you know better than many other humans of the dangers that the beasts from other worlds pose to humans and Pokémon of this world. You may delegate much to the kahunas, but in cases of emergency it would be your duty to lead in battle.*

“Okay, that makes sense,” agreed Moon. “By opening doors in the first place, we've sort of, um, opened ourselves up for attack?”

*Not necessarily attack. I think that most of the beasts who visit us through doors do so in good faith, but the environment is foreign and they are correctly wary of those who live here... humans so often end up destroying things they do not understand.*

“Yeah, I get you. Um, is there anything with like, island challenges that I have to do with you and Nebby?”

*Island challengers traditionally pay respects to me and to Luna at least once during their journey, but they do so by coming to the altar and stating their thanks. There is no need for further obeisances. But you should remind them, when you fight at the summit of the mountain, that you do so as close to the heavens as one may reach in Alola; and that their battles will be dedicated to me and to Luna.* Solgaleo's eyes glinted with something like laughter. *I know little of your human League traditions, though I have learned much by observing the construction of this one. It is a nice place they have built for battles. And it will be your duty to deal with the human side of things — fame and fortune. I trust you to use both of those things for the betterment of the islands.*

“Yeah, of course. Would I be able to help with money and stuff for the kahuna's individual goals? Like, I know Acerola suggested a sort of obstacle course thing to get to Ghostium Z, and Hapu wants to build a couple of Pokémon Centers on Poni Island. Those both seem like good causes to me.”

*That is up to you. I am sure you will find needs to fill. As long as there is life, there are needs.*

The sky was beginning to clear up, and Moon heard some distant shouting before thirty or forty white-suited Aether security guards came racing in with raised guns.

It took some time for everything to get sorted out— the Ula'ula island police came as well, so Moon gave witness statements and tried to describe the now-dead people who she thought might have been Foxes, but she wasn't sure. Several people were sent down to retrieve two bodies from
the lake— one of the maybe-Foxes and Kohaku. The maybe-Fox could be safely cremated, as they had no identification papers and Moon wasn't about to call up Jack and Emmett to ask if they knew about the person's family. But Kohaku was a different story, and it was not until the arrival of Nanu and Acerola— the former walking slowly with his hands shoved in his pockets, the latter skipping cheerfully past the smashed and blood-spattered altar tiles— that a solution was found.

“You're asking where to put him?” Acerola studied Kohaku's body, at which Moon couldn't quite bring herself to look.

“I guess he was, um, Foxglove's nephew?” Moon glanced at Nanu, then at Solgaleo for confirmation.

_He was._

Nanu blinked several times. He'd been standing a bit straighter, but Moon only noticed this when his shoulders slumped at the mention of Foxglove.

“I could ask,” said Acerola cheerfully. “His spirit is hanging around here somewhere. I'd have come to take care of him at some point anyway— we don't want the Lake of the Sunne haunted like the Thrifty Megamart, and he'll need to be sent off to the great Beyond sooner or later.”

Moon decided to ignore any mention of the _great Beyond_; that was certain to be a headache that she could not currently afford. “Do I have to see him or talk to him?”

“No,” said Acerola, turning to look at Moon with knowing eyes. “But it's possible that he'll ask to speak with you. I wouldn't turn him down, if he did. I try to help spirits that want to talk, when I can.”

“I guess that's fair.”

Nanu was still looking at Kohaku, at the holes bored into his chest by Tapu Bulu's horns and the blue-white pallor of his face— stark and wrong-looking, under the dyed-lilac hair.

“Not sure if I should be relieved, or sorry for the little bastard,” he said finally.

“Oh my god you put it into words.”

He dug in his pocket, pulling out a crumpled pack of cigarettes.

“I told you not to smoke those, they're bad for you,” said Acerola. Her eyes were closed.

“Don't get your hair in a twist, I'm not smoking the whole thing.” Nanu lit the cigarette with a lighter in his pocket, inhaled once, and blew out a single, perfect smoke-ring. “Rest in peace, you little shit.”

And with that, he stubbed out the cigarette and tucked it back into the carton. Moon fought the very inappropriate urge to giggle.

“Oh, there you are,” said Acerola suddenly. Her eyes shot open; they were fully black, like they had been when she was working half in the shadows to track down Totem Mimikyu at the Trainers' School. “I—” She fell silent for a few moments, her expression patient. “Do you want to talk to any of them, or not? I am literally your only conduit to the living world, so you ought to be nice to me.”

“He wants to talk to me?”

“Yes. He can't hurt you, he's not that powerful.”

Moon walked over and took Acerola's hand.

The world around them went dark; but there was Kohaku, glaring at her with crossed arms. At first he was still blue-waxy-pale, with holes in his chest; but then his image flickered and changed to a version that looked considerably more alive.

“Hi,” said Moon, after a few moments of silence.

Kohaku was still glaring at her, chest rising and falling as though he were breathing hard—which he wasn't, as spirits probably didn't need to breathe. “I hope you're happy,” he spat. “I'm dead and out of the way. Isn't that convenient for you?”

“Nobody's death is a convenience,” said Moon, appalled. “Like, dude. I never liked you, but I didn't wish you dead, holy fuck. That's all on Tapu Bulu.”

“I wish you were dead.”

“Funnily enough, I was already aware of this. You didn't exactly make it subtle when you decided to try and kill me just now.”

"Oh, fuck you."

“You know what I did wish, though?”

He rolled his eyes. “That I would change? Suddenly be nice and friends with you, like... ugh, the pink-haired one and the blonde with green streaks.”

“No, I wished you would leave us alone. And I don't know that I'd call Trinh and Uilani friends.”

“I— forgot their names,” Kohaku frowned. “I don't usually forget names.”

“That would be because you're dead,” said Acerola placidly. “You're losing your attachments to the living world. Not that you had many attachments anyway.”

He scoffed. “That's dumb.”

Moon sighed. “So, what do you want done with your body?”

“I'm not using it, am I?” He shrugged. “I don't give a shit, honestly.”

“When do you ever?” she snapped, exasperated.

He fell silent, looking away.

“Anything else?” said Acerola gently. “If you're done, I can take you to the final death. You can go find your uncle.”

“He probably doesn't want me.” Kohaku sounded tired. “I'll just... yeah. I'll just go.”

“Um, do you want me to tell anyone anything?” tried Moon. “Like last words or anything?”

He stared at her incredulously. “No. Literally, fuck all of them. And fuck you the most.”
“That's what I thought.” Moon lifted her free hand in an awkward wave. “Uh... I'd say see you, but I'm really hoping I don't.”

That earned her a snort. “Jokes for days, fuck you. It'd serve you right.”

Acerola let go of her hand, and the world brightened back to usual.

“From this end, that sounded damn creepy,” said Nanu conversationally.

“Weirdly,” said Moon, taking a deep breath, “it wasn't as bad as you're probably thinking.”

“What did he say when you asked him about last words?”

“Uh, it was something like— literally fuck all of them, and fuck you the most.”

“Ungrateful ass.” Nanu rolled his eyes. “And the body?”

“He doesn't care.”

“Cremation it is.” He waved over a couple of Aether employees, who began lifting Kohaku's body onto a stretcher. “We did that for Foxglove, too— spread his ashes at the Thrifty Megamart. I'll do the same for this one.”

“To be with his uncle?”

“I guess. Something like that.”

There were still other things to be done— some of the Aether employees helped to clean up the altar and helped to put away things like the stone that apparently wasn't Solgalium Z. Moon had been worried about the broken Sun Flute, but Solgaleo had merely glanced up at the sky to confirm that the moon was no longer covering up the sun in any way before placing his paw on the two halves of the flute and making a soft rumbling noise. A white light shone around his paw, and when he lifted it the flute was made whole once more.

Acerola came back from her dark-eyed trance, with a sober expression; she did not say anything about Kohaku, for which Moon was grateful. She and Nanu left, herding away the last of the Aether employees as they went.

Is that yours?

Solgaleo nodded towards a red speck that was cautiously floating toward them.

“Yeah, I think so. Hey, Rotom!”

“Hello, bzzt!”

“Glad you're back, buddy.” Moon opened her belt pouch, letting Rotom settle inside. “It was really smart of you to get out of there.”

“I wasn't about to stay and get smashed, bzzt. The Tapu said you would be all right, so I thought it would be better if I left.”

“Good call.”

I will show you Solgalium Z, if you like.
“Uh, yes. That would be great, thank you.”

*Then climb on my back, little one.*

Solgaleo knelt, and Moon climbed on his back. He trotted to the edge of the altar and leaped off the edge.

“OH MY GOD FUCK NO—”

They landed not in the water, but on a slender spire of rock that reached its peak about eight feet below the edge of the altar.

*All right?*

His tone was amused, and Moon felt herself flush. “Y-yeah. Sorry, I just— don't like heights.”

*I know.*

He leaped again, and Moon managed to contain the scream to a squeak instead. The next platform was only slightly lower, only three or four feet; but the one after that was at least fifteen. Thankfully it was the last one, though it was still a good twenty feet above the lake itself. Moon tried not to look out at the water as Solgaleo padded into the mouth of a rather small cave. She had to duck her head below his to get through without smacking her own.

She supposed that it made sense that the false Solgalium Z crystal looked a lot like the real thing. However, now that she was in the presence of Solgalium Z she wondered why she hadn't immediately been able to tell. The aura that hummed through the little cave was tangible, almost thick; and Solgalium Z glowed a bright, warm white, shot through with flecks of gold, orange, and electric blue. It was a large, spiky deposit, reaching from floor to ceiling for at least ten feet.

*You may break off a smaller piece,* said Solgaleo. Moon hastily climbed off his back, walking over to the crystal. It was brittle enough that she could snap a piece off with one hand, and she tucked it into the extra pocket on her belt.

“I'll keep it safe,” she promised, looking Solgaleo in the eye. “Until I can bring it back to Necrozma.”

*I would not have allowed you to see this place if I did not trust you* Solgaleo's eyes were calm—steady. *This is my proper den— where I sleep, and where the elder Luna and I have spent time creating baby starlights—the ones you call Cosmog. There are a few who wander around the lake, but they tend to prefer Luna's altar. It is more open to the sky, whereas I live in the shadow of the mountain.*

Moon swallowed. “It really is an honor,” she said softly. “Thank you for trusting me.”

The eyes warmed. *You are welcome, little one. There is nothing much to be seen here, so I will take you back upstairs and you may leave as you please.*

* * * * *

chat: *the four musketeers*
marvelous moon: Hey, do we have any kind of a group-call function?

heroic hau: yea i think so

marvelous moon: Excellent, I have a wild, long-ass story to tell you all

great gladion: Does this have anything to do with Tapu Bulu mind-blocking me earlier for about twenty minutes?

marvelous moon: Omg he really does care

marvelous moon: Short answer, probably yes. It'll be easier to explain over the phone.

lovely lillie: Call Gladion's phone, and he can add everyone else in.

marvelous moon: Will do

* * * * *

To: aewicke@aether.org

From: samsonoak@pmail.co.alo

Re: Greetings from Samuel Oak

If I remember correctly, Ms. Wicke, you were Viridian City's high school valedictorian back in... oh, what was it, '94? I didn't realize you'd risen so high in the Aether Corporation.

Recently it seems you've been trying to get in touch with my cousin Sam— or as you better know him, Kanto's own Pokémon Professor. He's asked that I take the lead on sharing our research with Aether, because I live out in the Route Ten area of Ula'ula Island. My studies are related more to the Alolan forms of Pokémon we've always known to be native to Kanto, but I'm happy to send you anything of Sam's that you're curious about as long as he okays it first. In return, I wouldn't mind seeing any notes you have on Alolan forms versus Kantonian forms.

I'm also letting you know (informally) that the Trainer whose application you've sent in for Kanto's Gym challenge is looking pretty good in the application database. Definitely in line for an elemental starter, if they don't get thirty more outstanding applicants.

If you don't mind, I'd like to pay the Aether Paradise a visit. Let me know when you're available and I'll show up— my research is self-directed and I set my own schedule.

Regards,

Samson Oak, Pokémon Professor
Moon was definitely doing a little kissy face in that selfie and Gladion was High-Key Suffering.

What could the Foxes possibly want with the Sun Flute, I wonder...

Moon getting captured accidentally-on-purpose because she's Tapu Bulu-etproof is exactly the same energy as Moon running into the desert after Nebby, and also the same energy as Moon. Just Moon, period.

Oh so they AREN'T Foxes!!! ...or Emmett says they aren't. WHO KNOWS

AHAHAHAH

“Are these blanks?” he said suspiciously. “They shouldn't be, you shot down a Trumbeak about forty-five minutes ago.” —there's an implied “dumbass” at the end of that sentence that everyone heard even if he didn't say it

“Get the Rotom out of her belt— I'm going to smash it, so she can't call for help.” —Rotom: "HASTA LA VISTA AND YEET MOTHERFUCKERS"

Kohaku discovers that heights make Moon go NOPE and this pushes like all of his Gross Behavior buttons

“Ooh,” said Kohaku mockingly, picking one up. “I've got a Sparkling Stone, so now I'm special and I get to go on a special journey.” —oh honey no, that's not how this works

It's weird how Moon will dunk on Emmett, and it just makes everyone laugh because he's dumb; but in this moment the other characters are dunking on him and like... you almost feel sorry for the guy. Oh no, is this Character Growth??!!

“In the confusion, Moon took the opportunity to punch Kohaku as hard as she could in the back of the knee.” —girl same

Solgaleo low-key sounds like JARVIS/Vision, aka Paul Bettany— who is quite a bit older than how I described Solgaleo in-story, but his voice sounds young and that's good enough for me.

Foxglove has been Kohaku's uncle since... um, probably the very end of Hibiscus? yeah this has been planned for a while.

I am SUPREMELY sorry for the romanized Google-Translate Japanese. If everybody could read the hiragana I would have written it in actual Japanese, but this story is in English so I wrote what you would be hearing him say, if you were Moon.

Tapu Bulu stating that people with serious psychoses and “scary” mental illness are unable to change is NOT CORRECT and I DO NOT AGREE WITH HIM. It is HIS OPINION and he is a FLAWED CHARACTER. This has been a PSA and it is also what I was warning about in the before notes.

Solgaleo keeps fake Solgalium Z in the tile-box by the altar. this is some Mad-Eye
Moody level paranoia

“Rest in peace, you little shit.” —I love writing Nanu

“Um, do you want me to tell anyone anything? Like last words or anything?” “No. Literally, fuck all of them. And fuck you the most.” —me, when I'm stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic on my way home from work and the eighteen-wheeler behind me lays on the horn even though I AM CLEARLY NOT THE CAUSE OF THE TRAFFIC JAM

Solgaleo: let's go get the rock, climb on my back :)
Moon: ok sure
Solgaleo: hang on, we're jumping off the altar! :)
Moon: WHAT THE FUCK
Solgaleo: haha psych :)

I didn't include the OT4 conference call because it was always going to be Moon repeating the story and then the rest of them yelling at her because she's a dumbass, and we've had that SO many times this series that you can just assume it happened again lmao

This chapter's email, surprisingly, has nothing to do with Moon, Red, or Blue... it's still important though, or I wouldn't have written it. ;)

OKAY so this is where we talk about Kohaku. He's the Very Specific OC death I was mentioned in the before notes. I wrote Tapu Bulu killing him, yes, but I wrote this with Tapu Bulu being ABSOLUTELY WRONG. He shouldn't have done that. Sure, I didn't have to write it that way. I'm the author and therefore god of CTN, right? I chose to do this for several reasons.

Kohaku was always going to die. I never planned a redemption arc for him because I am already going to be writing five (possibly more) messy, painful, and long-running redemption arcs for other characters. Some of said redemption arcs are already in place. As much as I believe in the power of medication and therapy and support networks from your friends and loved ones— it was going to be too damn hard to build all of that up from Literally Zero. All the other characters getting redemption arcs have some of those good things already. Kohaku does not.

I also wanted to emphasize the ANIMALISTIC nature of Pokémon. They're intelligent, and I've written legendaries and a few others with the ability to communicate telepathically. But at the end of the day, Solgaleo is a lion, Tapu Bulu is a bull, and both of those animals IRL are goddamn territorial. So Kohaku's death is violent and upsetting, and that was intentional; I apologize in advance if my content warnings were not adequate for anyone's mental health needs. I tried to be as specific as I could while still avoiding spoilers.
Flatter the mountaintops with sovereign eye,

Chapter Summary

Tapu Village, Victory Road Gate
****************************
Moon and Hau purchase last-minute necessities and say good-bye to Lillie and Gladion before beginning their ascension of Mount Lanakila.

Chapter Notes

Tumblr: joonieptree.tumblr.com (mostly inactive and very much a BTS stan account but if you would like to ask a private question I would be happy to answer you!)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM JOIN US WE ARE A GREAT GROUP OF PEOPLE AND WE WOULD LOVE TO HAVE YOU!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I have never in my life needed snow gear,” said Hau, looking around at the parkas, snow pants, heavy boots, and other cold-weather clothing. “I have no idea where to start.”

“Don't look at me.” Gladion raised his hands.

“My first-hand knowledge of the Alolan climate is more or less equivalent to yours,” added Lillie.

All three of them turned to look at Moon, who sighed.

“All right, I guess I'm the expert.”

“Knew we could count on you. A true bro,” said Hau, clapping her cheerfully on the back.

“I have seen snow approximately seven times in my life, and never more than two or three inches at a time.”

“That's... less than helpful,” said Gladion dryly.

“I wonder if there's anyone else in this store who knows more about it than we do?” said Moon, pretending to look around the small shop with her hand over her eyes as though she were trying to see far away. “A store clerk who sells the stuff we're looking to buy couldn't possibly have more knowledge on the subject than me. No way, no how.”

“All right, we get the point,” laughed Lillie.

The clerk had listened to the teasing with a grin on his own face, and was more than happy to help kit Moon and Hau out in things that would keep them warm and safe as they traversed Mount Lanakila. Gladion and Lillie were present because Gladion had insisted on coming to Ula'ula Island to see Moon in person after she had related her experience at the Lake of the Sunne; but also
because Moon and Hau needed to start making their way up Mount Lanakila and wanted to spend a little more time with their friends. Gladion and Lillie's presence in the cold-weather shop was more for moral support than based on any actual necessity.

They each ended up with a pair of snow pants, a faux fur-lined parka, heavy waterproof boots, and fleece hats that had only a large hole for one's eyes and a smaller one for one's nose. Hau's parka was orange and his snow pants were yellow— his favorite colors, which had the added bonus of being highly visible. Moon had considered a few different options, but ultimately decided that a bright-purple parka with black pants would stand out brightly against the snow. Both of their boots were brown, and the fleece hats were black.

“How about gloves, hats, and scarves?” asked the clerk. “It's always better to have more things than you need.”

“I've got some,” said Moon, digging through her backpack for the hat, scarf, and mitten/glove hybrid that Gladion had gifted to her. “They're pretty new, so they should be okay,”

“Yes, those are good quality.” The clerk peered at them. “Oh— I recognize that knitting pattern. They must be from Nievas?”

“I dunno, he gave them to me,” said Moon, indicating Gladion.

“You got them at the Aether Paradise?”

“Yes,” said Gladion, rather tersely.

He whistled. “Nievas is good stuff. It will last you your whole life, if you treat it well— and that's a good thing, because it's expensive. You don't want to have to replace something that nice.”

Moon had been quite sure that a knitted hat, scarf, and gloves could not cost all that much money, and thus had been happy to accept the present; but when she glanced at Gladion she saw that he was staring hard at the ground and slowly turning pink, then red. Hau and Lillie were watching with gleeful expressions on their faces.

“That's really nice of you, then,” she said, reaching out to touch Gladion's arm. “Thanks again.”

He nodded once, still scarlet-faced. Moon waited until the clerk had turned to help Hau pick out a hat, gloves, and scarf before she said quietly, “Do I want to know how much it cost?”

“Probably not, but I'll tell you if you ask me to.”

Moon considered this for a few moments. She tucked the hat and mittens back into her backpack and moved into Gladion's personal space, looking up at him through her eyelashes before looping the scarf around his neck and then her own. He blinked, staring at her; his hands went to her waist automatically.

“How much?” she murmured, quietly so as to not draw the attention of the others.

His mouth fell open. “Holy shit,” he mumbled. “Holy shit you're beautiful. Um. Um, they came as a set and it was, um. About nine thousand Poké?”

It actually wasn't quite as much as she was afraid he had spent on her; but it was still too much. Not that she was going to tell him that; she might be occasionally tactless but she wasn't a complete heathen. “Wow. They're really pretty and warm. Thank you so much.”
He slumped over, resting his chin on her shoulder and pulling her even closer. “I just— you look nice in red,” he mumbled. “I know you like purple and green and gray stuff, but I like red... that sounds selfish. I should have gotten you something purple.”

“No take-backsies, I love these and they're perfect,” Moon informed him. “It's really good wool yarn, too. I didn't know you could get something this nice from Mareep.”

“It's— not. Um, there's a Pokémon in Galar called Wooloo? They have really, really nice wool. Nievas sources all their raw wool from Galar, and they comb it out until it's practically silk and then they dye it and spin it into yarn. And then they make stuff with it. It's pretty, um— it's pretty neat.”

“You know a lot about it?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Um, they've had the store at the Paradise for, oh, twenty-five years, probably? Lillie and I had civics and economics classes with Wicke, and she had us pick a shop in the Paradise and write a paper about the business model. I picked Nievas because I liked all the pretty things they made. I went in and interviewed the owner and watched the process. Spinning is, um— it's really relaxing to watch. I kept going back even after I wrote the paper, and when I couldn't get my brain to shut up I'd go in and watch them spin yarn for a while.” She felt his mouth thin. “Of course, once my egg donor found out, I was lectured and told it was too girly and I wasn't allowed to go back anymore. I only went back for the first time when we all went to buy clothes, after she and Guzma went to Ultra Space. They've expanded to include clothes, too. And, um, the owner remembered me. Said he missed having me come in and watch the spinning machines. He wanted to give me the set for free but I told him I wanted to spend the money. If it had been for me, I'd have let him— well, actually no, I probably wouldn't have. If it had been for Lillie, or even Amelia, I'd have let him gift it. But it was for you, and, um— I know it's stupid but like... I like spending money on you? That sounds horrible, fuck. It's not like, putting a price tag on the relationship or anything. I just— you're worth it, to me.”

The quiet voice was rapidly devolving into mumbling, and by the way his head was growing hot against hers, he was blushing even more. Moon had grown up poor, and she keenly felt the value of things like a nine-thousand-Poké winter set, or a Master Ball that was probably millions if not billions of Poké. She knew that her parents would have liked to invest more in her— if they could have afforded for her to have a pet Pokémon at age ten when everyone else in her class had gotten one, then they would have; and they'd sat down with her when she turned thirteen in eighth grade and told her that they wouldn't be able to cover her college education so she would either have to attend university on scholarship or start working now to save up. She had elected to go the scholarship route, working hard to get good grades. She hadn't quite made valedictorian; but she'd been in the top ten of her graduating class, and that had been good enough to merit offers from all of the major universities.

“It means a lot to me,” she told him. “I have money now too, and I know I can spend it on you. But you're used to having money, so— I don't think it matters that much to you?”

“Yeah, no. I don't really care about that.”

“You like when we can just— be together. Spend time together, and...” Moon took a breath, hoping, daring— “ And touch each other.”

The silence pulsed between them; she was acutely aware of the way his hands clenched on her waist, on the rushed inhale next to her ear.

“Yeah,” he said, low and hoarse. “I like that, sunshine.”
Hau and Lillie were finishing up with Hau's purchases, and Moon regretfully let go of Gladion to take her own things to the counter and pay for them. He stayed close though, arms wrapping around her waist from behind as she counted out money and handed it to the clerk.

“Have a nice day now, and good luck with the mountain!”

“Thanks, you too!” called Hau. He glanced at Moon as the bell on the door tinkled to signal their exit. “Let’s get lunch and buy dinner, and then— we can head out?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

As they walked back over to the Pokémon Center, a bright red sign caught Moon's eye. The Pokémon Center itself was situated on the largest road in Tapu Village, facing south; the snow-gear shop and a few other stores (thrift store/consignment, electronics, a McMiltanks, and a rather shabby-looking pizza parlor as well as others she couldn't immediately identify) were across from it. The road that lead north to Mount Lanakila was just east of the Pokémon Center, and east of that the red sign informed Moon that the large empty lot there was for sale.

“Seems like this ought to be some prime real estate,” she said, pointing at the empty lot. “It's so close to the Pokémon Center and it's right at the bottom of the mountain. I would have thought Aether might build a clinic or an outpost here.”

“The Route Fifteen outpost was built because the Foundation was ostensibly interested in studying the biology of Ula'ula Meadow more than anything else,” Gladion informed her. “It hasn't been there for very long— only five years or so, probably. Which means that Lusamine had it built, so the reasoning about Ula'ula Meadow was probably a cover for wanting to get at the Lake of the Sunne.”

“I guess the proximity makes sense for being able to catch baby Nebby,” reasoned Moon.

Lillie's mouth tightened. “You're probably right, but Nebby was captured in the area where Phyco and Soliera went with us to search and study wild Cosmog and Cosmoem. Cosmoem tend to prefer very small caves and burrows where they can't easily be removed, so they didn't find much of them.”

“But there were a couple of Cosmog hanging around.” Moon had been more occupied at the time with her conversation with Lillie in the first place, but it had been odd to see other Cosmog. She had learned that day that Nebby, as a Cosmog, was considerably bouncier and more mischievous than Cosmog in general. They were all happy and smiley, but not quite as exuberant. “So Nebby is from the Altar of the Moone, more or less. Do all the Cosmog on Poni Island default to a Lunala evolution, if they evolve?”

“Nobody's really sure,” admitted Lillie. “It's actually something I wondered, too. Dulse said that their Solgaleo was the only survivor of Necrozma's first rage, but there have been plenty of different Solgaleo in that thousand years and no Lunala. They all stayed well-hidden, but it means there were also Cosmog and Cosmoem. I think that both of them have to exist to get a fifty-fifty chance for gender.”

“Out of sheer curiosity,” said Hau, “how exactly do we know Nebby is a girl?”

“Well, the notes in the Aether file said that her DNA extracts revealed chromosomal traits that most female Pokémon share. But one time I was talking to her after we escaped. I was, um, using neutral pronouns and she corrected me by drawing the female sign on the ground.”
“It's not like she has, uh, genitalia. So it would be hard to tell without doing a DNA analysis.” Hau scratched the back of his head.

“Right. And Nebby is, um, voluntarily helping the Solgaleo from Ultra Megalopolis by... well, mating. Don't look at me like that!” Moon, Hau, and Gladion were all snickering at Lillie's flushed face. “Nebby explained it to me. They don't actually do anything, it's just like— spending time together and poof, little Cosmogs pop into existence.”

“Netballflix and poof,” said Hau, which made Moon laugh so hard her stomach started to cramp.

Lunch was at the Pokémon Center, and Moon and Hau also bought their dinner to go, wrapped in foil to keep it warm. Moon tucked hers into an inside pocket of her purple parka. It wasn't quite cold enough in Tapu Village to necessitate putting the parka on immediately, but both she and Hau took off their shoes and pulled the snow pants on over their regular pants. Taking off the waterproof snow-boots to put snow pants on sounded kind of terrible. The snow pants were hot, made scratchy vinyl noises when her legs rubbed together, and looked awkwardly lumpy—especially, thought Moon, looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, because her hips were wider than the rest of her to begin with. She threaded her Trainer's belt through loops on the snow pants, put on her lighter jacket, and went back out to the café where Gladion and Lillie were waiting.

“I hate the way they sound,” she complained. “Listen when I walk. It does this high-pitched scratchy noise.”

“Oh god, what a tragedy,” said Gladion, his expression deadpan. “Truly the worst thing in the world.”

“You just miss looking at my legs,” retorted Moon, and was immediately gratified when he went beetroot red.

“I— shut up,” he muttered, turning away and slumping into the seat.

Moon and Hau had finished stocking up on food and necessities the night before, with at least two months worth of cup ramen and MREs; their backpacks were huge but it was worth it. It meant that they couldn't carry water bottles, but there would be plenty of water in the form of snow. It wouldn't be the cleanest water but they could purify it with carbon-filter bottles and iodine tablets. They also only had a few sets of clean clothes each, because they would have to make do with bathing once a week or so. There were a few outhouses and shower-sheds stationed along Victory Road, as there were in the Vast Poni Canyon; but whether or not they had power and/or working water at any given time was up to the weather. The cold could and frequently did freeze the pipes, apparently; and the water heaters and lights were powered by solar panels and thus were useless in a snowstorm. They had an extra tarp for their shared tent, which Hau insisted on carrying; Moon compromised by carrying both of the tarps while Hau had the poles and main tent-canvas. A more pressing issue would be fuel for a fire; no trees grew on Victory Road and even if they did it wouldn't be fair to future Trainers if they chopped them up. Firewood would be too heavy to carry, and they would need a lot of it anyway to stay warm. But Moon hit upon a solution— instead of using fires, they could take a power bank and an electric heater to keep warm, and use a teakettle to heat water. Ben or Uila could easily keep the power bank running, especially if they took it in turn.

There were some other supplies, which hadn't been necessary before. Instead of keeping the rope in her backpack, Moon's loop of Ariados-silk rope was hanging from her belt. Hau had an identical rope. They both had carabiners and some climbing harnesses, which Moon had no idea how to use but Hau assured her would be easy to learn. They both had ice-spikes, which could be strapped onto boots or around hands; and Hau had a small pickaxe. It was, technically, possible to traverse the entirety of Victory Road without having to climb anything; but that would take far longer than
four or five weeks—which Moon did not have. They were fast approaching the end of January, and February was a short month to begin with. She had promised Necrozma the Z-Crystals by Leap Year's Day and she was determined to make it there on time. Rappelling up and down cliff faces sounded about as appealing as shoveling Crobat guano but if she had made it through the Vast Poni Canyon, she could make it up Mount Lanakila.

Everything was packed and ready to go; and Moon, Hau, Lillie, and Gladion made their way out to the entryway to Victory Road. A trial guide in a bright teal parka guarded the entrance, ensuring that only Trainers who had the appropriate Z-Crystals could pass; this was where they would say good-bye.

With an impish glance at Moon, Hau reached out and clapped Gladion on the shoulder with one hand. “I'll miss you, buddy.”

Gladion's nose wrinkled. “Buddy sounds juvenile,” he said, but unhesitatingly walked forward to pull Hau into a proper hug. Moon grinned at Lillie conspiratorially before they hugged as well.

“I know you're nervous,” said Lillie gently, “but you'll do just fine.”

“Thanks. I'll text you when your boyfriend is being annoying. And also like, whenever I miss you.”

Her friend laughed. “I'll text you when your boyfriend is being annoying.”

“So, all the time?”

“I heard that,” said Gladion, his voice slightly muffled by Hau's shoulder. Hau, grinning, let him go. “Can I not catch a fucking break with either of you.”

But his eyes were amused as he turned toward them; and Hau took Lillie's hand and pulled her away, clearly intending on giving her a slightly more intimate good-bye than simple banter among friends. It left Moon and Gladion facing each other, with the trial guide looking tactfully down at his phone even though Moon had the feeling he was listening very hard to all of their conversations.

“Um— I'll miss you.” Much to her horror, Moon found her eyes growing very slightly damp—she wasn't tearing up, but if Gladion said something that made her feel things then anything could happen. She glanced down at the ground, not wanting to make him think she was making her cry.

She heard him swallow and felt his hand on her face—warm, gentle, thumb hooking under her chin to lift her eyes to his. “You'll be okay.”

“I know, but like—I'll just miss you. I dunno.”

The kiss-that-had-not-been only a couple of days ago suddenly made itself present at the forefront of Moon's mind, and she wondered if now, maybe, it might be; but his hand kept moving, gliding around to the back of her neck as the other brought her close in an embrace.

“I expect so many silly selfies,” he informed her. “I would call them ugly, but I don't think you're ugly. Also, I don't actually expect them. Please don't feel obligated to send pictures just because I made a joke.”

“I'll send as many selfies as you want,” laughed Moon. She turned her head and kissed his cheek. “But you better send me some, too. You should smile. I still haven't seen it in person.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I've—um, well. I only really remembered this recently, because I was
talking with my therapist about it. But I think at some point Lusamine told me I looked stupid when I smiled in pictures, so I shouldn't do that. Lillie said it's because when I smile I look even more like our father than I already do, and Lusamine wouldn't have liked seeing that. So I learned how to laugh without smiling, and I just kind of... stopped smiling. At all, really."

“Your mother’s a bitch. I don't believe you have a stupid smile.” She leaned back, looking up at him. “Can I see?”

He blinked at her a few times— then smiled.

It was hesitant and close-mouthed, with nervous energy; but exactly as she had expected it was beautiful. The corners of his eyes crinkled a bit— not quite as much as Lillie's did, but Moon supposed that a wider smile would deepen the crinkles.

“Oh, you've got a dimple,” she said, unable to stop her own answering grin. “You're genetically fortunate. I don't have dimples.”

He glanced away, smile slipping a bit in shyness; but Moon reached up, grasping his face in her hands, and pressed her finger into the dimple.

“It's cute,” she told him, watching as his face went pink. “I love it, it's so cute.”

“Shut up,” he mumbled, but the smile widened a little more and the dimple deepened. “You're so fuckin' weird.”

“I'm gonna kiss it.”

The pink deepened to red, and he huffed out an awkward laugh. “I mean, if you want to.”

Moon pulled his head down and kissed the dimple, carefully avoiding the urge to deliver on a proper kiss. “I fucking give up. God fucking damn it, I give up.”

“What are you giving up on?” asked Moon, amused. Her voice was muffled by his shoulder, since he'd pulled her in for a very tight hug.

“Pretending you aren't the cutest fucking being in this entire stupid universe.”

“That's a whole-ass lie when you, Kate, and Ellie all exist.”

“Ughhh.” But he was smiling again; Moon could hear it in his voice and her heart pattered alarmingly.

She closed her eyes, trying to memorize the way they held one another.

“When do you think you'll find out about your application?” Moon asked him.

He shrugged. “I dunno. Worst-case scenario, I'll apply for a different region.”

“Do you want to go anywhere else?”

“I've been to Kalos and Unova. Kalos was okay, I wouldn't mind going back. Didn't really like Unova, but I think that was more Lusamine's fault than anything.” He considered. “Sinnoh might be fun.”
“Because it's mostly small towns between very long stretches of wilderness?” teased Moon.

“Small towns means fewer people,” said Gladion seriously. “It's a factor.” But she felt him smiling again, the way his cheek moved against hers where they were pressed together. “Plus, their champion really gets my aesthetic. Black on black.”

“You're such a dork.” Moon turned her head and kissed him on the cheek.

“At your service.”

A comfortable silence rested over both of them. Moon had never fallen asleep standing up before, but Gladion's shoulder was comfortable and she wondered if she could.

Eventually Hau and Lillie returned, both of them distinctly flushed and smiling; Lillie's hair was a bit tousled and Moon made a fake-disgusted face at both of them.

“We just gotta, you know. Rip off the bandage,” said Hau, a bit glumly. “We'll text you when we're camped, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

Moon shouldered her backpack, glancing at Hau; he nodded, and they began walking over to the trial gate and the guide who was waiting for them.

“Everything seems to be in order,” he said, after a cursory inspection of their Z-Rings. “Wow, I don't know if I've ever seen that many Z-Crystals in one place at once.”

“I'm collecting them,” said Moon— though she wasn't going to mention what, or who exactly she was collecting them for. “I've just got Icium Z, and then I think I've got one of every crystal in the region.”

“That's ambitious,” said the guide, looking suitably impressed. “Nice job, that must have taken a lot of work. Well, you're both free to pass.”

“Thanks.”

Moon looked over her shoulder at Lillie and Gladion. They stood side by side, tall and slim and blond— she had once observed that Lillie could be a model but honestly, so could Gladion; they were both built for it.

“Good luck!” called Lillie. “Travel safely!”

“We will,” promised Moon.

She met Gladion's eyes. He wasn't smiling, but his expression was warm. Moon turned around, so she was walking backwards, and grinned at him and poked her fingers in her cheeks.

“What are you doing?” said Hau, amused.

Gladion's shoulders moved in a visible sigh but he smiled, in that awkward-cute way that Moon had thought only elementary school kids could achieve— the smile that happened when they were told to smile and didn't feel like it. The corners of the mouth were turned up, and the eyebrows rose; but it wasn't technically a smile. Lillie, looking between the two of them, was clearly trying not to laugh.

Moon stuck her lower lip out in an exaggerated pout and pushed her fingers farther into her cheeks.
Gladion sighed again, but this time the smile was genuine—a touch rueful, but the dimples appeared whether he was embarrassed or not.


“Right?”

Gladion rolled his eyes at them but lifted his hand in a wave. Lillie did the same. Moon and Hau waved back, then turned around to truly begin making their way up Victory Road.

* * * * *

DAY ONE

chat: the four musketeers

marvelous moon: Guess what the actual shittiest thing in the entire world is!!!

heroic hau: ignore her shes just cold & hangry

great gladion: ?

marvelous moon: CAMPING ON A FUCKING MOUNTAIN IN THE DEAD OF WINTER

lovely lillie: It's not that I'm saying “I told you so,” because I did not, in fact, tell you so.

lovely lillie: But that seems... self-explanatory.

heroic hau: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

marvelous moon: Ok I just finished eating my dinner and I have reason to believe that Hau was correct, I was just hangry

great gladion: I am not even a little bit surprised by this news.

marvelous moon: Some boyfriend you are Imao

great gladion: Just the facts, ma'am.

heroic hau: y r u quotin perry meganium

great gladion: Hapu has a lot of channels at her house. I've never seen Perry Meganium before.

great gladion: It's fascinating.

marvelous moon: I can't believe that you have the entire world of television shows before you and you went with Perry Meganium

great gladion: Well, what do you recommend?
chat: the four musketeers

**great gladion:** Your Zoroark costume is pretty great, but the scar is on the wrong side.

**heroic hau:** THE SCAR IS NOT ON THE WRONG SIDE!!!

**great gladion:** Sometimes clouds have two sides, a dark and light, and silver lining in between. It's like a silver sandwich! So when life seems hard, just take a bite out of the silver sandwich.

**heroic hau:** Listen, until your fathers return from war, they're counting on you to be the men of the tribe. And that means NO POTTY BREAKS!

**marvelous moon:** Did you actually binge-watch the entire show???

**great gladion:** I admit nothing.

**marvelous moon:** Oh dear god I've created a monster. Lillie, please tell me you're still sane.

**lovely lillie:** In my dream, we were right in the middle of the invasion and you stopped to use the bathroom. We die because of your tiny bladder.

**heroic hau:** HELL YEAH

**marvelous moon:** I hate all of you.

**great gladion:** My last girlfriend turned into the moon.

**lovely lillie:** That's rough, buddy.

**heroic hau:** AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

**marvelous moon:** Okay, that one was actually pretty good.

**chat:** the four musketeers
heroic hau: hey id like u all 2 kno that moon just rappelled up a cliff & she only screamed once

heroic hau: technically

heroic hau: if u scream the entire time w/o stopping 4 air i think it counts as once

marvelous moon: Why would you expose me like this

lovely lillie: Congratulations, Moon! Maybe to celebrate you should throw something essential but not fragile down the cliff so that Hau has to go back down and get it.

great gladion: Wow, that's evil.

heroic hau: betrayed by my own gf

heroic hau: y must life b so cruel

marvelous moon: I'm not going to throw anything off the cliff because that involves going close to it, but the amount of laughter I got out of the idea is immoderate

great gladion: Not really?

great gladion: You just pick something to throw and, as the kids say, “yeet”

marvelous moon: OH MY GOD

heroic hau: correction: it's “this bitch empty, YEET”

great gladion: I wasn't sure exactly what you were referencing so I asked Almas, my go-to pop culture expert, to explain it to me. He says that the full quote only applies if the object being yeeted is a container of some kind. And that it must, in fact, be empty.

heroic hau: how do u make memes sound clever

lovely lillie: Hau, this is the group chat, not the internet search bar.

heroic hau: ...

marvelous moon: GET REKT

lovely lillie: Sorry, that was kind of mean of me.

heroic hau: no listen that was frickin hilarious, dont apologize 4 witty bants!!!

heroic hau: i kno its just 4 the chat & u dont rly think im stupid lol

heroic hau: i can take a joke <3

lovely lillie: <3

great gladion: And that's my cue to put my phone away and go to sleep.
To: samsonoak@pmail.co.alo

From: aewicke@aether.org

Re: Re: Greetings from Samuel Oak

Thank you for reaching out to me, Samson. Would I also address you as Professor, or will Mr. suffice?

If you are free on the eighth of February between nine and eleven a.m, I don't currently have anything scheduled at that time. Attached to this email is a pass that will grant you entry to the Aether Island mansion; you may print it or merely download it onto your phone.

May I take your message regarding the Trainer in question as a definite acceptance to the Kantonian Gym challenge, then? I'm sure he would appreciate the knowledge but I don't wish to circumvent the system by telling him before he is notified himself. And I was rather hoping that he would be permitted to start early, which would surely negate the need to retain a certain ranking in the application database in order to earn an elemental Starter. There are extenuating circumstances (classified) that necessitate this Trainer's swift completion of the Gym challenge and subsequent return to Alola. It is unconventional, but waiting until June to complete the challenge would be inconvenient. If you do not mind liaising with your cousin to request an earlier starting date, I would be exceedingly grateful and so would the Trainer in question. Thank you for your time; I look forward to meeting with you.

*************

Amelia Wicke

Aether Foundation, COO

Head of HR, IT, Hospitality/Public Relations, Media Relations, Sales/Marketing, Security, Custodial Services

Acting President and CEO

Acting Head of Medical, Conservation, and Accounting

*************

Chapter End Notes

even if Moon did live in a snowy climate do you think she'd be spending a lot of time in it? hell no she stays inside and reads books

"Nievas" comes vaguely from Spanish and relates to snow. I thought it would be a good name for a shop specializing in hand-knit garments.
This entire exchange, where Gladion admits to spending approximately $85 USD on a matching hat, scarf, and mittens made from high-quality wool, because he thinks Moon is worth spending that kind of money on, is definitely me making sure that y'all understand that Gladion's love languages of giving are Gifts and Words of Affirmation.

Hey remember when they were gonna kiss and they didn't? Yeah Moon is currently trying to let Gladion know that he should definitely try that again, but she's not using her words like an adult so we aren't going to reward her lmao

also WOOLLOO

On the other hand, Gladion's receiving love language is Physical Touch. Also Quality Time because Gladimoon will literally just take naps together but my boy is touch-starved and too shy to ask for cuddles :((((((((

what is Scribe going to do with that conspicuously lampshaded piece of real estate, you ask? ... you'll see, you'll see

Netballflix and poof

So when I was about four years old, I had this vinyl-y windbreaker with matching pants. A very nineties look, which makes sense as I was born in '93. And whenever I wore the pants, I heard this mysterious scratching noise. I didn't like it and it confused me, and I couldn't get away from it and was considerably distressed by it. I eventually figured out that it was my little toddler thighs in the vinyl-y windbreaker material rubbing together and making the scritchy-scratch. Want to know how old I was when I figured this out? ...twenty-three. I was twenty-three.

Technically, Mount Lanakila is not a super long Victory Road in terms of like, DISTANCE, but it's covered in snow and I feel like hiking in the snow is going to take a lot longer than just climbing a mountain. Plus there's mountain faces and caves and stuff, and who says caves are all nice and vertical like they are in the game? We got drops, we got cliffs, we got some hardcore mountain-climbing Everest material. Why, do you ask? Well firstly, I like making Moon's life more difficult and secondly, this is my petty ass being annoyed that there aren't any winter clothes in SuMo or USUM. I know that XY and SwSh have them but I WANT TO WEAR FULL BLACK AND LONG SLEEVES IN ALOLA TOO DAMN IT

“But I think at some point Lusamine told me I looked stupid when I smiled in pictures, so I shouldn't do that. Lillie said it's because when I smile I look even more like our father than I already do, and Lusamine wouldn't have liked seeing that.” — 0:-)

FINALLY HE SMILES!!! and yet... while this is the exact point in the game where you see canon Gladion smile for the first time... THAT smile was a full toothy grin. This one is not. Do I have to write slow burn for a freaking smile? No. Will I? Absofuckinlutely.

listen to Dimple by BTS and read the lyrics. I fuckin love dimples they're cute as fuck and you best believe Gladion was always going to have them and that's one of the reasons I took a million years to write him smiling.

(also, if you would like to suffer as much as I do over BTS— watch a live performance of Dimple. it's SINFUL.)
Cynthia's all-black aesthetic is more, uh... Colress's Secret Twin Sister Who Is Also A Motorcycle Dominatrix Bond Villain, and Gladion's is more I Listened To My Chemical Romance In Seventh Grade. Don't hate me because I'm telling the truth.

Moon being a dork to try and make Gladion smile again is also HUGE bangtan energy. (stan bts)

and now CRACK

Perry Meganium is Perry Mason. Why? Because I couldn't find another Pokémon that begins with the “mey” sound— oh, you mean why Perry Mason? uh, I don't know. I'm old, cut me a fuckin break

You can assume, obviously, that Moon's suggestion was “Avatar: The Last Airbender,” because it is THE SINGLE GREATEST TELEVISION SHOW IN THE HISTORY OF TELEVISION SHOWS, THANK YOU THIS HAS BEEN MY TEDXTALK

... you can also assume that Gladion and Lillie literally binge-watched the entire show in two days. the episodes are twenty minutes long and there's only three seasons, it's totally doable

... and I've been waiting to use “My last girlfriend turned into the moon” for a Very Long-Ass Time and if you don't appreciate my one last braincell's crackfic aesthetic then I don't really know what to say to you

“if u scream the entire time w/o stopping 4 air i think it counts as once” —ouch

“Hau, this is the group chat, not the internet search bar.” —OUCH

Samson: oh hey, Gladion probably gets a starter in June or whatever!
Wicke: So, March?
Samson: ...no I said June
Wicke: I'm sorry, I can't hear you. March it is! :)
Let me confess that we two must be twain

Chapter Summary

Mount Lanakila
***************
Moon and Hau talk philosophy, BB and Kate evolve to complete their teams, and a Valentine's Day video-call leaves both Moon and Gladion quite flustered.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Sonnet 36 by William Shakespeare.

this is yet another chapter that I was embarrassed to write, though this wasn't NEARLY as bad as Haullie making out.

tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (very inactive BTS stan account)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM <---- copypaste into the address bar and JOIN US

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**DAY EIGHT**

“I don’t know if I can do this,” said Moon, staring at the dark drop-off before them.

“Rappelling down is a lot easier than rappelling up,” Hau reminded her. “Plus it's pretty dark.”

“There's a trail lamp at the bottom. I can still see how far down it goes.”

He was nice enough to give her a few seconds to try and compose herself before saying gently, “Well, we still have to go. This cave route saves us at least a week, if not more.”

“Yeah, I know.” Moon sighed, reaching for her belt and removing Hero’s ball. “Do we have enough room here?”

“We should.”

As with the two cliffs they had already traversed— one up and one down— Hero was made to stand on the higher level, with the rope anchored around her legs. Moon hated it but she had to go down first, being lighter than Hau. He helped buckle her into one of the harnesses, and she returned the favor before offering him a fist-bump for luck.

The cave wall was slick with ice, and was unfortunately reflective; and Moon had to keep her eyes open to see what she was doing. Jump, fall, swing in to break momentum with her feet; rinse and repeat, ad nauseam. Literally, because her stomach was spinning by the time she got to the bottom,
Only the trail lamp lit the path, and Moon watched as Hau bounced down along the rope after her. He took larger jumps, and was heavier so it sounded like he slammed into the wall every time; but she could hear him laughing quietly. Once he was standing upright on the ground, Moon recalled Hero to her ball and pulled the rope off the cliff.

“Boom, that's a whole week,” said Hau cheerfully. “Or it will be, when we get out of the cave. When do we get out of the cave?”

“It should be today,” said Moon, taking advantage of the trail lamp to consult The Traveller's Guide to Alola. “But closer to the evening, so I'm thinking we should camp right in the cavemouth. It won't be as windy.”

“Good idea.”

It was because they knew each other so well by now, and because the road was not a terribly easy one, that Moon and Hau were totally comfortable with travelling in silence. In the early days, when they hadn't known each other as well, the quiet had always been filled with questions, stories, and jokes; at this point they didn't need to talk to appreciate one another's company. Hau had become quieter in the last few weeks— really, since Ultra Space; and that was probably not a coincidence.

“Are you okay?”

The question echoed in the darkness of the cave. For a few minutes, he didn't say anything and Moon had begun to worry that he was offended by the question; but before she could apologize he sighed.

“I guess if I were going to talk to anyone about this, it would be you,” he said, with a half-smile in his voice. “I'm not sure talking to Lillie would help me feel better about this, and talking to Gladion definitely wouldn't help. I'm just thinking about Tapu Koko.”

“And being the next kahuna?”

“Yeah.” He was quiet for a few more seconds. “And other stuff too, I guess. You know how you grow up reading stories about heroes who save people?”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, you're obviously a hero. You're doing stuff for Necrozma, you're going to be the champion, and you've probably saved Gladion's life.”

“I don't know about that,” said Moon, feeling her face heat.

“I mean emotionally,” clarified Hau. “Ask him yourself if you don't believe me. We've talked about it and everything.”

“Um, okay. But why are we talking about me when I asked about you?”

“Context. I would read stories about heroes who save people, and you're clearly a hero. And I think Lillie and Gladion are both heroes too; they saved Nebby and Null. But I don't know if I'm as much of a hero as any of you. I feel like a sidekick a lot of the time.”

Moon considered this for a few moments. “I don't know if you can help what you feel,” she said finally. “I know I can't help my feelings sometimes. But believe me, none of us have ever thought
of you as a sidekick.”

“Not even Gladion?” he said dryly.

“Maybe at the beginning when he was being a jerk,” admitted Moon. “But he's definitely grown out of that way of thinking.”

“I guess you're right,” said Hau thoughtfully. “Um, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I've kind of felt like a sidekick, especially after having to stay behind when the three of you were in Ultra Space. And now I'm going to have to learn to be the kahuna. Kahunas are heroes, too. They help and save people all the time. It feels like the learning curve is going to be kind of steep.”

Moon digested this for a few moments. “I think all heroes have to learn how to be one. The difference is that you get to have lessons and a teacher. And I don't think you can be bad at doing good things. Either you do them, or you don't.”

Slowly, he smiled. “Okay,” he said, nodding. “That's true. And it's pretty nice to think about, too.”

* * * * *

DAY ELEVEN/TWELVE

Moon and Hau had not been to Mount Lanakila before this point in their lives, and as such spent quite a bit of time battling wild Pokémon. There weren't too many aggressive Pokémon on Victory Road, but there were a few that were at the very least malicious. Absol, like the one Moon's mother had, eyed them flatly and suspiciously; Sneasel and Snorunt giggled nastily whenever they landed a hit, no matter how small.

But there were two natural conclusions to battling with wild Pokémon on Mount Lanakila. Firstly, the temperature and climate were cold enough for BB to evolve into a Crabominable, and on their eleventh day on the road she finally did so— thus completing Hau's team.

“I'll miss evolving Pokémon,” said Hau, a touch wistfully. “But at the same time, I'm pretty glad I don't have to think about it anymore, you know?”

“Right.”

Kate had watched the evolution with interest, and Moon noticed that she had been fairly quiet for the rest of the day after that. It was unusual behavior for Kate, and Moon resolved to ask her about it the next morning.

As it turned out— she didn't have to.

“Poi-ya!”

“And that's the battle,” said Moon cheerfully, which summoned Kate back to her side. The defeated Snorunt scuttled away.

“I'm getting a prompting for Kate to learn Dragon Pulse, bzzt,” piped up Rotom.

“No kidding?” Moon grinned at Kate. “Nice going. Your special attack is pretty good, so that should work out really well for you.”
Kate's expression went suddenly apprehensive.

“What is it?”

The Poipole shook her head emphatically, gesturing with tiny paws at Rotom.

“Go ahead?”

“Poi poi.”

“Okay, if you're sure. Rotom, you can replace... um, Venom Drench, I think.”

“Replacing Venom Drench with Dragon Pulse, bzzt.”

Kate's eyes, pale-blue and pupil-less, suddenly flashed scarlet and then a royal blue.

“What the—”

The evolution occurred not so much as a process, but as an explosion. It all happened so quickly that she almost didn't have time to process it; but Kate's large head elongated at the bottom, her eyes and mouth shooting downward past arms and neck to her tail; two more spikes shot out from her sides and a pair of bat-like wings unfurled from her back. Her happy little mouth widened, sharp teeth poking bloodlessly out from the gums. And the spike that had been at the very top of her head grew several feet as the head itself—or as Moon realized, what had once been the head and was now... a thorax.

Naganadel—for she could only assume that this was Naganadel—was far larger than any of Moon's or Hau's Pokémon—eleven, perhaps twelve feet long; but what now seemed to be her waist was slender. The wings fluttered, and Kate blinked pale-blue eyes; then her mouth stretched into a sharp grin.

“Naga.”

Moon stared at her. “Um.”

“Wow,” said Hau.

“Naga poi?” Mama distressed no shouldn't have done she doesn't like—

“Aw, hey, no,” said Moon quickly, reaching out. “I was just really surprised, that's all. I really didn't expect you to get this big.

Is okay is okay

“Yeah, it's fine. You're still the same old Kate, right?”

Same same saaaaameee. Kate tumbled into a flip; as she was now much bigger Moon had to dodge out of the way in order to not be smacked by what she assumed was a giant stinger.

“Pol na del, naga poi.”

Her physical voice was a little deeper as well, not quite as high-pitched as Poipole. Moon reached up, not sure what to expect; her hand brushed against Kate's new face, which seemed to be made of some sort of chitinous shell.

“She looks like a wasp, doesn't she?” said Hau. His voice was suspiciously innocent.
“That's subject to interpretation.”

It really wasn't, and all of them knew it. Kate's expression changed, looking as though she were raising one eyebrow.

“All right,” sighed Moon. “She looks like a wasp.”

“So,” said Hau, with a grin in his voice. “You've got Macbeth, who is an actual Bug. You've got Hero, who's basically a metal spider. And now you've got Kate who is a very, very large wasp. Literally half your team are or look like Bugs, and you have a phobia. This is the height of irony.”

“It's not nearly as bad as it used to be,” protested Moon. “You don't see me cringing at Guzma when I battle with him.”

“No, but that’s because you're focusing on battling, not spending time in the presence of his Pokémon. They've got a purpose and so do you.”

That was also true. Moon sighed. “Fine,” she said, throwing her hands up in the air. “Fine, be like that.”

But there were people who ought to know that Kate had evolved. It was easy to persuade Kate to pose for pictures; she preened and simpered as Moon took pictures of the wings, the extra spikes, and the new location of her face. She wished she'd thought to film it— no doubt Professor Kukui would find it fascinating— but perhaps Dulse had some evolution recordings. As a biologist who worked with Naganadel and Poipole as part of his ordinary career, he was bound to have records of something.

She sent a casual picture to Gladion and Lillie in the group chat, and then as an after thought to Plumeria as well— she was a Poison-type specialist and might be intrigued. Wicke and both of the Professors were informed, and Moon asked Wicke to pass the information on to the Ultra Megalopolans.

Hau was training with BB after her evolution, testing out Ice Punch and other type-related moves; Moon decided she would do the same with Naganadel, who was a Poison- and Dragon-type— she would make a very interesting match with any Fairy-types but there weren't many to be found on Mount Lanakila. She occasionally caught a glimpse of an Alolan Ninetales, but the wild ones tended to keep to themselves, only rarely challenging Trainers or other Pokémon.

Even just a small amount of training quickly taught Moon that Kate as a Naganadel was an intensely powerful special-attacker. A Toxic-Venoshock combination could win pretty much any battle instantly; and Dragon Pulse was nasty. Moon paged through her catalogue of TMs and was delighted to discover that Kate could learn Flamethrower, which was a blessing as she didn't have much to counter Steel-types besides Ariel's Brick Break. She considered replacing Venoshock with Sludge Wave and eliminating Toxic completely, but taking two turns to set up a move that did a hundred and thirty points of basic damage with no loss to accuracy was superior to freeing up a slot for another type-coverage move. The only really good options she had were Dark Pulse and Thunderbolt. Ben negated the need for Thunderbolt and while Dark Pulse was tempting, she could cover Psychic-type moves with Hero and Ghost-type moves with Puck. If Kate had been able to learn Dazzling Gleam, that might have been another story— none of Moon's teammates could use any Fairy-type moves— but there was nothing else Moon really wanted to tack onto her moveset. And now her team was fully evolved as well— a good sign, as she neared the completion of the island challenge. To be able to rise to her full potential and strength as she took on the Pokémon League would be an honor, one to which she keenly looked forward.
chat: no longer hypothetically

kaBOOMna: Happy Valentine's Day, I guess

crystal collector: Omg are you asking me to be your valentine??!!??

kaBOOMna: I... assumed you already were?

kaBOOMna: But in case that was presumptuous: Moon Hawkins, be my valentine?

crystal collector: AKHDSKDSASADKHDSA

kaBOOMna: I'll take that as a yes, then.

kaBOOMna: It might be hard for you to get any privacy, but maybe we can video-call later?

crystal collector: Dude yes let's do it

crystal collector: There's a flap thingy in the middle of the tent. We usually just leave it open because us and all the Pokémon share body heat at night but I can zip it up.

crystal collector: I assume Hau will still be able to hear us but he'll probably be invested in his own call so hopefully we're not all eavesdropping or overhearing each other.

kaBOOMna: I hope not. I'm growing more comfortable with being affectionate with you, but I'm still reluctant to let others see that side of me.

kaBOOMna: I'm not sure if it's a toxic masculinity thing, an abused child thing, or just an awkward introvert thing.

crystal collector: I mean, I don't expect you to immediately become Boyfriend of the Year, because I know I'm definitely not Girlfriend of the Year material lmao

kaBOOMna: I beg to differ.

crystal collector: THEN BEG

crystal collector: Sorry, I've seen that meme on Ribomblr too many times

kaBOOMna: Half the time I have no idea what you're talking about.

kaBOOMna: I know what Ribomblr is, Molly and Rogelio both have one and apparently Almas made a post one time that went viral?

crystal collector: You should make a list of pop culture references you don't get and sometime
when we're actually in the same place we can sit down and I'll show or explain them to you

crystal collector: Not because there's anything wrong with not knowing the references, but because I think it'd be kind of fun

crystal collector: Definitely the kind of thing you can do while cuddling

kaBOOMna: I am in favor of any and all activities that can be done while cuddling.

crystal collector: That's what I thought lmao

crystal collector: Ok Hau is yelling at me to put Rotom away b/c we're getting to something that apparently “I really will not like”

crystal collector: OH GOSD IT'S A CHA SMH ELP

kaBOOMna: I'll be waiting for you to call, then.

* * * * *

chat: you are what you eat

salt: Is she okay.

malasadas: remind me 2 tell Lillie that our OTP is bein DESCUSTANG

malasadas: yes shes ok

malasadas: there was a bridge but it wasnt a rope one it was solid metal w/ support beams

malasadas: told her 2 keep her eyes shut & pretend u were piggybackin her again

malasadas: she did great

salt: Thank you.

malasadas: yep anytime

* * * * *

“I think great might be subject to interpretation,” said Moon, rolling her eyes.

She was bundled up in flannel pajamas and a heat-conserving blanket, with her teammates out around her. Puck, Ariel, and Ben were squeezed in close, being considerably smaller than the rest of her teammates; Macbeth was hunched over the four of them, Hero sat off to one side, and Kate
took up nearly all of the remaining space though she was on her side, peering her curved head around Macbeth's shell.

“Good god, she looks even bigger next to you,” said Gladion. “Listen, if Hau says you did great, then you did great. That's it, no ifs, ands, or buts.”

“Aw, no butts.”

“That's not what— I didn't—”

“Sorry, just being dumb.” Moon beamed at him, noting with pleasure the way his confusion had stained his cheeks pink. “But yeah, I made it across the bridge. It wasn't as bad as the canyon ones — not nearly as long, for one thing. Most of those are rope bridges, even if they're very solid. This one was a whole piece of metal, with no holes in it. And there were railings and supporting beams.” She paused. “Also, the whole thing was iced over, so right when I was just about to try and step onto it, Hau pushed me and I ended up flying across and landing head-first in a snowbank.”

“He failed to mention that,” said Gladion, a slight frown creasing his eyebrows; but Moon saw his mouth twitch slightly before forming a thin line.

“Go ahead and laugh, it's funny,” she told him.

He glanced away from the camera, smiling softly. Moon admired the picture he made, flushed and happy; she only wished that she could be with him, and not on a frozen wasteland of a mountain.

“Still,” said Gladion, looking back up. “This is what, the fifteenth day?”

“Yeah.” Moon sighed. “And I have fifteen more to go until I agreed to meet Necrozma.”

“As I recall, you told me she doesn't have an exact understanding of our time units.”

“No, she's used to Ultra Megalopolan time— the six-week cycle thingy instead of months. But I told her two months, or a cycle and a third, and she understood that. I hope she doesn't get impatient and come looking for me or something.”

“If you're late, I'll ask Tapu Bulu to find her and let her know,” said Gladion absently.

Moon blinked at him. “Really?”

“Hmm?” he blinked back. “Of course. He doesn't mind that sort of thing, as long as it doesn't involve human contact. And he's defeated Necrozma in battle before— that's the whole mess with the Thrifty Megamart. So he's not scared of her and he won't be in danger.”

“Oh.” Some of the worry in her gut lifted. “That's really sweet of you, thank you.”

He went a little pinker. “You're welcome. Have you eaten dinner yet?”

“Mm-hmm.” Moon held up her mug, which contained Tapu Cocoa. “It's Uila's turn to run the stove. Hau had pasta with red sauce and I had beef ramen; all the babies had beans. And hot chocolate is really nice before bed.”

“Somewhere that cold, I imagine it is.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence. She sipped her drink and watched Gladion— he clearly had something he wanted to say, but he kept looking up and away from the screen, a little nervously.
“What's wrong?” she said softly.

His eyes darted back to her, and then up again; then he sighed and, judging by the movement of the camera, got to his feet and started walking. The sound of laughter followed, and Moon heard Hau snickering on the other side of the tent, despite the noisy generator blocking most of the sounds.

“Ah, they're laughing at us?” she said sympathetically.

“I know they're not really laughing at us.” Gladion sounded grumpy. Cute, thought Moon helplessly. “I just— it's for you, not anybody else.”

The timing of his words was unfortunate, because as he was walking his bathrobe billowed out behind him, and the front of it opened over bare chest. Moon couldn't see much as he was holding the phone fairly close to his face, but she could see enough; and for you, not anybody else echoed with an incriminating appeal inside her brain.

“U-um,” she said, hating the voice crack. “Gladion— your robe...”

He glanced down, went beetroot red, and the camera flipped violently, falling to the floor with a clatter. She couldn't see anything but wooden floor, but the quietly choleric prose she heard indicated that the call hadn't dropped.

“Sorry,” he said, just as the camera moved and lifted to show him; the robe was now securely tied. “It just feels nice, and I took a shower not that long before you called.”

“I know.” She was being driven half distracted by damp hair. “We're pajama pals.”

Gladion snorted. “More than just pals, I'd hope.” He was still blushing.

“Well, duh. It's okay, seriously. I just didn't want you to get embarrassed about it later.”

“I'm embarrassed now.”

He'd been walking through Hapu's house, passing through the main room and waving to Hapu and her grandmother, aunt, and cousins as he passed; he closed a door behind him and went down the stairs, settling on what Moon realized was the couch where they'd watched movies.

“I know that saying so is pointless, but you don't have to be.”

“I'm not embarrassed because you saw.” He paused. “Okay, I'm only partly embarrassed because you saw. I'm mostly embarrassed because, um— I usually don't... wear a shirt. To sleep in.”

Moon blinked at him a few times. “Um.”

“You can blame Jeremiah,” he added, a note of venom in his tone. “I always wore pajamas like yours growing up, a button-down flannel set kind of thing. Then I ran away and I realized I didn't have to wear actual pajamas, so I stuck with T-shirts and shorts or sweatpants. But then Jeremiah, Ki-moon, and Almas joined up, and Jeremiah and Ki-moon moved into the room I was sharing with Rogelio. They were dating, but I don't think they were, um— I usually don't... wear a shirt. To sleep in.”

Moon blinked at him a few times. “Um.”

He was scarlet by the time he finished speaking. Moon absorbed this information.
“So, all the times we were camping—”

“I wore a shirt if it was cold enough, but usually I would get in my sleeping bag and then take it off — exceptions being when I have fallen asleep with you. Hau thought it was hilarious. He and Lillie had a bet on how long it would take you to notice— which I won, because you didn’t notice.”

His mouth was twitching, and Moon grinned. “Glad I could help you win some money.”

“Sometimes you can be charmingly oblivious.”

“I’m not sure whether that’s an insult, or a compliment.”

He laid down on the couch, placing his head on one armrest. “It’s occasionally frustrating, but for the most part to your credit. When you’re trying to signal something nonverbally, I usually pick up on it because I’m used to picking up on nonverbal signals.” His mouth thinned. “Sometimes they were the only warning sign I had, but that’s depressing and I’ve turned that skill to a much better use anyway.”

“Right.”

“It helps that you’re about as subtle as a thunderstorm.”

“Hey!”

He snickered. “I didn't say I minded. It's helpful for me to be able to read such obvious indicators that— well, that you like me.” Color, only barely faded, blossomed again in his face. “You know I'm, um... I don't always like myself. And when I'm feeling— when I have anxiety,” he corrected himself. “When I have anxiety, it's usually about, um, feeling like people don't really like me. Because I don't like me, so why would anybody else.”

“That's not—”

“Rational,” he finished for her. “Yes, I know. Anxiety is by nature irrational. Fear is normal, and to an extent healthy. Anxiety is fear taken to an illogical extreme, with imagined consequences that become of great importance to the point of blocking out all other thoughts.”

“That sucks,” said Moon sympathetically. “I'm sorry you have to deal with that.”

He shrugged. “I have medication and some therapy exercises to help these days, so it's not as bad as it used to be. Anyway, my point is that you aren't subtle, and not even my fucked-up brain can misread the way you act around me. It's reassuring.”

Warmth rushed to Moon's face as well; and when she saw the way Gladion's mouth twisted into a smirk, she knew that her blush was visible.

“But,” he continued, “you don't always pick up on me flirting with you, unless I make a point of being very unsubtle. Hau told me once that you almost never notice someone trying to flirt until after it's already done.”

“I'm not used to it,” said Moon, shrugging. “I told Hau and Olivia about this, actually— that was when Mallow's brother was hitting on me.”

“That was when I overreacted?”

“Right. Um, I was kind of flustered, because like you said I only notice if it's really obvious. I'm
just, I'm not used to people flirting with me.”

He seemed about to speak, but then closed his mouth, simply watching her.

Moon swallowed. “Because, um. You know—I grew up in Kanto, but I'm half Alolan. So I look different. I was always darker-skinned and taller than any girls my age. I like how I look, but nobody was ever interested in me. So I just, I literally don't know what to look for.”

“Hmm.” Gladion studied her for a few moments, then let out a little sigh. “The reason I came down here originally is kind of related to this. Moon, I find you devastatingly attractive.”

She was going to spontaneously combust. “Gladion—”

“I know it's rude to interrupt and usually I hate it, but please let me finish. I am frequently distracted by your eyelashes and your legs, both of which are stupidly long. And while I like those things in particular, as well as literally every physical trait you possess, it's really your personality that has me lying here on a couch in my pajamas saying the sappiest shit imaginable. Because I don't like thinking of you thinking that people don't find you pretty. Even if they actually don't, they're idiots and you don't need to account for their opinions. I think you're pretty, I think you're goddamn gorgeous, and it figuratively ruins my life at least once a day and whenever I spend time with you in person I am prone to losing my train of thought or forgetting how to breathe. And only some of that has to do with how you look. I am very fucking embarrassed now so I'm going to stop talking.”

Moon stared at him. He was bright red, and her own face burned with— not embarrassment, exactly, but— it was a lot of things. She was feeling a lot of things. It was enough that she carefully set her empty hot chocolate mug down on the floor, pulled her blanket up around her chin, and pressed her cold hands to her burning face.

“Gah.”

Unexpectedly, he smiled. “Come on, let me see you.”

She slowly pulled her hands away, but she wasn't sure where to look and couldn't quite bring herself to make eye contact.

“Like that,” said Gladion quietly. “When you look down like that, your eyelashes look really long. And then sometimes, you look up at me through them...”

Moon swallowed. Every inch of her skin was on fire; but that was in no way a subtle hint and she lifted her eyes, without moving her head. She was sure it gave her a peculiar appearance and that her eyes were half-shut and it looked stupid, but he nodded— his own eyes going dark with something she couldn't positively identify, but was pretty sure she reciprocated.

“Exactly. There's my gorgeous girl.”

Moon squeaked and dove for her pillow, pressing her face into it to hide.

“Not, of course, that you're my property or anything like that. We've entered into a mutual agreement of— well, I don't think possession is the right term and ownership definitely isn't but, um— I'm yours, and you're mine?”

“Arceus fuck, I like you so much.”

That earned her a soft laugh. “The feeling is entirely mutual.” He covered his mouth in a quiet
yawn. “It's getting late, and you probably need to be getting to bed.”

“Someday,” said Moon, trying to embody the oh-fuck-it attitude that Gladion had adopted when telling her she was, of all things, gorgeous—an adjective that was going to leave her red-faced and sputtering for probably the rest of her life—“I'd like to see you play the piano.”

He blinked a couple of times, tilting his head. “Why's that?”

The slight change in timbre in his tone wasn't something she usually would have noted as particularly important; but the angle at which he now looked at her—heavy-lidded, with an expectant expression—reminded her of what he had been saying about how she often missed it when he was trying to flirt with her. Moon hesitated for half a second, chewing on her lower lip in indecision; and watched almost in astonishment as his eyes narrowed, focusing slightly downward on her mouth.

“I-I, um, I've always—god, this is stupid.”

“Nothing you say is stupid,” he said gently, eyes softening and flicking back up to hers. “You've always what?”

“I— I like your hands.” It came out slightly rushed, and his eyebrows rose. “Like what you said, about my—eyelashes. And my legs. I like your hands.” She paused. “And your smile.”

For a few seconds he was silent, but then he nodded. “I'll start practicing again. Hapu doesn't have a piano, but it's only forty-five minutes to the Paradise by Charizard and I can spare a few hours a day. Lillie and I only have individual therapy twice a week now, and group therapy once a week. If I work hard, I should actually be able to play something for you at some point.”

Moon grinned at him, though she knew her face was still scarlet. “I would really like that,” she mumbled.

“As for my smile—well, I'll just have to do that more. And maybe send you some selfies.”

“I have no complaints.”

“Somehow, I didn't think you would.” He yawned again. “You really should go to sleep.”

“I guess,” said Moon reluctantly. She met his eyes one more time, smiling softly. “Good night, valentine.”

He laughed softly. “Good night, sunshine.”

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

crystal collector changed kaBOOMna's name to valentine

crystal collector changed their name to mountaineer
mountaineer: I like you so stupidly much. Good night.

mountaineer: Picture Attachment: [YetAnotherSelfie.jpeg]

valentine: Picture Attachment: [IMG107.jpeg]

valentine: Same.

* * * * *

To: samueloak@pmail.co.kan

From: samsonoak@pmail.co.alo

Re: Fwd: Re: Re: Greetings from Samuel Oak

Hey so she wants her Trainer kid to go early, is that a problem?

—Sam

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

I have made Mount Lanakila a Scary Place. This is mostly based on the fact that fully a quarter of the people who try to climb Mt. Everest end up fucking DEAD. Most of them are just chillin (heh, chillin) in the ice field, because it's literally too dangerous to try and retrieve their bodies.

Hau is suffering from a very mild form of what I'd like to call Ron Weasley syndrome, but the difference is that Hau is a Lot more patient so he doesn't get defensive about it. He's just legitimately not sure he's capable of being a hero. (ridiculous, esp when he's the whole-ass hero of my heart)

Some men are born heroes, some are made into heroes, some have heroism thrust upon them yadda yadda yadda anyway Hau is making his own damn self into a hero and that's the TEA

oh look BB and Kate finally evolved, good job author

Okay so Kate literally exploding into an evolution is just the funniest thing to me and that's why I wrote it. She's kind of like Inkay-to-Malamar in that her head becomes her butt, but in this instance her butt grows a whole lot of new limbs before becoming her head lmao

Naganadel are twelve-and-some feet tall, which makes Kate the biggest Pokémon that
ANY of OT4 own. The second largest one is Macbeth, followed by Hero. Why does Moon have a team of fuckin giants.

and yes I've been planning “half of Moon's team are/look like giant Bugs and she has a phobia” since like, Sakura so LAUGH WITH ME

more video game logistics. I actually use Sludge Wave/Dragon Pulse/Flamethrower/Air Cutter on my Naganadel, but it's sensible for Moon to go with the Toxic/Venoshock combo because that's her battling style.

The silly Valentine's Day texts transition over to the cute Valentine's Day video call and I am soft as frick for Gladimoon. more news at ten

“All, the whole thing was iced over, so right when I was just about to try and step onto it, Hau pushed me and I ended up flying across and landing head-first in a snowbank.” —HAU Y R U SO CHAOTIC ASJKSADKASKJ

mutually blushy Gladimoon is very important thank u

WHOOP THAT'S A WARDROBE MALFUNCTION

Gladion admitting he sleeps shirtless is mostly just Scribe being a hedonistic sinner, as though that's new. What up.

“Sometimes you can be charmingly oblivious.” —Gladion it's Valentine's Day stop roasting your girlfriend

“Anyway, my point is that you aren't subtle, and not even my fucked-up brain can misread the way you act around me. It's reassuring.” —AWWWWWWWWW

I have written Gladion as such a fucking tsundere in this installment and I'm just so pleased with that decision because it makes things like this, where he literally monologues for a paragraph about how he thinks Moon is hot, so much more meaningful lmao

“She was feeling a lot of things.” —girl same

The whole accidentally-biting-your-lip-and-reminding-your-romantic-interest-that-they-want-to-kiss-you trope is one of my favorites and you can bet like fuck we're going to use that ninety bajillion times in the future

Gladion's going to start playing the piano again!!! (now I just have to look up some pieces that will just about match his skill level— he's quite good, but he's no Lang Lang.)

Samson Oak is the chaotic version of Samuel Oak, change my mind
The injuries that to myself I do

Chapter Summary

Mount Lanakila
***************
Moon meets Necrozma once more.

Chapter Notes

It took me forfuckingever to write this chapter (this was the two-month hiatus in January and February), but I am finally happy with it.

My tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (it's a mostly inactive BTS stan account but I do get messages if you want to pm me without joining the discord. speaking of which: Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM we LOVE having new people!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * * *

DAY NINETEEN

It was quite by chance that they found Icium Z. In fact, if it had not been for Kate, playing with a squeaky-toy that had suddenly turned up in her luggage one day without explanation (she suspected Molly and Rogelio; it was the kind of thing they would do), they might not have found it at all. The toy was a rubber Eevee, and was often side-eyed by both Ben and Ollie; but Kate loved the toy to death and would squeak it whenever she could. Often, that happened to be at inopportune times such as three in the morning, or while Moon was trying to call her parents.

At this particular moment, Kate jumped a little too hard onto the toy— forgetting that she was nearly twelve feet long and no longer a graceful little Poipole— and it shot out from under her, whizzing merrily through the current cave and down a small side-passage that Moon wouldn't have otherwise noticed. It really was small— Kate, much wider than she used to be, couldn't fit into it; even Hau, eating his lunch, took one look at the crevice and paled.

"Nope," he said, shaking his head. "Not for love or money. Arceus, no."

"Watch out for my kids?" said Moon, indicating a now melodramatically-sobbing Kate and the rest of her teammates— Macbeth and Ariel, trying to soothe Kate with pets and gentle sounds; Puck and Ben, staring at Kate in disgust; and Hero, who just seemed entertained by the whole thing.

"Yeah. You should take the rope in, though. It's narrow enough you could get stuck, and I don't want to have to go in and pull you out."
It was sage advice. Moon secured one end of the Ariados-rope around Hero's leg and the other end through a loop on her belt before wiggling into the crack.

This part of the cave was not rock so much as pure ice— Moon suspected that the path had evolved to run through a glacier, rather than around it— so she was shortly very cold and a tad damp. The crack wasn't that tall, either— though she didn't know this until she let Rotom out of her belt to light the way.

It was a good three minutes before she found the squeaky Eevee, but lamplight ahead made her pause rather than turn back. She hadn't expected to find anything but the toy, and now she was curious.

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

marvelous moon: So

heroic hau: O GOD WHAT R U DOIN

great gladion: ???

marvelous moon: Kate has a squeaky toy and she lost it, so I am currently wedged into a little crack of a cave to try and get it

marvelous moon: I did find it by the way

marvelous moon: But there is a light at the other end?

lovely lillie: I'm told that seeing a light at the end of the tunnel is a bad sign.

heroic hau: LILLIE I LOVE U BUT U MADE IT WORSE

heroic hau: MOON COME BACK OUT HERE I SWEAR 2 ARCEUS

heroic hau: MOON PLS

marvelous moon: Would you relax, I am attached to the rope and I'm fine

marvelous moon: Omg seriously STOP PULLING

marvelous moon: Thank you

marvelous moon: I just wanna see what it is

marvelous moon: I'm just texting so that you won't worry

marvelous moon: You know, in case something happens
heroic hau: THAT DOES NOT MAKE IT BETTER

great gladion: Please be very careful. It's been nearly three weeks you've been on the mountain and I don't know how to find you if you get stuck.

marvelous moon: I'll be careful

heroic hau: HOW R U ALL SO CALM

lovely lillie: Well, this is a worry that's fairly specific to you. Moon's not as big as you are. The probability that she will get stuck is very low.

heroic hau: u didn't see this crack, its tiny

heroic hau: Picture Attachment: [IMG497.jpeg]

marvelous moon: How do you have so many pictures on your Dex??!!?

heroic hau: most of em r memes

lovely lillie: That is actually a very small hole. Moon, please be safe.

marvelous moon: Will do

* * * *

Moon let Rotom go to hover in the air once more, and shimmied through the narrow, icy crevice in the direction of the light. The Ariados-rope was probably about a hundred feet long, and she wasn't quite to the end of it but she was getting fairly close. Fortunately, the crevice was widening into what appeared to be a small chamber; and the source of the light was revealed to be a pale-blue crystal, spiking down from the ceiling.

And the chamber itself was not made of ice— Moon had simply gone through ice to find it. It was very cold though, and the stone chamber was iced over; but the important thing that below the large, pale-blue crystal stood one of the stone podiums with the official island-challenge design of triangles in yellow, pink, red, and violet traced around the rim. Inside the podium was a pale-blue crystal.

She wiggled out, walking toward the podium; she was stopped short when the rope had no more slack in it.

* * * *

chat: sprechen zie cousins?
lovestruck fool #1 changed their name to 99%!!!

99%!!! changed relationship guru's name to hi there

99%!!!: Hey can you ask Hero to take like, three steps closer to the cave

hi there changed 99%!!!'s name to THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING

hi there changed their name to >:(

>:(: r u ok

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: I'm fine

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: Pretty sure I found Icium Z tho but I can't reach it b/c there's no more slack in the rope

>:(: wat

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: As far as I know u can still read

>:(: im jared, 19

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: Please just have Hero move, I need to get the rock and then I'm gonna come out and test it

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: I'm getting one for Necrozma as well as me. Do you want one?

>:(: ...

>:(: yea sure y not

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: Cool

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: Get it?

THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING: Because we're in an icy cave?

>:( changed THE CAUSE OF MY SUFFERING's name to THE CAUSE OF ALL SUFFERING

THE CAUSE OF ALL SUFFERING: I didn't deserve that, but sure jan
The rope slackened enough to allow Moon to reach the podium. She took the crystal from the podium and let it click into place on her Z-Ring. She had to put the Z-Crystal that Marshadow had given her into the pouch of extra crystals, but she was entitled to one for herself and that was where that one would go. Another crystal, for Hau, went into the pocket of her snow-pants; and a third, for Necrozma, went in the pouch.

“Wea vi.”

Moon looked up to see a disapproving Weavile, clambering out of a smaller hole on the other side of the cave to stare at her.

“I can explain,” she said quickly, showing Weavile her Z-Ring. “One is for me, one is for my friend who is way too big to fit through the crack, and one is for Necrozma.”

The Weavile blinked at her, unimpressed.

“Um, Grandmother Starlight?” tried Moon.

One eyebrow rose. “Vi vi wea?”

“Yeah, I have a whole bunch of them for her. Want to see?”

She squatted and opened her belt pouch, pulling a few out. Weavile sniffed them disdainfully, then trotted past Moon to the crack that led out the way she had come. Moon watched, bemused, until Weavile turned to look at her.

“Vi vi,” she said crossly.

“Oh. Um, sure.”

Moon followed Weavile back through the crevice, with Rotom to light the way. She wasn't sure why the Weavile was coming with them, but she wasn't going to object as long as it didn't attack her or her teammates.

“Oh thank god,” said Hau, as she wiggled out of the crack. “I'm very glad to see you and even more glad I didn't have to try and get through that tiny hole. I see you brought a friend.”

He sounded slightly panicked, and Moon paused in her gathering of the rope to hug him reassuringly.

“I'm okay, dude,” she said cheerfully. “If there'd been any kind of drop I would have freaked out, but it was all level. Slightly downhill, which is why the toy went so far— here you go, by the way.” She tossed the toy to Kate, who squealed happily and pounced on it; the vibration shook the cave slightly and a few icicles tinkled to the floor with a crash. “And here's Icium Z. This is Weavile. I think it's suspicious that I took three crystals.”

She reached into her pocket and drew one out, passing it to Hau.

“Right on. Thanks.”

“Thanks,” said Moon, amused. “Yeah, he really is too big to fit through. Plus he would have been really upset the whole time. It's much better that I brought it out to him.”

That earned her a single stiff nod, and the Weavile turned and walked back to the crack, vanishing within.

“Thanks!” Hau called after it, but did not receive an answer. “So it was inspecting us, then?”

“Pretty much.” Moon nodded at Icium Z. “You've got BB, are you going to test it out?”

“Yeah, once we've packed up our lunch.”

It had been some time since Moon had seen Subzero Slammer performed or practiced the dance herself, but both she and Hau remembered it well enough that BB was able to test it with no problem. She had been holding Fightinium Z, which had suited her as both a Crabrawler and a Crabominable; but Icium Z afforded her a new advantage, especially with the many Zubat and Golbat which made their homes in the cave despite the cold.

* * * * *

DAY TWENTY

Hello.

“AAAAAAH!” screamed Moon and Hau in unison, sending their bowl of popcorn flying. This was a mistake, as all of the Pokémon in the tent (bar two and the newcomer) immediately leaped after it. The exceptions were Hero, who had no interest in popcorn; and BB, who put up fists as it faced off against the intruder: a solemn, innocently blinking Marshadow.

Is now a bad time?

“No, I just really wasn't expecting you,” said Moon, clapping one hand to her heart. Hau scrambled to pause the cheesy horror movie they had been watching on his Dex—Lillie's suggestion, as adrenaline apparently helped blood circulate more effectively through the body and would help keep them warm. “I'm glad to see you, though. What brings you to visit?”

I have been looking for Z-Crystals, as I see you have. Marshadow's gaze flicked over to her backpack and the Trainer belt sitting on top of it. Moon guessed he could sense the other crystals in her pouch. I have looked everywhere I sensed any sort of power that was even a little like Grandmother Starlight. I did not find much, but I was advised to visit an old sea-captain in a place called... ah, I do not remember. Amusement colored his voice. Acerola told me of a woman in this other place, who was born in Alola. She fights with ghosts, as Acerola does. The woman told me to visit the sea-captain and ask about a map. I had some trouble with the map, because I do not usually look at things from very high. But he told me which way I should go. There was a lot of ocean, but then I went to a little island and met a Pokémon who gave me this.

He held out one closed fist, opening it to show a pale-pink crystal. Moon took out the Colress scanner.

“That's a Z-Crystal aura, all right,” she decided, after studying the readout for a few moments. “Who was the Pokémon that gave it to you?”
Hmm. Marshadow's tiny, flame-tufted eyebrows knitted together in a slight frown. *I do not know if I should tell you. I trust you, but she was very hesitant to give me the crystal at all. She was kind, but she has been hurt before.*

Moon nodded. “That's okay,” she said. “I was just curious, that's all. I guess I don't really need to know.”

*She is old. Very old—possibly older than Grandmother Starlight, but even smaller than I am.*

“Older than—” Moon stopped, realization. “Oh my god.”

“What?” said Hau.

“I think he's talking about Mew.”

Yes, said Marshadow, sounding surprised. *How did you know?*

“What?”

“She's pink, and she's tiny and old. It fits.” Moon hesitated. “And what you said about her being kind but not trusting us reminded me of Mewtwo. Red says that Mewtwo isn't kind or trusting, and he understands but it makes him sad so he doesn't talk about it much.”

“Mew is like Mewtwo's mother, right?”

Moon nodded slowly. Red had only spoken about it to her once, and it was after she had asked Professor Oak and Blue and been told it was none of her business; but she'd only been fifteen, and wanted to know why Red got so sad anytime Mew was ever mentioned. “Mew lives on a jungle island, alone. Um—some scientists, who everyone thought were Silph Co. but turned out to be Team Rocket, found her on the island. She was pregnant, and they—well, Red didn't explain exactly how but he said they injected her with some weird genetic material, and she gave birth to Mewtwo. Like, an actual fetal birth and not laying an egg like most Pokémon do. She's one of the oldest living beings. Professor Oak thinks she probably mothered a creature a very, very long time ago, like ten or twenty thousand years, and that creature and its children eventually evolved to become humans.”

*She shared this story with me, about the scientists. It is why she does not trust humans. I asked her if she would like me to bring you to meet her, but she said it was not necessary—that I made the offer was enough to prove you were worthy of trust.*

Moon blinked. “Really?”

Marshadow's mouth curled up into a fey smile. *She is not the only one who shared a story. But go on with yours.*

“Oh.” Moon tried to think of Marshadow telling Mew about her, and failed utterly. “Um, anyway the scientists took baby Mewtwo and did all sorts of awful experiments on him. He became super smart, but he was also in a lot of pain and angry and he destroyed the mansion on Cinnabar Island where Team Rocket was doing the experiments.” She hesitated. “Blue told me once, after the fact, that he thinks that Mewtwo might have been responsible for the volcanic eruption on Cinnabar Island as well. That destroying the mansion wasn't enough, that he wanted to make sure that there was no way anyone would ever be able to replicate the machines that hurt him.”

“Where's Mewtwo now?” asked Hau.
“Red said he lives in a cave. It's sealed off. Red visits him sometimes, but he's the only person who's allowed. Mewtwo can and will kill any other human who comes near. I don't know where the cave is—he wouldn't say, because he didn't want me to go looking."

“Would you have?”

Moon considered. “I was like, fifteen when he told me. At that time? Yeah, probably. But I know better now.” She remembered Null in the hotel on Route Eight, attacking because she didn't understand what glasses were. Nihilego, attacking humans and Pokémon alike; Totem Eevee, hostile and cold; the pack of Lycanroc, brutal and merciless. Necrozma, in so much pain she felt she had to lash out.

*Do not tell anyone.* Marshadow's gaze was soft, but something burned coldly behind the softness. *The white-haired ones may know. They will understand.*

“Lillie and Gladion? Yeah, they'd get it.” Moon's throat tightened, her heart hurting for their abuse as much as Mewtwo's. “Probably better than I do, to be honest.”

Marshadow nodded. *If that is everything, I will go.*

“Just a second,” said Hau, to Moon's surprise. “Where do you usually hang out?”

*Hang... out?*

“Where do you live,” translated Moon. “Do you have like, a den?”

*Not in this plane. I lair in the shadows where I travel. His eyes gleamed. It is far safer there than anywhere on Terra, Ultra Megalopolis, or any other planet in the universe.*

“All right— good lord I might have as many questions as Moon, but that's beside the point. I bet you probably want to see Necrozma once she's all healed up, right?”

*I... do plan on it, yes.* Marshadow's tone was hesitant. *She may not wish to see me. She hasn't wanted to for a long time.*

“No, dude, she totally does,” Moon reassured him. “She asked me how to ask someone to forgive her before she spat Nebby out. We were talking about you.”

Marshadow made a squeaking sound—the first physical noise she had heard him make. It was slightly raspy, as though he breathed smoke—which he sort of did, as he was made of charcoal-gray, misty smoke that sometimes burnt teal and bronze.

“Nothing bad, I promise. I think she's sorry and she wants to say so.” Moon glanced at Hau. “Were you offering for him to come with us until we find Necrozma?”

“Yeah,” said Hau, holding his fist out with a grin. Moon bumped it approvingly.

*I know where she is already. I could take you to see her now, if you liked.*

“If we don't get there in—” Moon consulted Rotom. “Um, ten days, then you can do that. That's the deadline I asked her for.”

*You will find her in three. She is hiding on the main path, looking at the minds of Trainers who approach—some are approaching, as the building on the summit began taking visitors a few days ago.*
“Right.” The Pokémon League had opened on Valentine's Day; it was the nineteenth of February and nobody had been named Champion yet, which meant that either nobody had beaten the current Elite Four or they hadn’t defeated Professor Kukui, who according to the official press releases was standing in as the title challenger. Lillie and Gladion had sent plenty of news articles about it. “Do you think she'll mind waiting three more days?”

*It will pass like an eyeblink for her, as it would for me.* A tiny smile flickered onto Marshadow's face. *We are both old. A few days, a few minutes, it is all the same. I will travel with you, if you don’t mind.*

“Will you be cold?”

*I do not get cold, but thank you for thinking of me.* Marshadow's gaze flickered around the tent. *What were you doing when I got here? You screamed very loudly.*

* * * * *

chat: the four musketeers

marvelous moon: [HorrorMovieFan.jpeg]

marvelous moon: [PopcornAddiction.jpeg]

marvelous moon: He says hi, by the way

great gladion: What in the actual fuck.

heroic hau: LMAO MY SIDES

lovely lillie: Oh, is that Marshadow? Why is he with you?

marvelous moon: He was tracking down Z-Crystals for us

marvelous moon: He said he wants to tell you in person the story he told us but the tl;dr is Mew

marvelous moon: So you can probably expect a visit in a few days


* * * * *

DAY TWENTY-THREE

“About when are you thinking we're going to find her?” Moon asked Marshadow. He was perched on her shoulder, weighing almost nothing but watching in amusement as she and Hau scaled a
fairly steep hill.

Soon, said Marshadow, irritantly vague. Moon couldn't bring herself to be mad at him, because he was adorable; but he had that sly prankster vibe that many Ghost- and Dark-types had (Puck being the exception, as he was a little old man) and she had the suspicion that he was laughing at how hard she and Hau were breathing.

Moon finally crested the hill and was surprised to see a large, round crater in the path. A lumpy white heap sat in the center, but shifted slightly at her approach; some of the snow fell from the heap, and Necrozma's alien face, with the huge cleaver-jaw and no visible eyes, peered out at them.

“You've probably scared anyone who passes half to death, doing that,” called Moon cheerfully, ignoring the spike of nerves that hit her stomach like a fist. “How are you?”

I have not scared anyone. I knew it was you coming. Necrozma didn't have much in the way of eyes— at least not that Moon could tell, squinting at the dark carapace and the rainbow mound of spiky crystals on her forehead— but her gaze had weight all the same, and that weight shifted to Hau, who stood silently next to her. I remember you, but only slightly.

“Just her friend,” said Hau, waving one hand at Moon. “We're traveling together. Safety in numbers, especially on this mountain.”

“He's basically my brother,” said Moon, grinning at the delight that lit up Hau's face when she said so. “We're second cousins. And best friends, though you're pretty tied with Lillie for that in my eyes.”

“Dude, I'm honored. Thank you.” Hau reached out to grip her shoulder for a few moments, his smile getting a bit misty. “Anyway, you've got stuff to do.”

“Right.”

Moon strode forward, as Necrozma shook off the remainder of the snow, and pulled off her backpack, digging at her Z-Ring and the pouch of spare crystals in her belt. She'd decided to give away the crystals she'd worn on her ring— the memories had been what had helped Necrozma more than anything and it didn't make much of a difference to Moon what crystals she used. And she had written down the order she'd gotten them in as well, because that simply made the most sense.

“Well, first of all, here's one from a friend,” said Moon, pulling Marshadium Z out of the Z-Ring. Marshadow squeaked on her shoulder, moving over to hide behind her neck. Her hair would smell like smoke later, but she didn't really mind. Necrozma laid down, giving Moon easier access to her head, and she stuck the crystal in place.

More memories, said Necrozma, sounding surprised. Relief and joy.

“I was just really, really fucking glad to be alive at that point,” said Moon seriously, already checking her list for the next crystal. “Um— oh, looks like Primarium and Incinium. Here you go.”

Necrozma accepted the crystals, humming softly. True, guileless friendship in the blue, she said plainly. And the pride of your elders, in the black.

Moon was confused for about half a second, but then realized that elders most likely referred to the Professors, as they'd gifted her Incinium along with the replacement crystals. A thought struck her. “Is the pride of my elders a memory from me, or not really?”
It has a different flavor to it, said Necrozma, after a few moments. It is more about you, than of you.

“I wonder if that was Professor Kukui's personal crystal. He's got an Incineroar.”

“I bet it was,” said Hau stoutly. “You gave her my original Primarium, right?”

Yes, said Necrozma, swinging her head to look at him. Yes, that memory is yours. You rose without hesitation and gave immediately, willingly, and selflessly. I have lived long years and rarely been so pleasantly surprised by a human.

Moon turned to look at Hau as well. He was staring at Necrozma, wide-eyed; then his face warmed ever so slightly in the way that told Moon that he was blushing hard. “I— wow. God. Thank you. That's a hell of a compliment.”

It is only truth.

“And that's what makes it even more potent,” Moon informed her, grinning when Hau pressed his hands to his face before turning back to her task. “Telling your friends nice things about themselves is one of the greatest joys of being alive, honestly. What's next... oh, right. Snorlium Z.”

Necrozma accepted the crystal, shuffling a little further forward. Surprise, and some frustration.

“Yeah, I was really feeling like nobody would give me answers, but they were doing their best. And here's Mimikium.”

There was a long pause, after Moon placed Mimikium onto the mass of bonded stones. But then Necrozma said softly, Friends... misunderstanding one another, and then forgiving.

Moon smiled. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, they did.”

She selected Eevium and added it to the pile.

Tension, but also family.

“Sounds about fucking right,” said Moon, remembering hundreds of tiny bared teeth. “They really didn't want company. At least they didn't try to gank us.”

“You have such a way with words,” muttered Hau, but he was laughing.

“It's a gift and a charm.” Moon removed Pikanium and Pikashunium— whichever one was which — from her Z-Ring and set them onto opposite sides of the mass.

A mother, protecting ones she considers children.

“I wish every mom were as nice as Persis. And dude, she wasn't even nice. She was paranoid as hell, made me call Olivia from her phone to prove I wasn't just trying to steal crystals for shits and giggles. But she's a badass, especially because she did everything while super pregnant— wonder if she's had the baby yet. She loaded super soakers with Hyper Potions and used them to spray the Totems back to health.” That was more for Hau's benefit than for Necrozma's, and the giggle she heard behind her told her she'd hit her mark.

Then came Aloraichium. Necrozma frowned. I do not like this one, even if I am glad to have it back, she murmured. It is— tired, sick, impatient, disgusted, busy. I do not have the right word for the concept that I can convey to you in Terran.

*That sounds correct.*

“Yeah. We didn't like that either, but we're working on fixing things. It's gonna be okay.” Moon swallowed. “And I think, like a weirdly high number of things in Alola, the fixing things is actually going to fall to me more than anyone else.”

She picked out Lycanium, weighing it in her hand for a few moments, before setting it in place. At first Necrozma said nothing, and so Moon moved to take out Tapubulium.

*Wait. I... need a moment.*

Moon glanced at Hau, who shrugged in consternation. Marshadow, silent to this point, carefully climbed up to sit on top of the hood of Moon's purple parka. Necrozma's gaze shifted to Marshadow, then back down to the snow.

*I have been hurting for a long time.* Her voice, echoing more in Moon's mind than out loud, was even quieter against the soft, muffled noise of constant snowfall. *I was hurting so much I didn't think about how other people were hurting, too. You have hurt a lot, because of me.*

The simple acknowledgement brought tears to Moon's eyes, but she just shrugged. “It wasn't really that important.”

*You were the first to tell me that my pain was important. I cannot listen to you say that yours is not equally important.*

“I know it's *important,*” said Moon, looking down at the ground. “It just wasn't like... *important.* Your pain could literally have caused the death of our world. My pain was just, you know. Mine. It wasn't going to affect anybody else.”

*Would it not?*

“Yeah, no, that's bullshit, Moon,” said Hau cheerfully. He sounded oddly satisfied. “Lillie and Gladion and I are never quite sure how to bring this up with you, but you have this habit of like, constantly wanting to get going on the next thing without taking a minute to ever just *rest.* Like when we got back from Ultra Space and the next morning you literally left your wheelchair in your room and tried to say you were leaving because you had shit to do. And how like, you've been mad or sad about things, but then you hear about other people being mad or sad about things and you go well *my thing isn't as bad as theirs so therefore it's not a problem at all,* instead of dealing with it properly.”

Moon whirled around to glare at him. “That's— that's—“

“Entirely accurate? Thanks, I thought so too.” He beamed at her.

*Given all I know of you, in these memories both yours and mine and even his and others, it does not seem like an unjust declaration.*

Moon turned back around, frowning at the snow instead of Necrozma. “It really wasn't important, though. I can't take the time to deal with my own fucking issues if like, the entire world is at stake!”

“Emergencies are different, obviously. But even when they're over you kind of just— pretend like you're okay, a lot of the time.” Hau's voice went quiet. “Gladion worries, you know. He doesn't
want to tell you that maybe you should see a therapist, too; but he's like, half-suggested it in the
chat he has with me and Lillie—"

“You have one without me?”

“We like, almost never use it. Lillie added me to one she had with Gladion back when you were in
the desert for the first time, just so I could get first-hand updates too. But for something like this?
Yeah, absolutely.” Hau raised an eyebrow at her. “You and Lillie and Gladion can make one
without me, I won't be offended.”

“I'm not offended. If you're that worried about me, I guess it makes sense. I just... it feels like
you're all making a huge fuss for no reason, that's all.”

The point is, said Necrozma, making them both jump, you are insistent upon reflecting both your
worries and your credit to other people. I cannot heal or help you with this, but I can offer my
apologies for any pain I have caused you. And if your friend is so inclined, I would encourage him
to ensure that anyone else who has offered you pain is also persuaded to apologize.

“Oh my god, no, please don't,” begged Moon, turning to look at Hau in alarm. “Please, no.”

“Not everyone,” said Hau. “But I think some people should definitely have to apologize to you.
Like... ooh, Faba. I'd pay any amount of money in my bank account to see that.”

“I'm not taking apologies that don't mean anything, and you know that anything coming out of his
mouth is bullshit to begin with.”

“Guzma and Plumeria, then,” said Hau, folding his arms. “Maybe Emmett and Jack, eventually.”

Moon’s stomach rolled, thinking of Kohaku. “If you can persuade any of them into it, I'd honestly
be impressed. Knock yourself out.”

She fished Tapubulium Z out of the Z-Ring and pressed it into place.

Resentment and chaos.

“Let me guess, Tapu Bulu?” said Hau dryly.

Moon snickered. “How on earth did you know?”

The bull-god is unpleasant. He has come to visit me a few times— not to speak, simply to ensure
that I was not hurt anyone on his island. I am the largest threat to his rule at the moment— except
for a beast wandering in the mountains to the north. Less snow, more stone.

“A beast like, from Ultra Space?” said Hau, perking up. “The Tapus said there were four in Alola,
and I have to hunt them down.”

Yes, it is not from Terra. I could help you find them if I were staying here, but I am not.

“I think I have to find them on my own. But thanks for letting me know. It actually helps a lot,
because Ula'ula is the biggest island in Alola.”

I suppose you are welcome.

The next crystal was Fairium Z. Necrozma blinked again, then inhaled deeply and let out what
could only be a sneeze.
Pollen, she said, sounding disgruntled. *I am not fond of pollen. It makes me itch.*

Moon was intrigued. “Are you allergic, do you think?”

*I don't know what that means.*

“Um— it would take too long to explain the science but it just means your body doesn't like pollen. Like, it *really* doesn't like it.”

“I'm trying to wrap my head around the concept of a legendary Pokémon and-or Ultra Beast being allergic to something,” remarked Hau.

“Same.” Moon pressed Kommonium Z into place and waited for Necrozma’s inevitable commentary.

*I think,* she said, after a few moments of silence, *that you must be a very good Trainer. I have been up here lurking on the mountain, but my ears still work. I heard the young Luna summon the island gods to her altar, as I heard the roar of Sol as he devoured the intruders at his. They have chosen you.*

“I think you get a vote, too,” said Moon, her mouth dry. “And so does Marshadow.” The imp squeaked, surprised.

*If Sol and Luna trust you with this, I do as well. She paused. And you offered the gift of collecting my crystals, from your own good heart. The beasts with whom you travel approve of you, and love you.*

“Thank you.” Moon was oddly touched by the sentiment. “I appreciate that.” She weighed Groundium Z in her hand for a moment before pressing it to the mass.

*This tastes of hard work and satisfaction.* Necrozma's mouth, such as it was, widened and drew back to expose black, crystalline teeth; a strange, eldritch smile. *I had forgotten that sort of thing.*

“Glad I could help you remember it.”

She added Lunalium Z. Necrozma's eyes flashed blue before returning to scarlet. *Luna.*

“Yeah, that's Nebby.”

*She accepted my apology so quickly. I almost feel as though it was... inadequate.*

“No, you're fine,” Moon reassured her. “Nebby is like, almost incapable of holding a grudge. When she forgave you, she meant it.”

“She's way too happy-go-lucky to hang onto hurt,” added Hau.

*If you're sure.*

She was almost finished with the crystals. Moon pulled the remaining Tapu's Z-Crystals out of the bag she had kept them in, with no room on her Z-Ring. Molayne had said they were all technically Tapunium Z, but she could not quite help thinking of them as separate entities— Tapubunium was already part of the bulging crystal crown, but Tapufinium, Tapulelium, and Tapukonium were in her hands and she put all of them on at once.

*Oh...*
Necrozma's mind-voice was quiet. Moon hastily pulled her hands back, just in case; but then the legendary Pokémon sighed.

*I have consistently underestimated the beasts of this world, in my blind hunger. If I had thought, for even a moment, that this might be a better solution than eating everything I saw... I could have had help from many. The island gods helped you, and your friends. They might have helped me, too.*

Moon coughed and lowered her voice. “Tapu Bulu might not, because he's a jerk.”

*Perhaps.* Necrozma's voice sounded wistful. *But I might have helped him, in turn. I could have eaten the man who poisoned him with hatred and anger.*

“Do you eat people?” said Moon, half curious and half wary.

“Moon, serious question— why in the name of Arceus would you ask her that when you're like a foot away from her huge spiky black teeth?”

Not usually, said Necrozma, her voice rather arch. But for someone like that, I could be persuaded to make an exception.

Moon took out Solgalium Z, and kept one eye on Necrozma as she put it in place; her hypothesis was proven correct when Necrozma's eyes flashed golden-orange before returning to red.

*This is Sol,* she said. *Not mine, but yours.*

“My Naganadel calls yours, um, Redsun? I think it fits.”

*It is accurate.*

They were nearing the end. Moon pressed Icium Z in place.

Adventures and laughter. I often see the little rectangles in your hands— yours has a ghost in it. Why do they make you laugh so much?

“It's not the rectangles,” said Moon, grinning. “They, um— they send messages. Like Zossie's communicator? We talk to our friends with them.”

*Could you not have spoken with him through the cave?* Necrozma's gaze flicked briefly to Hau.

“I could have, but we were also talking to our friends. Lillie and Gladion. Um— you kind of met Lillie when you were eating Nebby? And Marshadow knows Gladion.”

*He is very nice,* said Marshadow softly. *He reminds me of you, Starlight.*

The name was said with such affection that it nearly took Moon's breath away. Even Necrozma seemed surprised, staring at Marshadow with wide eyes.

*Maybe I will meet him someday,* then, she said finally.

“You probably will, actually. If you drop by in a few years he'll be the kahuna of Ula'ula Island.”

*I might come.* Necrozma shrugged, her giant shoulders rippling in an oddly delicate motion. *If I am not busy. I had many duties before I forgot everything in the hunger.*

“What kinds of duties?”
Necrozma regarded her for a few moments. *Sol is the sun. Luna is the moon. I am the stars.*

“The what now,” said Moon, not sure she'd heard correctly.

*I can feel the turbulence in your thoughts. You called me a singularity, once; you weren't wrong. But singularities happen when stars die. I was not dead, exactly. I take the light given to me, and I reflect it out into the universe. I am called Starlight for a reason.*

“Like in the poem?” suggested Hau. “*Sun and moon, shadow and star?*”

*I don't know what a poem is, but that makes sense. Sol, Luna, Marshadow, and me. We are light and darkness.*

*You are light, and I am darkness,* corrected Marshadow.

*What would light be, without darkness? We shine the brighter for spending time with you.*

Marshadow squeaked again, clearly flustered at the thought. Moon grinned, picking up the last Z-Crystal, and pressed Mewnium Z onto Necrozma's forehead.

Necrozma went completely still.

“That's all of them,” said Moon, suddenly worried. “At least, that was all I could find. Can you remember anything else?”

She... Necrozma suddenly rolled to one side, struggling to rise; she stood on fours, enormous blocky hands pressing into the snow. *Her child. They took him. They hurt him.*

Her distress was palpable. Moon swallowed and took a few steps forward. “And they were paid in kind,” she answered. “Mewtwo wasn't *exactly* her child, but he destroyed everyone who hurt him.”

*It did not help him.*

“No,” agreed Moon. “No, it didn't.”

Necrozma lifted her head, looking up at the sky; it was mid-afternoon, beginning to deepen into twilight. *I did not have a child to lose,* she said simply, *but something precious was taken from me all the same. You have gotten it back, or most of it, but it is not like it was before.*

“Because you remember everything that happened.”

*I wish I could forget.*

Moon took another step forward. She was almost face to face with Necrozma; less than a foot between them. She hesitantly reached out, pressing her hand to the hard, crystalline carapace. Necrozma eyed her.

“Tapu Lele,” she said out loud. “I know I'm not on your island, and I know I'm not yet the Champion. But perhaps I can owe you a debt?”

*An interesting proposition.*

There was no flash of light, but Tapu Lele was there all the same. Both Moon and Hau jumped about three feet in the air.

“Thanks. Um— can you help her? Like you helped me?”
Tapu Lele drifted forward, looking first at Moon, and then at Necrozma. *No. It goes differently with beasts, than with humans. And you have done much to heal her yourself, though it would work better if her crown were finished.*

“There's more missing pieces?” Moon groaned. “Damn it, I thought we'd gotten everything.”

*There is— only one missing piece.* That was Necrozma, soft and hesitant. *Butterfly god, I don't know where to look for it.*

*Have you tried looking inward?* Tapu Lele's voice was mild.

*Why would I—*

There was a long pause; and then Necrozma made a nasty hacking noise that made Moon and Hau clap their hands to their ears, wincing. Then another, and another; and then she let her jaw drop open and a stone rolled out of it, landing in the snow with a steaming hiss as the heat of her fire-white saliva melted everything around it at once.

*As I thought,* said Tapu Lele. She sounded oddly smug. *I have often wondered why you would want to eat your own crown, Grandmother. The crown wants to be one piece, all together; unless, of course, a part of it is freely given. So of course you were hungry. You were looking for the other pieces to stay in your stomach, so they could be together and safe.*

Necrozma stared down at the stone, wide-eyed. Moon squatted to get a better look; it was blazing golden-white.

*I personally would not have chosen my own stomach as the safest storage space, but if there were no other option I see how it might serve.*

*I forgot I put it there,* said Necrozma forlornly. *All this trouble, because I forgot where I'd put it.*

*It hardly matters now.* Tapu Lele's gaze flicked to Moon. *You should finish the crowning, little rainbow. I will go back to my island now.*

She vanished without fanfare. Moon reached out and picked up the stone that had been inside of Necrozma. It was damp, so she dried it on her snow pants before holding it up.

Necrozma bowed her head, and Moon set the stone in the center of her forehead.

White light flared out, brighter than anything Moon had ever seen— her eyes watered before she pinched them shut, the ghostly after-image of Necrozma's surprise etched onto the insides of her eyelids in scarlet. Hau's yelp told her that he too had been temporarily blinded.

*I... look like me.*

Necrozma's stunned voice reached Moon's mind and she cracked her eyes open. Necrozma was still blindingly bright but not so bright that she couldn't make out a vague shape that reminded her of the golden, skeletal form she'd battled on Ultra Megalopolis.

*I look like me again,* she repeated. *I— I look like me.*

*Starlight, I think you are hurting their eyes,* said Marshadow.

The light faded considerably, until Moon was left blinking at yes, the golden-white, spindly bones that formed Necrozma's body. *Look,* she said. She still sounded dazed. *I feel so...*
She trailed off.

...so what? Marshadow encouraged her.

A fat, blazing-white teardrop rolled down Necrozma's face and fell into the snow, hissing where it instantly melted. So good.

The wonder and bewilderment in her voice nearly brought Moon to tears; and when Hau's arm landed on her shoulder she turned to look at him and saw that he actually was crying.

“I can't believe you did that,” he said finally. “We've known of Necrozma as this hungry, dark thing for years and years. And now she makes sense again. You realize you're going to have to write some new poetry, to add onto The Light of Alola?”

“Who says?” snarked Moon. “Someone who actually likes writing poetry can do that. I'm terrible at poems.”

“Maybe Cassie would do it. She likes to write.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She's kind of private about it, though.” Hau coughed. “I actually probably shouldn't have mentioned it.”

“I won't say anything,” promised Moon.

Moon Hawkins.

She turned to look up at Necrozma; Marshadow had long since left her shoulder and was now sitting on Necrozma's head, above the colorful crystal bump.

“Yes?”

I do not have the words to explain how grateful I am to you.

“Oh, that's fine, don't worry about it—”

No, let me speak. Thank you, Moon. Thank you— Champion.

And now she really was crying. “Um— you're welcome.”

I am leaving now. I have many things to put back in order, beginning with my home.

And I am going to visit Lillie and Gladion, added Marshadow. Thank you for helping my friend, Moon.

“Tell them we said hi,” said Moon, trying not to let her voice crack.

There was a flash of light and a swirl of shadow; and they were gone, leaving Moon and Hau standing in a cold hollow of snow.

“Well,” said Hau, after a few moments. “That was. Um.”

Both of their Dexes buzzed at once.
chat: the four musketeers

lovely lillie: I don't have the words for this so I'm just going to send you a picture

great gladion: LILLIE NO

lovely lillie: Lillie yes

lovely lillie: Picture Attachment: [IMG142.jpeg]

* * * *

“I also don't have words for this,” said Hau, staring at his phone.

“I do,” said Moon darkly, “but most of them are either exceedingly cheesy or exceedingly profane.”

She saved the picture to Rotom's file storage and set it as the lockscreen. Marshadow, aggressively cuddling a wide-eyed Gladion; Imp, Rey, Nox, and Eleanor were laughing, while Null just looked disgusted.

* * * *

chat: the four musketeers

marvelous moon: My crops are watered, my children are fed

marvelous moon: My skin is clear

marvelous moon: My homework is finished

marvelous moon: My uwus have busted and they are FAT

heroic hau: uh

marvelous moon: I love life and I love all of you and I love Necrozma and Marshadow most of all

great gladion: I'm guessing this means you found her?

marvelous moon: Yep
marvelous moon: And she's cured

marvelous moon: Not gonna lie, it feels pretty goddamn good

heroic hau changed marvelous moon's name to miraculous moon

miraculous moon: ...

great gladion: Seconded.

lovely lillie: Thirded.

heroic hau: 4thed, 5thed, and 6thed

miraculous moon: Why do you get four votes though

heroic hau: the 1st vote was for me. 4 was for necrozma, 5 for all the other pokémon in the world, 6 for all the humans

heroic hau: literally she could have eaten our sun and moon

heroic hau: we would have died

heroic hau: YOU

heroic hau: ARE

heroic hau: A

heroic hau: HERO

miraculous moon: ...

great gladion: We get that you're allergic to being recognized for doing good things, but take a benadryl and get over it

heroic hau: o damn

lovely lillie: You really can't deny that you saved the world, Moon.

miraculous moon: Things like this are why I both love you all, and hate you all. Thank you. I'm going to go be embarrassed now.

great gladion: Would you like to be embarrassed on a celebratory video call?

heroic hau: heck yea

heroic hau: GROUP CALL GROUP CALL GROUP CALL GROUP CALL

heroic hau: ...unless u were talkin about private stuff w/ moon in which case imma shut tf up
great gladion: I actually did mean a group call.

great gladion: I can talk with Moon privately later.

lovely lillie: Oooh...

heroic hau: OMG

great gladion: Guess what?

great gladion: You're both perverts. (: 

miraculous moon: I can't believe you used a passive-aggressive smiley face omg

* * * *

To: august_green@pmail.co.alo

CC: aewicke@aether.org

From: indigo_conference_automatic@indigo.org

RE: Application Status

Congratulations, Gladion Mohn (Kantonian Gym Challenge Applicant #2843). You have been accepted into this summer's Kantonian Gym Challenge. You have also been invited to attend early, under special circumstances. We will expect an email confirming your acceptance of the Gym Challenge and an ETA; visiting Trainers undergoing either challenge in the Indigo Conference must report to their respective regional professors before beginning the challenge: Professor Oak in Pallet Town, Kanto; or Professor Elm in New Bark Town, Johto. Travel expenses are the responsibility of the Trainer.

You should prepare to:

- challenge eight gyms, optionally taking on the Indigo Conference Elite Four and Champion of your respective region

  - Kantonian Elite Four and Champion
    - Lorelei, Agatha, Bruno, Lance
    - Red
  - Johtonian Elite Four and Champion
    - Will, Koga, Bruno, Karen
    - Gold
  - Bruno serves in both the Kantonian League and the Johtonian League.
• train with teammates of your choice, including an elemental starter if you qualify
• travel in all weather conditions and climates

Status of Elemental Starter Consideration: **Accepted**

You will be able to select your Elemental Starter at either Professor Oak's laboratory or Professor Elm's laboratory, depending on your selected region.

Thank you for applying to the Indigo Conference. We hope you enjoy your Pokémon journey.

**Personal Message:**

I was hesitant about you, Mr. Mohn. But I was persuaded to accept your application at the behest of my grandson and his partner, as well as an unusual recommendation letter written by Marion Hawkins— attached for your perusal. I look forward to your arrival. —Samson Oak

Attachment: [reasons why you should accept Gladion into the gym challenge.pdf]

*****

This message was sent by an automated service. Replies should be directed to indigo_conference_help@indigo.org.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Kate: twelve-foot tarantula wasp demon
Also Kate: overexcited golden retriever puppy

“I'm told seeing a light at the end of the tunnel is a bad sign.” LILLIE OMFG

Ok but watching horror movies to increase your adrenaline and bloodflow, and thus stay warm, is actually kind of a neat concept? I think I read about it somewhere but I might also have made it up. I forget which. *Spongebob rainbow* POSSIBLY FAKE SCIENCE

An interpretation of Marshadow's story, in case I wasn't clear: Marshadow looked around a lot and eventually heard about Mew's island but had no idea how to get there so he went to Acerola for advice. Acerola told him to visit Phoebe in Hoenn (srs she's a whole Hawaiian tropical aesthetic??!?!!? SHE WAS OBVIOUSLY BORN IN ALOLA AND DEFINITELY SHOULD HAVE BEEN A BATTLE TREE GUEST??!?!!? jfc game freak pls look up "continuity" in the dictionary >:[ ). Phoebe then directed Marshadow to Mr. Briney and Peeko, who let him look at a map; and then Marshadow went to Mew's island, which I can't remember what it's called at the exact moment I'm typing this up and I don't feel like googling it. And then they had A Chat.

Necrozma getting more and more emotional with each Z-Crystal— low-key meant to
symbolize her mental healing process. Reconnecting with these emotions through identifying with them in Moon's memories and stories is a direct correlation to therapy. I really miss therapy, but them's the breaks when you're nearly twenty-seven and don't have a full-time job in America. (SIGHS LOUDLY)

Necrozma is totally allergic to pollen, mostly because the idea makes me laugh

I cried about ten buckets of tears while writing Necrozma becoming her beautiful golden skeledragon self, in case you were wondering

ot4 text shenanigans are my favorite shenanigans

GLADION'S GOT AN ACCEPTANCE LETTER LOOK AT MY BABY GO

Also Professor Oak is an absolute fucking troll, attaching Moon's pdf lmao

***************************************************************************

The above notes were written when I originally completed the chapter. This note is something I'm adding right before publishing this chapter.

America is both a wonderful, and terrible place to live. I am a white, middle-class woman and I understand that I am very privileged in what I can do or say without endangering my own life; but many people are not so lucky.

Because of my privilege, I have the opportunity to speak up on behalf of my siblings of the human race who are not as fortunate as me. I don't want to get in their way, and I don't want to speak over them. All I have to say is this: Black Lives Matter. And if anyone seeing this wants to rebut with "all lives matter," then I hate to be the one to break it to you: until Black Lives Matter, all lives do not matter. There is an implicit, unspoken "too" on the end of Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter, Too. Because of course all lives matter! Fucking obviously they do! But until we take steps to prevent the Black community from being mistreated by the American "justice" system— until there are no more deaths like George Floyd's or Breonna Taylor's or Michael Brown Jr's— it is very clear to see that in the eyes of the American government all lives do not matter. "All lives matter" are empty words, designed to placate the "white moderate(s)" as Martin Luther King called them, who might be angrier if they were more personally invested in the problem. Until the people responsible for those deaths are held accountable, Americans cannot honestly say that all lives matter in their justice system. Until there are no more people making excuses for murderers, all lives do not matter. Until the corrupt police system is reformed, and until policemen are made to be accountable for their actions through body cameras, through demilitarizing the American police, through higher insurance rates for higher violence records, through changed laws and policies— all lives do not matter, and it is a lie to pretend that they do.

Silence is Complicit. Riots are the language of the unheard. Black Lives Matter.
“All right,” said Hau, turning to look at her with his bowl of instant oatmeal in one hand. “I have a very serious question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Who would win in a fight—Nebby, or Solgaleo?”

“Oh, a serious serious question.” Moon considered both options for a few moments. “Are we talking a fight to the death? Or just a friendly tussle?”

“Either or.”

“Friendly tussle goes to Nebby. Solgaleo wouldn't hurt her. But he'd win a fight to the death. You didn't see how he killed the Foxes at the Lake of the Sunne.”

Hau grimaced. “I definitely forgot about that. Okay, what about Nebby versus Nihilego?”

“Nebby, for sure.” On this she was definite. “She has a type advantage, but she can also give back just as much shit as she takes. The Nihilego wouldn't know what to do with itself.”
“Nebby versus Necrozma?”

“You already saw how that turned out.”

“Okay, fair.”

They finished breakfast and began breaking down the camp. Hau carried the generator and the canvas of the tent; Moon had the power bank, tent poles and stakes, as well as the teakettle they used to boil snow for drinking and food.

“What about Necrozma versus a Nihilego?” Hau asked, once they had begun the hike.

“Necrozma. She’s a grumpy old lady, she would literally just swat them back into the void.”

“Oh, I can totally see it.” Hau let out a hoot of laughter, which echoed off the snow into the bright, sunny air of the mountain.

They were getting rather close to the top, thought Moon. The sun seemed hotter up here, though the nights were colder and windier; and the air was beginning to thin out. When she was the Champion — and it still seemed surreal to say when, rather than if — she would have to get used to the high altitude, as this would be her workplace.

Hopefully, she would be working indoors. Pokémon Leagues were traditionally located inside, but Alola was so wild and different that she wouldn’t be surprised to see an open-air stadium, with better access to sunlight and moonlight. After all, Solgaleo and Lunala actually did watch island challenge championship battles from time to time.

Around noon they made it to a relatively leveled-off area of the path. Hau stopped, leaning down and panting for breath; the thin air affected him more, because he was bigger than Moon. “Lunch break?” he suggested.

“Yeah, this is a good spot for it.”

Ollie (and Kate, having learned Flamethrower) melted a wide swathe of snow to reveal several lumpy boulders, steaming with snow-melt. Moon set her backpack down and got out the power bank and the teakettle; Hau unloaded the generator. They packed snow into the kettle and let it warm up for cup ramen and MREs.

“Here, guys, have at it.” Moon opened a fresh sack of mixed beans, laying it out on the ground. All twelve of their teammates converged on the sack, nosing in for their favorite colors.

“I think we’re getting pretty close,” said Hau, echoing her earlier thought. “I’m not breathing very well.”

“Will you be okay?”

“Yeah. I can still breathe, I just gotta work for it.” He paused, watching steam hiss out of the spout of the teakettle. “So, who would win in a fight — Nebby, or Null?”

Moon groaned.

* * * * *
chat: no longer hypothetically

valentine: Moon.

mountaineer: Yes?

valentine: I have an email I'm afraid to open.

valentine: It's from the Indigo Conference and it says “Application Status” in the subject line.

mountaineer: OH MY GOD OPEN IT!!!

valentine: What if they've rejected me though.

mountaineer: Gladion.

mountaineer: They're not going to reject you.

valentine: But what if they do.

mountaineer: Honestly? Then you apply somewhere else. You said Sinnoh sounded nice.

valentine: I guess so.

mountaineer: But you're not going to know what to do unless you open the envelope...

valentine: Right.

* * * * *

“He's so nervous,” said Moon sympathetically. They were just settling down for the night, the sun beginning to sink on the other side of the mountain as they put up the tent; the sky was slowly fading from pale blue to honey gold.

“What does he have to be nervous about? He's smart and a good Trainer.”

“I know, but I guess anxiety makes it hard to hang onto the good things like that.”

Hau didn't say anything to that immediately. Moon had been looking at Rotom, waiting for an incoming text; but when she looked up at her friend she found he was watching her, eyes soft.

“What?”

“You worry just as much as he does, sometimes.”

“Yeah, but not to like, the point where it can incapacitate me.”

“I still think maybe you should see a therapist.”

“I don't think you're wrong,” Moon informed him, “but like many other things in life, it's going to
have to wait for a little bit. In case you didn't notice, we're on a death trap of a mountain.”

“You know, it's a funny thing, but I did actually notice that.”

They both chuckled at each other, and Hau shook out one of the tarps to lay on the snow beneath their tent.

“He's taking a really long time to answer.” Moon frowned down at Rotom. “I hope he's okay.”

“I'm sure he's alright.”

They had gotten the tent about halfway up when a quiet pop— almost unnoticeable underneath the crying wind— made Moon pause.

“Dude!” said Hau, staring past her. “It's thirty below zero and you're not wearing like, anything, you're going to die of hypothermia! What are you doing here?”

She whirled around. Gladion stood there in his nice gray coat and a pair of non-ripped jeans, teeth chattering; Marshadow was clinging to his leg, which would explain how he'd gotten there in the first place.

“H-h-had t-to c-come,” he stuttered, arms wrapping around himself. “P-p-probably sh-should've worn g-g-gloves, h-huh?”

Moon dropped the tent poles she was holding, rushing over to him and peeling off her parka; she had a windbreaker, at least, beneath it. “Put this on,” she said briskly, pulling one of his arms from his side. “Get your hands in the pockets.”

It only barely fit him, and was definitely too short in the torso; but it zipped closed and she pulled the hood up, snuggling it around his face.

“S-s-sorry,” he mumbled. “You sh-shouldn't have t-to give m-me your c-c-clothes.”

Moon, sensibly, ignored this. “We'll have the tent up in a jiffy,” she promised, tucking his hands into her pockets; he made a surprised noise, finding the heatwarmers she kept there. “Just hang on a second, okay?”

She turned to go but was surprised when his hand caught around her wrist. She stared at them for a few moments, then up at him.

“I got in,” he said.

“The gym challenge?”

He nodded.

“Awesome. I want you to tell me all about it when we're inside a kind-of warm tent, okay?”

Rather than loosening, his grip on her wrist tightened. “Just— c-can you listen to me?”

He sounded like he was about to cry; and crying on Mount Lanakila was a bad idea according to the frozen teardrops she'd had to deal with before, so she turned to face him fully, slipping her hands into his and putting both of their hands in the pockets of the parka.

“Oooh,” called Hau.
“Hey, shut up. We're having a conversation here.” She looked up at Gladion, at his soft-surprised green eyes, and lowered her voice. “What's up, love?”

His mouth fell open, and he blinked at her several times in surprise. Moon hadn't called him that out loud since she'd told him she knew he was going to be Ula'ula Island's next kahuna.

“I-I,” he said— though the stuttering, this time, seemed to be because he was flustered rather than because he was cold. “Um, I. Well, it's about. About that, actually.”

“About what?”

“In the email,” he said, staring at her; but his voice trailed off into nothing.

“In the email?” she prompted, after a few moments. “Like, the acceptance one?”

“Uh— yeah. That one.” He coughed, looking away for a few moments. “Um, it was kind of a generic acceptance email from a bot or whatever, but then there was a bit at the end where Professor Oak had added in a personal message and, um. He said you wrote me a letter of recommendation. And— and he attached it.”

“Oh my god,” muttered Moon, letting her head fall forward against his chest. “I can't believe— the actual fucking nerve of that man. This is revenge for all the times I've ever annoyed him.”

“I read it.”

“Oh my god.”

“Did you mean it?”

She knew what he meant but took refuge in hedging. “Did I mean what?”

He pulled one of his hands out of the parka pocket before digging in his jeans pocket, pulling out his Dex; a tap showed that the screen was open to said letter, open to the end of it.

14. *I'm definitely not ready to say this out loud or to his face, but I love him. And I want him to be happy.*

“Did you mean it?” he repeated quietly.

Moon nodded, still not able to look up at him. He closed his Dex screen, tucking it back into his pocket, and pulled his other hand out of the parka.

“You're going to catch your death of cold—”

His arms went around her, so tight she almost couldn't breathe; there was a multiplicity of layers between them but she was being squished against his chest, her nose wrinkling as the fur around the edge of the parka hood tickled her forehead and chin.

“I love you.”

His voice was so quiet she almost didn't hear it; but the way he froze after saying it made her heart pound. “I— really?”
He nodded, just barely. “I had to come and tell you,” he mumbled. “I know it wasn't expected, I
know it's not convenient. But, um. I had to. I just— I had to.”

“Don't apologize,” said Moon. Her voice came out entirely too breathless. “I'm happy to see you.
And—” She stumbled, but took a steadying breath; if he could come here and be brave, so
incredibly brave, then she could stop being a wimp for five seconds and return the favor. “And,
um... I love you, too.”

“I know,” he said, a note of amusement in his tone. “You said. In the letter.”

“I also said I wasn't ready to say it out loud, but I wrote that like, well over a month ago.” Moon
looked up at him, at the dry smile on his face. “But I am now, so... I love you.”

It was easier to say the second time; and it was beautiful and terrifying to watch the way his face
changed— to watch how he melted into her a little further with soft eyes, tightening arms, bowed
head.

“I didn't actually think you would write me a letter of recommendation,” he said, after a few
moments.

“I said I would, didn't I?”

“I thought you were joking, sunshine.”

“You're very recommendable.”

He snorted laughter. “High school dropout and juvenile delinquent. Sure, recommendable.”

“You're making it sound like you're not also a hero,” Moon reminded him. She reached up,
pressing her mittened hands to his cold face. “Also, Wicke's been getting you and the Skulls
cleared of charges, and you have a GED. So you're wrong on both counts anyway.”

“All right, fine, I'll stop putting myself down.” He rolled his eyes, but the soft smile on his face
belied the annoyed tone. The honey-gold of the sky was beginning to darken to blazing orange-red;
sunsets on Mount Lanakila were always something to behold. Gladion's skin glowed in the fiery
sunlight.

“Hey, I have a joke for you,” she said, before she could say something ridiculously stupid or sappy
like you're beautiful, or I'm so in love with you.

“Am I going to hate it?”

“Probably.”

He sighed fondly. “Well, let's hear it, then.”

Moon paused, for dramatic effect. “Why,” she said deliberately, “did the Squirtle cross the ocean?”

He sighed again, a little less fondly. “Why?”

“To get to the other tide.”

Gladion regarded her for a few moments. “That's possibly the worst joke I've ever heard in my
entire life,” he said finally. “I cannot fucking believe I'm in love with you. I demand a refund.”

“How do you get a Pikachu on a bus?”
“Moon, no—”

“You poke him on.”

“Oh my fucking god.”

“What did the Gyarados's kid want to be when he grew up?”

“Moon—”

“A Magi-cop.”

“Where the hell did you get these jokes, they're the actual worst.”

But Gladion's face cracked into a grin as he shook his head ruefully, and Moon stared at him because she'd only ever seen a sliver of white teeth in his smiles— infrequent enough to begin with. This was toothy, with the dimple at full prominence; and his mouth stretched wide enough to show his gums and that was just— *devastatingly cute.*

Her brain didn't come back online until she had delivered the little kiss to the corner of Gladion's mouth; and the moment she realized what she'd done his eyes went blank, staring at her as though she'd lost her mind.

“Oh my god,” blurted Moon, mortified. “I— that wasn't an accident but it was kind of an accident? Your smile is fucking breathtaking, and you're so cute and I wasn't thinking about it, I'm so—”

He bent, pressing his forehead to hers; his warm breath washed over her cold face and she fell silent, losing the ability to speak.

“Don't say you're sorry, sunshine,” he murmured. “Just— just help me, I've never— I don't know what I'm doing.”

“I don't really know what I'm doing, either.”

One of his hands curled farther around her, on the small of her back; the other rose, drifting to the back of her neck and slowly tangling in the too-long curls there. “Okay,” he whispered, swallowing as he stared at her— stared at her as though she might disappear at any moment. “Okay.”

They met almost in unison, but his nose bumped hers in the wrong spot before pressing past. They shared a single breath, and then his lips brushed gently over hers.

Moon let her eyes flutter closed, and kissed Gladion back.

Time stopped. Of this she was certain, for the evening that had been orange fading to purple seemed to have paused in a fugue of fuchsia. It glowed behind her eyelids, it warmed her hands that clung to his borrowed parka, it set her entire heart on fire and she was caught, she was captivated.

He gasped— a soft, bare thing after the plush pop of their lips. “Moon— Moon, I— I just— *Moon.*”

“I love you,” breathed Moon, because that was the only thought in her mind. “I love you so much.”

They met again, fire and sunlight and heat on one another. Gladion sighed into the kiss; the hand that was tangled in her hair slid upward, pulling her ever closer.

“Holy shit,” said Hau, nearby. “My ship is finally sailing.”
Moon half turned to yell but Gladion's other hand stopped her, cradling her cheek. “Ignore it,” he whispered, between kisses. “Let him have his fun.”

“I— okay.”

They might have stayed like that forever, but a sudden vibration at Moon's hip made her jump. Gladion sighed, slightly irritated. “Probably Wicke,” he muttered, pressing his forehead to hers as Moon tried to remember how to fucking breathe. “She was CC'ed on the email. So, um, this is nice.”

She laughed— she couldn't quite help it. “You are so endearingly awkward,” she informed him, standing on tiptoe to peck him on the nose. He was already pink but at this he went scarlet, looking away and scowling in embarrassment.

“Call from Amelia Wicke,” supplied Rotom.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Wicke's face, round and cheerful, appeared on the screen. “Ah, good,” she said, catching sight of Gladion in the camera as well as Moon. “I was wondering why his Dex wasn't picking up; there's no service on Mount Lanakila.”

“Yeah, and Rotom always has service,” said Moon. Gladion moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and eyeing Wicke over Moon's shoulder. “What can I do for you?”

“Gladion was accepted into Kanto's gym challenge.” Wicke paused, looking them over. “I'm... assuming you already knew that. He is being permitted to start early. I also assume, given circumstances with Ula'ula Island and the matter of the Foxes, that you would like to go as soon as possible.”

“Yeah.” Gladion sighed. “You want me back at the Paradise?”

“Not necessarily. We don't have an airstrip facility, only helicopter pads; but Aether does have a private jet, generally quartered in the airport on Poni Island. I'm having it inspected and fuelled, given the length of your journey.”

“Oh, lucky,” said Moon. “We had to come by boat. It took two weeks. It was kind of like a cruise, though.”

“You don't like heights,” pointed out Gladion.

“No, but you can't really see how high you are in an airplane, as long as you're not in the window seat. And I didn't really have a huge problem with heights until, um, Nebby. And Tapu Koko's bridge. So I'd probably have been fine on a plane. We just couldn't afford it.”

“If all goes well with the inspection,” said Wicke, still watching them, “are you prepared to leave the day after tomorrow?”

Gladion considered. “Yeah, probably,” he said, shrugging. “I don't plan on camping if I can use public transportation, not until Victory Road. It's not like I'm going to need to train against the first few gyms at the very least. So I might need camping gear eventually, but I can buy that in Kanto so I don't have to lug it around unnecessarily.”

“Red or Blue might let you borrow theirs,” suggested Moon. “Red even has the good shit. You know, since he lived on a mountain for two years.”
“Then,” said Wicke, looking at Gladion, “I will expect you at the airport on Poni Island, the day after tomorrow.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thank you. I wish you both a good evening.”

The call ended abruptly. Moon sighed, tucking Rotom into her pocket. “The day after tomorrow, huh?”

“Yeah. I want it out of the way.” Gladion hesitated. “Like— I know it's supposed to be about the journey. But I've been on a journey, you know. It just hasn't been a traditional one.”

“It's probably about having qualifications more than anything,” said Moon. “You know, like credentials. In case someone challenges your authority.”

“Watch someone challenge Tapu Bulu's authority and not die,” snorted Gladion, and okay, that was a good point.

“Hey, the tent is up!” called Hau, poking his head out. “Are you guys done making out?”

“We're not making out, but I guess—”

“Hell, no,” corrected Gladion, promptly turning her around. She vaguely heard Hau snickering in the background, but was shortly thereafter quite distracted.

* * * * *

“Part of me regrets coming up here and actually kissing you right before I'm about to leave for several months,” said Gladion, after some time.

He sounded slightly breathless, and when Moon looked at him his face was red and his hair was messy. I did that, she thought smugly.

“I don't,” she answered. “Regret it, that is. This is— good.”

One of his eyebrows rose. “Good?”

“Yeah. Nice.”

“I must not be doing a very good job if all you have to say about this is nice.”

“We are literally both novices at the whole kissing thing. I still have no idea what I'm doing.”

“I think you have some idea.”

About a minute after that they had to stop again, because even though breathing through one's nose was entirely possible it was also difficult to breathe period, due to the thinness of the air. Gladion was less used to it than she was, and every time he exhaled it was warm over her face and mouth.

“Still just nice?”
“I'll allow exceedingly pleasant,” Moon informed him.

He grinned. “I work so hard, and this is the thanks I get.”

“I think you're hanging too much up on whether I'm enjoying myself or not,” laughed Moon. “It's a two-way street, you know. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Thoroughly.”

“Then we're both winning.”

He regarded her for a moment before hugging her tightly. “I like how you think,” he said, his voice low and warm. “I'll miss you.”

She could feel the ache of the future already; still worth it, one hundred percent worth it. “I'll miss you, too.”

“I'll come back as soon as I can.”

“No, don't do that.”

Gladion raised one eyebrow at her. “I kind of have to.”

“Well, yes, you have to. But I mean— don't rush yourself. You're already going early. And—”

Moon hesitated, looking down. “The thing about traveling in a country that you've never lived in before, is that it leaves you entirely free to become someone you really like. If you don't like who you are where you live, then when you travel you can become a new person. And you can take that home with you, too.”

“Is that how Alola is for you?”

“Oh, yes,” she reassured him. “In all the ways that count, and then some. Considering my whole destiny or whatever. But the point is, I like who I am now so much better than I liked who I was in Kanto. So you go and take your journey, and— honestly, do some sightseeing, and take pictures. Especially take pictures, because I love Alola but I still miss how beautiful Kanto is sometimes.”

“I'll try to take a lot of pictures,” he promised, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“And you don't have to be Lusamine's son,” said Moon, and quickly sensing his disapproval, rushed through the remainder of her thought. “You don't have to be your dad's son, either. You can just be— Gladion. Just Gladion.”

He didn't say anything immediately. Moon waited, hoping she hadn't hurt him; but then his hand slipped under her chin, tipping it up so she had to look at him.

“Thank you,” he said softly, before leaning in the few extra inches. “You're sweet, Moon.”

The whisper of it onto her lips was a wholly new thrill, one that made her smile; and when he realized she was smiling he ended up smiling too so they couldn't kiss properly. Moon laughed softly, and was surprised when Gladion let out the squeaky little giggle that she'd loved in the recording Lillie sent her.

“You're so cute,” she chuckled, “so cute—”

“Same for you, sunshine, with your pretty smile.”
“Oh my god.” She couldn't stop grinning. “We're both idiots.”

“Idiots who—” His voice cracked, and he began giggling again; Moon dissolved into laughter as well. “Oh, god, sorry. Idiots who love each other.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

The sun had fully set, at some point; and it was in the dark when Hau stuck his head out of the tent and yelled, “I've made a bunch of ramen, are you guys not freezing?”

“No, not really,” said Gladion casually.

“That's a filthy lie, your ears are like ice.”

“I'm warm enough.”

His voice was low and teasing, and Moon felt herself flush to her scalp as they walked toward the tent.

“Gross!” shouted Hau, though he was laughing as he said it. “Also Lillie says congratulations, and she's mad you didn't take her too.”

“She was in her therapy session and I didn't feel like waiting.” Gladion eyed Hau. “Besides, I'm sure Moon's spent enough time third-wheeling you and my sister that this probably feels something like comeuppance.”

“It definitely does,” said Moon promptly, ducking into the tent. The warmth of the heater blasted her face, and she sighed happily, plopping down onto the floor and reaching for her sleeping bag. “It really, definitely does.”

She laid out her things for them to sit on, and then let out her Pokémon. Marshadow was sitting on the heater next to Uila, eyeing them both with amusement but saying nothing.

“It was nice of you to bring him,” said Moon earnestly. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

You're welcome. It is nice to see him happy.

Gladion went pink. “Um, thanks.”

You're welcome, too.

“But I guess it doesn't matter that Lillie isn't here,” decided Hau. “Firstly, I'm glad she, at least, is not freezing her ass off like the rest of us. And secondly, she's going to get the experience anyway because I definitely filmed y'all kissing.”

“You did fucking not.”

“I did. Lillie's the only one who's seen it, and she's under strict orders not to share,” said Hau. “I'll send it to you guys and delete the file myself. and then you can decide what to do with it.”

“I want it gone yesterday, I want it gone forever—”

“Yeah, I'm gonna need a copy of that,” said Moon quietly to Hau. “For science.”

“Absolutely, for science.”
Gladion's ears were an angry shade of red but he subsided with only an annoyed pout to remind them of his objections. “You mentioned ramen,” he said sullenly.

“Yep. I made one of each flavor— chicken, beef, and shrimp. I kinda want the beef but I will eat any of them so knock yourselves out.”

“I like shrimp, gimme the shrimp,” said Moon, reaching out.

“Chicken's fine.”

They ate in silence, with steam curling out from the styrofoam. Gladion shrugged off Moon's parka before unbuttoning his coat, though he didn't take it off. Hau, because he was insane, had shed all reasonable layers and wore a T-shirt and shorts. Ordinarily Moon would have told Hau to turn around so she could change into her thermal pajamas, but for now she was fine in her windbreaker. The snow pants were annoying and she had leggings on, so she pulled the snow pants off and chucked them into the corner of the tent. Hau laughed— probably at Gladion, because she would bet his face was doing a number of interesting things but she wasn't going to look. She didn't want to embarrass him.

“How long are you sticking around?” asked Hau.

“I hadn't thought about it,” Gladion admitted. “I didn't really have a plan in mind. I was just like holy shit I got in and Moon loves me I have to go tell her I love her.”

“Okay,” said Hau, nodding and lifting his Dex. “I'm going to need you to repeat that, on film—”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Hau burst out laughing. “Never change, Gladion. Never change.”

“Except for the better.”

“Well, duh. But I like your grumpy ol' self just fine. The rest of us can be nice for you.”

“Yeah,” said Gladion softly, his arm slipping around Moon's waist. “Yeah, you can. Um— I can go back, if I'm imposing?”

“Not at all. You can literally stay the night if you want.” Hau's gaze flicked to Moon, and his eyes went limpid with mischief. “Just, you know, don't boink. We would all have to smell that afterwards.”

“For fuck's sake, we're not going to—” Gladion sighed as Moon fell over laughing. “I hate you both.”

“Nah,” said Moon, turning her head from where she was lying down on the tent floor and looking up at him with a grin. “You love me.”

He went bright red. “Sh-shut up.”

Eventually Hau busied himself with a video call to Lillie on the other side of the tent, even zipping up the divider to give them privacy. Moon had Gladion turn around while she hastily got herself into her thermal pajamas, then unzipped her sleeping bag so it would lie flat. She had some blankets, and was accustomed to snuggling with as many of her Pokémon as wanted to get cozy; but sharing with Gladion meant that there would be less blanket per person.
“You've got your teammates on you, right?” she asked him.

“I never go anywhere without them.” Gladion smirked. "Unlike some people I could mention."

“Shush, you.” Moon flapped one hand in his direction. “So, of my teammates, only Hero prefers to sleep in the ball which is a mercy. Kate still isn't aware that she's twelve feet long, so she still wants to cozy up but the problem is that she wiggles in her sleep. She's ripped three holes in the tent at this point.”

“Did you patch them?”

“Yep, patched and sealed with wax. It's too cold out there not to, honestly.” She grinned at him, sitting down and patting the sleeping bag to indicate she wanted him close. “The funny thing is, Kate actually made the wax.”

He blinked at her. “Is it toxic?”

“I love that that's your question, instead of how the hell did she make wax.”

“That's implied.”

“Well, Kate's kind of like— well, she looks like a giant pink and purple Beedrill, or maybe a Vespiquen. Right?”

“Right.”

“Well, most bees make wax as well as honey, and apparently so does Kate. She told me she can make it toxic if she wants to but she can also make it non-toxic. So we sealed the holes with some of the non-toxic wax.”

“Ah.”

“It's like, gross neon purple,” added Moon, grinning. “Hau hates how it looks, because our tent is red-orange.”

“I never took him as the sort to care about aesthetics.”

“Not usually, but I think he was annoyed about her ripping holes in the tent anyway. My point is that Kate has to sleep in her ball now, until she's got better control of her body. She's kind of— well, she's kind of like Nebby, honestly. Dulse said that when Poipole evolve into Naganadel it means they're ready to become nest-mothers if they want to, but he picked Kate for my team because she has zero desire to be a nest-mother. So she's like, biologically capable of reproducing, like Nebby is, but she's got the mind of a child.”

“That makes sense.”

They were sitting on Moon's open sleeping bag, and she was playing with the thermal blanket— well, not playing with it so much as clenching her fists in the fabric. “And, um— Macbeth and Ben sleep out of the ball, but she just kind of sits back on her hind legs and shuts her eyes. Like, she sleeps sitting up, but actually also sometimes with her eyes open which is creepy.” Macbeth, sitting toward the center of the tent, made a protesting noise. “I love you, girlfriend, but it's creepy no matter who's doing it. It's not just you. If Ben did it I would find it equally creepy. Anyway, she squats and holds Ben. Ariel's a snuggler but she doesn't really, um, lie down very well. Because she's a bird. And Puck, even though he'd die before admitting it, is also a snuggler. And he is more or less human-sized and doesn't mind lying down.”
“So you usually go to sleep with Puck and Ariel?”

“Yes.” Moon glanced up at him. “Um, I’d kind of like to go to sleep with you, like we’ve done before. But we need our teammates out with us, because it’s freezing and we don’t really have enough blankets.”

“Puppy pile, got it.”

“Only if they want to, though.”

“They’ll be fine,” said Gladion, reaching for his belt. “Imp will hang from the ceiling pole, and he’ll probably be awake most of the night anyway. Nox would rather stay in his ball, so if we set it next to Hero and Kate he’d probably be thrilled. But Null, Rey, and Ellie are all cuddlers. And Null runs like a fucking furnace, I literally wake up sweating every morning and I usually don’t wear a shirt to sleep in.”

Moon’s face burned.

“Though I will be wearing one today,” he added, his voice deceptively casual. “It’s too fucking cold not to.”

One of his hands, pale and slender, reached out to loosen her hand from where in the blanket she had clenched it.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yeah,” breathed Moon, twining her fingers through his. “Yeah, and I don’t know why. Kind of stupid, huh?”

“It’s not stupid.” He was letting out his teammates with his free hand, except for Nox; Moon still couldn’t make herself look up but she heard them rustling around. Imp squeaked as the tent pole creaked with his weight; and Ellie— getting to be very tall and slender, for a Riolu— had wrapped her paws around Gladion’s neck, hanging from his back. Rey blinked sleepily before padding over to where Puck was quietly laying down and settled next to him. And Null sat next to Gladion with her head on her paws, scarlet-orange eyes slightly narrowed but still soft. ‘I’ve been in therapy. Feelings aren’t stupid. Ever. They can be irrational, but they’re still your feelings. They’re still valid.”

He reached out with his free hand, warm palm gently curling around her face; his pinky-finger was tucked under her chin and a light pressure made her lift her head to see him properly.

“I’m scared, too,” he said, and she could see the truth of it in his eyes. “What if I wake up tomorrow and this is all a dream?”

“I’m more concerned about embarrassing myself.”

“Sounds fake, but okay.”

She laughed— couldn’t quite help it. He smiled at that, then leaned in gently to kiss first her forehead, then each cheek, and then finally her lips.

“Ca-ri?”

Ellie’s voice was deeper and slightly uncertain. Gladion paused, frowning, and turned around.
“Oh.”

“Did she literally evolve because you kissed me,” said Moon, staring at Ellie—who was now a Lucario.

“Rio ca lu,” confirmed Ellie, nodding.

“I think it had more to do with the amount of emotional energy she was handling and how her body could process it.”

“Oh, but that’s scientific jargon for how she literally evolved because you kissed me.”

He sighed. “Yeah, probably.”

“That’s the cutest shit I’ve ever heard and I am high-key going to explode.”

Ellie looked pleased. A calmness settled through Moon, easing her buzzing nerves and rapid heartbeat to something slow and soft. It was much more subtle than anything Ellie had ever managed before—her emotional aura projections previously tended to hit rather strongly, so this was a nice change.

The calmness made it easier to let go of the thermal blanket. Without breaking eye contact, Gladion took the blanket and spread it over both of them so they were lying down facing one another, heads on Moon's pillow. Puck and Rey huddled closer behind her; Ariel, Null, and Ellie were behind Gladion. Imp chittered happily at them from the ceiling pole, and Macbeth and Ben watched from their seats next to the generator, where Marshadow was sitting with Uila. Hero, Kate, and Nox’s Pokéballs rested on Moon’s parka. She could vaguely hear the buzz of the generator, and Hau’s murmuring voice in his half of the tent; his other Pokémon also shifted and settled, rustling quietly into places to sleep.

“You're beautiful,” said Gladion, even though he went bright red as he said it.

“So are you.”

He laughed softly. “I think you're biased.”

“I mean, the whole constant scowl tends to give you a very, um, **fuck off and don't talk to me** kind of vibe.”

“I cultivate that on purpose.”

“I know.” She grinned at him. “But you have a lovely smile. I want you to smile all the time.”

He went even redder, but resolutely reached out beneath the blanket and pulled her close. These kisses were sleepy—warm and soft, neither of them lifting their heads from the pillow. Moon closed her eyes and missed him, missed him though he was right there; after this she wouldn’t see him for a few months. She thought of him in Kanto, just in time for the cherry blossom front; she thought of him visiting Lavender Town and the memorial tower, one of the rarer tourist destinations but one she knew he would like. She thought of him at the bleak dormant volcano of Cinnabar Island, green-glass eyes surveying the ocean southward. And—she thought of him in Pallet Town, in Viridian City. On the train, at the train station, walking through her hometown with Red and Blue on either side of him. Facing Blue at his gym, and Red at the League.

Suddenly she wanted nothing more than to tell them everything—not about Gladion, because he could do that himself; but about her journey. Part of her had kept all of that to herself, because it
was safer and easier if they didn't have to worry. But— they'd probably worried anyway, hadn't they?

“Stop thinking so loud,” mumbled Gladion. His hand reached around the back of her head, tilting her close for a slightly firmer kiss before letting her fall back to where she'd been. “Just go to sleep, sunshine.”

“I love you,” she whispered, into another kiss.

“I love you, too.”

And sleep took them, safe and sweet, into the shadows.

* * * * *

[sometime the next morning]

To: satoshired@pmail.co.kan, garyo@pmail.co.kan

BCC: gamohn@aether.org

From: marionhawkins@pmail.co.alo

Re: stuff n things

Hey so my boyfriend got accepted into Kanto's gym challenge and he's coming early so guess who you're meeting at some point in the next three months whoop

I don't know details of how he's getting there or anything, you're literally going to have to ask the Prof as he's arranging things with Ms. Wicke.

So anyway I have another reason for writing. I've been through what Red would probably call some Big Damn Hero shit. I haven't wanted to talk to the two of you about it because like... I didn't want to burden you or something? Idk I know it's a stupid reason but I'm trying to get over it which is why I'm talking to you. So I should call you guys because it's easier to discuss out loud than over email. I found an app for my dex that does free international video calls so you should get it and we can talk. It's called Skypther, the icon in the store is like a white silhouette of one of Scyther's claws on a blue background. You can add me as a friend, my username is just my name because whoever made the app doesn't believe in having fun nicknames.

Thanks for being good friends, and being there for me a lot when I was younger. I love you both a lot.

Love, Moon
“What about Necrozma versus a Nihilego?” “Necrozma. She's a grumpy old lady, she would literally just swat them back into the void.” —Nihilego: hey look some food—Necrozma: YEET, BITCHES

Higher elevation means thinner air which means they're going to have some difficulty breathing. Especially Hau, who is a Big Dude and needs a lot of oxygen to get to all of his body.

“I still think maybe you should see a therapist.” “I don't think you're wrong, but like many other things in life, it's going to have to wait for a little bit. In case you didn't notice, we're on a death trap of a mountain.” —YOU get a therapy! And YOU get a therapy! EVERYONE GETS A THERAPY WHOOOOOO

I have partially based the difficulty of scaling Mount Lanakila on the difficulty of scaling Mount Everest. The temperature of Mount Everest, at the time I'm writing this author note (this was in like January lmao), is thirty degrees (Fahrenheit) below zero. This is convenient because -30F is just about equal to -34C, which means no matter what temperature scale you know you can look at it and go “WOW THAT'S REALLY HECKING COLD”

This chapter is brought to you by Not Thinking Through Your Decisions Before You Apparate To A Frozen Wasteland.

Fun fact: I rewrote this chapter like three times. because, as I said, i've been thinking about how to write it for the entire series.

The terrible Pokémon jokes happened because I googled “terrible Pokémon jokes.”

You're welcome.

“I cannot fucking believe I'm in love with you. I demand a refund.” — I call major Tapu Bulushit

Like I said several chapters ago: I wrote slow burn literally for Gladion smiling because the first time I played Sun and he came down the elevator at me and smiled after the battle my whole heart went OUCH

Moon accidentally kissing Gladion because she was so enchanted by him grinning: a big mood

HEY SO MOON'S ONLY BEEN KISSED ONCE IN HER LIFE AND GLADION'S BEEN KISSED NEVER SO THEY HAVE NO IDEA WTF THEY ARE DOING???? SOMEBODY HELP MY BABIES

I get all like squicked out about describing the technicalities of kisses so here have all of the adjectives without any of the verbs okay BYE

Gladion being just as overwhelmed as Moon: HELP

“Holy shit, my ship is finally sailing.” — hard same

This is the second time Wicke has interrupted Gladion and Moon having A Moment. She has also interrupted Lillie and Hau having A Moment, back in ABiFP. This is a motif you will DEFINITELY be seeing again because I love writing it.
“So, um, this is nice.” —GLADION AKHDSKHAHJ

“I'm... assuming you already knew that.” —translation: “You both look debauched.”

“Watch someone challenge Tapu Bulu's authority and not die.” —unless, of course, you're Nebby

“Are you enjoying yourself?” “Thoroughly.” “Then we're both winning.” —wipes tear
I'm so proud of them

BOTH OF THEM SMILING INTO THE KISS SO THEY CAN'T DO IT PROPERLY AND THEN LAUGHING ABOUT IT FASHJKASJKSA

“I'm going to need you to repeat that, on film—” “Oh, fuck off.” —one of my favorite verbal exchanges in this chapter. I LOVE MY BOYS

Kate making purple beeswax is very much Fake Science because she would need a hive to create it in, and also she's based on a tarantula wasp not a bee and idk if they actually make wax. I just wanted it to happen lmao

Moon why are you getting self-conscious now. You have literally fallen asleep with Gladion like at least ten times at this point.

ELLIE LITERALLY EVOLVED BECAUSE OF GLADIMOON AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH

“These kisses were sleepy— warm and soft, neither of them lifting their heads from the pillow.” —why do I write things that hurt me

not @ how Moon BCC's Gladion on the email so that 1) she can give Gladion her user name for what is essentially Skype and 2) this clearly happened when she was more coherent but after she had her “I need to talk to my honorary brothers” epiphany so you can assume it's like the next morning probably

yeah anyway writing this chapter made me want to die in a good way because FINALLY but um I hope you liked it :D
Finding thy worth a limit past my praise

Chapter Summary

Mount Lanakila, Alola League

*******************************
It's all led to this moment, right now.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title is from Sonnet 82 by William Shakespeare.

if you would like to reach me on tumblr, I'm at jonioepertree.tumblr.com. (it's a BTS stan blog and I refuse to apologize. proud ARMY what up)
if you would like to join the Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord, copypasta the following link into your browser: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gladion returned to Poni Island the following morning after breakfast, Marshadow winking him into the shadows after one last soft, sweet kiss that left Moon so happy that her chest sort of hurt. Though, as Hau pointed out, that could probably also be attributed to the high elevation.

But on the bright side, the day's path led them to a cave, which offered some shelter from the icy wind and bitter chill; and after spending most of the day hiking upwards through said cave, Moon saw—at last—a dimming light at the end of the tunnel. The end of said tunnel had also been marked with a wooden archway, containing the yellow, pink, red, and violet flags of the island challenge.

“Oh my god,” said Hau, with great feeling in his voice. “Oh my god— I think we're here.”

He shuffled his backpack higher onto his shoulders, the heavy tent poles and generator jostling slightly; and then he began speed-walking up the last slope to the cave entrance; she almost had to run to keep up with his long pace.

Moon had never been so happy to see a Pokémon Center in her entire life. This one looked a little different— she realized, after a moment, that it was because snow had piled up over a drift on one side of it and there was enough on the roof that it looked white rather than red.

“Look,” she said, snickering. “It's a Premier Pokémon Center. You know, like a Premier Ball.”

“I got that, yeah.” Hau rolled his eyes but he was grinning.

Besides the Pokémon Center, there were a few other buildings that she hadn't at all expected. There was an urgent-care clinic complete with helicopter pad, which made sense as Pokémon Centers couldn't always care for truly severe injuries or illnesses. Another building, squared and bricky with a huge satellite dish on the roof, proclaimed itself to be the Alola League Broadcasting And
Media Department. And there were several smaller shops around the main path—a couple of clothing shops, another chain of the noodle restaurant down on Mount Hokulani (it was so odd to think of Mount Hokulani as being down from anywhere), a full laundromat, a sauna, and a gift shop that appeared by the window display to be themed around the Alola League.

“Hello, and welcome to the— oh, holy shit! LARA! COME HERE, IT’S TRAINER HAWKINS!”

This was bellowed by a large, balding man with one of those heavy, wearable camera rigs. He wore sensible winter clothing, except for a hat.


“We'd like to ask you a few questions!” hollered a woman, running toward them in what Moon was alarmed to see were treacherously high heels. “About your Pokémon journey, and your intentions for the League, and your previous media appearances—”

“Oh, god,” realized Moon. The woman was holding a microphone and a recorder of some kind. “Oh. Okay. I mean, not right now. I've gotta call my media person.”

They both blinked at her, clearly disappointed.

“Also,” said Hau, gently but leaving no room for argument as he stepped slightly in front of Moon—he was taller than both the man and the woman, and rather more intimidating even bundled up in snow gear and a heavy backpack. “We've been on this mountain for a month, and we are very tired and would like to settle in first. Maybe you can give Moon your contact information, and she or her, uh, media person can let you know when she's available to speak?”

“Well, uh, I guess—”

“Thanks, that's very reasonable and kind of you,” said Moon, not letting them finish before she marched toward the Pokémon Center as quickly as she could manage with her heavy backpack. Hau, laughing quietly and not bothering to hide it, followed.

She pushed the Pokémon Center doors open and sighed deeply as a blast of piping hot air smacked her in the face. “Oh my god.”

There were a few people around—employees at the main desk, café, and Mart, as well as two or three Trainers who were clearly sizing them up; but for the most part, the place was pretty empty. Moon and Hau glanced at each other, then made their way over to the desk.

“Hi, welcome to the Alola League Pokémon Center!” said the desk employee, beaming. “I bet you're glad to be here, huh?”

“You cannot believe how nice it is to be inside of an actual building,” said Hau decisively. “I live on a tropical island. I didn't sign up for this frozen wasteland.”

“I kind of did, but then again I used to live on a nice, temperate peninsula with no hope of ever getting to go to the frozen wasteland in question.” Moon leaned forward on the counter. “Can I get a single room?”

“Absolutely. I just need a name for the room.”

“Moon Hawkins.”
The employee's eyes widened, just enough for Moon to notice. “A-alright, Trainer Hawkins. Here's your room key. Please let us know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

She waited for Hau to get his key, and they plodded back through the Pokémon Center and up to their rooms— adjacent, which was nice. Moon let her backpack fall to the ground and sighed deeply before peeling off her still snow-encrusted winter gear and tossing it in a pile by the door.

Laundry and food were clearly the priorities here; it would be so, so nice to eat something that wasn't fucking *ramen*.

* * * * *

chat: **the four musketeers**

**miraculous moon:** Do you think Charizard will deliver pizza to the alola league pc

**lovely lillie:** Did you make it??!?

**miraculous moon:** Only just lmao

**miraculous moon:** I need to do all of my laundry and eat like everything in this building

**heroic hau:** not if i get there 1st

**miraculous moon:** At least let me have like

**miraculous moon:** Idk three sandwiches

**miraculous moon:** Ok maybe five

**heroic hau:** im gonna have @ least 10

**heroic hau:** or u know what would b rlly good rn

**heroic hau:** a SALAD

**miraculous moon:** OH WHAT ABOUT FRESH BERRIES THOUGH

**heroic hau:** 1 OF THOSE BELUE BERRY ACAI BOWLS

**miraculous moon:** OR LIKE A SLICE OF LEPPA BERRY PIE HOT FROM THE OVEN

**heroic hau:** GENIUS

**great gladion:** I'd like to request pictures as proof of survival.

**miraculous moon:** What if I'm a ghost and I can't take pictures anymore?
miraculous moon: Kidding, a ghost couldn't text you back

miraculous moon: Well, unless it's Rotom lmao

miraculous moon: Anyway

miraculous moon: Picture Attachment: [ProofOfSurvival.jpeg]

miraculous moon: Hey Lillie did he save it

great gladion: Why would I not save a picture of my girlfriend?

miraculous moon: sdajkdakhdak

lovely lillie: It's his background picture, and he was doing the squeaky giggle.

great gladion: You absolute brat, you're TOAST.

lovely lillie: I only have to avoid you until tomorrow, because you'll be on a plane to Kanto.

great gladion: You can run, but you can't hide.

heroic hau: i take 5 seconds 2 wrap up my hair in a towel w/ some oil because the mountain has done a # on it

heroic hau: & the chat has dissolved into chaos

heroic hau: wtf u guys

heroic hau: Picture Attachment: [IMG623.jpeg]

miraculous moon: You had two hundred LESS pictures the last time you sent one in the chat

heroic hau: u dont understand my need 2 curate an extensive meme collection

heroic hau: its v v important moon

* * * *

Moon Hawkins began a chat with Caroline Palmer.

Moon Hawkins named the chat Help Pls

Moon Hawkins changed Caroline Palmer's name to The Expert

Moon Hawkins changed their name to The Idiot
The Idiot: Hello Caroline this is Moon Hawkins

The Idiot: So I just got to the Alola League and there was a dude with a camera and a lady in very impractical heels who came running at me as soon as I stepped out yelling about interviews

The Idiot: I told them I had to talk to my media person

The Idiot: That got me into the Pokémon Center but I can see them outside from my room and I need to go to the laundromat without them bothering me

The Idiot: What do

The Expert: Hi, Moon! Did you happen to get their names?

The Idiot: I think the lady was called Lara? Didn't catch the dude's name.

The Expert: Okay, so that was Lara LaRue.

The Idiot: ...am I supposed to know who that is

The Expert: Right, you're not really into social media or the blogosphere.

The Expert: So basically she's an online tabloid shark. Was the camera guy bald and kind of husky?

The Idiot: yea

The Expert: That's Josh Vickerson. Honestly, they're kind of both pieces of work. You shouldn't give them any reason to think you will interview with them. In fact, you should give them my number instead. I'll tell them to take a hike.

The Idiot: You're a lifesaver and my laundry thanks you

The Idiot: Picture Attachment: [MyLaundryThanksYou.jpeg]

The Expert: What's holding it up??!

The Idiot: My Metagross is using Psychic lmao

The Expert: That would do it.

The Expert: Um so this is the first time you've talked to me since I gave you my number, and low-key I definitely thought you were kidding about hiring me but we should talk about some stuff so that I get paid.

The Expert: Like I admire you and everything but I don't really want to do this for free

The Expert: No offense intended!!!

The Idiot: None taken, you're absolutely right. What do you charge?

The Expert: I don't know??!! I've never done this before

The Idiot: Okay so a quick internet search says the average publicity agent makes between 3.5
million and 6.4 million Poké per year

The Idiot: So let's say an even 6 million per year

The Idiot: Seems worth it to me

The Expert: WHAT

The Expert: DO YOU LITERALLY HAVE THAT KIND OF MONEY

The Idiot: I wouldn't have offered if I couldn't pay you

The Expert: HOLY SHIT

The Expert: UM OKAY YES OBVIOUSLY I'M JUST KIND OF OVERWHELMED

The Expert: THANK YOU SO MUCH OH MY GOD

The Expert: I did think you were kidding but just in case I did set up a website for you.

The Expert: It isn't live yet, Vanya is better at html than I am so he's still working a few things out for me

The Idiot: Oh, really? How much should I pay him?

The Expert: Omg he did it as a favor to me because he also thought you were kidding but was willing to put up with my delulu ass

The Idiot: Okay but he still did IT work for my website so I should definitely pay him

The Expert: Um let me ask him

The Expert: Okay he says he's spent like maybe three hours on this total so you only owe him like twenty bucks

The Idiot: My dad is an accountant and I'm not all that great at math

The Idiot: But I know that twenty divided by three is like, six and some leftover. Six and some per hour is definitely less than minimum wage.

The Idiot: I'm giving him at least a hundred, take it or leave it

The Expert: He'll take it

The Expert: Do you literally just collect employees by talking to people??!!??!

The Idiot: ...you know, now that I think about it, I am technically a CEO because I talked to a random stranger one day

The Expert: WHAT
The Idiot: Long story, it's partially why I have so much money

The Idiot: And you should DEFINITELY link to their website on mine, that's good publicity!!!

The Idiot: But if you've ever heard of Lunarbean, I'm the CEO I guess

The Idiot: Little company based on the Poké Pelago?

The Expert: OH MY GOD

The Expert: YOU'RE THE CEO OF LUNARBEAN

The Idiot: ...yes?

The Expert: PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TRYING TO FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE FOR MONTHS BUT THE GUY WHO RUNS IT IS REALLY PRIVATE ABOUT YOU, HE JUST CALLS YOU "A GENEROUS BENEFACCTOR" EVERY TIME HE'S ASKED

The Expert: LARA LARUE TRIED TO GET AN INTERVIEW WITH HIM AND HE HAD HER CHASED OFF THE ISLAND BY HIS STOUTLAND

The Expert: LITERALLY YOU'VE KIND OF REVOLUTIONIZED THE FOOD INDUSTRY IN ALOLA AND IT'S FUCKING EVERYONE UP IN THE BEST WAY

The Idiot: I knew I liked Carnation for a reason lmao

The Expert: Any other grand epiphanies you have for me??!!? Do you have X-ray vision? Have you saved an entire orphanage from burning to the ground? Are you the secret love child of Champion Red and Champion Cynthia??

The Idiot: Red is hella gay, so no

The Idiot: Like HELLA hella gay and grossly in love with his boyfriend

The Idiot: And I actually do have this on good authority, I grew up in Pallet Town

The Expert: ...I don't even have the fucking words right now

The Expert: I'm going to need you to call me probably, so I can get some information for the website anyway but like... How is your life like this?

The Idiot: If I knew the answer to that question, I might not actually need a publicity agent.

* * * * *

chat: no longer hypothetically

mountaineer changed the chat name to <3
mountaineer changed their name to nervous nellie

mountaineer changed Valentine's name to jet-setter

jet-setter: I like the chat name change. I assume you've done username changes as well?

nervous nellie: Picture Attachment: [HowDidYouKnow.jpeg]

nervous nellie: SHUT UP ROTOM

nervous nellie: So anyway it turns out that I spent the entire trip up to Mount Lanakila like, not realizing I was going up to challenge the Pokémon League

nervous nellie: And uh

nervous nellie: Now I'm here

nervous nellie: And I just realized I don't know what the fuck I'm doing

nervous nellie: Send help

jet-setter: If I could come hug you better, I would.

nervous nellie: I accept your hypothetical internet hugs and raise you some hypothetical internet kisses

nervous nellie: :*

jet-setter: What is that supposed to be?

nervous nellie: A kissing face lmao

jet-setter: I thought kisses were X's and O's.

nervous nellie: O's are hugs actually but yes, you are correct

jet-setter: xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo

jet-setter: oooooooooo000000000000000000000000000

jet-setter: xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

nervous nellie: OMG HALP I DIED

jet-setter: I just had a mildly humorous realization.

jet-setter: Uilani signs all of her text messages with “x.”

jet-setter: I'd have to ask Molly or Rogelio if she does that for everyone, but it's an interesting coincidence because she's one of the Skulls that actually tried to ask me out back in the day

nervous nellie: Omg and she could have screwed up my last haircut out of jealousy or something
nervous nellie: I should do something nice for her

jet-setter: Maybe I should start signing my texts to you like that. x

nervous nellie: UM

jet-setter: Are you going to challenge the League tomorrow?

nervous nellie: I think I'll try, yeah

nervous nellie: I might wait until the afternoon. I have a lot of laundry

jet-setter: Are your teammates ready?

nervous nellie: Yeah. They were getting bored at the end of the mountain haha. Like oh, look, another Golbat. Puck can OHKO them with Leaf Blade at this point and that's only like 1/4x effective

jet-setter: Good. Tell them thank you from me, for helping you become such a good Trainer.

nervous nellie: Awww omg you're so sweet, I'll definitely tell them <3

jet-setter: <3

jet-setter: Are you doing anything tonight?

nervous nellie: I'll probably start my laundry

jet-setter: I'm also doing laundry at the moment. Do you want to video-call while we're doing that?

nervous nellie: I would love that.

* * * * *

“Good luck,” said Hau, with a grin. “I'll be right behind you.”

“Going to try and throne-snatch me like Red, huh?” teased Moon.

“I mean, given our whole divinely-mandated assignments, I'm not going to be at all disappointed if I lose.”

“Okay, fair.”

“But it's worth a shot. You'd be a pretty good kahuna... heh, maybe I'd be a good Champion.”

“Trust me,” said Moon dryly, “if I had to pick I almost think I'd take the stress of being a kahuna over the stress of being the Champion. Red almost never takes off the baseball cap in public, but he's got some gray hairs in there and he's only twenty-four.”

She held out her arms, and Hau hugged her back. “Go show Alola what you're made of,” he whispered, eyes bright with joy. “My badass best friend.”
“Do not make me fucking cry, Hau Akiona. I will kick your ass.”

“Been there, done that.” He beamed at her. “Have fun!”

“I plan to.”

Moon had on her parka because it was still incredibly cold on Mount Lanakila, but had foregone the snow pants since she wouldn't be outside for very long. She adjusted her red hat and scarf, pulling the hood of her parka over them, and pulled on her gloves. With one last wave to Hau, she stepped out into the cold.

She hadn't gotten a good look at the League building in person since arriving at the peak, but a few of the cold nights on the mountain had been spent with Hau, watching broadcasts of the few Trainers who had arrived to challenge the Elite Four since the League had opened. There had been about twenty of them; only three had made it past the Elite Four to challenge stand-in Champion Maleko Kukui, and all had lost.

It occurred to her that she should probably warn some of the people she knew that she was going to be on television shortly. Her parents and Lillie were the obvious first choices; but then she opened Skypther and sent a quick message to Red and Blue, as well as Gladion since he had gotten on a plane a couple of hours ago. She wasn't sure if he had wi-fi on the plane or not—it seemed likely, since it was an Aether plane.

Wicke was another person to tell, and Moon added an addendum to ask if she would let as many people know as she thought would be interested in seeing the battles live. That reminded her of Caroline, to whom she also sent a message.

Her website had gone live that morning, and she'd looked at it over breakfast. It was really quite nice—a simple black-and-white layout, with neat lines and a plain font. Caroline had asked her a bunch of questions, similar to the ones that Hapu had answered when they filmed her kahuna ceremony; and those questions and answers were posted on an “About” page of the website. There was a link to the Lunarbean website that Arby had put up; and on a note of inspiration she had also asked Caroline to put up links for the websites of the Aether House and the Pokémon Nursery with invitations for site visitors to donate money if they were so inclined.

But the main focal point of the website was a picture of Moon—a selfie she'd taken an hour or two after she and Hau had finished Hapu's Grand Trial, on the roof of Hapu's house. Her teammates were all at least partially visible. Kate was still a Poipole, clinging to a clearly uncomfortable Puck with an adoring expression; Macbeth sat behind Moon in that squatting crouch she had, while Ben was curled in a ball on Moon's lap. Hero had also folded its legs up as far as it was able, eyeing the camera (Rotom) with wary amusement; and Ariel was perched on top of Hero though her attention was focused on something past the camera. Probably Null, as Gladion and his teammates had been hanging out on the other side of the roof. The picture was funny—Kate and Puck mostly, but also Ben glaring at the camera, and Ariel not paying attention. It was also the only part of the website that was in full color.

She had stopped walking, focused on sending messages; the final set of messages were to Molly and Rogelio, who would no doubt tell the rest of the Skulls; that included Plumeria and Guzma.

By the time she was finished she was starting to get replies along the lines of Good luck! and We'll be watching!, coming not just from the people she'd messaged but others she hadn't expected. Hapu offered a simple, Congratulations on your achievements, and battle well. Hala, Kai, and Leilani also sent messages, accompanied by a brief video of Mel and Wiki screaming “GOOD LUCK, MOON” at the camera. Molly and Rogelio's replies induced a near-constant stream of messages,
most of them unintelligible capslocked text-screaming.

“Okay, wow,” she decided, laughing softly. “Rotom, you'd better put everyone on mute so I can get
this done. Except— um, my parents, and Gladion. Oh, and Caroline and Wicke.” She mentally
apologized to Hau and Lillie, but they would understand.

“Done and done.”

“Thanks, pal.” She tucked Rotom back into her belt-pouch and looked up at the League building.

There was a lot of blue glass and dark metal, in a modern design that contrasted nicely with the
roughness of the blizzard terrain. For a moment she just stared at the building, then took a deep
breath before reaching for the Pokéballs at her belt.

It was cold, and Puck glared at her before shuffling close for warmth. Ariel and Kate both made
loud, excited noises as Hero creaked with amusement and Macbeth held a sulky Ben in her arms.

“All right, guys,” she said, looking at each of them. “This is it. Are you all ready?”

Six nods.

“Then let's go.”

* * * * *

“We come to you live, from the Alolan League National Broadcast. It is twelve thirty-seven pm, on
the twenty-seventh of February. A new challenger has entered the League Building and registered
to take on the challenge of the Elite Four. We'll rejoin you after the following commercials.”

* * * * *

The filming began more or less from the moment Moon stepped into the building. The cameras
here were much more professional than the one held by Josh what's-his-name, operated by a series
of Rotom-AI'ed robots rather than people. A single interviewer came over to ask her name after
she'd finished and turned in the challenge paperwork, and to ask if there was anything they
shouldn't say.

“Um, you probably want to talk to my publicity agent,” answered Moon. She'd prepared a couple
of index cards for this exact scenario, on Caroline's advice, she dug in her pocket and pulled one
out, handing it to the interviewer. “You can call or text her at this number, or just email. She's more
on top of things than I am.”

“Ah, thank you,” said the interviewer earnestly. “You're much more organized than most Trainers
are when they come to challenge the League.”

“Well,” said Moon, as casually as she could manage, “I've learned from people who are a lot more
experienced with this kind of thing than I am.”
“RED! RED GET YOUR ASS OUT OF BED! OUR ONLY DAUGHTER IS FUCKING CHALLENGING THE ALOLA LEAGUE!”

“Blue, it's seven in the goddamn morning. Could you call it up on the TV in our room and maybe fucking chill for a minute.”

“IF WE WATCH IT IN BED YOU’RE GOING TO FALL BACK ASLEEP.”

“We both have work today.”

“I HAVE TAKEN THE LIBERTY OF CALLING IN SICK ON YOUR BEHALF—”

“Oh my god, fine, I'm coming, you can stop shouting. Can you at least make some popcorn?”

There were, of course, four chambers to choose from. Moon studied each of them, reading the symbols emblazoned above each door. Rather than the yellow, pink, red, and purple she had come to associate with the island challenge, the symbols and decor for each door were gray, russet, lavender, and mint green.

She found herself walking to the russet door, without thinking about it. It seemed right.

Olivia waited, with tired eyes and a knowing smile. Moon smiled at her in return.

“How are you?”

“I'm okay,” said Olivia quietly. Her eyes flicked briefly upward; Moon took this as a sign of her unwillingness to discuss personal issues on national television. “Are you ready for our battle?”

“I am.”

“Then let us begin.”

chat: gay

mololly: holy shit are u guys FUCKIN SEEIN THIS

not dad: yes molly
**not dad**: we are literally in the same room

**mololly**: not YOU, im talking to the terrible triplets

**dj**: I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE HAS A GRASS-TYPE OUT AGAINST A BUG-TYPE??!!

**moonie**: she literally has a type advantage dumbass

**dj**: SURE BUT IT'S NEGATED BY THE TYPE WEAKNESS

**dj**: OMG

**diamond**: and yet she still managed to one-shot an armaldo

**diamond**: amazing

**dj**: I CANNOT BELIEVE WHAT IM SEEING RN??!!

**dj**: WHAT THE FRICKLE FRACKLE FUCKLE IS HAPPENING ON THIS DAY

**not dad**: well i wouldn't claim to be an expert

**not dad**: but it looks like she's wrecking kahuna olivia's shit

**moonie**: okay i was kind of expecting the one-shots for lycanroc and gigalith b/c of the type advantage but i did not expect it for probopass

**mololly**: are u blind moonie

**mololly**: that wasn't a one-shot

**moonie**: it was circumvented by sturdy so imo it literally counts as a one-shot even if it takes two turns

**not dad**: oh wow i didn't know kahuna olivia had a minor?

**dj**: WOW

**dj**: DAMN

**dj**: ANOTHER TYPE ADVANTAGE NEGATED BY A FUCKIN ONE-SHOT

**diamond**: holy shit she just beat olivia's entire team

**diamond**: with JUST a decidueye

**not dad**: in this household we stan TALENT

**mololly**: all in favor of Future Champion Moon Fucking Hawkins

**mololly**: say a motherfuckin AYY LMAO

**dj**: AYY LMAO
“Congratulations,” said Olivia, with a warm smile. “One down, three to go.”

“Four,” corrected Moon, thinking of Professor Kukui.

“Do you think you can beat him?”

It wasn't a mean question, simply a curious one. Olivia didn't have a mean bone in her body. “Yes,” said Moon, after a few moments. “Not because I think he'll be an easy opponent. I've watched him battle. I think I'll beat him because I've worked really, really hard for this.”

Olivia smiled. “It's not quite live, you know. There's a seven-second delay for censorship purposes.”

“Good to know, thanks.” Moon smiled back. “Can you go home and take the rest of the day off? You deserve it.”

“Sadly, I have to stay until five pm. But I appreciate you for thinking of me.”

“Take a nap, then,” suggested Moon. “Can you turn the cameras off in your individual chambers? Red can do that in Kanto.”

“I'll be all right, Moon.” Olivia waved her off. “I've got caffeine, and a pillow if I really do need to take a nap. Go on and finish your challenge.”

Kahili's chamber was similar in layout to Olivia's, with the exception of the mint light-wings that popped out as battlefield barriers, versus the oragney-brown stone-shaped ones. It was also noticeably colder in this room than it was in Olivia's room.

“Hi,” said Moon, to Kahili.

The mint-haired woman eyed her suspiciously. “You look familiar, challenger Hawkins.”

“I definitely ran into you just after I found the pedestal with the Flyinium Z-Crystal and you
showed me the dance for it. That was in like, July.”

“Ah, yes. I remember now.” Kahili’s gaze went a little friendlier. “You've grown since then.”

“Yes... yeah. I really have.”

* * * * *

**chat:** Kahuna Group Chat

**Hala Akiona:** Is it wrong of me to state that I am bursting with pride right now?

**Hapu Kahonua:** It seems quite natural to me.

**Olivia Wala'e:** It's not wrong at all.

**Hala Akiona:** It means even more coming from you, whom my great-niece has already defeated.

**Hapu Kahonua:** Are you feeling well, Kahuna Olivia?

**Olivia Wala'e:** I'm all right, thank you for asking. I barely had the opportunity to get a hit in, so my Pokémon are much worse for wear than I am. There's Max Revives under the chair, so they'll be all right too.

**Ishmael Nanu:** The girl's got spirit, I'll give you that.

**Ishmael Nanu:** The camera on Kahili's face is something else.

**Hapu Kahonua:** I do not think Ms. Hano expected her entire team to be laid out flat by an adolescent Jolteon.

**Hala Akiona:** I did try telling her not to underestimate Moon, but she can be quite prideful.

**Ishmael Nanu:** Serve her right, frankly.

**Olivia Wala'e:** Nanu, don't be mean.

**Ishmael Nanu:** No offense, kiddo, but have you met me?

**Hapu Kahonua:** Kahuna Olivia, everyone but you is in agreement that whether or not Kahili were to accept your request for assistance with your duties as kahuna and Elite Four, she ought to have been a great deal politer about it.

**Hala Akiona:** She will challenge Moon a great deal, but that is to be expected. It is good for someone with such power as a realm's champion to have people that challenge them.

**Ishmael Nanu:** Still a frigid bitch.

**Olivia Wala'e:** NANU.
Kahili was panting by the time the battle ended. She recalled her fainted Toucannon before bending down for a few moments, resting her hands on her knees and staring at the ground.

“Um— are you okay?” said Moon cautiously. She summoned Ben back to his Pokéball, taking a few steps closer.

Kahili held up one hand, and Moon stopped. The woman took a few more moments, then straightened up, regarding Moon with a cool expression. “Interesting,” she said, after a few moments of silent observation. “You are the first challenger to have taken out my team without any casualties on your end.”

“That's all Ben.” Moon patted his Pokéball proudly. “I have a really good type advantage, and honestly Rain Dance and Thunder is kind of OP.”

“I'm going to have to get my hands on a Gliscor,” murmured Kahili, just loud enough for the cameras to hear. “Then we'll see who's OP.” She cleared her throat. “Congratulations, Trainer Hawkins. You can proceed to the next chamber.”

“Are you sure you're—”

“I'm fine.” Kahili paused, the sharpness in her tone fading to neutrality once more. “You did well, Trainer Hawkins.”

Moon took that for the dismissal it was, though she wasn't certain why Kahili didn't like her.

Molayne waited, an obnoxious grin on his face. “Heya, Moon,” he said companionably. “Ready to get wiped out?”

“You wish, old man.”

“Old man? Excuse you, I'm only thirty-four.” He laughed, loud and cheerful. “Bring it on, infant.”

“Oh, now them's fighting words.”

At the other end of the universe, four people, a Naganadel, and a cluster of Poipole were huddled over a small screen, staring with wide eyes. When the girl on the screen sent out her own
Naganadel, there were a series of gasping squeaks from the Pokémon who watched the battle.

“Yes, Mischa,” said one of the people absently, reaching up to run a soothing hand over the Naganadel's flank. “That is the Poipole you and I gave her. She has named her Katharina—Kate, for short. From what I understand, she is very happy.”

Mischa, the Naganadel, purred quietly.

“Yes,” agreed Dulse.

“What did she say?” asked Zossie, not taking her eyes away from the screen.

“She said that she admires Moon’s courage. Kate has a great disadvantage against this trainer’s teammates.”

“But Moon was clever enough to teach her friend a Fire-type move,” pointed out Phyco, also absorbed in the battle. “Her Naganadel could not last against the opposing Metagross’s Psychic-type moves, but the type coverage was wise.”

Soliera remained silent, but her smile was proud.

* * * * *

“Very nice,” said Molayne approvingly, recalling his Bisharp. Moon blinked—this battle had been more difficult, as she had no direct type counters for Steel in her party.

“Wow,” she said, blinking. “Not going to lie, I thought I might actually lose to you for a second in the middle there.”

He grinned. “When I knocked out your large purple friend?”

“How did you know?”

“I could see it in your face. You're an easy read, Moon Hawkins.” But Molayne's amusement softened into something more solemn. More proud. “But you earned that win. Heal up and go see Ace, yeah?”

She recognized his tone as the same one he used when he praised Sophocles on a job well done. It felt, in an odd way, as though she had been adopted by him in the same fashion; and that touched her more than she could say with words.

“Thank you,” she said finally, and turned to leave his chamber.

* * * * *

“Hello, Moon.”

Acerola's smile was luminous. Moon stared at her for a few minutes, surprised; it seemed as
though the other girl had grown a few inches. She still wore her patchy dress, still stood barefoot on the smooth stone floor; but her back was straighter, and her eyes were brighter.

“‘You're happy here,’” concluded Moon.

The smile crinkled at the eyes, the way Lillie's did. “Very happy.”

“Good. I'm glad.”

“‘I wish the timing were a little better,’” added Acerola, joy dimming slightly. “‘I haven't been able to help Kahuna Nanu and Kahuna Olivia as much as I would have liked. I don't mind helping, it was just—a lot. You know.’”

“‘Yes,’” Moon assured her. “‘I do know. And you're thirteen, remember. It's okay to be overwhelmed. You did the right thing for yourself.’”

“I know. Still, it's hard to watch friends struggle.” Something mischievous glittered in the younger girl's eyes. “‘Not for so much longer though, eh?’”

Moon smiled back. “‘Not for much longer,’” she promised.

* * * * *

chat: <3

jet-setter: Rotom don't let her have these notifications right now. She's busy.

Rotom joined the chat.

Rotom: Done.

Rotom left the chat.

jet-setter: So you won't see this until you're done with the battle.

jet-setter: I'm watching from the plane, I've got wi-fi.

jet-setter: I really should be sleeping, because of the whole nineteen-hour time difference and whatnot.

jet-setter: But, you know, I'm not.
jet-setter: I couldn't really sleep, knowing you're taking on the last great challenge of your journey.

jet-setter: I can't believe you wiped out Olivia and Kahili with a Pokémon apiece.

jet-setter: Kahili especially. I've watched most of the other challenges and she's tough as hell.

jet-setter: Holy shit you just took out Ace's Mimikyu in two hits.

jet-setter: Those things are tanky as fuck, my god.

jet-setter: You're incredible.

jet-setter: And Kate as a Naganadel is something else. I haven't had the privilege of seeing her in action before today, but damn.

jet-setter: There goes Froslass.


jet-setter: I already miss you.

jet-setter: Did you know you bite your lower lip when you're embarrassed or when you're concentrating?

jet-setter: It is extremely fucking distracting.

jet-setter: Wait you

jet-setter: Moon

jet-setter: MOON

jet-setter: YOU JUST TOOK OUT HER OTHER THREE TEAMMATES WITH PUCK ALONE

jet-setter: That was so goddamn fast

jet-setter: God you're hot.

jet-setter: Okay that was a little strong. True, but strong.

jet-setter: Fuck.

jet-setter: I can't wait to see you become the Champion.

jet-setter: I love you.

Acerola laughed, recalling her last Pokémon. “Nicely done,” she said warmly. “When you head out, the way upstairs will be open to you.”
“You're a fantastic Trainer,” Moon said earnestly. “Seriously, you're only thirteen and already on the level of everyone here. I wish I'd been as cool as you when I was thirteen.”

Her smile crinkled again. “Thank you, Moon.”

* * * * *

To: [encrypted]

From: md_faba@aether.org

Re: It's time

Everyone's distracted with the brat. She won't win, nobody has yet. I've managed to get something that will let you and your allies in. I've also managed to procure and install a key to the elevator shaft in the main mansion so you may isolate yourself in the mansion lab and thereby control the facility. It was quite the delicate operation. I assume I will be compensated for the risks I took to obtain it.

I apologize for the spacing of the letters in this email. It is a necessary evil to avoid triggering the filter in my outbound messages that will alert that bitch Wicke if I type certain words or phrases. I hope it is still readable.

Contact me further to arrange specifics and coordinates.

—Marcus D. Faba, Ph.D

* * * * *

Chapter End Notes

I was honestly not looking forward to writing this chapter, because I actually kind of... don't... like... writing... Pokémon... battles... BUT I had the brilliant idea of showing Moon's battles from the POV of other people, through various forms of technology and communication. I love cheating my own system.
“Look, it's a Premier Pokémon Center. You know, like a Premier Ball.” — ok but this is, in-universe, premier dad-joke material

OH BOY PEOPLE ALREADY KNOW WHO MOON IS

Ramen is tasty. I would not like to eat ramen for a month straight while hiking Mount Everest. This post is brought to you by the broke college-student gang.

Moon and Hau going off about fresh fruit and vegetables is a Whole Damn Quarantine Mood

“i take 5 seconds 2 wrap up my hair in a towel w/ some oil because the mountains done a # on it” — we stan Good Hair Care in this house

HEY REMEMBER CAROLINE AND VANYA LMAO

Now that Moon is in the process of becoming a Big McFuckin Deal, she's going to have to deal with people who are looking to take advantage of the fact that Moon is a Big McFuckin Deal

So 6 million yen is about $56,000 USD. Moon basically just put Caroline through college

Caroline also serves as a “normal meter” for Moon here. Moon's been getting major Protagonist Privileges and Caroline is here to remind her that Ordinary People Do Not Have Protagonist Privileges

GLADION WITH THE X'S AND THE O'S MAKES MY WHOLE GODDAMN HEART GO FLIPPITY FLOP IN MY CHEST THANKS BYE

Red is definitely, totally a little bit grey on the top underneath the hat and he's self-conscious about it which is why he never takes it off in public. Blue thinks he's being vain but it's one of those things they've agreed not to argue about anymore.

I'm not @ how Blue refers to Moon as “our only daughter” lmao

I love my Team Skull babies <3

“it was circumvented by sturdy so imo it literally counts as a one-shot even if it takes two turns” — I count any hit that would be a one-shot if not negated by Sturdy as an actual one-shot, so tl;dr Moon one-shotted all six of Olivia's teammates in technically seven hits

E4 Teams of six because they only have five teammates each in canon:
- Olivia: Armaldo, Lycanroc (Midnight), Gigalith, Probopass, Cradily, Minior
- Kahili: Braviary, Hawlucha, Oricorio (Baile), Mandibuzz, Toucannon, Scarmory
- Molayne: Klefki, Magezone, Metagross, Alolan Dugtrio, Alolan Sandslash, Bisharp
- Acerola: Mimikyu, Banette, Froslass, Palossand, Dhelmise, Drifblim

Obviously, the kahunas have a group chat lmao. Equally obviously, most of their group chat consists of them saying “Nanu” in various tones, relating to whatever he's said or done to provoke them.

Aww Kahili doesn't like Moon :(((

I can't @ the U-Megs watching Moon's battle from the other end of McFuckin Ultra Space... liek dis if u cri evertiem

yes Molayne has emotionally adopted Moon. no he will not be taking questions at this time. thank you for your consideration.

“I know. Still, it's hard to watch friends struggle. Not for so much longer though, eh?”
“Not for much longer.” — yes, Acerola is referring to it being Moon's job to find replacements for most of the people who need replacing

I have nothing to say about Gladion texting Moon. absolutely NOTHING goodbye

now what the fuck could Faba be up to...
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured

Chapter Summary

Alola League
************
Here, in the heavens of Alola, under the eyes of the gods— you have been tried by all of the elements. You have wandered the land, harming neither beast nor flower. You have lost yourself and found yourself again. You have suffered for friends and enemies alike, and you have suffered for the realm. You have been weighed upon the scales of eternity, and have not been found wanting.

Accept what is owed you, Moon Hawkins. And know this: the journey was only the beginning.

Chapter Notes

My tumblr: jooniepertree.tumblr.com (BTS stan blog. THEY'RE COMING BACK IN NINE DAYS MOM I LOVE THEM)
Conquer The Night Fan Server Discord: https://discord.gg/BXNrwKM

And here we are.

Are you ready?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Moon emerged from Acerola’s chamber and watched as a line of lavender light joined the beams of grey, russet, and mint to meet in the center of the floor. The lights pooled into white around a circular platform. The most interesting thing about the platform was that it contained a design that also lit up in white light: a circle, with a partially-filled in crescent on one half and slender lines protruding from the other half: a moon and a sun.

She walked slowly toward the design, taking Rotom out of her pocket and peeking at the notifications. There were... a lot.

“You have thirty-eight emails, approximately four hundred and seven messages on Skypther, and one thousand, five hundred and twenty-two text messages, bzzt,” Rotom promptly summarized.

“Oh, god.” Moon sighed, then remembered she was on national television and pasted a smile onto her face. “Well, I guess that's to be expected. Most of the texts are from Molly and Rogelio, right?”

“Correct, bzzt.”

“Nice.”

She tucked Rotom away once more and took off her backpack, digging into it for Hyper Potions,
Revives, and Max Elixirs. Once her teammates were back to perfect health she put everything away and swung her backpack on again.

“Here goes nothing,” she said out loud, and stepped on the half-moon-half-sun floor.

A quiet electronic whirr sounded, and after about five seconds the platform began to rise. Moon squeaked, pressing her hands to her face and closing her eyes.

“This is fine, I'm fine,” she mumbled—not quite loud enough for the cameras or mics to hear. She focused on simply breathing, not looking at the League as it dropped below her; and soon enough the platform came to a halt.

She looked up, and fell in love.

The Champion's chamber wasn't open to the sky, but rather roofed with thick, perfectly clear glass. There were a few sprays of snow scattered over the roof, but it appeared as though either the glass or the metal framing between each large pane had been made to produce heat. Snow near the edges melted quickly, while sprays at the center of the panes remained pristine. Moon could see the wind flying above them, at the highest place in Alola.

The chamber itself was mostly empty. The floor was tiled in a hexagonal pattern, currently a light blue color; it chimed softly with the sounds of footsteps as Professor Kukui emerged from behind the empty throne.

Neither of them spoke immediately. Professor Kukui's smile was far too soft, far too proud; if he kept that up she was definitely going to cry.

“Hello, Moon Hawkins,” he said, after a few moments. “It's been a journey, yeah?”

Moon smiled. “Yeah,” she agreed.

He indicated the chamber. “What do you think?”

“I think that I like my future workspace.”

That earned her a laugh. “You'll have to earn it. Are you ready to face me?”

She closed her eyes, reflecting back on everything she had done to get to this point; and as she did, she heard a soft voice, one she recognized.

Here, in the heavens of Alola, under the eyes of the gods—you have been tried by all of the elements, rumbled Solgaleo.

You have wandered the land, harming neither beast nor flower. You have lost yourself and found yourself again, chirped Nebby.

You have suffered for friends and enemies alike, and you have suffered for the realm, stated Necrozma.

You have been weighed upon the scales of eternity, and have not been found wanting, murmured Marshadow.

And then they spoke in unison: Accept what is owed you, Moon Hawkins. And know this: the journey was only the beginning.

Moon opened her eyes, smiling as the tears fell, and meeting her teacher's warm gaze.
They faced one another. The robot cameras whirred and clicked—some taking still photos, most filming at various angles for the live broadcast. Professor Kukui's smile was soft and kind, but Moon had watched some of the other challenge broadcasts with Hau. She knew that he would show her no mercy.

“One final hurrah for your island challenge,” he said, grinning. “Let's have a battle worthy of this moment, yeah!”

“Bring it on.”

Professor Kukui, instead of moving immediately, glanced up at the wall; all of a sudden a bright orchestral theme swelled around them, loud enough to hear but not so loud that it would have any effect on the battle.

“Oh, nice,” said Moon appreciatively, reaching for Macbeth's ball. “If I win, do I get to pick the soundtrack?”

“Within reason.” The Professor grinned. “Kahili's in charge of public relations for the League. She gets veto power on music choices.”

“Well darn, there goes my plan to only play Cottonee Joe for every battle,” joked Moon.

“Remind me to thank Kahili, yeah.”

They both laughed, and Professor Kukui reached for his belt as well. Almost in unison, they sent out their first teammates.

Moon winced when she realized she'd sent Macbeth out against a Lycanroc. The lean wolf regarded her Golisopod with a lopsided grin, waiting for an order from its trainer; but Moon wasn't waiting to find out what that would be.

“Macbeth, use First Impression!” she shouted.

“Duke, take her down with Accelerock!”

Macbeth, despite her bulk, was faster. She slammed into the wolf, causing him to stagger; he skidded back a few steps and retaliated almost at once, sharp rocks scoring along the Golisopod's carapace. It wasn't strong enough to knock her out, but she rumbled in alarm and promptly retreated to her ball, by way of Emergency Exit. Moon patted Macbeth's ball and sent Puck out instead.

Professor Kukui's grin was almost as wolfish as Lycanroc's. “Duke, use Crunch!”

“Puck, hit him with Leaf Blade!”

Puck, bless his heart, neatly dodged what would have been a super-effective Crunch and snapped back with Leaf Blade. Even if Lycanroc hadn't already taken damage, Moon was pretty sure this would have knocked him out in one hit. Lycanroc fainted, and the Professor recalled him and sent out, instead, a lovely Alolan Ninetales.
It wasn't a great matchup, but Moon was more or less prepared for this. “Puck, use Smack Down!”

“Isobel, Ice Beam!”

The Ninetales was faster than Moon expected her to be, and Puck wasn't able to dodge in time. The move didn't knock him out, but he staggered hard, only barely managing to pull off his own move afterward. It was super-effective, but her Decidueye's discomposure had weakened his attack.

Moon chewed on her lip and considered her options; she didn't have much time. Puck was shaking off the effects of the move, eyes narrowed. She could recall him and send out Hero, who would have absolutely no issues taking out the fox...

“Puck, another Smack Down!”

“Izzy, another Ice Beam!”

Puck lunged first, this time, and the Ninetales fainted before getting a hit in.

...or she could rely on her long-time friend's sheer spite to help win the battle.

Professor Kukui nodded approvingly, recalling his Ninetales; but her next opponent was a Braviary and Moon knew there was no way Puck was going to fend off a Flying-type attack in his present state. She hastily recalled him and sent out Ben, who snarled menacingly.

“Nice to see you, too,” said Professor Kukui, mouth twisting into a cheerful smirk. “Starstrike, use Crush Claw!”

“Ben, Rain Dance!”

She was almost certain that Professor Kukui didn't have any Water-type teammates. If she remembered correctly, his remaining teammates were Magnezone, Snorlax, and Incineroar. If Magnezone had Thunder, that could spell trouble for a future teammate; but she was willing to take the risk. Braviary was one of the Professor's least-defeated Pokémon. Trainers focused on the Incineroar, who had emerged as the cheerful ace; and on the tanky Snorlax. They always seemed to forget how hard Braviary could hit.

Ben took the Crush Claw, though not without wincing; and the rain fell from the ceiling, small clouds swirling around the glass. Moon was pretty sure that the effect was made with fog machines rather than actual cloud formations. An outdoors Rain Dance could change the actual weather if it were strong enough but there was a thick layer of glass between them and the sky. Regardless, the rain began to fall.

“You know that the production team hates weather conditions, yeah?” said Kukui, grinning.

“Honestly,” pointed out Moon, with a raised eyebrow, “that isn't really my problem. It's not an illegal move.”

“No, but you want to be nice to the production team. They can make or break you, yeah.”

“Fair enough. We'll work something out afterward.”

“You're pretty confident you're going to win.”

Moon met his gaze. “Don't I have reason to be?”

He studied her for a few moments longer, then nodded. “Yeah. You do, yeah. Starstrike, another
Crush Claw!"

“Ben, use Thunder!”

Braviary was fast, but her Jolteon was faster; and Thunder was one hundred percent accurate with added STAB anyway. It was a one-hit knockout.

“Good move,” said Professor Kukui, though his tone was a little guarded. Moon looked at him, and realized that he probably hated to lose as much as she did. And she'd only lost once in her career— perhaps twice, if one counted the clusterfuck of Nihilego back in Ultra Space. Being rescued by a Mythical Pokémon probably didn't count as a victory.

Professor Kukui sent out his Magnezone. Moon was pretty sure that the Magnezone had Sturdy instead of Magnet Pull so she recalled Ben— neither Thunder nor Thunderbolt would do much, and Shadow Ball even less— and sent out Hero in his stead.

“Interesting,” said Professor Kukui. There was a slight frown steadily creasing his eyebrows, but he cleared his throat and resumed his usual smile. “Ion, use Thunder Wave!”

“Hero, use Bulldoze!”

Metagross tended to be fairly quick, despite their bulk; Hero was no exception and she hit the Magnezone hard— hard enough that Moon spotted a slight, glowing sheen that crept briefly over their opponent. Sturdy had activated, which meant it would have been a one-hit knockout.

Magnezone showed no other signs of weakness, however, and Thunder Wave took effect. Hero, being a sentient supercomputer, was particularly susceptible to paralysis; her limbs twitched and jerked a little more than Moon was comfortable with so she recalled her friend and sent out Ariel instead.

Professor Kukui's expression was disbelieving, but Ariel was faster than Magnezone and it only took a simple Brick Break to knock out the opponent. Ariel chirped proudly, and the professor nodded before sending out Snorlax.

“Maxima, use Body Slam!”

“Ariel, another Brick Break!”

Ariel was fast and Brick Break was super-effective; but Body Slam had STAB, and Snorlax's weight lent the attack further power. Unfortunately for Ariel the attack proved paralytic, and sparks crawled over her body as she squawked in discomfort. Her Toucannon was fairly tanky, so Moon was pretty sure that she could take another hit from the Snorlax if she had to; the issue would not be speed but the ability to hit at all. If not, she would either have to recall her bird or let her faint. There were advantages to letting Ariel faint— her teammate wouldn't like it, none of them ever did; but it meant she could send in Macbeth fresh to use First Impression again, which could probably knock out the Snorlax.

She made her decision. “Ariel, shake it off and use Beak Blast!”

Ariel squawked determinedly, her beak heating up.

“Maxima, another Body Slam!”

Body Slam hit first, but that was exactly what Moon wanted to happen. The Snorlax hit Ariel, and her friend managed to take the hit— just barely. However, the heat from Ariel's preparation for
Beak Blast gave Snorlax a burn. Ariel, though struggling to remain in the air with her paralysis, opened her mouth and shot a red-hot Beak Blast at Snorlax. The combination of the move and the burn was a good one. It didn't knock out the Snorlax—they were too tanky for that—but it was what Moon had hoped would happen.

“Hmm,” said Professor Kukui.

He didn't move to recall Snorlax, which meant he still had something up his sleeve. Moon couldn't remember what other moves she'd seen his Snorlax use in the battle streams she and Hau had watched, huddled together at night on the frozen mountain.

She recalled Ariel, and sent out Puck. That produced another frown from the Professor—Body Slam wouldn't work on a Ghost-type—but then his face relaxed into another grin. “Maxima, use Crunch!”

*Oh, shit.* “Puck, Low Sweep!”

It was fortunate for Moon that Snorlax was naturally slow; but it was unfortunate that they were so incredibly tanky. Even a super-effective move wasn't enough to knock out Snorlax. It hit, but then Crunch knocked out Puck. Moon realized, with some surprise, that it was the first actual knock-out the Professor had gotten on her.

She had a little more time to think, because Snorlax couldn't attack an opponent who wasn't out. She was fairly certain that one more hit, of just about any type beside Ghost, would knock out the Snorlax at this point. Puck was out and Hero and Ariel were both incapacitated; that left Ben, Macbeth, and Kate. She hadn't used Kate yet—and it occurred to her, as she sent out her last fresh teammate, that most of Alola would have no idea what the fuck Kate even was. That was oddly satisfying; and it reminded her of Gladion, using Null in his Battle Royal competitions as an “Absol in a helmet.” His story had never stood up to close inspection, and though Moon had no need to lie about Kate she had no doubt that she would be answering questions about her in whatever interviews Caroline had lined up for her. If she won, there would be an official League interview; but Caroline had mentioned one for the celebrity gossip webzine she liked, as well as some more formal publications.

Professor Kukui's eyes lit up when Kate appeared; the competition vanished to be replaced by academic excitement. “Oh, is that Naganadel? Private Soliera let me observe her Poipole and gather data on it for the Pokédex, yeah, but I wasn't able to persuade Private Dulse to get me any information on Naganadel.”

“Well, he didn't bring her to Terra, and I don't think the Ultra Megalopolitan government is going to be terribly fond of Terrans just popping in for a quick scientific visit.”

“Why not?”

“Zossie said they're racists.”

He snorted with laughter. “I think xenophobic might be a better word to use there, yeah. We're technically a different species.”

“I thought they were just slightly blue humans.”

“Nah, definitely a different species. Dulse was kind enough to give me some basic Ultra Megalopolitan biology lessons, even though he wouldn't tell me about Naganadel, yeah.”

“I think he's very protective of them,” explained Moon, thinking of how the alien had locked his
Naganadel up before they'd returned to Terra. “I think Necrozma might have tried preying on Naganadel and Poipole sometimes, when she couldn't find anything else to eat.”

The Professor winced. “That'd do it, yeah.” He cleared his throat, shifting; Moon turned her own attention back to Kate, who had been spinning in place while cooing softly to herself. Twelve-foot demonic tarantula wasp or not, there was something inexplicably adorable about how babyish her largest teammate was inclined to behave.

“Kate, use Dragon Pulse!”

“Maxima, Heavy Slam!”

Kate was faster, and the Snorlax finally fainted. Moon grinned as Professor Kukui audibly sighed before pulling out his last Pokéball.

She'd seen Incineroar before, but it seemed a lot taller in person. Still smaller than Kate, but most Pokémon were. Professor Kukui took a deep breath, face growing serious.

“Blazer, use Outrage!”

That was a Dragon-type move, shit shit *shit*. “Kate, hit him with another Dragon Pulse!”

Kate was quicker, and Dragon Pulse was always a good choice; but Outrage was a powerful move *and* supereffective. The Naganadel was not doing well. Another Dragon Pulse probably wouldn't be enough to knock Incineroar out. Moon was running out of options.

“Kate, one more Dragon Pulse! You can do it!”

Professor Kukui didn't have to say anything— technically couldn't, because Outrage worked over two or three turns and his Incineroar was locked into the move. Dragon Pulse was successful, but Kate fainted when the second Outrage hit.

She went for Ben, as he was in better shape than any of her remaining non-fainted teammates; but Professor Kukui was already performing the steps to a Z-Dance she'd only seen used a few times: Black Hole Eclipse. Nanu had used it when she'd fought him, and she'd watched Kukui use it before so she knew what was coming.

“Ben, use Thunderbolt!”

“Blazer, Malicious Moonsault!”

It was the special Incinium Z move, like Puck's Sinister Arrow Raid or Poppy's Oceanic Operetta. The lights around the battlefield dimmed as Incineroar bounded forward. Ben tried to dodge, but Incineroar leaped high above the square, arms splayed and legs straight, to land directly on her Jolteon with both physical and magical weight. He was knocked out instantly.

The lights brightened once more. Moon nodded, recalled Ben, and sent out Macbeth.

Professor Kukui's eyes looked almost pitying. “Blazer, use Flare Blitz!”

“Macbeth, First Impression!”

His eyes widened, and Moon felt the twist of triumph low in her belly as Macbeth, a blur of grey-white-violet, shot forward with sharp, slicing claws. Bug-type was super-effective against Dark-type; Incineroar fainted dead away.
There was a long silence. Ben's Rain Dance had faded a while ago, but the battlefield still gleamed with faint traces of water. Moon waited for Professor Kukui to recall Incineroar before recalling Macbeth.

“Wow,” the Professor said finally. His blank, almost confused expression softened into a wide, toothy smile. “Wow.” He looked up at the robotic camera drones, circling in closer, and began clapping. “Moon Hawkins, everybody!”

“Oh my god stop,” said Moon under her breath.

The Professor cleared his throat; the cameras floated down closer. “I couldn't win, even though I went all-out,” he admitted. “But what a refreshing feeling, yeah! You even beat me without using a Z-Move!”

Moon shrugged. “I was kind of focused on not losing,” she admitted. “I kind of wish I had, but... you know.” She glanced at one of the cameras, smiling. “I guess I'll have a lot of opportunities to use them in the future.”

* * * * *

Alolan League Live Broadcast: Chat

mamareanie07: OMG

xXxPokéFanxx: HOLY SHIT FINALLY AFTER TWENTY-THREE CHALLENGERS

bewarethebewear: She's so humble!!! She seems really nice

AlcremieDeMenthe: watchin from Galar, sick battle m8

pikapop: she doesn't look alolan

holymalasadaszubatman: @pikapop does that matter tho??!!?

luranluran: guys she has a website apparently? she said she's half alolan, one quarter kantonian, one quarter unovan

baepsAAAAAEEEEEE: omg I LOVE her haircut

bewarethebewear: @luranluran Omg do you have a link??!!?

CaroPal: Hi, everyone! You can check out Moon's website at https://www.**********.alo.com. The website went up this morning, so please try not to crash it haha! —Caroline (Moon's publicist)

mudgay: OMG MOON MY BABY T___T I'M SO PROUD

28378219_dhfs: Check out my website for cool pictures! ;)

AlcremieDeMenthe: @CaroPal thx m8 I'll check it out
bewearthebewear: @CaroPal Tysm!!!

mamareanie07: @28378219_dhfsf fuckin spam bot, reported

holymalasadaszubatman: @CaroPal YO CAROLINE MY DUDE HI I'VE HEARD A LOT ABOUT U

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic: @28378219_dhfsf: Chat Rule #3: No spam. This is your only warning. A second offense gets you banned.

pikapop: also what the fuck was that purple thing, creepy asf

CaroPal: @holymalasadaszubatman: ...who are you

luranluran: @pikapop do you have anything nice to say. like at all.

mudgay: @[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic goddamn no mercy... that's kinda hot

FoxyNine: @pikapop It looked like a poison-type, kind of

holymalasadaszubatman: @CaroPal HELLO I AM HAU, MOON'S SECOND COUSIN AND BFF

baepsAAAAAEEEEEE: @pikapop it was kind of cute actually?? like it was just spinning around and singing to itself while she was talking to the prof

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic: @mudgay Why are you like this.

pikapop: @luranluran why are you already trying to suck ass when she isn't even the champion yet

CaroPal: @holymalasadaszubatman Oh right, she mentioned you! Aren't you challenging the League next?

mudgay: @[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic you like it ;)

bewarethebewear: @FoxyNine It used dp tho so i think it's a dragon maybe?? I'm not sure but it looked like it had stab

mamareanie07: @baepsAAAAAEEEEEE agreed, purple thing is a cinnamon roll

mudgay: @holymalasadaszubatman hau aren't you supposed to be getting ready to fight or something

FoxyNine: @bewarethebewear: Oh maybe! Do you think it could be both?

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic: @mudgay Beside the point.

holymalasadaszubatman: @CaroPal @mudgay lol yea im signin off rn & goin in. wish me luck... ive never beaten moon in my life but im gonna give it my best lol

luranluran: @pikapop um she kind of is??!? nobody's beaten the prof before soooo

mudgay: @holymalasadaszubatman omg good luck!!! we're all watching at the paradise, amelia
pulled it up on the big screen for us. we'll cheer for you and moon!!!

pikapop: @luranluran honey, she's gotta defend the title before she's a champion

baepsAAAAAAEEE: @holymalasadaszubatman Omg I see you on the screen!!! I know you signed off but good luck!!!

mamareanie07: @holymalasadaszubatman gl!!! and as a single woman on behalf of alola can I just say you're a fine-looking man ;)

FoxyNine: @holymalasadaszubatman: good luck!

AlcremieDeMenthe: @holymalasadaszubatman cheers m8, may the best trainer win

luranluran: @pikapop excuse me HONEY, but in the kanto registers you can find blue listed as a champion even though he only held the title for like forty-five minutes. so yes, moon is in fact the champion. she defeated the professor who was holding the title against a challenger.

mudgay: @mamareanie07: hate to break it to you but he is super happy w/ his girlfriend lmao

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic: @pikapop @luranluran According to International Pokémon League Regulation #5 (paragraph 2), Moon Hawkins currently holds the position of Unchallenged Champion. If she fails to defeat her first challenger, she will become a Former Champion, similarly to Blue Oak of Kanto. If she defends her title against her first challenger, she will become Alola's first Champion. There is no need to debate about this further.

mamareanie07: @mudgay ah damn, why are the hot ones always taken

luranluran: @[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic THANK you

baepsAAAAAAEEE: ok damn malasada guy's actually a rlly good battler

pikapop: @luranluran still a kiss-ass

bluwue: @luranluran Hi I hate to correct you on a technicality when you are in fact correct, but I was the champion of Kanto for forty-SIX minutes, not forty-five

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic @pikapop Chat Rule #1: No abusive language. This is your only warning. A second offense gets you banned.

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic made bluwue an [ADMIN]

[ADMIN] bluwue: @[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic Um excuse me what the fuck

[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic: @[ADMIN] bluwue You're more knowledgable about Moon than I am.

mudgay: @[ADMIN] Soph-O-Matic @[ADMIN] bluwue wait holy si ht are you actually blue??? like THE. BLUE. OAK??!!?

[ADMIN] bluwue: @mudgay Love the username!!! And yes I am

mamareanie07 @[ADMIN] bluwue OMFG HI I LOVE YOU
The Champion's throne itself wasn't terribly comfortable, but there was a room behind the official Champion's arena with two couches, a mini-fridge, and not one but five televisions, all attached to the ceiling. A cabinet next to the mini-fridge held Hyper Potions, Max Elixirs, and Revives. Both Moon and Professor Kukui took the opportunity to heal their Pokémon first before sitting down; Professor Kukui picked up a remote control and clicked all of the TVs on at once. Each one showed one of the Elite Four chambers, and the last one showed the central platform below the Champion's arena.

Hau was in Kahili's room. He'd gone to Molayne first, judging by the way Molayne was currently applying medicines to his teammates; Olivia and Acerola were still waiting. Olivia was frowning down at her phone and typing; Acerola appeared to be talking to thin air but her eyes seemed oddly dark, so Moon decided she was probably talking to someone dead. It was a weird thing to think about, but weirdness was sort of Acerola's thing.

"So, if Hau defeats you, he will be the unchallenged Champion, and you'll be a former Champion, yeah," said Professor Kukui, observing Hau with a grin on his face. "And if you defend the title, you'll be the Champion of Alola. How's that sound?"

"Pretty damn good." Moon inhaled, steeling herself. "But, um— I already knew that I would be the Champion."

"That's some confidence you've got, yeah," chuckled Professor Kukui. "Hang onto that, it will serve you well."

"No, I mean— I've talked with, um. Solgaleo and Lunala." She hesitated, but it would be better to straighten out what tradition she could as early as possible. "And Necrozma, and Marshadow. They've asked me to, um... fix some things."

Professor Kukui regarded her with solemn eyes, though he was still smiling. "Like the kahuna tasks that Hau and Gladion are doing?"

"Yeah— wait, how did you know about Gladion?"
“I was informed by Ms. Wicke. She said he'd given his permission for her to tell a few people, yeah.” The Professor shook his head, still smiling. “It's a big burden for a young guy, but you're even younger— and Hapu and Sophocles are young, and so is Acerola. So I guess it will be all right.”

“Yeah, I think so too.” Moon hesitated. “Um, was there really no way to get somebody for the Elite Four besides Olivia?”

Professor Kukui's face fell. “I'm still looking,” he said softly. “But the International Pokémon League Regulations have rules about who and who can't serve as an Elite Four member, yeah. I tried asking Nanu— thought he might go for it since it's less of a job than kahuna. But he said he just wants to retire.”

“Yeah, he should be done. And somebody needs to look after Aether House anyway.”

“Aether House?”

Moon explained what she and Hau had done to get Nanu out of his Route Seventeen base of operations, transferring Po Town surveillance responsibility to the Aether Paradise; and how Acerola's career change had left a gap of someone responsible to take care of Aether House.

“Hmm.” Professor Kukui's eyes warmed. “Well, Moon, that already seems like something a Champion would have done, yeah? He's a kahuna, you know— if he'd really stood his ground about staying, you couldn't have made him go and the Tapu would have backed him up.”

“I didn't make him leave the island.”

“No, but if you think about it— part of what Nanu does when he watches Po Town is kind of punishing himself, yeah? He still feels awful about Foxglove still, and making sure the Foxes get up to as little mischief as possible with almost no government support isn't a fun job. So staying there and seeing all those awful things— he makes himself do that, and the Tapu doesn't tell him he doesn't have to because... well, you know Tapu Bulu isn't kind.”

“Gladion said he's a dick,” said Moon, because there was a part of her that found humor in the blasphemy.

“That might be putting it strongly, but you get the idea, yeah.” Professor Kukui coughed. “But then, you came in and you told him what to do— and he didn't fight you.”

“He fought us at first,” argued Moon.

“Maybe, but the point is he came. And neither he nor Tapu Bulu, in the end, said no.” Professor Kukui's eyes were knowing. “And I heard from Nanu and Acerola about what happened at the Lake of the Sunne, yeah? That was something a kahuna really ought to have done, but you pretty much took care of it yourself. Nanu and Ace just came to help clean up after.”

Moon thought about it. “I guess,” she admitted, after a few moments. “What are the requirements for someone to become an Elite Four member?”

“Has to have finished the island challenge or equivalent,” said Professor Kukui, holding up one finger. “Has to be a relatively well-known and accomplished Trainer, ideally a type specialist but I'm not too picky about that. Can't have a criminal record, and has to be willing to do it, yeah. You can't make someone be Elite Four if they don't want to be.”

“That's not a lot of requirements.”
“No, but you'd be surprised how many people can't meet all of them.” Professor Kukui sighed. “Molayne was a given, honestly; and it was a little worrying to lose Acerola as a trial captain but she's happier in the Elite Four, yeah. Kahili was a celebrity long before I asked her to serve— she's a pro golfer, and her family owns the Grand Hano and the golf resort there. She's been really helpful, with getting connections through advertising and broadcasting. Pokémon battling is a sport, you know, but it doesn't quite fit into the same television category as other sports so there are rules about it, yeah. She helped make sure we're in compliance with everything, so we don't get fined by the International League for malpractice. But there was just nobody else. None of the other trial captains can be spared— none of them want to quit anyway. Hala might be able to do it once Hau's fully taken over, but that's probably two or three years down the road, yeah.”

“Two or three years?”

“Hapu's an exception, yeah,” said Professor Kukui, addressing her immediate counterexample before she could bring it up. “Nobody was expecting Ikaika to pass away; he was healthy as a horse and loved his job. Usually the old kahuna will retire in name, but they're meant to stick around for a bit, to train the new kahuna. Hapu couldn't even have that. She asks Hala for a lot of advice— used to ask Olivia too, but she doesn't like bothering her these days. You remember how Molayne hung around during Sophocles' trial, yeah? Trial captains do the same thing. When Nanu or Gladion picks a new captain to replace Acerola, she'll have to spend some time training them.”

Moon nodded slowly. “Well, we'll have to keep looking out for people,” she said, with a nod. “Solgaleo and Lunala don't like that Olivia's in the Elite Four. Neither does Tapu Lele.”

“Did they talk to you about that?”

“Yeah. Among other things.” Moon cleared her throat. “That's one of the things I have to do, get another person. I have no idea who could do it, but I'll look around.”

“And Nanu or Gladion picks a new captain, yeah.” Professor Kukui nodded. “We'll find someone sooner or later, but it would be nice if it were, you know, sooner.”

“That's the plan.”

They watched Hau battle in silence for a while; after defeating Kahili he moved on to Acerola. His battle with her was more of a struggle than it had been for Moon; which made sense, because Moon's battle with Molayne had been her hardest one and Hau had more or less wiped him out with ease thanks to Ollie and BB. After a hard win against Acerola, Hau went into Olivia's chamber and brought out Poppy.

“Oh, well he'll be done pretty quick,” said Moon, getting to her feet. “Should I go sit on the throne now?”

“Yeah, why not?” Professor Kukui chuckled. “I'm going down to the hub to wish him good luck before he comes upstairs. You can be grand and imposing.”

Moon grinned. “I've got something in mind.”

She was pretty sure that she was not on a live feed while there was a challenger in the Elite Four, though if she was she would definitely hear about it later. Professor Kukui waved as the platform took him back down to the hub room, and Moon climbed up to sit on the back of the Champion's throne instead of the seat. It was a bit of a precarious perch, but her goal was to make Hau laugh and laugh he did, the moment he caught sight of her.
“You're ridiculous,” he sputtered, walking towards her. Moon grinned and hopped off the seat.

“My chair, my rules,” she said.

“What if it becomes my chair?”

“Then I'll have had it for,” she checked her watch. “Oh, thirty-two minutes. Hey, if you win I might beat Blue's record for shortest Championship.”

“If I win,” said Hau, rolling his eyes.

“Hey, none of that. Believe in yourself and fight hard.” Moon pointed a stern finger at him.

“Yeah, yeah. We'll do our best— we always do.” He patted his teammates lovingly, before looking back up at her with a fire in his eyes that she knew.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded.

Moon stood in the Champion's half of the arena— the northern end, with the throne. Hau took the southern half, and they looked at each other for a moment.

She took a deep breath, and smiled.

* * * * *

**Skypther Chat: Gladion Mohn, Lillie Mohn**

**LM:** I don't know who to cheer for.

**GM:** Yeah, same here.

**LM:** Both?

**GM:** Damn straight.

* * * * *

Moon sent out Macbeth, and was expecting Hau to send Uila out in turn; but then again it was a title challenge, her first title challenge; and it made sense that Hau, even knowing he was meant to be a kahuna and not a champion, would try to give her a fight worth remembering. So she was momentarily surprised when his first pick was BB instead— at least, until the battle properly began.

“Macbeth, use First Impression!”

“BB, Stone Edge!”
Macbeth hit first, as she expected; but Moon was surprised when Stone Edge didn't just trigger Emergency Exit, but knocked Macbeth out entirely. She was even more surprised when BB brought her little fists together and cracked her knuckles with a wheezy giggle.

“Did you teach her that?”

“...maybe.”

“Nice.” She air-fived him, and he returned the favor with a giggle of his own.

Her next pick was Kate, who promptly took the Crabominable out with a well-placed Flamethrower. Hau nodded resignedly and sent Uila out instead.

Because Hau usually sent Uila out first, Moon was used to taking the Raichu out in one hit with a super-effective First Impression. Without that advantage, she often forgot that Uila was immensely strong and powerful— and that he was fast. Psychic knocked Kate out instantly, and that brought them both down to four teammates.

She did, however, have other tactical options; and sent out Ben. Hau raised his eyebrows— Electric-type versus Electric-type was an odd matchup— but Moon had taught Ben Shadow Ball ages ago, and Uila went down.

As she expected, Hau's next choice was Rumble. She hadn't set up with Rain Dance, mostly because Ben was rather fragile and Uila had access to Psychic and Focus Blast; as a result, she wasn't going to take her chances with Thunder and instead settled for Thunderbolt. This did a reasonable amount of damage, but Rumble had Bulldoze and Ben was out as well.

They were three for three. Moon selected Ariel, and finished off Rumble with Brick Break; Hau countered with Sonar and Dragon Pulse. He couldn't knock her out in one hit, but Ariel didn't have anything that was terribly effective against Sonar either so it was a grapple of sheer power until Ariel went down first.

Moon didn't have any Fairies, or they would have been her first option for Sonar. But Hero could fend for herself against the Noivern, especially since he was already weakened by Ariel. Iron Head knocked Sonar out; four for four.

Hau sent out Ollie.

“Ah, shit,” murmured Moon, before remembering that they were on national television and glancing guiltily at the cameras.

“Nice,” snickered Hau. “Ollie, Flamethrower!”

“Hero, use Bulldoze!”

Hero managed to hold out through one turn, but a second Flamethrower spelled her end. Moon only had Puck left; Hau had Ollie and Poppy. For the first time, she began to wonder if, perhaps, she might actually lose.

Hau grinned. “Ollie, one more Flamethrower!”

“Puck, dodge and hit him with Smack Down!”

Puck was fast, but he was still slightly singed around the edges by Flamethrower. Ollie was not so lucky; he'd already taken damage from Hero and Smack Down knocked him out. That left only
“Remember our very first battle?” she said to Hau.

“Yeah,” he said, smiling crookedly. “Yeah, I do.”

Moon was hit with a wave of fondness—for her friend Hau who stood before her now with his powerful Primarina; and for the boy she had met seven months ago with an excitable Popplio.

“Poppy, use Ice Beam!”

“Puck, Leaf Blade!”

On any other Water-type it might have been a one-hit knockout; but Hau had trained Poppy well. Puck took the Ice Beam with a wince, but it didn't knock him out, either. Moon smiled, already forming the steps of the dance; Hau, on the other side of the arena, did the same.

“Poppy, use Oceanic Operetta!”

“Puck—Sinister Arrow Raid!”

The water swelled, and the arrows rose. Poppy stood on her tail and sang, a siren call of beauty, love, and pride; Puck rose high in the air, his wings a dark outline against the bright sky above the glass.

They crashed together in a wave of cold water and sharp arrows. Moon, laughing, shielded her face from a spray of water even as it slopped over her clothes; she could hear Hau laughing too and it was this, this was what they were fighting for. Not for prestige, nor even a title; but for the joy of the battle, the love of their teammates.

When all was quelled, Puck stood damp and triumphant, with weary eyes; Poppy had been knocked out.

Hau let out a loud whoop, quickly recalling Poppy before running forward, his arms outstretched. “Moon, you did it!” he roared, catching her in a bear hug. “You did it, you're the Champion! You did it!”

Something happy and tired settled in her chest, a feeling like coming home after a long day. It felt right.

“Yeah,” she said out loud, blinking. “I—I did it.”

For a few moments they stood there in silence, both of them dripping wet from Oceanic Operetta; but then the whir of the platform sounded, and Moon looked over to see Kukui and the Elite Four, rising to meet them.

“Congratulations, Moon Hawkins,” said Professor Kukui warmly. “You're a Champion we can all be proud of.”

He strode forward, resting one hand each on her shoulder and Hau's. “That was an amazing battle, yeah! The Pokémon Trainers of Alola are really something else!” His eyes went suddenly damp. “And it was really special to me, that the two of you were the Trainers who helped make my dream come true. You're the Trainers who've put Alola on the map, on par with all of the other regions in the International League.”
“Ah really, Professor, I’m not all that—” Hau began to demur.

“Nope,” said Moon firmly. “You almost beat me this time, Hau. That was the best battle I’ve ever had with you, bar none. We were neck and neck. I might be the Champion, but you’re my rival and my equal, and you better not forget it.”

Hau stared at her, wide-eyed; but then his eyes also grew suspiciously wet. “Thanks, Moon,” he said softly. “That— it means a lot.”

“You’re both fantastic Trainers,” agreed Olivia, smiling tiredly at them. “It's always a pleasure to battle you.”

“I called it!” said Acerola triumphantly. “I knew you would be the Champion the first time I met you, Moon Hawkins. And I knew Hau would be your first challenger.”

“Well, not all of us are gifted with brilliance and precognition,” drawled Molayne. “But the two of you are special, and you deserve this— and other things.” He winked pointedly in Hau's general direction.

“Congratulations on completing the island challenge,” added Kahili. She had a pleasant smile on her face— Moon wasn't sure how real it was, and didn't want to try and find out on national television. “It's a grand achievement, with or without the League.”

Professor Kukui turned around, keeping his hand on Moon's shoulder; he looked up at one of the camera drones, which obligingly zoomed in closer. “People of Alola,” he said, a grin on his face. “I give you your Champion: Moon Hawkins!”

Moon looked at the camera, and thought for a few moments about what she wanted to say; but there was really only one thing for it. “Hello, Alola,” she said, grinning. “And— thank you.”

* * * * *

Moon Hawkins, Champion of the Alola League, will return in Weedkiller.

Chapter End Notes

oh my god we did it we REALLY DID IT

In SuMo you battle Professor Kukui for the Championship; in USUM you battle Hau. Having Professor Kukui as the stand-in Champion makes sense to me; he clearly knows a lot about Pokémon and in this case in particular is a skilled battler (as one Masked Royal might agree lmao). However, I also liked the idea of Moon fighting Hau, because they were each other's first battles. It makes sense that they would meet in battle here, at the end of what they began. And if Moon's the Champion, she has to be able to defend her title. It's also a literary echo of Blue beating Red to the Championship and holding his title for forty-six minutes before being dethroned— except Moon maintains her title. Therefore you get both battles. (You're welcome.)
Cottonee Joe is my favorite Pokémon pop culture pun yet. Again, you're welcome.

First Impression has +2 priority and Accelerock has +1. I did actually look that up because I wanted to be sure I was writing this accurately.

Hi so canonically Kukui's Ninetales has Blizzard and Ice Shard but not Ice Beam, but I'd like to point out that this is bullshit. At this level a well-trained Pokémon will probably be fast enough that priority doesn't matter all that much. Blizzard doesn't have the same accuracy but since Ninetales generally has Snow Cloak it comes in handier than Ice Shard's priority. You can also safely assume that instead of Safeguard, Ninetales has Psychic. I don't remember if Alo-Ninetales can learn Psychic or not but it's a fantastic coverage move for Poison-types so we're going to say it can lmao

“...or she could rely on her long-time friend's sheer spite to help win the battle.” — Puck is the Pokémon embodiment of petty revenge

Kukui's starter Pokémon (dependent on which one you pick) canonically has its elemental Z-Crystal, not its special one. However this is once again bullshit, so I let Blazer have Incinium Z.

Hey so the live broadcast chatroom is a MESS but besides Caroline, Hau, and Blue who are explicitly named, you can find two other characters that you have met before. One is pretty obvious, the other less so unless you've been paying very close attention. You will read more about them in both Weedkiller (though you may not know it's them) and Flowers Grown From Bones.

I also don't have an actual website for Moon. I thought about making one with a tumblr account or blogspot or something, but I would want to be able to change the domain name and that costs money which I do not have because my ass is broke

But also Blue literally popping into the chat to correct someone about his forty-SIX minutes of Championship and then accidentally getting made a chat admin is peak Reluctant Hero material and I enjoy that because it usually happens to Red instead of Blue lmao

Moon's battle with Hau is less detailed than her battle with Kukui. This is because Moon has fought Hau before, so you have a better idea of what to expect; and also because... well, we all already knew she was gonna win

Hau's more excited about Moon winning than she is, because she's just in shock lmao

“Moon looked at the camera, and thought for a few moments about what she wanted to say; but there was really only one thing for it. 'Hello, Alola,' she said, grinning. 'And — thank you.'” — no, Moon. Thank you.

End Notes

I don't have the words to explain how happy I am to be writing this story, and for you all to be reading it. I love playing in this universe, and I love exploring the possibilities that exist
I love Gladion— he was really the character who got me into this fandom, and he makes me smile every time I think about him. I love Lillie— a character who is canonically gentle and feminine, and who shows such strength and growth in both her story and my interpretation of it. I love Hau, and his enthusiasm and excitement for Pokémon and battling; and though canon Moon is an RPG Main Character and thus doesn't have a personality proper, I have loved creating someone I believe she could be.

In writing about mental health issues, and some of the things that survivors of emotional abuse face, I have grown to face some of my own mental health issues head on, and to take steps in correcting them. I have enjoyed the catharsis of writing characters who heal in both the ways I have healed, and the ways that I have yet to heal.

I have never been in a romantic relationship in my life, unless you count the failed attempt at a relationship with an immature boy who I now pity more than resent— seven or eight years ago, now. I don't really count that as a relationship, given how nothing ever physically happened and how this event was the catalyst for most of my mental health issues to begin with. I have always loved romances— have always been a romantic. Though I am happily single (I would rather be happily single than in an unhappy relationship) I do, occasionally, get lonely. It has been fun and therapeutic to write happy, developing relationships. Even if I never find a Someone, I will always find joy in the idea of it.

My sister is solidly under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, and so writing characters with whom she can identify and relate (though she neither plays Pokémon nor reads fanfiction) gives me great joy. And though I consider myself for the most part a heterosexual, cisgender woman, I have found that I identify with certain aspects of the grey/ace spectrum, specifically demisexuality. And while I largely am comfortable as a cisgender woman, I have times when I wish I were neither female nor male. I don't think I can comfortably describe myself as agender or nonbinary, but I much prefer androgyny to femininity. I am still a woman, but I am not a terribly womanly woman, if that makes any sense. It has been a pleasure to learn this about myself as I have written characters who are exploring their sexuality and gender identity. I'm not open about this with most people, but I trust all of you, my readers, with this information. (Pronouns are still she/her, but I'm thinking about the merits of they/them so this could change.)

And that brings me to you. One of the greatest joys I have had in writing this story is in the responses I get from readers. Most of the time, you are excited about the story and the characters, and you are highly complimentary of my writing ability. The thing that has surprised me the most is how you have cared about me, the author, as a person outside of the story. I choose to share bits and pieces of my life with you in the author notes, generally to explain personal context to something I have written; but then in the comments I learn that you have experienced the same thing, or that you understand something I am going through or have said and want to offer your sympathy and advice. For someone who is extremely introverted and struggles to make friends easily, this is wonderful and overwhelming and humbling. I have made friends with many of you, through both the comments and the Discord. Even if I don't say much outside of comments and author notes, know that I love all of you and that I am so, so grateful for the simple friendship you have offered me.

What does the future hold? I have no idea. I will finish this series— though ironing out the spacing of the next few installments is going to be a bit tricky. I don't currently have much writing inspiration from Sword and Shield, for which I am honestly rather grateful; I would want to write that instead of Conquer the Night as it's more “current.”
Like Moon, all I have to say at this point is this: thank you. Thank you for everything. Thank you for reading, for your kudos, for your comments, for the Discord if you're part of it (and if you're not, you're welcome to join!), and for the love you have all shown for my little story. (I say little, as though it's not 600-700k fucking words lmao.)

See you in Weedkiller... where things are going to get really, really interesting.

Love,

Sarah (Scribe34)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!